

Consensus

Theory and Evidence from an African Collective Choice Rule

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Motivation

Throughout history, human groups have governed their collective lives under a wide range of political rules. In Western societies such as the United States or Great Britain, political decisions typically rely on institutions that use universal adult suffrage, indirect electoral representation through parties and parliaments, and majority rule.

This relatively modern institutional package has diffused widely, including across the African continent. However, Western democratic institutions may conflict with long-standing African political institutions that reflect societies' own cultural values and worldviews.

I focus on a political tradition that has attracted sustained interest from anthropologists, political theorists, and post-independence African leaders: decision-making by *consensus*.

What is Consensus?

- Consensus is a collective choice rule used for selecting leaders, managing shared resources, or coordinating the provision of public goods.
- It involves a period of deliberation in which at least some members of the polity present alternatives and weigh their merits.
- After deliberation, a respected authority figure typically uses agenda-setting power to recommend a final course of action.

Political Theory

Consensus shares deliberative features that allow citizens to express preferences and shape outcomes (Mansbridge 1983; Graeber 2007).

African philosophers contend that frictions between consensus traditions and Western democratic norms may help explain governance failures, noting that consensus has at times been invoked to justify one-party systems (Wiredu 1995; Okeja 2022).

- Consensus emphasizes direct participation, extended discussion, and tacit agreement, reinforced by collectivistic values and deference to elders or chiefs.
- Western democracy prioritizes voting, competition, leadership turnover, and individualistic ideals of political equality.

While consensus incorporates deliberation, its hierarchical structure—where an authority ultimately decides—can conflict with egalitarian democratic principles.

These contrasts frame the question of whether consensus strengthens or undermines efforts to consolidate Western-style democracy in Africa.

Anthropological Evidence

Tswana and Kgalagadi (Botswana): Societies with a high level of citizen participation in the regulation of public affairs done through a public assembly called *lekgota* by the Kgalagari and *lekgotla* by the Tswana (Kuper 1971).

Wolof (Senegal): Power to select (*fal*) or depose (*folli*) rulers decided by deliberation and consensus of a council (Schaffer 2000).

Igbo (Nigeria): Collective decisions made through a series of nested councils, where decisions are made by consensus, not by majority rule (Jones 1971).

