

Democracy has been good for us, but how good? – Insights from the Afrobarometer survey

By Dr. John Osae-Kwapong

April 28, 2022 marked thirty years of the referendum approving the 1992 Constitution. Given the country’s post-independence political trajectory which includes two previously failed attempts at multiparty democracy each lasting no more than three years, it is quite remarkable what the 4th republican constitution has achieved. In his reflection, President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, among many things, boldly declared that “*democracy has been good for us*”.

In 1999, Giovanni Carbone penned the following:

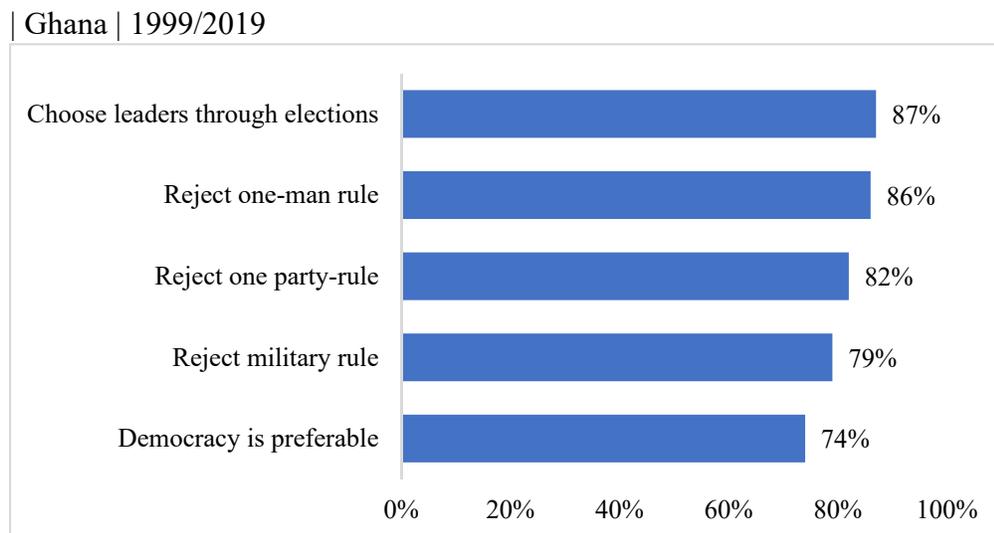
“In order to survive and consolidate over the long term, any new democratic regime will need to undergo (among other things) a process of gradual legitimization. Legitimacy, in turn, can be acquired in two fundamental ways. The first is normative: People hold values and beliefs that assert democracy’s inherent superiority and value it “for its own sake.” The second is performance-based: People come to accept democracy because it helps to attain valued goals such as material wellbeing or social peace.”

Using the above as a framework, and drawing on data from the Afrobarometer survey conducted over eight rounds (1999-2019), I want to reflect further on the president’s assertion that “*democracy has been good for us*” by rephrasing the statement to “*democracy has been good for us, but how good?*”

How good has democracy been for Ghana?

On Carbone’s argument that “*People hold values and beliefs that assert democracy’s inherent superiority and value it for its own sake,*” how does the verdict of Ghanaians measure up against this assertion?

