

# Benefits in exchange for political support? The effect of social safety nets on protest participation in Sub Saharan Africa.

## **Abstract**

Many researchers have investigated the rationale behind protest participation. Some have argued that people protest as a result of economic grievances. Others, however, perceive economic prosperity to be the driving force behind protest participation. Still others have stated that economic factors are not of primary importance or not the only factors in explaining why people protest. Despite the lack of consensus on the role and importance of economic factors in explaining protest participation, African leaders have since long provided economic benefits to their citizens with the aim of increasing regime legitimacy and deterring anti-regime protests. More recently, social safety nets have expanded in Sub Saharan Africa, which might be another way for authoritarian leaders to deter protests and strengthen their grip on power, thereby worsening prospects for democratization. The literature has not yet addressed this question. This constitutes a significant gap as donors often fund social safety net programs. By doing so, donors could possibly, although inadvertently, be aiding authoritarian regimes in clinging on to power. Hence, the aim of this research is to test whether social safety nets bring about these negative political consequences. It does so by answering the following research question: what is the effect of social safety nets on protest participation in Sub Saharan Africa? In order to answer the research question, this study conducts a multilevel binary logistic regression analysis by drawing on data from the Afrobarometer project. Thereby, it gauges the effect of multiple variables at the country and individual level on protest participation in twenty Sub Saharan African countries. The main finding of this study is that social safety nets do not have a significant effect on protest participation in the countries studied, whereas other factors have more explanatory power.

**Dylan Bakker**

**S1542753**

**Leiden University**

**Supervisor: Dr. L. Demarest**

**Word count: 7736 (excluding reference list, tables and appendices)**

# 1. Introduction

In December 2010, after Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself, demonstrations erupted in Tunisia, leading to the resignation of president Ben Ali in 2011 (BBC, 2013). The anti-regime protests were said to be a result of people's dissatisfaction with the economic circumstances in the country. More recently, in 2018, protests occurred in Sudan after the government decided to impose austerity measures, including cuts to bread and fuel subsidies (BBC, 2019). The demonstrations, which started in one northern town as a result of anger over rising prices, transformed into a nationwide protest aimed at ousting president Omar Hassan al-Bashir (IISS, 2019). Eventually, Al-Bashir, who until then was in power for almost three decades, was overthrown in a military coup.

The occurrence of anti-regime protests, such as the ones witnessed in Tunisia and Sudan, has led many to investigate the reasons behind protest participation. Thereby, it has often been argued that people protest as a result of dire economic circumstances (Arezki & Brückner, 2011; Berazneva & Lee, 2013; Brinkman & Hendrix, 2011; Mueller, 2013). Others, however, consider economic prosperity to be the driving force behind protest participation (Flacks, 1970; Inglehart, 1981, p. 890). Still others have stated that economic factors are not the primary or the sole factors in explaining why people attend a protest march or demonstration (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997, p. 150; Demarest; 2016; Harsch, 2008). Despite the lack of consensus on the role and importance of economic factors in explaining protest participation, African leaders have since long provided economic benefits to their citizens with the aim of increasing regime legitimacy and deterring anti-regime protests. In recent decades, social safety nets have expanded in Sub Saharan Africa. These safety net programs might be another way for African leaders to build political support and discourage African citizens from joining anti-government protests. In turn, this could result in authoritarian leaders strengthening their grip on power, thereby worsening prospects for democratization on the African continent.

This question has not yet been addressed in the existing literature. This is a significant gap as social safety net programs are often funded by donors. As these social safety nets might be a way for African leaders to deter anti-regime protests, donors could possibly, although inadvertently, be aiding authoritarian regimes in clinging on to power. The aim of this study is hence to test whether social safety nets bring about these negative political consequences. It does so by answering the following research question: what is the effect of social safety nets on protest participation in Sub Saharan Africa? In order to answer this research question, this study conducts a multilevel binary logistic regression analysis, drawing on Afrobarometer data. Twenty Sub Saharan African countries, for which the relevant data are available, are included in the analysis. Besides social safety nets, the analysis takes into account other factors, which based on existing theories, are expected to have an effect on protest participation. The

results of this research indicate that social safety nets do not have a significant effect on protest participation in Sub Saharan Africa. Instead, other factors have more explanatory power.

The paper will proceed as follows. The next section discusses the theoretical framework of this research. The third section elaborates on the methods applied and the data used in this study. The fourth section presents the result of the logistic regression analysis. The final section concludes.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Multiple theories have been developed on the rationale behind protest participation. As already mentioned, some of those theories focus on the role of economic grievances in explaining political protest. For instance, Mueller (2013) finds that economic grievances were the main driving force behind the 2009-2010 demonstrations in Niger. According to her study, low prospects of upward mobility, rather than dissatisfaction with the anti-democratic tendencies of president Tandja, motivated people to join the anti-government protests. Arezki and Brückner (2011) claim that during the 1970-2007 period, rising international food prices led to a significant increase in the frequency of anti-government demonstrations and riots in low income countries. Similarly, Berazneva and Lee (2013) conducted a cross-national analysis of the 2007-2008 food riots in Africa, and find that higher levels of poverty, limited food availability and restricted access to food made the occurrence of protests more likely. Finally, Brinkman and Hendrix (2011, p. 8) state that the withdrawal of energy subsidies increases the likelihood of political protest. In addition, Brinkman and Hendrix (2011, p. 10) argue that demonstrations are more likely to take place during periods of slow or negative economic growth as well as in countries that have low levels of economic development.

Other researchers argue that economic prosperity increases the likelihood that people will participate in political protest. Inglehart's (1971) theory on post-materialism posits that people seek to fulfil their basic needs directly related to survival before focusing on more remote concerns such as politics. From this proposition, Inglehart (1981, p. 890) expects post-materialists to be more supportive of social change and more willing to engage in unconventional political action than materialists. After all, post-materialists feel secure about meeting their basic needs, whereas materialists are preoccupied with satisfying those needs. Consequently, post-materialists, in contrast to materialists, have the time and energy to invest in more remote concerns such as politics and are therefore more willing to engage in protest. Flacks (1970), in his study on the American student movement of the 1960's, claims that students from affluent families are repelled by materialistic and nationalistic values and instead, place great emphasis on the need for autonomy and self-expression. The values internalized by the more wealthy students are often at variance with the dominant culture in society, making these students more likely to join a protest movement than people from less affluent backgrounds.

