



*Working Paper No. 109*

**THE LIMITED IMPACTS OF FORMAL  
EDUCATION ON DEMOCRATIC  
CITIZENSHIP IN AFRICA**

by Robert Mattes and Mughogho

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**AFROBAROMETER WORKING PAPERS**

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**June 2009**

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## **The Limited Impacts of Formal Education on Democratic Citizenship in Africa<sup>1</sup>**

Africa is the poorest and most underdeveloped continent in the world. Among many political and social consequences, poverty and the lack of infrastructure place significant limitations on the cognitive skills of ordinary Africans, and thus their ability to act as full democratic citizens. Along with limited access to news media, the extremely low levels of formal education found in many African countries strike at the very core of the skills and information that enable citizens to assess social, economic and political developments, learn the rules of government, form opinions about political performance, and care about the survival of democracy.

On the basis of the systematic socio-political surveys that have been conducted in Africa thus far, only a minority of Africans can be called committed democrats (Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005). Yet poorly performing leaders, governments and political regimes are often accorded surprisingly high levels of positive evaluations and high levels of trust by their citizens. These two factors often co-occur in a particularly corrosive form of “uncritical citizenship” whereby citizens exhibit higher levels of satisfaction with the quality of governance and the performance of democracy than actually demand to live in a democracy (Chaligha, Mattes, Bratton & Davids, 2002; Mattes & Shenga, 2007). Uncritical citizenship stands in direct contrast to Pippa Norris’s (1999) concept of the “critical citizen” who supports the ideals of democracy yet is likely to identify shortcomings in their representative institutions, elected leaders, and the policies they pursue.

While these maladies of democratic citizenship have usually been attributed to deeply-rooted cultural values endemic to African societies (Etounga-Manguell, 2000; Chazan, 1993), previous research has found at least some evidence that Africans are more likely to act as agents, rather than subjects, once they gain access to higher levels of formal education, make use of print and electronic news media, and gain basic knowledge about their political leaders (Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005; Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Evans & Rose, 2007a, 2007b).

As part of a larger research project on the various linkages between higher education and democracy in Africa, we extend these studies in this paper in three important ways. First, we attempt to unpack the various elements of cognitive awareness and isolate and trace the direct and indirect effects of formal education. Second, we examine the effects of formal education across a much broader range of dimensions of democratic citizenship than others have studied. Finally, we attempt to isolate and assess the specific impact of higher education within this process.

### **Formal Education and Democratic Citizenship**

At least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, formal education has held a privileged position in democratic theory. An informed, critical and participatory public, skeptical of government but tolerant and trusting of other citizens, has been widely seen as essential to give life to democracy and safeguard it against other forms of political regimes (Lipset, 1959; Almond & Verba, 1963; Diamond, 1997). Indeed, while its precise impact may vary across countries, and often depend on broader institutional arrangements, public opinion research within Western democracies is virtually unanimous in its conclusion that formal education is strongly linked to political knowledge, interest and involvement (Dalton, 1996). In the words of Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry (1996: 2):

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to extend our thanks to the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network for Africa (HERANA) who commissioned this paper (for more on HERANA, see <http://www.herana-gateway.org/>). We have received valuable comments and criticisms from Tracy Bailey, Michael Bratton, Nico Cloete, Thierry Luescher and Njuguna Ng’ethe, as well as the participants of the HERANA Public Seminar held in Accra, Ghana ( 9 February 2009). We, however, bear sole responsibility for the analysis and conclusions.

The notion that formal educational attainment is the primary mechanism behind citizenship characteristics is basically uncontested.... Formal education is almost without exception the strongest factor in explaining what citizens do in politics and how they think about politics.

Education's impact is usually seen to affect citizenship along at least three paths. First of all, formal education may affect attitudes and behavior via a "positional path" by sorting citizens into differing social networks, situations and classes (Nie et al, 1996). Second, formal education may promote democratic citizenship through a "socialization path" whereby children are explicitly trained to see democracy as preferable to its alternatives, accept the authority of the democratic state and its officials, and take part in the duties of democratic citizenship. Finally, formal education may facilitate democratic citizenship via a "cognitive path," increasing both people's verbal and cognitive proficiency, as well as their ability to construct their own ideas and critical thoughts. This cognitive path provides key facts about history and context, plus a greater ability to learn the rules of the political game and the identity of political leaders. "Critical citizens," in turn, should exhibit a greater ability to tolerate different outlooks, reach reasoned electoral choices, and refrain from extremist doctrines (Lipset, 1960: 79; Nie et al, 1996; Norris 1999).

But while there is considerable evidence of a positive contribution of formal education to various elements of democratic citizenship in Western societies, formal education has yet to play such a central role in empirical research outside of the industrialized West (though there is growing evidence from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union) (see Evans & Rose, 2007a for a useful review). As Geoffrey Evans and Pauline Rose (2007: 2) demonstrate, the actual evidence of the impact of education in developing societies is "surprisingly thin." They argue that one of the key reasons is that, while modernization theory generally sees education and the development of cognitive skills as a "social requisite of democracy" (Lipset, 1959), it tends to bundle education together with a range of other forces of progress such as secularization, urbanization, industrialization, affluence, and the expansion of the middle class (Lipset, 1959; Almond & Verba, 1963; Inkeles & Smith, 1974). Indeed, latter-day modernization theory tends to conclude that education is merely a marker of more important shapers of pro-democratic values, specifically material security (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

Yet, as Evans and Rose (2007a: 4) argue, we infer the "democratic returns to education" found in Western settings to developing contexts such as Africa at great risk. Most studies have been conducted in countries where democracy is largely taken for granted, schools make at least some explicit attempt to instill pro-democratic values, and primary and secondary education is almost universal (meaning that the measured impact of education is usually one of intermediate and higher education). In Africa, however, significant numbers of citizens have never been inside a formal school, and many have never proceeded beyond primary schooling. And for those who have received some schooling, most have been educated in schools run by non-, or less-than-democratic states with no pro-democratic tint to their teaching. Beyond the *content* of what is taught, the dominant *style* of teaching and learning in Africa's schools is often said to parrot its colonial predecessors, concentrating on rote memorization and failing to encourage practical skills, critical thinking or autonomous participation (Harber, 2002).

Finally, it should be noted that not all scholars would necessarily see this as detrimental to democratic citizenship. A growing number of American political scientists now argue that the role of knowledge and cognitive skills is overstated. They claim that the poorly informed tend to reach the same political opinions and decisions as the well informed, largely because they utilize "low information reasoning" using personal experience of commonly accessible information (like prices, joblessness, housing construction etc.) as heuristic cues to evaluate government performance (Popkin, 1994; Lupia & McCubbins, 2000).

