



*Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 105*

**TRENDS IN POPULAR ATTITUDES TO  
MULTIPARTY DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA,  
2000-2012**

by Michael Bratton

October 2012

**Research Questions**

This paper addresses four research questions:

- Do Africans *want* democracy?
- Do they think they are *getting* it?
- What *trends* over time are evident in popular demand for, and the perceived supply of, democracy?
- What do Africans think about specific democratic *institutions*, notably, among others, political parties?

**Method**

Results are based on the Afrobarometer, an independent, African-led, cross-national public opinion research project. When complete, Round 5 of the Afrobarometer (2011-2013) will survey the opinions and behavior of some 53,000 citizens in 35 countries. At the present time, interim results are available for twelve countries from surveys conducted in late 2011 and early 2012 (n=22,813). Although the Afrobarometer will soon include North Africa, the countries covered here are concentrated in the sub-Saharan sub-continent. They are broadly distributed across West Africa (Benin, Cape Verde, Ghana and Liberia), East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) and Southern Africa (Botswana, Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa and Zimbabwe).

**Caveats**

The coverage of the Afrobarometer, however, is only partially representative of sub-Saharan Africa, let alone the continent as a whole (see Table 1). On one hand, the economies of the twelve countries surveyed so far are low- or lower-middle income; their average gross national income per capita is only slightly higher (US\$2399) than for all of sub-Saharan Africa (US\$2018). On the other hand, the same countries enjoy a much more open political atmosphere; 50 percent are “free” according to Freedom House compared to 18 percent for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. Thus, the preliminary results presented here are based on countries that are reasonably representative in terms of economic wealth but are well ahead of the pack in terms of democratization.

**Table 1: Country Coverage**  
**Sub-Saharan Africa and Afrobarometer Compared**

	Gross National Income per capita, 2010 <sup>1</sup> (US\$, mean)	“Free” Countries, 2011 <sup>2</sup> (percent)
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b> (N = 49 countries) From Angola to Zimbabwe	2018	18
<b>Afrobarometer Round 5, 2011-13</b> (N = 35 countries) Phase 1, cross-sectional data (N = 12 countries) Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe	2399	50
<b>Afrobarometer, 5 Rounds, 2000-2012</b> Time-series data (N = 7 countries) Botswana, Ghana, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe	2276	43

1. World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 2012.
2. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*, 2012.



Moreover, some of the analysis that follows isolates just seven countries for which the Afrobarometer has comprehensive trend data from five rounds of surveys conducted between 2000 and 2012. The seven countries are: Botswana, Ghana, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe. In one respect, these countries are even less representative of Africa insofar as they are all English speaking. But they are somewhat more typical of the sub-Saharan region in terms of economic development (US\$2276) and political freedom (43 percent are “free”).

Most important, within each country, survey respondents are selected carefully to provide an accurate cross-section of the adult population.<sup>1</sup> This paper provides descriptive statistics of their attitudes with a margin of sampling error of less than plus or minus three percent.

