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Malawi youth agenda faces priority of ‘wisdom of the elders’ and limited political participation

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 624 | Witness Tapani Alfonso and Joseph J. Chunga

Summary

“We want youths of the country to have integrity and be patriotic. We do not want youths to be used only for political campaigns, we want them to be utilised positively in developing the nation.” Those were the words of Malawi President Lazarus Chakwera as he launched the National Youth Service in July 2022 (Moyo, 2022).

Youth (aged 18-35) constituted 54% of registered voters in the 2019 election (Malawi Electoral Commission, 2019), making them highly attractive to candidates (Sangala, 2018). The Youth Decide Campaign (YDC), an initiative of civil society organisations in the run-up to the June 2020 fresh presidential election, argued that it was high time that young people were given a voice in the country's political decision making and compiled a Youth Manifesto that it asked presidential candidates to sign (Mtawali, 2020a).

But when Chakwera unveiled his cabinet in July 2020, youth leaders accused him of “violent and heartless exclusion of the youth” (Mtawali, 2020b) and questioned the government's commitment to addressing the needs and interests of young Malawians.

Findings of the most recent Afrobarometer survey do little to allay concerns about a lack of young voices in Malawi's policy discourse. Most Malawians, including the youth themselves, prioritise the “wisdom of the elders” over fresh ideas from young people. And levels of political participation by young people do not reflect an active quest for a place at the decision-making table.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Eight rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 39 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed samples of 1,200 adult Malawians in November-December 2019 and in February 2022. Samples of this size yield country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Key findings

- Two-thirds (67%) of citizens believe that for the country to do well, Malawians should listen more to the wisdom of the elders rather than to fresh ideas from young

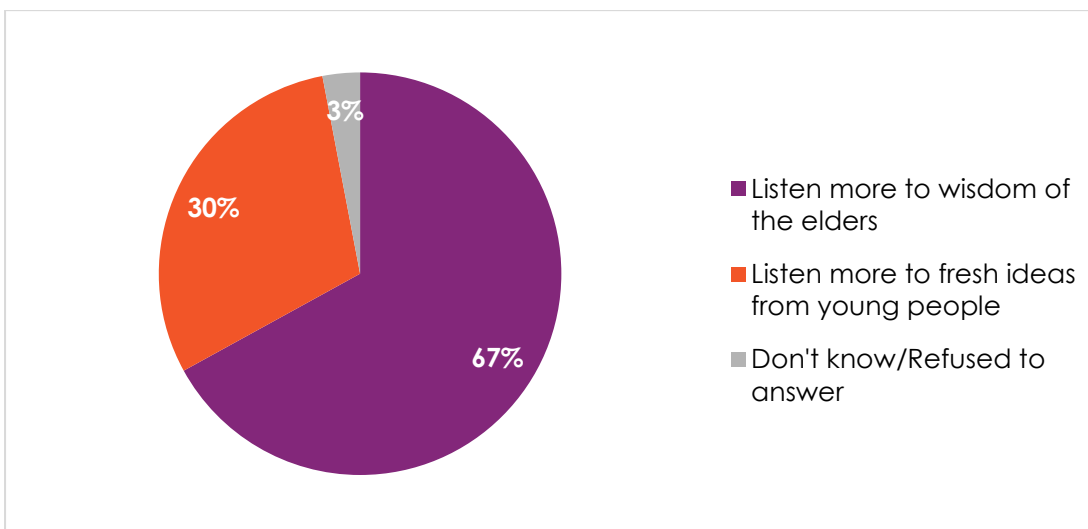
people. Even among 18- to 35-year-old respondents, 61% prioritise the wisdom of the elders.

- Young Malawians' priorities for increased government spending to help young people are business loans (33%), job creation (30%), job training (16%), and education (15%).
- Like their elders, young citizens cite management of the economy as the most important problem the government should address.
- One in four young respondents (25%) say they “frequently” discuss politics with family and friends.
- Except for voting in elections, young Malawians report similar levels of political participation as their elders:
 - About one in eight young citizens (13%) say they contacted a member of Parliament during the previous year, while 18% say they contacted their local government councillor.
 - Two in 10 young respondents (20%) say they worked for a political party or candidate in the 2019 election.
 - Six in 10 (61%) report attending political rallies in the run-up to the 2019 election.
 - But only 60% of young respondents say they voted in the most recent national election, compared to 85% of their elders.