Figure 1: Attitudes towards democracy and non-democratic forms of government

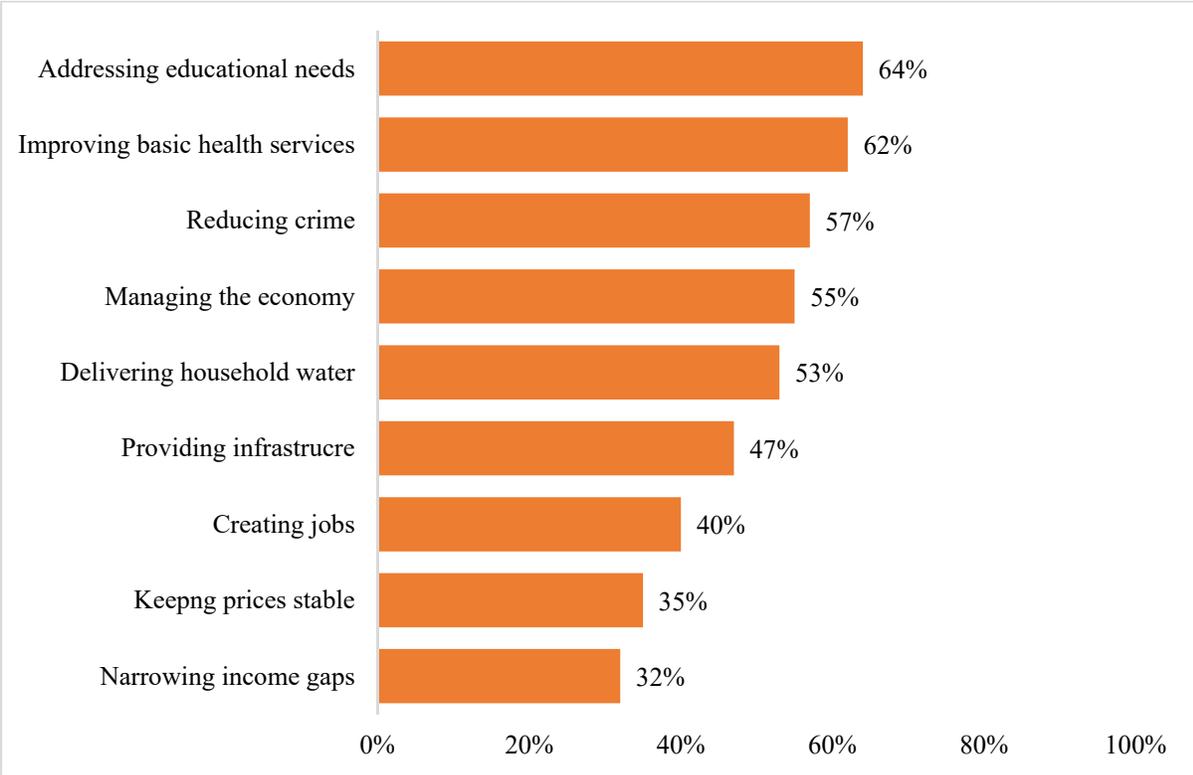


On this dimension, the transition to democracy can be largely described as having produced the desired effect of bringing our values and beliefs into accepting democracy as being preferable to any other form. As I asserted in a recent reflection piece, we have made our peace with democracy and I am particularly impressed by the high percentage of Ghanaians who say that we must choose our leaders through elections, one of the key linchpins of democratic practice.

The 4th Republic has seen eight elections and while two ended up in the Supreme Court for judicial adjudication because the outcome was disputed by the party declared as having lost, the preference for the use of elections as the mechanism for choosing leaders remains high.

The other dimension of Carbone’s argument is that “*People come to accept democracy because it helps to attain valued goals such as material wellbeing or social peace.*” This statement begs the question: How do Ghanaians evaluate the extent to which our democratic form of government has delivered on critical social and economic goods?

Figure 2: How well has democracy delivered critical social and economic goods? | Ghana
| 1999/2019