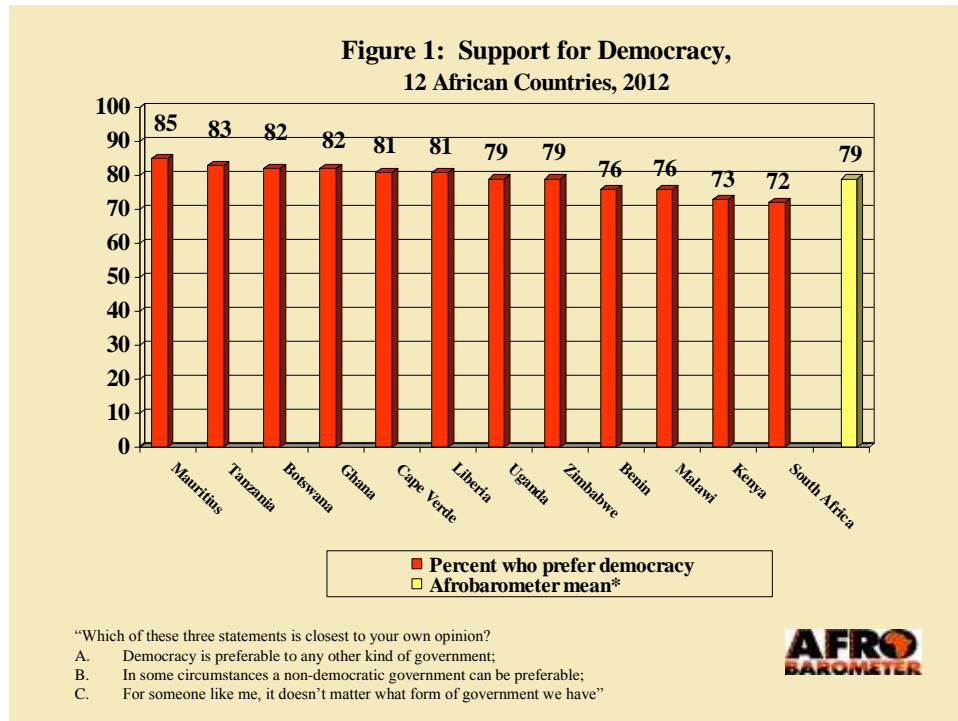
**Demand for Democracy**

To determine whether Africans *want* democracy, the Afrobarometer asks four related survey questions. The first item measures popular expressions of support for democracy; the remainder measure mass rejection of one-party, military and one-man rule. Taken together, these items form a scale of *demand for democracy*. The logic of the scale is that effective demand requires more than lip service to democracy; it also implies that people abandon attachments to old autocratic regimes.

Across twelve countries in 2012, some 79 percent of Afrobarometer respondents say that, “democracy is preferable to any other form of government” (see Figure 1). Overt support is highest in countries commonly seen as liberal democracies with competitive party systems such as Mauritius, Botswana, Ghana and Cape Verde (all over 80 percent). But support is also high in Tanzania (83 percent), an electoral democracy with de facto one-party dominance. By contrast, South Africans are somewhat more cautious about expressing support for democracy (72

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-and-methods/sampling-principles>.

percent), perhaps because they feel elected governments have not met their high expectations for the delivery of improved living standards.



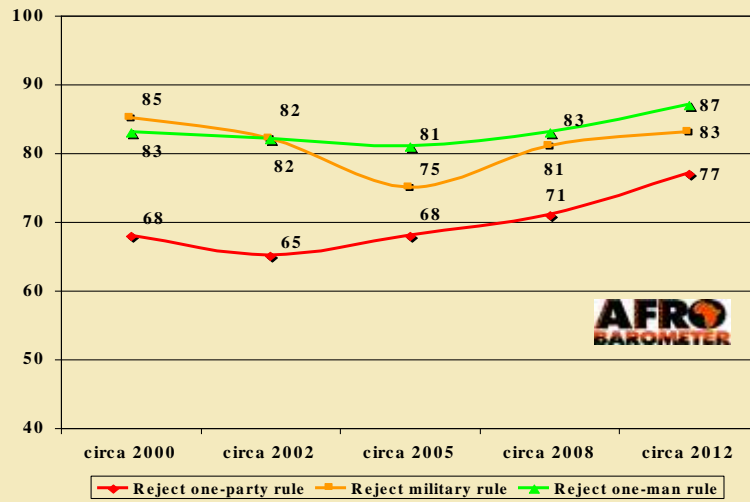
But how deep are popular commitments to democracy? Among citizens, democracy becomes “the only game in town” only if everyone *also* rejects authoritarian alternatives. There is little doubt that the Africans we interviewed now disassociate themselves from familiar forms of post-colonial autocracy (see Figure 2). Across seven countries in 2012, 83 percent of respondents spurn military rule and 87 percent look down on one-man rule. Thus, as in earlier surveys, Africans feel even more strongly about the forms of government they *don’t want* than express positive support for the form of government (democracy), they say they *do want*.

But we detect a residue of popular nostalgia for one-party rule. Fewer people reject this form of government (77 percent) than personal or military rule. One might expect that Tanzanians would be most attached to a single-party system, but in fact they reject it at an average level (76 percent). Instead, at 68 percent rejection, South Africans are the most willing among all Africans interviewed in 2012 to entertain the possibility that “only one political party is allowed.”

Of greatest interest, however, are trends over time. Figure 2 shows that, on average, popular resistance to military and one-man rule has remained roughly constant since 2000. People have long known that they dislike these forms of government and have not wavered even as fledgling democratic regimes in Africa have encountered growing pains. But popular rejection of one-party rule has gradually solidified, rising twelve percentage points from 2002. One possible interpretation of this trend, to be further explored as we proceed, is that African citizens are learning about the advantages of multiparty competition.

**Figure 2: Rejection of Autocracy:**

Average Trends, 7 African Countries, 2000-2012



Percentages rejecting authoritarian political regimes.

