

Nigerians want democracy, though dissatisfaction rises amid worsening economic conditions

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 606 | Amara Galileo, Raphael Mbaegbu, and Sunday Joseph Duntoye

Summary

When Nigerians go to the polls on 25 February, they'll be carrying the weight of a tough few years. A dependence on crude oil for foreign exchange earnings, a shortage of dollars in the economy, a recent interest rate hike by the Central Bank of Nigeria, and a new currency redesign, among other factors, have created economic misery for many Nigerians (Vanguard, 2022; Mojeed, 2023). A cash crunch that sparked violent protests in several regions, galloping inflation, and a 6% depreciation of the naira in 2022 has slowed economic activity in the country and made life more difficult (Yusuf, 2023).

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2019), four out of 10 Nigerians had real per capita expenditures of less than about \$300 in 2019, which translates to about 83 million people considered poor by national standards. Almost two-thirds (63%) of Nigerians are multidimensionally poor, suffering deprivation along three dimensions of well-being (financial, education, and basic infrastructure services) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022a; Elebeke, 2022). Nigeria's inflation rate jumped by 5 percentage points, to 21.09%, between October 2021 and October 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022b), in part because of disruptions in the supply of food products and higher import costs due to currency depreciation (Abubakar, 2022).

Afrobarometer survey findings reflect these negative trends. Nigerians' assessments of the country's overall direction, its economic situation, and their personal living conditions have worsened significantly over the past two years. The proportion of citizens experiencing moderate or high levels of lived poverty has doubled since 2017.

Citizens' ratings of the government's performance on key economic issues are overwhelmingly negative. Management of the economy and unemployment join crime/insecurity and electricity as the most important problems that citizens want their government to address.

Despite these challenges, Nigerians remain steadfast in their preference for democracy over other types of government. But dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working in their country continues to increase, and is especially high among citizens who are unhappy about the economy.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Nigeria, led by NOIPolls, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians between 5 and 31 March 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

- Nine out of 10 Nigerians (89%) say the country is going in “the wrong direction,” a 20-percentage-point increase from 2020.
- Large majorities describe the country's economic condition (85%) and their personal living conditions (71%) as “fairly bad” or “very bad.”
- Eight in 10 Nigerians (79%) experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty during the previous year, up 20 percentage points compared to 2020.
- Management of the economy (39%) and unemployment (35%) rank as the second- and third-most important problems that citizens want the government to address, outranked only by crime/insecurity (41%).
- Despite these difficulties, seven in 10 Nigerians (70%) say democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 - Citizens who disapprove of the country's direction and economic conditions are actually more likely to support democracy than those who criticise the country's direction and economic conditions.
- But more than three-fourths (77%) of citizens express dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working in the country, a 20-percentage-point increase compared to 2017.
 - Dissatisfaction is significantly higher among citizens who disapprove of the country's overall direction and economic conditions.

The current state of affairs

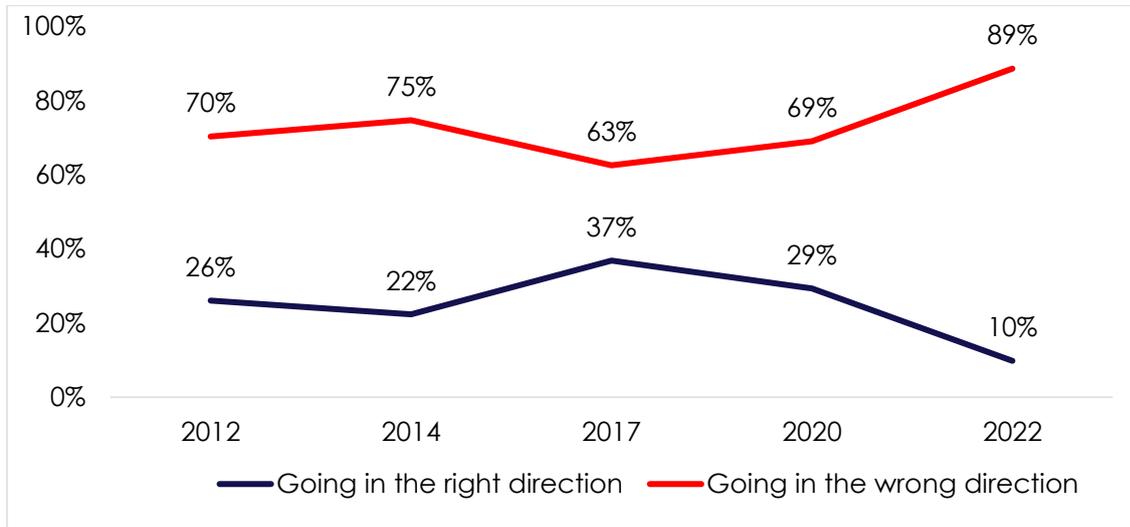
Overall direction of the country

Nine in 10 Nigerians (89%) say their country is going in “the wrong direction,” a 20-percentage-point increase compared to 2020 (Figure 1).

Assessments are consistently negative across key demographic groups (Figure 2). Residents in the southern part of the country are particularly pessimistic about the direction of the country (93%, vs. 85% in the North), as are the poorest respondents (93%, vs. 80% of those experiencing low or no lived poverty¹).

