



**Term Limits, the Presidency, and the Electoral System:
What Do Nigerians Want?**

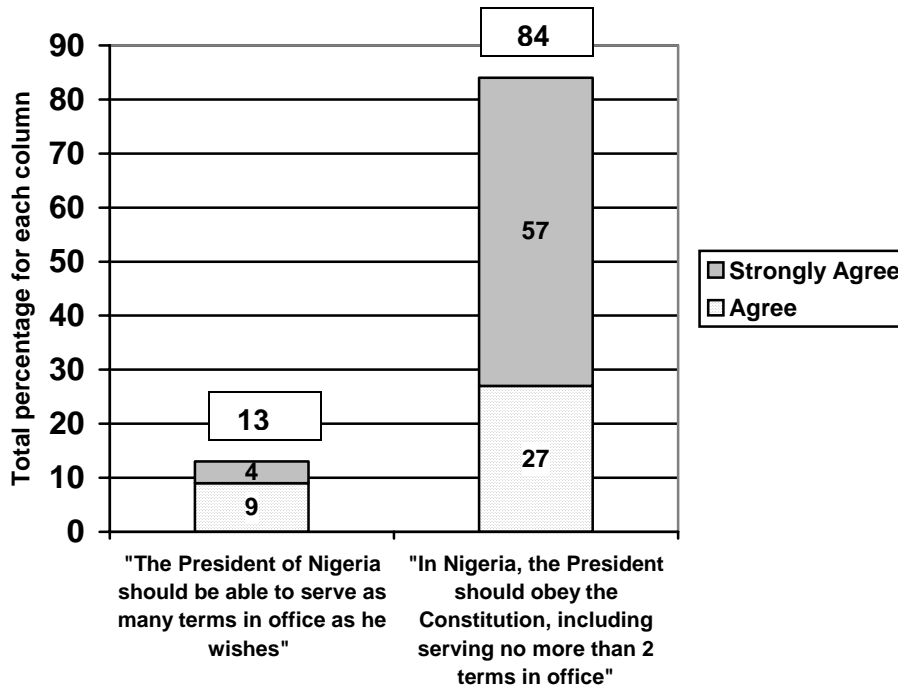
The controversy over presidential term limits is at the center of public discussion in Nigeria. The most recent national opinion survey by the Afrobarometer¹ finds strong support among the Nigerian public for term limits, free elections, competitive politics, and constitutional government.

In a national, representative survey of Nigerians,² an overwhelming majority of 84 percent agree that Nigeria's President should "obey the Constitution, including serving no more than two terms in office." Within this group, 57 percent of all persons surveyed agree strongly that the two-term limit should be respected.

By contrast, just 13 percent of citizens believe that the President "should be able to serve as many terms in office as he wishes," with only 4 percent agreeing strongly.

This recent survey shows widespread popular disapproval for an indefinite tenure of the chief Executive, and firm support for the present constitutional limit of two terms for elected officials. The survey also confirms other recent polls reflecting a strong desire among the public for limits on the terms of leaders.³

Views on Presidential Term Limits



Nigerians from different parts of the country often vary in their views toward important public issues. On the question of term limits, the strongest opposition is found in the North-Central zone of the country, in the North-West, and in the South-West (outside of Lagos). A somewhat greater proportion of citizens in the South-East, the South-South, Lagos state, and the North-East express some acceptance of indefinite presidential terms.

In every zone of the country, however, at least three-quarters of the public supports the current two-term limit for the president. In the South-West and the Niger Delta areas, eight in ten affirm the current term limit. In the North-West and the “middle belt” of the country, nine in ten prefer the current constitutional dispensation.

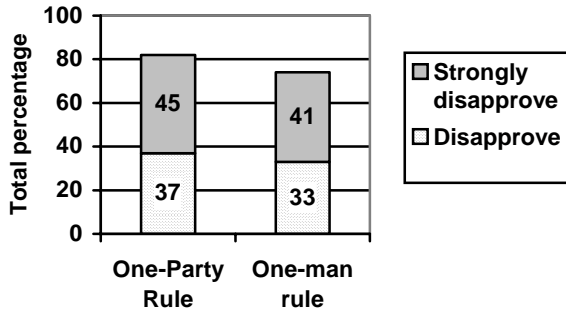
Term Limits: Public Views Among Nigeria’s Regions

(% agreeing with each statement)

| | North-Central | North-West | South-West | North-East | Lagos | South-South | South-East |
|---|---------------|------------|------------|------------|-------|-------------|------------|
| <i>The President of Nigeria should be able to serve as many terms in office as he wishes</i> | 6 | 9 | 8 | 14 | 16 | 19 | 23 |
| <i>In Nigeria, the President must obey the constitution, including serving no more than two terms in office</i> | 91 | 89 | 85 | 82 | 82 | 80 | 76 |

Nigerians express equally strong views about the type of democracy they would like to see.⁴ When asked about the possibility of different political arrangements for the country, some 82 percent reject the idea of rule by a single party (45 percent strongly reject this idea). Further, when asked about ‘one-man’ rule by a strong President, 74 percent are opposed (41 percent strongly). Nigerians therefore show clear preferences for multi-party competition and electoral choice, including turnover of the Presidency.