Besides the assumptions of modernization theory, another principal reason that we know little about the impact of formal education outside of the West has been the lack of good micro-level data. This is beginning to change, however, with the development of various cross-national, longitudinal Barometer survey projects in the developing world. In the first book length analysis of Afrobarometer data, Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi (2005) demonstrated that formal education, along with an associated range of cognitive factors they

call “cognitive awareness of politics,” is an important source of popular demand for democracy. Those people who have been to school, who use the news media, who know the identity of their political leaders, and who understand democracy as a set of political procedures rather than economic outcomes are far more likely to prefer democracy and reject its authoritarian alternatives. In a further analysis of data from a subsequent survey conducted in a wider range of countries, Evans and Rose (2007b) showed that the impact of formal education on the demand for democracy is independent of other elements of modernization, such as occupational class position, economic resources, urbanization or secularization.

### **Higher Education and Citizenship**

Studies of the specific impact of higher education on democratic citizenship are rare. The standard operationalization of most variables measuring formal education is “years of education” which assumes that all positive contributions to democratic citizenship accumulate monotonically the longer one stays in school, and then in college or university. In one exception, Dalton (1996) has shown that university education (combined with high levels of political interest) makes an important difference in the way Western voters relate to political parties and election campaigns.

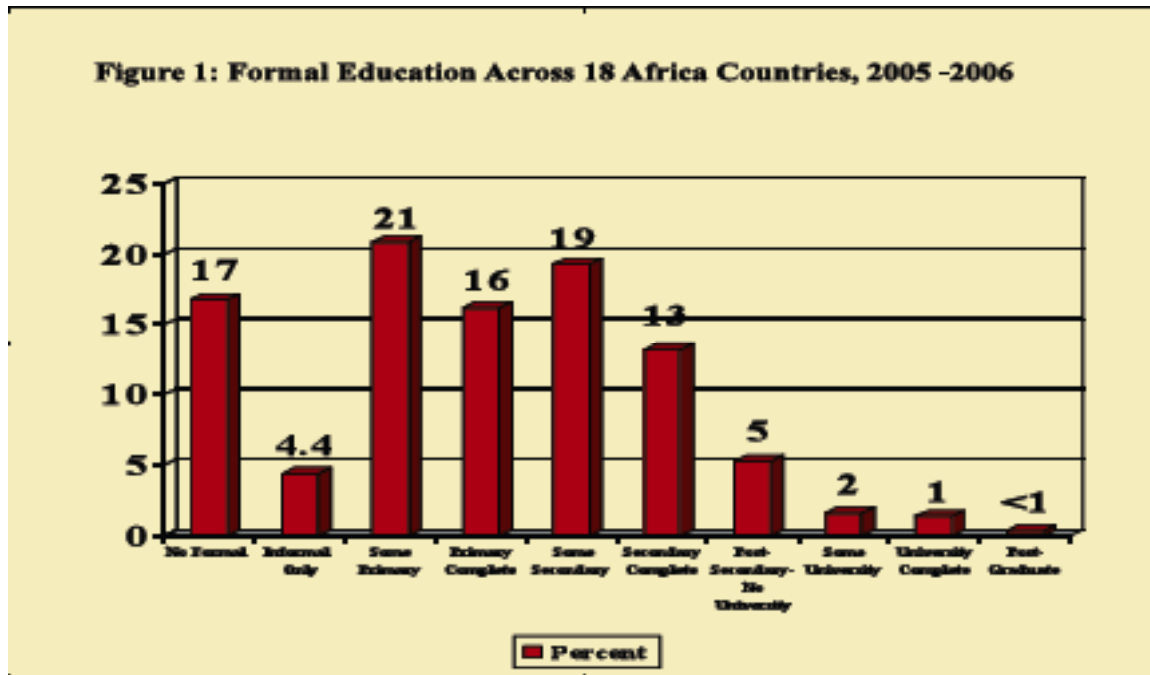
The overall, system-level impact of college and university education in Africa is likely to be minimal simply because so few citizens ever progress to these levels. However, there are good reasons to suspect that the micro-level democratic dividend of higher education might be more substantial. If Africa’s schools are the sites of rote learning, its colleges and universities offer at least the possibility of a different pedagogy that may be more effective in promoting critical skills and habits, and enabling students to appreciate diversity, difference, ambiguity, contradiction and nuance (see Cloete & Muller, 2007; Cross et al, 1999 and World Bank, 2000). Indeed, university students were a driving force behind the popular protests that brought down autocratic leaders in many countries across Africa in the early 1990s (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997). And younger, university-trained elected representatives have also formed the core of cross-party coalitions that have initiated key reforms in some African parliaments (Barkan et al, 2004).

Evans and Rose (2007b) attempted to assess the differing impacts of various levels of education by creating a series of “dummy” variables (variables that take either the value of 0 or 1) for different levels of schooling (primary, secondary, post-secondary). They found that each level of education (including post-secondary) made a statistically significant contribution to popular support for democracy. While this is encouraging, the finding is less than conclusive since standard dummy variable analysis is designed to compare to a referent group (in this case, those with no schooling), a series of wholly discrete nominal categories with no overlapping or cumulative content. But education is different. While each category certainly contains a discrete set of respondents, the concept is not discrete. The effect of being in secondary school (compared to having no schooling) also includes the effect of having been in primary school; and the effect of post-secondary education (when compared to those with no schooling) includes the impacts of both primary and secondary schooling. And while the coefficient associated with secondary association might appear to be statistically different from those associated with other categories of education, the coefficients measure the contrast with a “no education” referent group, not with other categories. Indeed, as Evans and Rose’s (2007b) models become more fully specified, the statistical differences between the coefficients associated with secondary and post-secondary education diminish rapidly.

Thus, this paper attempts to take three steps beyond what we already know about the impact of formal education in Africa. First, we attempt to unpack the set of factors that Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi (2005) call “cognitive awareness” and isolate the discrete contribution of formal education to each of these other factors. Second, we examine the impact of education on a much wider range of facets of democratic citizenship than previous studies of Afrobarometer data. We compare the impact of formal education on (1) rates of political participation, (2) the ability to formulate political opinions, (3) basic democratic values, and (4) the willingness to offer critical performance evaluations. Third, we examine the distinctive impact of higher education by re-analyzing all these linkages only among those who have finished high school (or technical training), distinguishing those who have had at least some university education.