Whereas the academics mentioned above place a strong emphasis on economic factors in explaining why people protest, others have problematized the relationship between economic circumstances and protest participation. These academics argue that, although economic circumstances may be important, they do not necessarily constitute the primary or sole factor in explaining why people protest. For example, Harsch (2008) claims that rising food prices and rising fuel costs remain valid explanations for political protest participation, but are not necessarily the main reasons why people attend a protest march. Instead of rising prices, Africans attend demonstrations because they are dissatisfied with their corrupt, autocratic regimes. Protest, then, is a way for Africans to voice their concerns, influence policies and bring about the democratization necessary to solve the problems faced by ordinary African citizens. Bratton and Van de Walle (1997, p. 150) claim that economic factors, such as the structure of the economy, changes in the economy over time and economic policy reform are relevant in explaining protest participation. However, they make the additional claim that these economic factors have less of a direct effect on the onset of protests. Instead of economic factors, institutional factors, namely political competition in civil society and political participation constitute the most important factors in explaining political protest frequency. Finally, Demarest (2016) states that economic grievances were important, but not sufficient in explaining mass mobilization of protesters during the 2011-2012 electoral protests in Senegal. She argues that successful mobilization required the provision of organizational and financial means by key political actors. In the case of Senegal for example, four politicians financed the expenses of the Mouvement 23, money that could be diverted to the goal of mobilizing protesters.

As described in the sections above, different explanations for the reasons behind protest participation have been offered by academics. Some researchers have highlighted that protests are a result of dire economic circumstances. Others have stated that economic prosperity results in higher protest participation rates. Still others have questioned whether economic factors are indeed the primary or sole factors in explaining the rationale behind protest participation. Despite the discussion in the existing literature on the role of economic factors in explaining the reasons behind protest participation, African leaders have since long aimed to strengthen their grip on power by providing economic benefits to their subjects in exchange for political support. For instance, Bates (1981) shows how African governments intervene in agricultural markets as a means of building political support. According to him, African leaders implement pricing policies that reduce the prices received by producers of cash crops to a level below world market prices. By pursuing these policies, African governments are able to put a downward pressure on food prices. Because protests initiated by urban workers are most frequently driven by the erosion of workers' purchasing power, lower food prices help to dampen the risk of anti-regime demonstrations and increase the regime's legitimacy.

Bates' argument is in line what has been termed 'urban bias' by Lipton (1977). Lipton argues that urban sectors in society are better organised and have more political leverage than rural sectors. In order to prevent unrest among urban dwellers, which could potentially threaten regime stability, elites tend to

allocate resources towards projects that satisfy the needs of city dwellers rather than aiming to satisfy the needs of the rural population. Harsch (1993) has illustrated how the inability of African governments to pursue the policies described by Lipton and Bates, due to the imposition of austerity measures through structural adjustment programs, has undermined regime stability. According to Harsch, structural adjustment had a negative impact, mainly on people's living standards. Due to cuts in subsidies for example, consumers faced higher fuel and food prices, while at the same time, privatization of state enterprises led to increased levels of unemployment. These austerity measures acted as a catalyst for anti-government protests in Africa and as a precursor of the movements in Africa that demanded democracy from authoritarian regimes.

More recently, social safety nets have expanded across the across Sub-Saharan Africa and have become an important part of development strategies (World Bank, 2018, p. xix). The social safety net programs have been championed by international organizations such as the World Bank, mainly because of the benefits that these programs offer to vulnerable African citizens, such as protection against price shocks and shocks from natural disasters. However, the potential negative political consequences that might result from the implementation of social safety nets are often overlooked. After all, social safety nets might be implemented by African governments for the same reasons as described by Bates and Lipton, namely as a means of increasing the legitimacy of African regimes. For example, De La O (2013) finds that early enrolment in the Mexican conditional cash transfer program led to an increase in the incumbent's vote share in the Mexican presidential elections of 2000. In addition to increased support for the incumbent during elections, social safety nets might have the potential of discouraging people to protest against their regimes, thereby strengthening autocratic leaders' grip on power and worsening prospects for democratization. The existing literature has not yet found an answer to this question, which is a significant gap in the literature. After all, if social safety nets do help authoritarian leaders to remain in power, donors, that often fund social safety nets should reconsider their policies. Hence, the aim of this study is to answer the following research question: what is the effect of social safety nets on political protest participation in Sub-Saharan Africa? Thereby, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H1: Citizens are less likely to participate in protests in countries where spending on social safety nets is higher.

### **3. Methodology**

The dependent variable in this study is protest participation. In order to measure protest participation, data from the Afrobarometer project was used. The Afrobarometer (n.d.) is an organization that collects demographic data and conducts survey research with the aim of gauging the public opinion among the citizens of Sub-Saharan Africa with regards to economic, social and political issues. The Afrobarometer (n.d.) adopts a clustered, stratified, multi-stage, area probability sample, with the aim of generating a

representative sample. The Afrobarometer measures protest participation by asking African citizens the following questions: have you participated in a demonstration or protest march during the past year? If not, would you do this if you had the chance?<sup>1</sup> Respondents can choose from a number of predetermined answer which, for this study, have been coded in such a way to solely indicate whether someone has or has not attended a protest march or demonstration (see appendix A, table A1).