Fresh ideas from young people vs. wisdom of the old

Two-thirds (67%) of Malawians say that in order for their country to do well, they need to listen more to the wisdom of the elders. Only 30% think they should instead listen to fresh ideas from young people (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Fresh ideas from young people vs. wisdom of the elders | Malawi | 2019



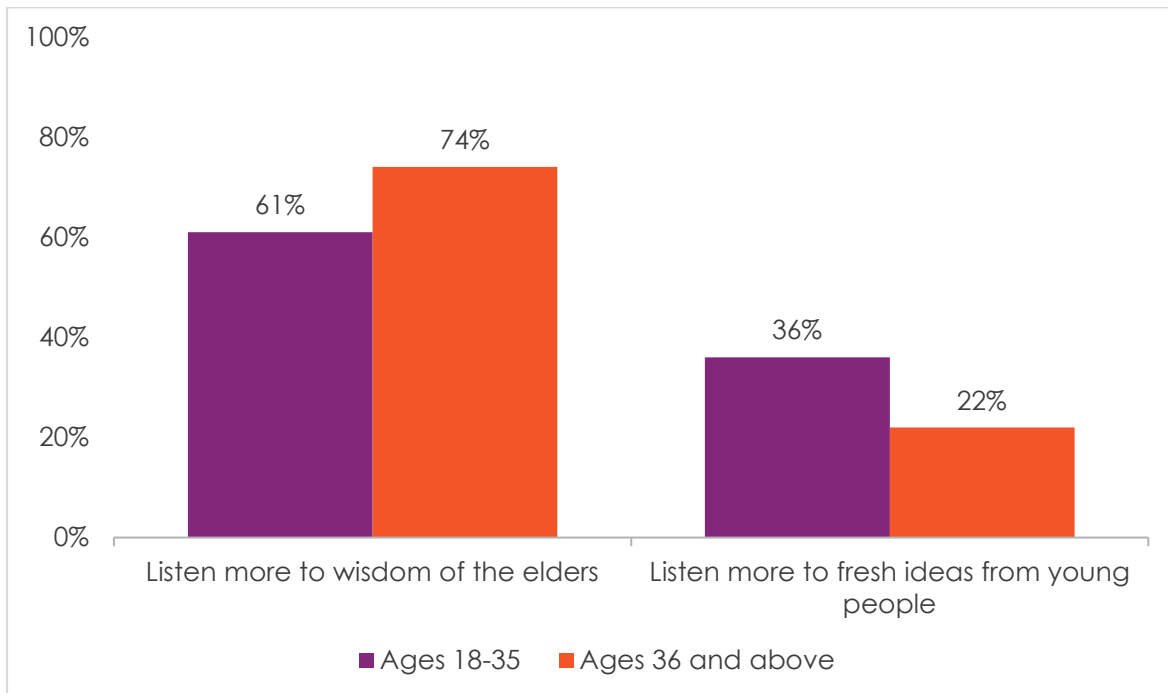
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to the wisdom of our elders.

Statement 2: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to fresh ideas from young people.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

One might expect that young respondents would support the idea that listening to fresh ideas is more important than listening to the wisdom of the elders. However, 61% of youths (aged 18-35 years) also prioritise listening to the wisdom of the elders. A preference for listening to fresh ideas is stronger among young respondents (36% vs. 22% among those aged 36 and older), but far from a majority (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Wisdom of the elders vs. fresh ideas from young people | by age group
 | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to the wisdom of our elders.

