Approaching presidential transition, Liberians supportive and critical of their democracy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 121 | Mina Okuru and Daniel Armah-Attoh

Summary

After a decade of relative stability that has included two presidential elections, Liberia is looking ahead to its first post-war electoral leadership transition when President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's second term ends in 2017.

Less than a generation removed from civil war, the country is still rebuilding governance and economic structures, and the upcoming elections – which are already drawing candidates from more than 20 political parties – promise to put that progress to the test.

Afrobarometer survey findings suggest that Liberians can build on public support for democracy and its components, including support for regular and fair elections and multiparty competition, although overall demand for democracy is relatively weak compared to other African countries. About four in 10 Liberians consider their country "not a democracy" or "a democracy with major problems," and half are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in Liberia.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. After five rounds of surveys between 1999 and 2013, results of Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) are currently being published. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

Practical Sampling International of Nigeria interviewed 1,200 Liberian adults in May 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Liberia in 2008 and 2012.

Key findings

- Two-thirds (68%) of citizens prefer democracy over any other form of government, and large majorities disapprove of one-party rule (85%) and one-man rule (81%). Disapproval of military rule is less strong (60%) and has declined by 18 percentage points since 2008. Overall, demand for democracy stands at 37%, significantly below the average of 43% across 36 African countries surveyed in 2014/2015.

- Eight in 10 Liberians (83%) support regular elections as the best way to choose their leaders, and a majority (58%) support multiparty competition.

- Overwhelming majorities of Liberians say they feel free to choose whom to vote for (91%), to join any political organisation they wish (90%), and to say what they think (82%).

- Three-fourths (77%) of citizens support the news media's "watchdog" role, but they are about equally divided as to whether the media should have the freedom to publish whatever it wants or should be subject to government oversight. Support for media freedom has declined by 28 percentage points since 2008.

- Liberians are quite critical of the extent and quality of their democracy. Only about half (53%) consider the country a "full democracy" or a "democracy with minor problems." And the proportion of Liberians who rate their most recent national elections as "completely free and fair" or "free and fair, but with minor problems" has declined by 16 percentage points since 2008, to 54%. Half (50%) of all respondents say they are dissatisfied with how democracy is working in the country. Overall, perceived supply of democracy in Liberia is 35%, which matches the 36-country average.
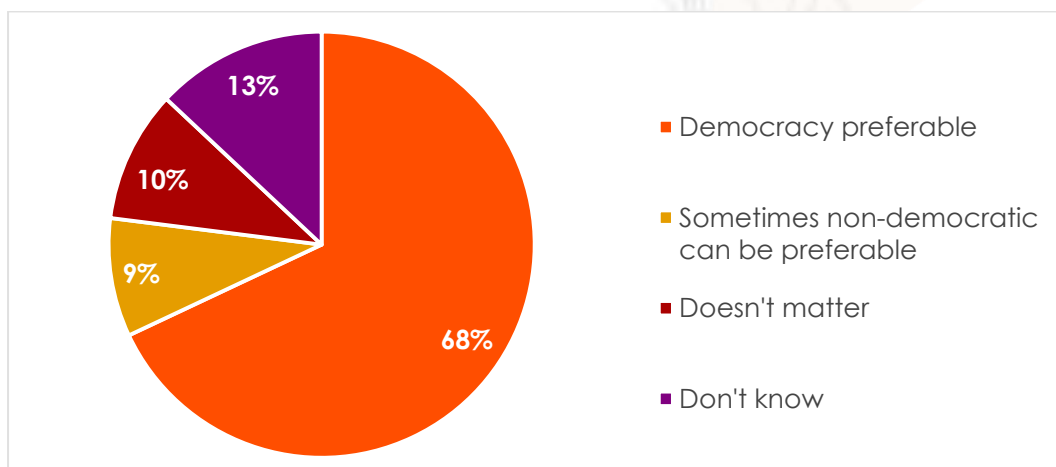
Demand for democracy in Liberia

Afrobarometer gauges demand for democracy by examining citizens' preference for democracy over other political systems and disapproval of three non-democratic forms of government (one-party, one-man, and military rule).

Preference for democracy

With political conflict and instability still a recent memory, two-thirds (68%) of Liberians say they prefer democracy over any other form of government. This is an average level of support for democracy among 36 African countries surveyed in 2014/2015 (67%).

