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Keeping up with the Dlaminis: Perceived inequalities and satisfaction with democracy in Africa

by Thomas Isbell | May 2023

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Abstract

Does perceived inequality shape how satisfied ordinary Africans are with how democracy is functioning in their countries? I use nationally representative Afrobarometer survey data (collected in 2016-2018 in 34 countries, N=45,811) to test whether satisfaction with democracy (SWD) is higher among people who (1) feel that their living conditions are equal to others' or (2) feel that they are better off than other people. Controlling for both individual- and country-level effects, I show that feeling better off than other people increases satisfaction, and feeling worse off than other people decreases satisfaction, with how democracy is functioning in the respondent's country. People who feel equal to others are more satisfied than those who feel relatively deprived, but less satisfied than people who say they are better off than others. These results suggest egocentric expectations of the functioning of democracy among ordinary Africans. I demonstrate that these relative assessments are significant and comparable in effect size to widely used predictors of satisfaction with democracy found in the literature, such as economic country-level evaluations, partisanship, and political interest. These results therefore should encourage future research to include individual-level comparative assessments as predictors of SWD. Our results represent the most recent cross-national re-examination of predictors of SWD in Africa. My regression results are widely in line with past empirical research – both in and outside of Africa – and suggest that SWD is primarily shaped by political and economic performance evaluations. This points to the explanatory model of SWD in Africa being relatively stable across time.

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[1] According to Statistics South Africa, Dlamini was the most common South African surname in 2018, the most recent year for which data were released (Nxumalo, 2019)

Introduction

In the past decade, much attention has been given in media and political debate to the possible negative effects of high income inequality and wealth inequality on democracy. At least since Piketty's (2014) tome *Capital in the 21st Century* became somewhat of a surprise commercial success and popular-culture phenomenon (Pinkser, 2014; Tracy, 2014; Wade, 2014; Sheil, 2016), a great deal has been said and debated about the consequences of high inequality on democratic systems. For example, Stiglitz (2014, p. 1) notes that

> [g]rowing inequality within most countries around the world is one of the critical issues facing the world today. People everywhere sense that it is morally wrong. We sense that it cannot be justified. We sense that it is dividing our societies and undermining our democracies. And we are right in sensing this harm.

While Stiglitz argues that the connection between economic inequality and democracy is somehow widely "sensed" by people, closer empirical scrutiny of the linkage at the individual level is limited in the literature.[2] Although an ample literature explores linkages between equality and democracy from a theoretical perspective (see Dahl, 1961, 1973, 2006; Rueschemeyer, 2004) and a historical perspective (see Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Boix, 2003; Houle, 2009), far less evidence is available at the individual level.[3] Considering that many of the world's most unequal societies are in Africa, particularly Southern and Central Africa (Beegle, Christiaensen, Dabalen, & Gaddis, 2016), it is unfortunate that even less empirical evidence is available regarding the possible connection with democracy in these cases. Indeed, nationally representative Afrobarometer survey data from Round 5 (2011-2013) for 34 African countries[4] underline that people do appear to associate equality with democracy. When asked which of four response options they considered "the most essential characteristic of democracy," 25% of respondents selected government narrowing the gap between rich and poor, placing this characteristic second behind free and fair elections to choose leaders (33%), ahead of freedom of expression and government efficiency[5] (Figure 1). When the question was repeated with a different set of response options, equal job opportunities was the most frequently mentioned characteristic of democracy (36%), more common than law and order (24%), multiparty competition (18%), and media freedom (17%). (This question has not been asked in survey rounds since Round 5.)

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[2] Stiglitz (2011) argues that inequality allows a greater concentration of political influence and power in an increasingly small monetary and political elite. This influence and power further accelerate economic inequality, which leads to even greater political influence and power. Rather than benefiting the people as a whole, Stiglitz argues that inequality leads to a smaller and smaller set of clients that the government and state serve (epitomised in his description of the new democracy as "Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%," (Stiglitz, 2011).

[3] Studies have examined the relation between levels of inequality and social trust (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005; Uslaner, 2008), participation and engagement (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Uslaner & Brown, 2005), and political representation (Bartels, 2008) and have linked these to the "health" of democracy. Similarly, Rothstein (2011) has linked inequality (and corruption and social trust) to the quality of governance, which is linked to democracies (as their governance is typically of better quality) but is not synonymous with democracy. Moreover, these studies use aggregated data at sub-national levels or national-level indicators, rather than an individual perspective.

[4] Round 5 data were collected in Algeria, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. For the Round 5 data and codebook, see Afrobarometer (2015a, 2015b).

[5] It is important to compare response frequencies only to other responses within the response-option group, not across questions.

**Figure 1: Most essential characteristic of democracy** | 34 African countries | 2011/2013
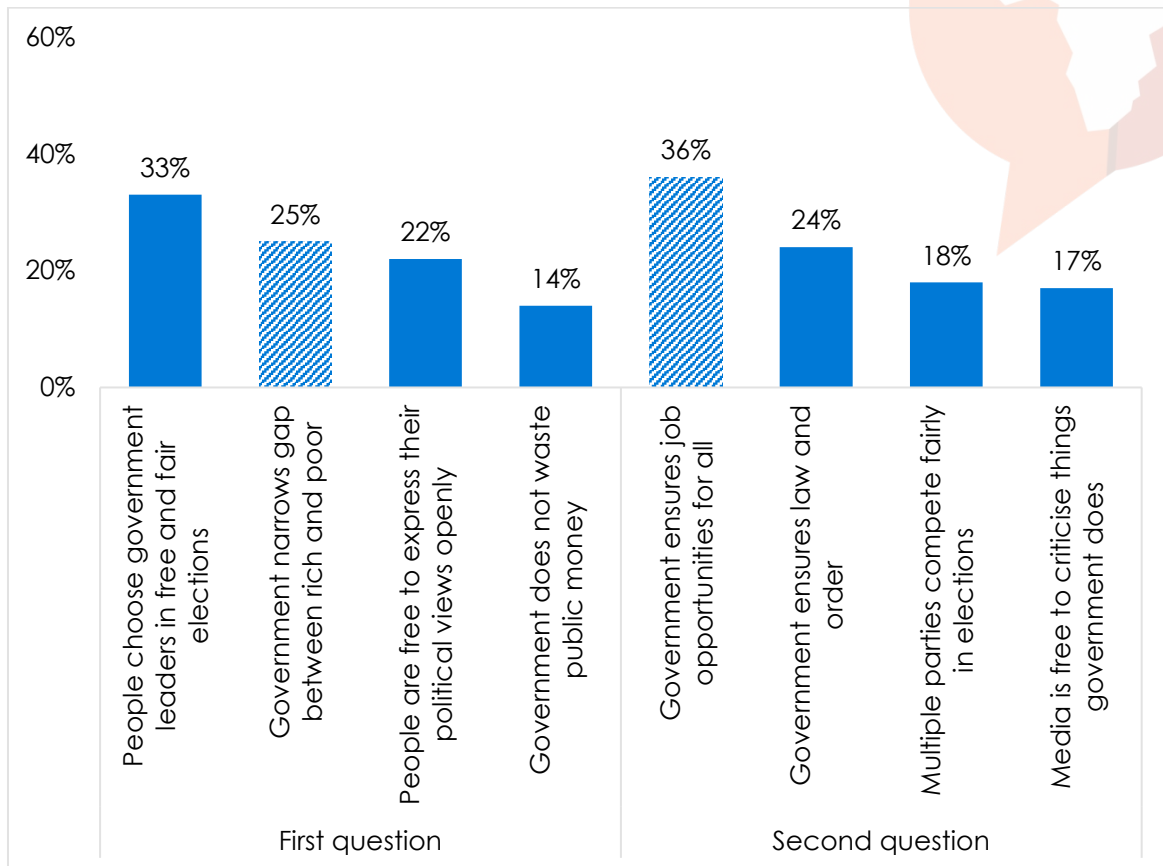
Respondents were asked: *Many things may be desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. If you have to choose only one of the things that I am going to read, which one would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy? (Question was asked twice, with two different sets of response options ("First question" and "Second question."))*
Source: Afrobarometer Round 5 (N=40,801)

