

## Nigeria's pre-election pulse: Mixed views on democracy and accountability

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 18 | Nengak Daniel Gondyi, Raphael Mbaegbu, and Peter Lewis**

### Summary

Nigeria's 2015 general elections, delayed by six weeks because of scaled-up military operations against terrorism, are likely to be the most competitive in the country's history (see Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 11 at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has used the extra time to distribute more voter cards and complete other preparations. In the tense build-up to the elections, this new analysis of Afrobarometer survey data collected in December 2014 takes the democratic pulse of Nigerians as they get ready to head to the polls.

Focusing on attitudes toward democracy and accountability, the analysis finds that while most Nigerians embrace the concept of democracy and reject other forms of government, significant proportions of the population express support for non-democratic practices, such as military rule or an authoritarian president who is above the checks of Parliament and the courts. Public dissatisfaction with how democracy is working in Nigeria and with the performance of their elected leaders is high. Many Nigerians believe that public institutions and office holders can serve as checks on each other, but they do not see voters as playing a leading role in holding political officials accountable. Levels of citizen trust in institutions and leaders vary, in parallel with perceptions of office-holder corruption, suggesting that addressing corruption is likely to be a key to building public trust in elected offices and government agencies.

### Afrobarometer survey

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 currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Nigeria, led by Practical Sampling International (PSI) in collaboration with the CLEEN Foundation, interviewed 2,400 adult Nigerians between 5 and 27 December 2014. (For 80 cases, supplementary interviews were conducted on 18 and 19 January 2015.) The sample covered 33 of Nigeria's 36 states, as well as the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). It was not possible to conduct interviews in three states in the North East zone – Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe – due to unrest in the region, so substitutions of sampling units were made from neighbouring states in the same zone. Thus, each of the country's zones is represented in proportion to its share of the national population. A sample of this size yields national-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys have been conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2012.

## Key findings

- Two-thirds (65%) of Nigerians favour democracy as the best form of government, a decline from 69% in 2012, and one in five (21%) say non-democratic forms can sometimes be preferable.
- While majorities reject non-democratic alternatives, 15% approve of military rule, 11% support one-party rule, and 9% approve of one-man rule.
- Nigerians show relatively weak support for checks and balances to ensure that public officials perform their functions appropriately, and most respondents do not see voters and their ballots as playing leading roles in ensuring accountability.
- Ahead of the elections, key political office holders receive weak approval ratings on their performance, and public perceptions are characterized by low levels of trust and high levels of perceived corruption.

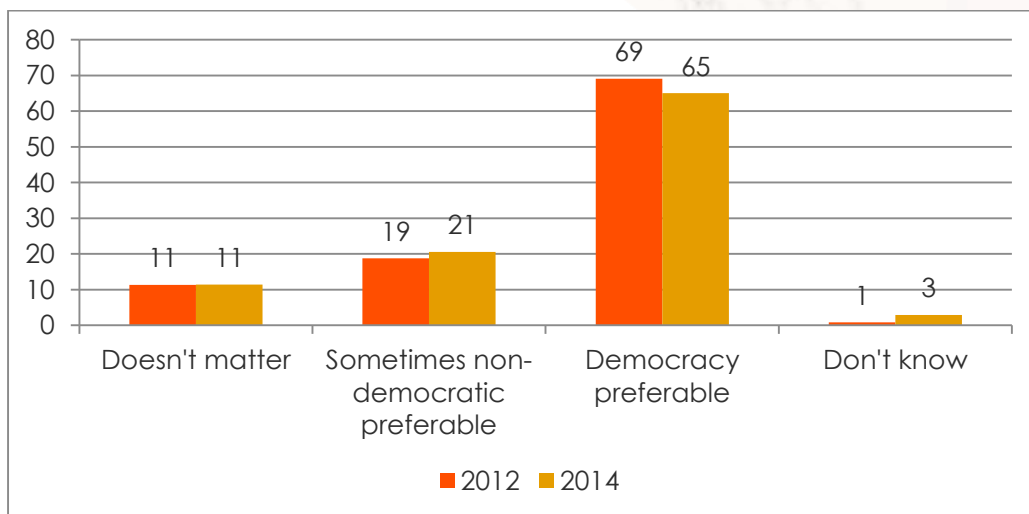
## Support for democracy

Over the past 15 years, Nigeria has held four general elections, in 1999, 2003, 2007, and 2011. While democracy has other prerequisites, the conduct of periodic elections is arguably the most important factor for the sustenance of democracy. Nigerians are not strangers to the concept of democracy – 72% understand the meaning of the word “democracy” in English (including 69% of women), while 21% require a local-language translation to understand the word.

Two-thirds (65%) of Nigerians prefer democracy over other forms of government. This is a decline from 69% in 2012. Moreover, a full 21% of citizens say non-democratic forms of government can sometimes be preferable, while 11% say the system of government in place does not matter (Figure 1).