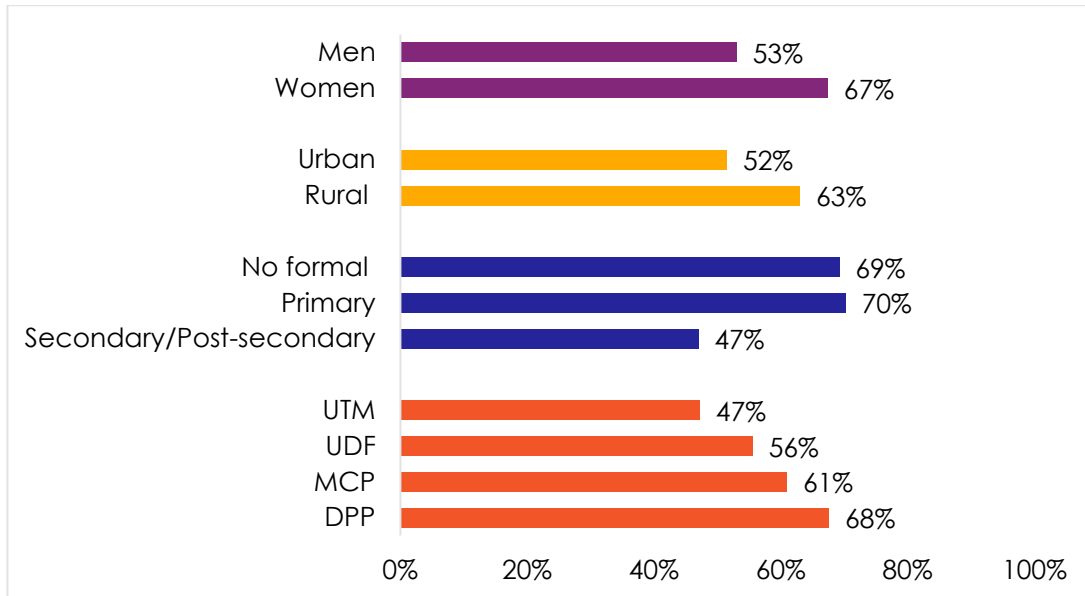
Statement 2: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to fresh ideas from young people.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Looking only at respondents aged 18-35 (Figure 3), we see that in most key demographic groups, a majority of youth prioritise the wisdom of the elders. The exceptions are youth with secondary or post-secondary education (47%) and supporters of the United Transformation Movement (UTM) political party (47%).

There are, nonetheless, significant differences between some of the sub-groups: Female (67%), rural (63%), and less educated (69%-70%) youth are particularly likely to favour the wisdom of the elders over youth's fresh ideas, as are supporters of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (68%).

These findings suggest high levels of entrenched adultism – the assumption that adults are better than young people – and seem to support the thesis that the supposed supremacy of adult wisdom leads youths to internalise and accept limitations pressed on them by adults (Checkoway, 2011). Such attitudes may undermine young people's faith in their own capabilities and limit their fight for their agendas in the political arena.

Figure 3: Support among youth for listening more to wisdom of the elders
 | 18- to 35-year-olds | by demographic group | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to the wisdom of our elders.
 Statement 2: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to fresh ideas from young people.
 (This figure shows % of respondents aged 18-35 who “agree” or “strongly agree” with Statement 1.)

Malawian youth agenda: What are the top priorities?

The journey toward youth participation probably starts with the youth identifying their issues of concern. Checkoway (2011, p. 342) argues that “too often issues expressed by youth are ones given to them by adult authorities. ... When young people identify their own issues, however, it can awaken their spirit and move them into action.”

Afrobarometer asked respondents, “If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment?” The results show that the leading priorities for young Malawians are business loans (33%), creation of job opportunities (30%), job training (16%), and education (15%) (Figure 4). These results are not surprising considering the prevalence of unemployment and underemployment in Malawi, where youth unemployment reached a two-decade high in 2021 (Statista, 2022).

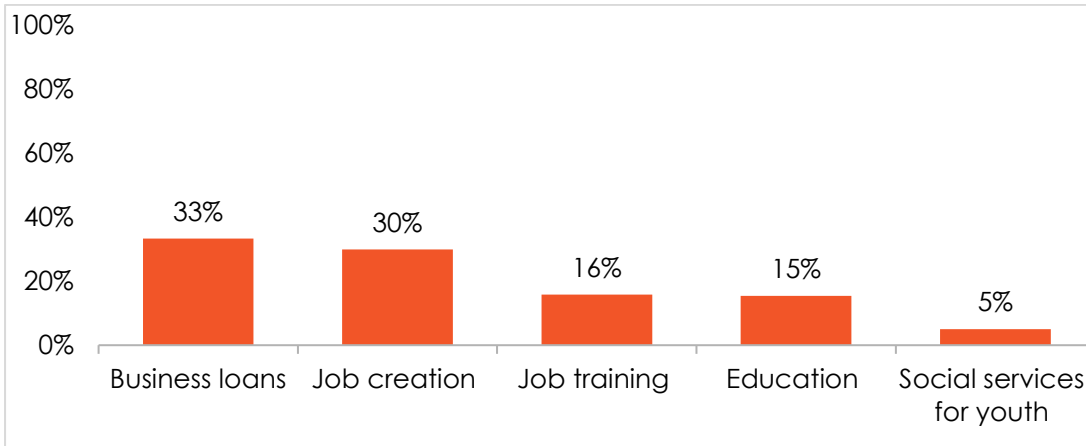
These responses from young people are almost identical to those of their elders. Could this mean that the youth are reflecting the voices of the older citizens, or indeed the elders are aware of the needs of their youth?

