



POPULAR OPINIONS ON DEMOCRACY IN LIBERIA, 2008

Introduction

From the year it achieved independence in 1847 until 1980, Liberia was a one-party dominant state in which government was controlled by the settler minority (Africans manumitted from the United States and their descendants). The settler government marginalized the indigenous African majority. By the 1970s, mass organizations emerged and mobilized Liberian society around the demand for an end to one-party rule. On April 12, 1980, the army – largely comprised of indigenous Liberians – intervened in the politics of the country through a bloody coup d'état that overthrew the settler-controlled civilian administration. However, while the army was unable to bring about the social and economic changes desired by the population, it also refused to disengage from politics. The desire to hold on to power culminated in the rigging of the elections of October 1985. Thereafter, challenges to military rule not only increased, but also assumed violent forms.

In 1989, the country descended into civil war. Between 1989 and 2003, the war led to the total failure and collapse of the state. Both the military dictatorship of the 1980s (that emerged out of the coup) and the military bureaucratic state of the 1990s and early 21st century (that emerged out of the war) professed support for democracy, although with limited positive results. But in the comprehensive peace agreement that was fashioned in Accra, Ghana in August 2003, democratic politics finally surfaced as the most reasonable and generally agreed method for reconstituting the state, building the peace, and establishing political stability.

In 2005, Liberia seated Africa's first female President through democratic elections, and embarked upon the building of democracy, following more than two decades of civil upheaval that had destabilized the population, destroyed infrastructure, and rendered governance institutions dysfunctional. The crisis left behind a legacy of failed institutions and presented the new government with enormous challenges of rebuilding infrastructure, reforming devastated institutions, and instituting democratic principles of governance.

After four years of democratic rule, what do Liberians think about the state of democracy in their country, the performance of democratic institutions, and the prospects for democracy? The country's first Afrobarometer survey, conducted in December 2008, offers a chance to get some answers to these questions.

Summary findings

In general, the 2008 Afrobarometer survey found that:

1. A majority (72 percent) of Liberians prefer democracy to any other kind of government;
2. Liberians resoundingly disapprove of non-democratic forms of governance (i.e., one-man rule, 88 percent; one-party rule, 81 percent; and military rule, 77 percent).

3. A majority of Liberians have deep attachment to some core democratic values and practices. Eighty-eight percent agree that leaders in the country should be chosen through regular, open and honest elections; 83 percent say the constitution should limit the President to only two terms in office; 74 percent think the President must obey the laws and court decisions even if she thinks they are wrong; 73 percent believe the national legislature should make laws, rather than the president; and nearly two-thirds (61percent) agree that many political parties are needed to ensure that Liberians have real choices in who governs them.
4. More than three out of four Liberians (77 percent) believe that the media should act as a check on government by investigating and reporting on corruption and government mismanagement. However, nearly equal numbers (73 percent) think opposition parties should instead cooperate with the government rather than being critical.
5. Just half of Liberians (51 percent) feel very or fairly satisfied with the way democracy works in the country. A large minority (44 percent) are unsatisfied. Nonetheless, a majority (72 percent) is willing to allow the present system of elected government time to deal with inherited problems.
6. However, popular trust in constitutional and democratic institutions among Liberians is generally low.

The Afrobarometer

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, markets and economic conditions. The Afrobarometer started in 1999 and has now conducted four rounds of surveys, expanding from 12 countries in Round 1 (1999-2001) to 20 in Round 4 (2008-2009). Fieldwork for the first Afrobarometer survey in Liberia was undertaken between December 8 and 21, 2008 by Subah Belleh Associates under the supervision of the Liberia Democratic Institute. The survey is based on a randomly selected national probability sample of 1,200 respondents representing a cross-section of adult Liberians aged 18 years or older. A sample of this size yields a margin of error of approximately ± 3 percent at a 95 percent confidence level. The survey was conducted in all 15 counties, with each county and urban and rural areas sampled in proportion to their share of the national population. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by trained fieldworkers in the language of the respondent's choice.

Popular Understanding of Democracy

Before exploring how much Liberians want democracy, or how much democracy they think they are getting, it is important to understand what Liberians mean when they talk about democracy. We explore this issue using a series of "democracy vignettes" that were included in the Round 4 Afrobarometer survey. Each vignette described a simple country scenario referring to the levels of freedom and the degree of real competition that occurred via elections within the country. Respondents were then asked to rate how democratic they thought that country was, with responses ranging from completely democratic, to a democracy with minor problems, a democracy with major problems, or not a democracy.