Given that notions of equality and equity indeed appear to be tied to democracy in the minds of ordinary Africans, I would expect that stubbornly high levels of income inequality and wealth inequality in many countries blemish citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of their democracies.

In this paper, I use a perceptual measure of individual inequality, rather than the more commonly applied country-level aggregate indicators of various forms of inequality. I do this for two reasons. First, past research suggests that subjective perceptions of inequality often do not match up with objective measures of inequality (Loveless & Whitefield, 2011; Kuhn, 2011, 2019; Norton & Ariely, 2011; Chambers, Swan, & Heesacker, 2014; Niehues, 2014; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018). If I assume that people link levels of inequality to the functioning of democracy, it must be because they first perceive inequality, and then evaluate this perception and decide that it is linked to the functioning of the political system. Second, widely used measures of inequality capture inequality at the country level. Studies then frequently argue that these country-level scores are associated with aggregated individual behaviours, attitudes, or values. This aggregation is problematic, as it may obscure our understanding of important sub-national variation.

To capture subjective individual inequality, I use an Afrobarometer question that asks respondents about their perceived personal living conditions compared to other people in their country.
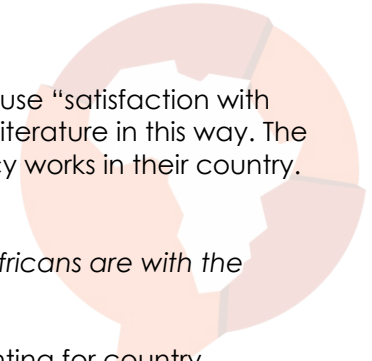
To measure how people feel democracy is working in their country, I use "satisfaction with democracy" (SWD), which is widely used in survey research and the literature in this way. The item asks respondents how satisfied they are with the way democracy works in their country. As such, in this paper I ask:

> *Does their perceived relative living situation shape how satisfied Africans are with the functioning of democracy in their country?*

To address the research question, I test two hypotheses while accounting for country differences using multilevel models. I employ the most recent round of Afrobarometer survey data that included a question on perceived relative deprivation and advantage (Round 7, 2016/2018, 34 African countries, N=39,092).[6]

In this paper I address several gaps in the literature. First, I provide an update to the SWD literature in Africa using the most recent complete round of available Afrobarometer data. In the literature, cross-national studies of predictors of SWD in Africa are few and far between, and to the best of my knowledge haven't used Round 7 Afrobarometer data (2016/ 2018).[7] Second, I explore whether perceived relative situation is a significant predictor of SWD. While inequality has been touted as a problem for democracy, little empirical scrutiny exists of this linkage from an individual perspective, especially in the more rarely studied African cases. Third, in a methodological contribution, I explore the value of using perception-based, relational individual-level measures in the context of understanding the implications of inequality.

Our analysis suggests that feelings of both relative advantage and relative deprivation, rather than feeling equal to others, shape SWD. The effects of feeling relatively better off and relatively deprived are significant above and beyond (and comparable in size to) widely used predictors of SWD in the literature, such as political interest and political freedoms. This suggests that individual comparative assessments of living situation should be included in future research, as they form important predictors of SWD. The results moreover suggest that both political and economic performance evaluations strongly shape SWD. The findings provide an update to the literature on SWD in Africa and further our understanding of important predictors of SWD more generally.

Structure

In the next section, I summarise the existing literature on determinants of satisfaction with democracy in Africa and beyond and discuss central tenets of the literature on democracy and objective and perceived equality. In Section 3, I introduce our dependent, independent, and control variables and discuss our data and methods. In Section 4, I construct a series of regression models to test whether perceptions of relative living conditions predict satisfaction with democracy. Section 5 presents my conclusions.

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[6] My data set includes the following countries: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Eswatini, an absolute monarchy, is not included in the analyses of this paper, as a question regarding partisanship was not asked in the country.

[7] Memoli and Quaranta (2019) present the most recent cross-national research on SWD in Africa, using several rounds of Afrobarometer data collected between 2002 and 2013. Guldbrandtsen and Skaaning (2012) use Round 3 data, collected in 2005/2006, while Gold (2010) uses the first four rounds of Afrobarometer survey data (1999-2009).
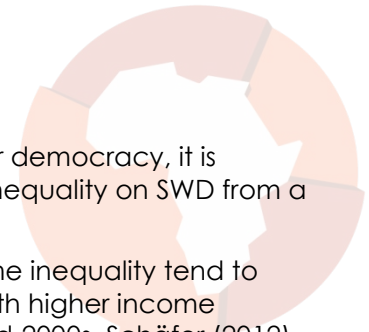
2. Inequality and satisfaction with democracy

Given the strong recent interest in the consequences of inequality for democracy, it is surprising that only a limited literature exists scrutinising the effect of inequality on SWD from a comparative, empirical perspective.

Several studies have shown that people in countries with lower income inequality tend to report more satisfaction with democracy than people in countries with higher income inequality. For example, in a study of 25 European countries in the mid-2000s, Schäfer (2012) finds that country-level income inequality reduces satisfaction with democracy, especially among the more developed Western European states. Schäfer finds that trust in institutions and incumbents as well as more positive views of the economy and personal income significantly improve satisfaction. Similarly, in a study of 20 European countries using European Social Survey data from 2002-2003. Anderson and Singer (2008) find that higher country levels of income inequality significantly reduce satisfaction with democracy.