This study's independent variable of interest is social safety nets. Social safety nets are defined by the World Bank (2018, p. 5) as "non-contributory interventions designed to help individuals in households cope with chronic poverty, destitution, and vulnerability". The social safety net programs included in this study are unconditional cash transfer programs, conditional cash transfer programs, social pensions, food and in-kind transfers, school feeding programs, public works, workfare and job creation, fee waivers and targeted subsidies and lastly, other types of social assistance such as scholarships. The variable social safety nets is operationalized as the annual absolute spending per capita on all social safety net categories by a country, expressed in 2011 prices and daily purchasing power parities (PPP) in U.S. dollars (pp. 10 & 139). The amount spent on social safety nets includes the costs of the benefits themselves as well as the administrative costs of running and implementing the social safety net programs (p. 13). Data on annual absolute spending per capita have been collected from the World Bank's (pp. 7-8) ASPIRE database, a database containing performance indicators for social protection and labor programs.<sup>2</sup> The ASPIRE database gauges how much a country spends on social protection and labor programs, based on administrative data collected by World Bank staff and in-country consultants. Thereby, government statistics on program expenditures and program budgets from donors are used as primary data sources, whereas data received from program and sector officials as well as existing analysis are used as secondary sources.

Besides the independent variable of interest, this study adopts a number of control variables at the country-level. First of all, the political rights index rating is included in the analysis. A higher political rights index score (with 1 being the lowest and 7 being the highest score) is expected to increase protest participation. Tilly and Eisinger, for instance, argue that when political systems are more open, in the sense that they offer routinized opportunities through formal institutions for citizen participation, the likelihood that people will protest is lower, due to the fact that there are less costly ways for them to influence policies (in Meyer, 2004, p. 128). In contrast, if political systems are closed, citizens have little opportunities to address their grievances through formal institutions and routinized forms of politics. Therefore, citizens are more likely to engage in unconventional forms of politics, such as protests, in order to influence policies. Moreover, Bratton and Van de Walle (1997, p. 144) have argued that the type of regime has an effect on protest participation. For instance, military regimes are least

---

<sup>1</sup> For all Afrobarometer questionnaires, see <http://afrobarometer.org/surveys-and-methods/questionnaires>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/aspire/indicator/social-expenditure>

likely to experience protests. After all, due to the absence of political parties, there are no political channels through which protest can be organized. Besides, the coercive nature of military regimes makes joining a protest too risky for African citizens. As opposed to military regimes, multiparty regimes are most likely to experience protests as the existence of multiple parties provide the channels through which protests can be organized. The political rights index score is taken from Freedom House (2010; 2013; 2016; 2017), an organisation that evaluates the state of freedom in the world. Freedom House employs a team of experts, both from within the organisation itself as well as from external organisations such as think tanks and the academic community. These experts use sources ranging from news articles to NGO reports, on the basis of which they assign scores to countries on ten political rights indicators. On each of these indicators, countries receive a score ranging from 0 to 4, with 0 representing the smallest degree of freedom and 4 representing the greatest degree of freedom. The indicators for political rights take the form of questions which are subdivided into categories. The political rights indicators are grouped under three categories, namely electoral process, functioning of the government and political pluralism and participation. In addition, two discretionary questions not related to these categories have been added for political rights. The first of these questions can receive a score of 1 to 4, whereas the second question can receive a score of minus 4 to 0. Once the scores have been assigned to each of the indicators, they are aggregated. Subsequently, the scores are converted into a rating ranging from 1 to 7 for the political rights index. Thereby, 1 represents the greatest degree of freedom and 7 represents the smallest degree of freedom.

The second control variable at the country-level that is included in this research is Gross National Income per capita or the sum of goods and services produced by resident plus net receipts of primary income from abroad divided by the population (World Bank, n.d.). According to some theories, people are expected to attend a protest march as a result of economic grievances, for example when people are faced with poverty or food crises (Mueller, 2013). Based on this proposition, political protests are most likely to occur in countries with low levels of GNI per capita (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997, p. 129). In contrast, some academics claim that prosperity is the driving force behind political protest participation. For example, Inglehart (1971) claims that people who are certain of satisfying their basic needs are able to spend their time and energy on more distant concerns such as politics. In addition, Flacks (1970) has stated that students from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to join a protest movement than people who are less well-off. Others have argued that political democracy is more likely to be obtained by wealthy countries (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997, p. 129). In that case, countries with higher levels of GNI per capita are more likely to experience prodemocracy protests. Data on the GNI per capita for each country in this study is retrieved from the World Bank's World Development Indicator database. In this study, the GNI per capita based on purchasing power parity (PPP) is used, which is calculated by converting GNI to international dollars using purchasing power parity rates

(World Bank, n.d.). Subsequently, the natural logarithm of this variable is computed and included in the eventual analysis.

Table 1.0 shows the descriptive statistics of all country-level variables included in this research. The mean for the amount per capita spend on social safety nets equals 104.22. Cameroon spends the least amount of money per capita on social safety nets, namely 1 U.S. dollar (measured for the year 2016). In contrast, Mauritius spends the most amount of money per capita on social safety nets, namely 626 U.S. dollars (measured for the year 2015). The political rights index has a mean score of 3.01. Cameroon and Uganda are the lowest scoring countries in this study in terms of political rights, with an index score of 6 (measured for the years 2017 and 2016 for Cameroon and Uganda respectively). Cape Verde (measured for the year 2010), Ghana and Mauritius (both measured for the year 2016) have the highest possible score in terms of political rights, which is a score of 1. Lastly, GNI per capita has a mean of 8.1852 international dollars for the countries studied. Niger has the lowest level of economic development with a GNI per capita equal to 1000 international dollars (measured for the year 2017) . In contrast, Mauritius has the highest level of economic development, with a GNI per capita equal to 21.040 international dollars (measured for the year 2016).

Table 1.0  
*Descriptive statistics of country-level variables*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>
Social safety nets	1	626	104.22	0.0012
Political rights index	1	6	3.01	0.0774
GNI per capita	6.91	9.95	8.1852	0.2335

Besides the country-level data described above, this analysis includes a number of control variables at the individual level. All individual-level data is taken from the Afrobarometer project. The first control variable at the individual level refers to how African citizens rate their living conditions compared to those of others. Respondents can state that their living conditions are much worse, worse, the same, better or much better than the living conditions of their fellow citizens. Inequality could possibly make people feel deprived and, according to some, this feeling of relative deprivation motivates people to join a protest march or demonstration (in Mueller, 2013, p. 405).