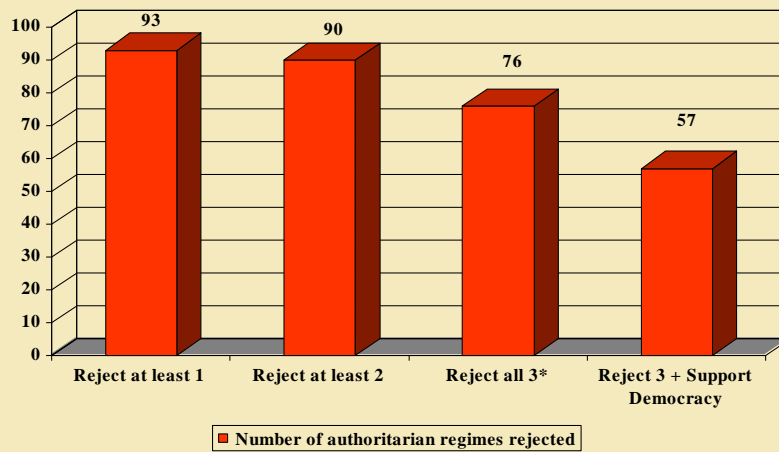
"There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternative:

A. Only one political party is allowed B. The army comes in to govern the country C. The president can decide everything?"

Countries covered are Botswana, Ghana, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

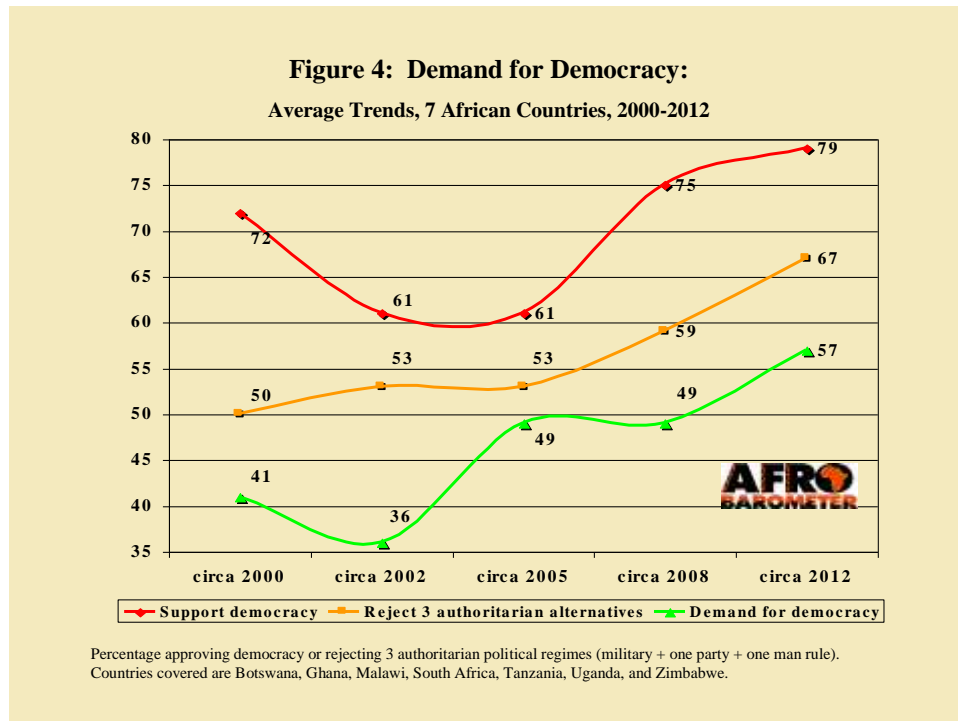
As stated, *demand for democracy* is calculated as an additive scale of *both* support for democracy *and* comprehensive rejection of *all three* authoritarian alternatives. Figure 3 show that almost everyone rejects at least one form of autocracy (97 percent). Three quarters reject all three (76 percent). But, when coupled with support for democracy, just 57 percent of African citizens interviewed actually *demand* democracy as we define this sentiment.

**Figure 3: Demand for Democracy,**  
Average Levels, 7 African Countries, 2012



\* Military rule + one-party rule + personal dictatorship

Temporal trends in African attitudes to political regimes, however, are quite positive (see Figure 4). After dipping in the early 2000s, support for democracy has risen to an all time high in recent years. Rejection of all three autocratic alternatives jumped by 17 percentage points between 2000 and 2012. And, in a landmark finding, Figure 4 shows that, for the first time in any Afrobarometer survey (and at least in the seven countries for which data are presently available), a majority of respondents (57 percent) can be described as committed democrats who demand democracy.