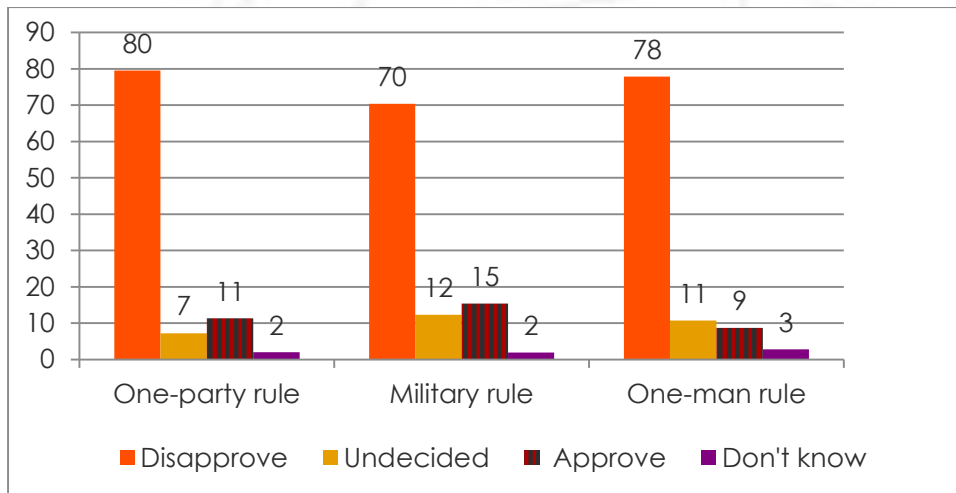
While majorities reject non-democratic alternatives, 15% approve of military rule, 11% support one-party rule, while 9% approve of one-man rule (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Preferred form of government | 2012-2014**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion? (%)  
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.  
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.  
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

**Figure 2: Support for alternative forms of government | 2014**



**Respondents were asked:** *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: (%)*

A: *Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office?*

B: *The army comes in to govern the country?*

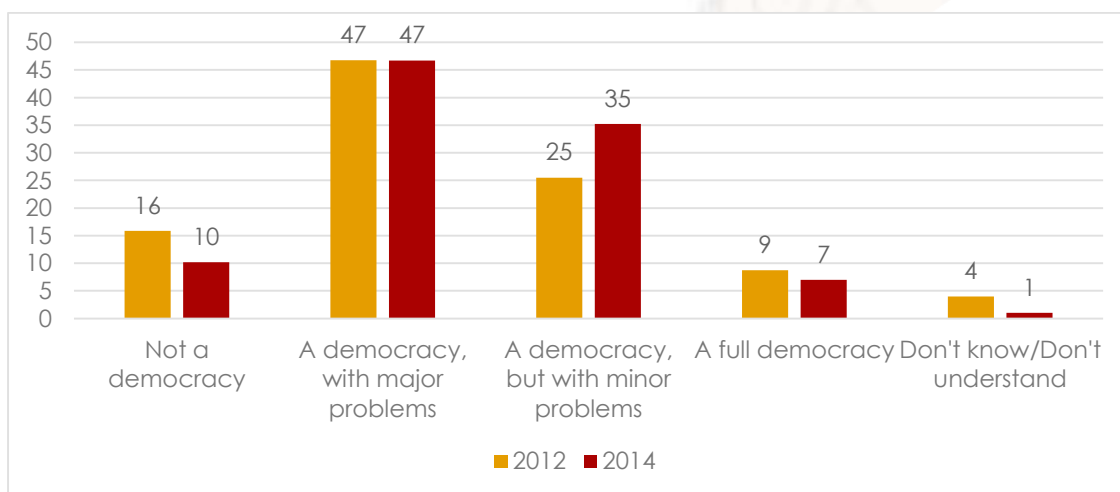
C: *Elections and the National Assembly are abolished so that the president can decide everything?*

### The quality of democracy in Nigeria

Only 7% of citizens say Nigeria is “a full democracy,” down from 9% in 2012, while 10% say it is “not a democracy” at all, a drop from 16% in 2012. Most Nigerians see their country as a democracy “with major problems” (47%) or “with minor problems” (35%) (Figure 3).

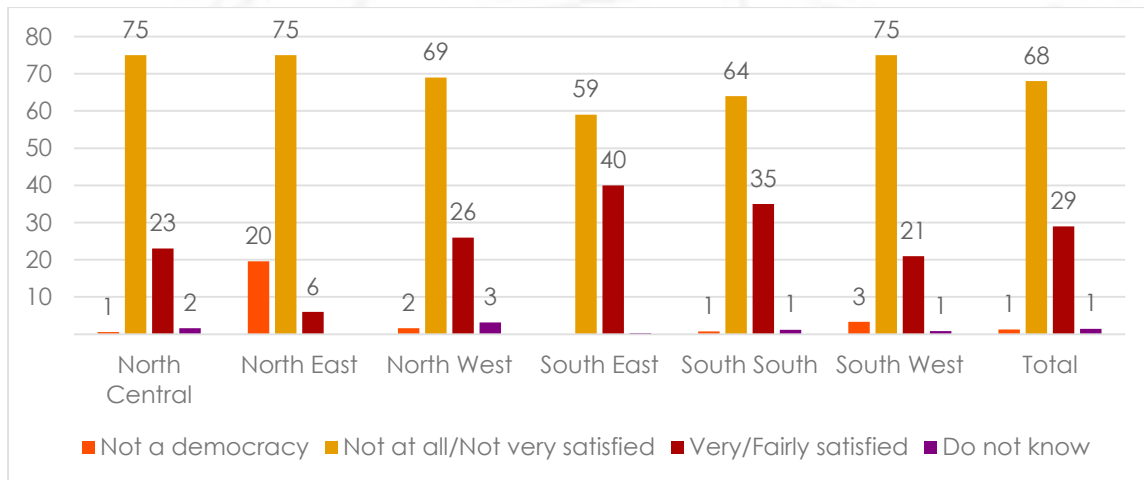
Only 29% are “very satisfied” or “fairly satisfied” with the way democracy is working in Nigeria, while 68% are “not very” or “not at all” satisfied (Figure 4). Dissatisfaction with the quality of democracy is a theme that cuts across the country’s six geopolitical zones or regions, peaking at 75% who are “not very” or “not at all” satisfied in the North Central, North East, and South West. Respondents in the South East are the least dissatisfied (59%). There is no significant difference between men and women regarding their satisfaction with democracy in Nigeria.

