Few political scientists would dispute that political institutions help to shape the attitudes and behavior of citizens. Indeed, one of the leading paradigms in the study of political life today is known as the “new institutionalism.” This body of theory assumes that ordinary people—when they think and act politically—take their cues from the structure of rules, procedures, and customs prevailing in the polity in which they live. As such, political institutions provide a revealing aperture through which to view—and to explain—regularities in public opinion and mass participation.

But a lively debate persists about the relative importance of formal and informal institutions. What is the operative framework for studying the politics of new democracies? Is it a sovereign constitution, along with the rule-governed agencies and legal procedures with which a constitution is associated? Or is real-world politics driven by more contextual dynamics, in which “actual existing” social and power relations—not words on paper—determine who gets what, when, and how? Put differently, do citizens respond primarily to the inscribed regulations of formal institutions or to the unwritten codes embedded in everyday social practice?

According to Douglass C. North’s classic formulation, political institutions can be “any form of constraint that human beings devise to shape human interaction,” and can work through “both formal constraints—such as rules that human beings devise—and informal constraints—such as conventions and codes of behavior.”

Most practitioners of the new institutionalism disregard North’s quali-
fication and focus only on formal institutions, thereby underrating the impact of the informal realm. This bias may be reasonable for established democracies, where the rule of law guides political actors and a widespread ethic of “constitutionalism” reinforces written constitutions. But these conditions rarely hold in emergent democracies, where legal limits on state power are usually novel and untested. Even if the rule of law is not completely absent in such societies, it is often weakly developed or sometimes ignored with impunity, usually in deference to personal or communal ties. Under these conditions, the influence of formal institutions may be sharply attenuated as political actors align themselves with more familiar relationships and routines.

Such considerations bear on the study of how ordinary Africans arrive at assessments of democracy. When they judge the new political regime, are they thinking of its formal institutions, such as elections, multiple parties, and control of executive power by independent legislatures and courts? Or do African publics still view politics in their countries mainly through the lens of such informal institutions as clientelism, corruption, and trust in (or fear of) “Big Men”? If, as expected, public opinion is mediated by both formal and informal institutions, which are the more salient? And assuming that informal institutions remain important, do they on balance help or harm democracy?

As exemplified by North’s broad usage, the term “institution” is one of the loosest in the social-science lexicon. It has been used variously to refer to the rules of the political game, to organizations that link individuals to the political system, or even to “stable, valued and recurring patterns of (political) behavior.” In this article, I mean by formal institutions the organized routines of political democracy, such as regular elections for top officeholders and legal constraints on the political executive. By informal institutions I mean the patterns of patron-client relations by which power is also exercised. Sadly, neither of these two types of political institutions, nor their interactions, are well understood as they exist in and touch on Africa.

One group of Africa scholars—whom we may characterize as “formalists”—contends that the nature of official state institutions decisively shapes citizens’ stances toward democracy. Relevant institutions include the constitution (whether it is unitary or federal, presidential or parliamentary); the electoral system (whether it is majoritarian, plurality-based, or proportional); and the party system (whether it is fragmented or one party dominates it). Donald Horowitz, for example, has argued that a federal constitution helps to ease political conflict in deeply divided societies. Andrew Reynolds recommends proportional representation as an electoral formula to protect minority rights. And Daniel N. Posner discovers that the competitiveness of the party system affects whether ethnic groups mobilize along language or tribal lines.

Other scholars—whom we might dub “informalists”—remind us that
official state institutions are usually weak in Africa, where unwritten rules hold far more sway. Indeed, Goran Hyden asserts that “Africa is the best starting point for exploring the role of informal institutions” and that these derive from a social logic he calls “the economy of affection.” As examples of informal institutions, he includes charisma (an authority relationship based on personal trust); clientelism (the expression of political loyalty to providers of patronage); pooling (horizontal exchanges within small groups); and collective self-defense (for example, the development of shared norms of sovereignty and noninterference).