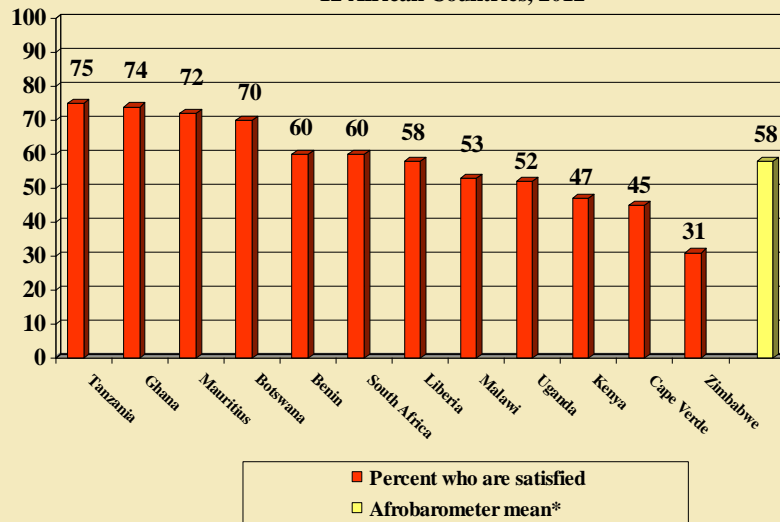


### Supply of Democracy

Turning to the supply side of the political marketplace, we now ask whether Africans think they are *getting* democracy. In other words, to what extent do they regard political elites as supplying the form of government that most Africans want? To pursue this question, an additive construct of the *perceived supply of democracy* is assembled from two indicators.

The first indicator measures satisfaction with “the way democracy works in (your country).” Figure 5 shows results for twelve countries in 2012. In this case, Tanzanians claim the top spot, with citizens of Ghana, Mauritius and Botswana close behind. Whatever one thinks about the quality of democracy in Tanzania (or the perspicacity of its citizens), there can be little doubt that Tanzanians like their form of government. By contrast, less than one third of Zimbabweans (31 percent) pronounce themselves satisfied with a repressive regime still dominated by the ZANU-PF party of President Robert Mugabe.

**Figure 5: Satisfaction with Democracy,  
12 African Countries, 2012**

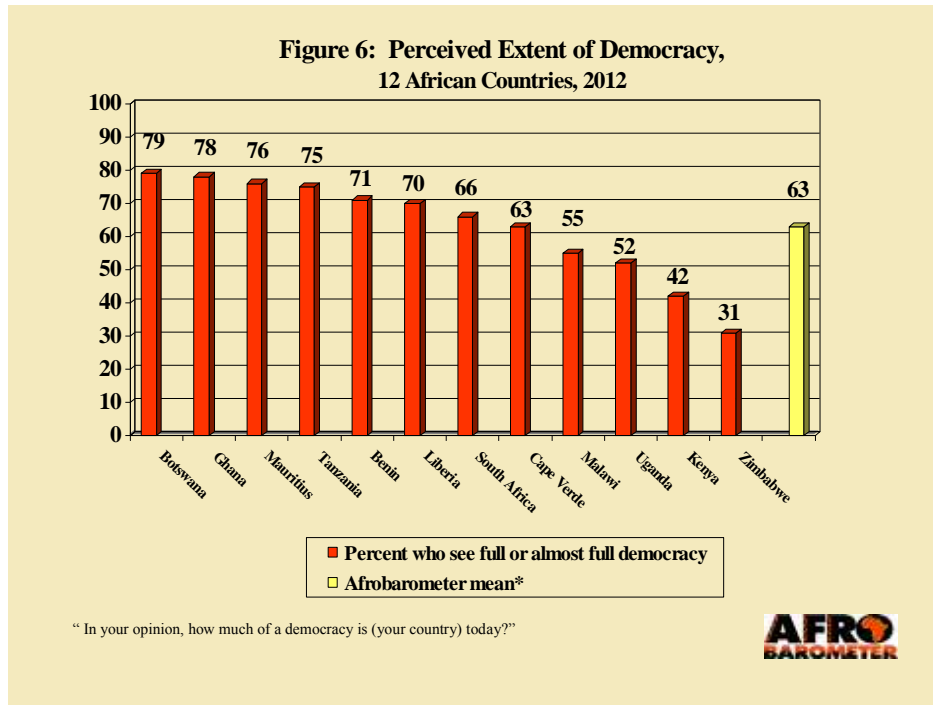


“Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in (your country)?”



The second indicator—the extent of democracy—measures citizen estimates of “how much of a democracy” their country is today. The four-point response scale runs from “a full democracy”, through one with “minor” problems, to one with “major” problems, to “not a democracy.” Figure 6 reports proportions seeing either a “full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems.” Again, countries are distributed roughly as expert opinion might predict, for example with Botswana, Ghana and Mauritius at the top. Notably, countries in which the last election descended into violence—namely Kenya and Zimbabwe—fall at the bottom. In both these cases, putative “power-sharing” arrangements were substituted for disputed electoral processes, causing citizens to question whether electoral democracy has been reliably installed.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Citizen estimates of the extent to which the last election was “free and fair” are the best predictor of the perceived supply of democracy. See Michael Bratton (ed.) *Voting and Democratic Citizenship in Africa* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, forthcoming 2013).