**Figure 3: Extent of democracy in Nigeria | 2012-2014**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Nigeria today? (%)*

**Figure 4: Satisfaction with democracy | by region | 2014**



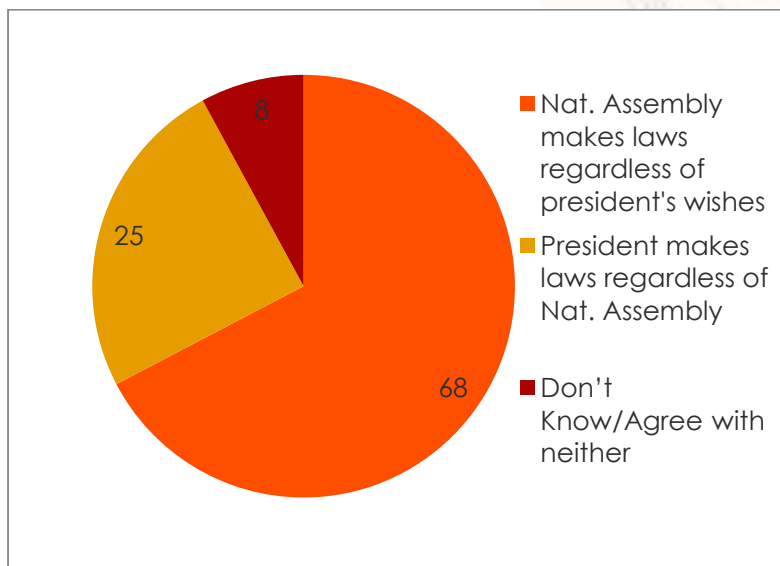
**Respondents were asked:** Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Nigeria? (%)

### The practice of democracy: Checks and accountability

In addition to support for and satisfaction with democracy, a number of questions sought to determine citizens' attitudes toward specific elements of democracy, including the balance of executive, legislative, and judicial powers and the role of opposition political parties in supporting or holding the government accountable. The results show mixed views of democracy in practice.

Two-thirds (68%) of Nigerians say law-making power should rest with the National Assembly, "even if the president does not agree," but a significant minority (25%) say the president should "pass laws without worrying about what the National Assembly thinks" (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Who should make laws | 2014**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (%)

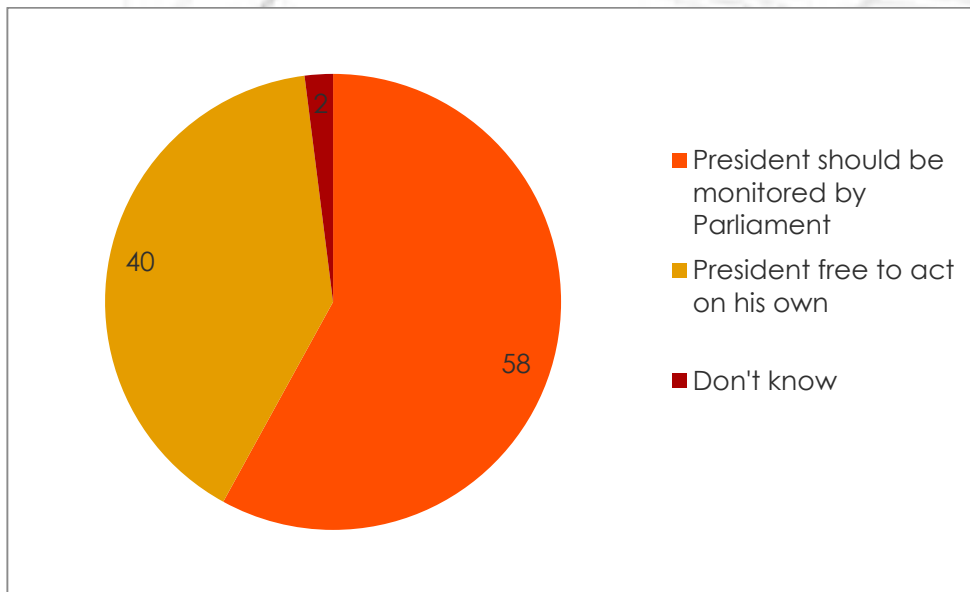
Statement 1: Members of the National Assembly represent the people; therefore they should make laws for this country, even if the president does not agree.

Statement 2: Since the president represents all of us, he should pass laws without worrying about what the National Assembly thinks.

Regarding checks against excesses and abuses of power, survey respondents hold mixed views on institutional accountability and largely dismiss accountability to the voters.