Political Leaders

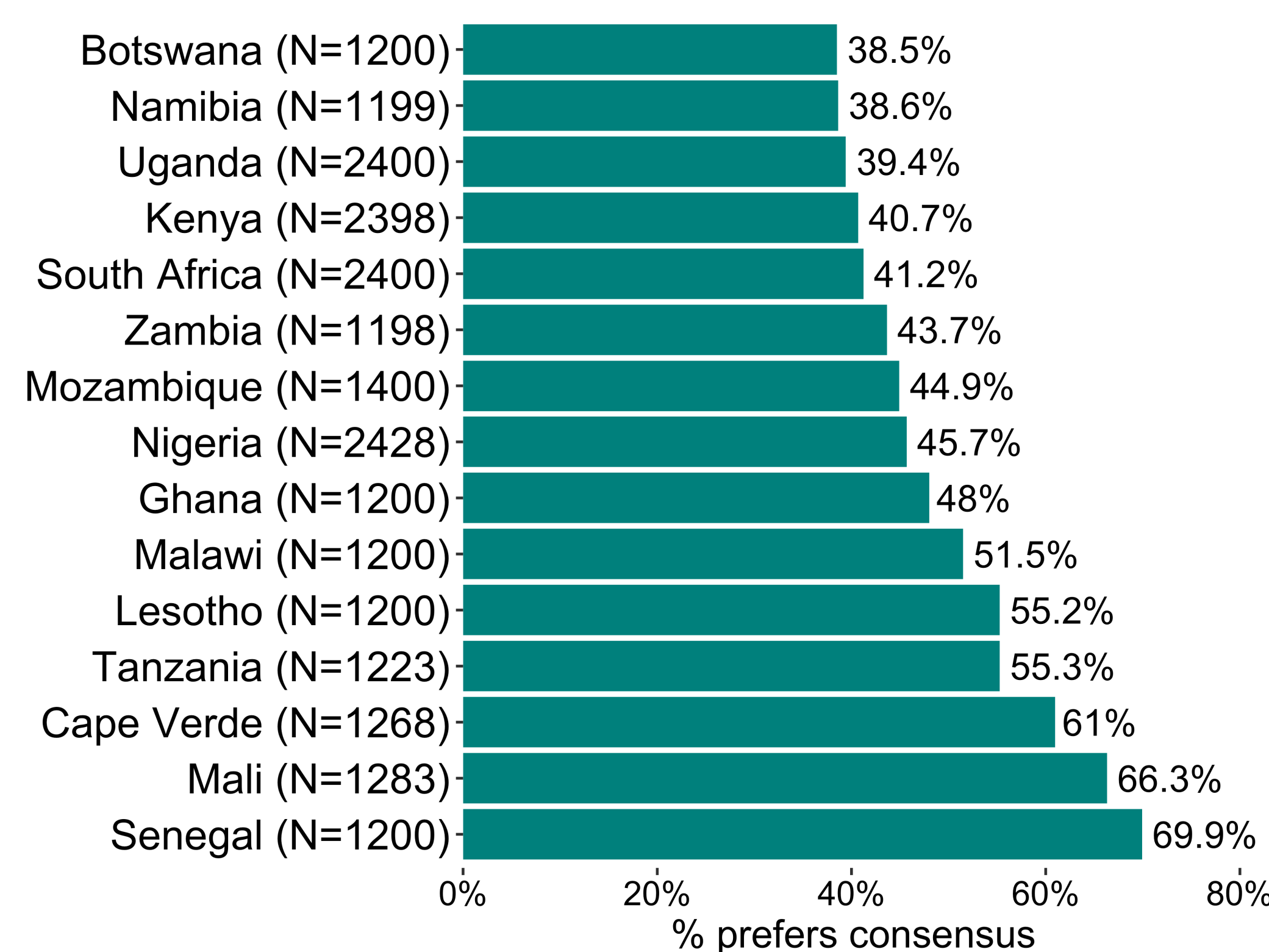
- Kaunda, First President of Zambia: »In our original societies we operated by consensus. An issue was talked out in solemn conclave until such time as agreement could be achieved.«
- Nyerere, First President of Tanzania, »In African society the traditional method of conducting affairs is by free discussion.«
- Mandela, First President of South Africa: »Our meetings continued until we reached a form of consensus — they could end only in unanimity, for majority rule was a foreign notion.«

Cross-country Evidence

To document preferences for consensus in Africa, I use previously underexamined data from Afrobarometer round 2 (2002-3). In this round, the common questionnaire included the following item:

Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

- A. *In order to make decisions in our community, we should talk until everyone agrees.*
- B. *Since we will never agree on everything, we must learn to accept differences of opinion within our community.*