But these results may not hold elsewhere. In what appears to be the broadest study on inequality and SWD to date, Han & Chang (2016) use data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project, consisting of 76 cross-national election surveys in 43 countries between 2001 and 2011 (CSES modules 2 and 3).[8] South Africa is the only case in Africa. Unlike Schäfer (2012) and Anderson and Singer (2008), Han & Chang (2016) find no significant effect of country-level income inequality on SWD.

Schäfer (2012), Anderson and Singer (2008), and Han & Chang (2016) do not include a perceptions-based, individual-level measure of inequality. Generally speaking, research linking individual-level perceptual or attitudinal measures of inequality and SWD is limited. In a study of 10 African countries,[9] Cho (2004) finds evidence that more positive perceived relative situation is a significant predictor of more SWD in eight of his 10 countries.[10] In Africa, to the best of our knowledge, no other study has examined the linkage between perceptions of individual inequality and SWD.[11] Gold (2010) studied the role of group-based grievances on SWD using a multilevel model of 20 countries for Afrobarometer rounds 1-4 (1999-2009) and recoding SWD as a binary outcome variable (very/fairly satisfied vs. not very/not at all satisfied). The results suggest that (ethnic) group-based, meso-level considerations and grievances also shaped SWD in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. These, Gold concludes, are simultaneously individual-level predictors of SWD, like level of education and personal living conditions.
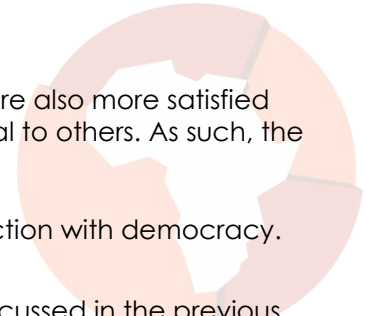
Hypotheses

Based on Afrobarometer survey data presented in Figure 1 above, it is reasonable to assume that respondents evaluate how democracy is working by whether democracy is able to deliver what people appear to see as a core characteristic of democracy – equality. This assumption is based on rational institutional theory, which posits that satisfaction is rationally based and informed by how people evaluate institutional performance (Mishler & Rose, 2001). From a rational institutional perspective, it would therefore be reasonable to expect

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[8] The CSES itself consists of more surveys. Han & Chang (2016) include only surveys in which data on SWD are available and exclude countries that cannot be considered democracies in the election year (using Cheibub, Gandhi, & Vreeland's (2010) dichotomous variable of democracy).

[9] The data set that Cho (2004) used includes Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

[10] Cho (2004) chose to run country models for each of the 10 countries, rather than a single analysis accounting for country effects. The effect of perceived relative situation was significant in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria, Tanzania, Malawi, Mali, Botswana, and South Africa. The effect was not significant in Lesotho and Mali.

[11] Several studies have looked at horizontal, group-based perceptions of inequality in the study of group mobilisation (Langer, 2005) and conflict (Stewart, Brown, & Langer, 2008; Langer, Mustapha, & Stewart, 2009; Brown & Langer, 2010; Langer & Stewart, 2015).

that people who feel equal to others in terms of their living situation are also more satisfied with the way democracy is working than people who don't feel equal to others. As such, the first hypothesis follows the rational institutional theory:

H1: Perceived lived equality is associated with greater satisfaction with democracy.

However, from past research on the determinants of SWD – briefly discussed in the previous section – we know that egocentric considerations play an important role, too. Studies have found that the sense of being a "winner" or beneficiary of the system (or more precisely of an election) increases SWD, while feeling like a "loser" reduces SWD. Rather than feeling equal, it might therefore be that feeling better off than others (i.e. relatively advantaged) increases SWD. In line with such an egocentric expectation, a competing hypothesis posits:

H2: Perceived relative advantage is associated with greater satisfaction with democracy.

3. Data, methodology and variables

I draw on survey data from Afrobarometer Round 7, collected between September 2016 and September 2018 in 34 African countries.[12] The survey was conducted face to face, in the respondent's choice of language, using nationally representative samples. The data set consists of 45,812 individual cases. Country samples range from 1,193 (Guinea) to 2,400 (Tanzania, Ghana), yielding error rates of 2 (n=2,400) and 3 (n=1,200) percentage points. I exclude respondents who said their country is "not a democracy," as it is unclear whether their response should be considered a factual statement or an evaluation that fits into the scale as an extreme negative statement.[13] This leaves N=39,092.[14]

As the data are clustered within country units, I employ multilevel modelling with Level 1 analysis at the individual level and Level 2 analysis at the country level.[15] Due to the relative sample sizes at Level 1 (N=39,092) and Level 2 (N=34), I test only random intercept models and use only restricted maximum likelihood models.[16]

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[12] My data set includes the following countries: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. For the Round 7 data, see Afrobarometer (2019). I dropped Eswatini from the later regression models because questions regarding incumbent support were not posed in the country.

[13] I excluded respondents based on two survey questions. First, I excluded respondents who said that their country is not a democracy or that they don't understand either the question or the term "democracy," in response to the question "*In your opinion how much of a democracy is [country] today?*" Respondents are read out response options: *not a democracy, a democracy with major problems, a democracy with minor problems, a full democracy*. I also excluded respondents who said the country is not a democracy when asked how satisfied they are with the functioning of democracy in their country. In the data set, 5,616 said their country is not a democrcay in the context of evaluating the extent of democracy, and 830 said that their country is not a democrcay in the context of SWD.

[14] Excluding respondents who say their country is not a democracy may introduce bias into the models. Respondents who say their country is not a democracy may in fact be expressing a strongly negative assessment. As such, excluding these respondents may produce an overly positive estimation of average levels of satisfaction.

[15] For information on Afrobarometer's sampling methodology, see Afrobarometer (2020b).

[16] To test whether clustering at the country level is significant, I first run a null model with no predictor variable. The estimates of covariance parameters are significant at the 1% level. To further confirm the necessity for a multilevel modelling analysis, I calculate the interclass correlation coefficient for either dependent variable. In both cases (using REML estimation), the coefficient for satisfaction with democracy (0.13) meets the minimum threshold of 0.05.
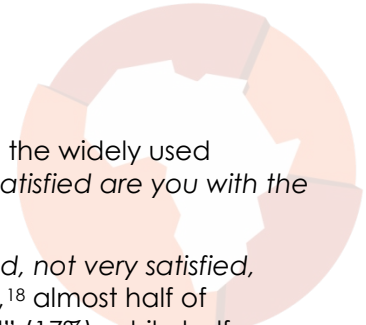
Dependent variable: Satisfaction with democracy

To measure satisfaction with democracy, I use a question that follows the widely used question text and answer format.[17] This question reads: *Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [respondent's country]?*

Four response options were read out to respondents: *not at all satisfied, not very satisfied, fairly satisfied, very satisfied.* Across the 34-country sample (N=37,902),[18] almost half of respondents are either "not very satisfied" (30%) or "not at all satisfied" (17%), while half are "very satisfied" (16%) or "fairly satisfied" (36%) (see Figure 2 below). Large country variations emerge, however, once responses are grouped by country. For example, while large majorities in Tanzania (80%), Ghana (80%), Sierra Leone (68%), and Namibia (68%) are satisfied, 87% of Gabonese and 85% of Malagasy are dissatisfied.