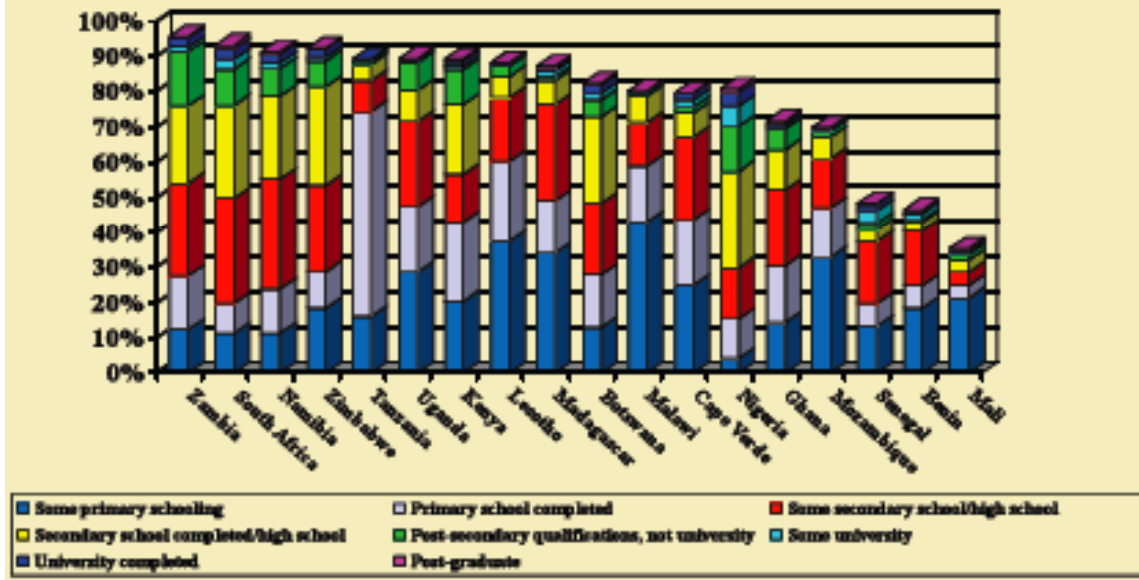
### Formal Education in Africa

As of 2005-06, 17 percent of the 21,600 adults interviewed by the Afrobarometer across 18 countries told interviewers that they had *no* formal education (though 4 percent say they have had some informal schooling, consisting mostly of Islamic Koranic schools (see Figure 1). 21 percent had some primary education, and a further 16 percent went as far as completing primary school. Just over one in ten adults (13 percent) said they had completed a high school education. And less than one in ten (9 percent) went beyond high school, with just 2 completing university education.



Access to formal education varies widely across countries.<sup>1</sup> While large proportions of citizens in West Africa have no formal schooling (over one half of the sample in Benin, over forty percent in Mali, and one quarter in Ghana and Senegal), the relevant proportions are relatively low in Southern Africa (less than one tenth in Zambia, South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe).

**Figure 2: Access to Formal Education, By Country (2005-2006)**



Formal education also varies in other important ways. The correlation coefficients listed in Table 1 show that older Africans are far less likely to be educated than their younger counterparts, as are rural dwellers compared to urbanites, and women compared to men. In turn, we also find that educated Africans are far less likely to experience what we call *lived poverty* (measured as the frequency with which respondents go without a range of basic necessities).

**Table 1: Demographic Correlates of Formal Education**

	Formal Education
Age	-.281***
Rural	-.279***
Lived Poverty	-.255***
Female	-.107***

*N*=21,583

### Formal Education and Cognitive Awareness of Politics

But do low levels of education preclude Africans from developing a deeper cognitive awareness of politics? Or can un- or less-educated citizens make up an educational deficit by listening to electronic news media, or regularly talking about politics with spouses, families, neighbors or co-workers, thereby adding the experiences of others to their own (Richardson & Beck, 2004)? Stated differently, to what extent do low levels of education limit (or higher levels promote) *news media use*<sup>2</sup> (measured as the weekly rate of reading newspapers, or listening to radio or watching television news), and the accumulation of *political information* (measured as the extent to which respondents are able to provide correct answers to three questions about the identity of political leaders, and three questions about the constitutional and governmental system)?<sup>3</sup> We also wonder whether, and how much formal education facilitates *cognitive engagement* (measured as the frequency of political discussion with friends and neighbors, combined with their degree of interest in politics),<sup>4</sup> and a sense of *political efficacy* (indicated by the belief that one is able to understand government affairs, and that other people listen to what you have to say about politics).<sup>5</sup> For a point of comparison, we also test the relative contribution to cognitive awareness of identification with a political party and membership in civic associations. Previous research shows that these factors are often important



determinants of a mobilized, rather than autonomous form of participation and citizenship in Africa (Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi, 2005).

We begin by examining the bivariate linkages of each of these factors. We find that formal education in Africa is strongly correlated with news media use and political information, but has a more modest linkage with cognitive engagement, and virtually nothing in common with political efficacy (Table 2). Formal education also makes a far greater difference for news media use, and the acquisition of political information than does identification with a political party or membership in a civic group. However, it appears that group membership and partisan loyalty promote cognitive engagement with politics at least as well as formal education.

**Table 2: Formal Education and Cognitive Awareness (Bivariate Correlations)**

	Formal Education	Party Identification	Group Membership	Media Use	Political Information	Cognitive Engagement
Partisan Identification	.040***					
Group Membership	.074***	.100***				
News Media Use	.494***	.038***	.116***			
Political Information	.355***	.186***	.174***	.308***		
Cognitive Engagement	.171***	.271***	.166***	.218***	.273***	
Political Efficacy	.046***	.052***	.034***	.069***	.088***	.104***

*Pearson's r correlation coefficients*

*N=21,482*

*NS p=>.05, \* p=<.05, \*\* p=<.01 \*\*\* p=<.001*

However, each of these coefficients is probably inflated because they mask the fact that each variable shares similar patterns on demographic variables (age, rural/urban location, gender and poverty), as well as overlapping variance with the other elements of cognitive awareness. Thus, in order to obtain the cleanest assessment of the independent linkage of formal education with each element of cognitive awareness, we calculate partial correlation coefficients, holding constant their demographic correlates and other elements of cognitive awareness.

Table 3 confirms that citizens with higher levels of formal education are indeed far more likely to use news media and to be aware of the identity of leaders, as well as other basic political facts and constitutional rules. However, formal education seems to offer no real advantage in terms of increasing citizens' cognitive engagement or political efficacy. Cognitive engagement seems to be promoted far more effectively by identification with a political party and, to a lesser extent, membership in civic organizations. Thus, the main impact of formal education in Africa on the cognitive awareness of politics is through the stimulation of news media use and by giving citizens the skills to accumulate basic facts about the political system, rather than of increasing cognitive engagement or efficacy.

