



## Why Democracy Promoters Must Pay Close Attention to Ghana and Africa's Other Growing Democracies

By Isaac Oforu Debrah, Southern Voices Network Scholar  
November 2015

"Democracy is not a finished task; it is always a work-in-progress that progresses, stagnates, or regresses depending on the actions and omissions of the governed and the government."

– E. Gyimah-Boadi<sup>1</sup>

For decades, Ghana has been a trailblazer in political development on the African continent, starting with its leadership role in the struggle against colonial independence. Ever since the third wave of democratization that swept across Africa in the 1990s, the country has been cited as a model of political development on the continent.<sup>2</sup> After six successive elections and two transitions from one political party to the other, many observers believe the country's democracy is close to consolidation. Indeed, it is considered one of the few liberal democracies in Africa and a key reference point for how democracy can succeed in a volatile context.<sup>3</sup> In 2009, U.S. President Obama referred to Ghana as a "model for democracy" in Africa, and, indeed, it is the first Sub-Saharan African country the president visited upon his assumption of office.

Yet such effusive praise for Ghana's success as a liberal democracy appears to mask some of its deeply rooted challenges. Some argue that democratization in Ghana has not been able to overcome pre-existing disparities in development throughout the country.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, critics argue that the clientelist political settlement has

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This publication was made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed in this paper are solely the responsibility of the author and do not represent the views of the Wilson Center or the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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prevented Ghana from turning economic growth into structural transformation and reducing deep regional inequalities.<sup>5</sup> This challenge is rooted in the current two-party system, which is shaped and sustained by a patronage system that has penetrated all levels of government and which continues to undermine the nation's already weak institutions.<sup>6</sup>

The most recent Afrobarometer survey in Ghana (Round 6, which was conducted in 2014) suggests a decline in the level of satisfaction with democracy among citizens (see Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> At the same time, there is a growing mistrust of key institutions such as parliament, the judiciary, the presidency, the electoral commission, local authorities, and the police, among others. These results are particularly worrisome because Ghana continues to adhere to the intrinsic aspects of democracy, including inclusive suffrage, relatively free and fair elections, rule of law, an active civil society, and civil liberties such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and the freedom to form and join organizations.

Yet Ghana's progress on the intrinsic aspects of democracy has not been matched by improvements in the instrumental aspects of democracy, i.e. the provision of public goods. Thus, the expected dividends of democracy—improvements in the living conditions of ordinary citizens—are not yet readily visible to the people.<sup>8</sup> This failure to deliver on living conditions is driving the mistrust of key institutions and as a result potentially hindering larger democratic gains. Indeed, democracy is consolidated when there is little or no probability of reversal or breakdown in institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Ghana's case is worth the attention of U.S. and African policymakers, democracy promoters, and academics because a political crisis in one of the stalwarts of democracy in Africa—particularly one within a sub-region known for civil strife, poor governance, and economic stagnation—could lead to a broader decline in perceptions of democratization. This could also negatively affect the strategic efforts of the United States and its allies in supporting democracy and governance in the region.