The second individual-level control variable indicates how often a respondent or anyone in their family has gone without food. Respondent’s answers range from never to always. A lack of basic necessities is expected to have an effect on protest participation as people might protest due to the dire economic circumstances that they face. For instance, Berazneva and Lee (2013) show that restricted access to food make the occurrence of political protest more likely.

The third control variable refers to whether people are optimistic about the future. It is measured by asking African citizens the following question: looking ahead, do you expect economic circumstances in this country to be better or worse in twelve months' time? This study looked at whether respondents were optimistic or not. People's expectations about future conditions have shown to be related to protest participation by Mueller (2013), who finds that when people face low prospects of upward mobility, they are more likely to attend a protest march or demonstration.

The fourth control variable is satisfaction with democracy, which is measured by asking African citizens how satisfied they are with the way democracy works in their country. Answers are coded as either satisfied or not satisfied. People might protest out of dissatisfaction with corrupt and autocratic governments (Harsch, 2008). Africans view protest both as a way to voice their concerns about the lack of democracy and as a way to achieve democracy, which they perceive to be necessary to solve problems faced by ordinary citizens. In addition, Resnick and Casale (2011, p. 13) expect people to express their dissatisfaction with how the political system is functioning through channels other than voting, including through protest.

The fifth control variable is being a member of a voluntary association or community group. The Afrobarometer asks respondents whether they are a member of a voluntary association or community group. Again, as in the case of being a member of a religious group, answers are coded as to solely indicate whether someone is a member or not. Being a member of a voluntary association or community group is often said to be related to protest participation. Mueller (2013) states that grievances do sometimes not suffice in explaining why people protest. Instead, mobilization mechanisms such as being a member of a civil society organization and being asked to protest may be necessary in order to motivate people to join a protest march. In addition to Mueller, Bratton and Van de Walle (1997, p. 148) argue that a strong civil society has the potential of organizing mass efforts aimed against authoritarian regimes in favour of democracy. For instance, they find that a strong positive relationship exists between the number of trade unions and the number of protests in a country. After all, trade unions provide the channels through which political protest can be organized.

The sixth control variable is being a member of a religious group. Data on this variable is collected by the Afrobarometer by asking people whether they are a member of a religious group that meets outside of regular worship services. This research solely looks at whether someone is a member or not, regardless of what type of member (inactive member, active member or official leader) the respondent claims to be. Mueller (2013, p. 417) argues that membership in a religious network decreases the likelihood that an individual will attend a protest march. For instance, attending Koranic school has a negative effect on protest participation. Mueller shows that in Niger, the Islamic Council showed little support for protests against the regime and instead preferred dialogue to solve the situation. Thus, the Islamic Council might have demotivated people who attended Koranic school to join the demonstrations.

In addition, Mueller (2013, pp. 413-414) argues that many Nigeriens believed that the dire economic circumstances in the country were a result of God's will. This might suggest that these people are less willing to protest, because they believe that it is out of their hands. In contrast, however, McClendon and Riedl (2015) argue that exposing people to religious messages can boost political participation. They find that in Kenya, the messages of the Pentecostal churches gave people a positive self-image, which in turn had a mobilizing effect in terms of political participation.

The seventh control variable is education. Education is measured by the Afrobarometer by asking respondents what the highest level of education is that they have enjoyed. Answers in this study have been coded into four categories indicating whether a respondent has enjoyed a form of post-secondary education, secondary education, primary education, or lower than primary education. Some claim that education has a positive effect on protest participation. McVeigh and Smith (1999) for instance claim that American individuals that spend a lot of time educating themselves are 5 times more likely to engage in protest than those who have not educated themselves. In addition, Verba, Brady and Schlozman (1995, p. 271) argue that education enhances political interest and civic skills. In turn, the civic skills and political interest acquired through education have a positive effect on participation in time-based political activities, including protest (1995, p. 283).

The eighth control variable is media access. Respondents are asked how often they get their news from a number of sources, namely radio, television, newspapers and the internet. This study looked at how often a respondent got their news from the radio, ranging from never to every day. Receiving information from the media is relevant here because it helps in keeping government leaders accountable. Adsera, Boix and Payne (2003, p. 448) argue that when citizens have more information about the policies and actions of politicians, it is more costly for these politicians to implement bad policies or engage in corruption, because citizens have the opportunity to retaliate, for example through anti-regime protests. Thus, people who receive information on bad government policies are expected to participate in protests sooner than those who have little or no access to media. However, in the African context, different types of media sources have different effects on people's attitudes towards their governments. For example, Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi (2005, pp. 209-210) claim that African governments often control what is broadcasted on television, while finding it harder to control other types of media sources. Radio, for instance, often provides independent content such as news and discussions of public affairs. In other words, Africans that get their information mainly from television are more likely to obtain biased and pro-government information than citizens that get their information from radio, making the former group less likely to engage in protest than the latter.

The ninth control variable included in the analysis is age. Age is taken into account due to the fact that it is expected to have an effect on different forms of political participation, including protest. For instance, Quintelier (2007) has found that young people prefer other forms of political participation than

older generations. Whereas older generations prefer traditional forms of politics, the youth prefers new forms of political engagement such as social movement activities and protests. Moreover, Melo and Stockemer (2014) find that younger generations are less likely to vote than older generations, while this relationship is reversed for unconventional forms of political participation, including demonstrations. The above mentioned studies apply to western countries, but evidence of high levels of youth involvement in protests are also prevalent in the African context. For instance, during the pro-democracy movements in Africa, protests were often initiated by students, such as in Malawi in 1992 and in Zambia in 1989 (Resnick & Casale, 2011, p. 5).