**Table 3: Formal Education and Cognitive Awareness (Multivariate Correlations)**

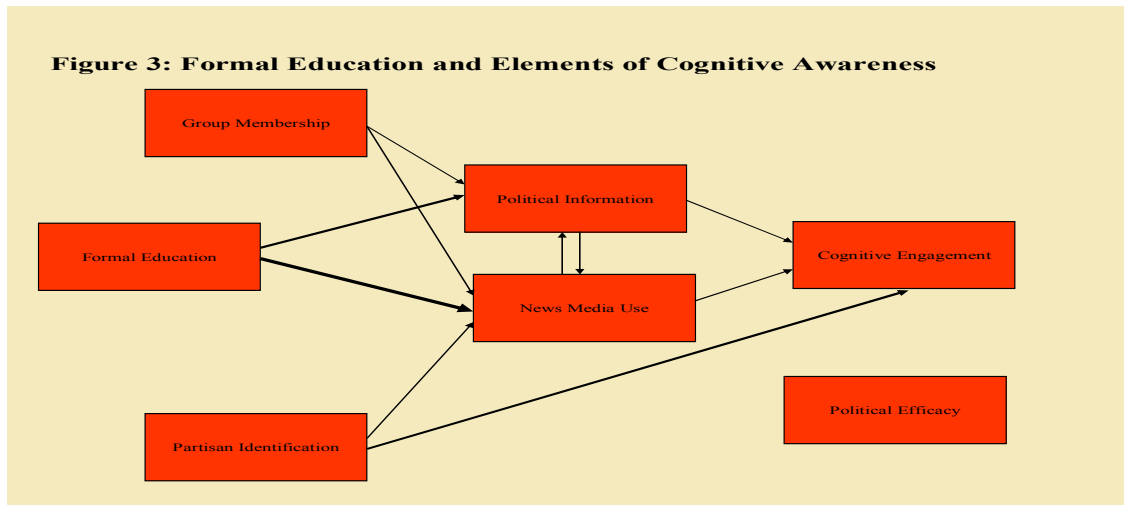
	Formal Education	Party Identification	Group Membership	Media Use	Political Information	Cognitive Engagement
News Media Use	.305***	.118***	.104***			
Political Information	.230***	-.019**	.105***	.108***		
Cognitive Engagement	.034***	.223***	.092***	.126***	.134***	
Efficacy/Competence	.002 <sup>NS</sup>	.017*	.003 <sup>NS</sup>	.032***	.042***	.040***

*Partial correlation coefficients controlling for age, rural/urban location, gender, lived poverty, group membership and partisan identification, as well as every other element of cognitive awareness.*

*N=21,157*

*NS p=>.05, \* p=<.05, \*\* p=<.01 \*\*\* p=<.001*

Taking note of the partial correlations amongst the other variables, we can construct the beginnings of a proto path model where formal education’s main impacts are in stimulating news media use, and the accumulation of political information (see Figure 3). In turn, both political information and news media use bring about higher levels of cognitive engagement. Political efficacy, apparently, develops in isolation of either enlightenment or mobilization. Thus, to the extent that formal education has an indirect impact on other elements of democratic citizenship, we observe that it flows primarily through greater news media use and higher level of factual knowledge about politics.



Given the results of the multivariate assessment of the linkages amongst cognitive awareness, we turn to assess the impact of formal education on a range of aspects of democratic citizenship, by first estimating its direct effects but also by measuring its indirect effects via increased news media use and the accumulation of political information. Do higher individual levels of higher formal education, either directly or indirectly, promote higher individual rates of democratic participation in Africa? Does it make Africans more articulate? Do they promote greater endorsement of key democratic values? And do they make people more critical of political and economic performance?

Our method of analysis is to conduct multivariate, ordinary least squares regression analysis in which formal education and the four key elements of cognitive awareness reviewed above (news media use, political information, cognitive engagement, and efficacy) are regressed, iteratively, on a series of dependent variables, in each case holding constant age, rural/urban location, gender, and lived poverty. This procedure allows us to isolate the direct impact of formal education (as expressed by the unstandardized regression coefficient, or b). Then, in each case, we run a second analysis to estimate the total potential explanatory

power (in terms of the block adjusted  $R^2$ ) of only formal education, news media use, and political information, which as we have just seen would enable us to capture the most likely direct and indirect democratic impacts of schooling.

### Formal Education, Cognitive Awareness and Political Participation

We begin by asking whether educated Africans are likely to become involved in democratic politics. We examine the direct or indirect (via increased political information and use of the news media) effects of education on conventional forms of participation, ranging from relatively simple acts such as identifying with a political party, registering to vote, and voting, to increasingly difficult forms such as joining civic associations (religious, community and business groups as well as trade unions), taking part in community affairs (attending community meetings and working with other people on local issues), and contacting formal leaders (such as MPs, local councilors and government officials) and informal leaders (such as religious and traditional leaders). We also test for linkages with unconventional forms of participation, specifically taking part in protests.

Looking at the far right column of Table 4, we see that the combined effects of formal education, political information and news media use tell us very little about who does and does not participate in African politics. Only with regard to contacting formal leaders do these cognitive factors form a substantial part of the explanation (jointly explaining 5 percent of the variation in this activity). The direct effects of schooling are even more negligible. Holding constant a range of associated factors, education has statistically significant correlations only with contacting officials and joining civic association; and the size of the effect is miniscule.

**Table 4: Formal Education, Cognitive Awareness and Political Participation**

	Formal Education (0-9) b	News Media Use (0-4) b	Political Information (0-6) b	Total Adjusted $R^2$	Block $R^2$	N
Formal Contact	.007*	.016**	.047***	.117	.051	19,976
Partisan Identification	-.003 <sup>NS</sup>	-.008**	.039***	.095	.035	21,182
Group Membership	.010*	.115***	.075***	.068	.035	21,168
Community Participation	-.007 <sup>NS</sup>	-.014*	.063***	.136	.032	21,175
Informal Contact	.024***	-.011 <sup>NS</sup>	.040***	.073	.022	18,766
Registered & Voted	-.002 <sup>NS</sup>	.003 <sup>NS</sup>	.019***	.115	.020	21,182
Protest	-.000 <sup>NS</sup>	.075***	-.007 <sup>NS</sup>	.046	.017	21,178

*Controlling for age, rural/urban location, gender and lived poverty, as well as cognitive engagement and efficacy.*  
 $NS p > .05$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

### Formal Education, Cognitive Awareness and Articulatensess

If formal education makes little difference to political participation in Africa, does it at least increase ordinary Africans' abilities to articulate preferences and opinions about political life? We assess people's ability to offer opinions about the state and political regime in which they live in several ways. First we use a single item that measures respondents' ability to provide a response spontaneously to an open-ended question that asked: "What, if anything, does 'democracy' mean to you?" We also use three valid and reliable indices that assess respondents' abilities to offer preferences and opinions (regardless of whether they are positive or negative). The first index simply sums the number of substantive opinions respondents were able to offer across 20 questions on the performance of democracy (the freeness and fairness of elections, satisfaction with democracy, and the extent of democracy) and government (the extent of official

corruption, the responsiveness of elected representatives, the degree to which the electoral system produces accountability, and the overall job performance of key incumbent leaders). The second index measures people's ability to offer preferences about democracy and non-democratic alternatives across 4 survey items. And the third measures people's ability to give their preferences to 27 question items that ask about political, social and economic values.

Table 5 shows a substantial direct and indirect impacts. Higher levels of education, news media use, and political information each make significant and positive contributions to increasing Africans' ability to offer opinions (positive or negative) about the performance of the political system (11 percent variance explained), provide preferences about democracy versus alternative regimes (10 percent), and a range of social and political values (8 percent), as well as provide some meaning to the word "democracy" (9 percent).