About one in 10 Liberians say that non-democratic systems can sometimes be preferable (9%), and similar proportions say the form of government doesn't matter (10%) or they don't know (13%) (Figure 1).
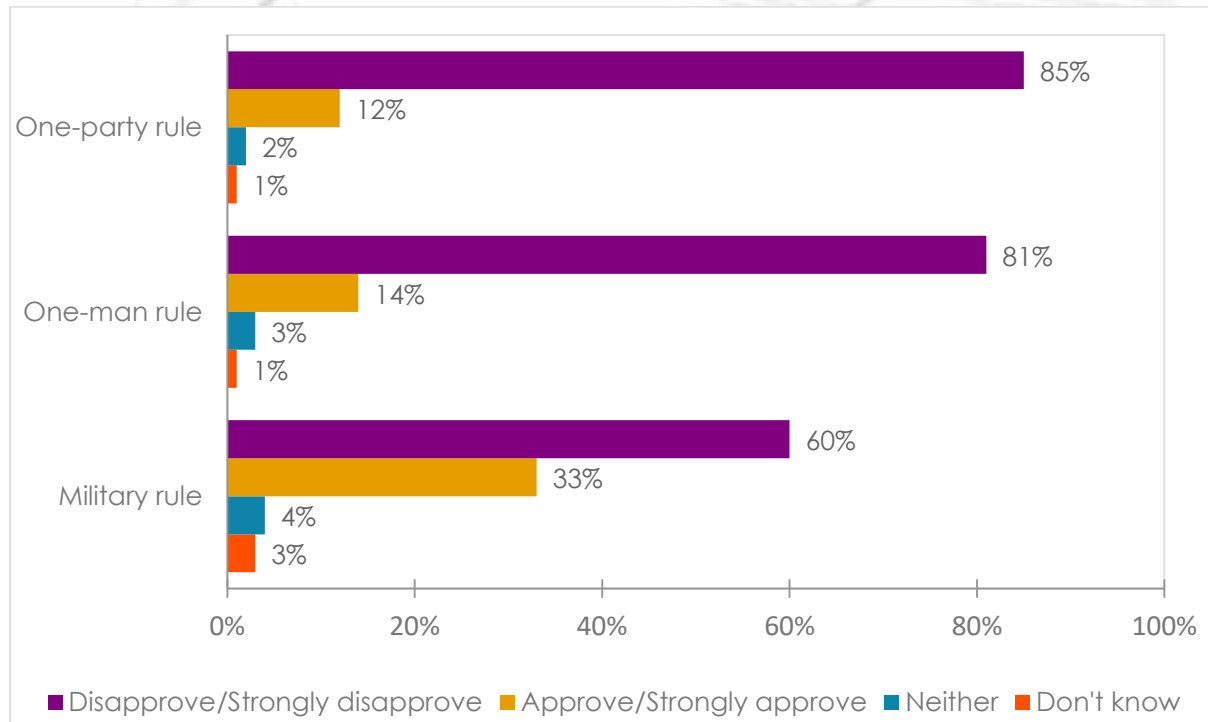
Figure 1: Support for democracy | Liberia | 2015

Respondents were asked: *Which of these statements is closest to your own opinion?*
Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

Rejection of non-democratic alternatives

Liberians' general preference for democracy finds support in overwhelming public opposition to non-democratic forms of government. Large majorities of Liberians "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" of one-party rule (85%) and one-man rule (81%) (Figure 2). A smaller majority (60%) disapprove of military rule, the seventh-lowest level of disapproval among the 36 countries surveyed in Afrobarometer Round 6 (2014/2015).

Figure 2: Rejection of non-democratic forms of government | Liberia | 2015

Respondents were asked: *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: (a) Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office? (b) The army comes in to govern the country? (c) Elections and House of Representatives are abolished so that the president can decide everything?*

Preference for democracy is stronger among urban (70%) than rural residents (65%); among men (73%) than women (63%); and among youth (68%) and adults (69%) than senior citizens (57%) (Table 1). Support for democracy increases with education, ranging from 46% of citizens with no formal education to 60% of those with primary schooling and 78% of those with at least a secondary education.

Similarly, urbanites, youth and adults, and respondents with at least a primary education are more likely to reject one-party rule than rural folks, the elderly, and the uneducated. Urban residents as well as youth and adults are more likely to disapprove of one-man rule than rural dwellers and senior citizens.

With regard to military rule, respondents residing in urban centres, youth, and citizens with at least a primary education are more accommodating of such a regime than rural dwellers, adults, and persons without education. This finding is worrying. Urbanites and the educated tend to be opinion leaders in society. Moreover, youth constituted a core mass in rebel-group activities during the Liberian war and may be particularly susceptible to being drafted into activities aimed at undermining the country's democracy.

Table 1: Components of demand for democracy | by urban-rural residence, gender, age, and education | Liberia | 2015

	Prefer democracy	Disapprove/ Strongly disapprove of one-party rule	Disapprove/ Strongly disapprove of one-man rule	Disapprove/ Strongly disapprove of military rule
Urban	70%	89%	89%	54%
Rural	65%	82%	75%	66%
Male	73%	85%	82%	60%
Female	63%	85%	81%	61%
Youth (18-35 years)	68%	85%	81%	58%
Adults (36-60 years)	69%	88%	83%	64%
Senior citizens (61+ years)	57%	69%	77%	59%
No formal education	46%	78%	84%	72%
Primary education	60%	84%	75%	58%
Secondary/tertiary education	78%	88%	84%	58%

Respondents were asked:
1. *Which of these statements is closest to your own opinion?*
   Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
   Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
   Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.
2. *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: (a) Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office? (b) The army comes in to govern the country? (c) Elections and House of Representatives are abolished so that the president can decide everything?*

Trends in support for democracy, rejection of autocratic alternatives

Table 2 shows changes in support for democracy and rejection of non-democratic alternatives from 2008 to 2015. On every indicator in each survey round, a majority of Liberians have favoured the "democratic" option.

Strikingly, however, public disapproval of military rule declined by 18 percentage points between 2008 and 2015, dropping to 60%. Disapproval of one-man rule and preference for democracy recorded smaller declines of 7 and 4 percentage points, respectively, while opposition to one-party rule increased by a marginal 3 percentage points.

Table 2: Trends in support for democracy and rejection of autocratic alternatives | Liberia | 2008-2015

	2008	2012	2015	Change 2008-2015
Prefer democracy	72%	81%	68%	**-4%**
Reject one-party rule	82%	90%	85%	**+3%**
Reject one-man rule	88%	89%	81%	**-7%**
Reject military rule	78%	79%	60%	**-18%**

Measuring demand for democracy

Afrobarometer calculates demand for democracy as the proportion of citizens who both prefer democracy over other political systems *and* reject all three non-democratic forms of government (one-man, one-party, and military rule). In Liberia, 37% of citizens hold these views of "true democrats" – fewer than average (43%) across 36 African countries surveyed in 2014/2015 (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Demand for democracy | 36 countries | 2014/2015