## Elements linked to Satisfaction in Democracy

### Satisfaction with Democracy

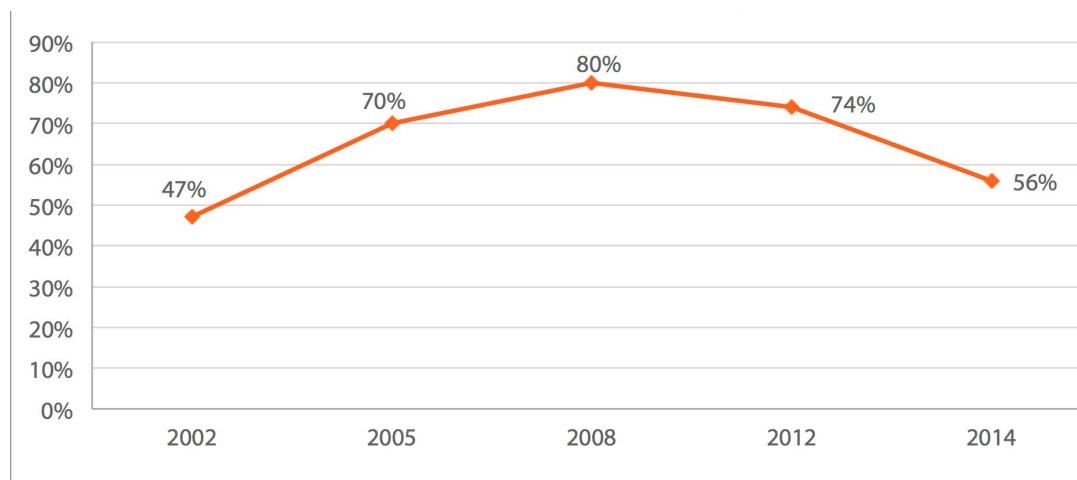


Figure 1: Respondents answering fairly satisfied/very satisfied. Afrobarometer data (2002–2014)  
Respondents were asked: “Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Ghana?”

Public satisfaction with democracy in Ghana increased significantly from 2002 to 2008, reaching a peak at the time of its second transition from one democratically elected government to another. Since then, it has declined dramatically, falling 24 percentage points from 2008 to 2014.

Why are Ghanaians increasingly dissatisfied with democracy? How does a lack of trust in institutions help explain this? This paper explores four key explanations, analyzing trends in Afrobarometer data. First, trust in institutions is related to increasing satisfaction with democracy. Second, satisfaction with democracy corresponds with good economic management. Third, there is a positive correlation between presidential approval ratings and satisfaction with democracy. Fourth, narrowing the economic gap between the rich and the poor corresponds with satisfaction with democracy.

### Mistrust in Public Institutions

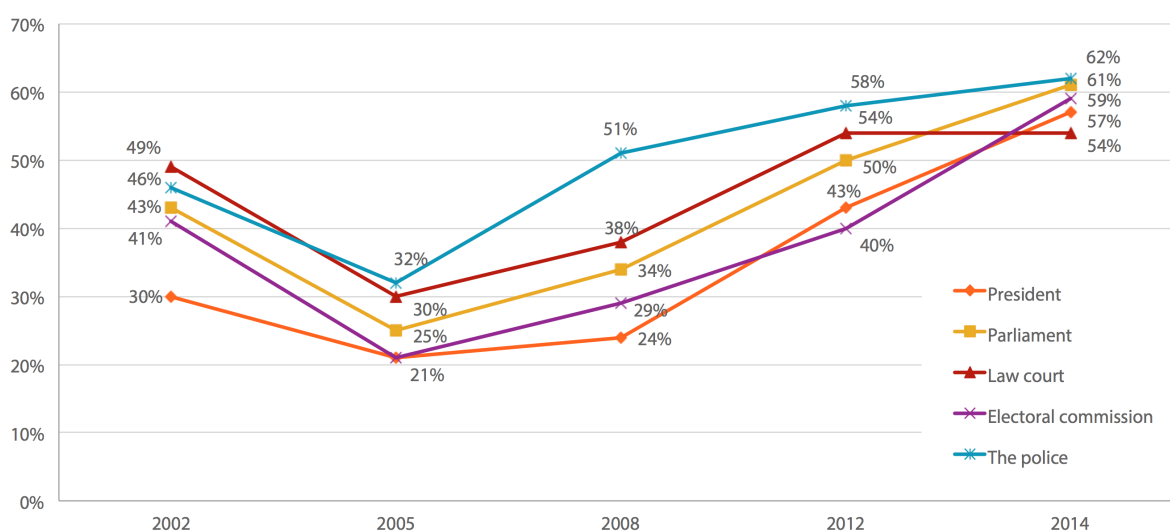


Figure 2: Respondents answering just a little/not at all. Afrobarometer data (2002–2014).

Respondents were asked: “How much do you trust each of the following, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say?”