A majority of Nigerians (58%) say the National Assembly “should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis” how public funds are spent, while 40% say the president should be allowed to govern freely without “wasting time” to justify expenses (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Support for legislative oversight | 2012-2014**



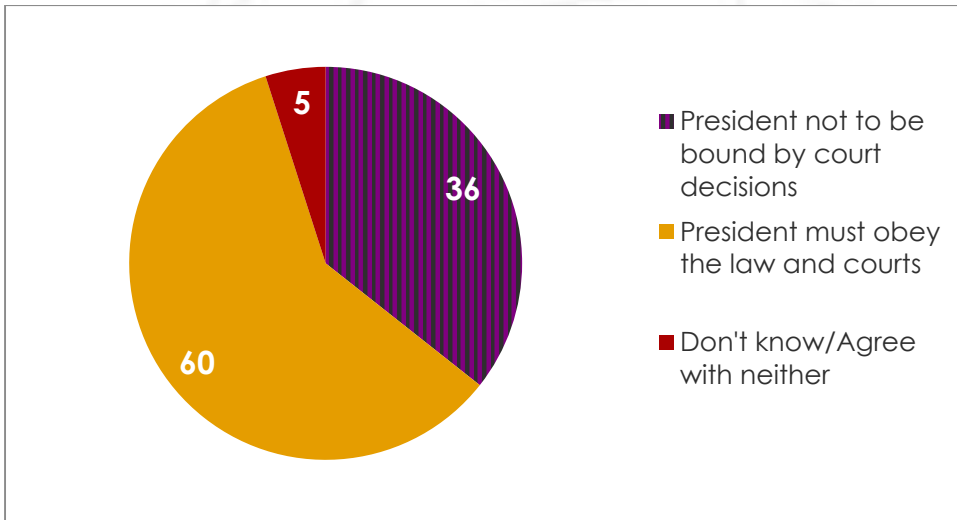
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (%)

*Statement 1: The National Assembly should ensure that the President explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.*

*Statement 2: The President should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.*

Regarding the balance of executive and judicial powers, more than one-third (36%) of Nigerians say the president should not be bound by a court decision if s/he does not agree with it, while 60% say the president must “always obey the laws and the courts” (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: President bound by court decisions? | 2014**



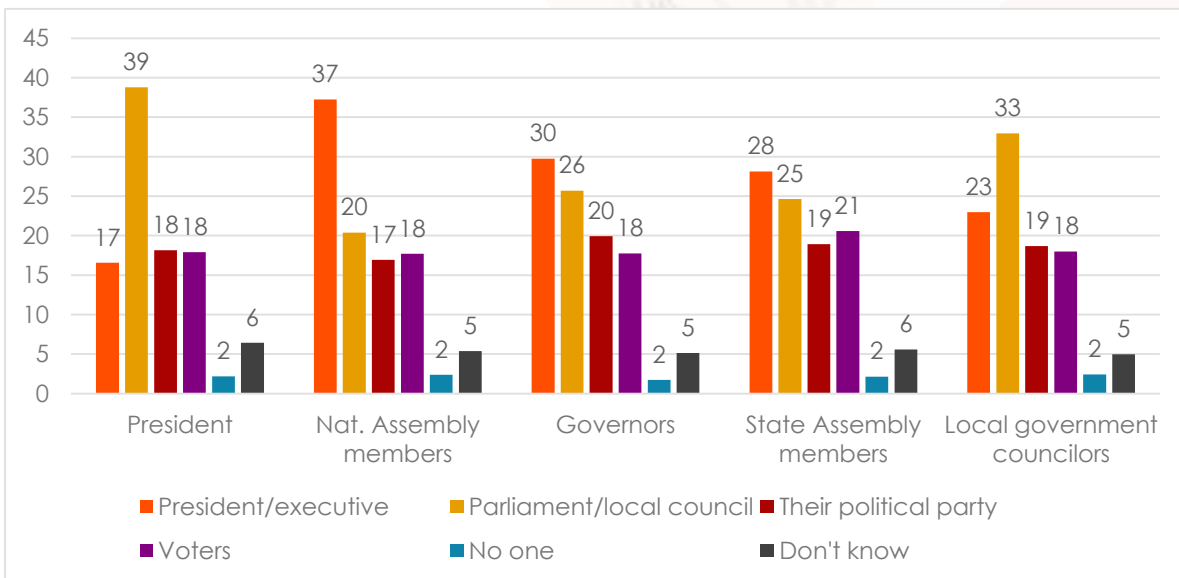
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (%)

Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.

Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.

Respondents rank voters low in their ability to hold public officials accountable for doing their jobs. The largest proportions see the president as responsible for holding Parliament to account (37%) and Parliament as responsible for holding the president to account (33%). Only about one in five respondents see it as the voters' responsibility to hold elected officials accountable for their performance (Figure 8).

