

Africans want age limits for government heads (but don't reject retirement-age leaders)

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 599 | Daniel Armah-Attah and Sarah Nuba

Summary

Over the years, some policy actors have blamed aspects of African countries' development challenges on the advanced ages of their leaders, though no theory or empirical evidence establishes such a relationship (Anoba, 2018; Sackey, 2021). The elections of Emmanuel Macron as president of France at age 39 (2017), Sebastian Kurz as chancellor of Austria at age 31 (2017), and Nayib Bukele as president of El Salvador at age 37 (2019) led some democracy watchers to wonder when Africa – the world's youngest continent, with under-35s making up about two-thirds of the population – will produce youthful presidents (Alim, 2019; Phekani, 2019).

In all but one (Ethiopia) of the 28 African countries that chose presidents or prime ministers during the period 2018-2021, the winners were more than 50 years old (see Table A.2 in the Appendix for details). In 19 countries, the winners were above age 60, despite the participation of 27 under-50 candidates in those countries. As Nigeria prepares for elections in February 2023, the National Youths Union of Nigeria has reignited this discussion by calling on citizens to elect a president who is less than 60 years of age (Sahara Reporters, 2022).

The 2019/2021 Afrobarometer Round 8 survey in 34 countries asked Africans whether they think their countries should have minimum and maximum age limits for heads of government, and if so, what these limits should be.

Findings show that most Africans favour both minimum and maximum age limits for their leaders, though their views on what those limits should be vary greatly.

Comparing the ages of incumbent leaders to citizens' proposed age limits and to countries' official retirement ages, we find that heads of government have exceeded average citizens' maximum age limits in 15 of 34 countries, and have exceeded official retirement age in 23 countries. But citizens in 27 countries also tend to propose age limits for heads of state that exceed the official retirement age, suggesting that they aren't opposed to retirement-age leaders.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been conducted in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys were completed in 18 countries between August 2019 and March 2020 before fieldwork was suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys in 16 more countries between October 2020 and July 2021 completed the 34-country round. (See Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates.)

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples that yield country-level results with margins of error of

+/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.¹

This 34-country analysis is based on 48,084 interviews. The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, each country is weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Key findings

- On average across 34 countries, three-quarters (76%) of Africans are in favour of a maximum age limit for heads of government. About the same percentage (74%) support minimum age limits for these chief public servants.
 - Maximum age limits have majority support in all surveyed countries, exceeding nine out of 10 citizens in Mali (95%), Benin (94%), and Senegal (90%).
- Citizens' views on what the minimum and maximum age limits should be vary widely.
 - For a minimum age limit, the mean across 34 countries is 39 years, ranging from a low of 34 years in Morocco to a high of 42 years in Ghana, Guinea, Namibia, and Tanzania. The modal (most frequently cited) proposed minimum across 34 countries is 40 years, ranging from 30 years in the Gambia and Morocco to 40 years in 29 out of the 34 countries.
 - For a maximum age limit, the mean across 34 countries is 66 years, ranging from 58 years in Morocco to 72 years in Zimbabwe. The modal maximum age is 70 across the 34 countries.
- Compared against the mean and modal minimum age limits proposed by survey respondents, the heads of governments in all 34 countries were old enough to qualify for the office. However, assessed against the mean maximum age limits proposed by citizens, heads of government in 15 countries were too old at the time of the survey to occupy their positions.
- The ages of incumbent heads of government at the time of the survey exceeded their countries' official retirement ages in 23 of the 34 surveyed countries.
- However, the mean maximum age limits proposed by citizens were higher than the official retirement age in 27 countries, suggesting that despite strong support for age limits, many citizens are quite generous with respect to how old their heads of government can be.

Do Africans support age limits for heads of government?²

Among the 34 countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in 2019/2021, 28 have constitutional provisions for a minimum age for presidents or prime ministers.³ In contrast, only two set a

¹ The weighted Mozambique Round 8 sample is nationally representative except that it excludes rural Cabo Delgado, comprising 6.3% of the adult population of Mozambique. Insecurity and resulting difficulties in obtaining necessary fieldwork clearances prevented Afrobarometer from collecting sufficient data in this area.

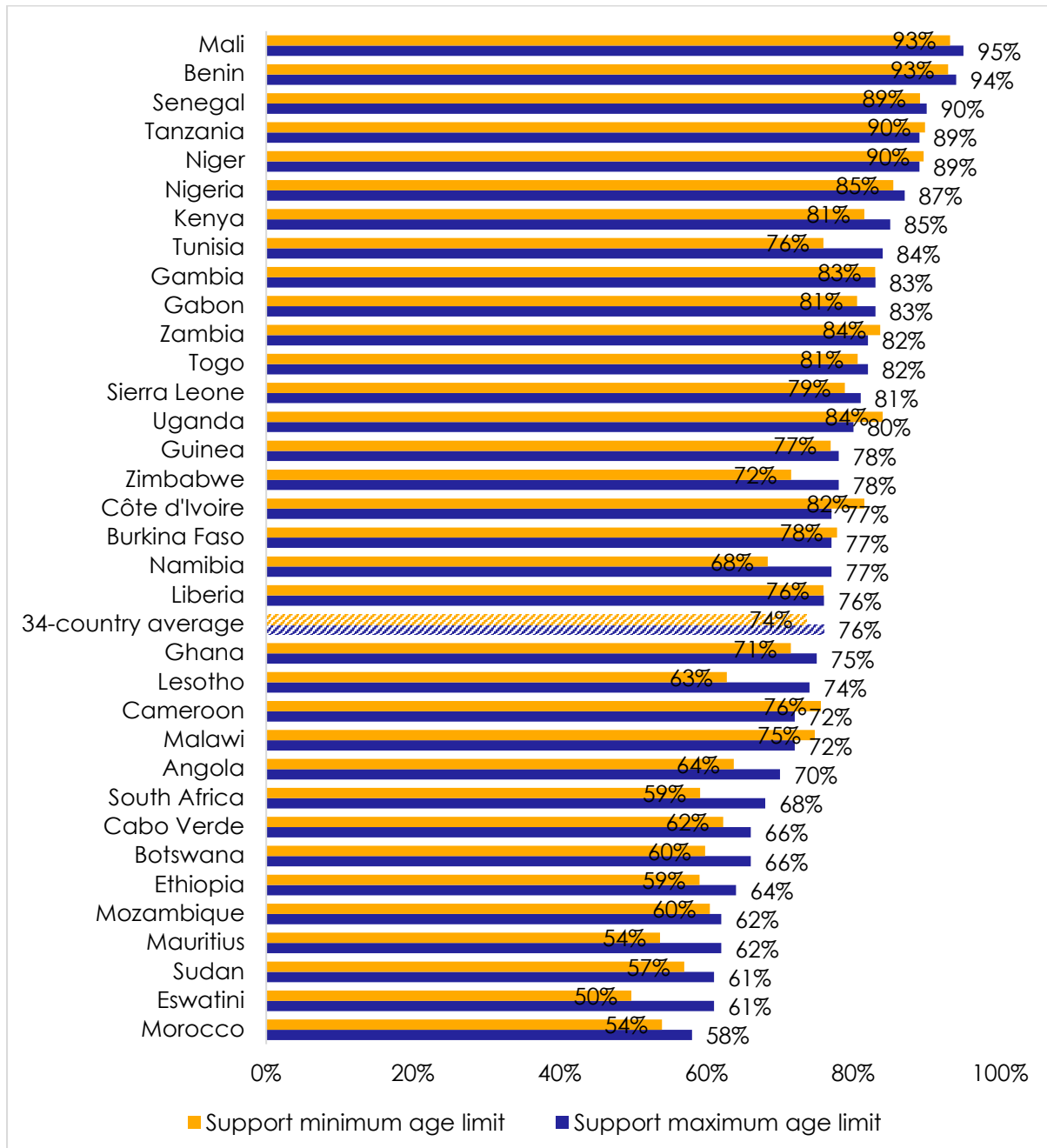
² Afrobarometer asked about minimum and maximum ages for presidents and (in Eswatini, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Mauritius, and Morocco) prime ministers.