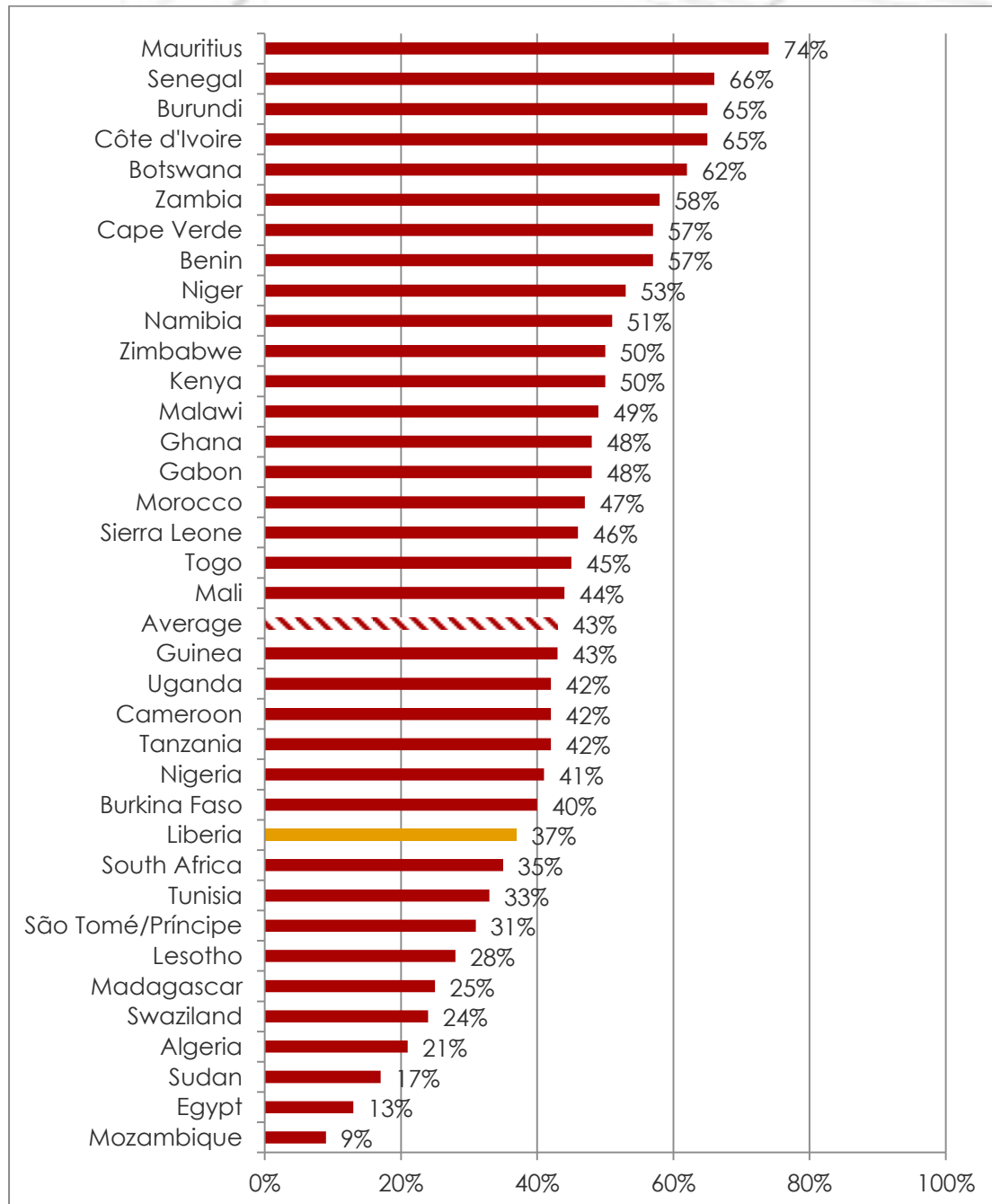| Country	%
Mauritius	74%
Senegal	66%
Burundi	65%
Côte d'Ivoire	65%
Botswana	62%
Zambia	58%
Cape Verde	57%
Benin	57%
Niger	53%
Namibia	51%
Zimbabwe	50%
Kenya	50%
Malawi	49%
Ghana	48%
Gabon	48%
Morocco	47%
Sierra Leone	46%
Togo	45%
Mali	44%
Average	43%
Guinea	43%
Uganda	42%
Cameroon	42%
Tanzania	42%
Nigeria	41%
Burkina Faso	40%
Liberia	37%
South Africa	35%
Tunisia	33%
São Tomé/Príncipe	31%
Lesotho	28%
Madagascar	25%
Swaziland	24%
Algeria	21%
Sudan	17%
Egypt	13%
Mozambique	9%

