



Working Paper No. 122

**ANCHORING THE “D-WORD” IN
AFRICA**

by Michael Bratton

**A comparative series of national public
attitude surveys on democracy, markets
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Anchoring the “D-Word” in Africa

Abstract

Efforts to do comparative research on political attitudes have been complicated by varying understandings of “democracy.” The Afrobarometer is exploring new techniques to overcome this difficulty.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a remarkable proliferation of comparative survey research within political science and cognate disciplines (Heath et al. 2005, Norris 2008, Smith 2009). In addition to the long-standing World Values Survey (WVS), new entrants include the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), the Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP) and the various regional studies that comprise the Global Barometer Surveys (GBS). To a greater or lesser extent, and among other concerns, these studies seek to capture public attitudes towards democracy, both on the demand side (covering topics like support for democracy and rejection of authoritarian alternatives) and the supply side (including assessments of satisfaction with, and the estimated level of, democracy).

Because of the broad geographical scope of these comparative surveys, questions arise as to the validity, reliability and equivalence of core concepts, especially the elusive idea of “democracy” – a contested, multidimensional, and normative term. Do survey respondents within and across countries and among world regions understand the “d-word” in similar or divergent ways? Is there sufficient similarity in popular conceptions to justify making direct comparisons of results from questionnaire items that employ the word “democracy”? In the absence of a clear convergence about meanings do we need to adjust survey responses to correct for differences of understanding? If so, how?

My instinct is to suspect that differences in popular understandings of democracy across continents, countries, social groups and individuals pose more serious challenges of conceptual equivalence and content validity than analysts have been willing to acknowledge to date. I argue that comparative survey researchers face a pressing need to anchor the “d-word” against some sort of common, probably relative but preferably universal, standard. Without such standardization, I doubt whether global comparisons about the quality of democracy, at least as judged by citizens themselves, can be justified at all.

This brief analysis discusses the various ways in which the Afrobarometer research network has sought to grapple with this problem. I describe three different methods that we have tested. And I discuss the pros and cons of each.¹

Democracy Self-Defined

First, the Afrobarometer allows survey respondents to define democracy in their own words. The question asks: “What, if anything does democracy mean to you?”² The answers are post-coded. Although about one quarter say “don’t know,” the Africans we have interviewed express unexpectedly liberal and procedural conceptions. Those with an opinion ranked the meanings of democracy as follows: civil liberties (especially freedom of speech), government by the people, voting and elections, peace and unity, equality and justice, and socioeconomic development. The primacy of individual freedoms is stable over time on the two occasions we have measured it in 2000 and 2005 and largely consistent across the African countries we have studied (Bratton 2006).

Taking a similar approach, Dalton, Shin and Jou (2007) draw on nearly fifty surveys in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America to ask, “whether contemporary publics display a reasonable understanding of the meaning of democracy.” They also find that, first and foremost, “democracy is broadly identified in terms of freedom and civil liberties.” Moreover, this conception holds immediately following as well as some years after a regime transition. Because “a basic understanding of democracy has apparently diffused widely

¹ Of course, other approaches are possible. Richard Rose and his colleagues at the New Democracy Barometer and its successor projects have consciously avoided the “d-word,” asking instead about a “system of government with regular elections and many parties” (Rose et al. 1998).

² Even if the question is translated into a vernacular language, the term “democracy” is always stated in the official national language. The interviewer elicits up to 3 responses, which enables various options for analysis: by first response, by all responses, or by all respondents.

around the world,”³ many analysts – ourselves included – have therefore been content to assume that data based on survey items using the “d-word” can be validly compared across space and time.

The advantage of a self-defined characterization of democracy is that it allows citizens to anchor all other responses to questions about democracy according to their own subjective – and therefore supposedly meaningful – standard. Moreover, an open-ended inquiry into definitions is superior to a closed-ended list of attributes, which experience suggests tends to prompt respondents to conflate democratization with the satisfaction of material needs.

But, by the same token, we do not know whether all survey respondents conceive of freedom in the same way. Are they thinking of negative freedom from an overbearing state or positive freedom to exercise inalienable human rights? And, even if people mention freedom more frequently than any other meaning, only four out of ten do so (40 percent in 2000, 41 percent in 2005). Moreover, some people can offer more than one meaning of democracy and different people do not always prioritize subsidiary meanings in exactly the same order. Thus it seems presumptuous – even heroic – to base the comparative study of public attitudes to democracy on the assumption that all people understand democracy simply and commonly as freedom.