³ Two countries have a minimum age of 30 years (the Gambia and Botswana); 35 is the minimum in 18 countries (Angola, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, and Zambia); and 40 is the minimum in eight countries (Benin, Gabon, Ghana, Mauritius, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe). In six countries, there is no indication of a minimum age: Eswatini, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Morocco, Mozambique, and South Africa.

maximum age limit, while incumbents in two other countries, with the support of the legislatures, have managed to abolish age limits to allow them to seek additional terms.⁴

When citizens are asked directly, three-fourths of them say they think their constitutions should provide for both minimum age limits (74% on average across 34 countries) and maximum age limits (75%) for their heads of government (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Support for minimum and maximum age limits for government heads
| 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: Should there be a minimum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? Should there be a maximum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? (% "yes")

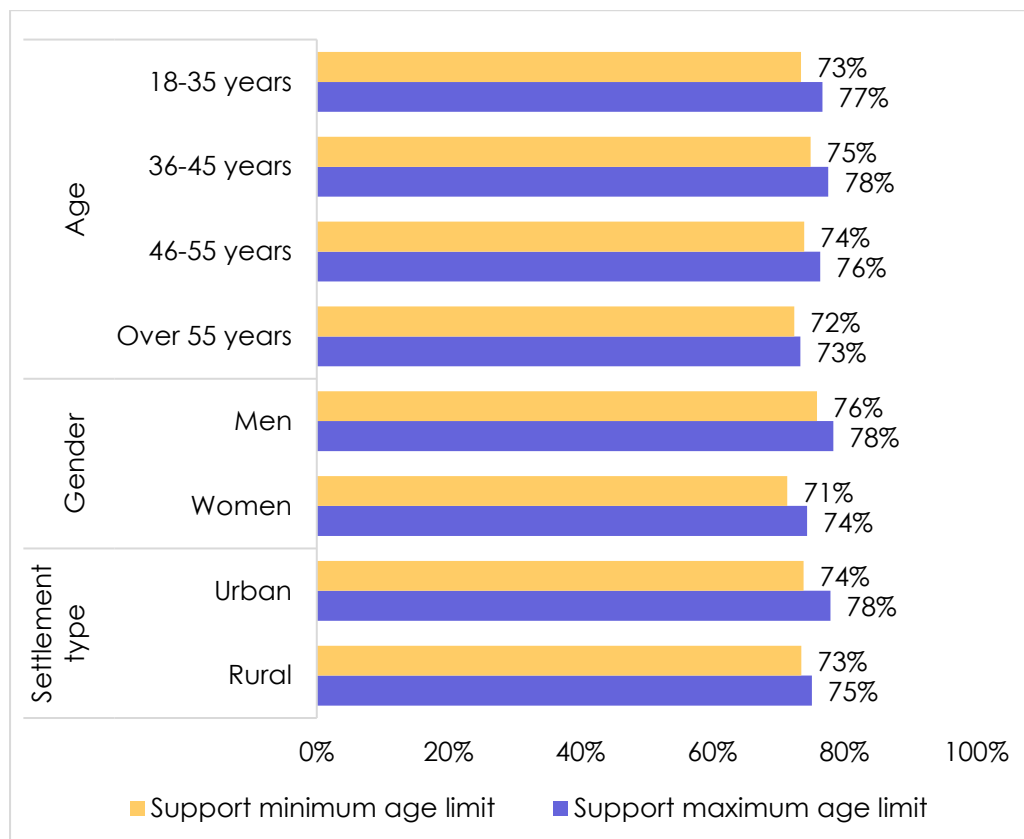
⁴ Benin and Burkina Faso have maximum age limits of 70 and 75 years, respectively, for presidents. In Côte d'Ivoire and Uganda, maximum age limits of 75 years were abolished through constitutional amendments.

Support for both types of age limits exceeds nine out of 10 citizens in Mali and Benin. It is weakest in Morocco and Eswatini, but even there half or more of all adults favour these limits.

Countries expressing strong support for minimum age limits tend to do the same for maximum age limits. Eswatini and Lesotho are unusual in that in both countries, maximum age limits are 11 percentage points more popular than minimum age limits.

Support for both types of age limits is strong across key demographic groups (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Support for minimum and maximum age limits for government heads
| by demographic group | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: Should there be a minimum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? Should there be a maximum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? (% who say “yes”)

What should the age limits be?

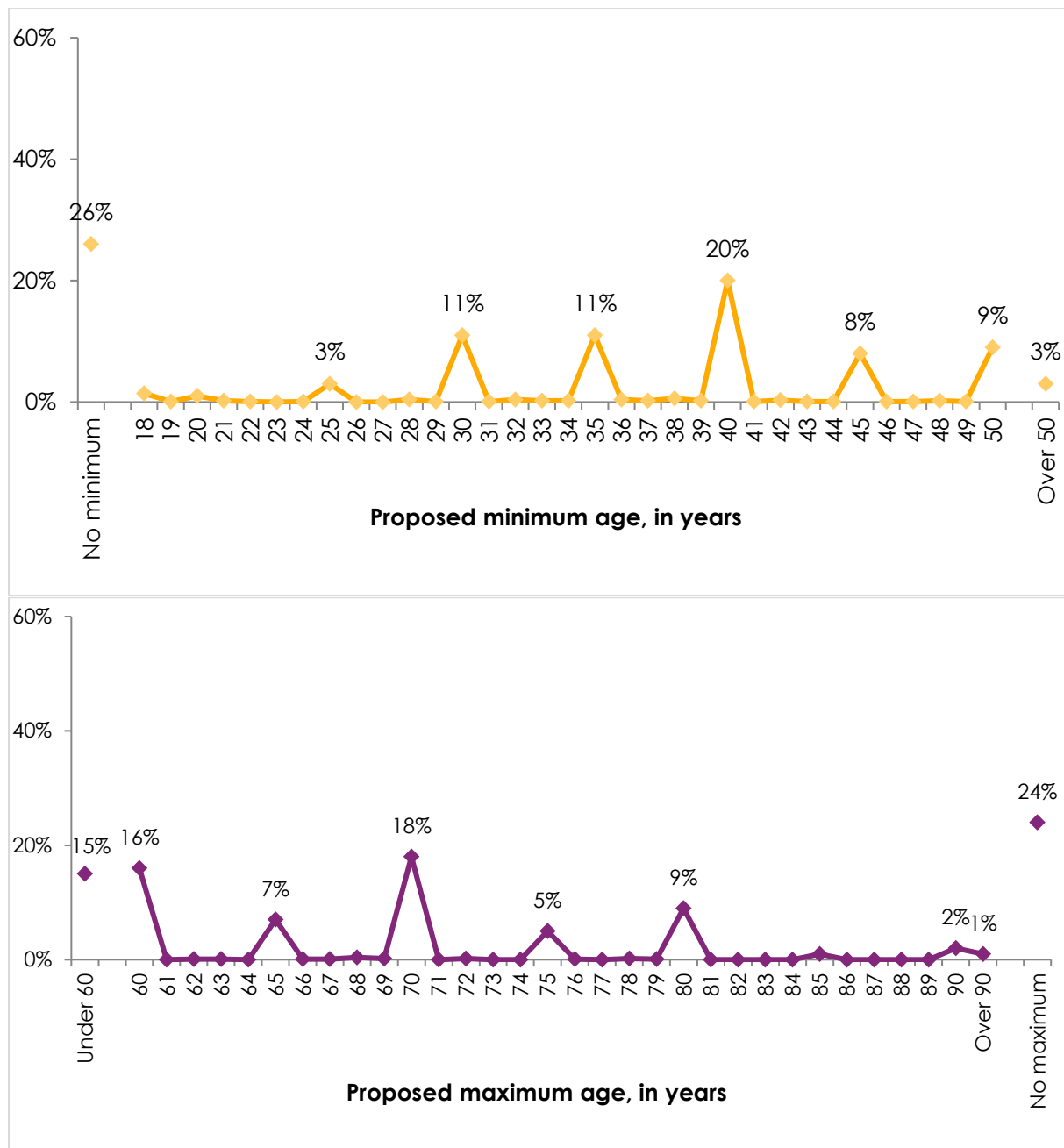
When respondents who favour minimum and maximum age limits for presidents or prime ministers are asked what they think those limits should be, they offer a wide range of suggestions.