**Table 5: Formal Education, Cognitive Awareness and Articulateness**

	Formal Education (0-9) b	News Media Use (0-4) B	Political Information (0-6) b	Total Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Block R <sup>2</sup>	N
Able to Offer Opinion on	.313***	.315***	.437***	.131	.108	21,105
Able to Offer Opinion on	.032***	.048***	.057***	.117	.097	21,161
Able to Offer Meaning of	.013***	.052***	.030***	.110	.091	21,182
Able to Offer Responses to	.053***	.040***	.227***	.101	.079	19,903

Controlling for age, rural/urban location, gender and lived poverty, as well as cognitive engagement and efficacy.  
NS  $p > .05$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

### Formal Education, Cognitive Awareness and Democratic Values

While educated Africans are more likely to offer preferences and opinions, we now turn to examine the content of those expressed attitudes. We begin by examining people's values, as measured by a wide range of different questions in the Afrobarometer that ask people about democracy and its alternatives, as well as tap their support for a range of other democratic practices and norms.

First, we attempt to replicate earlier findings (Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005; Mattes & Bratton, 2007; and Evans & Rose, 2007a, 2007b), and to test the direct and indirect impacts of formal education on public *demand for democracy* (measured as support for democracy and rejection of presidential dictatorship, military rule and one party rule). We also assess whether education encourages Africans to embrace a series of key democratic values.

We tap popular *demand for the rule of law*, we construct an index from three questions that assess whether respondents feel (1) "It is important to obey the government in power no matter who you voted for," (2) "It is better to find legal solutions to problems even if it takes longer," and (3) "The use of violence is never justified in [e.g. your country's] politics today". We also assess *opposition to corruption* by asking respondents whether different corruption scenarios are "wrong and punishable." We measure *demand for freedom of expression* through three questions that ask people whether (1) "the news media should be free to publish any story that they see fit without fear of being shut down," (2) "People should be able to speak their minds about politics free of government influence," and (3) "We should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it." To assess *demand for political equality*, we use a single question item that asks people whether "All people should be able to vote, even if they do not fully understand all the issues in an election." And to measure support for *demand for gender equality*, we use answers to two questions: (1) "women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men," and (2) "women should have equal rights and receive the same treatment as men."<sup>6</sup>

To assess *demand for bureaucratic accountability*, we use a battery of items that ask people what they would do if they encountered a range of different instances of bureaucratic intransigence (with active citizenship indicated by those who say they would take some form of positive action or protest). We tap *demand for*

*electoral accountability* with two items that ask people about who is responsible for “making sure that, once elected” members of parliament and local government “do their jobs” (with the democratic response indicated by those who say that it is the job of the voters, rather than the President, Legislature or political party).<sup>7</sup> Finally, to tap the extent to which Africans see themselves as active agents or passive subjects of authority, we use a series of single items that ask: (1) whether elected leaders should “listen to what the people say” rather than “follow their own ideas”; (2) whether people, rather than government, “are responsible for their own well-being”; (3) and whether people “should be more active in questioning the actions of our leaders.”

Table 6 confirms earlier findings that education has a positive and sizable impact on the demand for democracy by itself and indirectly through news media use and political information, each of which also has a positive impact (a “block” adjusted R<sup>2</sup> of 9 percent). We also find that education has a notable impact on people’s stated willingness to confront bureaucratic intransigence and demand accountability (4 percent). Across the rest of these values, however, the total impact of education, news media use and political information is negligible to non-existent. While formal education generally increases the extent to which citizens support a range of democratic principles such as equality, expression and accountability,<sup>8</sup> the overall size of the impact is almost always very small. In general, cognitive factors seem to have very little to do with whether or not Africans hold democratic values or predispositions.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 6: Formal Education, Cognitive Awareness and Democratic Values**

	Formal Education (0-9) b	News Media Use (0-4) b	Political Information (0-6) b	Total Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Block R <sup>2</sup>	N
Demand Democracy	.058***	.065***	.064***	.104	.089	21,182
Demand Bureaucratic	.023***	.001 <sup>NS</sup>	.017***	.050	.040	21,182
People Responsible for Well-Being	.008 <sup>NS</sup>	.106***	.054***	.038	.025	19,981
Demand Gender Equality	.054***	.074***	.036***	.047	.023	19,982
Demand Free Expression	.080***	.018*	-.036***	.028	.022	21,174
People Should Question Leaders	.021**	.019 <sup>NS</sup>	.085***	.023	.017	19,985
Leaders Should Listen To People	.010 <sup>NS</sup>	-.063***	.086***	.018	.016	19,968
All People Should Have Equal Vote	-.063***	-.059***	.012*	.016	.015	19,983
Demand Representative	.018***	-.049**	.049***	.020	.014	21,182
Interpersonal Trust	-.021***	-.013*	-.028***	.016	.013	19,564
Demand Rule of Law	-.025***	-.046***	.049***	.028	.012	21,174
Opposes Corruption	.012***	.020***	.002 <sup>NS</sup>	.024	.010	21,180

*Controlling for age, rural/urban location, gender and lived poverty, as well as cognitive engagement and efficacy.*

*NS p>.05, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001*

### **Formal Education, Cognitive Awareness and Critical Citizenship**

If they are not especially likely to hold more pro-democratic dispositions, are educated Africans more likely to offer critical evaluations of political and economic performance? We examine the impact of formal education, news media use and political information on a wide range of evaluations of political performance. At the broadest level of the political regime, we begin with Africans’ evaluations of the *supply of democracy* provided by their multiparty regime (calculated as someone who both thinks they are living in a democracy and is satisfied with the way democracy works). At an intermediate level, we look at the perceived *legitimacy of the political system* (an index of responses to questions about whether the constitution reflects the values of all citizens, and the right of the police, courts, and tax authority to make people comply with their decisions). People’s evaluations of *the status of political freedoms* are measured by a series of questions that ask whether people’s ability to say what they want, join any organization they want, vote without fear, influence government and not worry about either arbitrary arrest or crime has improved over the past five years. We measure *trust in state institutions* (police, army and courts), *government institutions*

(President, Parliament, local councilor, Electoral Commission, and governing party), *state media* (electronic and print) and *independent media* (electronic and print).

At the most specific level, we measure evaluations of *presidential performance* and the performance of other representatives (MPs and local councilors), the *extent of corruption* amongst state officials (police, judges, tax officials, health workers and teachers) and government leaders (President, MPs, local councilors), as well as the perceived *responsiveness of elected officials* (again, MPs and local councilors). We measure even more specific evaluations of *government policy performance* in with regard to macro-economic management (economic management, creating jobs, keeping prices low, narrowing the income gap, and delivering food), delivering services (health care, education, water, and HIV/AIDS programs), fighting crime and corruption, and *local government performance* in delivering a range of goods (maintaining roads, keeping the community clean, collecting taxes, and spending revenues). Finally, we use Afrobarometer items that ask people about the *status of economic goods* (whether there are more goods, more jobs, and a smaller income gap than five years ago), their economic expectations and their evaluations of current national and personal economic conditions.