Within this rich social matrix, three informal institutions seem especially pertinent to struggles for democracy in Africa: clientelism, corruption, and “Big Man” presidentialism. René Lemarchand has argued that, by distributing material rewards to clients, political patrons help to integrate a diversity of cultural groups into a national political community. By contrast, Sahr Kpundeh argues that corruption—defined as the misuse of public office for private gain—“adversely impedes development . . . and participatory governance.”

And Nicolas van de Walle draws attention to presidentialism, especially in its informal guises:

Regardless of constitutional arrangements . . . power is intensely personalized around the figure of the president . . . He is literally above the law, controls in many cases a large proportion of state finance without accountability, and delegates remarkably little of his authority on important matters . . . Only the apex of the executive really matters.

Corruption, clientelism, and “Big Man” presidentialism—all dimensions of neopatrimonial rule—tend to go together as a package. They are “stable, valued and recurring patterns of behavior” to which all political actors are acutely attuned. Indeed, these practices are so ingrained in African political life as to constitute veritable political institutions.

Before turning to empirical analysis, a few final points of conceptual clarification are in order. First, I distinguish formal and informal institutions for analytical purposes only; in reality, these structures thoroughly interpenetrate one another. Indeed, hybrid regimes such as the neopatrimonial variety so common in Africa arise precisely when informal practices of presidential dominance, official corruption, and patron-client ties seep into the formal operations of the state. Second, the assumption that both types of institutions affect the development of democracy is only a first step. The more critical question is which matters more: formality or informality? Guillermo O’Donnell argues that in Latin America “the actual rules being followed” often trump mere “parchment” institutions. As a working hypothesis, one would expect this balance to prevail in African countries as well.

Finally, in an important insight, Gretchen Helmke and Steven
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Levitsky show that informal institutions are a double-edged sword with regard to democracy. Illicit procedures (such as corruption) usually undermine the fair and equal treatment of citizens. Yet in situations where formal institutions remain weak, personal connections (ties of personal loyalty to an incumbent president, for example) can help to secure legitimacy for a fragile democratic regime.

**Data and Measurement**

Data from the Afrobarometer (AB), a comparative series of public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, markets, and civil society, will help us to analyze the manner and extent of political institutions’ effects on popular attitudes toward democracy in Africa. Because the AB uses a standard questionnaire with identical or functionally equivalent items, it affords unique opportunities to compare results across countries and over time. Still, caution should be used in extrapolating findings to the continent as a whole: Survey work can go forward only in Africa’s more open and stable societies, so the most authoritarian and conflict-ridden countries have to be left out. The trends reported here are based on three rounds of AB surveys. Round 1 took place in a dozen countries between 1999 and 2001 (“circa 2000”); Round 2 covered sixteen countries from 2002 to 2003 (“circa 2002”); and Round 3 was carried out in eighteen countries in 2005 and 2006 (“circa 2005”).

Let us look first at the “demand side” of public opinion. Do Africans want democracy and, if so, has popular support been rising or falling? Moreover, as the collective memory of democratic transition fades, are Africans more or less nostalgic for previous systems of authoritarian rule? The analysis then moves to the “supply side” by asking whether Africans think that they are getting the political regimes they desire. Now that they have experienced democracy in practice, are Africans satisfied with the quality of rule delivered by their leaders? And, over time, how much democracy do they think their respective countries have achieved?

The analysis finally turns to possible institutional explanations for democratic attitudes. Unlike in conventional macro-level studies, here political institutions are measured from a micro-level perspective. For example, do Africans prefer multiparty elections to other sets of rules for choosing leaders? Do they think that elections are adequate mechanisms for ejecting nonperforming politicians? Do they think the president ought to obey the constitution? Do they conclude that he actually does so?