Predictor variables: Perceived relative equality and advantage

Both predictors – perceived relative equality and advantage – are computed from a variable that asks respondents how they feel their living conditions compare to those of other people in their country.[19] This variable makes no reference to what "living conditions" refers to. Substantive responses to this question are *much worse, worse, same, better,* and *much better.*[20]

To test whether perceived relative economic equality or advantage inform SWD, I compute four dummy variables that dichotomise the perceived relative situation variable by coding each of the four *unequal* categories (much better, better, worse, much worse) as 1 and all other categories as 0. I do not include a dummy for "equal," making it a reference category. This means that each *unequal* category is compared to the equal category. I do this to be able to test the hypotheses, which make opposing predictions, and because it is not clear whether a possible association between perceived relative situation and satisfaction with democracy is linear. For example, Isbell (2023) found that the relation between perceived relative living situation and political trust is linear, but an earlier analysis (Isbell, 2022) found that the relation between perceived relative living situation and demand for democracy is not linear.

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[17] Despite its wide use, the validity and reliability of the SWD measure as used in most survey research has been questioned. The question item has been criticised for lacking a clear reference as to what *exactly* the respondent is asked to assess or refer to, as well as lacking any reference to time. Moreover, it has been argued that the question makes the implicit assumption that there exists such a thing as a standardised measure of what democracy should be (Canache, Mondak, & Seligson, 2001). Much of the literature on democracy acknowledges that democracy likely means different things to different people and in different contexts (Norris, 1999). Indeed, it has been suggested that SWD (1) captures support for incumbent authorities; (2) captures system support, meaning the functioning of political institutions (Kuechler, 1991; Fuchs, 1993; Fuchs, Guidorossi, & Svensson, 1995; Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Klingemann, 1999), or (3) is best understood as a summary indicator of several dimensions of political support (Kaase, 1988; Clarke, Dutt, & Kornberg, 1993; Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Anderson, 2002).

[18] I excluded missing data as well as respondents who refused to answer (N=90) or said they didn't know (N=1,100). The percentages reflect unweighted data, meaning that larger country samples account for a larger share of the data used. The data are weighted within countries using withinwt to address possible sampling and household size issues.

[19] Respondents were asked: *In general, how do you rate your living conditions compared to those of other [citizens in your country]?* I use the terms "living conditions" and "living situation" interchangeably.

[20] In my sample of 34 countries, around one in three respondents (34%) feel equal, while a majority (53%) say they feel either "better" (28%) or "worse" (25%). Only one in 10 (11%) say their situation is very different ("much better" (3%) or "much worse" (8%)).

Figure 2: Satisfaction with democracy | by country | 34 African countries | 2016/2018
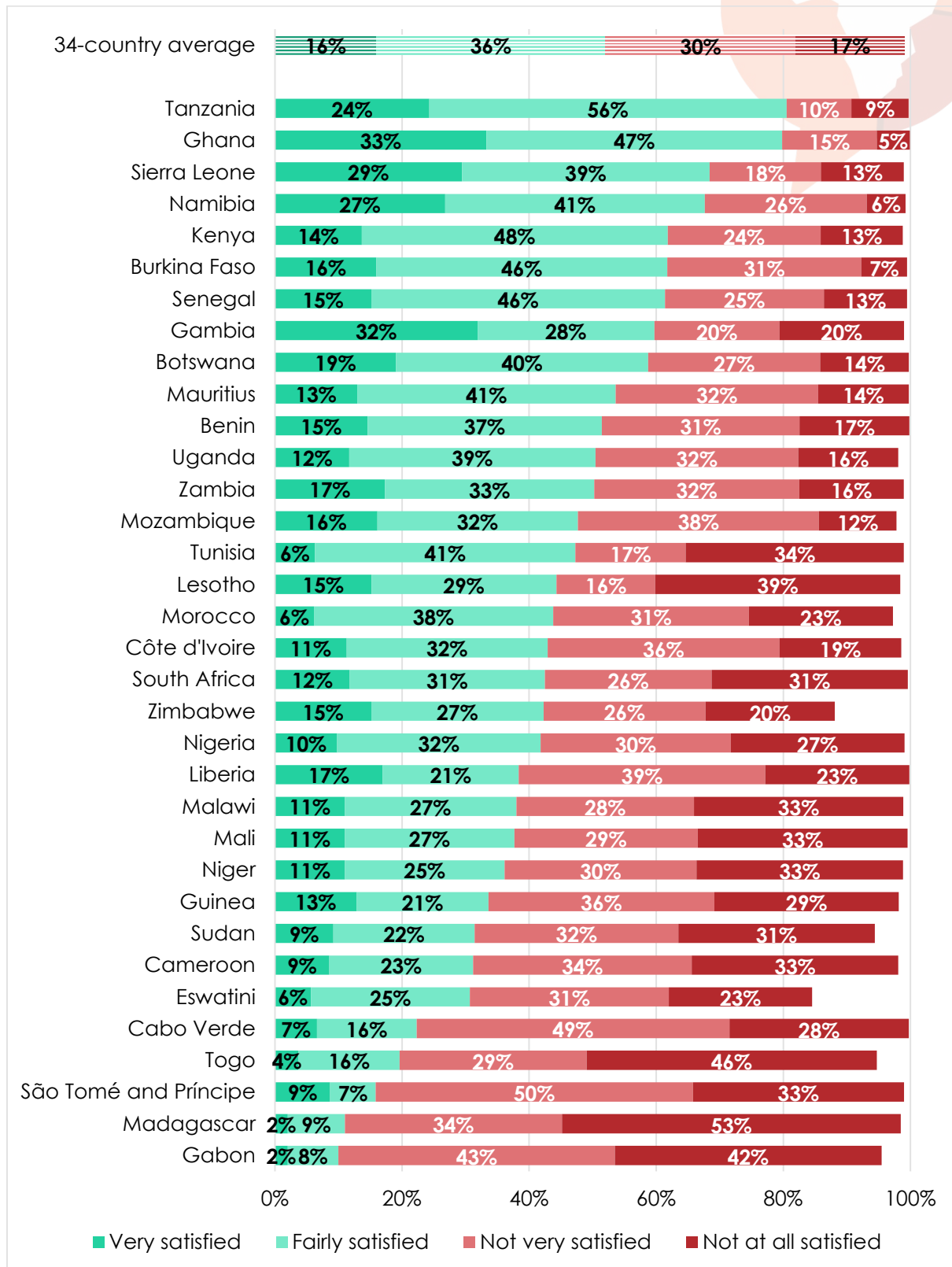
Respondents were asked: *Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [respondent's country]?*
Source: Afrobarometer Round 7 (N=39,092)