The tenth control variable included in this analysis is the respondents' gender, either male or female. Verba, Burns and Schlozman (1997) have shown that women tend to be less politically informed. In addition, men are more likely to show interest in politics than women. Due to these gender differences, men are more likely to participate in politics than women. Moreover, Mcadam has claimed that the barriers to protest participation are higher for women than for men (in Schlussman & Soule, 2005, p. 1088). Furthermore, women might believe that joining a protest is inappropriate for the female role. Finally, Coffe and Bolzendahl (2011) find evidence for a gender gap in Sub Saharan Africa related to political participation. They state that women are less likely to engage in forms of collective action than men.

The eleventh control variable employed in this study is area of residence. The Afrobarometer asks people whether they live in a rural or in an urban area. The area of residence is relevant for this analysis, because urban dwellers are more likely to protest than people that live in rural areas. This proposition is in line with the argument made by Lipton (1977). Lipton argues that urban sectors in society are better organised and have more political leverage than the rural sectors of society. Due to their organisational capabilities and political power, urban dwellers have the capacity to threaten regime stability by rising up against their governments.

Finally, this analysis includes a control variable, which provides information on who the respondents perceived to be the survey sponsor. The Afrobarometer asks respondents who they think sponsored the survey. Respondents can choose from answers such as the government or a private company. This variable is included in the analysis because the person sent to do the interview as perceived by the respondent might distort the answers that people give. For example, if a respondent believes that the government sent somebody to conduct the interview, they might lie about whether they have attended a protest march, perhaps fearing government reprisals. Thus, this research looks at whether believing that the government sponsored the survey leads to less people stating that they have joined a protest.

The data for all the variables included in this study was collected in the following way. First of all, for social safety nets, data for the latest year available are included in this study. Secondly, the individual-level data is taken from the nearest Afrobarometer round following the year for which data on social

safety nets was available. Finally, the country-level data is taken for the year previous to the year in which the Afrobarometer survey was held. Countries for which data was unavailable or not available in the chronological order as described above are left out of the analysis. This leaves us with twenty Sub Saharan African countries and a sample size of 28002 respondents. The countries included in this research are Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Ghana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. For all of these countries, except for Cape Verde and Lesotho, data from Afrobarometer round 7 was used (see appendix B, table B1). For Cape Verde the Afrobarometer dataset for round 5 was used and for Lesotho, the dataset for round 6 was used.

## 4. Results

In order to test whether social safety nets have an effect on protest participation, this study conducts a multilevel binary logistic regression. The SPSS version 25 software package is used. Table 2 shows the results of the analysis.

Table 2.0

*Participated in a protest march or demonstration, odds ratios from all independent and control variables*

<i>Country-level variables</i>	
Social safety nets	1.000 (0.0012)
Political rights index	1.028 (0.0774)
GNI per capita	1.195 (0.2335)
<i>Individual-level variables</i>	
Living conditions much worse than others	1.127 (0.1584)
Living conditions worse than others	0.860 (0.1559)
Living conditions same as others	0.840 (0.1275)
Living conditions better than others	0.905 (0.0937)
Gone without food once or twice	1.136* (0.0733)
Gone without food several times	1.261***

	(0.0798)
Gone without food many times	1.220* (0.1153)
Always gone without food	1.711*** (0.1609)
Optimism about future economic conditions in the country	1.263*** (0.0731)
Satisfaction with democracy	1.161** (0.0689)
Member of a voluntary association or community group	2.215*** (0.0872)
Member of a religious group	1.339*** (0.0548)
Secondary education	1.486*** (0.1085)
Post-secondary education	1.696*** (0.1377)
Got news from the radio every day	1.679*** (0.1048)
Got news from the radio a few times a week	1.342*** (0.0943)
Got news from the radio a few times a month	1.269* (0.1253)
Got news from the radio less than once a month	1.220 (0.1353)
Age	0.988*** (0.0037)
Gender	0.739*** (0.0325)
Area of residence	0.735*** (0.0968)
Perceived government sponsor	0.976 (0.1007)
<hr/>	
Number of observations	28002

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. The data are weighted using the within-country weights provided.

\*\*\* Significant at 1 per cent level; \*\* significant at 5 percent level; \* significant at 10 percent level

Before controlling all variables for one another, three separate models are constructed, gauging the effect of the individual country-level variables on protest participation. The first model shows that annual absolute spending per capita on social safety nets does not have a significant effect on protest participation. In other words, although African leaders might believe that social safety nets can be used to deter protests, the results of this study do not support this expectation. The second model indicates that the political rights index score of a country does not explain why people protest. Thus, this study provides no support for the prediction that protest participation is likely to be higher in closed and non-competitive political systems, which offer little or no opportunities for political participation through formal institutions (Resnick & Casale, 2011, p. 16; Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997, p. 144). The third model shows that Gross National Income per capita does not have a significant effect on protest participation, providing no support for the idea that countries with higher levels of GNI per capita are more likely to obtain political democracy and are therefore more likely to experience prodemocracy protests (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997, p. 129). In addition, these results do not indicate that materialists or people from relative wealthy families are more likely to protest than materialists or people from less affluent backgrounds (Inglehart, 1981, p. 890; Flacks, 1970).

The fourth model controls all country- and individual-level variables for one another. The first variable at the individual level included in this model is perceived inequality. A respondent's perception that their living conditions are worse than the living conditions of others does not have a significant effect on protest participation. In contrast, being faced with a shortage of food does have a positive effect on protest participation. This might indicate that that, at the individual level, absolute economic grievances, rather than relative deprivation, motivate African citizens to attend a protest march (Berazneva & Lee, 2013; Mueller, 2013). Besides current economic conditions, being pessimistic about future economic conditions has a significant positive effect on protest participation. This finding might mirror the claim made by Mueller, namely that people are more likely to protest when they are faced with low prospects of upward mobility. However, economic grievances are not the sole reason why people protest. After all, being dissatisfied with democracy has a positive effect on protest participation. These results might support the statement made by Harsch (2008) that people protest out of dissatisfaction with corrupt and autocratic regimes.