Popular satisfaction with democracy and citizen estimates of the extent of democracy are closely correlated (Pearson’s  $r = .526^{***}$ ). As shown in Table 2, some 79 percent<sup>3</sup> of respondents display consistent opinions along these two dimensions. The indicators can therefore be combined in order to measure the *perceived supply of democracy*.

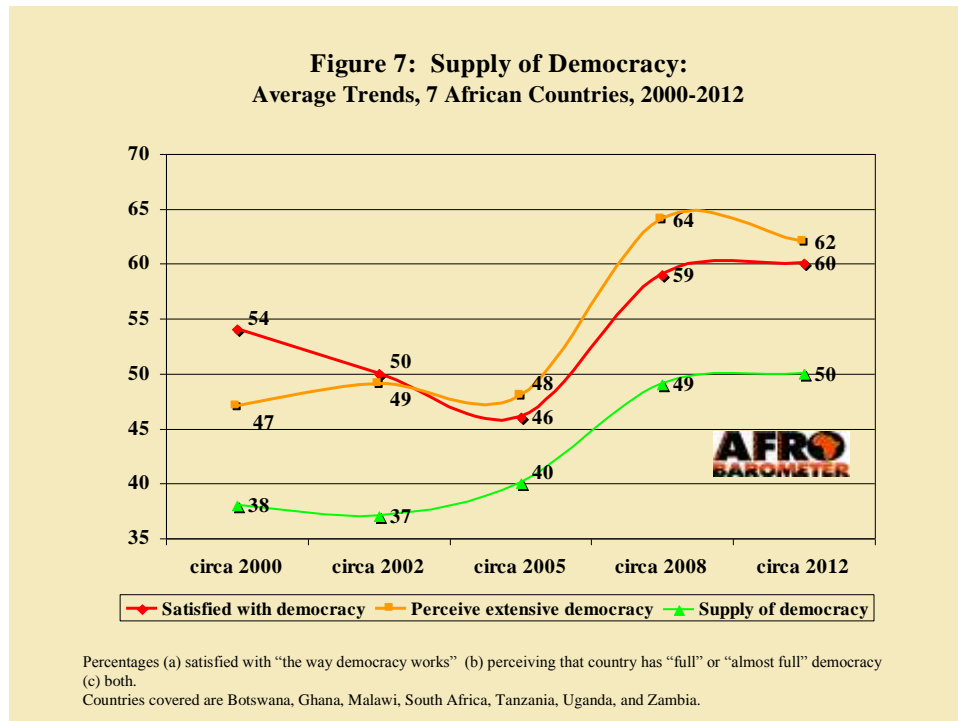
**Table 2 : Cross-Tabulation of Extent of Democracy  
by Satisfaction with Democracy, 2012**  
(n = 22,813 AB R5 respondents)

	Not satisfied with democracy	Satisfied with democracy
Don't see extensive democracy	30%	9%
Perceive extensive democracy	14%	49%

Pearson’s  $r = .526^{***}$

<sup>3</sup> Add 30 percent in the upper left quadrant to 49 percent in the lower right quadrant. Total percentages add to 100.

Variations over time in all these attitudes are displayed for seven African countries in Figure 7. Several conclusions follow. First, both satisfaction and extent increased over the period 2005-2008, which coincided with a commodities boom in the world economy and growth in many African economies. Second, both political indicators stabilized thereafter, settling at a level in which three out of five citizens express satisfaction and a similar number perceive extensive democracy. Third, and not surprisingly, these trends are echoed in the combined index of supply. In a select group of countries in Africa, exactly half of all respondents now think that democracy is being supplied in 2012.



Is the perceived supply of democracy therefore simply a function of the health of the economy? A multivariate analysis suggests otherwise. Figure 8 compares the relative effects of citizen attitudes about the availability of economic goods and political goods. It shows that both kinds of performance matter (all predictors are statistically significant). To be sure, citizens who think that the economy is doing well and is being capably managed are likely to think that democracy is being supplied. But the delivery of political goods matters more (compare beta values). If people feel free to speak their minds and, especially, if they regard the last national election as free and fair, then they are *especially* likely to perceive a supply of democracy.<sup>4</sup> These results suggest that Africans are gaining confidence that the institutions of civil liberty and open elections are beginning to take root.

<sup>4</sup> The explanatory preeminence of free and fair elections is robust to the inclusion of country fixed effects.