Figure shows proportion of respondents who both prefer democracy and reject all three non-democratic alternatives.
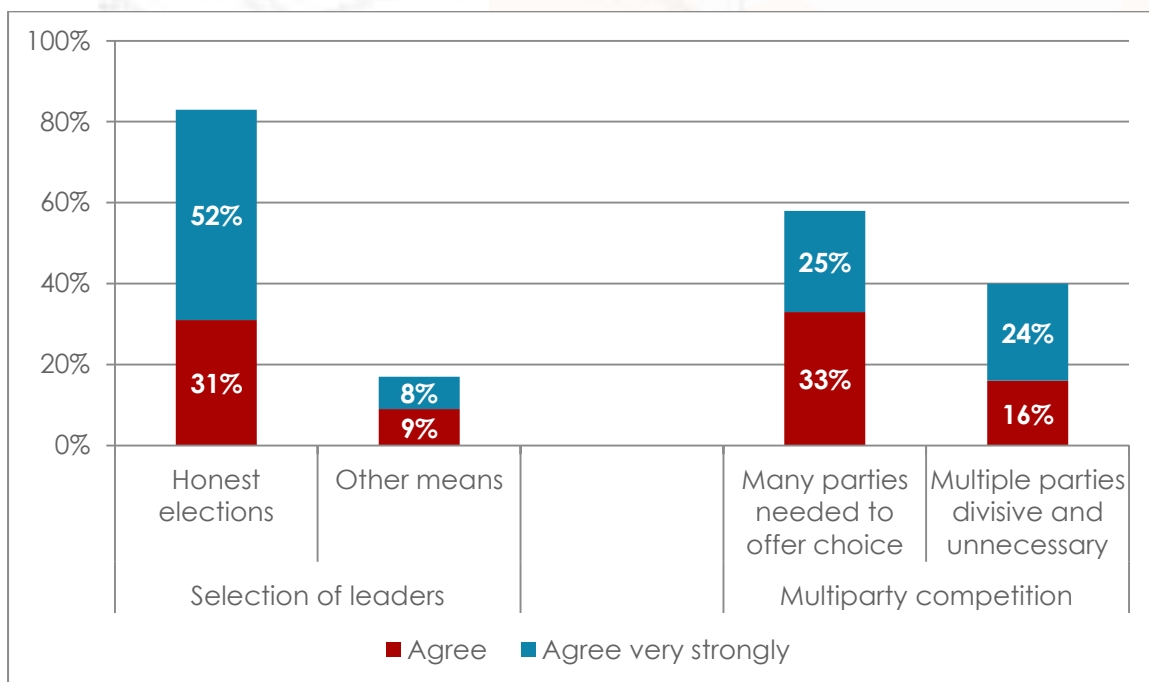
Democratic practices and freedoms

Liberians' preference for democracy is complemented by widespread support for specific democratic practices, including the selection of leaders by ballot and multiparty competition. But while they affirm their personal and political freedoms, Liberians are divided as to the freedom the media should enjoy.

Support for elections and multiparty competition

The right to freely choose political leaders through the ballot box is widely considered a fundamental component of democracy. A large majority of Liberians (83%) agree – including 52% who "agree very strongly" – that leaders should be chosen through regular, open, and honest elections. Fewer than two in 10 (17%) believe that "since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders" (Figure 4).

While support for elections is overwhelming, a smaller majority favour multiparty competition. About six in 10 Liberians (58%) believe the country must have many political parties to provide citizens with "a real choice in who governs them," while a substantial minority (40%) say that multiple political parties are divisive and unnecessary.

Figure 4: Support for elections and multiparty competition | Liberia | 2015

Respondents were asked:
1. *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.
2. *Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.*
   Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Liberia.
   Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Liberians have real choices in who governs them.
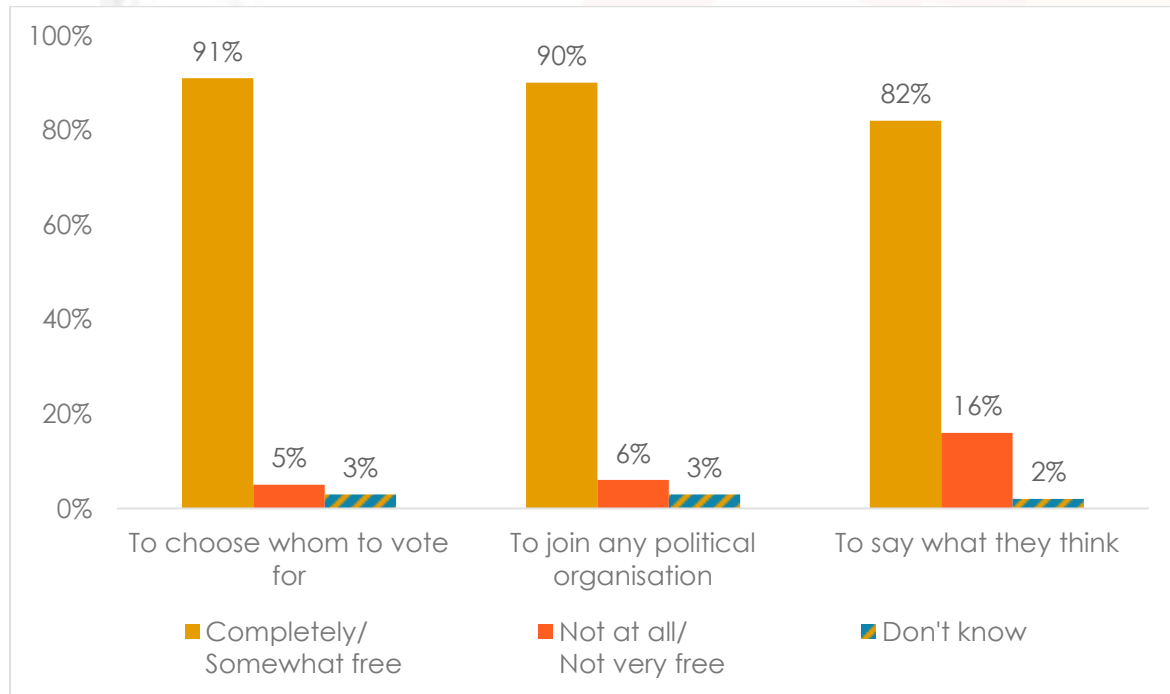
Personal and media freedoms

Among individual rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are the freedoms to say what you think, to associate with whom you wish, and to vote without undue pressure or constraint.

The general conviction among Liberians is that citizens are assured of these rights. Large majorities say they are "somewhat free" or "completely free" to vote for the candidate of their choice without feeling pressured (91%), to join any political organisation (90%), and to express their opinions (82%) (Figure 5).

About one in six citizens (16%) say they are "not very free" or "not at all free" to say what they think – an assessment in line with a strong feeling (mentioned by 55% of respondents) that Liberians "often" or "always" have to be careful about what they say about politics.