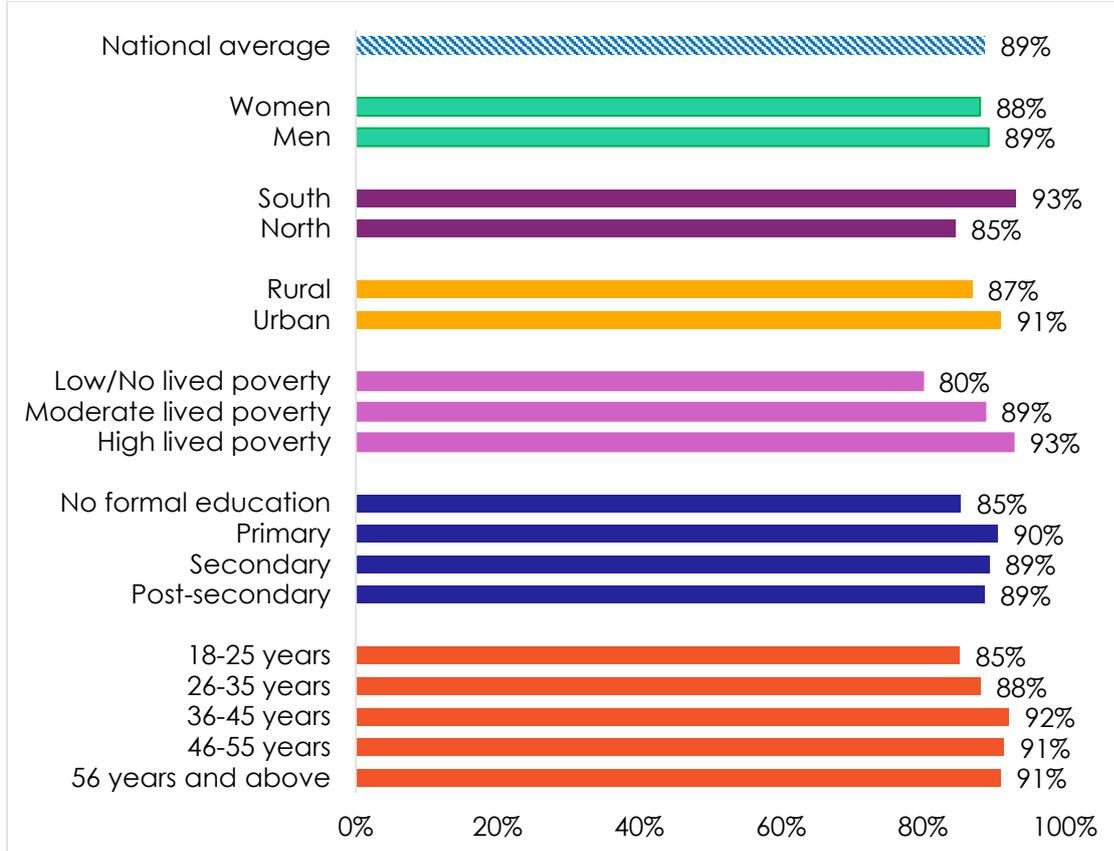
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes & Patel (2022).

Figure 1: Overall direction of the country | Nigeria | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: Let's start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So, let me ask you about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Figure 2: Country going in the wrong direction | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



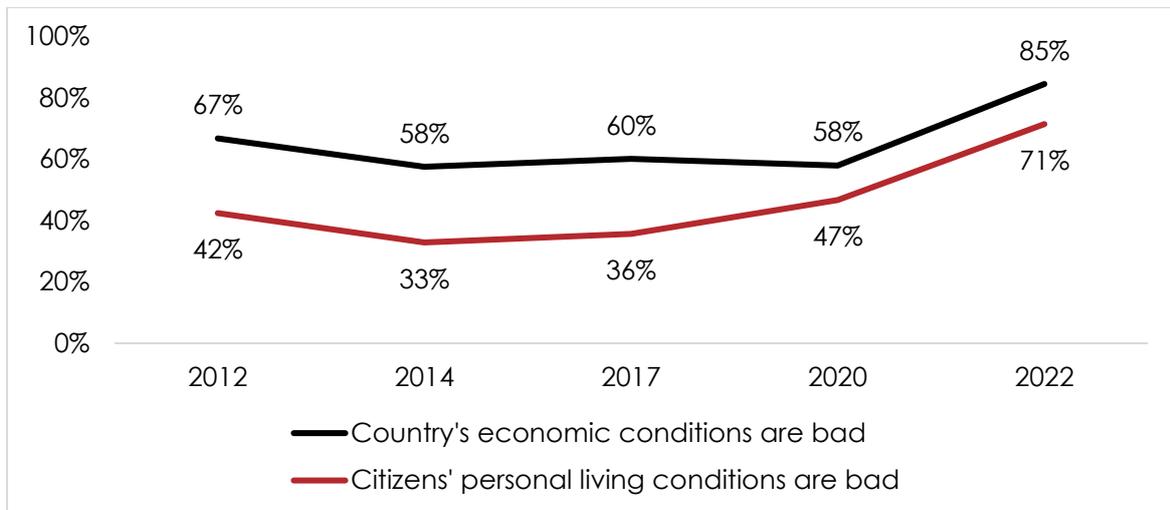
Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who say "going in the wrong direction")

National economy and personal living conditions

More than eight in 10 Nigerians (85%) describe the country's economic condition as bad, including 62% who say it is "very bad." Negative assessments of the economy have increased by 27 percentage points compared to 2020 (Figure 3).

The proportion of citizens who describe their personal living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad" has increased by 24 percentage points since 2020, from 47% to 71%, continuing a worsening trend since 2014 (33%).

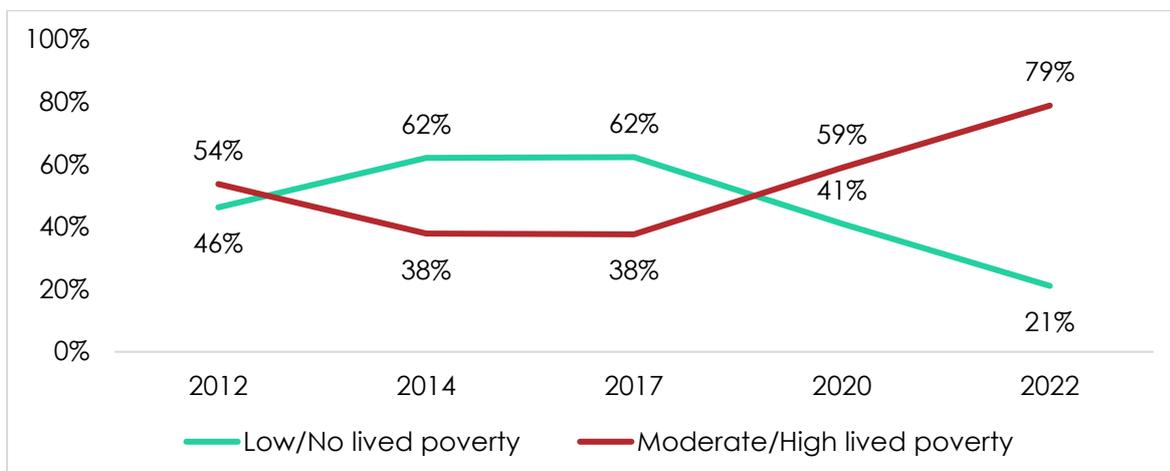
Figure 3: Negative assessment of economic and personal living conditions | Nigeria | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: Your own present living conditions? The present economic condition of this country? (% who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")