Young people’s emphasis on business loans vis-à-vis job creation varies somewhat depending on their gender, location, and education level (Figure 5).

More women and urban residents place an accent on job creation (33% and 35%, respectively), while more men and rural residents emphasise business loans (37% and 36%, respectively).

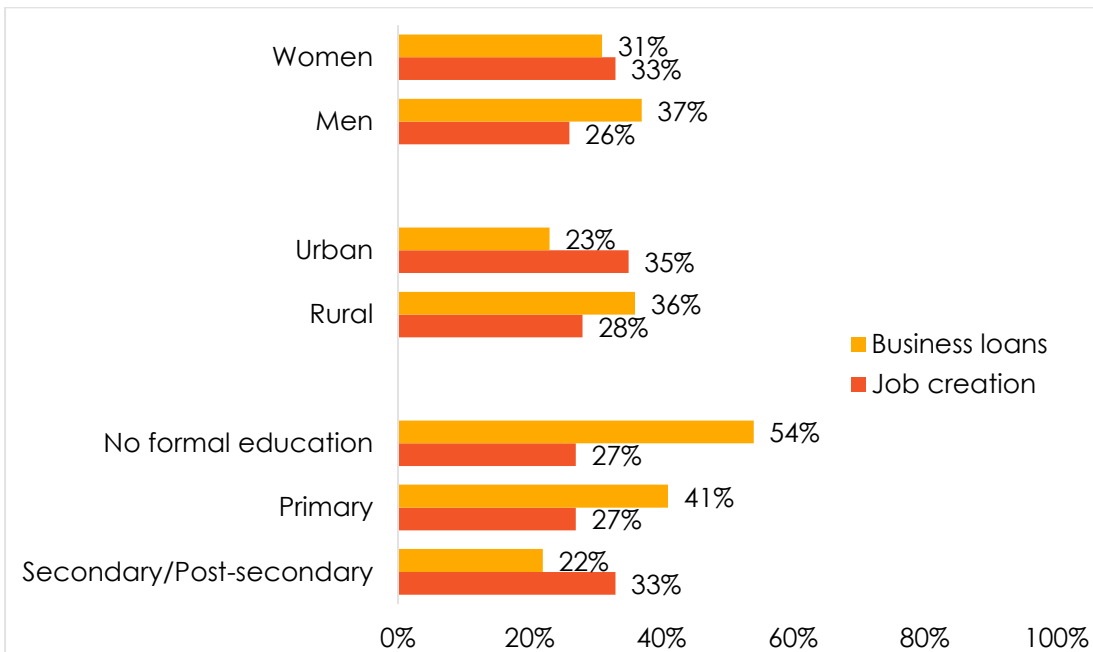
Interest in business loans is highest among citizens with no formal education (54%, vs. just 22% of those with post-secondary qualifications), while the most educated tend to prioritise job creation (33%).

Figure 4: Priorities for government investment in youth | 18- to 35-year-olds | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: *If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment? (Figure shows responses of those aged 18-35.)*

Figure 5: High-priority investments for youth | 18- to 35-year-olds | by demographic group | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: *If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment? (Figure shows responses of those aged 18-35.)*

Respondents were also asked what they consider the most important national problems that the government must address. The top five problems mentioned by 18- to 35-year-olds are management of the economy, food shortage, agriculture, income, and poverty (Table 1). These match the priorities of the over-35 cohort except that the older group includes corruption among its top five instead of income.