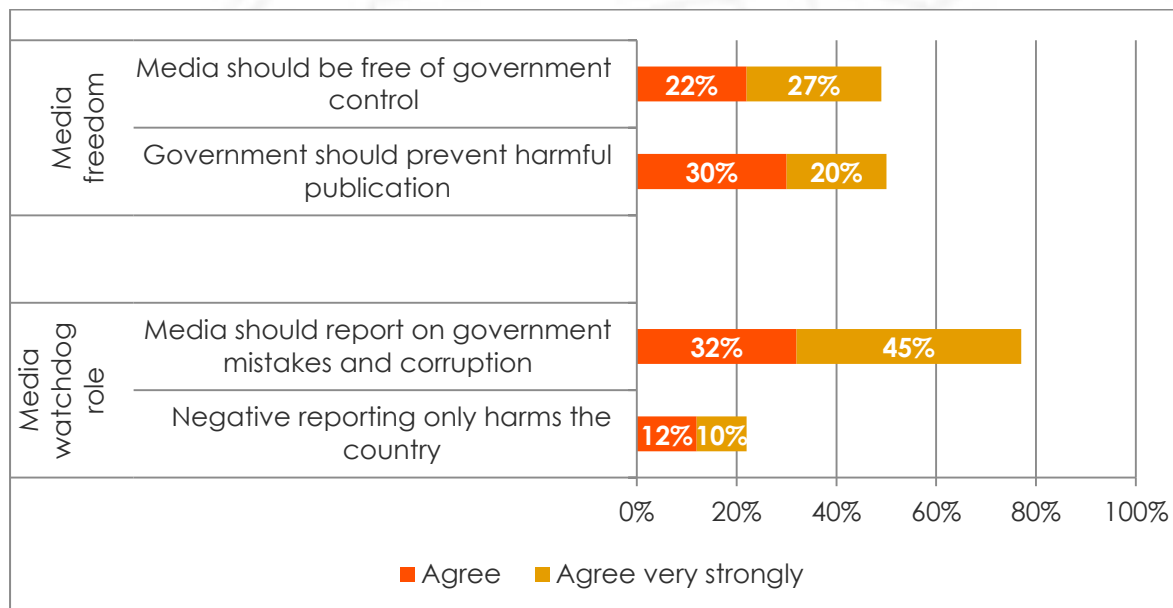**Figure 5: Personal freedoms** | Liberia | 2015

Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you: (a) To say what you think? (b) To join any political organisation you want? (c) To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured?*

Liberians are evenly divided in their opinions on whether the news media should be free from government interference: About half (49%) "agree" or "agree very strongly" that the news media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control, while the other half (50%) say the government should be able to prevent publications that it considers harmful to society.

Even so, three-fourths (77%) of respondents "agree" or "agree very strongly" that the media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption. Only about one-fifth (22%) think that too much reporting on negative events harms the country (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Media freedom and watchdog role | Liberia | 2015

Respondents were asked:
1. *Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.*
   Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.
   Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.
2. *Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.*
   Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.
   Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.

Public support for media freedom from government control dropped sharply, by 28 percentage points, between 2008 and 2015, while support for the media's watchdog role remained stable (Table 3). Support for elections as the best way to choose leaders declined slightly (by 5 percentage points) over the same period, while the preference for multiparty competition and perceptions of personal freedoms (of speech, association, and vote choice) showed little change.

Table 3: Trends in democratic practices and freedoms | Liberia | 2008-2015

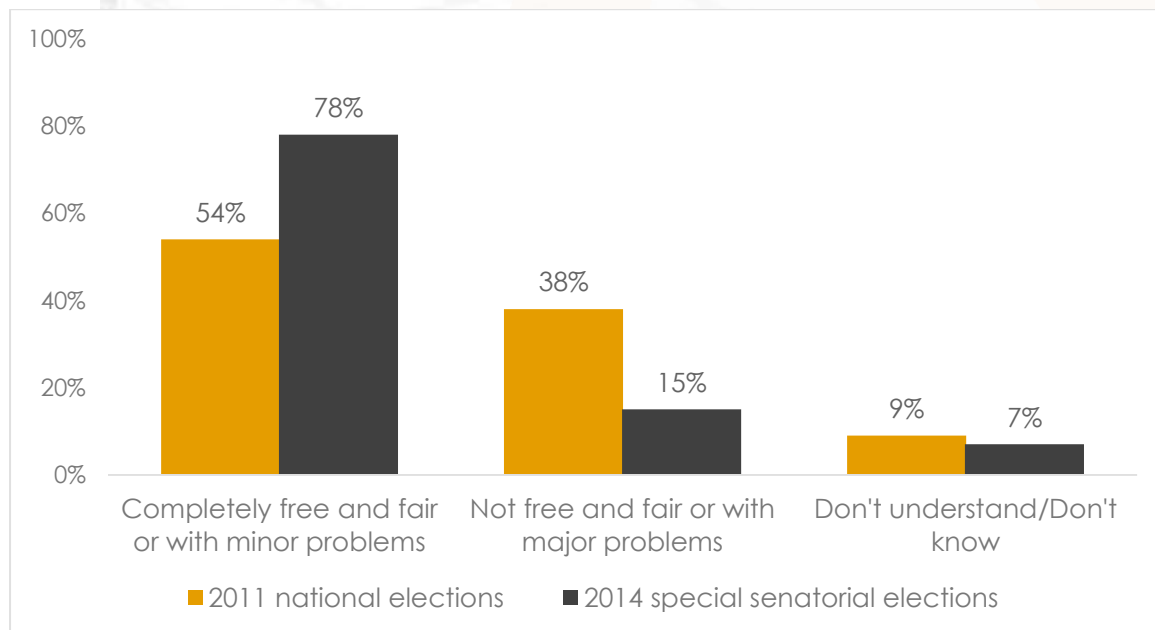|	2008	2012	2015	Change (2008-2015)
Choose leaders through elections	88%	92%	83%	**-5%**
Many parties needed for real choice	60%	69%	58%	**-2%**
Completely/somewhat free to choose whom to vote for	94%	97%	91%	**-3%**
Completely/somewhat free to join any political organisation	88%	92%	90%	**+2%**
Completely/somewhat free to say what you think	85%	87%	82%	**-3%**
Media should be free of government control	77%	47%	49%	**-28%**
Media should report on government mistakes and corruption	77%	77%	77%	**0**