Control variables

Past research has suggested a number of explanations for why people are satisfied or not with democracy in their countries. To assess whether perceived equality or relative advantage are important in understanding satisfaction with democracy, I must hold constant the effect of these known explanations. I therefore include a number of control variables (see Table 1 for an overview).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics | 34 African countries | 2016/2018[21]

Name	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Individual level				
Satisfaction with democracy	1	4	2.51	0.96
Lived Poverty Index	0	3	1.49	0.93
Asset index	0	12	5.79	3.23
Freedoms index	0	9	5.86	2.90
Free elections	1	4	3.12	1.03
Ethnic group treated fairly	0	3	0.48	0.84
Level of corruption	1	5	2.48	1.33
MPs listen	0	3	0.77	0.89
Economic performance index	4	16	8.06	2.94
Service delivery index	5	20	12.11	3.53
Government narrowing income gaps	1	4	1.86	0.87
Performance of the president	1	4	2.75	0.98
Country going in right direction= 1	53.8% "wrong direction," '; 46.2% "right direction"			
Incumbent partisan	0	2	0.73	0.85
Trust state institutions	0	9	5.36	2.77
Interest in politics	0	2	0.79	0.71
Rural=1	44.5% urban, 55.5% rural			
Level of education	0	9	3.43	2.22
Age	18	106	37.10	14.93
Female=1	49.7% men, 50.3% women			
Country level				
Rule of Law Index	0.07	0.91	0.57	0.21
Economic growth, % (mean 2011- 2017)	1.74	6.93	4.64	1.49
Majoritarian electoral system=1[22]	44.1% non-majoritarian, 55.9% majoritarian			
Income inequality (Gini)	30.80	63.00	42.62	8.41
GDP (per capita/PPP)	1200	21600	5358	5250
Human Development Index	0.35	0.79	0.55	0.10

Source: Afrobarometer Round 7 (N=39,092)

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[21] Possible issues of multicollinearity are tested for using the variance inflation factor. All variables meet the assumption.

[22] This is measured using data from Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2020).
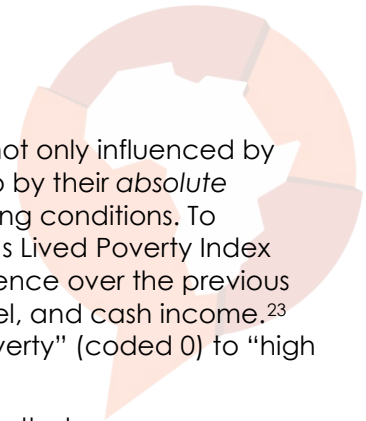
Absolute and relative poverty experiences

How satisfied people are with the functioning of democracy is likely not only influenced by how they feel their living situation compares to that of others, but also by their *absolute* individual experience of poverty, as well as their *objective* relative living conditions. To account for absolute individual experience, I employ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI), which is scored by averaging people's reported poverty experience over the previous 12 months on five dimensions: food, water, medical care, cooking fuel, and cash income.[23] The LPI is computed into a four-point scale running from "no lived poverty" (coded 0) to "high lived poverty" (3).[24]

To account for objective relative conditions, I compute an asset index that measures people's ownership or access to non-elemental goods: a radio, television, mobile phone, computer, motor vehicle, and bank account.[25] I then compute an individual's objective relative situation score by subtracting the computed national mean asset score from their individual asset score.[26]

As discussed in the introduction, past research outside of Africa has suggested that people are less satisfied with democracy in more unequal countries. To account for this, I control for income inequality at the country level using the Gini coefficient. Lastly, at the country level, I control for the level of development by using the Human Development Index.

Performance evaluations of democracy

In line with the literature discussion above, SWD appears to be frequently linked to political and economic evaluations.

To account for political evaluations, I compute an index of civil freedoms and rights, which measures how often respondents feel they have to be careful about what they say about politics, which political organisations they join, and how they vote.[27] In addition, even if people enjoy freedoms in political and private life, they might still suffer from discrimination

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[23] Afrobarometer developed the Lived Poverty Index in earlier rounds to gauge the lived experiences of deprivation among respondents. For more information, see Mattes (2008).

[24] The questions read: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?* A factor analysis (extraction method: maximum likelihood) was performed, and a single factor was extracted (direct oblimin rotation). The items were found to be suitable for a factor analysis with a significant Bartlett' s test of sphericity (p<0.001) and a KMO above the threshold (0.817). The factor produced an eigenvalue of 2.612 (five items) and accounted for 52.24% of variance. A reliability analysis produced a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of 0.746.

[25] The questions read: *Which of these things do you or anyone in your household own: Radio? Television? Mobile phone? Computer? Motor vehicle? Bank account?* A factor analysis (extraction method: maximum likelihood) was performed, and a single factor was extracted (direct oblimin rotation). The items were found to be suitable for a factor analysis with a significant Bartlett' s test of sphericity (p<0.001) and a KMO above the threshold (0.802). The factor produced an eigenvalue of 2.665 (six items) and accounted for 44.42% of variance. A reliability analysis produced a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of 0.768.

[26] Using the LPI to compute both the absolute individual experience of poverty and their objective relative conditions would have introduced multicollinearity issues.