This study also finds that being a member of a voluntary association or community group increases the probability that someone will join a protest. This once again shows the importance of a strong civil society in organizing demonstrations against authoritarian regimes, as emphasized by Bratton and Van de Walle (1997, p. 148). Furthermore, it highlights the importance of mobilizing mechanisms which are sometimes necessary to motivate people to protest (Mueller, 2013, p. 420). In addition, it might indicate

that organizational means are necessary to make successful mobilization feasible (Demarest, 2016). Besides being a member of a voluntary association or community group, the findings of this study show that being a member of a religious group has a positive effect on protest participation. Thus, the claim made by Mueller (2013, p. 417) that members of religious groups are less likely to protest is not supported by the results of this study. Rather, religious groups are expected to mobilize protesters, as is in line with arguments made by McClendon and Riedl (2015).

Education is also relevant when predicting protest participation. After all, having enjoyed a form of secondary or post-secondary education increases the probability that someone will attend a protest march. This might be due to the idea that educated people are more interested in politics and have acquired the civic skills which can be useful when becoming politically engaged (Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995, p. 271). In addition to getting information through education, getting news from the radio at least a few times a week has a positive effect on protest participation. This is perhaps in line with the argument that radio stations are more likely to provide unbiased or less biased information than other media sources, thereby keeping governments accountable, possibly through promoting protest participation (Adsera, Boix & Payne, 2003, p. 448; Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005, pp. 209-210).

Age has a negative effect on protest participation. The findings of this study show that if a respondent's age increases by a year, the probability that the respondent will attend a protest or demonstration decreases. Thus, it might indeed be the case that older generations prefer traditional forms of political participation, whereas younger people prefer newer forms such as protests (Quintelier, 2007, p. 174; Melo & Stockemer, 2014, p. 33). Besides age, gender is an important predictor of whether somebody will join a protest. Being a woman decreases the probability that somebody will join a protest march, possibly reflecting the gender gap prevalent between men and women (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2011, p. 254).

In line with the argument made by Lipton (1977), whether respondents reside in the city or the countryside also has a significant effect on protest participation. The findings of this study show that residing in rural areas has a negative effect on protest participation, perhaps because rural dwellers lack the organizational capabilities and political leverage that city dwellers do possess. Finally, the perceived survey sponsor was included in the analysis in order to control for the possibility that respondents might give false answers if they believed that the government was sent to conduct the survey, perhaps fearing reprisals. However, the results of the logistic regression analysis found only a small, non-significant, negative effect of believing that the government sponsored the survey on protest participation.

In short, the results from the multilevel logistic regression conducted in this study show that social safety net spending has no significant effect on protest participation. In addition, the results provide no evidence for the prediction made in the literature that the political rights index score, GNI per capita and

perceived inequality have a significant effect on protest participation. In contrast, the effects that the remaining variables have on protest participation are in line with the findings in the existing literature. Finally, believing that the survey was sponsored by the government did not affect the reported protest participation rates in any significant way.

## **5. Conclusion**

Many have argued that people protest because of economic grievances. African citizens take to the streets because they are faced with a lack of food, fuel or other necessities. The protests in Tunisia and Sudan are seen as examples of this. Other researchers, however, have argued that people protest as a result of economic prosperity or have stated that factors other than the economic circumstances in a country need to be taken into account in order to explain why people protest. Despite the lack of consensus on what the driving forces behind protest participation are, efforts by African leaders to provide economic benefits to their citizens have often been portrayed as a way to deter protests, increase regime legitimacy and strengthen autocrats' grip on power. In that sense, social safety nets might have the effect of discouraging ordinary African citizens to protest against their authoritarian regimes, thereby worsening prospects for democratization in Sub Saharan. The situation described above has provided the motivation for this study, which has aimed to answer the following research question: what is the effect of social safety nets on political protest participation?

The results of the multilevel binary logistic regression analysis conducted in this study show that social safety nets do not have a significant effect on protest participation, thereby undermining the idea that social safety nets strengthen the position of authoritarian leaders through deterring protests. In other words, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. In addition, this study has found that the political rights index score of a country does not have a significant effect on protest participation, providing no evidence for the idea that more closed political systems encourage people to protest. Finally, the results of the analysis do not support the prediction that higher levels of wealth at the country level encourages people to attend a protest march. After all, GNI per capita does not have a significant effect on protest participation.

At the individual level, perceived inequality, in contrast to economic grievances such as food shortages, does not have a significant effect on protest participation. Thus, African citizens are expected to protest as a result of absolute economic grievances rather than due to feelings of relative deprivation. In addition to dire economic circumstances in the present, pessimism about future economic conditions has a positive effect on protest participation among Africans.

Besides economic grievances, political grievances at the individual level have an effect on protest participation, indicating that dissatisfaction with corrupt and autocratic regimes are important factors in

explaining why African citizens protest. In addition, being a member of a voluntary association, community group or religious group is also a driving force behind protest participation. This might indicate that both voluntary associations as well as religious groups act as mobilizing forces that encourage people to stand up against their regime.

Having enjoyed a form of secondary education or higher also spurs protest participation. Perhaps, in school, Africans gain the civic skills and political awareness that are useful for becoming politically engaged. In addition, radio stations, perhaps by providing their listeners with relatively unbiased information, promote protest participation.

This study has also found that the odds that somebody will attend a protest march decrease when a person is older, perhaps reflecting a difference in preference for different types of political participation between older and younger generations. In addition to younger generations, the probability that somebody will attend a protest march decreases when that person is a woman, possibly indicating that a gender gap is prevalent in African politics. Besides gender, This study has found support for the proposition that residing in the countryside has a negative effect on protest participation, possibly due to the fact that rural dwellers have less organizational capabilities and political leverage than African citizens that reside in the cities. Finally, a respondent's believe that the government sponsored the survey did not have a significant effect on reported protest participation rates.

In sum, according to the results of this study, social safety nets do not have a significant effect on protest participation. In addition, the results for other predictors included in the analysis showed mixed results. Some variables that were expected to have an effect on protest participation did not have an effect while other variables did have the expected effect. In other words, the findings of this research provides support for some claims made in the existing literature, while failing to provide support for others.