**Figure 8: Explaining the Perceived Supply of Democracy**  
Multiple Regression Analysis

	B	S.E.	Beta	Sig
(Constant)	-.459	.033		.000
<b>Economic Goods</b>				
Country's present economic condition	.067	.006	<b>.096</b>	<b>.000</b>
Government's management of economy	.115	.008	<b>.129</b>	<b>.000</b>
<b>Political Goods</b>				
Freedom to say what you think	.167	.008	<b>.174</b>	<b>.000</b>
Last election was free and fair	.230	.007	<b>.282</b>	<b>.000</b>

Ordinary least squares regression model. N = 13,498 survey interviews. Adjusted R square = .194  
B= unstandardized regression coefficient; S.E. = standard error;  
beta = standardized regression coefficient; Sig = statistical significance



### Demand versus Supply

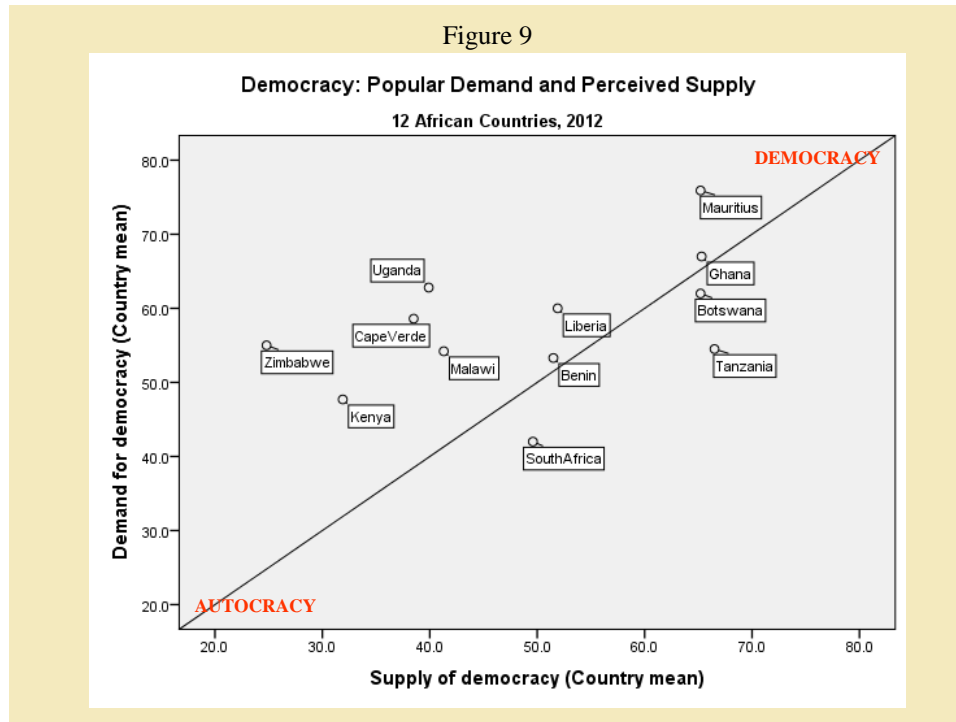
On balance, however, demand *exceeds* supply. Across the twelve countries for which 2012 data are so far available, an average of 58 percent say they *want* democracy, but just 49 percent think that they are *getting* it.<sup>5</sup> This 9-point gap signifies that, in general, African political elites are not delivering the amount of democracy that their citizens desire. Because ordinary Africans wish to increase the existing supply of democracy, they are primed arguably to maintain ongoing pressure for change.

This general result obscures important country differences. Consider several countries from Figure 9.

- In *Mauritius*, demand for democracy is very high (76 percent), but the perceived supply lags some 11 points behind. Thus citizens may well keep pressing for an even higher quality of democracy.
- In *Ghana*, demand and supply are in equilibrium, which implies popular satisfaction with the political status quo, albeit at a fairly high level of democracy. Barring setbacks, one would not necessarily expect future demand-driven increases in democratic supply.
- Demand and supply are also in balance at intermediate levels in *Benin*. This configuration suggests that a hybrid regime—neither democratic nor autocratic—is undergoing consolidation in this country.

<sup>5</sup> Note that these figures differ slightly from means reported in Figures 4 and 7 for seven countries: 57 percent and 50 percent respectively.

Figure 9



- The mismatch between demand and supply is most marked in *Zimbabwe* (55 percent versus 25 percent). A 30-point gap between citizen expectations and perceived regime performance indicates a population longing for a more democratic dispensation.
- In *South Africa* popular demand (at 42 percent) and perceived supply (at 49 percent) are quite low, both absolutely and relative to other African countries.