One way to examine the results is to look at the proportions of respondents who favour certain age limits (Figure 3).

For minimum age limits, 40 years is the most popular or modal choice (20%), followed by 35 (11%), 30 (11%), 50 (9%), and 45 (8%).

For a maximum, 70 years gets the most votes (i.e. is the modal value) (18%), followed by 60 (16%) and a variety of ages under 60 (15%). About one in 10 respondents who favour a maximum age limit suggest it be set at 80 years (9%).

Figure 3: Proposed minimum and maximum ages for government heads
| 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked:

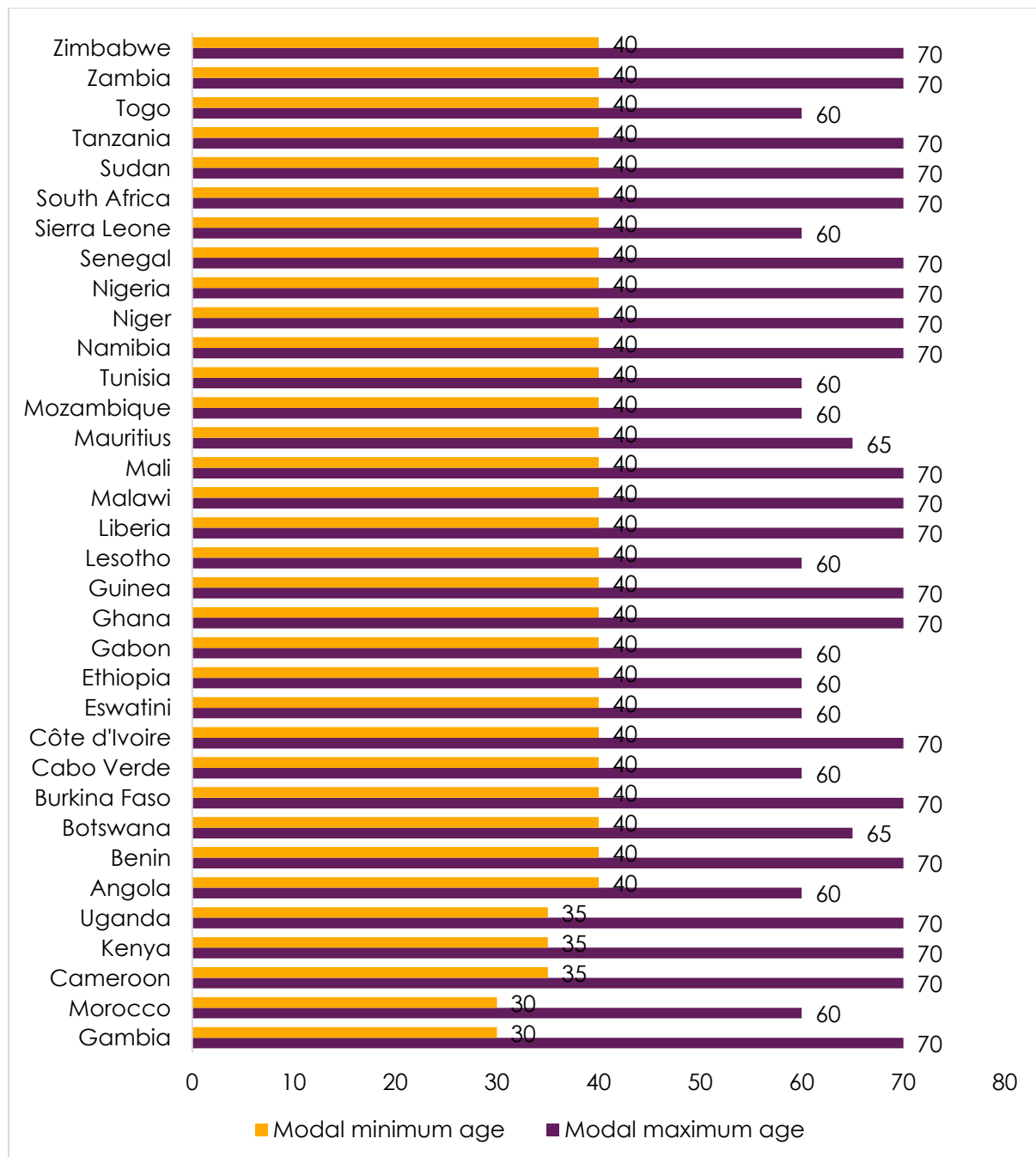
Should there be a minimum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? [If yes:] What should the minimum age be?

Should there be a maximum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? [If yes:] What should the maximum age be?

All countries record a modal minimum age of 40 except Uganda, Kenya, and Cameroon, which has a modal minimum age of 35, and Morocco and the Gambia, with a modal minimum age of 30 (Figure 4).

For the maximum age, 21 countries record 70 years as the most common response, while 60 years is the most common response in 11 countries.

Figure 4: Modal proposed minimum and maximum ages for government heads
| 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked:

Should there be a minimum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? [If yes:] What should the minimum age be?

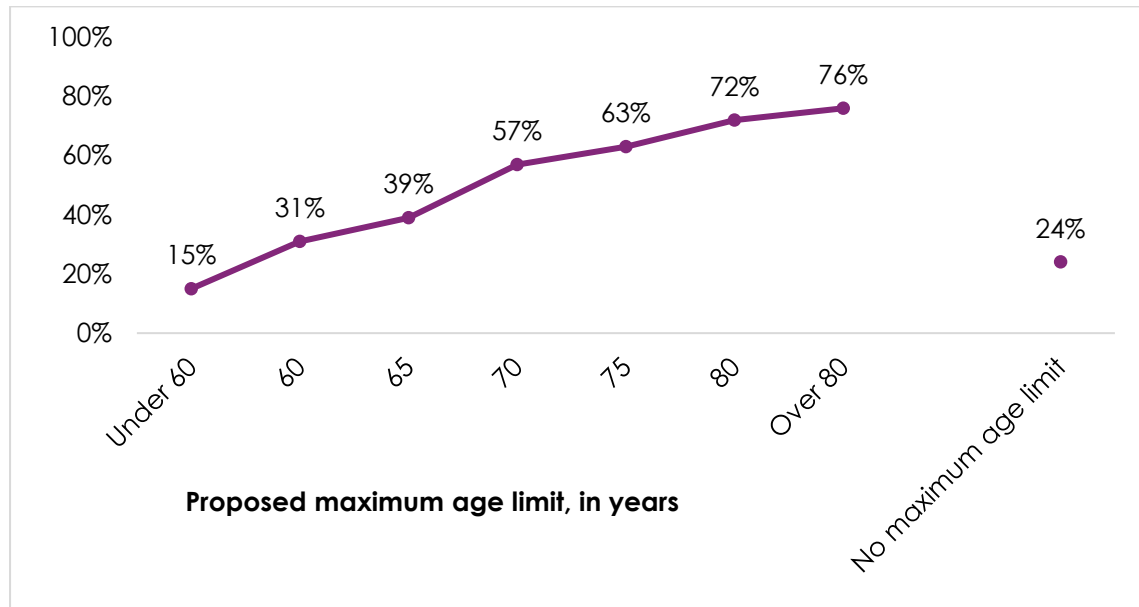
Should there be a maximum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? [If yes:] What should the maximum age be?