From 2002 to 2012, popular trust declined across a range of public institutions, including the presidency, the parliament, the electoral commission, the courts of law, and the police, as illustrated in Figure 2.<sup>10</sup> Statistical analysis confirms that decreased trust in public institutions is correlated with satisfaction with democracy: the fewer people that trust these core institutions, the less satisfied they are with democracy.

The dwindling trust in institutions may be explained by recent scandals that have hit various state institutions in Ghana. The incessant media discussions of graft in the Ghana Youth Employment and Entrepreneurial Development Agency (GYEEDA) and Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA) have deepened citizen mistrust in public institutions. The 2013 GYEEDA scandal alone is estimated to have cost Ghanaian taxpayers approximately U.S. \$300 million. The government’s handling of the scandal was equally worrying. For example, some of the key perpetrators were made to refund the monies instead of being prosecuted.

The deeply troubling revelations, coupled with the government’s handling of these scandals, have fueled the perception that people in positions of authority may have been complicit. One oft-cited example is the acquittal in March 2015 of Mr. Woyome, who is a financier of the ruling National Democratic Congress

government, on the charge of defrauding the state of \$32 million. The presiding judge, Justice John Ajet-Nassam, criticized state prosecutors for failing to call key witnesses, which included the former attorney general and her deputy, whose decisions led to the payment of such an amount. This is symptomatic of institutional failure and can only diminish citizens' trust in institutions which are the essential pillars of a functioning democracy.

## Sound Economic Management

Statistical analysis also indicates that satisfaction with democracy in Ghana corresponds with perceptions of sound economic management. Yet, as noted above, the excitement that characterized Ghana's re-introduction of multi-party politics in 1992 has not been matched by significant improvement in the well-being of the people. Democratization, which was expected to herald a new era of sound economic management after years of military misrule, continues to be an illusion. Rampant depreciation of the cedi, rising inflation, widening budget deficits, and increasing public debts continue to be monumental challenges. Annual GDP growth has decreased from 14.2 percent in 2011 to 4.2 percent in 2014.<sup>11</sup> The stock of public debts exceeds 70 percent of GDP.<sup>12</sup> As of June 2015, Ghana's official inflation rate stood at 17.2 percent. Ghana is now cited as a cautionary tale of how not to manage public finances.<sup>13</sup> Paul Collier recently described Ghana's experience as a "story of disaster."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the optimism that heralded the discovery of oil in 2007—which led to the then sitting President John Kufuor's prediction of Ghana becoming an "African tiger"—has ended in disappointment. Indeed, the Public Interest and Accountability Committee, an independent civic body established under Ghana's Petroleum Revenue Management Act 2011 (ACT 815), reported an oil revenue loss of \$100 million between 2011 and 2013.

## Perceptions of Economic Failure

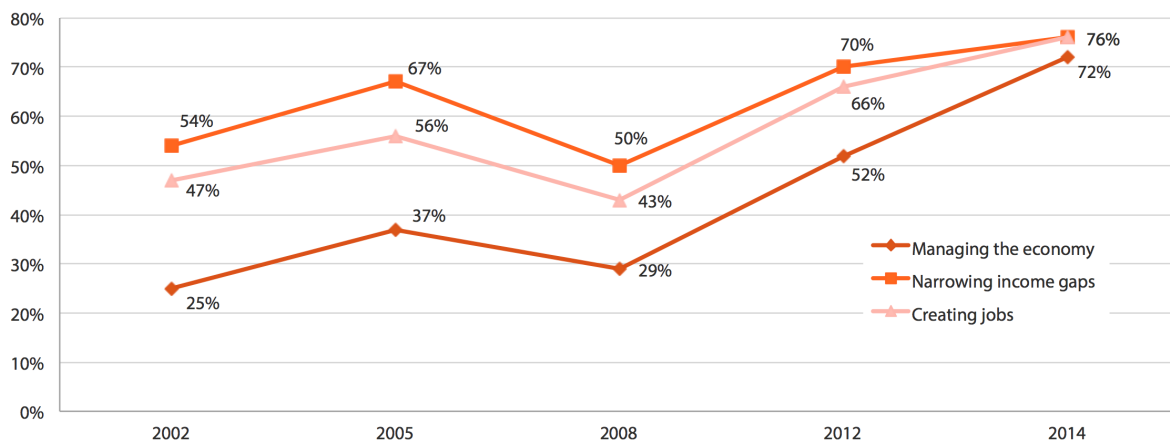


Figure 3: Respondents answering very/fairly badly. Afrobarometer data (2002–2014).