Eight in 10 Nigerians (79%) experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty during the previous year, double the proportion recorded in 2014 and 2017 (38%) (Figure 4).

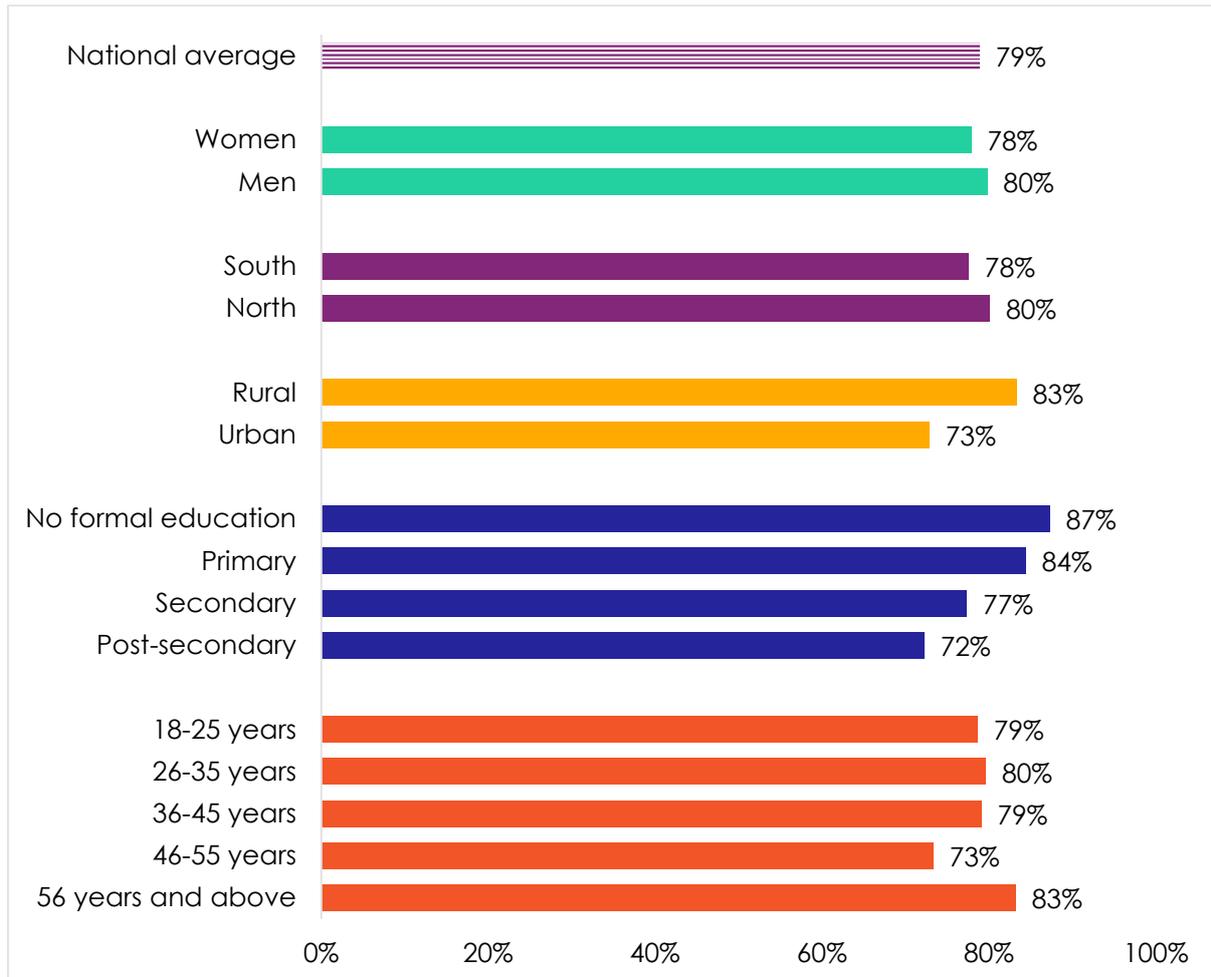
Figure 4: Lived poverty levels | Nigeria | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?

Moderate/high lived poverty was about equally common in the North and South but was considerably more prevalent in rural areas than in cities (83% vs. 73%) (Figure 5). It declined somewhat as respondents' education level increased, ranging from 87% of those with no formal schooling to 72% of those with post-secondary qualifications.