Since we have just demonstrated that educated Africans are consistently less likely to say they “don’t know,” we conducted these analyses using versions of the dependent variables that exclude “don’t know” responses.<sup>10</sup> Three main findings emerge (see Table 7). First, formal education, media use and political information have sizeable impacts on how people evaluate the national economy, the status of political rights, and the degree of trust they place in government and state. Second, with one exception, formal education consistently has a statistically significant and negative impact on performance evaluations. Thus, schooling not only enables Africans to offer more opinions, it also allows them to offer more critical opinions. Third, the contributions that formal schooling makes toward enabling more critical citizenship are mitigated by the effects of higher levels of political information and, sometimes, the effects of news media use. That is, while education (holding constant media use and information) makes people more critical of performance, we know that formal education simultaneously leads people to acquire greater amounts of political information, which in turn (holding constant education and news media use) make people consistently more forgiving of bad performance (see the unstandardized coefficients for political information in Table 7). Moreover, while higher levels of news media consumption sometime induce greater criticalness, they more often have the opposite effect of making people more forgiving.

**Table 7: Formal Education, Cognitive Awareness and Performance Evaluations**

	Formal Education (0-9) b	News Media Use (0-4) b	Political Information (0-6) b	Total Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Block R <sup>2</sup>	N
Personal Economic Conditions	.011***	.115***	.020***	.199	.091	20,123
Status of Political Freedom	-.089***	.008 <sup>NS</sup>	.098***	.091	.059	19,073
Trust Government Institutions	-.146***	-.065***	.070***	.106	.055	17,407
Trust State Media	-.168***	-.046***	.069***	.084	.054	13,079
Economic Expectations	-.075***	.110***	.078***	.103	.046	17,759
Status of Economic Goods	-.039***	.084***	.054***	.112	.038	19,707
Trust State Institutions	-.122***	-.053***	.028***	.056	.036	19,380
Govt Economic Performance	-.056***	.074***	.058***	.103	.034	18,224
Supply of Democracy	-.082***	.031***	.048***	.079	.030	17,020
National Economic Conditions	-.021***	.067***	.041***	.090	.030	20,426
Government Service Delivery	-.044***	.028***	.057***	.091	.029	18,982
Presidential Performance	-.102***	-.045***	.106***	.066	.026	19,909
Elections Free and Fair	-.122***	-.039***	.048***	.058	.022	19,149
Representative Performance	-.098***	-.034***	.032***	.055	.018	17,753
Local Government Delivery	-.068***	.048***	.023***	.061	.014	17,572
Government Corruption	.043***	.079***	-.005 <sup>NS</sup>	.039	.011	14,191
Legitimacy	-.020***	.010 <sup>NS</sup>	.042***	.025	.010	16,143
Responsiveness	-.049***	.016 <sup>NS</sup>	.041***	.027	.009	18,495
Trust Independent Media	-.082***	.032**	.021**	.018	.009	14,670
State Corruption	-.003 <sup>NS</sup>	.056***	.022***	.022	.004	14,690

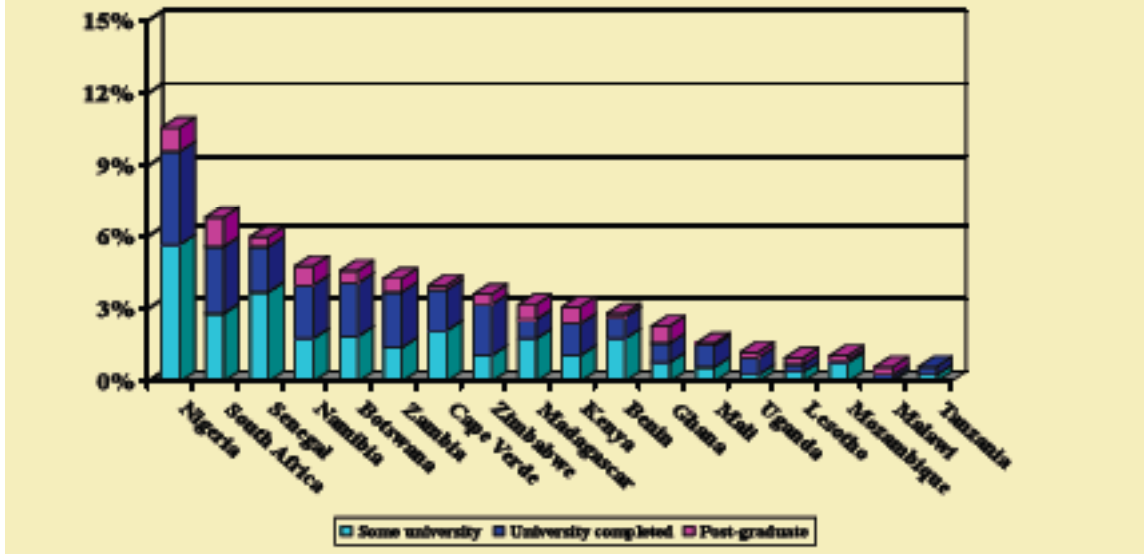
*Controlling for age, rural/urban location, gender and lived poverty, as well as cognitive engagement and efficacy.  
NS p>.05, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001*

### Higher Education and Democratic Citizenship

Against this broad context of formal education’s overall effects, which was based on a comparison of respondents up and down the educational scale, we now narrow our focus to examine the particular impact of higher education. As seen in Table 1, the overall political impact of college and university education in Africa on citizen behavior is likely to be minimal simply because so few citizens ever progress to these levels. However, there are many good reasons to suspect that the micro-level democratic payoff might be more substantial. If Africa’s schools are the sites of rote learning, its colleges and universities offer at least the possibility of a different pedagogy. As stated earlier, higher education may be effective in promoting critical skills and habits, and encouraging students to appreciate diversity, difference, ambiguity, contradiction and nuance (see Cloete & Muller, 2007; Cross et al, 1999 and World Bank, 2000). As noted earlier, university students were a driving force behind the popular protests that brought down many of Africa’s dictators in the early 1990s (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997), and younger, university-trained elected representatives have formed the core of cross-party coalitions that have initiated recent reforms in some African parliaments (Barkan et al, 2004).

In order to assess the degree to which Africans who have been to college or university think or act differently, and to isolate that impact from the fact that Africans who have been to college or university also have a high school diploma, we restrict all subsequent analysis to only those who have completed a high school education, comparing those with *any* university exposure to those who have either completed high school or have some technical training (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: University Attendance, By Country, 2005-2006**



We begin by repeating the same initial analyses we conducted on formal education and examine the bivariate associations of post-secondary education among this smaller group of school leavers (Table 8). We see one interesting contrast: while African citizens with higher levels of formal schooling tend to be younger than their less educated respondents, those who have been to university tend to be slightly older than those with a high school education only. Otherwise, university attendees are similar to the overall profile of educated people: they are more urban, and more male, and they also are less likely to experience poverty than high school graduates. But the differences between these two groups are far less pronounced than across the full educational spectrum.