[27] Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful: Of what they say about politics? About what political organisations they join? About how they vote in an election?* The index is computed through the simple addition of constituent variable scores and without recoding of the resulting scale. A factor analysis (extraction method: principal axis factoring) was performed, and a single factor was extracted (direct oblimin rotation). The items were found to be suitable for a factor analysis with a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity (p<0.001) and a KMO above the threshold (0.707). The factor produced an eigenvalue of 2.250 (three items) and accounted for 74.99% of variance. A reliability analysis produced a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of 0.833.
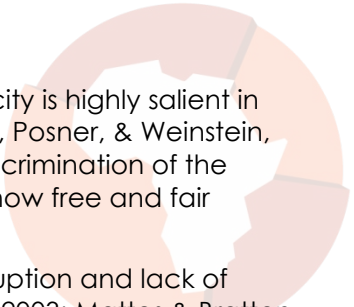
based on group membership. Past research has suggested that ethnicity is highly salient in many African countries (Posner, 2004, 2005; Habyarimana, Humphreys, Posner, & Weinstein, 2007; Eifert, Miguel, & Posner, 2010). As such, I control for perceived discrimination of the respondent's ethnic group by the government.[28] Moreover, I include how free and fair respondents feel the most recent national election was.[29]

Previous studies have found that SWD is negatively influenced by corruption and lack of regime responsiveness (Bratton & Mattes, 2001; Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Guldbrandtsen & Skaaning, 2010; Norris, 2011; Linde, 2012; Ariely, 2013; Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014; Christmann & Torcal, 2017; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). I control for reported overall level of corruption as a proxy for what the respondent deems to be the most salient form of perpetrator of corruption.[30] I moreover include the V-Dem Rule of Law Index (Coppedge et al., 2019; Pemstein et el., 2019). To gauge responsiveness, I include whether respondents feel that members of Parliament listen to what they have to say.[31]

Economic evaluations, too, have been linked to SWD (Christmann, 2018). I compute two indices that capture respondents' evaluations of how the government is doing in terms of economic performance and service delivery. Economic performance entails questions about how the government is perceived to be managing the economy, improving the living standards of the poor, creating jobs, and keeping prices stable.[32] Social service delivery entails evaluations of how the government is handling providing enough to eat, drinking water, health services, and education.[33] The indices are computed by adding response scores for each respondent and do not recode the additive score. The indices are coded for higher scores to represent more positive evaluations.

Related to economic performance evaluations is the assessment of how the government is handling inequality. I use a question that asks respondents to evaluate how well the government is narrowing gaps between "rich" and "poor."[34] This variable speaks to a broad sense of inequality but does not allow any further reasoning as to what form of inequality

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[28] Respondents were asked: *How often, if ever, are _____s [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?*

[29] Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20xx]?*

[30] Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?*

[31] Respondents were asked: *How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say: Members of Parliament?*

[32] See Afrobarometer codebook for R7 for a detailed description of the variables. I use factor analysis to test whether the variables reflect a connected concept. A factor analysis (extraction method: maximum likelihood) was performed, and a single factor was extracted (direct oblimin rotation). The items were found to be suitable for a factor analysis with a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity (p<0.001) and a KMO above the threshold (0.748). The factor produced an eigenvalue of 2.405 (four items) and accounted for 60.14% of variance. A reliability analysis produced a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of 0.778.

[33] Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Ensuring everyone has enough to eat? Providing water and sanitation services? Improving basic health services? Addressing educational needs?* I use factor analysis to test whether the variables reflect a connected concept. A factor analysis (extraction method: maximum likelihood) was performed, and a single factor was extracted (direct oblimin rotation). The items were found to be suitable for a factor analysis with a significant Bartlett' s test of sphericity (p<0.001) and a KMO above the threshold (0.788). The factor produced an eigenvalue of 2.547 (four items) and accounted for 64.35% of variance. A reliability analysis produced a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of 0.815.

[34] Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Narrowing gaps between rich and poor?*

(wealth, income, assets) the respondent is referring to, how much inequality a respondent perceives to exist, or how much inequality a respondent deems acceptable or desirable.

It is likely that people's satisfaction with the functioning of democracy is shaped by what they have experienced in the past or how they expect the functioning to change in the future. To test this, I include respondents' assessment of the overall direction of the country.[35] Lastly, I include their evaluations of the president's performance.[36]

Personal ties

In their assessment of democracy, people may evaluate democracy as a means to allow people or parties whom they support to rule. In the empirical literature, for example, it is widely noted that winner/loser considerations shape satisfaction with democracy, with election winners being more satisfied than election losers (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Anderson & Tverdova, 2001; Blais & Gélineau, 2007; Singh, Karakoç, & Blais, 2012; Loveless, 2021). In previous studies on this topic, the winner/loser variable was captured by using the respondent's reported voting behaviour in the most recent election. However, this is not captured by Afrobarometer. Following Mattes and Bratton (2007), I instead control for the winner/loser effect by coding a control variable that distinguishes whether someone feels close to the party of the president or prime minister (coded 2), a different party (1), or no party (0),[37] as well as an index of trust in state institutions that consists of reported trust in the police, army, election commission, and courts of law.[38] The trust scale runs from "no trust" (0) to "trust a lot" (9).

Interest

Anderson and Guillory (1997) find that interest in politics increases SWD. Unfortunately, Afrobarometer Round 7 did not ask respondents about their interest in politics. Instead, I use the reported frequency with which respondents discuss politics with friends and family as a proxy for interest.[39] I also include age, gender, location (urban vs rural setting), and level of education, which have been commonly used in the literature.

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[35] Respondents were asked: *Let's start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask you about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?* As the question makes no reference to what is being queried (politics, economy, conflict), our best estimation is that respondents are reporting upon whatever is most salient to them.

[36] Respondents were asked: *Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president?* Responses are *strongly disapprove* (coded as 1), *disapprove* (2), *approve* (3), and *strongly approve* (4). From the question alone it is unclear whether the "president's performance" should be deemed a political, economic, cultural or other evaluation; I follow Mattes and Bratton's (2007) opinion and categorise the variable as a political evaluation.

[37] Respondents were asked: *Do you feel close to any particular political party? [If "yes":] Which party is that?*

[38] Mattes and Bratton (2007) included a variable on trust in the national broadcaster; however, that question is not queried in Round 7. Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? Electoral Commission/ The Police/ Courts of law/ The army?* Responses range from *not at all* (coded as 0), *just a little* (1), *somewhat* (2), to *a lot* (3). A factor analysis (extraction method: maximum likelihood) was performed, and a single factor extracted (direct oblimin rotation). The items were found to be suitable for a factor analysis with a significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p<0.001$) and a KMO above the threshold (0.765). The factor produced an eigenvalue of 2.324 (4 items) and accounted for 58.09% of variance. A reliability analysis produced a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of 0.752.

[39] Respondents were asked: *When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters: Never? Occasionally? Frequently?*

4. Analysis: Is relative situation important in the context of known predictors of SWD?

In this section, I test whether perceived lived equality (Hypothesis 1) and perceived relative advantage (Hypothesis 2) shape how satisfied ordinary Africans are with the way democracy is working in their country. In these models, I hold constant a number of known predictors of SWD, as well as socio-demographic characteristics. Following the recommendation of Ray (2003), I run separate models for separate explanatory variable groups so as to not to include intervening variables in a single model.[40]

The results shown in Table 2 emphasise that how people feel compared to others – both negative and positive comparisons – is significantly associated with SWD, even when we control for widely used explanations of SWD. The results also clearly support Hypothesis 2 and do not support Hypothesis 1. This means that feeling relatively better off than others (compared to feeling equal to others) is significantly associated with higher satisfaction with democracy.[41] In models 1a and 1b, this relationship holds for both the sense of being "better" off than others and of being "much better" off than others. Moreover, these effects are statistically significant above and beyond a number of known predictors of SWD, such as political (Model 2) and economic (Model 3) evaluations, partisanship (Model 4), and interest (Model 5). This means that people who feel better or much better off than others are more satisfied with democracy than people who feel equal to others, who in turn are more satisfied than people who feel worse off or much worse off than others, regardless of how they evaluate political and/or economic performance, whether they support the ruling party or not, and whether they are interested in politics or not. In addition, the results demonstrate that people who feel deprived compared to others are less satisfied with democracy, even when we control for performance evaluation of democracy, partisanship, and interest.