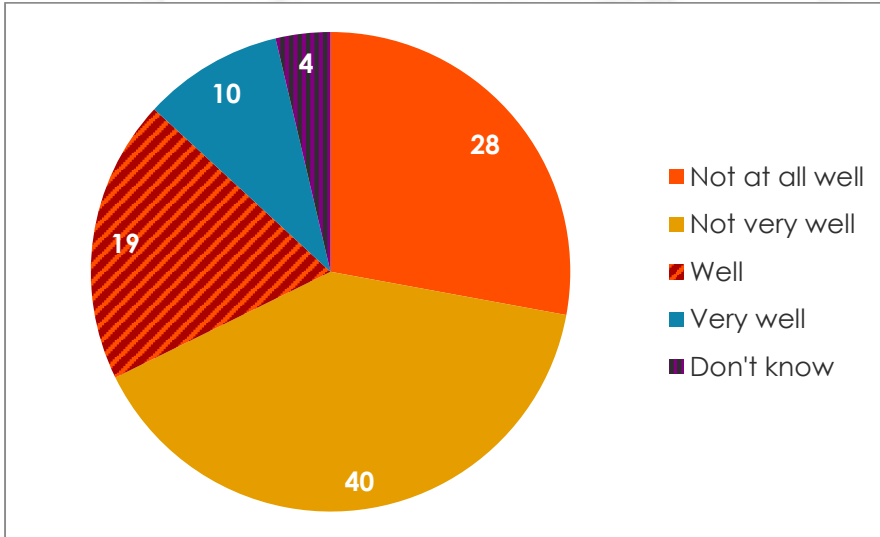
**Figure 8: Who holds elected officials accountable | 2014**



**Respondents were asked:** Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, [National Assembly members, local government councillors, the president, state governors, State Assembly members] do their jobs?

Similarly, two-thirds (68%) of Nigerians do not see elections as a means to “enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want” (Figure 9).

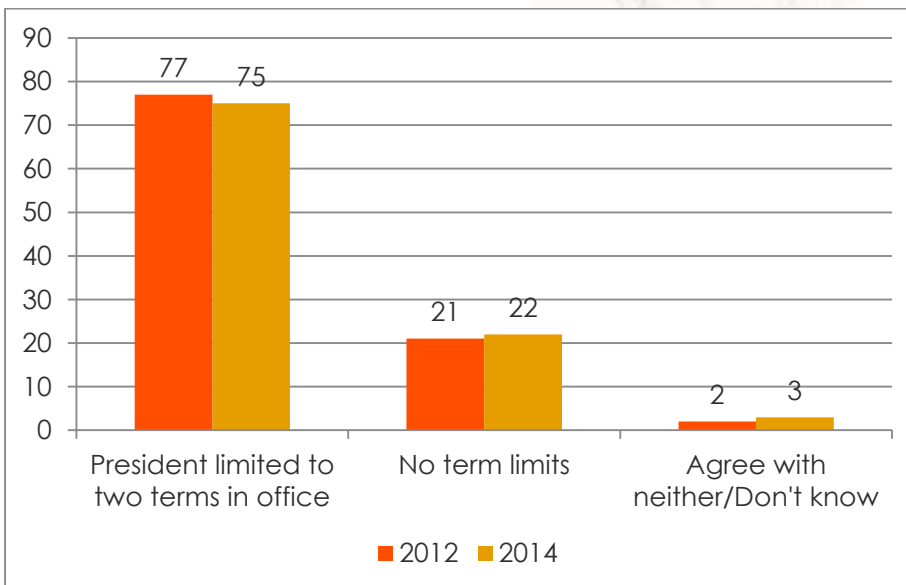
**Figure 9: Election efficacy for removing officials who don't perform | 2014**



**Respondents were asked:** How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want? (%)

As for limiting presidential power by limiting the number of terms he or she may serve, three-fourths (75%) of Nigerians say the president should be limited to two terms in office (Figure 12). This support for term limits has not changed substantially since 2012. In the North East, 92% insist on term limits, compared to 64% in the North West (Figure 13).

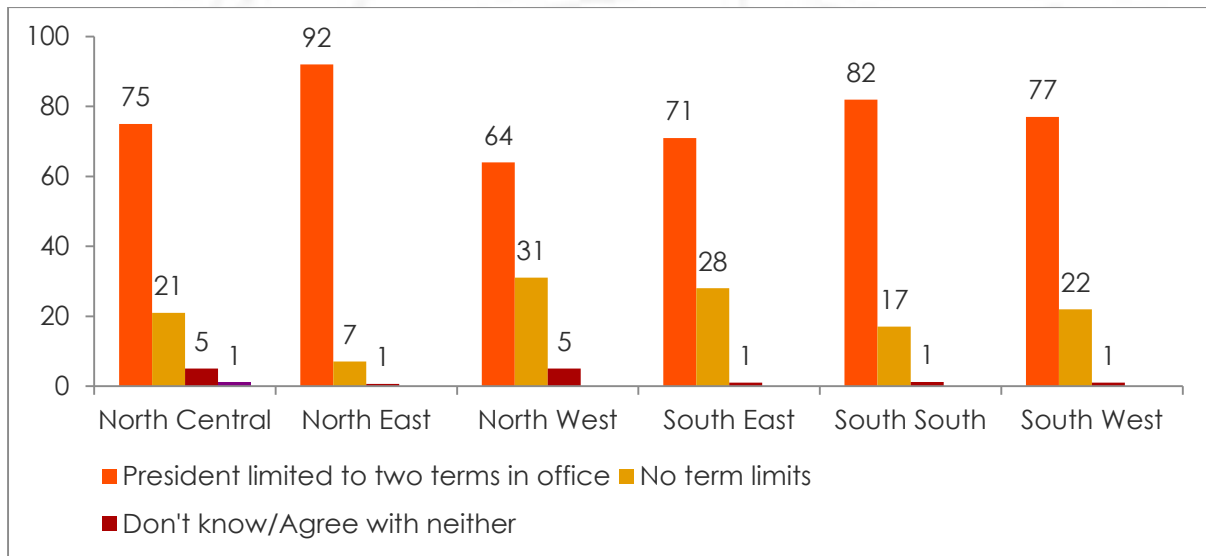
**Figure 12: Views on presidential term limits | 2012-2014**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (%)

Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.  
 Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.