Note: Modal values exclude respondents who say "no minimum" or "no maximum."

Another way to summarise citizens' preferences with regard to a maximum age limit is to look at what proportion is likely to endorse a given age as a maximum limit (Figure 5). This assumes that a person who supports a given maximum limit (e.g. 60 years) would also endorse a higher maximum (e.g. 75 years) as preferable to having no maximum at all. Thus, on average

across 34 countries, while only 31% would set the maximum limit at 60 years, a majority (57%) would endorse a limit of 70 years.

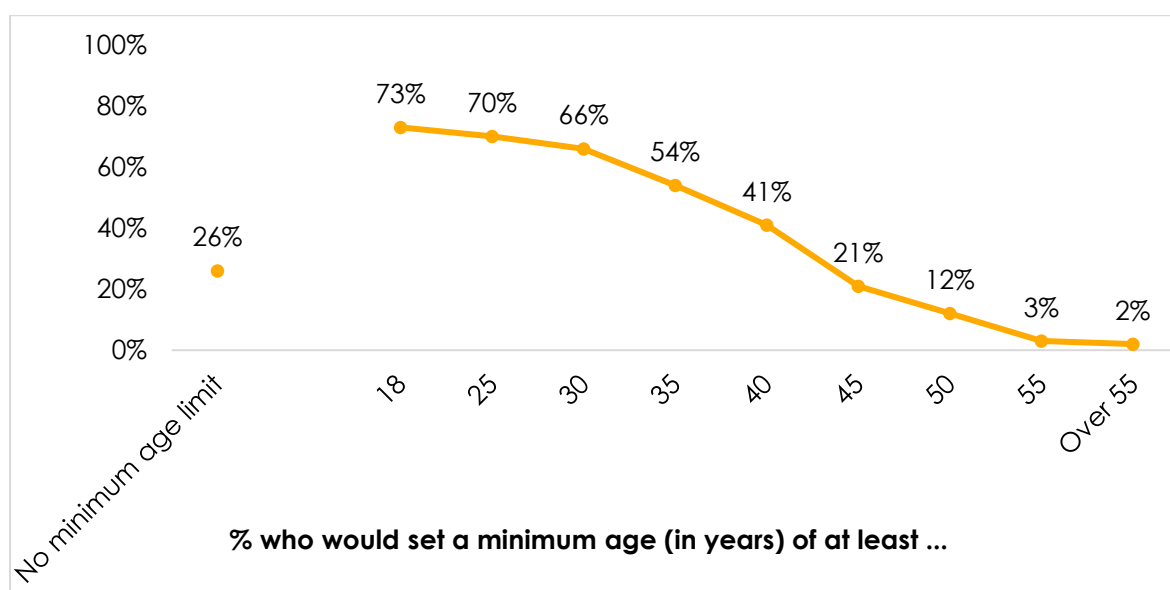
Figure 5: Proposed maximum ages for government heads | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: Should there be a maximum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? [If yes:] What should the maximum age be? (Cumulative percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who propose each age limit or below.)

Similarly, we can consider what proportion think a given age is too young to head a government. As shown in Figure 6, 73% of respondents would set the minimum age at 18 years or higher, and a majority (54%) would insist that a head of government be at least 35 years old. But only one in five (21%) would set the minimum age at 45 years or higher.

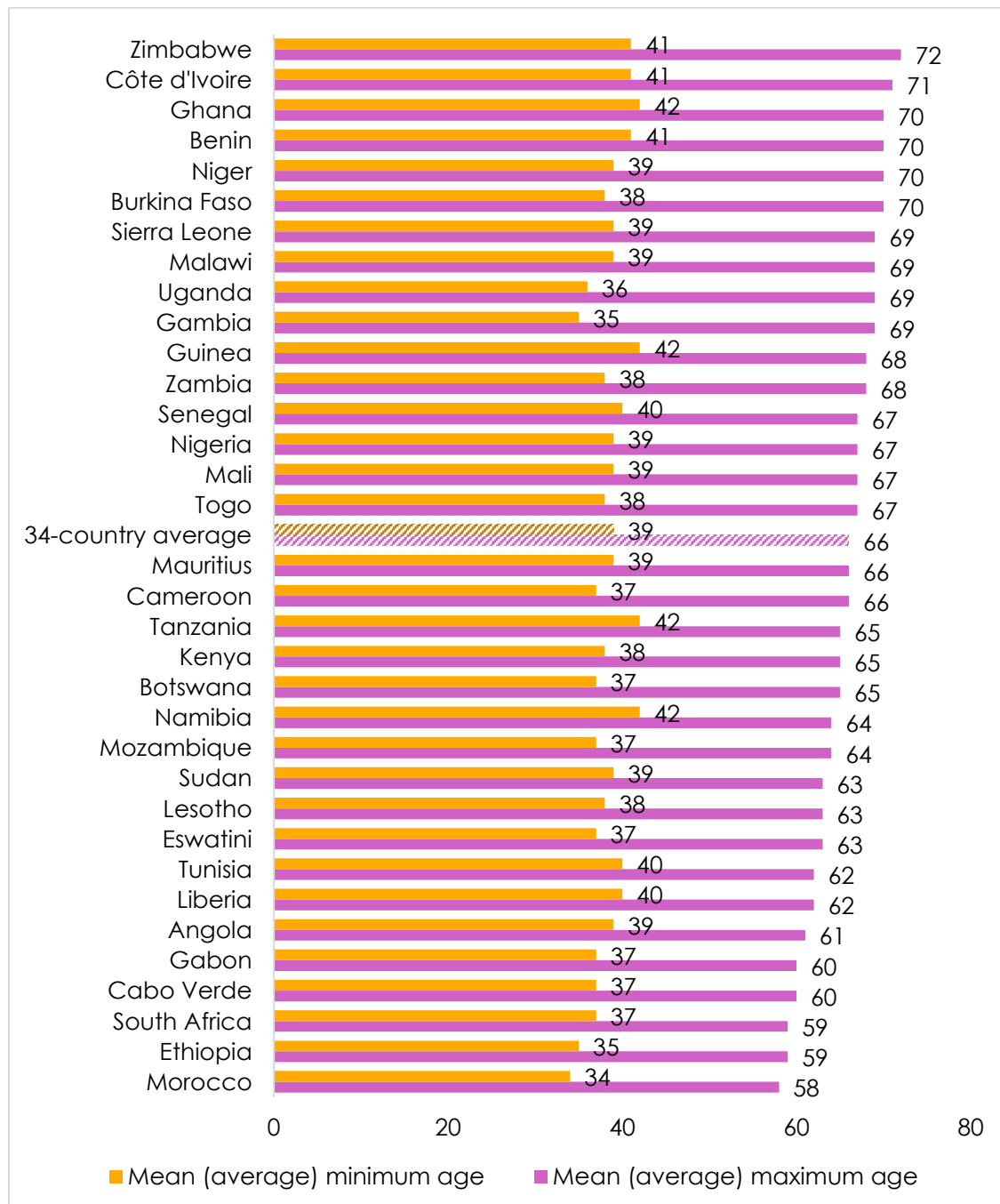
Figure 6: Proportion who would set minimum age higher | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: Should there be a minimum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? [If yes:] What should the minimum age be? (Cumulative percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who propose each age limit or above.)

Finally, a third way to interpret the findings is to calculate mean minimum and maximum ages for each country (Figure 7). The mean age is the average of all the ages suggested by all respondents (excluding those who did not want a minimum or maximum age, respectively).