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?"

Another potential reason for the decline in satisfaction with democracy is the growing perception that the income gap in Ghana is not narrowing. Indeed, the percentage of Ghanaians who believe that the government is doing poorly when it comes to reducing inequality increased from 54 percent in 2002 to 76 percent in 2014, as illustrated in Figure 3. Findings revealed a positive correlation between government's ability to narrow income gaps and satisfaction with democracy. Thus the probability of becoming satisfied with democracy is higher when income gaps are narrowed. Ghana's economic growth has not brought significant improvements in the quality of life of the majority of the population. Although Ghana's GDP grew

at an average of 6.4 percent between 2000 and 2014, reaching an all-time high at 14.2 percent in 2011, the growth has not led to equal gains for all citizens or a bridging of the inequality gap.<sup>15</sup> Poverty levels between the north and the south remain high, which presents an added challenge to addressing and reducing economic inequality.<sup>16</sup> Also, key programs introduced to support the poor such as the School Feeding Program, the Capitation Grant, and the National Health Insurance Scheme, continue to suffer because the government is behind on statutory payments.<sup>17</sup>

## Presidential Job Approval

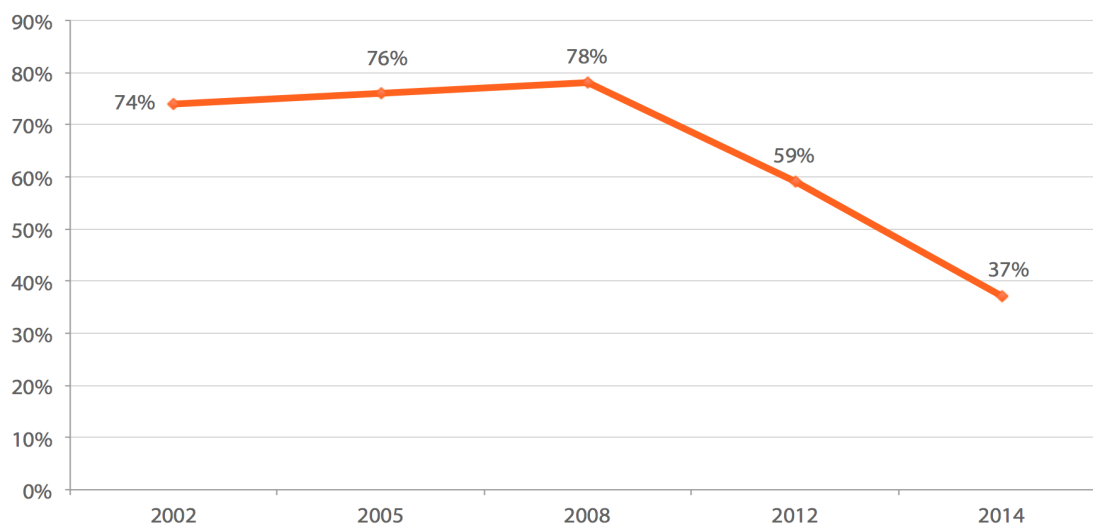


Figure 4: Respondents answering strongly approve/approve. Afrobarometer data (2002–2014).

Respondents were asked: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past twelve months, or haven’t you heard enough about them?”