**Figure 13: Views on presidential tenure limits | by region | 2014**

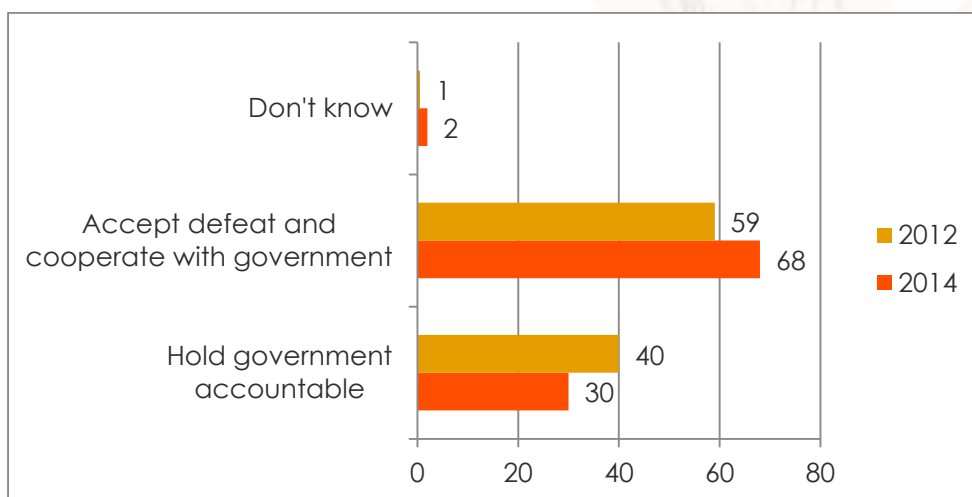


(% who agree with each statement))

Asked about the role of losing political parties in holding the government accountable, only 30% of Nigerians say the opposition should “monitor and criticize the government in order to hold it accountable,” while two-thirds (68%) suggest that the opposition should “accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country” (Figure 10). The call for the opposition to accept defeat and cooperate with the government rather than hold it accountable rose by 9 percentage points from 2012.

The North East region stands out in its conception of the opposition party as a tool for accountability, with 45% saying the opposition should help to hold the government accountable. The South East ranks highest (76%) in the call for the opposition to accept defeat and cooperate (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Role of opposition parties after elections | 2012-2014**



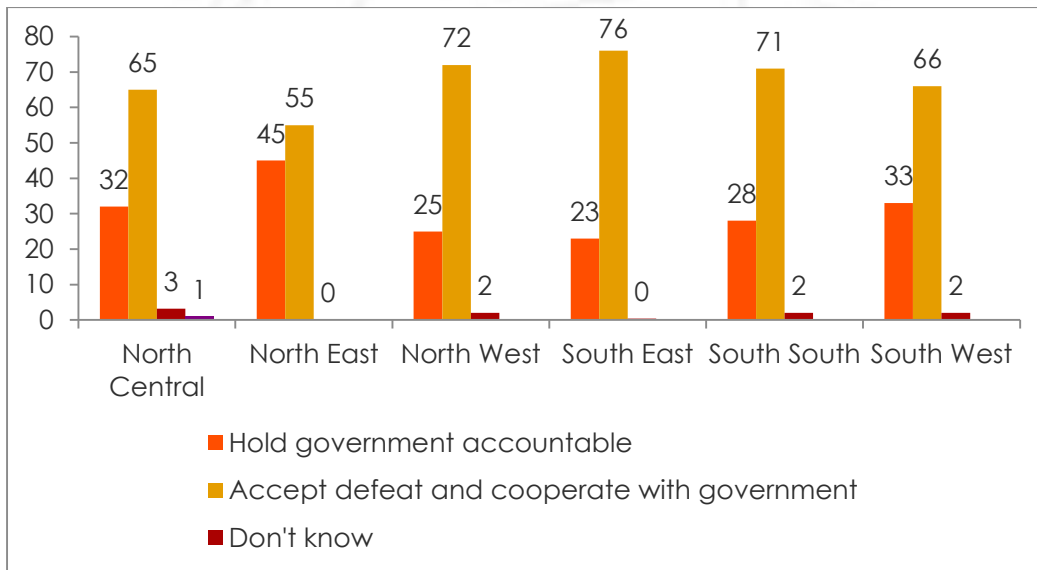
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (%)

Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticize the government in order to hold it accountable.

Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country.