Based on their responses to this question, Liberians seem to have a good understanding of the meaning of democracy. Vignette A describes a country with "many political parties and free elections [where] everyone is free to speak their minds about politics and to vote for the party of their choice [and] elections sometimes lead to a change of ruling party." Eight in every ten Liberians (80 percent) classified this country as a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems. In contrast, only 50 percent consider a one-party dominant system with free elections, but no changes in ruling party (vignette B) a full democracy or democracy with only minor

problems, while 42 percent classify this as a democracy with major problems or not a democracy. Finally, Vignette C described a state with that holds elections, but that has only one large political party and many small ones, and where “people are afraid to express political opinions or to vote for the opposition [and] the opposition is so weak that it seems that it can never win an election.” A clear majority of Liberians (64 percent) classify a this country as a democracy with major problems or not a democracy at all, while only 27 percent consider this a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems.

While this doesn’t reflect a perfect understanding of democracy – especially the fact that one in four rate the last system as a democracy – the overall trends in responses shown here indicate that among a majority of Liberians, the popular understanding of democracy broadly conforms to conventional understandings.

Enlightenment through education appears to be an important factor influencing citizens’ understandings of democracy. More educated Liberians are less tolerant of flaws in democracies. A relatively larger percentage (87 percent) of Liberians with tertiary education classified the first country (Vignette A) as a full democracy, compared to those with primary or no education (74 percent each). Similarly, 54 and 72 percent respectively of more educated Liberians classified the second two countries (Vignettes B and C) as ‘not a democracy’ or ‘a democracy with major problems’ as compared to a little over a third and a half respectively of those with primary or no education. Younger Liberians are slightly less tolerant of flaws in democracy.¹ Comparatively, Liberians aged 18 to 35 years (66 percent) are somewhat more likely to classify vignette C as “democracy with major flaws” or “not a democracy” than people over 60 (61 percent). Meanwhile, rural respondents are more likely to respond that they “don’t know” to all the vignettes.

Demand for Democracy

Support for democracy is most simply measured by the question “*Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government; In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable; For someone like me, it doesn’t matter what kind of government we have.*” Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of Liberians express support for democracy, by agreeing with the first statement (Table 1).

Table 1: Support for Democracy (percent, 2008)

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government	72
Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government	9
Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have	12
Don't know	7

However, it is (or may be) easy to express this kind of notional support for democracy, so Afrobarometer probes popular commitment to democracy more deeply by exploring popular tolerance for non-democratic or authoritarian forms of government. Both the current political administration of Liberia and the opposition have many functionaries who were key players and well-known actors in previous authoritarian regimes. This notwithstanding, Liberians resoundingly disapprove of one-man rule (88 percent), one-party rule (81 percent) and military rule (77 percent) (Table 2). In general, it appears that the scarring effects of the destruction of human lives and properties that characterized the recent bleak episode in the history of Liberia have made most Liberians wary of these non-democratic regimes. The overwhelming rejection of one-man rule, in particular, may be attributed in large part to negative experiences with dictators.

¹ We classified those aged 18-35 years as young; 36-59 as middle aged; and 60+ years as elderly.

Table 2: Rejection of Authoritarian Alternatives (Percent, 2008)

	One-party rule	Military rule	Strongman rule
Strongly Disapprove	48	49	53
Disapprove	33	28	35
Neither Approve Nor Disapprove	1	2	2
Approve	12	14	7
Strongly Approve	5	5	2
Don't know	1	1	1

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

Liberians living in rural settlements are more likely to *approve* of one-party rule (20 percent) than urban respondents (12 percent). But in contrast, rural residents are more likely to *disapprove* of military rule compared to those in urban areas (82 percent vs. 73 percent). Older people (92 percent) are also more inclined towards disapproving of military rule than younger people (73 percent), probably because they lived as adults through the full period of violent conflicts occasioned by military rule.²

Popular Attachment to the Values and Practices of Democratic Politics

There are other indicators of demand for and commitment to democracy, such as support for the important institutions that form the substance of democracy. For the most part, these indicators yield results that are encouraging for the deepening of democracy in Liberia. For instance, 88 percent agree with the statement that “we should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open and honest elections,” rather than through other methods (12 percent) (Table 3).