Most important, *supply exceeds demand* in South Africa, creating an inverted gap (8 points, second in size only to Tanzania at 12 points). This imbalance suggests that, even though South Africans are disappointed in the performance of their democratic regime, they are still getting more democracy than they say they want. As such, citizens in South Africa appear unusually vulnerable to the appeals of a strong populist leader who might promise material prosperity in a trade-off against civil liberties.<sup>6</sup>

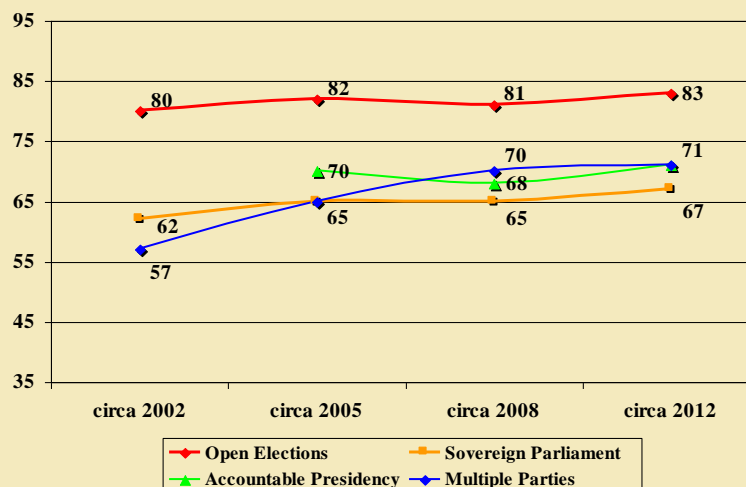
### Institutions

Overall, however, countries like South Africa and Tanzania—where supply exceeds demand—are outliers in the group of African countries reviewed here. In most places, demand for democracy continues to rise even as the overall supply of democracy stabilizes (See Figures 4 and 7).

But is a positive demand trend evident when we disaggregate the vague concept of democracy by considering particular democratic institutions? In other words, do African citizens support open elections, a sovereign parliament, a presidency that is accountable, and multiple political parties? Figure 10 tracks temporal trends in demand for these institutions across seven countries as follows:

<sup>6</sup> See Lydia Polgreen, “Unfulfilled Promises Are Replacing Prospects of a Better Life in South Africa,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2012, p.5. This article cites Afrobarometer data to substantiate the headline.

**Figure 10: Demand for Democratic Institutions:**  
Average Trends, 7 African Countries, 2000-2012



For question wordings see text.

Countries covered are Botswana, Ghana, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.



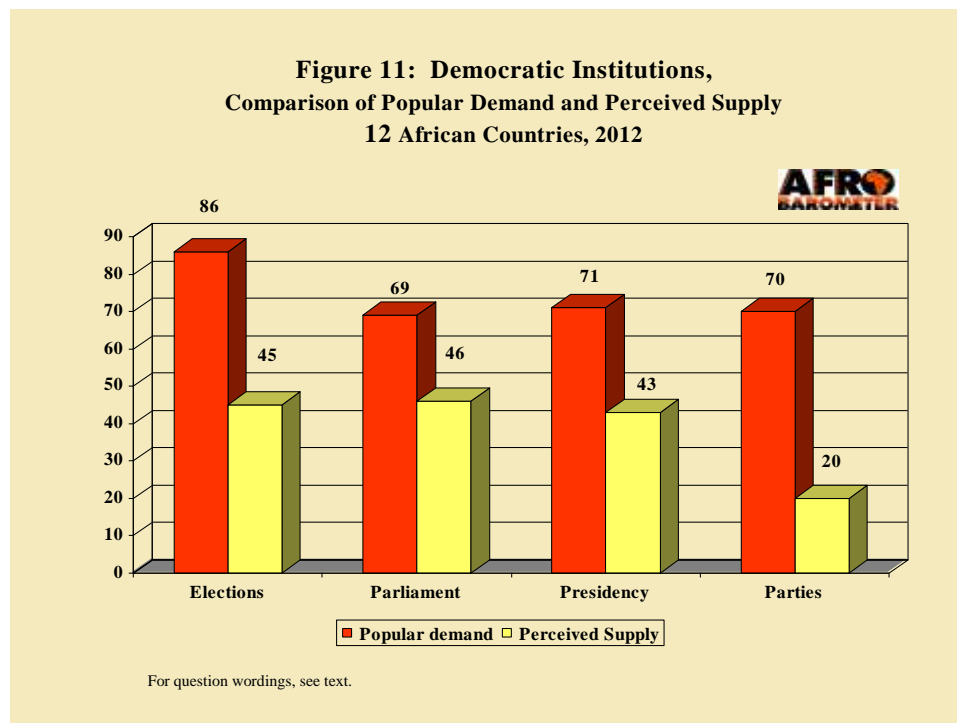
- *Open Elections.* Overwhelming majorities agree that, “we should choose our leaders through regular, honest and open elections” (83 percent) rather than some “other method.” This high level of positive popular sentiment has remained steady since 2000.
- *Sovereign Parliament.* Two-thirds of interviewed Africans now believe that parliament, rather than the president should “make laws for this country,” a proportion that has risen slightly over the past decade (from 62 to 67 percent).
- *Accountable President.* An even larger proportion (70 percent, steady over time) insists on the rule of law whereby “the president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.” A rising proportion (now 77 percent) endorses presidential term limits.
- *Multiple Political Parties.* A large observed shift has occurred in public opinion about multiparty competition. In 2000, just over half (57 percent) of survey respondents agreed that “many political parties are needed to make sure that (citizens) have real choices about who governs them.” By 2012, this proportion had risen by 14 points (to 71 percent).