**Figure 11: Role of opposition parties after elections | by region | 2014**



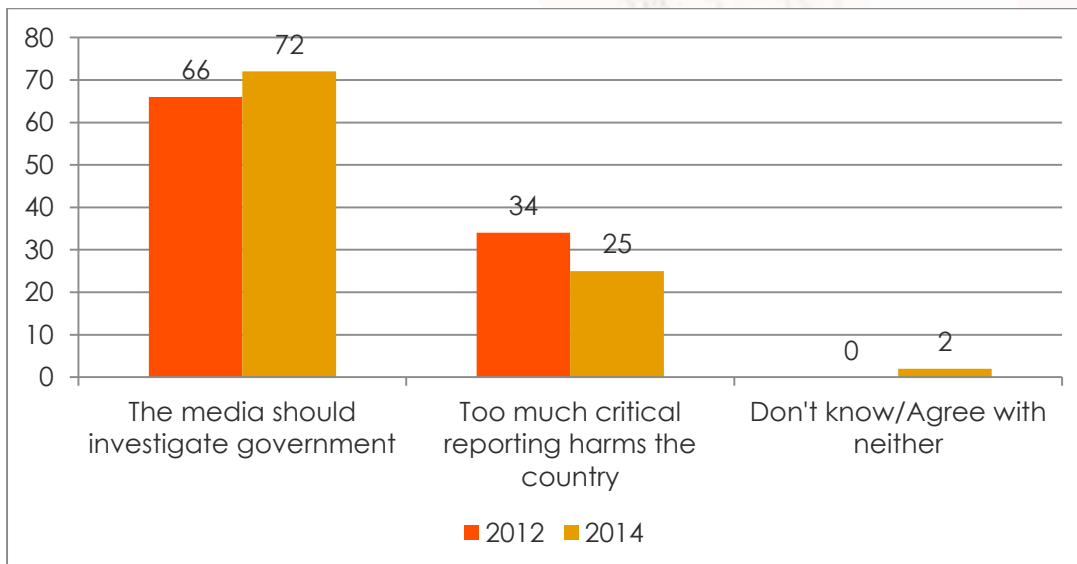
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (%)

Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticize the government in order to hold it accountable.

Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country.

Finally, regarding another potential check on political power, seven of 10 respondents (72%) support the media’s mandate to “constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption,” while 25% say that such reporting harms the country (Figure 14).

**Figure 14: Check on government by the media | 2012-2014**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (%)

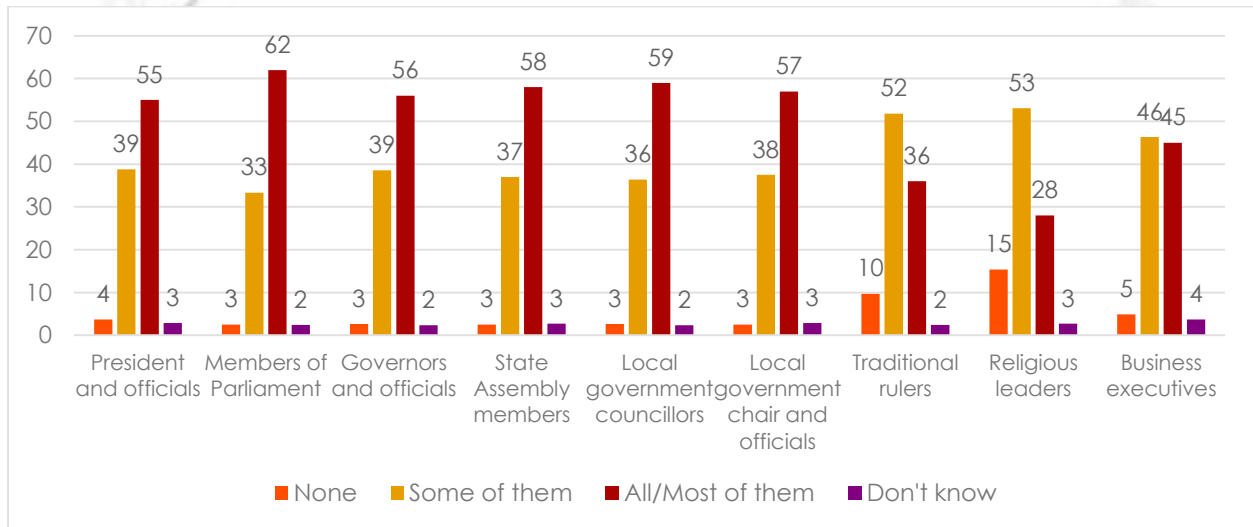
Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.

Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.

## Corruption and trust

Corruption is a major problem in Nigeria, and the promise to fight corruption has featured prominently in the election campaign. A majority of survey respondents see “most” or “all” elected office holders at all levels as corrupt, whereas religious and traditional leaders are less likely to be perceived as corrupt. Members of the National Assembly lead the list, with 62% of citizens saying that “most” or “all” of them are corrupt (Figure 15). More than half (55%) of citizens say the president and most or all of his office are corrupt. By comparison, smaller proportions say religious leaders (28%) and traditional leaders (36%) are corrupt.

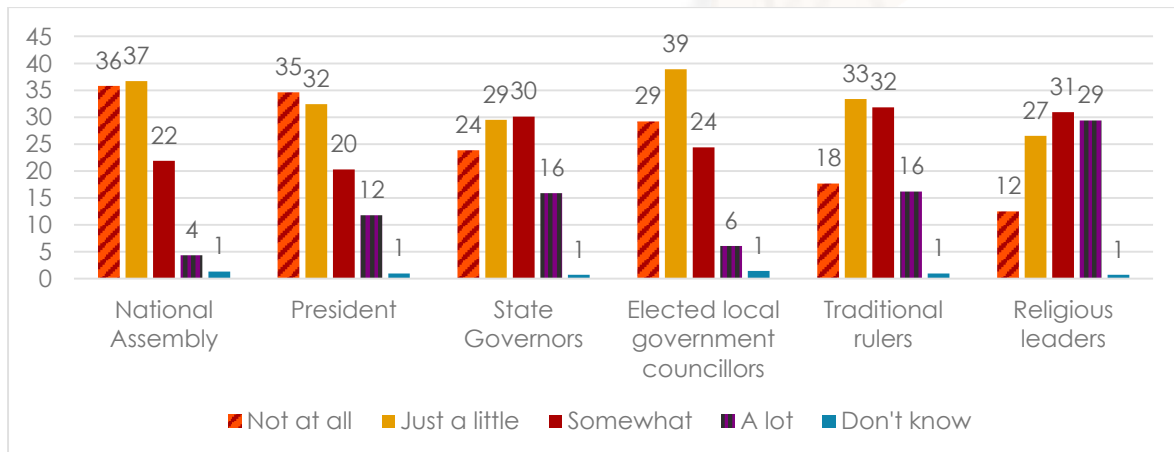
**Figure 15: Perceptions of corruption | 2014**