**Table 8: Demographic Correlates of Formal Education**

	Formal Education	High School Completed Vs. At Least Some University
Age	-.281***	.059***
Rural	-.279***	-.141***
Lived Poverty	-.255***	-.146***
Female	-.107***	-.060***
N=	(21,269)	(4721)

Pearson's r correlation coefficients  
 NS p>=.05, \* p<=.05, \*\* p<=.01 \*\*\* p<=.001

Similarly, the effects of higher education (when compared to those of high school education) on news media use and political information are also far more modest than those of formal education in general (Table 9). And once we apply the relevant multivariate controls, we see that those who go on to university education are only slightly more likely to use the news media or know basic facts about the political system than ordinary school-leavers (Table 10).



**Table 9: Post Secondary Education and Cognitive Awareness (Bivariate Correlations)**

	Some	Party	Group	News	Political	Cognitive
News Media Use	.176***	-.008 <sup>NS</sup>	.057***			
Political Information	.108***	.125***	.189***	.145***		
Cognitive	.107***	.213***	.175***	.175***	.210***	
̄Efficacy/Competence	.048***	.064***	.053***	.080***	.106***	.151***

Pearson's *r* correlation coefficients

*N*=471

*NS* *p*>.05, \* *p*<.05, \*\* *p*<.01 \*\*\* *p*<.001

**Table 10: Post-Secondary Education and Cognitive Awareness (Multivariate Correlations)**

	Some	Party	Group	News	Political	Cognitive
	University	Identification	Membership	Media	Information	Engagement
				Use		
News Media Use	.081***	.013 <sup>NS</sup>	.072***			
Political Information	.060***	.086***	.142***	.058***		
Cognitive	.077***	.182***	.106***	.140***	.113***	
̄Efficacy/Competence	.018 <sup>NS</sup>	.028 <sup>NS</sup>	.007 <sup>NS</sup>	.035*	.039**	.110***

Partial correlations controlling for age, rural/urban location, gender and lived poverty, as well as every other element of cognitive awareness.

*N*=4686

*NS* *p*>.05, \* *p*<.05, \*\* *p*<.01 \*\*\* *p*<.001

Given these result, we again conduct multivariate, ordinary least squares regression analyses in which formal education is regressed, iteratively, on a series of dependent variables holding constant the four key elements of cognitive awareness (news media use, political information, cognitive engagement, and efficacy) as well as age, rural/urban location, gender and poverty. This enables us to isolate the independent statistical impact of higher education. But since we have demonstrated that there appears to be little chance of an appreciable “knock-on” effect of higher education via greater use of news media or the acquisition of more political information, we estimate a “block”  $R^2$  by simply regressing each dependent variable on higher education only.

Does university education appreciably increase democratic political participation in Africa? Table 11 shows that Africans with at least some university education are less likely than high school graduates to identify with a political party, and more likely to become involved in protest and contact formal officials, the absolute size of the difference is relatively small.<sup>11</sup> As with formal education in general, higher education plays no role in encouraging people to join civil society organizations, become involved in community affairs, or vote.

**Table 11: Formal Education, Cognitive Awareness and Political Participation**

	At Least Some	Total Adjusted	Block $R^2$	N
	University	$R^2$		
	(0-1) b			
Partisan Identification	-.126***	.077	.006	4,699
Protest	.149***	.041	.006	4,699
Formal Contact	.049*	.114	.004	4,231
Group Membership	.057 <sup>NS</sup>	.091	.001	4,697
Community Participation	.034 <sup>NS</sup>	.151	.000	4,699
Informal Contact	.007 <sup>NS</sup>	.082	.000	4,076
Registered & Voted	.000 <sup>NS</sup>	.118	.001	4,699

Controlling for age, rural/urban location, gender and lived poverty, as well as cognitive engagement and efficacy.

*NS* *p*>.05, \* *p*<.05, \*\* *p*<.01 \*\*\* *p*<.001

Compared to high school leavers, university attendees are very slightly more able to offer opinions on government performance, but exhibit no statistically significant differences in terms of their ability to

provide a meaning of democracy, or offer preferences about democracy and a range of other social and political values.

And compared to school leavers, those who have attended university are very slightly more likely to demand freedom of expression. In fact, they are *less* likely to believe that everyone should have an equal vote, or to say that elected leaders should be governed by public opinion (rather than their own beliefs). Yet the most important finding here is that there is virtually no difference between high school graduates and those who have attended African universities in terms of their social and political values.

**Table 12: Formal Education, Cognitive Awareness and Articulatensess**

	Some University (0-1) b	Total Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Block R <sup>2</sup>	N
Able to Offer Opinions on Government Performance	-.284*	.037	.000	4686
Able to Offer Meaning of Democracy	-.016 <sup>NS</sup>	.034	.000	4699
Able to Offer Preferences on Democracy	.002 <sup>NS</sup>	.033	.001	4695
Able to Offer Value Preferences	-.066 <sup>NS</sup>	.045	.000	4222

Controlling for age, rural/urban location, gender and lived poverty, as well as cognitive engagement and efficacy.  
NS p=>.05, \* p=<.05, \*\* p=<.01 \*\*\* p=<.001

**Table 13: University Education and Democratic Values**

	At Least Some University (0-1) b	Total Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Block R <sup>2cc</sup>	N
All People Should Have Equal Vote	-.148**	.004	.002	4233
Leaders Should Listen To People	-.100*	.010	.000	4230
Demand Bureaucratic Accountability	-.027*	.010	.000	4699
Demand Freedom of Expression	.104*	.025	.000	4698
Demand for Democracy (0-4)	.044 <sup>NS</sup>	.033	.002	4699
Demand Gender Equality	.037 <sup>NS</sup>	.056	.001	4232
People Responsible for Well-Being	.010 <sup>NS</sup>	.025	.001	4232
Demand Rule of Law	-.039 <sup>NS</sup>	.040	.000	4698
Demand Representative	-.008 <sup>NS</sup>	.019	.000	4699
Opposition to Corruption	.015 <sup>NS</sup>	.016	.000	4698
People Should Question Leaders	.024 <sup>NS</sup>	.006	.000	4232
Interpersonal Trust	.054 <sup>NS</sup>	.002	.000	4232

Controlling for age, rural/urban location, gender and lived poverty, as well as cognitive engagement and efficacy.  
NS p=>.05, \* p=<.05, \*\* p=<.01 \*\*\* p=<.001

The most consistent impacts of university education can be seen in terms of performance evaluations. Controlling the other elements of cognitive awareness and demographic factors, we find that (with one exception), university attendees are consistently more likely to offer more critical evaluations of the performance of their economies, governments and political regimes. At the same time, the size of the impact is quite limited. At most, those who have been to university are only about one-fifth to one-fourth of a point more negative than high school graduates on four or five point scales.