Endogenous Origins

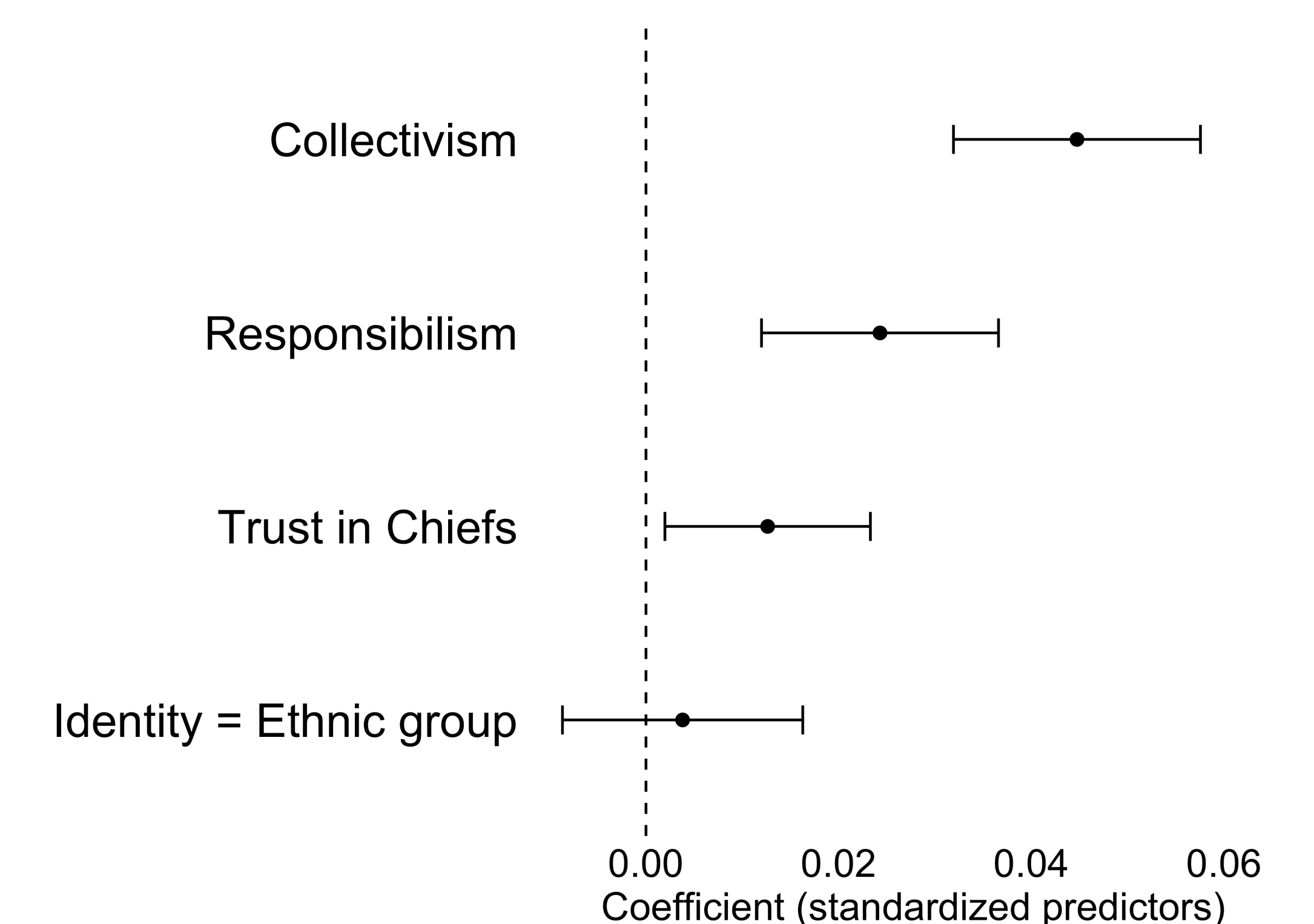
To explain the origins of contemporary preferences for consensus, I use data on village headman selection from the *Ethnographic Atlas*, which codes mechanisms such as inheritance, seniority, status, and consensus. Following Giuliano and Nunn (2018), I match precolonial institutions to present-day populations through linguistic descent.

	Model 1	Model 2
Historical Consensus	0.037** (0.011)	0.050*** (0.013)
Num.Obs.	18535	18531
R2	0.001	0.029
Demographic Controls	No	Yes

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Culture

Collectivistic societies emphasize “interconnected and embedded in interdependent social relationships, along with normative prescriptions and values about the priority to be given to individual and group interests.” (Brewer and Chen 2007).



Democratization

“[Consensus] is the aspect of the traditional system to which the advocates of the one-party system appealed in their attempts to prove its African ancestry and authenticity” (Wiredu 1995).

	One-Party Rule	Council of Chiefs or Elders Rule	One Man Rule
Consensus	0.075*** (0.018)	0.169*** (0.019)	0.082*** (0.015)
Num.Obs.	21679	20293	21332
R2	0.001	0.004	0.001

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001