Regardless of methodology, informal institutions are harder to observe than formal ones. Survey-based indicators are admittedly approximate and fail to capture the full dimensions of complex informal phenomena. But the following indicators represent a sustained effort to capture empirically some key, but slippery, concepts.
Clientelism is measured by an average construct of two related survey questions that ask respondents to “choose either A or B”: first, either “A) As citizens, we should be more active in questioning our leaders,” or “B) In our country these days, there is not enough respect for authority”; and second, either “A) Since leaders represent everyone, they should not favor their own family or group,” or “B) Once in office, leaders are obliged to help their home community.” I classify as clients those individuals expressing loyalty toward hometown patrons (in both cases option B).

The indicator of corruption is more straightforward: “How many national assembly representatives/local government councilors do you think are involved in corruption?” Regardless of actual levels of graft, those saying “most” or “all” perceive widespread official corruption.

In closing, presidentialism—ties of personal loyalty to a presidential “Big Man”—is probed with a question asking: “How much do you trust the President?” Those saying “a lot” or “completely” are taken to be complicit in the informal aspects of presidentialism because, even if the ruler oversteps his constitutional role, these individuals are likely to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Trends in Attitudes Toward Democracy

In 2005, a decade and a half after regime transitions began in earnest in Africa, a clear majority (62 percent) of citizens interviewed prefer democracy to any other kind of government. But is the term “democracy” broadly understood? Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of the more than 25,000 respondents to AB Round 3 could attach a meaning to the “d-word.” And, among this better-informed group, 75 percent prefer a democratic regime.

People have the most confidence in democracy in Ghana, Kenya, and Senegal, all countries in which recent elections have brought about an alternation of ruling groups. But support for democracy is a minority sentiment in Madagascar, where leadership alternation was violently resisted by the last loser; and Tanzania, where many residents of the island of Zanzibar were unhappy with the outcome of the previous election. Low levels of support for democracy, however, should not be mistaken for support for a nondemocratic alternative, as large numbers say they “don’t know” enough about regime alternatives (Tanzania) or have no regime preference (Madagascar).

To probe the depth of expressed democratic commitments, the survey asks people whether they harbor nostalgia for any of the autocratic forms of government previously common in Africa. Fully 73 percent of all Africans polled, for example, now reject military rule. Compared to the 62 percent who support democracy, this result suggests that feelings of hostility toward authoritarianism are more common than feelings of
support for democracy. More people can specify the type of regime that they do not want than the kind of regime that they do desire. They may be attached to the general idea of democracy, but have limited knowledge of or commitment to its specific component institutions.

There is little relation between popular rejection of military rule and a country’s experience. In those countries where no military coup has ever succeeded (Zambia, Kenya, and Zimbabwe), as well as in those where successful coups have led to long periods of praetorians in power (Ghana and Lesotho), more than four out of five people reject this regime. It is troubling to discover, however, that a majority of Namibians—a population with memories of strong-arm rule from apartheid-era South Africa but no other history of military intervention in politics—say that they would be unconcerned if “the army came in to govern the country.”

Similarly, there is little connection between a legacy of single-party rule and its rejection today. With few exceptions, Africans everywhere now seem to prefer a plural polity: On average, 71 percent reject one-party rule. Citizens of Zimbabwe and Zambia have experienced de facto or de jure one-party monopolies, while people in Nigeria and Botswana have never experienced either. Yet at least four out of five respondents in all these countries reject one-party rule. Tanzanians remain more sympathetic to single-party rule than all other Africans, perhaps because the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi has always held power in Tanzania, bridging the one-party and multiparty eras. And the liberation-movement heritage in Mozambique, Namibia, and Uganda—and even in South Africa—leads significant minorities still to find appeal in the idea of a vanguard party.

Democracy’s trajectory in Africa is reflected in trends in the levels of popular demand for various types of political regime. Are prodemocratic attitudes rising or falling? In the twelve countries for which we have three observations, mass support for democracy has fallen slightly over the past six years, from 69 to 61 percent (see Table 1).16

The proportion of people who reject military rule has also dipped (from 82 to 73 percent). Because people continue to reject one-party and one-man rule—the latter at very high levels—the greatest threat to popular support for democracy appears to come from people who are beginning to feel nostalgia for military rule.