In Model 6, I include all explanatory and control variables. When all competing explanations are considered in a single model, only feeling much better off than others is significantly associated with satisfaction with democracy. Feeling much better off – in this model – shows one of the strongest associations with satisfaction with democracy, along with the performance of the president, perceived quality of elections, and overall direction of the country. This model accounted for about 20% of variance in satisfaction with democracy within countries and about 53% of variance between countries. The results suggest that these are powerful models in explaining variance in satisfaction with democracy in Africa. The results also underline that perceived relative situation is significantly associated with SWD. In particular, perceptions of relative advantage should be considered alongside widely used explanatory variables of SWD in the future.

As noted in the introduction, empirical studies of the predictors of SWD in Africa are few and far between. It is therefore worth elaborating on a few observations as to what informs SWD in Africa today. Both Guldbrandtsen and Skaaning (2010), using Afrobarometer Round 3 data, and Memoli and Quaranta (2019), using data collected before 2013, concluded that SWD in Africa is informed by perceived economic performance and perceived political performance. Our results confirm this conclusion with more recent Afrobarometer data, suggesting time-stable cognitive models by which respondents assess the functioning of

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[40] I nonetheless encounter some issues of multicollinearity. For example, I find economic performance evaluation and social service delivery performance are highly correlated (r(33968)= 0.636; p<0.001), as are economic performance evaluations and handling of income gaps (r(34534)= 0.664; p<0.001).

[41] For many results discussed in this section, it is impossible to determine a causal direction between the hypothesised independent and dependent variables. For example, respondents who are more satisfied with democracy (for whatever reason) may therefore think more highly of the president's performance or say that the country is headed in the right direction (see discussion below).

Table 2: Modelling satisfaction with democracy | 33 countries | 2016/2018

	M1a: Relative living situation	M1b: Controls	M2: Political evaluations of democracy	M3: Economic evaluations of democracy	M4: Partisanship and trust	M5: Interest	M6: Full model
Intercept	2..477***(0.056)	2..386***(0.063)	1..613(0.349)	0..769(0.432)	2.101(0.337)	2.691(0.378)	0.127(0,408)
Much worse= 1	-0.143***(0.02)	-0.184***(0.02)	-0.068***(0.022)	-0.006(0.021)	-0,131***(0,021)	-0.146***(0.02)	-0,009(0,024)
Worse= 1	-0.116***(0.013)	-0.145***(0.013)	-0.071***(0.014)	-0.038***(0.013)	-0,105***(0,013)	-0.126***(0.013)	-0,02(0,015)
Better= 1	0.065***(0.012)	0.075***(0.012)	0.05***(0.013)	0.031*(0.013)	0,064***(0,012)	0,065***(0,012)	0,028(0,014)
Much better= 1	0.206***(0.028)	0.232***(0.028)	0.17***(0.03)	0.112***(0.03)	0,193***(0,028)	0,213***(0,028)	0,129***(0,034)
Relative to national asset mean			-0.006**(0.002)	-0.007**(0.002)	-0,01***(0,002)	-0,013***(0,002)	-0,002(0,002)
Lived Poverty Index			-0.059***(0.007)	-0.048***(0.006)	-0,088***(0,006)	-0,102***(0,006)	-0,031***(0,007)
Freedoms index			-0.014***(0.002)				-0,008***(0,002)
Free elections			0.202***(0.006)				0,136***(0,006)
Ethnic group treated fairly			-0.061***(0.007)				-0,028***(0,007)
Change in corruption			0.113***(0.004)				0,054***(0,005)
MPs listen			0.089***(0.006)				0,035***(0,007)
Economic performance index				0.045***(0.003)			0.031***(0.003)
Service delivery index				0.015***(0.002)			0.008***(0.002)
Government narrowing income gaps				0.002(0.008)			0.004(0.009)
Country going in the right direction=1				0.167***(0.006)			0.108***(0.007)
Performance of the president				0.241***(0.011)			0.173***(0.013)
Incumbent partisan					0.097***(0.006)		0.033***(0.007)
Trust in state institutions					0.073***(0.002)		0.035***(0.002)
Interest in politics						-0.024**(0.007)	-0.019*(0.008)
Age		0.003***(0)	0.002***(0)	0.002***(0)	0.002***(0)	0.003***(0)	0,001***(0)
Female=1		-0.019*(0.009)	-0.02(0.011)	-0.003(0.01)	-0.006(0.01)	-0.035***(0.01)	0,004(0,012)
Rural=1		0.102***(0.01)	0.056***(0.012)	0.06***(0.011)	0.058***(0.011)	0.102***(0.011)	0,032*(0,013)
Level of education		-0.036***(0.002)	-0.03***(0.003)	-0.026***(0.003)	-0.028***(0.003)	-0.033***(0.003)	-0,022***(0,003)
Rule of Law Index			0.244(0.249)				0,097(0,204)
Economic growth % (mean 2011-2017)				0.04(0,034)			0.068(0.033)
Majoritarian electoral system					0.1(0.097)		0.054(0.088)
Income inequality (Gini)			-0.004(0.007)	-0.004(0.005)	-0.002(0.006)	-0.002(0.007)	-0.001(0.006)
Human Development Index			0.195(0.524)	0.611(0.504)	0.025(0.475)	-0.07(0.541)	0.693(0.483)
Within country R²	0.010	0.024	0.124	0.169	0.087	0.034	0.208
Between country R²	0.021	0.021	0.245	0.384	0.282	0.050	0.532

Note: Cell entries are linear mixed model coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Effect sizes displayed as zero have been rounded off. *p <= 0.05, **p <= 0.01, ***p <= 0.001. Source: Afrobarometer Round 7.

democracy in Africa. This is interesting not only given the passage of time, but also considering the additional country cases included in this analysis.[42]

Looking at political evaluations of democracy, the results suggest that perceiving elections to be of good quality (ß=0.202***, Model 2) and levels of corruption to be declining (ß=0.113***, Model 2) are significantly associated with greater satisfaction with democracy. Feeling that MPs listen (ß=0.089***, Model 2) and feeling that one's ethnic group is not discriminated against (ß=- 0.061***, Model 2) are also significantly associated with more satisfaction. Further, the models underline the importance of economic assessments, with positive government performance evaluations in both economic matters (ß=0.045***, Model 3) and social services (ß=0.015***, Model 3) as well as more positive evaluations of the performance of the president (ß=0.241***, Model 3) significantly correlated with more SWD. Interestingly, how the government is perceived to be handling narrowing gaps between rich and poor is not.