Table 3: Choose leaders through elections vs. other methods (percent, 2008)

Agree Very Strongly with Statement 1	62
Agree with Statement 1	26
Agree with Statement 2	6
Agree Very Strongly with Statement 2	6
Don't know	1

Question: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.*

Statement 1: *We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open and honest elections.*

Statement 2: *Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.*

Urban dwellers (92 percent) are somewhat more likely to support elections than rural respondents (85 percent). Highly educated Liberians (94 percent) are also more likely to support elections than the least educated (85 percent) or uneducated (83 percent).³

Even though the levels of endorsement for other core institutions of democracy are not as high as preference for democracy and rejection of authoritarian regimes, majorities still support most of them. When presented with two statements (A) “*Political parties create division and confusion;*

² Those who were fighters or members of factions involved in the conflict were more likely to approve of one-party rule (36 percent) than non-fighters (16 percent). It must be noted however that only forty three respondents were fighters, which makes the margin of error for this result quite high.

³ Former fighters or members of factions involved in the conflict are much more likely to support other methods for choosing leaders (32 percent) than non-fighters (11 percent).

it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Liberia” and (B) “Many political parties are needed to make sure that Liberians have real choices in who governs them,” nearly two-thirds (61percent) of Liberians opt for many political parties. However, a little over a third (38 percent) viewed multiple political parties as divisive and therefore unnecessary.

Again, experience appears to have taught Liberians not to tolerate executive dominance. Sixty-five percent of Liberians believe Parliament should demand explanations from the President on how tax revenue is spent. Just a third (34 percent) hold the view that the president need not account. And nearly eight in ten Liberians (77 percent) believe that the media should act as a check on government by investigating and reporting on corruption and other mistakes. A fifth (22 percent), however, think such reports will damage the country (Table 4).

In fact, opinions on parliament and media checks on the government are largely influenced by the level of education. Liberians with tertiary education are far more likely to strongly support the view that parliament (60 percent) and the media (62 percent) should monitor, examine and scrutinize how the President runs the country than the uneducated (35 and 38 percent, respectively).

Table 4: Popular opinions on core institutions of democracy (percent, 2008)

National legislature checks the President on the usage of tax monies	65
President should not be bothered justifying actions	34
Media checks and reports on corruption in government	77
Too much reporting on corruption harms country	22
Opposition parties examine and criticize government policies	26
Opposition parties cooperate with government	73
National legislature should make laws	73
President passes laws without worrying about what the legislature thinks	24
President not bound by laws or courts decisions she thinks are wrong	25
President always obeys the laws and courts	74
Constitution should limit the President to serving a maximum of two terms in office	83
There should not be any constitutional limit on how long the president serves	16

Questions: [A] *The National Legislature should ensure that the President explains to it on a regular basis how her government spends the taxpayers' money vs. [B] The President should be able to devote her full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying her actions.*

[A] *The news media should constantly investigate and report on corruption and the mistakes made by the government vs. [B] Too much reporting on negative events, like corruption, only harms the country.*

[A]: *Opposition parties should regularly examine and criticize government policies and actions vs. [B] Opposition parties should concentrate on cooperating with government and helping it develop the country.*

[A] *The representatives to the National Legislature represent the people; therefore they should make laws for this country, even if the President does not agree vs. [B] Since the President represents all of us, she should pass laws without worrying about what the National Legislature thinks.*

[A] *Since the President was elected to lead the country, she should not be bound by laws or court decisions that she thinks are wrong vs. [B] The President must always obey the laws and the courts, even if she thinks they are wrong.*

[A] *The constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office vs. [B] There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.*

In contrast, a solid majority of Liberians (73 percent) think opposition parties should cooperate with the government rather than being critical (26 percent). This opinion is likely a reflection of the popular recognition of the devastating consequences of high-strung political opposition and the placement of a premium on consensus, peace and stability. It may also indicate that the public perceives the strong presence of former combatants in the opposition parties as a potential danger to the country’s democratic experiment. In fact, supporters of both the ruling party and

opposition parties agree on this issue (75 and 78 percent, respectively).⁴ An extension of the opinion regarding cooperation is the fact that among the ruling and opposition parties' supporters, clear majorities (81 and 77 percent respectively) agree on the media's role as a watchdog over government. In addition, at least 6 in every 10 Liberians with similar political affiliations accepts the oversight responsibility of parliament.

In the opinion of the ordinary Liberian, high-level political office holders must play the political game according to the laws of the land. A substantial majority (73 percent) believes the national legislature should make laws, rather than the president (24 percent). Another 74 percent say the President must obey the laws and court decisions even if she thinks they are wrong. Only a quarter thinks the President should have unfettered freedom to act as she pleases. Also, 83 percent believe the constitution should limit the President to only two terms in office – an opinion which is probably a product of unpleasant experiences with dictatorships.