Supply of democracy

Afrobarometer measures a country's supply of democracy by asking citizens how much of a democracy they think their country is and how satisfied they are with the way democracy is working in their country. While not part of the "supply of democracy" measure, citizens' perceptions of their most recent national elections can also shed light on how they feel about their democracy.

Freedom and fairness of national elections

Liberians offer mixed reviews of the quality of their recent elections. When asked about the freeness and fairness of the last national elections (held in 2011), 54% say they were "completely free and fair" or "free and fair, but with minor problems," while nearly four in 10 (38%) describe them as "not free and fair" or "free and fair with major problems." With respect to special senatorial elections in 2014, a much higher percentage (78%) see them as generally free and fair (Figure 7).

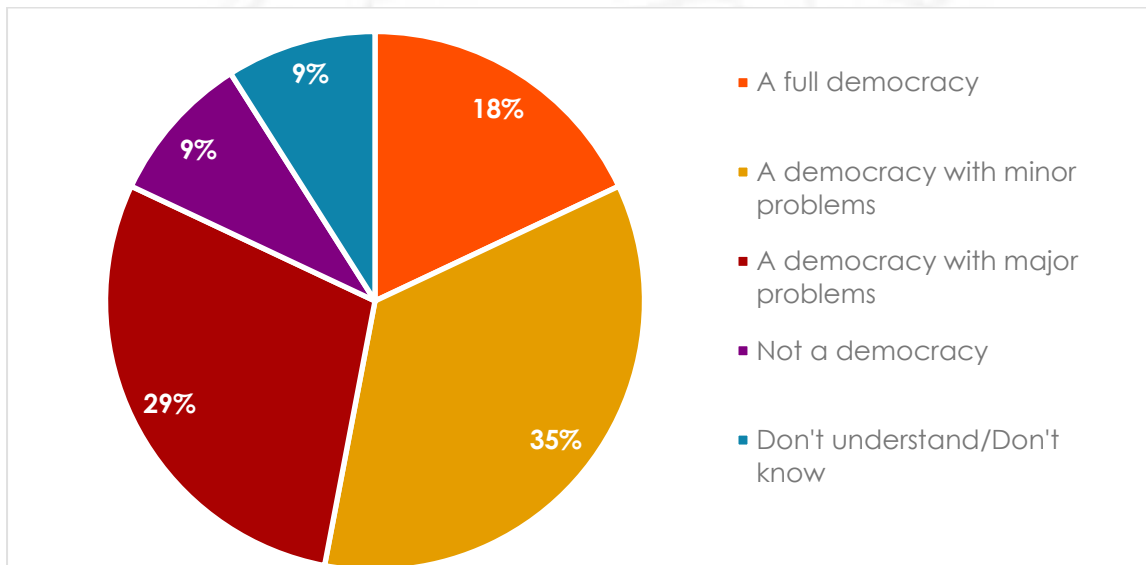**Figure 7: Freeness and fairness of recent elections** | Liberia | 2015

Respondents were asked:
1. *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2011?*
2. *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the special senatorial elections held in 2014?*

Extent of democracy

Only a slight majority (53%) of Liberians believe the country is "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems." Nearly four in 10 Liberians (38%) think the country is "not a democracy" or is "a democracy with major problems" (Figure 8).

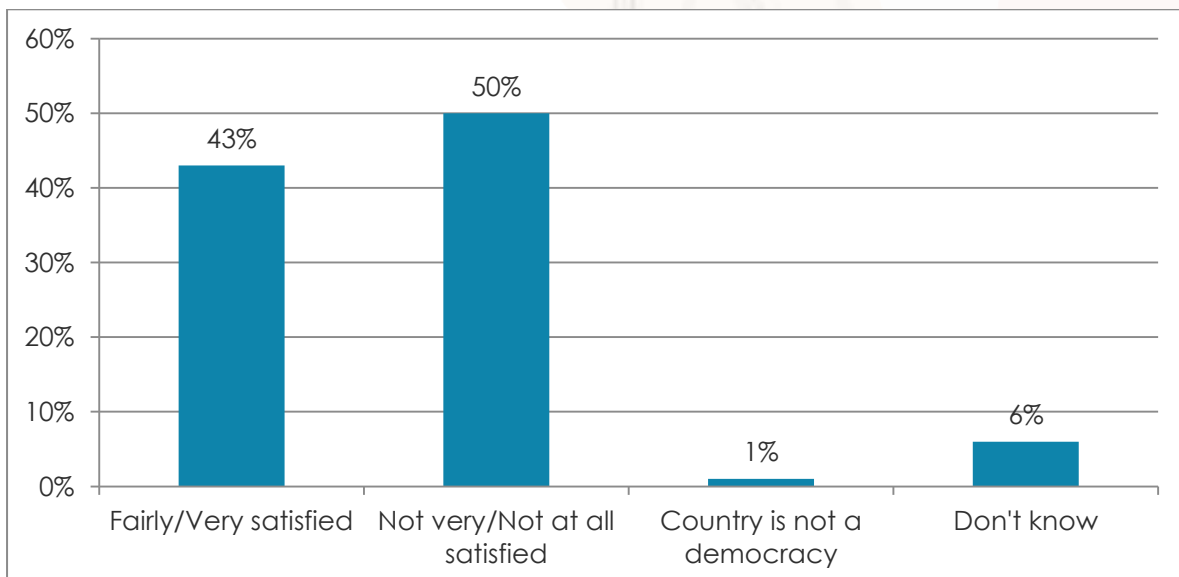**Figure 8: Perceived extent of democracy** | Liberia | 2015