Figure 5: Moderate/High lived poverty | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



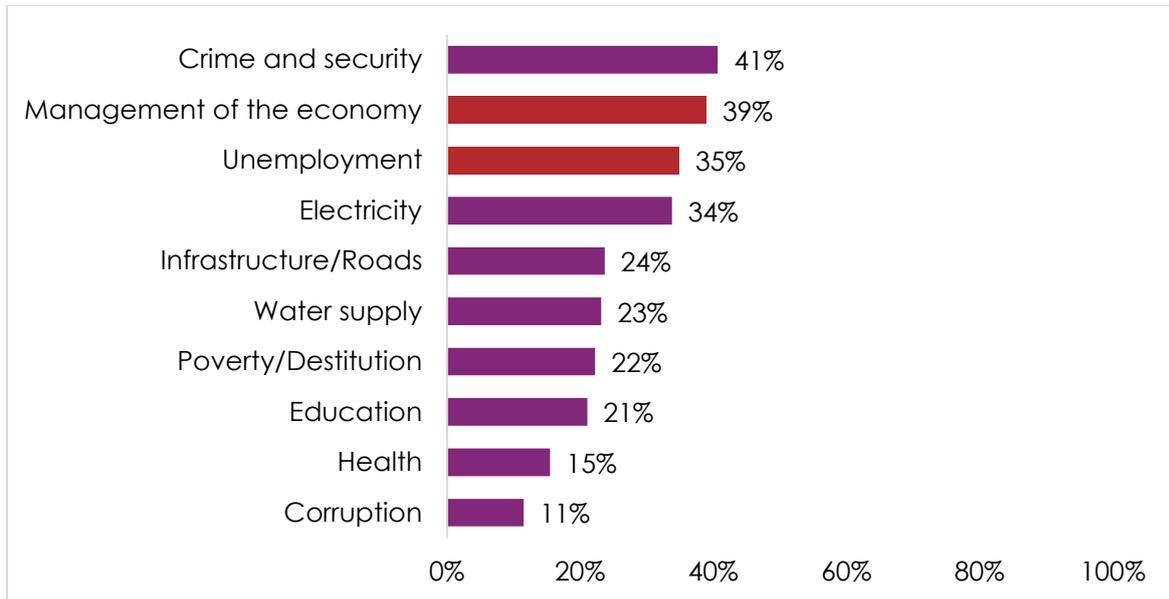
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income? (% of respondents with "moderate" or "high" lived poverty)

Most important problems facing Nigeria

When Nigerians are asked what they consider the most important problems that their government should address, management of the economy and unemployment emerge as No. 2 and No. 3, cited respectively by 39% and 35% of respondents as one of their three priorities for government action. Only crime/insecurity places higher (41%) (Figure 6).

Other citizen priorities include electricity supply (34%), infrastructure/roads (24%), water supply (23%), poverty (22%), and education (21%).

Figure 6: Top 10 most important problems | Nigeria | 2022

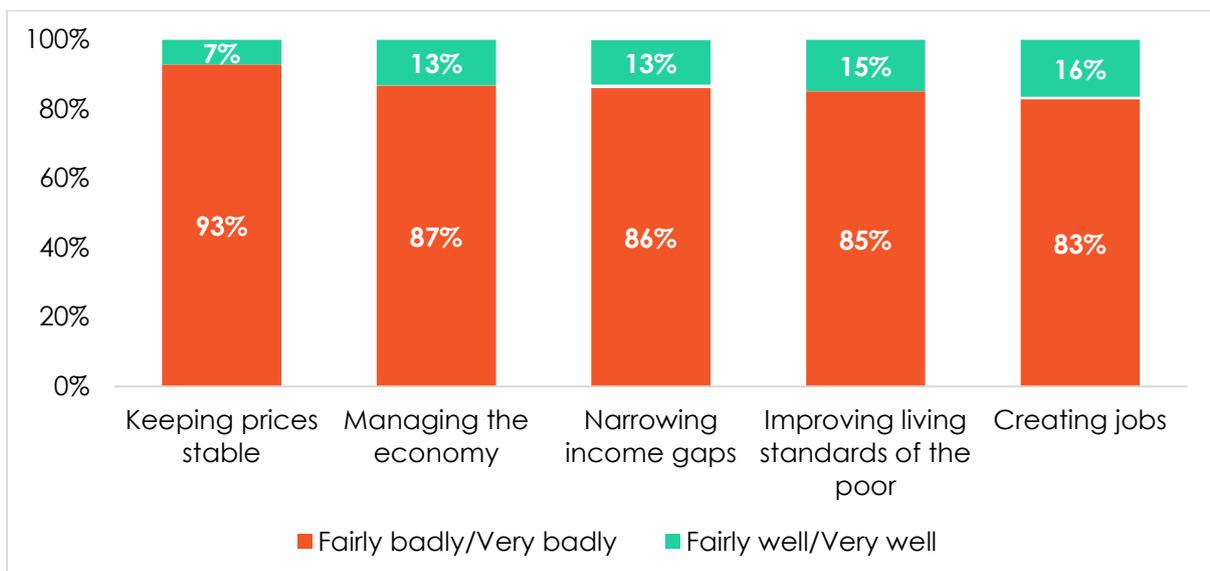


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three answers. The figure shows the percentage of respondents who cited each problem as one of their up to three priorities.)

Government's economic performance

In line with their gloomy views on the economy, Nigerians give the government poor marks on its handling of economic matters. Overwhelming majorities say the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” at keeping prices stable (93%), managing the economy (87%), narrowing income gaps (86%), improving living standards of the poor (85%), and creating jobs (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Negative evaluations of government economic performance | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?