The Supply of Democracy

Many Liberians seem to believe that their country is democratic. A little over six in ten (63 percent) believe Liberia is a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems. Only about a third think it is a democracy with major problems, while 3 percent believe it is not a democracy (Table 5).

Table 5: Extent of democracy (percent, 2008)

Not a democracy	3
A democracy, with major problems	27
A democracy, but with minor problems	38
A full democracy	25
Do not understand question /do not understand what 'democracy' means	2
Don't know	6

Question: *In your opinion how much of a democracy is Liberia today?*

Liberians with tertiary education are more likely to think the country is a democracy with major problems (45 percent) compared to those with secondary, primary or no education (31, 23 and 19 percent, respectively). Members of opposition parties (33 percent) are also more likely to describe Liberia as a democracy with major problems compared to 21 percent of ruling party (Unity Party) affiliates.

Overall, a slim majority of Liberians (51 percent) say they are very or fairly satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, while 44 percent are not at all or not very satisfied (Table 6). As with the extent of democracy, Liberians with tertiary education are much more likely to be “*not at all satisfied*” with democracy (21 percent) than those with secondary and primary education (14 percent each) or the uneducated (16 percent). This could be because better-educated Liberians apply higher standards in their assessment of democracy. Of Liberians living in urban settlements, 49 percent are unsatisfied with democracy, compared to 39 percent in rural areas.

⁴ Former fighters are actually stronger in their support cooperation between the ruling and opposition parties (81 percent) than non-fighters (72 percent).

Table 6: Satisfaction with democracy (percent, 2008)

Liberia is not a democracy	1
Not at all satisfied	15
Not very satisfied	29
Fairly satisfied	27
Very satisfied	24
Don't know	5

Question: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Liberia?

It is encouraging evidence of the supply of democracy that an overwhelming majority of Liberians (88 percent) believe they are “completely” or “somewhat” free to join any political organization of their choice, and also to vote for any candidate of their choice without feeling pressured (94 percent). In addition, a solid majority (72 percent) believes ballots are secret and that the powerful in the society cannot find out how they voted. It is therefore not surprising that a sizeable majority (70 percent) described the last national elections held in 2005 as “completely free and fair” or “free and fair but with minor problems.”⁵

However, some democratic opinions expressed by Liberians are quite worrying. First, a little over half of the population (53 percent) believes competition among political parties “always” or “often” leads to violent conflict (45 percent thinks otherwise). Similarly, 56 percent fear (either “a lot”, “somewhat” or “a little”) that they may become victims of violence or political intimidation during election campaigns (41 percent do not think so). Despite the fact that a majority of the respondents (85 percent) think that Liberians are “completely” or “somewhat” free to say what they think, we find that self-censorship is simultaneously quite high: seventy-two percent think Liberians “often” or “always” have to be careful of what they say about politics. Thus, Liberians really do not think they have freedom of speech. However, a quarter (26 percent) does not perceive self-censorship among Liberians. Other worrying opinions expressed by Liberians include, among others, the belief that it is “difficult” or “very difficult” for an ordinary person to make his/her voice heard between elections (63 percent); and that elections neither ensure that parliament reflects the views of voters (56 percent) nor ensure the removal from office of leaders who do not do what the people want (57 percent).⁶

Trust in Constitutional and Democratic Institutions

Popular trust in constitutional and democratic institutions among Liberians is generally low. The only trust rating above 50 percent is that for the presidency (58 percent). Trust levels for the law courts, ruling party, national legislature, national electoral commission, local government officials, the police and opposition parties are all below 50 percent, ranging from 45 to just 27 percent (Table 7).

⁵ **Questions:** (1) In this country, how free are you (a) To say what you think (b) To join any political organization you want and (c) To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured. (2) How likely do you think it is that powerful people can find out how you voted, even though there is supposed to be a secret ballot in this country? (3) On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2005?