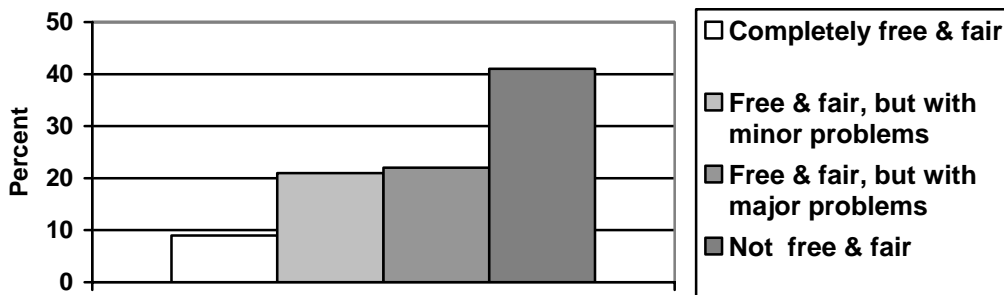
Views on Political Alternatives



Nigerians also reflect concerns about the performance of the electoral system in providing for free choice and the fair selection of leaders. When asked about their assessment of the 2003 elections, only 9 percent believe the last elections were “completely free and fair,” while 41 percent feel the elections were “not free and fair” at all, and another 22 percent believe the elections showed “major problems.”

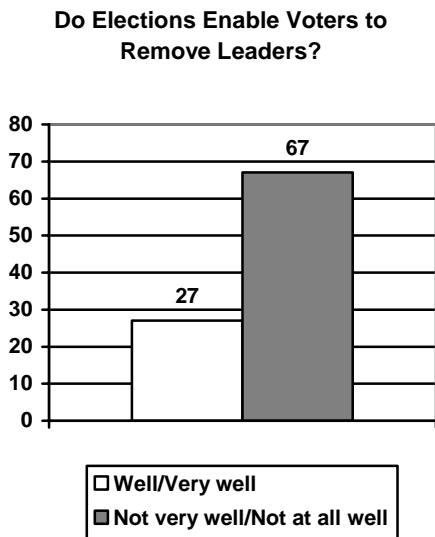
This general lack of confidence highlights public concerns for improving the quality of elections in Nigeria.

Popular Views on the Last Elections (2005 survey)



In addition, Nigerians have many reservations about the ability of elections to allow for a turnover of leaders – one of the most basic functions of the institutions of democracy.

In the latest survey, about a quarter of Nigerians believe that elections work well at enabling voters to remove leaders who “do not do what the people want.”⁵ More than two-thirds believe that elections do not work well at producing a desired turnover of leadership.



These strong popular views should be taken into account in the debates over term limits for elected leaders. While advocates on different sides of the issue may assert “what the people want,” scientific opinion surveys offer us clearer evidence of actual views among the public. These recent survey results also reinforce the critical challenges of electoral reform and free political competition in Nigeria’s young democracy.

¹ The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys on democracy, markets , and civil society. It is conducted by a network of social scientists in eighteen African countries. The Afrobarometer is supported by by grants from several international development agencies and development banks. The current report is based on the most recent Afrobarometer survey in Nigeria, which is the fourth since the transition to democracy in 1999. For more information, see www.afrobarometer.org.

² This survey was carried out from September–December 2005 among a random, representative sample of 2,400 Nigerian citizens age 18 and above. All geographic regions and language groups were included. Interviews were conducted in Nigeria’s major languages, plus English and Pidgin.

³ An August 2005 poll commissioned by *Hurilaws* found that 88% of likely voters in Nigeria opposed or strongly opposed “changing the constitution to allow President Obasanjo to run again.” See Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates, Inc., “Survey of Likely Voters in Nigeria,” August 2, 2005.

⁴ Interviewers asked the following question: “There are many ways to govern a country. Would you approve or disapprove of the following alternatives?”

- a. “Only one political party is allowed to stand for elections and hold office.”
- b. “The army comes in to govern the country” (72 percent opposed).
- c. “Elections and the National Assembly are abolished so that the president can decide everything.”

⁵ The question was: “Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?”