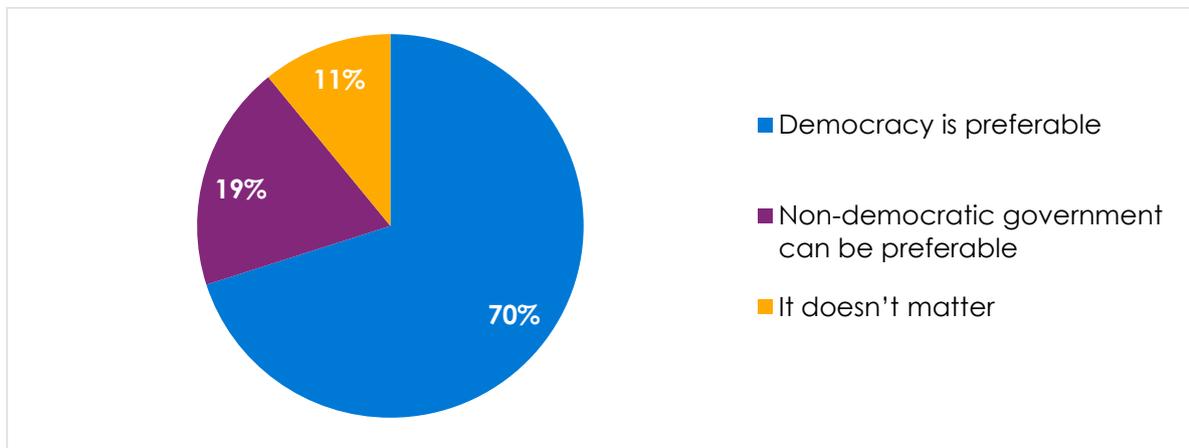
Views on democracy

Support for democracy

Numerous studies have found that positive views of economic conditions contribute to greater support for democracy and greater satisfaction with its workings (see, for example, Lipset, 1960; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Inglehart, 1999; and Tilley & Hobolt, 2011).

But in spite of their negative assessments of the country's economic condition, a large majority (70%) of Nigerians say they prefer democracy to any other type of government. One in five (19%) think that sometimes a non-democratic government can be preferable, while 11% are indifferent to the type of political regime their country has (Figure 8). These values have remained fairly steady over time.

Figure 8: Support for democracy | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

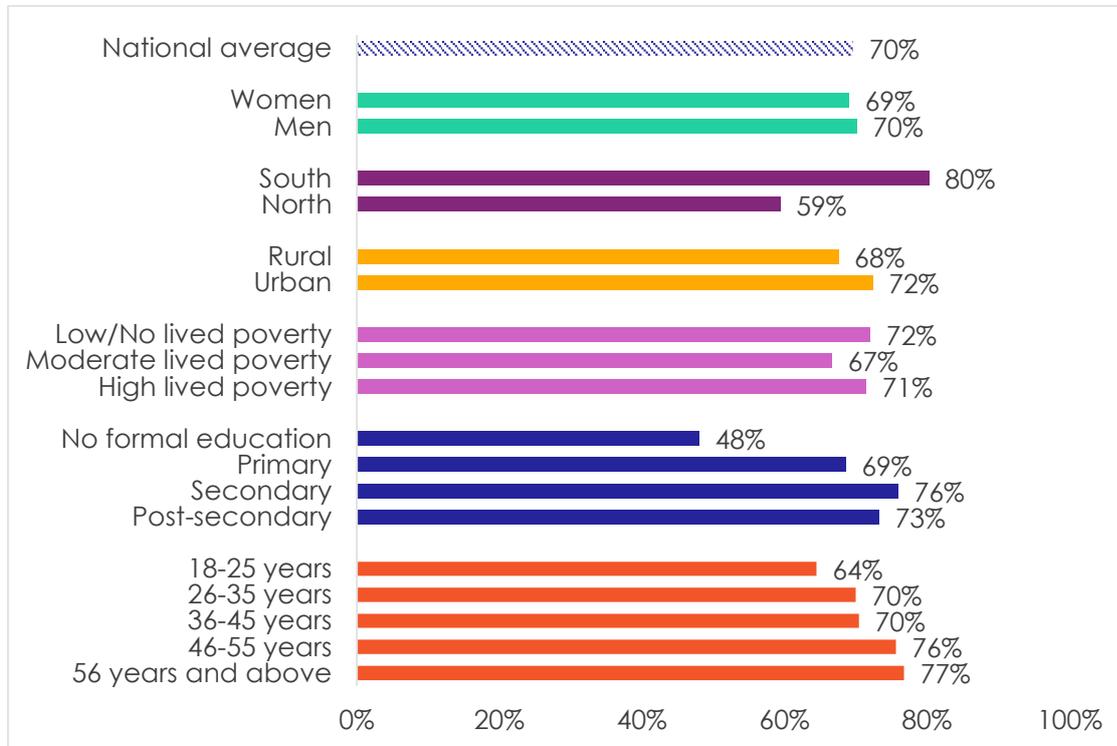
However, support for democracy varies considerably by certain demographic characteristics (Figure 9). It is far stronger in the South (80%) than in the North (59%). And it increases with respondents' level of education, ranging from fewer than half (48%) of those with no formal education to about three-fourths of those with secondary (76%) or post-secondary (73%) qualifications. The youngest respondents are least likely to express support for democracy (64%, compared to 70%-77% among their elders).

Interestingly, support for democracy is stronger among Nigerians with gloomy views of the country's direction and economic conditions. Citizens who describe the economy as "fairly bad" or "very bad" are 22 percentage points more likely to support democracy than those who say the country's economic condition is good (73% vs. 51%) (Figure 10).

Similarly, those who say the country is going in the wrong direction are more likely to report a preference for democracy (70%) than those who say the country is going in the right direction (63%). And citizens offering negative assessments of their own living conditions are slightly more likely than those with positive views to support democracy (71% vs. 67%).