But these changes are evident only at the margins. As of our most recent observation in 2005, clear majorities were still dismissing military rule and backing democracy. Moreover, a half or more of all respondents have always rejected all three authoritarian alternatives. Finally, to the extent that people learn to be politically consistent—that is, by simultaneously rejecting all forms of autocracy and embracing democracy—demand for democracy is basically holding steady.

Lest we mistakenly take Africa-wide averages to be more representative than they really are, let us examine the cases of extreme change
within countries. Popular support for democracy is down most sharply in Tanzania, perhaps because people are becoming confused about whether a one-party–dominant system is truly a democracy. But popular support is up by 10 percentage points in Lesotho, mainly because of the introduction between 1999 and 2002 of a more proportional electoral system. Because this institutional reform was the only major change between elections, herein lies *prima facie* case evidence that formal institutions are beginning to matter in building democratic attachments.\(^{17}\)

Finally, the most promising sign for democracy’s prospects concerns popular political patience. The survey question asked: “Choose either A or B: A) Our present system of elected government should be given more time to deal with inherited problems; or B) If our present system cannot produce results soon, we should try another form of government.” The proportion selecting A—the patient option—actually rose and then stabilized (at 56 percent), suggesting that, even as some democratic commitments weaken with time, Africans are nonetheless willing to accept democracy, “warts and all.”

Turning to the supply of democracy, many citizens are beginning to perceive that democracy has distinct shortcomings—“warts” if you will—that include defamatory political discourse, a poor record of service delivery, and new opportunities for corruption. These concerns are reflected in the sharply declining proportion of Africans interviewed who say that they are “satisfied with the way democracy works in [my country].” Down an average 13 percentage points (from 58 percent circa 2000 to 45 percent circa 2005), the direction of this trend applies to eight of the twelve countries for which three observations are available.

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**Table 1—Trends in Attitudes to Democracy, 12 African Countries, 2000–2005 (in percentages)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Circa 2000</th>
<th>Circa 2002</th>
<th>Circa 2005</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DEMAND</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support democracy</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject military rule</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject one-party rule</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject one-man rule</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject all 3 authoritarian alternatives</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express demand for democracy*</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display political patience</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUPPLY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with democracy</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceive extensive democracy</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceive supply of democracy†</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect democratic future</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* reject all three authoritarian alternatives and also support democracy  
† average of satisfaction with, and extent of, democracy
Satisfaction with democracy has risen only in Ghana, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa. The continental average is pulled sharply downward by Nigeria, where satisfaction with democracy has collapsed by 58 percentage points in just six years—a steep decline that parallels popular approval of President Olusegun Obasanjo’s job performance. Standing in sharp contrast to Nigeria is its smaller West African neighbor Ghana, where democracy’s approval rating is up 16 percentage points. This again draws attention to formal political institutions such as Ghana’s impressive and steadily improving national Electoral Commission, which has clearly helped democracy to consolidate in that country.

In 2005, for the first time, mass satisfaction with democracy dipped below 50 percent. This means that in nine of the eighteen countries surveyed, fewer than half of all citizens were satisfied. In Madagascar, Malawi, Nigeria, and Zambia, those who approved of democracy’s performance amounted to barely a quarter of the population. Judging by this yardstick, these were the Afrobarometer countries in which democracy was at greatest risk. And just 14 percent of Zimbabweans were satisfied with democracy’s condition—a sign of just how far, under Robert Mugabe, that country has fallen from the ranks of Africa’s open societies.

Several hopeful signs offset this bad news. First, as an alternate measure of democracy’s health, the survey asked: “In your opinion, how much of a democracy is [your country] today?” This indicator—which we call the “extent of democracy”—has remained stable over the three rounds of surveys, with about half those interviewed continuing to say that they live in a reasonably high-quality democracy. An apparent slight decline is not statistically significant.