These results allow several conclusions. First, among democratic institutions, elections attract most mass support, a finding consistent with the prevailing status of African regimes as “electoral democracies” or “electoral autocracies.” Second, the popular consolidation of other institutions lags behind that of elections. For example, one third of interviewed Africans are still unsure whether parliament should take the lead in making laws, a result that accurately reflects the continued dominance of the executive branch over the legislative process in most countries. Finally, Africans are gradually accepting multiparty competition; after initially viewing open

political contests with considerable suspicion, people now place multiple parties in second place behind elections as the most strongly endorsed democratic institutions.

But is demand for particular institutions matched by supply? Figure 11 dissects this question, showing (again) considerable gaps between high levels of demand and low levels of perceived supply. Results refer to twelve countries in 2012.

- *Elections.* Of those citizens who demand elections (86 percent), only about half think that electoral conduct is “completely free and fair” (45 percent).
- *Parliament.* Of the 69 percent who want a sovereign legislature, far fewer (46 percent) think that the president *never* “ignore(s) parliament.”
- *Presidency.* The gap is even wider between demand for presidential accountability and perceptions that the president actually abides by the rule of law (i.e., *never* “ignore(s) the courts”) (28 points versus 23 points).
- *Multiparty Competition.* Despite high and rising levels of popular approval for multiple parties (70 percent), few citizens are confident that party competition *never* “leads to violent conflict” (just 20 percent).



Thus the gap between institutional promise and performance is widest for political parties. This important result points to a core contradiction in public opinion about the democratic process in Africa. At the same time as popular demand for multiple parties is rising, fully three-quarters of survey respondents worry that multiparty competition may all too easily degenerate into discord, intimidation and violence.

For several reasons, opposition parties appear to be an especially weak link in institution building for democratic development in Africa. First, although one-third of interviewees report feeling “very close” to a preferred political party, an equal proportion remains unaffiliated. Second, popular trust in opposition parties is lower than for any other institution—including the presidency, parliament, and ruling parties—averaging just 42 percent.<sup>7</sup> Finally, perhaps for fear of partisan violence, many more people think that opposition parties should “concentrate on cooperating with the government” (59 percent) rather than “examin(ing) and criticiz(ing) its policies and actions” (37 percent).

Thus, not only is a tradition of loyal opposition missing in African politics, but no sign is present in public opinion that such an institution is about to emerge. Absent capable opposition parties, it is difficult to see how the growing popularity of democracy in Africa will be translated into truly effective demand for further democratization.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis in this paper provides firm empirical footing for concluding that:

- Ordinary Africans *want* democracy and reject authoritarian alternatives. Over time, they increasingly *demand* their preferred political regime.
- In most countries, citizens don’t think they are *getting* an adequate *supply* of democracy.
- Public opinion data point to a great diversity of regime forms and trajectories in Africa, ranging from Ghana’s stable liberal democracy to Zimbabwe’s contested electoral autocracy. Perhaps surprisingly, democracy is looking shaky in South Africa.
- While Africans are beginning to embrace multiparty competition, they do so with reservations about the risks of violent conflict and the fecklessness of opposition parties.
- The institutional deficit of weak opposition parties hinders the conversion of popular preferences for democracy into effective demand for further democratization.

These generalizations will be further tested and refined as results become available from additional Afrobarometer surveys during the course of 2012 and 2013.

---

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion see Carolyn Logan, “Rejecting the Disloyal Opposition? The Trust Gap in Mass Attitudes Toward Ruling and Opposition Parties in Africa,” *Afrobarometer Working Paper* No. 94 (2008), [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).

### **About the Afrobarometer**

The Afrobarometer is a collaborative survey research project conducted by a network of social scientists from more than 30 African countries. The Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) provides overall project direction. At the sub-regional level, the following Core Partners coordinate survey and other activities: the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. Michigan State University and the University of Cape Town provide analytic and technical support services. The Afrobarometer Network gratefully acknowledges generous contributions from the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, and the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. Grants from these donors support research, capacity building and outreach activities in Afrobarometer Rounds 5 and 6, 2010-15. For more information, see:

[www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)