People also appear to make cross-time assessments when judging democracy's performance. People who say the country is going in the right direction are significantly more satisfied with democracy (ß=0.108***, Model 6). This suggests that while current performance matters, satisfaction with democracy appears to also be linked to cross-time comparisons. In line with previous work in Africa and beyond, I find that people who are partisans of the ruling party are significantly more satisfied with democracy than those who are not (ß=0.1***, Model 6). While being a partisan of the incumbent's party is significantly associated with more SWD, partisanship does not mitigate the effect of being worse off. This suggests a certain degree of sophistication in Africans' assessments of democracy, in which affiliation with the ruling party does not gloss over insufficiencies in people's day-to-day lives.

Unlike Guldbrandtsen and Skaaning (2010), who find that average GDP per capita growth between 2000 and 2005 was significantly associated with more SWD, I find that country economic growth in the recent past is not significantly associated with SWD at the country level. My results in this regard echo a similar non-significant result reported by recent work by Memoli & Quaranta who satisfaction with democracy using various rounds of Afrobarometer data from 32 countries between 2002 and 2013.

What do we take away? The results suggest that relative self-placement is significantly associated with SWD and should be included in predictor models in the future. Generally, feeling better off (compared to equal) is associated with higher levels of SWD, and feeling worse off (compared to equal) is associated with less SWD. Feeling better off than others routinely shapes SWD above and beyond known predictors of SWD.

Comparing across the models, only political evaluations completely suppress the effects of feeling relatively worse off. This is important. The results suggest that if countries get political performance right, egocentric notions of relative living situation are no longer significantly associated with SWD. Taking the explained variance between countries into account further underlines the importance of political factors in explaining SWD in Africa: 54% of variance between countries in terms of satisfaction with democracy is accounted for by the political evaluations model, more than any other model.

The results in this section reflect the most recent Afrobarometer survey data and thus provide a much-needed update to past studies of SWD in Africa. I confirm that how respondents evaluate the functioning of democracies appears stable across time. Both political and economic evaluations shape SWD, as do winner/loser gaps. Moreover, the results point to

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[42] In addition to all Round 3 countries, Round 7 included Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Togo, and Tunisia.

strong cross-time considerations that respondents make in assessing democracy. This is weakly understood from past research.[43]

5. Conclusion

Given public and media interest in the effects of inequality on democracy, surprisingly little empirical research has tested this linkage from an individual perspective: Are people who don't feel equal to other people in their country less satisfied with democracy?

Using recently collected Afrobarometer data from 34 African countries, I find that feeling advantaged compared to others with regard to living situation is significantly associated with higher levels of satisfaction with democracy, while feeling relatively deprived is significantly associated with less SWD. Even though survey data tell us that people associate democracy with equality and equity, SWD appears to be a function of feeling better off than others, rather than feeling materially equal to others. This may suggest that ordinary Africans harbor egocentric rather than sociotropic expectations of democracy.

However, taken alone, these findings are only of limited value. The important question is whether perceptions of relative situation account for something that is previously unaccounted for in the literature. In other words, do perceptions of relative situation remain significant predictors of SWD when pitted against other, known predictors? Indeed, I confirm that the effects described above largely hold up against widely used predictors of SWD, such as political performance evaluations, the country's economic situation, support for the incumbent, and engagement. Feeling better off – especially much better off – than others appears to be associated with more SWD even when we control for other considerations. The results therefore suggest the value of including subjective, relative perceptions as competing predictors in future models of SWD.

These results contribute to the literature in several ways. First, I provide an update to the understanding of predictors of SWD in Africa using a more recent round of Afrobarometer data (2016/2018) than previous research. I largely confirm results obtained in earlier work (Cho, 2004; Gold, 2010; Guldbrandtsen & Skaaning, 2010; Memoli & Quaranta, 2019), which found that SWD is significantly associated with both political and economic performance evaluations as well as partisan winner/loser considerations. This suggests that many of the same factors associated with SWD in earlier survey rounds still hold in the data used in this paper.

Second, I contribute to the literature by showing that perceived relative economic advantage, rather than feeling equal to others, increases satisfaction with democracy. Satisfaction with democracy appears to be shaped by hierarchical relative considerations, rather than subjective experiences of equality. I also show that perceived relative economic advantage is significantly correlated with SWD above and beyond previously used predictors of SWD. As such, my work motivates the inclusion of such measures in future work examining SWD in Africa. Since my findings with regard to covariates of SWD in Africa are in line with what has been found in cases outside the continent, it is plausible that my findings regarding perceived relative situation may hold in cases outside of Africa as well. A revision of past models for cases outside of Africa may be advisable.

Lastly, I contribute to a growing literature that explores the value of perception- and experience-based measures of inequality in explaining behaviour and attitudes. A growing body of research suggests that objective measures of inequality correlate only weakly (if at all) with how ordinary people perceive inequality. This study helps further the understanding of how inequality may be captured from an individual-level, perceptual perspective,

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[43] Mattes and Bratton (2007) include comparisons to the past regime (prior to democracy), but not to past performance of the democratic regime. Guldbrandtsen and Skaaning (2010) include only the average GDP per capita growth 2000-2005, but no perceptual variable.

highlights that experiences of inequality are not framed purely by material considerations, and contributes to the conceptual understanding of perceptual measures of relative situation.
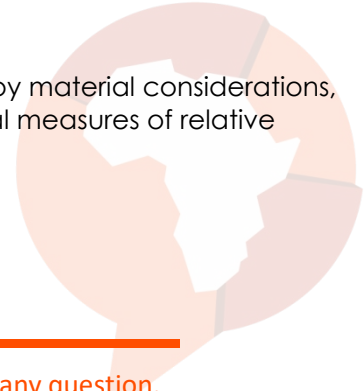
Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.
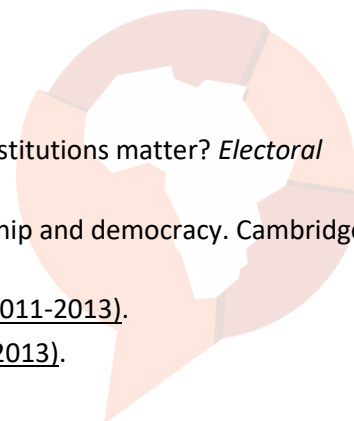
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