Figure 7: Mean proposed minimum and maximum ages for government heads
| 34 countries | 2019/202



Respondents were asked:

Should there be a minimum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? [If yes:] What should the minimum age be?

Should there be a maximum age for candidates for president [or prime minister]? [If yes:] What should the maximum age be?

Note: Mean values exclude respondents who say "no minimum" or "no maximum."

The mean (average) preferred minimum age across 34 countries is 39 years, very similar to the modal (most popular) minimum age of 40 years. The means of citizens' proposed minimum age limits range from a low of 34 years in Morocco to a high of 42 years in Ghana, Guinea, Tanzania, and Namibia. The mean proposed minimum ages exceed 40 years in just seven countries.

Across the 34 countries, the mean maximum age is 66 years. The mean maximums range from 58 years in Morocco to 72 years in Zimbabwe, with only six countries averaging 70 years or above.

What proposed age limits imply for each country's current leadership

To examine what these proposed minimum and maximum ages would mean for current heads of government, we compare them to each leader's age at the time of the Afrobarometer Round 8 survey. As we can see in Figure 8, the leader's age exceeded the mean proposed minimum age in every country; the differences in years are detailed in Figure 9.

For instance, President Paul Biya of Cameroon (the oldest) was 51 years older at the time of the survey than the country's mean minimum age limit for a president, while Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali (the youngest) was 8 years older. Thus, considered against the mean minimum age limits suggested by citizens, all current heads of governments in the 34 countries would be old enough to qualify to occupy their positions.

Heads of government are, however, older than the preferred maximum age in 15 countries, by margins ranging from one year (for President Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon) to 22 years (for President Biya of Cameroon) (Figure 10).

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Figure 8: Mean proposed minimum age, mean proposed maximum age, and leader's age | 34 countries | 2019/2021

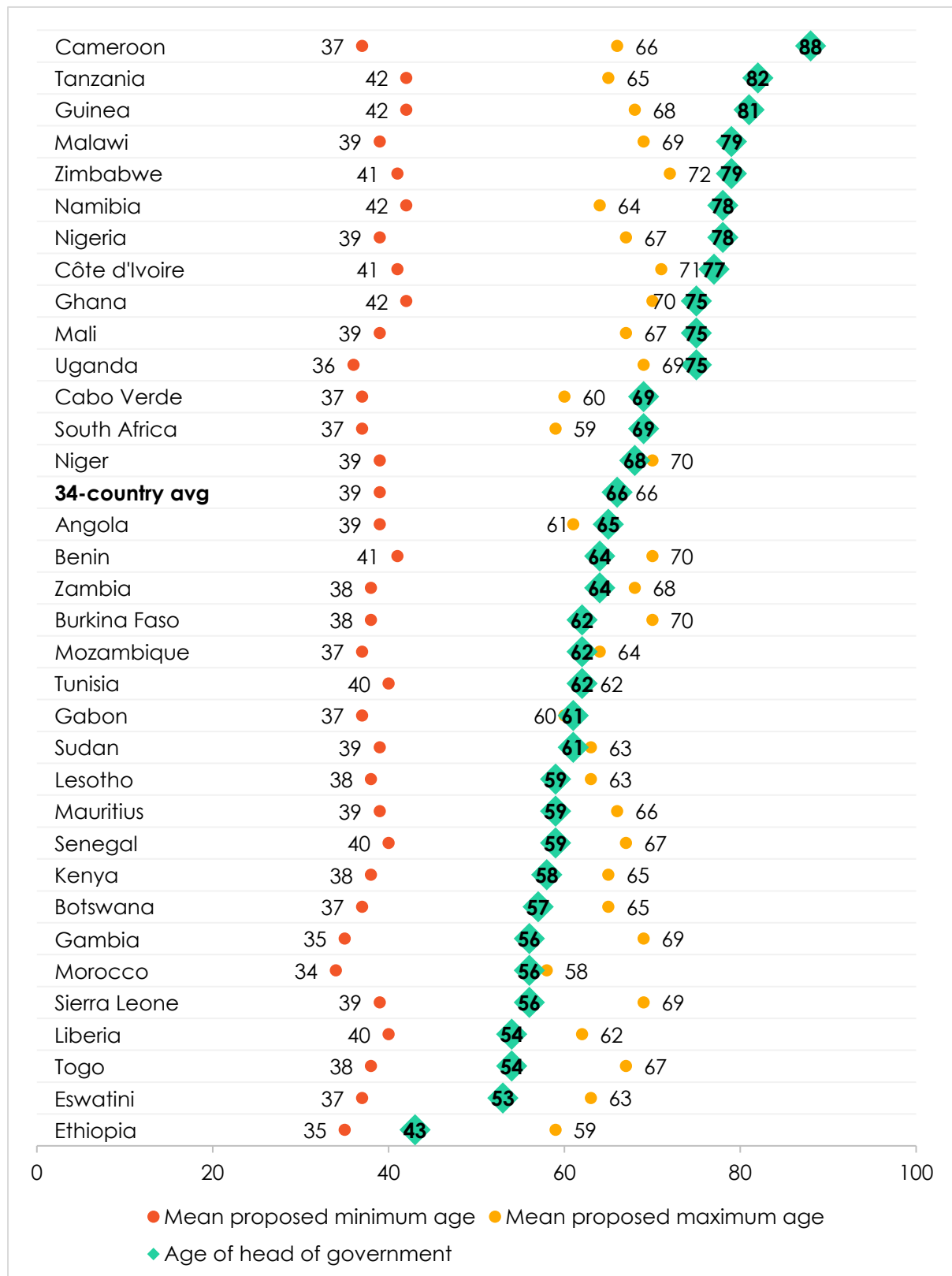


Figure 9: Incumbent age less mean proposed minimum age | 34 countries
 | 2019/2021