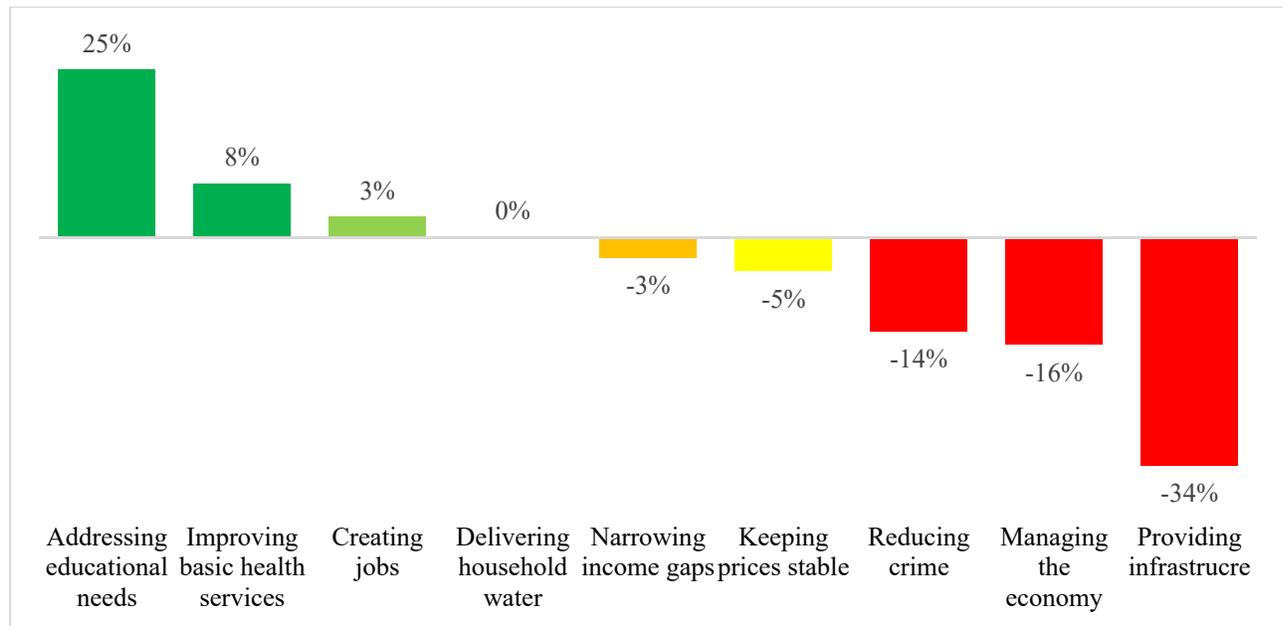


Average percentage over eight rounds (1999 – 2019)

The figure above is the rating on the delivery on key selected social and economic goods. A careful examination of the graph shows a mixed review on the extent to which these goods have been

delivered so far. The delivery of social goods, especially education and basic health services, are rated better than the delivery of economic goods as the tail end of the graph above shows in areas such as job creation, price stability, and income inequality.

Figure 3: How has democracy’s delivery of critical social and economic goods changed over time? | Ghana | 1999/2019



Percentage (change over time) of Ghanaians who rate government performance as “fairly well” or “very well”

In the previous graph, I presented the average rating of the delivery of key social and economic goods over eight rounds of the Afrobarometer survey. In this graph, I show the extent to which the delivery of those goods has changed over time – positive or negative- over those eight rounds of the survey. The picture is mixed, with both positive and negative changes over time.

The next thirty years

In wrapping up his speech, President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo noted that there is still work to be done and cited the threats to our democracy as “chieftaincy conflicts, land disputes, ethnic conflicts, cyber security issues, youth unemployment, economic hardships, and corruption in our public life.” Indeed, the president has his pulse right on the challenges we face and as the Afrobarometer data shows, there is work to be done to ensure that democracy delivers critical social and economic goods at sustainable levels. It is also important to point out that the president ended on a note of optimism saying, “the basic commitment to resolving these challenges, within the framework of due process and democratic institutions, must remain unshaken.”

So, in the next thirty years, when we return to reflect on sixty years of the constitution of the Fourth Republic, it is my ardent hope that we would have made more sustainable progress, and further

strengthened our resolve to continue on the path of democratic governance. More so, that we would have dealt satisfactorily with the challenges the president pointed out because as Carbone said in 1999, “*gravely and consistently dismal results in the achievement of other goals (security, economic well-being, or social equality) might overwhelm the will to remain loyal to the democratic model.*”



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