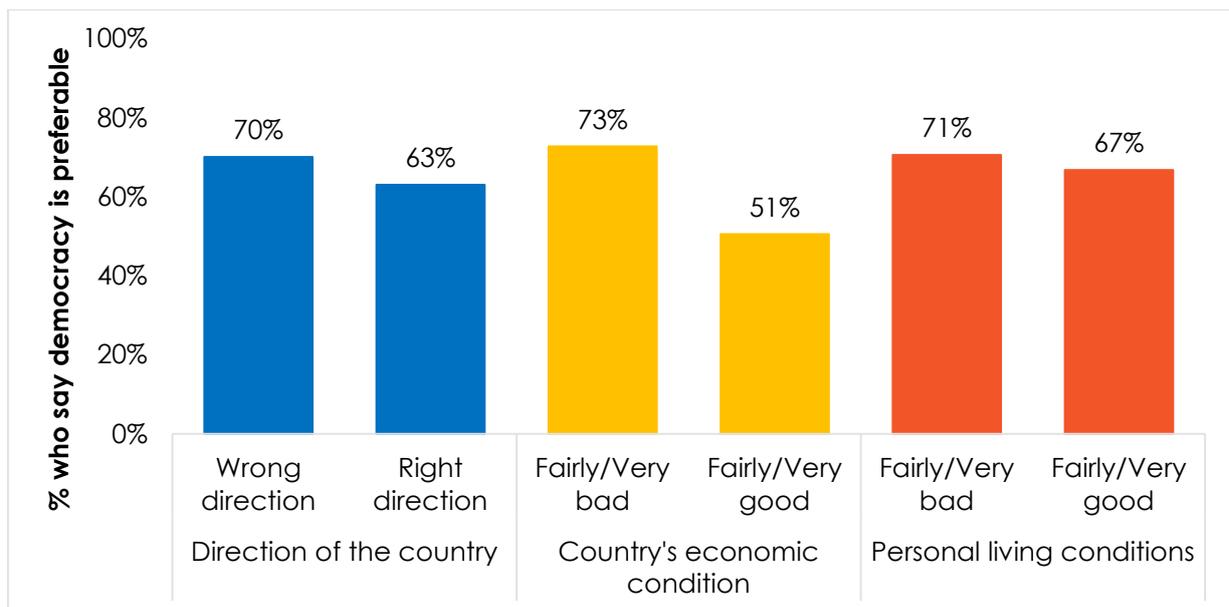
An analysis of causal factors at play here is beyond the scope of this dispatch; it may even be that causation runs the opposite way, e.g. that believers in democracy are particularly disappointed in the country's direction and economic performance. But in any case, these data suggest that dissatisfaction with the nation's direction and performance does not appear to undermine support for democracy.

Figure 9: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



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

Figure 10: Democracy is preferable to any for other kind of government | by perceived country direction and state of the economy | Nigeria | 2022

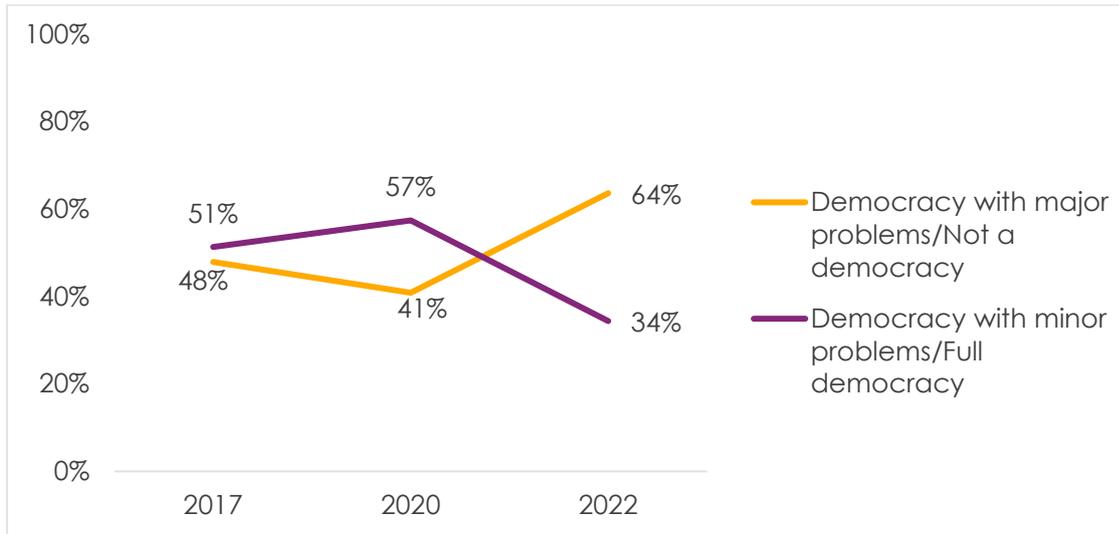


(% who say that "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government")

Quality of Nigeria's democracy

While a strong majority of Nigerians support democracy, many are unhappy with the quality of democracy in the country. Only one-third (34%) describe their country as “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems,” a drastic decline from 2020 (57%) (Figure 11). Almost two-thirds (64%) say the country is “a democracy with major problems” or “not a democracy.”

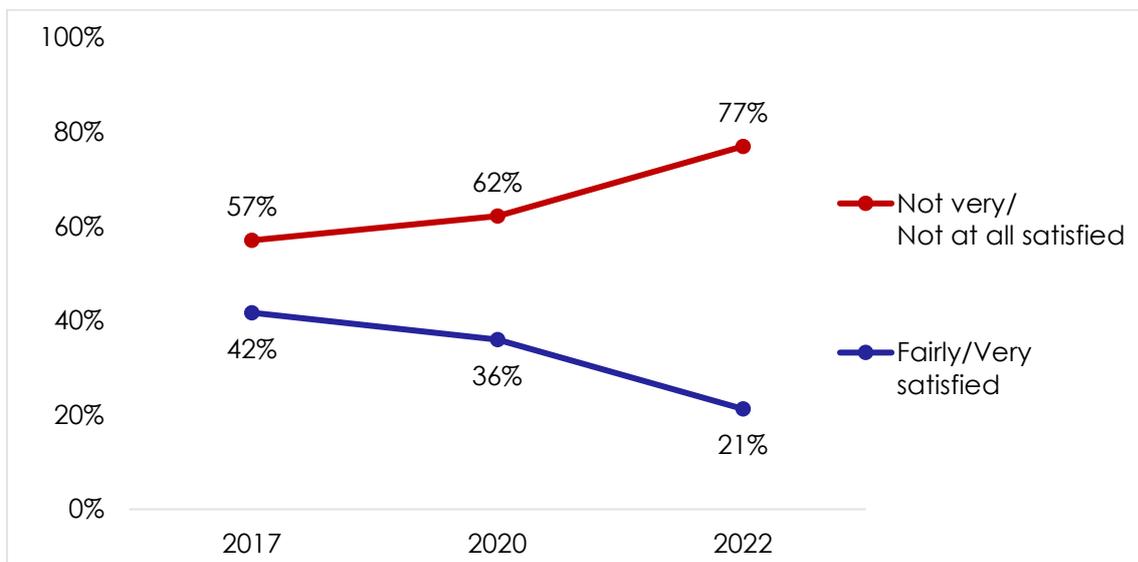
Figure 11: Extent of democracy | Nigeria | 2017-2022



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

Likewise, Nigerians are increasingly displeased with the way their democracy is functioning. Only two in 10 (21%) express satisfaction with the way democracy works in the country, half the proportion recorded in 2017 (42%) (Figure 12). Dissatisfaction with democracy has climbed from 57% in 2017 to 77%.