Second, our respondents expressed hope about the future stability of democracy. When asked for the first time in 2005, “In your opinion, how likely is it that [your country] will remain a democracy?” some 54 percent replied that they thought democracy was more likely than not to endure. Taken together with the positive finding about popular patience, these results suggest that Africans have not yet given up on democracy. Indeed, they seem to have emerged from the elated honeymoon of regime transition with the sober view that democracy is imperfect, but still better than the alternatives and thus worth keeping.

To conclude the description of recent trends, I want to make a passing comment about the reliability of the Afrobarometer data. If public opinion constitutes an accurate portrayal of real levels of and trends regarding democracy, then aggregate survey results should correlate with standard measures based on expert opinion. As a test, I compare AB assessments of the “extent of democracy” with the familiar Freedom House (FH) index. Figure 1 confirms that the different research methods tend to validate each other: The AB and FH country-level results correlate very closely (Pearson’s r greater than 0.8); accordingly, most observations hug the same regression line. The few exceptions are minor:
Zimbabweans tend to see a little more democracy than do scholars, while the experts are slightly more sanguine about democracy in Cape Verde than that country’s citizens. For the most part, however, ordinary Africans and specialists arrive at almost identical assessments.

**Explaining Democratic Attitudes**

If survey research says basically the same thing as expert opinion, why bother with the time and expense that surveys require? The reason is that survey data give us a fuller, more fine-grained picture. They permit us to peer below the country level to portray results by different social, economic, regional, and cultural groups. Survey data can also reveal how individuals arrive at their opinions, including via routes that run through formal as well as informal institutions.

For example: Who among the electorate wants democracy? When sociodemographic influences are regressed on demand for democracy, the results are revealing. Being a woman or living in a rural area suppresses demand. And aging raises it. Predictably, education is the most important social factor shaping demand for democracy, with an impact three times larger than age or habitat. Perhaps surprisingly, however, Muslims are more likely to demand democracy than adherents of other religions, though this result may reflect the inclusion in the Afrobarometer of Mali and Senegal, where democratic procedures readily coexist with moderate forms of Islam.

Take an even more interesting question: On what basis do Africans conclude that they are getting democracy? What institutional points of reference, if any, do they use? With the popularly perceived extent of democracy as the object to be explained, we can postulate that people
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will base this opinion on their assessments of the quality of political institutions, both formal and informal. Previous analysis has shown that the two most powerful attitudinal predictors of the extent of democracy concern a formal political institution (whether citizens see the last election as “free and fair”) and an informal personal tie (whether citizens trust the incumbent national president).19

Do the qualities of these institutions continue to predict the supply of democracy circa 2005? And which is the more important: the formal or the informal institution? Model 1 in Table 2 shows the powerful impacts of both formal elections and informal trust. In a regression analysis, the qualities of these two institutions together predict a third of the variance in popular estimates of the extent of democracy (see adjusted R square). This compares favorably with the 8 percent of variance that is explained by a respondent’s education, which is usually held to be a strong predictor of democratic attitudes.20

Indeed, the quality of national elections seems to be the principal standard by which ordinary Africans judge their country’s degree of democracy. But people also look for excellence in leadership. They must trust the incumbent president before they will judge that democracy is taking root.

Strikingly, the formal institution seems to matter more than the informal one. Here we have additional, cross-national evidence that the rules of democracy (that is, high-quality elections) are formative for popular regime assessments. This finding casts doubt on Staffan Lindberg’s assertion that any kind of election, regardless of quality, will strengthen the regime.21 But since this finding also contradicts conventional wisdom about the weakness of institutions in Africa, it must be explored and tested further. To that end, we note that when the impact of the same two predictors is tracked over time, we find citizens’ judgment that elections have been “free and fair” accounting for a larger proportion of the explained variance in “extent of democracy” in 2005 (64 percent) than was the case in 2002 (59 percent). Because the explanatory power of the official institution increased significantly from 2002 to 2005, we can tentatively infer that formal rules are gradually displacing informal ones in the public mind.