Democracy Disaggregated

Because democracy is an abstract concept that refers to an ideal form of government, it is easy, costless, and socially approved for citizens to associate themselves with it. There is therefore need to design concrete survey questions to probe whether citizens understand more tangible attributes of a democratic regime. And because democracy is also a multidimensional construct, these questions should capture a range of the sundry ways in which democratic principles operate in practice.

One approach is to disaggregate a democratic regime according to component institutions. Instead of asking only about “democracy” writ large, Afrobarometer surveys also ask about four key institutions that are commonly considered to provide political rules for operating a democratic regime: open elections, competing political parties, legal constraints on the executive, and legislative autonomy.⁴ None of the survey questions on these topics employs the “d-word.” In addition to asking whether citizens demand these institutions, we also inquire whether they think political elites are providing an adequate supply. Because the present analysis concerns the intrinsic meaning of democracy, I concentrate here on the demand side.

Results indicate that:

- a) On average, popular demand for “regular, honest and open elections” is higher than for other democratic institutions. This pattern tends to hold across African countries and over time (at least between 2005 and 2008).
- b) Popular demand exceeds perceived supply for all four democratic institutions. This result indicates that most Africans are receiving less democracy than they say they want.
- c) Across 19 African countries in 2008, the average level of popular demand for four democratic institutions (68 percent) is roughly on a par with expressed support for “democracy,” stated as such (70 percent). This suggests, against the expectations of skeptics, that the “d-word” question is capturing some concrete manifestations of regime type.

By disaggregating a democratic regime into component institutions and exploring public opinion towards each, we are able to calibrate popular responses to different dimensions of a democratic regime. This approach has the advantage of revealing that Africans clearly associate democracy with elections but less so with executive accountability between elections. And they remain somewhat wary of multiparty

³ For philosophical claims about the universal link between democracy and freedom see Bova 1997 and Sen 1999.

⁴ In Afrobarometer Round 4 (2008) the number of items was expanded to eight, including four additional democratic institutions: presidential term limits, parliamentary oversight, legitimacy of opposition, and free mass media.

competition, which is associated in many people's minds with conflict and violence. Lastly, we discover that popular responses to survey stimuli about democratic institutions adhere to similar patterns across African countries.

However, there are several drawbacks to inferring shared meanings of democracy from popular attitudes to constituent institutions. Not least is the fact that the survey questions refer only to formal, national institutions in a context where informal ties permeate political life and the horizons of political life are often quite local. Second, the questions about democratic institutions are idiosyncratic to the Afrobarometer and to my knowledge are not asked in surveys in other parts of the world, thus limiting cross-continental comparability. Most importantly, however, expressions of popular support for diverse democratic institutions do not cohere around a single scale that could plausibly be labeled support for "democracy."⁵ For all these reasons, we continue to lack guidance on how to adjust "d-word" indicators to take account of the fact some Africans may have distinctive understandings of democracy.

Democracy Anchored

To address the perennial challenge of "interpersonally incomparable responses" in survey research (Brady 1985), we are currently attempting to standardize respondent assessments of democracy consolidation against a set of anchoring vignettes (King et al. 2004, King and Wand 2007, Hopkins and King forthcoming).⁶ The root question explicitly employs the "d-word": "In your opinion, how much of a democracy is your country today?"⁷ But, building on the institutional approach of Rose et al. (see footnote 1) and acknowledging that Africans regard political freedoms and competitive multiparty elections as central to their conceptions of democracy (see previous sections), the vignettes are:

- a) Country A. "Adam lives in a country with many political parties and free elections. Everyone is free to speak their minds about politics and to vote for the party of their choice. Elections sometimes lead to a change of ruling party. In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Adam's country?"
- b) Country B. "Betty lives in a country with regular elections. It has one large political party and many small ones. People are free to express their opinions and to vote as they please. But so far, elections have not led to a change of ruling party. In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Betty's country?"
- c) Country C. "Christopher lives in a country with regular elections. It has one big political party and many small ones. People are afraid to express political opinions or to vote for the opposition. The opposition is so weak that it seems that it can never win an election. In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Christopher's country?"