The findings of this study have certain policy implications for donors. Donors are recommended to divert their resources towards projects that might have a positive effect in terms of democratization. For instance, donors could invest in voluntary associations that could play a large role in keeping governments accountable. In addition, donors could invest in education as a way to teach Africans certain civic skills. Thereby, special attention could be paid to women's' education as this might help in closing the gender gap and spur women to become politically engaged. All of these measures might help in spurring protests against authoritarian regimes, possibly leading to democratization on the African continent. However, donors should take into consideration that protests do not necessarily lead to democratic improvement. Rather, protests are often followed up by government repression and democratic setbacks. Thus, donors should always be careful in deciding on their policies, thereby not only taking into account the potential positive but also the potential negative political consequences of their actions.

Although this study might be helpful for donors in deciding on their policies, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution as it suffers from a number of limitations. First of all this study has measured the effect of multiple country-level variables during a limited time period. In turn, this could cause problems in terms of reliability. For instance, rather than the amount spent on social safety net during a specific year, trends over multiple years in social safety net spending might be a better predictor of protest participation. After all, it could possibly be the case that not the general level of social safety net spending, but drops or increases in social safety net spending explain the level of protest participation. Secondly, it is not clear whether the social safety net programs included in this study alleviate the problems, such as food shortages, that might otherwise be a reason for African citizens to join a protest march. If social safety nets do not alleviate these problems, safety net spending is less of a useful predictor for protest participation. An in depth case study, conducted over a longer period of time could possibly help to circumvent these limitations and improve our understanding of the effect of social safety nets on protest participation.

## 6. Reference list

- Adsera, A., Boix, C. & Payne, M. (2003). Are you being served? Political accountability and quality of government. *The journal of law, economics, and organization*, 19(2), pp. 445-490.
- African elections database. (n.d.). *About the database*. Accessed 12 May 2019, from <http://africanelections.tripod.com/about.html>
- Afrobarometer. (n.d.) *About Afrobarometer*. Accessed 12 May 2019, from <http://afrobarometer.org/about>
- Afrobarometer. (n.d.) *Sampling principles and weighting*. Accessed 12 May 2019, from <http://afrobarometer.org/surveys-and-methods/sampling-principles>
- Arezki, R. & Brückner, M. (2011). Food prices and political instability. CESifo working paper, 3544, pp. 1-20.
- Bates, H. (1981). *Markets and states in tropical Africa: the political basis of agricultural policies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- BBC. (2013). *Arab uprising: country by country- Tunisia*. Accessed 19 may 2019, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-12482315>
- BBC. (2019). *Sudan coup: why Omar al-Bashir was overthrown*. Accessed 19 may 2019, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47852496>
- Berazneva, J. & Lee, D.R. (2013). Explaining the African food riots of 2007-2008: an empirical analysis. *Food policy*, 39, pp. 28-39.
- Brady, H.E., Verba, S., Schlozman, K.L. (1995). Beyond SES: a resource model of political participation. *American political science*, 89(2), pp. 271-294.
- Bratton, M. & Van de Walle, N. (1997). *Democratic experiments in Africa: regime transitions in comparative perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bratton, M. Mattes, R. & Gyimah-Boadi, E. (2005). *Public opinion, democracy and market reform in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brinkman, H.J. & Hendrix, C.S. (2011). Food insecurity and violent conflict: causes, consequences, and addressing the challenges. *World Food Programme*, 24, pp. 1-28.
- Coffe, H. & Bolzendahl, C. (2011). Gender gaps in political participation across Sub-Saharan African nations. *Social indicators research*, 102(2), pp. 245-264.
- De La O, A.L. (2013). Do conditional cash transfers affect electoral behavior? Evidence from a randomized experiment in Mexico. *American journal of political science*, 57(1), pp. 1-14.
- Demarest, L. (2016). Staging a ‘‘revolution’’: the 2011-2012 electoral protests in Senegal. *African studies review*, 59(3), pp. 61-82.
- Flacks, R. (1970). Social and cultural meanings of student revolt: some informal comparative observations. *Social problems*, 17(3), pp. 340-357.
- Freedom House. (2010). *Methodology*. Accessed 11 May 2019, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2010/methodology>.

- Freedom House. (2013). *Methodology*. Accessed 11 May 2019, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2013/methodology>
- Freedom House. (2016). *Methodology: freedom in the world 2016*. Accessed 11 May 2019, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2016/methodology>
- Freedom House. (2017). *Freedom in the world 2017: methodology*. Accessed 11 May 2019, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2017>
- Harsch, E. (1993). Structural adjustment and Africa's democracy movements. *Africa today*, 40(4), pp. 7-29.
- Harsch, E. (2008). Price protests expose state faults: rioting and repression reflect problems of African governance. *African renewal*, 22(2), pp. 15-21.
- IISS. (2019). *The protests in Sudan*. Accessed 19 may 2019, from <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2019/the-protests-in-sudan>
- Inglehart, R. (1971). The silent revolution in Europe: intergenerational change in post-industrial societies. *American political science review*, 65(4), pp. 991-1017.
- Inglehart, R. (1981). Post-materialism in an environment of insecurity. *American political science review*, 75(4), pp. 880-900.
- Lipton, M. (1977). *Why poor people stay poor: urban bias in world development*. London: Temple Smith.
- McClendon, G. & Riedl, R.B. (2015). Religion as a stimulant of political participation: experimental evidence from Nairobi, Kenya. *The journal of politics*, 77(4), pp. 1045-1057.
- McVeigh, R. & Smith, C. (1999). Who protests in America: an analysis of three political alternatives- inaction, institutionalized politics, or protest. *Sociological forum*, 14(4), pp. 685-702.
- Melo, D.F. & Stockemer, D. (2014). Age and political participation in Germany, France and the UK: a comparative analysis. *Comparative European politics*, 12(1), pp. 33-53.
- Meyer, D.S. (2004). Protest and political opportunities. *Annual review of sociology*, 30, pp. 125-145.
- Mueller, L. (2013). Democratic revolutionaries or pocketbook protesters? The roots of the 2009-2010 uprisings in Niger. *African Affairs*, 112(448), pp. 398-420.
- Quintelier, E. (2007). Differences in political participation between young and old people. *Contemporary politics*, 13(2), pp. 165-180.
- Resnick, D. & Casale, D. (2011). The political participation of Africa's youth: turnout, partisanship, and protest. WIDER working paper, 56, pp. 1-33.
- Schlussman, A. & Soule, S.A. (2005). Process and protest: accounting for individual protest participation. *Social forces*, 84(2), pp. 1083-1108.
- Verba, S., Burns, N. & Schlozman, K.L. (1997). Knowing and caring about politics: gender and political engagement. *The journal of politics*, 59(4), pp. 1051-1072.
- World Bank, (2018). *The state of social safety nets 2018*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- World Bank. (n.d.). *GNI, Atlas method (current US\$)*. Accessed 12 May 2019, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ny.gnp.atls.cd>