As a set of formal institutions, however, democracy consists of more than elections alone. Do Africans also endorse the full array of democracy’s component institutions? Here we consider four formal institutions, including elections.

First, the Africans we interviewed overwhelmingly prefer to “choose leaders through regular, open and honest elections” rather than “adopt other methods.” Over time, this preference has held steady among four out of five respondents, and is especially strong in Ghana and Benin. In my opinion, popular support for open elections is now an institutionalized norm of African politics.
Second, competitive elections imply support for another formal institution of democracy: *multiple political parties*. People say that they prefer “many political parties . . . to make sure [they] have real choices in who governs them” versus finding multiparty competition “unnecessary . . . [because] parties create division and confusion.” Abandoning earlier reservations, publics approved of multiple parties at a rate that shot up by an average of 12 percentage points over the three short years from 2002 to 2005, with even greater increases appearing in Lesotho and Zimbabwe.

Third, Africans want their executive presidents held accountable, at least to *parliament*. A gradually rising proportion of citizens—two-thirds by 2005—require that “the members of parliament (rather than the president) make laws.” This sentiment is most widespread in Senegal and Mozambique.

Finally, the only formal democratic institution that may be losing support is the rule of law. The proportion that wants the president to “obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong,” has recently fallen from three-quarters to two-thirds of all respondents. But this anomalous result may simply be an artifact of a change in the wording of a question that earlier had made explicit reference to constitutional term limits on presidents.

On balance, therefore, growing numbers of Africans seem to support several key political institutions that constitute the formal foundation of a democratic regime. But is this progress on the demand side (the institutions that people want) matched by equal satisfaction on the supply side (the institutions that people get)?

Figure 2 suggests that Africans are not getting the institutions they want. While 81 percent call for open elections, just 47 percent think that elections actually “enable voters to remove leaders from office.” Whereas 66 percent wish to subject the president to the rule of law, a mere 36 percent acknowledge that, in practice, the president “never ignores the constitution.” While a similar two-thirds demand a representative legislature, fewer than half think they have actually elected a
parliament that “reflect(s) the views of voters.” Finally, while a clear majority (63 percent) yearns for peaceful multiparty competition, a large minority (41 percent) still fears that, in reality, “competition between political parties leads to violent conflict.”

Because the performance of all formal institutions systematically falls short of popular expectations, we postulate that people will seek to make up for perceived institutional deficiencies by counting on the informal ties characteristic of clientelism, corruption, and presidentialism—each of which represents a dimension of neopatrimonial rule. Some 28 percent of Africans interviewed exhibited clientelist tendencies when they agreed that they should “respect [the] authority” of leaders who “help their home communities.” Twenty-six percent of respondents thought “all” or “most” MPs and local councilors to be “involved in corruption.” And, as before, the 64 percent of adults who say that they trust the incumbent president “somewhat” or “a lot” give us a sense of the personal ties that underlie presidentialism.

To weigh the relative importance of specific institutions in shaping the perceived extent of democracy, I enter all four formal institutions and all three informal institutions into a more comprehensive regression analysis (see Model 2 in Table 2). Based on the size and the signs of the regression coefficients, we arrive at several interesting conclusions.

First, once a full range of institutions is considered, an informal linkage stands out. People are most likely to judge the extent of democracy in terms of their trust in the incumbent president. The evidence therefore suggests that African politics has not yet moved fully from the
realm of personalities and factions to the realm of policies and formal institutions.