- A full democracy
- A democracy with minor problems
- A democracy with major problems
- Not a democracy
- Don't understand/Don't know

18% | 35% | 29% | 9% | 9%

Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Liberia today?*

Satisfaction with the way democracy works

Despite their support for democracy in general, fully half (50%) of Liberians say they are "not at all satisfied" or "not very satisfied" with the way democracy works in their country. Only a minority (43%) say they are "very" or "fairly" satisfied (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Satisfaction with democracy | Liberia | 2015

Respondents were asked: *Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Liberia?*

Older Liberians are more critical of the country's democracy than their younger compatriots: Citizens above age 60 are less likely to see Liberia as a democracy (43% vs. 54% on average for younger citizens) and to express satisfaction with the way democracy is working (27% vs.

44%) (Table 4). Likewise, respondents with no formal education are less likely than educated citizens to see the country as a democracy (45% vs. 54%). However, rural residents (56%) are somewhat more positive than urbanites (49%) in their view of the country's status as a democracy.

Table 4: Extent of and satisfaction with democracy | by urban-rural residence, gender, age, and education | Liberia | 2015

	Full democracy or with minor problems	Very or fairly satisfied with democracy
Urban	49%	42%
Rural	56%	45%
Male	54%	45%
Female	51%	41%
Youth (18-35 years)	51%	41%
Adults (36-60 years)	56%	47%
Senior citizens (61+ years)	43%	27%
No formal education	45%	43%
Primary education	54%	40%
Secondary/tertiary education	54%	45%

Respondents were asked:
1. *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Liberia today?*
2. *Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Liberia?*

Over time, citizens' perceptions of the extent of democracy in Liberia and their satisfaction with how their democracy is working increased between 2008 and 2012, then declined significantly (Table 5). Assessments of Liberia as "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems" decreased by 9 percentage points over the eight-year period, including a 17-percentage-point drop since 2012. Similarly, satisfaction with the way democracy works in Liberia went down by 7 percentage points between 2008 and 2015, including a 16-percentage-point plunge since 2012.

Table 5: Trends in extent of and satisfaction with democracy | Liberia | 2008-2015

	2008	2012	2015	Change 2008-2015
Country a full democracy/a democracy with minor problems	62%	70%	53%	**-9%**
Fairly/Very satisfied with democracy	50%	59%	43%	**-7%**

Respondents were asked:
1. *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Liberia today?*
2. *Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Liberia?*

Measuring supply of democracy

Combining perceived extent of democracy and satisfaction with democracy to measure the supply of democracy in the country, 35% of Liberians both see their country as a democracy (a "full democracy" or one with minor problems) and are "fairly" or "very" satisfied with the way democracy is working. This matches the average among 36 surveyed countries (Figure 10).

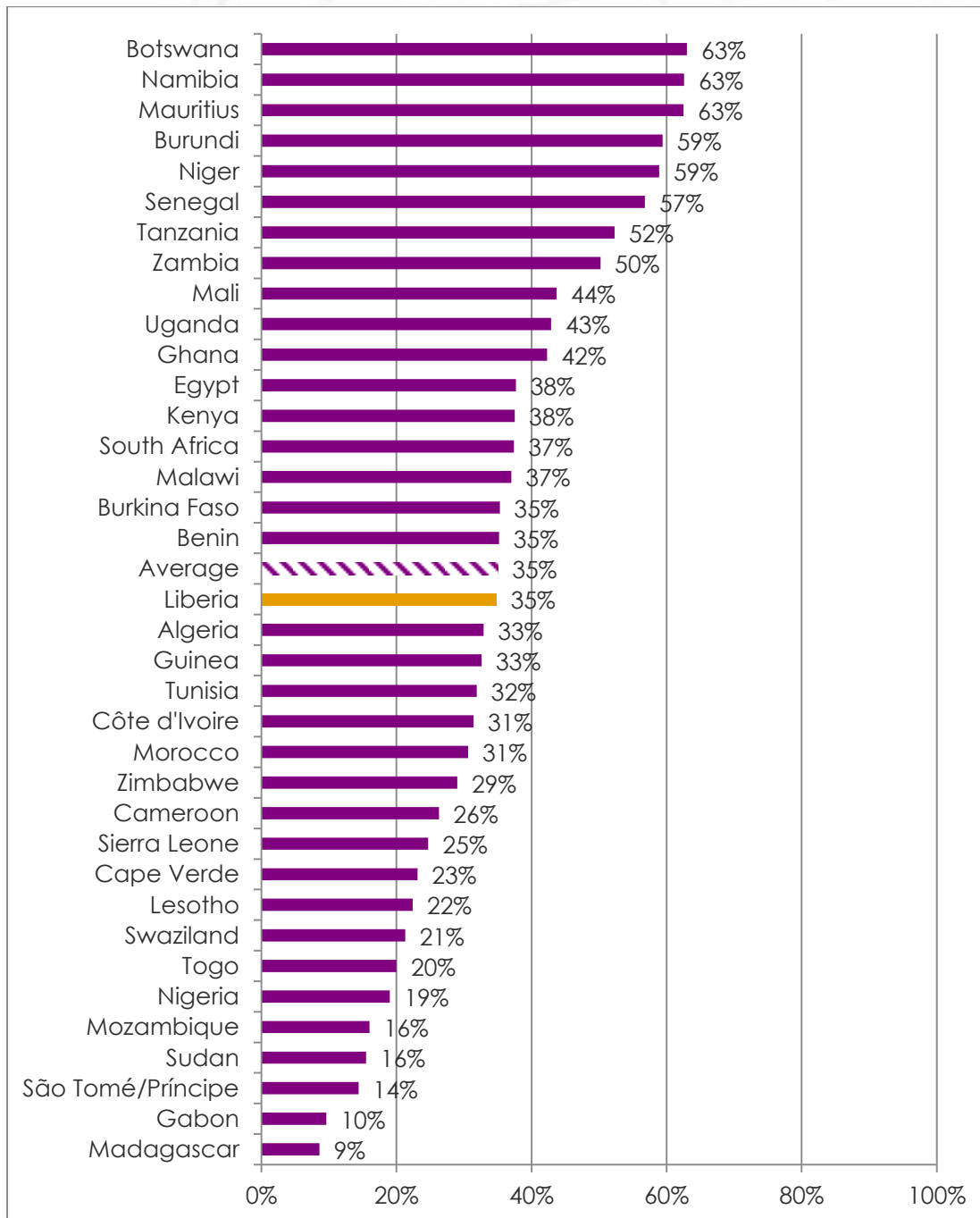## Figure 10: Supply of democracy | 36 countries | 2015