## Appendix A

Table A1

*Descriptive statistics of variables*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Question wording</b>	<b>Answer scales</b>	<b>Recoded scales</b>
Protest participation	Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?	0 = No, would never do this 1 = No, but would do if had the chance 2 = Yes, once or twice 3 = Yes, several times 4 = Yes often	0 = Did not attend a protest or demonstration 1 = Did attend a protest or demonstration
Perceived inequality	In general, how do you rate your living conditions compared to those of other people in your country?	1 = Much worse 2 = Worse 3 = Same 4 = Better 5 = Much better	Dummy variable 1: 0 = Not much worse 1 = Much worse  Dummy variable 2: 0 = Not worse 1 = Worse  Dummy variable 3: 0 = Not the same 1 = The same  Dummy variable 4: 0 = Not better 1 = Better  Dummy variable 5: 0 = Not much better 1 = Much better
Number of times gone without food	Over the past year, how often, if ever, has you or anyone in your family gone without enough food to eat?	0 = Never 1 = Just once or twice 2 = Several times 3 = Many times 4 = Always	Dummy variable 1: 0 = At least once 1 = Never  Dummy variable 2: 0 = Other than once or twice 1 = Once or twice  Dummy variable 3:

			<p>0 = Other than several times 1 = Several times</p> <p>Dummy variable 4: 0 = Other than many times 1 = Many times</p> <p>Dummy variable 5: 0 = Other than always 1 = Always</p>
Optimism about future economic conditions	Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in twelve months' time?	<p>1 = Much worse 2 = Worse 3 = Same 4 = Better 5 = Much better</p>	<p>0 = optimistic 1 = not optimistic</p>
Satisfaction with democracy	Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country?	<p>0 = The country is not a democracy 1 = Not at all satisfied 2 = Not very satisfied 3 = Fairly satisfied 4 = Very satisfied</p>	<p>0 = Satisfied with democracy 1 = Not satisfied with democracy</p>
Member of a voluntary association or community group	Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member. Some other voluntary association or community group	<p>0 = Not a member 1 = Inactive member 2 = Active member 3 = Official leader</p>	<p>0 = Not a member of a voluntary association or community group</p> <p>1 = Member of a voluntary association or community group</p>
Member of a religious group	Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member. A religious group that meets outside of regular worship services	<p>0 = Not a member 1 = Inactive member 2 = Active member 3 = Official leader</p>	<p>0 = Not a member of a religious group 1 = Member of a religious group</p>
Education of the respondent	What is your highest level of education?	<p>0 = No formal schooling 1 = Informal schooling only</p>	Dummy variable 1:

		<p>2 = Some primary schooling  3 = Primary school completed  4 = Some secondary school/high school  5 = Secondary school/high school completed  6 = Post-secondary qualifications, other than university</p>	<p>0 = Higher than primary school  1 = Primary school or less</p> <p>Dummy variable 2:  0 = Lower or higher than secondary education  1 = Secondary education</p> <p>Dummy variable 3:  0 = Lower than post-secondary education  1 = Post-secondary education</p>
How often got news from radio	How often do you get news from the following sources? Radio	<p>0 = Never  1 = Less than once a month  2 = A few times a month  3 = A few times a week  4 = Every day</p>	<p>Dummy variable 1:  0 = Other than never  1 = Never</p> <p>Dummy variable 2:  0 = Other than less than once a month  1 = Less than once a month</p> <p>Dummy variable 3:  0 = Other than a few times a month  1 = A few times a month</p> <p>Dummy variable 4:  0 = Other than a few times a week  1 = A few times a week</p> <p>Dummy variable 5:  0 = Other than every day  1 = Every day</p>
Gender of respondent	Respondent's gender	<p>1 = Male  2 = Female</p>	<p>0 = Male  1 = Female</p>
Area of residence	Urban or rural primary sampling unit	<p>1 = Urban  2 = Rural</p>	<p>0 = Urban  1 = Rural</p>
Perceived survey sponsor	Just one more question: Who do you think sent us to do this interview?	<p>0 = No one  1 = Afrobarometer  2 = Research company  3 = Non-government or religious organisation  4 = University/school/college  5 = Private company</p>	<p>0 = Other than the government  1 = The government</p>

		6 = Media 7 = Political party or politician 8 = Government 9 = International organization or another country 10 = God	
--	--	--	--

## Appendix B

Table B1

*Afrobarometer round and response rates for each country*

<b>Country</b>	<b>Afrobarometer round</b>	<b>Response rate</b>
Benin	7	97%
Botswana	7	78%
Burkina Faso	7	94%
Cameroon	7	77%
Cape Verde	5	94,2 %
Ghana	7	96%
Lesotho	6	72,6%
Madagascar	7	94%
Malawi	7	99%
Mali	7	96%
Mauritius	7	75%
Namibia	7	82%
Niger	7	87%
Nigeria	7	98%
Senegal	7	88%
Tanzania	7	97%
Togo	7	68%
Uganda	7	94%
Zambia	7	93%
Zimbabwe	7	96%