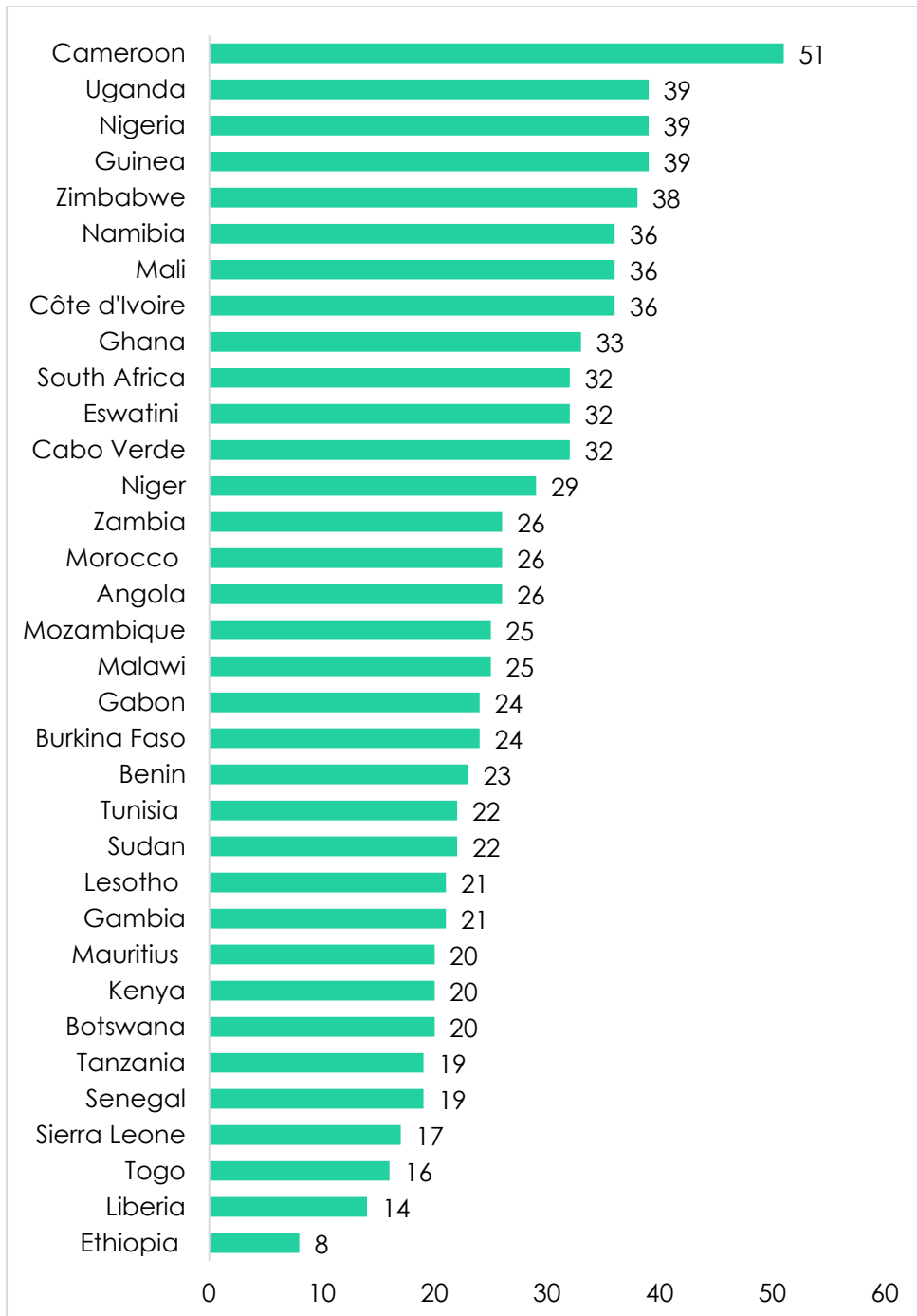


Figure shows incumbent leader's age at the time of the Afrobarometer Round 8 survey minus the country mean value for a proposed minimum age limit. A positive value means the incumbent is older than the mean proposed minimum age.

Figure 10: Incumbent age less mean proposed maximum age | 34 countries
 | 2019/2021