An initial examination of the frequency of responses from the 2008 Afrobarometer data seems to suggest that the vignettes work as planned. Table 1 shows that, overall, respondents rank the hypothetical cases in the intended order: on average, 76 percent regard Country A (a liberal democracy) as a full or nearly full democracy, as compared to 48 percent for Country B (an electoral democracy) and just 13 percent for Country C (an electoral autocracy). And they place their own country (59 percent) between Countries A and B. These results enjoy an empirical face validity that reflects the partial attainment of civil liberties, the resilience of dominant parties, and the relative rarity of leadership turnovers in Africa's multiparty electoral regimes.

⁵ Factor analysis on 2008 Afrobarometer data (principal components, no rotation) produces two dimensions, which together explain 57 percent of the variance in the four institutional indicators. Support for elections hangs together with support for parliamentary supremacy; and support for multiple parties hangs together with judicial review of presidential decisions. But the two dimensions are negatively related to one another.

⁶ This project is a joint effort with Eric Chang.

⁷ Response categories are 1 = "not a democracy," 2 = "a democracy with major problems," 3 = "a democracy with minor problems," 4 = "a full democracy", 8 = don't understand (the term "democracy") and 9 = "don't know."

Table 1: Popular Estimates of the Extent of Democracy, 2008: Own Country versus Hypothetical Vignettes

	Not a Democracy	A Democracy with Major Problems	A Democracy with Minor Problems	A Full Democracy	Don't Know
Own Country	5	25	30	29	10
Country A	2	8	23	53	13
Country B	11	28	34	14	14
Country C	46	26	9	4	14

Cell entries are percentages of survey respondents choosing this estimated extent of democracy.

By the same token, however, the data also reveal that people remain uncertain about distinguishing fine degrees of democracy. Sometimes they rank the vignettes in an “incorrect” order on a scale of democracy, with C above B, B above A, and sometimes even C above A (in 3 percent of cases). Or, reflecting uncertainty about the precise characteristics of a democratic regime, they rank vignettes as “tied” at the same level of democracy. Table 2 illustrates these results. If a strict order is required, only 71 percent of individuals can rank Countries A and C “correctly” (82 percent can do so if ties are allowed). And, disturbingly, only 37 percent (72 percent if ties are allowed) can rank all three vignettes strictly in the intended order. In short, only about one out of three Africans interviewed could reliably use a four point ordinal scale to distinguish the extent of democracy in three hypothetical African regimes.

Table 2: Respondents’ Rankings of Hypothetical Vignettes

	Correct Ranking	Incorrect Ranking
Countries A and C in strict order (no ties)	71	29
Countries A and C in loose order (ties allowed)	82	18
Countries A, B and C in strict order (no ties)	37	63
Countries A, B and C in loose order (ties allowed)	72	27

Cell entries are percentages of survey respondents choosing this ranking of vignettes.

This result calls into question whether survey respondents understand the “d-word” in the same way. If they do not, then there is a problem of content validity with the term “democracy” as used in comparative survey questionnaires. We cannot be certain that individual respondents use the same standards when judging whether they support democracy or the degree of democracy they think their own country has attained. An important implication is that countries should not be compared based only on raw point estimates of democracy indicators aggregated from public opinion data.

Fortunately, a technique is available for ameliorating this sort of incomparability. The order of hypothetical vignettes provides a baseline for re-scaling survey responses. Using the present example, we can anchor every respondent’s estimate of the extent of democracy in her own country against the scale implicit in the vignettes. For example, respondents who judge their own country poorly in relation to standards on the vignettes scale will see an increase in their assessments of the extent of democracy. And, conversely, respondents who judge their own country relatively generously will see their own-country assessments diminish.⁸

Table 3 displays the effects of this correction on the rankings by degree of democratic development in 19 African countries in 2008. The first column of figures shows the mean score for all citizens in each country on the original four-point scale for the perceived “extent of democracy.” In the second column this variable is recoded into a seven-point scale corrected for the respondents’ positions *vis a vis* the vignettes. Because

⁸ Analysis is limited to those observations whose value of the recoded democracy variable is a scalar. We excluded the cases (n = 5918 out of N = 26,143) that have interval values. Our next step is to convert those observations into scalar-values by the minimum entropy criterion suggested by King and Wand (2007).

these scores are measured on different scales,⁹ raw country scores cannot be directly compared. Instead, we counter-pose the rank of each country across the original and transformed scales.