There is a positive correlation between president’s job performance and satisfaction with democracy. The presidential approval rating has dropped significantly in recent years from 78 percent in 2008 to 37 percent in 2014 (see Figure 4). Again, this may be explained by the present economic difficulties and the president’s unfulfilled electoral promise of improving the living conditions of the masses. Although the president has embarked on some key projects such as the construction of high schools with support from the World Bank and roads infrastructure financed by loans from the Brazilian and Chinese governments, critics argue that these projects are more geared towards short-term electoral pay-offs than long-term investment in sustainable poverty alleviation.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In Ghana, both the elite and general population prefer the current democratic arrangement. However, caution must be exercised in the assessment of Ghana’s democratic progress given the obvious lack of progress in instrumental aspect of democracy. Democracy must not only be taken for what it is, but also what it does. As a result, bridging the gap between democracy’s intrinsic and instrumental aspects is crucial to meet the expectations of citizens. Ghana’s democracy is experiencing crises of morale perhaps because more than two decades of democratization have not significantly improved the living conditions of majority of its citizens. In an era where democracy is in retreat globally, paying close attention to Ghana—one of Africa’s stable democracies—is vital.<sup>18</sup> The following are a few key recommendations.

1. The U.S., the World Bank, and other key partners must link democracy programs to economic programs that deliver socioeconomic goods, a key dividend of democracy.
2. The African Union must strengthen its monitoring mechanism. The Continental Early Warning System established by the African Union to monitor potential hotspots must pay attention to not only visibly volatile areas but also established democracies across the continent. The body must be reinvigorated and well-resourced to carry out its mandate.
3. Diplomacy needs to work hand-in-hand with democracy assistance. In recent years, commitment to democracy promotion has appeared to ebb with the global financial crises and the justifiable cause of fighting terrorism. Given the risks noted above, the U.S. and other key donors must reinvigorate democracy promotion.
4. Democracy assistance must go in tandem with capacity building for civil servants, since most of them lack policy expertise. Capacity building should focus on mid-level civil servants, who are likely to remain within the institution longer than political appointees and are therefore better able to contribute to policy reforms.

For a set of policy recommendations regarding democracy in Ghana, see the accompanying Southern Voices Network Policy Brief No. 4, by Isaac Debrah.

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Amanda Lenhart, Alina Rocha Menocal, and Jacob Engel, *Ghana, the Rising Star: Progress in Political Voice, Health and Education* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2015).

3. See Freedom House's report, *Freedom in the World 2015: Discarding Democracy: Return to the Iron Fist* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2015). <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015#.Vlg8euK26Sp>
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Lindsay Whitfield. "Competitive Clientelism, Easy Financing and Weak Capitalist: The Contemporary Political Settlement in Ghana," *DIIS Working Paper 27* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2011).
5. The institutional arrangement that sustains the distribution of power is characterized by a reciprocal relationship of dispensing material incentives from the political class (patrons) to their supporters (clients) in return for helping the former get elected or retain power.



Lindsay Whitfield, "Growth without Economic Transformation: Economic Impacts of Ghana's Political Settlement," *DIIS Working Paper 28* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2011).

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7. Afrobarometer is an African-led, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are almost complete (2014–2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents. The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), interviewed 2,400 adult Ghanaians between May 24 and June 10, 2014. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of  $\pm 2\%$  at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, and 2012.
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Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi, "What Makes Democracies Endure?" *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 7.1 (1996): 39–55.
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15. World Bank GDP Growth Data.
16. Ghana Statistical Service, *Ghana Poverty Mapping Report 2015* (Accra: Ghana Statistical Service 2015). <http://www.statsghana.gov.gh/docfiles/publications/POVERTY%20MAP%20FOR%20GHANA-05102015.pdf>
17. The NHIS (introduced in 2003) aims to provide adequate health care regardless of ability to pay. The School Feeding Program (introduced in 2005), supported by donors such as the Government of the Netherlands, to provides free nutritious meals to children in deprived public schools to boost school enrollment and attendance. For more see Joyce Abebrese, *Social Protection in Ghana: An Overview of Existing Programmes and their Prospects and Challenges* (Friedrich Ebert Foundation: Berlin). <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ghana/10497.pdf>
18. Larry Diamond, "Facing up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 26.1 (2015): 141–155.

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