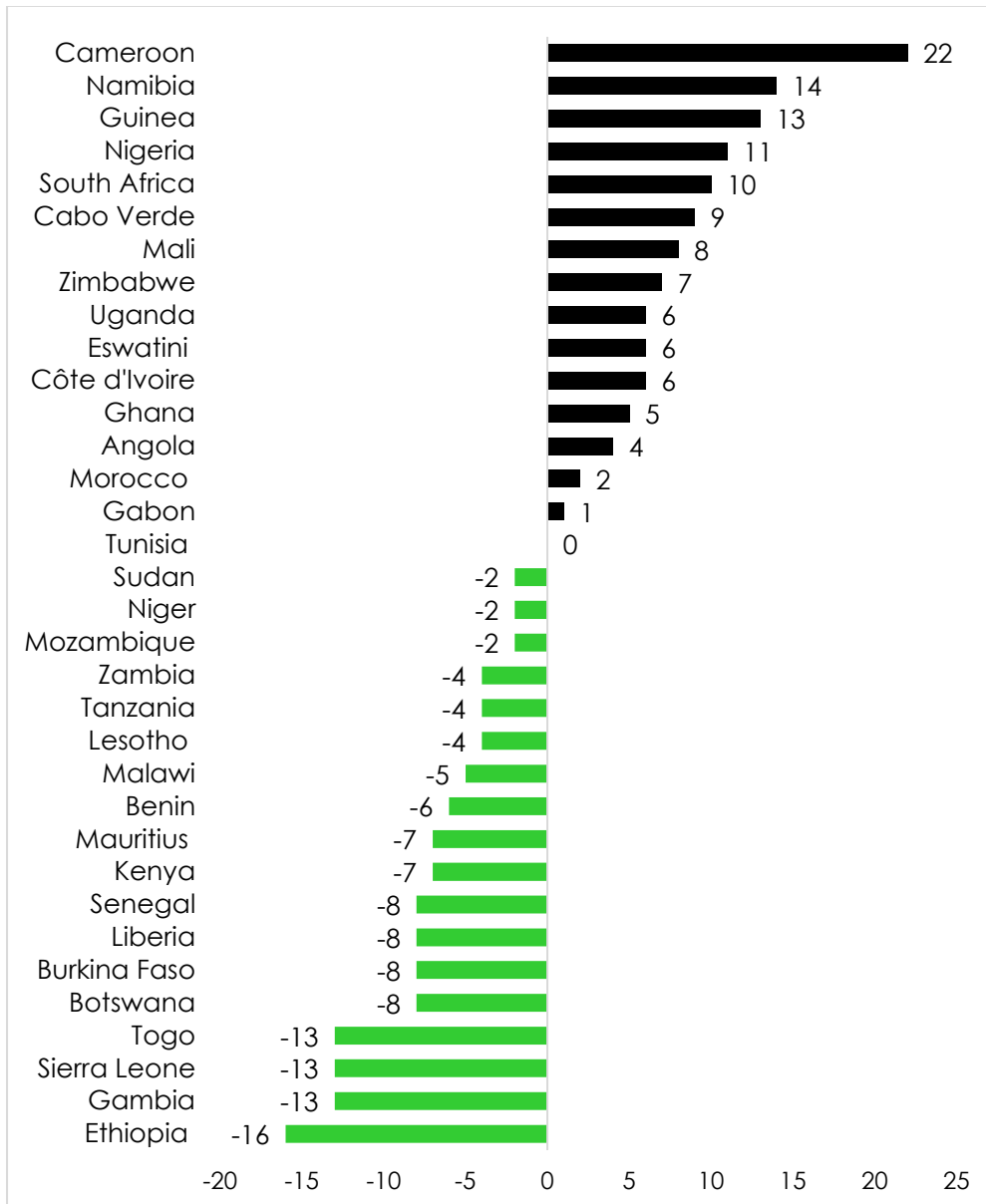


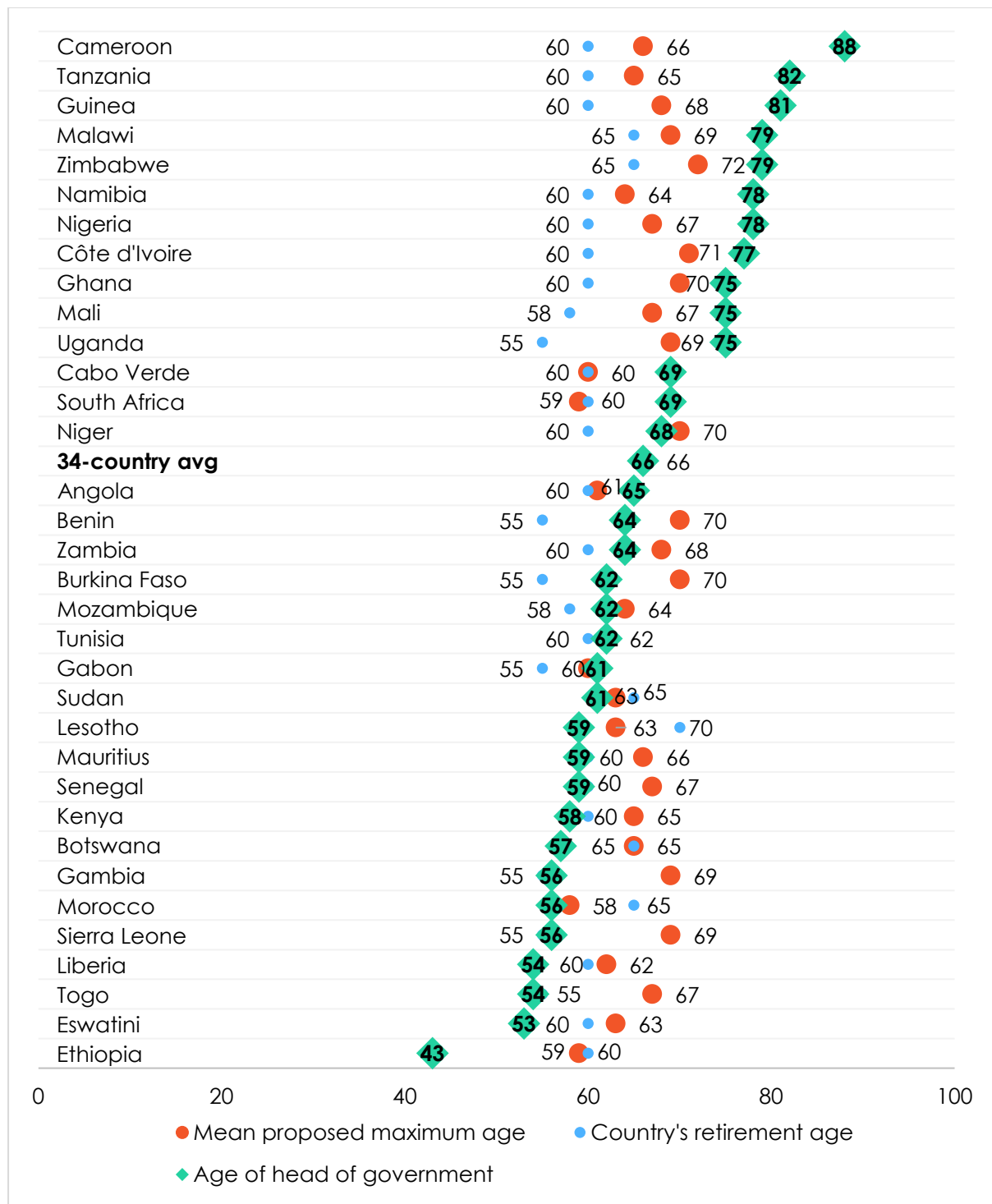
Figure shows incumbent leader's age at the time of the Afrobarometer Round 8 survey minus the country mean value for a proposed maximum age limit. A positive value means the incumbent is older than the mean proposed maximum age.

Does support for maximum age limits signal rejection of gerontocracy?

We have established strong public support for instituting maximum age limits for heads of government and seen that 15 incumbents had surpassed the mean preferred maximum at the time of the Round 8 surveys. Do these findings signal that Africans reject gerontocracy? We explore this question by comparing countries' mean preferred maximum age limits and incumbents' ages at the time of the survey to the countries' mandatory ages of retirement from active public service,⁵ as displayed in Figure 11.

⁵ Some countries have different retirement ages for different groups of workers. Mozambique sets 60 and 55 years as retirement ages for men and women, respectively. In Mali, the retirement age ranges from 55 to 58

Figure 11: Mean proposed maximum age, official retirement age, and leader's age
| 34 countries | 2019/2021



years, while in Nigeria, it is 60 years for everyone except teachers, who retire at 65 years. Depending on the type of profession, Guineans retire at 55, 60, or 65 years. Burkinabè in blue-collar jobs retire at 55 years; those in white-collar jobs at 58 years; supervisors, technicians, and managers at 60 years; and doctors and university teachers at 63 years. For purposes of our analysis, we used the retirement age for men (i.e. 60 years) for Mozambique, the upper boundary retirement age of 58 years for Mali, the mid-level retirement age of 60 years for Guinea, and the general retirement age of 60 years for Nigeria.

At the time of our surveys, 23 heads of government were older than their country's official retirement age. Margins range from one year (for Ali Bongo of Gabon, Julius Maada Bio of Sierra Leone, and the late John Magufuli of Tanzania) to 28 years for Cameroon's Biya (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Incumbent's age minus official retirement age | 34 countries | 2019/2021

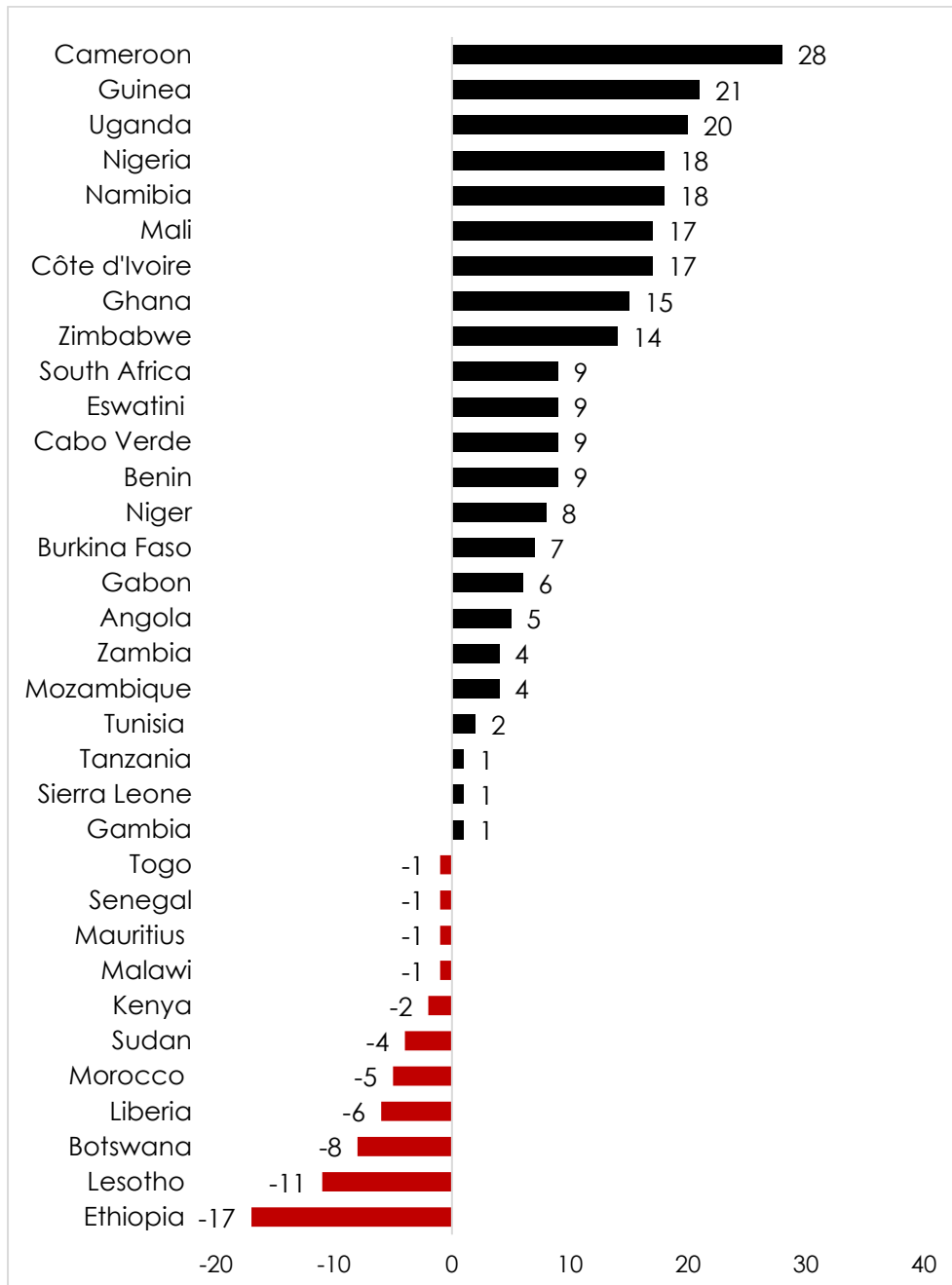


Figure shows incumbent leader's age at the time of the Afrobarometer Round 8 survey minus the country's official retirement age. A positive value means the incumbent is older than the official retirement age.