Table 1: Top five most important problems for youth vs old | Malawi | 2022

Rank	Ages 18-35	Ages 36 and above
1	Management of the economy	Management of the economy
2	Food shortage	Food shortage
3	Agriculture	Agriculture
4	Wages, incomes, and salaries	Poverty
5	Poverty	Corruption

Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?*

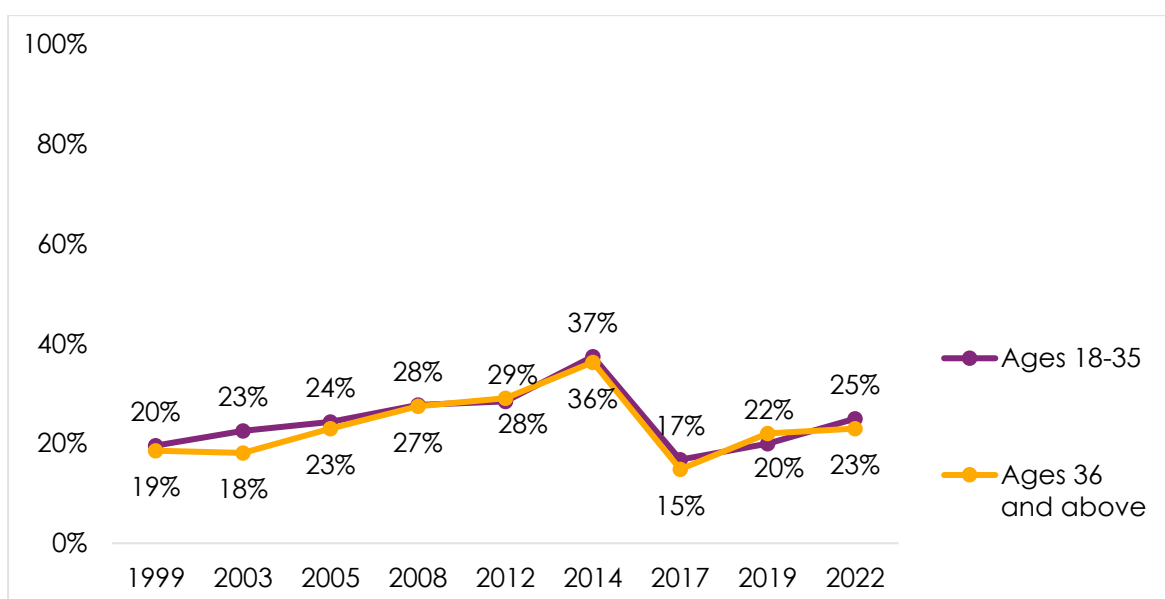
Political engagement

One reason that older people dominate in African politics is what Adebayo (2018, p. 142) describes as “political apathy and passivity on the part of the youth,” who fail to take advantage of their numerical strength to shape public policies and political commitments in their favour. Afrobarometer data allow us to assess youth engagement in the political arena through their interest in political discussions, attendance at political rallies, work for political leaders or parties, and participation in elections.

Political discussions

One in four young Malawians (25%) say they “frequently” discuss political matters with friends or family, about the same proportion as among those over age 35 (23%) (Figure 6). For both groups, these numbers represent an 8-percentage-point increase from 2017 (17% and 15%, respectively) but are well below their peak (37% and 36%, respectively) in 2014, when the survey was conducted about two months before elections.