Country	%
Botswana	63%
Namibia	63%
Mauritius	63%
Burundi	59%
Niger	59%
Senegal	57%
Tanzania	52%
Zambia	50%
Mali	44%
Uganda	43%
Ghana	42%
Egypt	38%
Kenya	38%
South Africa	37%
Malawi	37%
Burkina Faso	35%
Benin	35%
Average	35%
Liberia	35%
Algeria	33%
Guinea	33%
Tunisia	32%
Côte d'Ivoire	31%
Morocco	31%
Zimbabwe	29%
Cameroon	26%
Sierra Leone	25%
Cape Verde	23%
Lesotho	22%
Swaziland	21%
Togo	20%
Nigeria	19%
Mozambique	16%
Sudan	16%
São Tomé/Príncipe	14%
Gabon	10%
Madagascar	9%

Figure shows proportion of respondents who both see their country as a democracy and are "fairly" or "very" satisfied with the way democracy is working.

Trends in demand for and supply of democracy

As depicted in Figure 11, both demand for and supply of democracy in Liberia increased between surveys in 2008 and 2012, then declined even more significantly. Over the eight-year period, demand dropped by 12 percentage points, while the decline in supply was

marginal (2 percentage points). As a result, whereas demand had exceeded supply in previous survey rounds, the two are fairl close in 2015.

Figure 11: Trends in demand for and supply of democracy | Liberia | 2008-2015
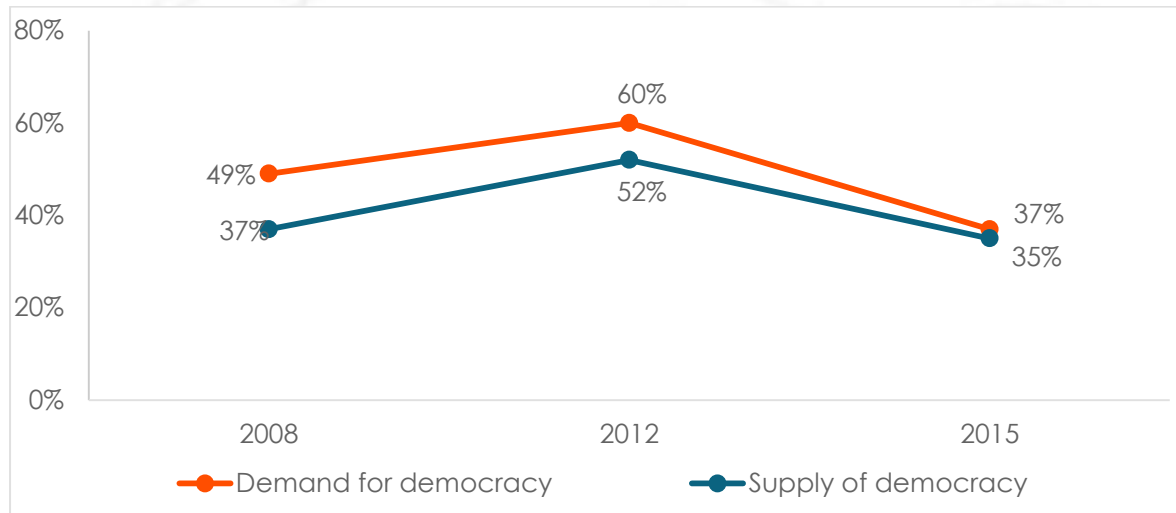

Figure shows proportion of respondents who both prefer democracy and reject all three non-democratic alternatives (demand for democracy) and proportion who both see their country as a democracy and are "fairly" or "very" satisfied with the way democracy is working (supply of democracy).

Conclusion

While majorities of Liberians support democracy, elections, and multiparty competition and reject non-democratic regimes, their overall demand for democracy is weaker than in most other African countries surveyed in 2014/2015. This reflects their comparatively weak opposition (by 60% of respondents) to military rule, particularly among urban and younger citizens.

Liberians appear to feel secure in their political freedoms and favour an aggressive "watchdog" media, but citizens are evenly divided as to whether the media should be free from government interference.

As Liberians approach an important electoral transition, they are quite critical of the extent and quality of their

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

democracy: Only about half consider their country a democracy, and just as many are dissatisfied with the way it is functioning.

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