Significantly, in 27 countries, the mean proposed maximum age limits for heads of government are higher than the official retirement ages. Differences range from one year in Angola to 28 years in Cameroon (Figure 13). In only five countries do the official retirement

ages exceed the average preferred maximum age limits for heads of government – Lesotho, Morocco, Sudan, Ethiopia, and South Africa.

These findings indicate that citizens are quite generous with their proposed maximum age limits. Africans' support for age limits for heads of government does not appear to signal a rejection of older leaders.

Figure 13: Mean proposed maximum age minus official retirement age | 34 countries | 2019/2021

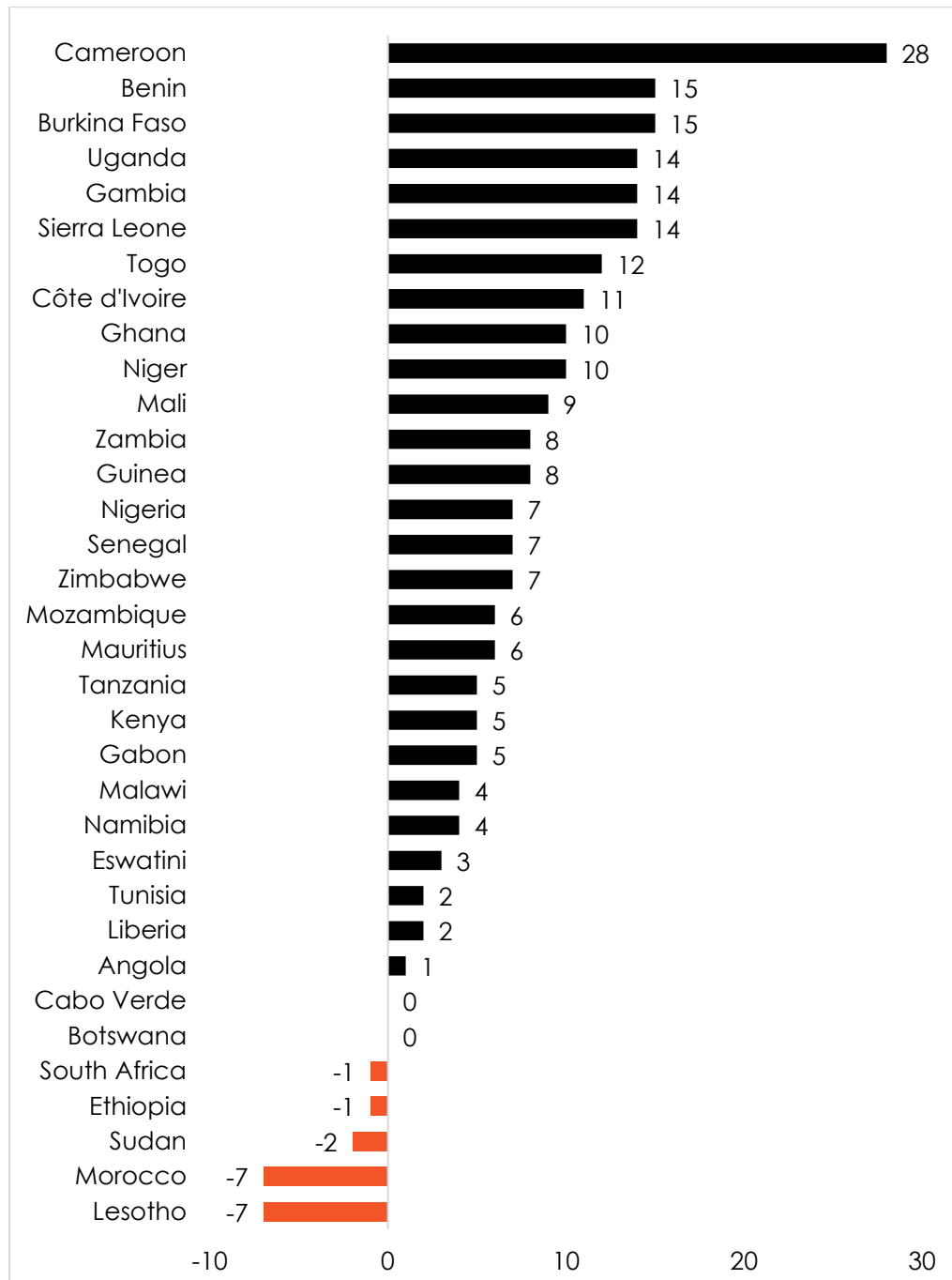


Figure shows each country's mean value for a proposed maximum age limit minus its official retirement age. A positive value means that the average proposed maximum age limit for a head of government is higher than the official retirement age.

Conclusion

Survey findings show that a large majority of Africans in 34 countries support the institution of minimum and maximum age limits for heads of government, though their suggested age limits vary widely. In most countries, the mean preferred maximum age is higher than the country's official retirement age, suggesting that people are willing to let their heads of government serve until an older age – but not indefinitely.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 8 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov.-Dec. 2019	N/A
Benin	Nov.-Dec. 2020	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Botswana	July-August 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec. 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Cabo Verde	Dec. 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Cameroon	Feb.-March 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov. 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Eswatini	March-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Ethiopia	Dec. 2019-Jan. 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb. 2020	2015, 2017
Gambia	Feb. 2021	2018
Ghana	Sept.-Oct. 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov.-Dec. 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	August-Sept. 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Liberia	Oct.-Dec. 2020	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Nov.-Dec. 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Mauritius	Nov. 2020	2012, 2014, 2017
Morocco	Feb. 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Mozambique	May-July 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Namibia	August 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Niger	Oct.-Nov. 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Nigeria	Jan.-Feb. 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Senegal	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
South Africa	May-June 2021	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018
Sudan	Feb.-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Tanzania	Feb.-March 2021	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Togo	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2012, 2014, 2017
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept.-Oct. 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Zambia	Nov.-Dec. 2020	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017
Zimbabwe	April-May 2021	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017

Table A.2: Presidential/Prime ministerial elections (2018-2021) and ages of the elected

Country	Election (2018-2021)	President/Prime minister during Afrobarometer Round 8 survey	Official designation	Leader's age during Round 8 survey
Ethiopia	2018	Abiy Ahmed Ali	Prime minister	43
Eswatini	2018	Ambrose Dlamini (late)	Prime minister	53
Togo	2020	Faure Gnassingbé	President	54
Sierra Leone	2018	Julius Maada	President	56
Gambia	2021	Adama Barrow	President	56
Morocco	2021	Saadeddine Othmani	Prime minister	56
Botswana	2018	Mokgweetsi Masisi	President	57
Mauritius	2019	Pravind Jugnauth	Prime minister	59
Senegal	2019	Macky Sall	President	59
Sudan	2021	Abdel Fattah al-Burhan	President	61
Mozambique	2019	Filipe Nyusi	President	62
Tunisia	2019	Kais Saied	President	62
Burkina Faso	2020	Roch Marc Christian Kabore	President	62
Benin	2021	Patrice Talon	President	64
Zambia	2021	Edgar Lungu	President	64
South Africa	2019	Cyril Ramaphosa	President	69
Cabo Verde	2021	Jorge Carlos Fonseca	President	69
Mali	2018	Ibrahim Boubacar Keita	President	75
Ghana	2020	Nana Akufo-Addo	President	75
Uganda	2021	Yoweri Museveni	President	75
Côte d'Ivoire	2020	Alassane Quattara	President	77
Namibia	2019	Hage Geingob	President	78
Nigeria	2019	Muhammadu Buhari	President	78
Zimbabwe	2018	Emmerson Mnangagwa	President	79
Malawi	2019	Peter Mutharika	President	79
Guinea	2020	Alpha Condé	President	81
Tanzania	2020	John P.J. Magufuli (late)	President	82
Cameroon	2021	Paul Biya	President	88

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