⁶ (1) In your opinion, how often, in this country does competition between political parties lead to violent conflict? (2) During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (3) In this country, how often do people have to be careful of what they say about politics? (4) How easy or difficult is it for an ordinary person to have his or her voice heard between elections? (5) Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections (a) Ensure that the Representatives to the National Legislature reflect the views of voters and (b) Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

Table 7: Trust in institutions (percent, 2008)

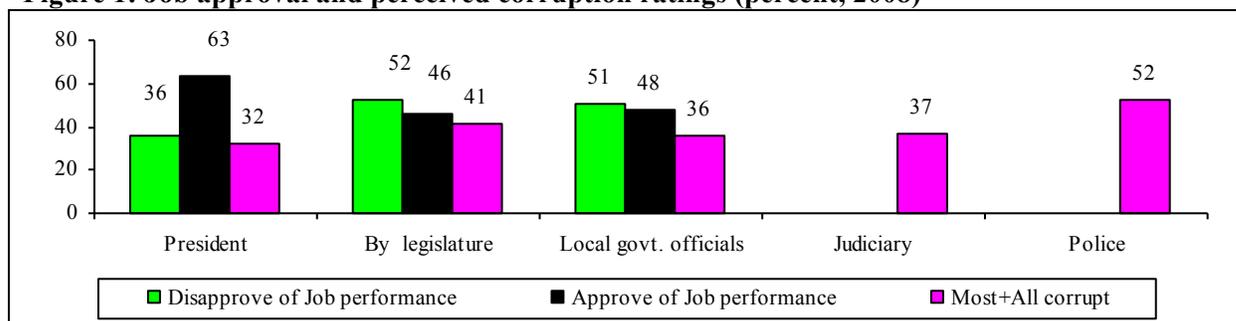
	Not at all or Just a little	Somewhat or A lot
The Presidency	40	58
Courts of law	55	45
The ruling party	56	41
National Legislature	58	40
Local government officials	61	38
National Elections Commission	61	37
The police	67	32
Opposition political parties	70	27

Question: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Public official performance and corruption ratings

The approval ratings of key public officials are mixed. The Liberian President enjoys much higher approval ratings than other elected officials. While 63 percent of Liberians approve of the way that President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has performed her job over the past 12 months, only 46 percent approve of the performance of their representative in the national legislature, and 48 percent are satisfied with the efforts of their local government councilor. Moreover, perceived corruption within the presidency (32 percent believe most or all officials in the office of the presidency are corrupt) is relatively low compared to the police (52 percent), legislature (41 percent), the judiciary (37 percent) and local government (36 percent) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Job approval and perceived corruption ratings (percent, 2008)



Questions: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past twelve months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say (a) President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (b) Your Representative to the National Legislature (c) Your local government officials?

How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say (a) The President and Officials in her Office (b) Representatives to the National Legislature (c) Local government officials (d) Police (e) Judges and Magistrates?

Patience with Democracy

Perhaps given the lessons they have learned from their country's troubled recent history, Liberians appear to be prepared to nurture their young democracy. When asked to choose between two statements – “[A] Our present system of elected government should be given more time to deal with inherited problems” and “[B] If our present system cannot produce results soon, we should try another form of government,” an encouraging majority (72 percent) opts for the first statement. Education again has significant influence on the willingness to allow elected government time to deal with inherited problems. Liberians with tertiary education are much more willing (81 percent) to be patient with democracy than those with primary education (69 percent) or the uneducated (70 percent). Former fighters are far less likely to exhibit patience

with democracy (60 percent) than non-fighters (72 percent). This could be an expression of the impatience that characterizes the lives of these fighters, which has the potential of triggering conflict and truncating efforts at entrenching democracy in Liberia.

Conclusion

Overall, Liberians are positive about democracy and are confident about the future of democracy in their country, but they also see challenges in its actual practice. Despite the fact that over 70 percent of Liberians reject authoritarian regimes (and fully 88 percent reject one-man rule), only 51 percent are satisfied with actual workings of democracy in their country. This suggests that many people, especially educated people, want more from democracy. Furthermore, there is general support for important democratic institutions such as a multiparty system, parliament exercising its law making and oversight responsibility, the media assuming a watchdog role, and the President adhering to the rule of law.

However, some responses raise concerns, especially the finding that there is a strong popular association of violence with political competition, relatively widespread fear of becoming a victim of political violence, high levels of self-censorship, reported difficulties in getting one's voice heard between elections, and the belief that elections will not ensure that parliament reflects the views of voters or enable the removal from office of leaders citizens perceive as non-performers. These are challenges that ought to be addressed by the political leadership of the country.

Future rounds of Afrobarometer surveys may show whether demand for democracy – and its perceived supply – are trending up. Hopefully, after more exposure to democratic rule and more time for the democratic government to work to heal the country, people will be more satisfied with democracy and believe more firmly that the type of government has an impact on their lives.

This Briefing Paper was prepared by Alaric Topka and Dan Saryee of Liberia Democratic Institute (LDI).

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