**Table 14: University Education and Critical Performance Evaluations**

	At Least Some University (0-1) b	Total Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Block R <sup>2</sup> “	N
Personal Economic Conditions	.077*	.211	.012	4690
Trust State Media	-.374***	.085	.005	3687
Trust Government Institutions	-.279***	.089	.002	4693
Economic Expectations	-.094*	.185	.002	4695
Government Corruption	.197***	.045	.002	4697
Presidential Performance	-.350***	.082	.002	4699
Supply of Democracy	-.291***	.094	.001	4698
Government Control of Crime & Elections Free & Fair	-.216***	.076	.001	4698
Status of Political Freedom	-.197***	.157	.000	4697
Trust State Institutions	-.168***	.043	.000	4695
Status of Economic Goods	-.111***	.167	.000	4696
Government Service Delivery	-.132***	.113	.000	4694
National Economic Conditions	-.146***	.128	.000	4697
Government Economic Performance	-.143***	.129	.000	4696
Representative Performance	-.120*	.060	.000	4697
Legitimacy	-.087*	.041	.000	4696
Local Government Delivery	-.092*	.060	.000	4699
Responsiveness	-.102*	.012	.000	4698
State Corruption	.086*	.025	.000	4695

Controlling for age, rural/urban location, gender and lived poverty, as well as cognitive engagement and efficacy.  
 NS p>=.05, \* p<=.05, \*\* p<=.01 \*\*\* p<=.001

### Conclusions

Africa is a continent of “low information societies” characterized by poor communications infrastructure, limited access to news media, low levels of schooling and even lower levels of access to higher education (Mattes & Shenga, 2007). Against this backdrop, one might expect that the limited availability of education would provide significant advantages for the minority of citizens who are able to attend school or university. The evidence reviewed in this paper does indeed suggest that Africa’s schools and universities have paid some democratic dividends.

Viewed across 18 countries, increasing levels of formal education both enable and stimulate Africans to make greater use of the media to get news about politics. It also facilitates citizens’ acquisition of the basic information that allows them to make sense of the larger political system. Both news media use and political information, in turn, lead citizens to become much more cognitively engaged with politics, both taking a greater interest in and actively discussing politics with friends and neighbors (though education plays no direct role in this respect).

Africans with higher levels of schooling are also more likely to display key critical skills. Not only are educated respondents more likely to formulate preferences and offer evaluations of political and economic performance, they are also more likely to offer critical opinions, especially in terms of how they rate the national economy and the degree to which they distrust government and state institutions, including state-run news media. Higher levels of schooling also lead Africans to demand democracy, that is, to see democracy as the most preferable regime and to reject non-democratic forms of government such as the one party state, strong man dictators or military rule.

Beyond the preference of democracy to other regimes, however, formal education does not produce other democratic orientations. There are few significant, and even fewer substantive differences between less and more educated respondents in terms of a wide range of values such as individualism, equality, expression, trust in others, accountability, or probity in government. Finally, education makes an extremely limited contribution to political participation. Educated respondents are more likely to contact formal officials (a more individualistic form of participation), they are no more or less likely to vote, identify with a political party, join civic groups, get involved in community affairs or protest.

Higher education, however, has far more limited effects on enhancing democratic citizenship. Those Africans with a university education are, indeed, more critical of the performance of the economy, their government and the larger political regime, though the size of the differences are small. In general, those Africans who have attended university display few statistically significant, and even fewer substantively important differences with high school graduates in terms of political information, news media consumption, political participation, articulateness or pro-democratic values.

Even with the enormous challenges faced by Africa's schools, students who move up the educational ladder and complete high school become more knowledgeable, more articulate and more critical democrats (at least in comparison to the majority of citizens interviewed in the 18 countries included in the Afrobarometer surveys of 2005-2006 who had a primary school education or less). Why, however, do we fail to see any further democratic progress amongst those who have managed to get a university education? Is it the content of the curricula that fails to provide any greater knowledge or stimulate interest and engagement? Or is it the style of teaching that fails to kindle debate and greater critical thinking? Has the brain drain simply robbed the continent's universities of too many of its intellectuals and qualified lecturers? Or does a lack of resources and massive overcrowding simply overwhelm both students and faculty and nullify the impact of an adequate curricula and pedagogy? To answer such questions, we will need to broaden the analytic focus to make more direct comparisons of Africa with other continents, especially other developing regions such as Asia and Latin America. But we will also need to narrow it to examine not only cross-national and cross-regional differences within Africa, but focus it to allow us to compare across universities and curricula. Answering these questions through a sustained research program will not only improve the quality of higher education, but also assist in the development of democracy on the continent.

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<sup>1</sup> “Country” accounts for 18 percent of the variation around the mean of education ( $\text{Eta}^2 = .177$  and  $\text{Eta} = .421$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

<sup>2</sup> Factor analysis extracted a single unrotated factor (Eigenvalue 1.78) that explains 59.8 percent of total variance of the three items. Index reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha = .65) is acceptable ( $n=21,600$ ).

<sup>3</sup> Factor analysis identified two factors, the first of which explains 36.2 percent of total variance with an Eigenvalue of 2.17. Index reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha = .64) is acceptable ( $n=22,600$ ). Also a comparison of questions on awareness of incumbents with previous surveys suggests a high degree of test-retest reliability. To be sure, measuring citizens’ information is always a tricky affair; findings often differ sharply depending on whether researchers ask respondents to recall certain facts from memory, or recognize them from a list of several possible answers. Thus, because the Afrobarometer uses the recall method, one should be aware that our findings might understate the actual level of awareness.

<sup>4</sup> The two items are sufficiently correlated (Pearson’s  $r = .33$ ) and reliable (Cronbach’s Alpha = .50) warranting the creation of a two item average construct ( $n=21,600$ ).

<sup>5</sup> The two items are sufficiently correlated (Pearson’s  $r = .48$ ) and strongly reliable (Cronbach’s Alpha = .65) warranting the creation of a two item average construct ( $n=21,600$ ).

<sup>6</sup> Factor analysis extracted a single unrotated factor (Eigenvalue = 1.54) which explains 51.2 percent of the common variance. Index reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha = .51) is low and barely acceptable ( $n=20,389$ ).

<sup>7</sup> The two items are strongly correlated (Pearson’s  $r = .74$ ) and strongly reliable (Cronbach’s Alpha = .84) warranting the creation of a two item average construct ( $n=21,600$ ).

<sup>8</sup> However, consistent with earlier research (Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005) we find that educated Africans are *less* likely to favor a universal franchise.

<sup>9</sup> The results shown on Table 6 were calculated on dependent variables where “don’t know” responses were recoded to middle categories on the response scale. Because more educated respondents were less likely to say they “don’t know” across these items, we also recalculated each of these equations using dependent variables that excluded the “don’t know” responses. The results were virtually identical across all items.

<sup>10</sup> We replicated this analysis for each item with a version of the variable that recodes “don’t know” responses to a middle category. In contrast to values, we found that the combined impact of education, news media use and political information was consistently larger when we use the versions that exclude “don’t know” responses.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, higher education has no statistically significant impacts when entered into a regression analysis on its own. Significant impacts emerge only after holding constant other elements of cognitive awareness and demographic factors.

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