Second, other informal institutions perform as expected: Clientelism (in the form of loyalty to hometown patrons) has a positive effect on perceived extent of democracy; but the perception that elected leaders are corrupt has an effect that is strongly negative. Our data therefore confirm theoretical claims that informal institutions can have either positive or negative effects as regards democracy. In this light, clientelism and corruption are best viewed as two sides of the same coin of distributive politics: Citizens defer to authority when they benefit materially, but question and condemn their leaders when benefits accrue to others, especially political elites.22

Third, all formal institutions are statistically significant, reaffirming that—if effectively applied—written rules can help to form popular attachments to democracy. Among the four formal institutions that we have considered, however, a representative legislature seems to have the most effect on ordinary people’s judgments of democratic progress. We conclude, therefore, that Africans demand more than clean elections. They also require that their leaders spend the time between elections being responsive to popular needs and accepting accountability for their performance in office.

The Institutionalization of Democracy in Africa

Is democracy becoming institutionalized in Africa? It is, if only in part. A decade and a half after the first African regime transitions and despite growing popular disillusionment with democracy in practice, the general idea of “rule by the people” remains an attractive prospect for solid majorities of citizens. But popular attachment to the specific institutions of a democratic regime—and how willing citizens feel to apply formal criteria of institutional development to the evaluation of regime performance—is a much more varied and tentative matter.

Survey research suggests that regular, open elections are now an institutionalized feature of African politics. Ordinary people use the quality of elections—are they “free and fair”?—as the main gauge of democracy’s development in their countries. Moreover, the reform of electoral institutions—for example, the introduction of a proportional electoral system in Lesotho and the creation of an effective electoral commission in Ghana—can have additional positive effects.

Yet even as elections take root, people still question the competitiveness of formal institutions. Many harbor doubts that elections can bring about alternations of incumbent presidents and ruling parties, while others are realizing that an “electoral” democracy alone does not ensure the presence of a responsive and accountable leadership between elections.

Public support for such other formal institutions of democracy as
multiple parties, independent courts, and assertive legislatures lags behind support for elections. In addition, the supply of all formal institutions fails to meet popular demands. People continue to think that presidents ignore constitutions, that legislatures fail to represent popular desires, and that multiparty competition all too easily spills over into political violence. As such, Africans estimate that the key elements in a well-functioning democracy—notably institutions that check the executive—are performing below par.

Because formal rules mandating public accountability are persistently weak, people turn to other standards for judging the extent of democratic growth. Informal values and patterns of behavior continue to shape Africans’ orientations toward their respective polities. When asked to appraise the quality of democracy in their own countries, citizens still fall back on personal ties of trust—especially trust in the “Big Man” president who continues to personify the government and the regime. As long as loyal clients are rewarded by the distribution of material benefits, informal ties can help to generate legitimacy for a democratic regime. But if political elites monopolize available resources, then citizens tend to see corruption, an informal institution that is clearly corrosive to democracy.

NOTES


9. René Lemarchand, “Political Clientelism and Ethnicity in Tropical Africa:


14. Afrobamarometer surveys are based on randomly selected national probability samples ranging in size from 1,200 to 2,400 respondents per country and representing a cross-section of citizens in each country aged 18 years or older. Samples are selected from the best available census frames and yield a margin of sampling error of no more than plus or minus three percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level. All interviews are conducted face-to-face by trained fieldworkers in the language of the respondent’s choice. Response rates average above 80 percent.

15. Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is included since, at the time of the first survey in 1999, it was still a relatively open society. Uganda is also covered because, even in the country’s conflict-wracked northern zones, survey research has proven possible.

16. The figure of 61 percent diverges from the previously reported average of 62 percent because it refers to only 12 countries. AB does not yet have three observations for all 18 countries.


18. Although only 46 percent expressed high levels of satisfaction (“fairly” plus “very” satisfied), even fewer (36 percent) expressed low levels (“not very” and “not at all”).


20. Because educated people have developed their critical faculties, education is negative for the perceived extent of democracy, whereas the institutional indicators are positive.


22. I am indebted to E. Gyimah-Boadi for helping me think through this puzzle. Other useful comments from Wonbin Cho, Adrienne LeBas, and Daniel Posner were received gratefully.