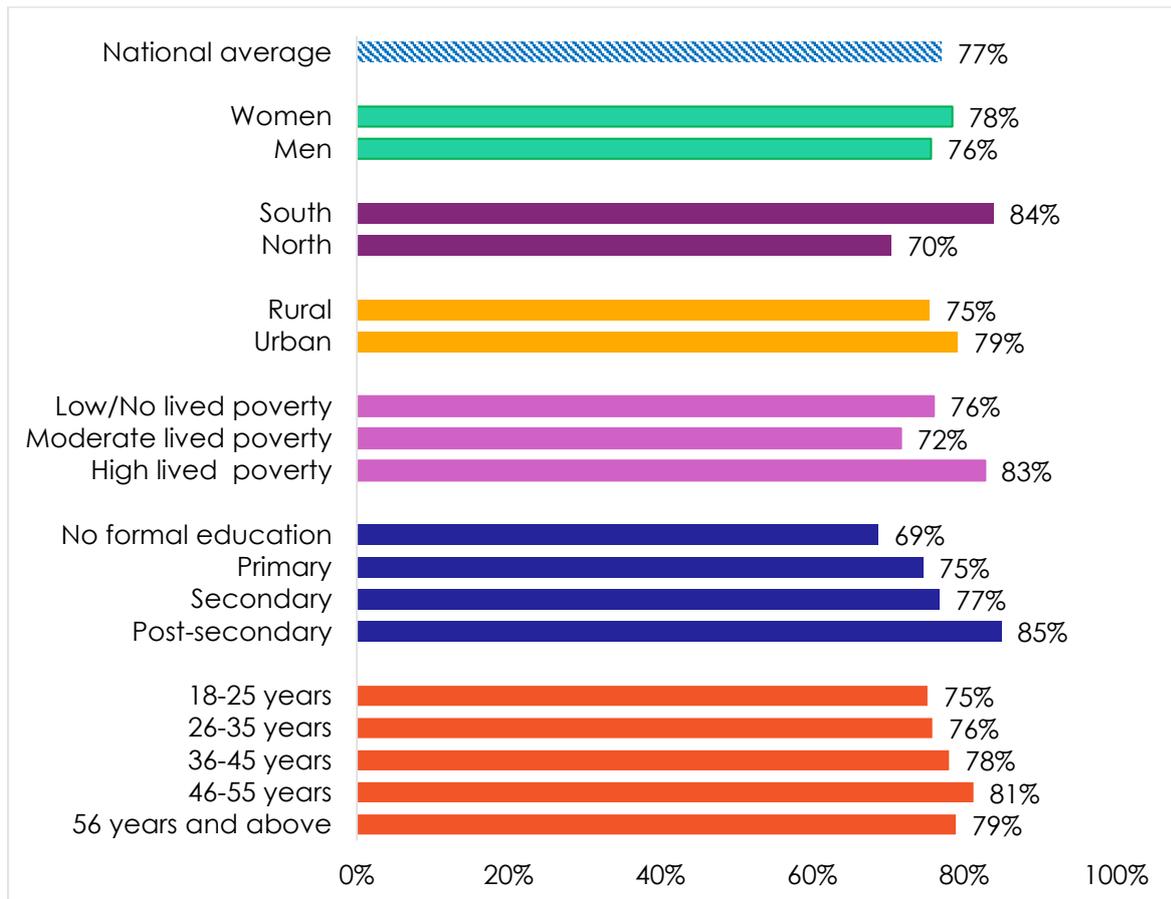
Figure 12: Satisfaction with democracy | Nigeria | 2017-2022



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

Dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working is stronger in the South than in the North (84% vs. 70%) and increases with respondents' level of education, ranging from 69% of those with no formal education to 85% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 13). The poorest respondents are particularly dissatisfied with the country's democracy (83%, vs. 72%-76% of better-off citizens).

Figure 13: Dissatisfied with the way democracy is working | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022