**Respondents were asked:** How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (%)

Findings on how much citizen trust their leaders tend to mirror perceptions of corruption. More than one-third of citizens say they do not trust the president (35%) or the National Assembly (36%) “at all” (Figure 16). Overall, the National Assembly earns the least trust, with only 4% trusting it “a lot.” Among elected office holders, state governors are the most trusted, with 16% trusting them “a lot.” In sharp contrast, 29% say they trust religious leaders “a lot.”

**Figure 16: Trust in political, traditional, and religious leaders | 2014**



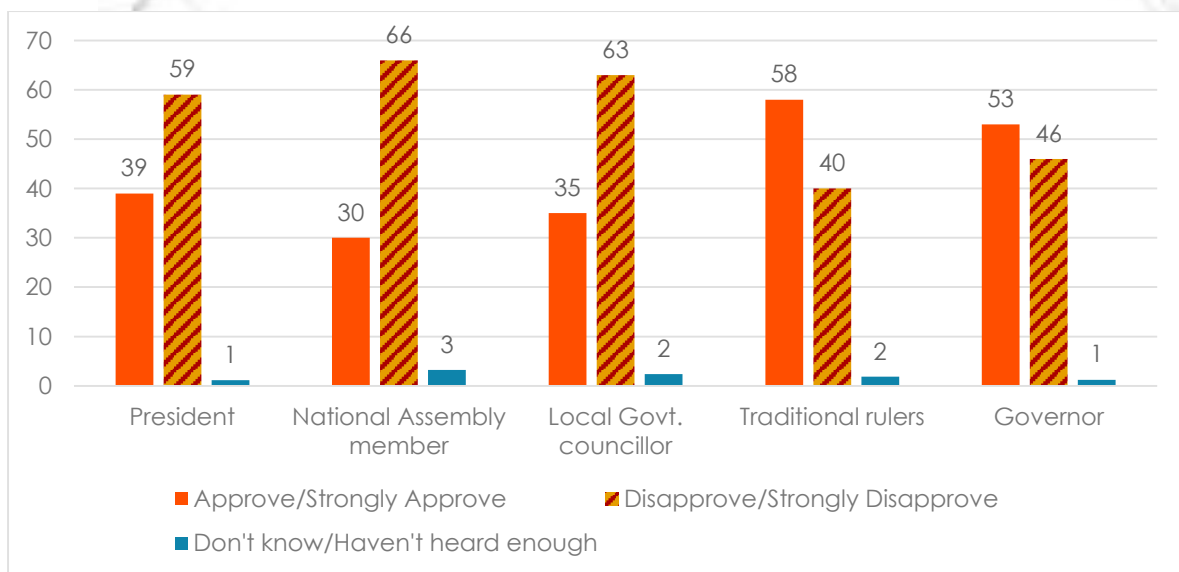
**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (%)

### Performance ratings of public office holders

Alongside relatively low levels of citizen trust and high levels of perceived corruption, public officials at all levels receive low approval ratings for their performance. Parliamentarians score lowest; only 30% of citizens “approve” or “strongly approve” of their performance, while 66% “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove.” President Goodluck Jonathan’s performance receives approval from 39% of citizens and disapproval from 59%. At 53% approval, governors score the highest performance rating among public officials.

A majority of Nigerians (58%) approve of the performance of traditional rulers – a significantly higher approval rating than those of elected public officials.

**Figure 15: Performance ratings of leaders | 2014**



**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? (%)

### Conclusion

As Nigerians head toward their fifth general elections since 1999, strong majority support for democracy co-habits with a high level of tolerance for values and practices at variance with democracy.

Nigerians do not consider their role as voters to be crucial in ensuring accountability among public officials. While institutional checks and balances are crucial in every democracy, Nigerians may need to consider the value of the ballot as a viable guarantor of accountability.

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To further explore data from Nigeria, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at [www.afrobarometer-online-analysis.com](http://www.afrobarometer-online-analysis.com).

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**Nengak Daniel** is program manager for the CLEEN Foundation in Lagos, Nigeria. Email: [nengak.daniel@cleen.org](mailto:nengak.daniel@cleen.org)

**Raphael Mbaegbu** is program officer for the CLEEN Foundation in Lagos, Nigeria. Email: [Raphael.mbaegbu@cleen.org](mailto:Raphael.mbaegbu@cleen.org)

**Peter Lewis** is associate professor and director of the African studies program, School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C. Email: [plewis18@jhu.edu](mailto:plewis18@jhu.edu)

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