This procedure produces interesting results. On one hand, the rank order of countries is similar in important respects. Ghana stays right near the top on both scales and Nigeria remains dead last, results that have considerable face validity. Moreover, over two-thirds of the countries (13 out of 19) occupy the same echelon on both indicators or vary by no more than a rank or two. A test of ordinal correlation indicates a moderately strong connection between both versions of the “extent of democracy” variable.¹⁰ We therefore reject the notion that the two rankings are mutually independent. This result provides a preliminary rebuttal against the cynical claim that the original “d-word” formulation is *completely* incomparable.

Table 3: Extent of Democracy, Anchored by Vignettes, African Countries, 2008

	Extent of Democracy (original 4 pt. scale)	Extent of Democracy (recoded 7 pt. scale)	Rank (original)	Rank (recoded)	Change in Rank
Benin	3.19	5.44	4	2	+ 2
Botswana	3.49	4.82	1	7	- 6
Burkina	2.83	4.59	12	12	0
Cape Verde	3.11	5.10	6	4	+ 2
Ghana	3.45	5.46	2	1	+ 1
Kenya	2.60	4.14	16	16	0
Lesotho	2.51	3.70	18	18	0
Liberia	2.91	4.68	10	9	+ 1
Madagascar	2.80	4.11	14	17	- 3
Malawi	2.82	5.04	13	5	+ 8
Mali	2.94	4.59	8	11	- 3
Mozambique	2.93	4.49	9	13	- 4
Namibia	3.16	5.14	5	3	+ 2
Nigeria	2.43	3.61	19	19	0
Senegal	2.56	4.22	17	15	+ 2
South Africa	2.84	4.61	11	10	+ 1
Tanzania	3.23	4.96	3	6	- 3
Uganda	2.73	4.44	15	14	- 1
Zambia	2.98	4.73	7	8	- 1

On the other hand, the anchoring procedure draws attention to two countries whose ranks change radically. Botswana drops six places (from rank 1) and Malawi ascends eight places (to rank 5). In Botswana – which has never had a turnover of ruling party and has recently experienced high-handed executive rule and press restrictions under President Ian Khama – citizens apparently set high standards for judging what constitutes “a full democracy.” In Malawi, by contrast, citizens are either less demanding in their judgments about democracy or they assess that – in fact – elections are becoming fairer, political elites are circulating, and independent candidates are gaining political representation in their country.

In this regard, variance between original and “anchored” results can be interpreted in terms of political learning on the part of African citizens. Most of the countries whose rankings improve on extent of

⁹ The formula for the transformation generates $2j+1$ response categories, where j = the number of vignettes. With 3 vignettes, we generate a seven-point scale.

¹⁰ Kendall’s $\tau = .708$.

democracy have experienced electoral alternation of ruling parties (e.g. Benin, Cape Verde, Ghana, and Senegal), which suggests that citizens use leadership turnover as a cue to determine whether democratic rules are working as intended. By contrast, most of the countries that move down in the rankings have large rural populations whose daily lives are detached from central government and national politics (e.g. Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique and Tanzania). These generally “uncritical citizens” are prone to offer overly generous assessments of democratic performance (Chaligha et al 2002, Mattes and Shenga 2007). Once they hear descriptions of other political regimes in the anchoring vignettes, however, they tend to stiffen their judgments about whether their own country is really a democracy.

The next step in our research agenda is to explore the causes and consequences of differential interpretations of the “d-word” at the individual level. It seems likely, for example, that educated urbanites are more likely than non-literate rural dwellers to exercise relatively informed and critical views about democratic achievements. And individuals who, compared to their compatriots, discount the supply of democracy in their countries may be more likely to vote against incumbent governments. For the moment, however, I simply argue that, in the aggregate, an “anchored” version of citizen perceptions of the extent of democracy offers a more reliable comparative ranking of countries than previously produced by public opinion research in Africa.

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