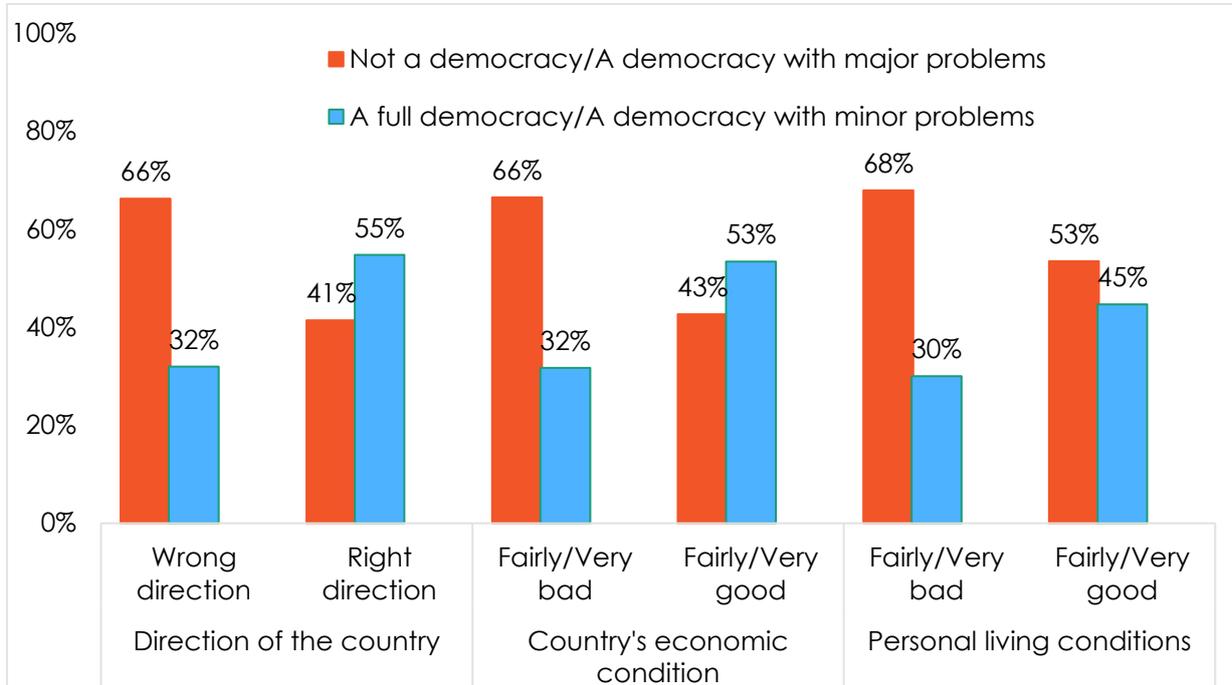


Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Nigeria? (% who say "not very satisfied" or "not at all satisfied")

While we saw above that negative assessments of the country's direction and economic performance correlate with greater support for democracy, we see the opposite correlation when it comes to how Nigerians see their own democracy: Citizens who think the country is going in the wrong direction are more likely to say their country is not a democracy or is a democracy with major problems (66%, vs. 41% of those who are optimistic about the country's direction) (Figure 14). So are those with gloomy views about the country's economic condition and their personal living conditions.

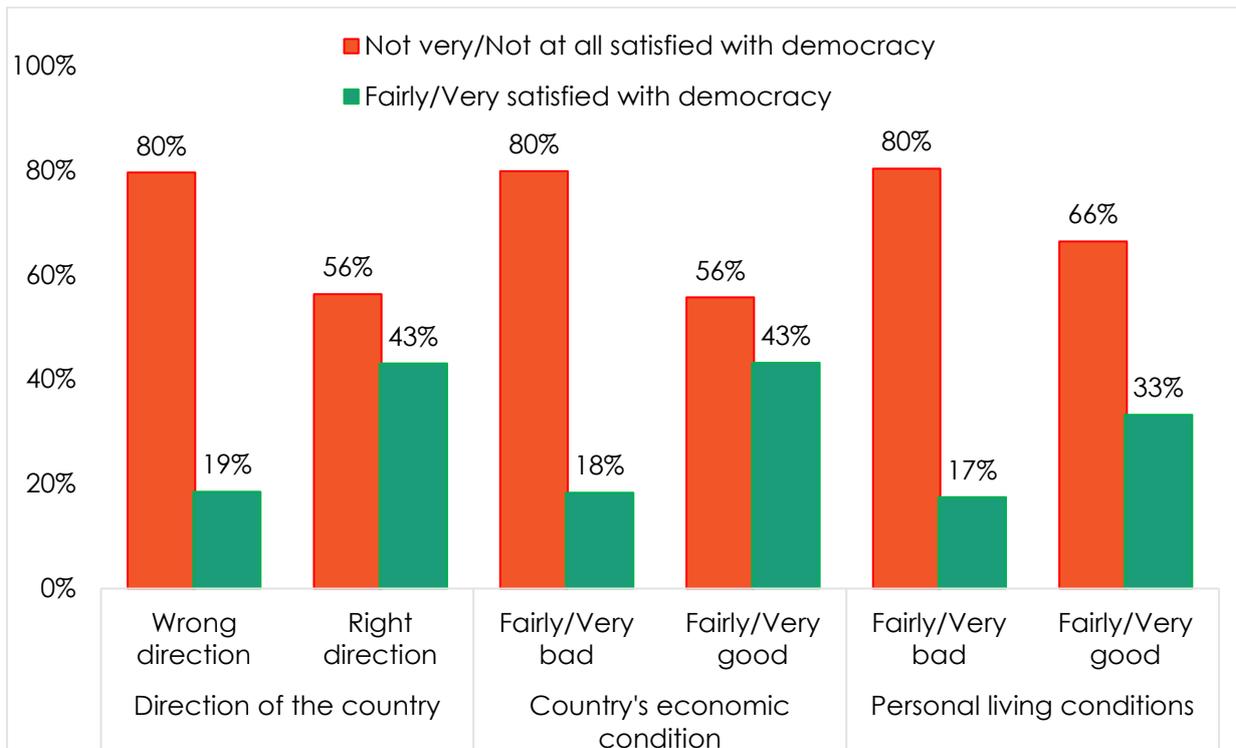
Likewise, respondents with more negative views on the country's direction and economic performance are more likely to express dissatisfaction with the way their democracy is working. Those who think the country is going in the wrong direction are 24 percentage points more likely to be dissatisfied with their democracy (80%, vs. 56% of those who approve of the country's direction) (Figure 15). The trend is the same with regard to negative views on economic and living conditions.

Figure 14: Extent of democracy | by views on the country's direction and economic conditions | Nigeria | 2022



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

Figure 15: Satisfaction with democracy | by views on the country's direction and economic conditions | Nigeria | 2022



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

Conclusion

Large – and growing – majorities of Nigerians say that the country is heading in the wrong direction and that their economic and personal living conditions are bad. Those who hold negative views of the country's direction and economic performance are more likely to express dissatisfaction with their democracy. But in spite of perceived worsening economic conditions, Nigerians' support for democracy remains strong.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the European Union, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Mastercard Foundation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the University of California San Diego, the Global Centre for Pluralism, the World Bank Group, Freedom House, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Humanity United.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 606 | 21 February 2023