Figure 6: Frequently discuss politics | by age group | Malawi | 1999-2022

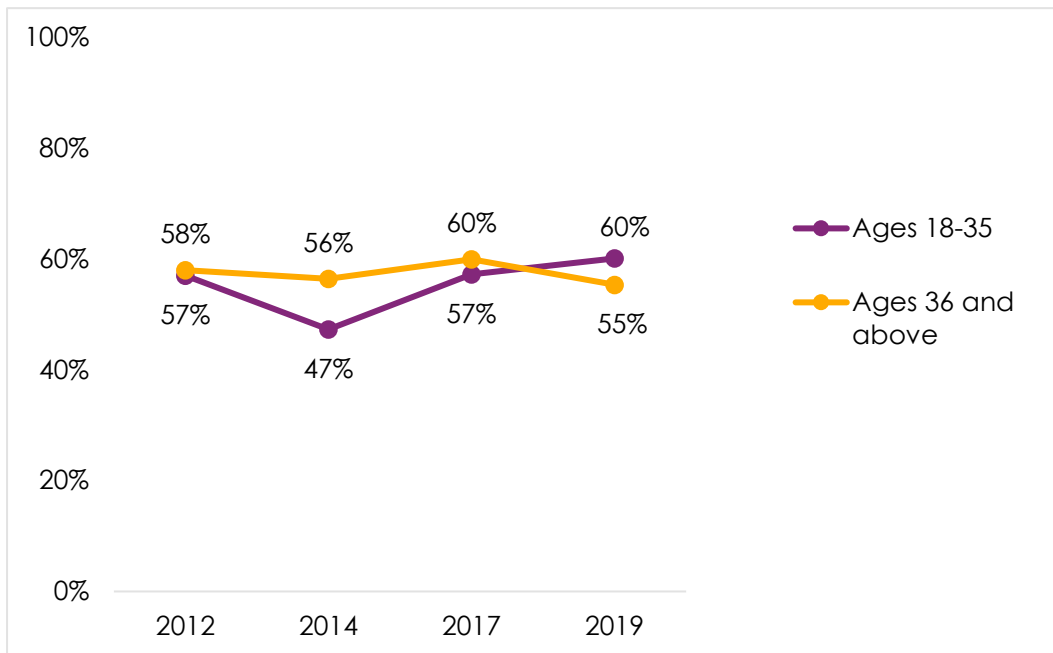


Respondents were asked: *When you get together with your friends or family, how often would you say you discuss political matters? (% of those who say “frequently”)*

Attending political rallies

Attending political campaign rallies is an important means of political participation, as it provides voters with an opportunity to hear, understand, and analyse the parties' or candidates' manifestos and align them with their own needs and priorities. Six in 10 young adults (60%) say they attended campaign rallies in the run-up to the 2019 elections, 5 percentage points more than respondents over age 35 (55%). For young respondents, this reflects a 13-point increase compared to 2014 (47%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Attended campaign rally in the last national election | by age group | Malawi | 2012-2019



Respondents were asked: Thinking about the last national election, in [year], did you attend a campaign rally?

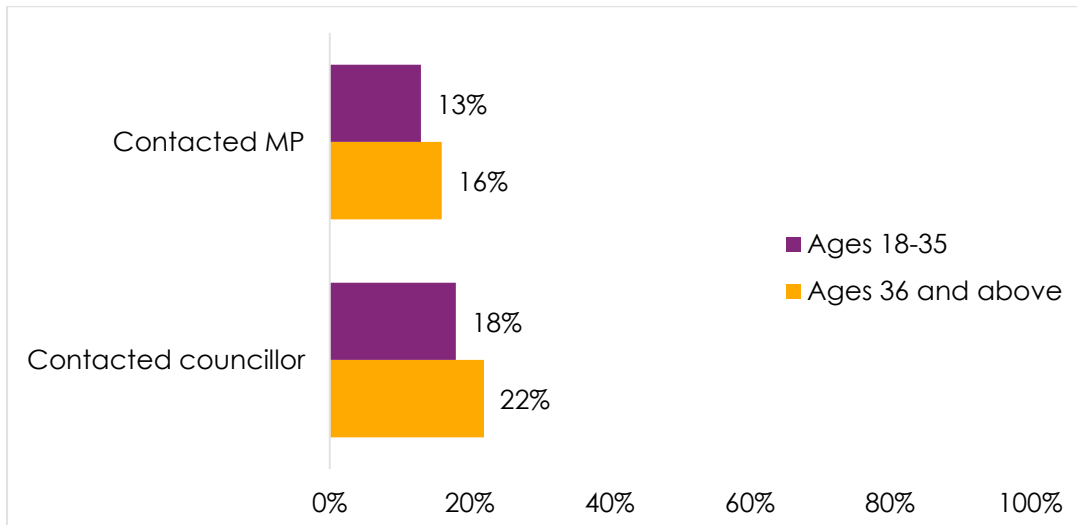
Engagement with political leaders

One way that young people can be “competent citizens rather than passive recipients of services” (Checkoway, 2011. p. 341) is by engaging their political representatives. Survey findings show that only about one in eight young respondents (13%) say they contacted a member of Parliament (MP) once or more during the previous year about some important problem or to share their views (Figure 8). This is slightly lower than the proportion of respondents over age 35 who report contact with an MP (16%).

Similarly, 18% of young people say they contacted a local government councillor, compared to 22% of respondents over age 35.

The frequency of contact with political leaders did not change significantly between 2019 and 2022.

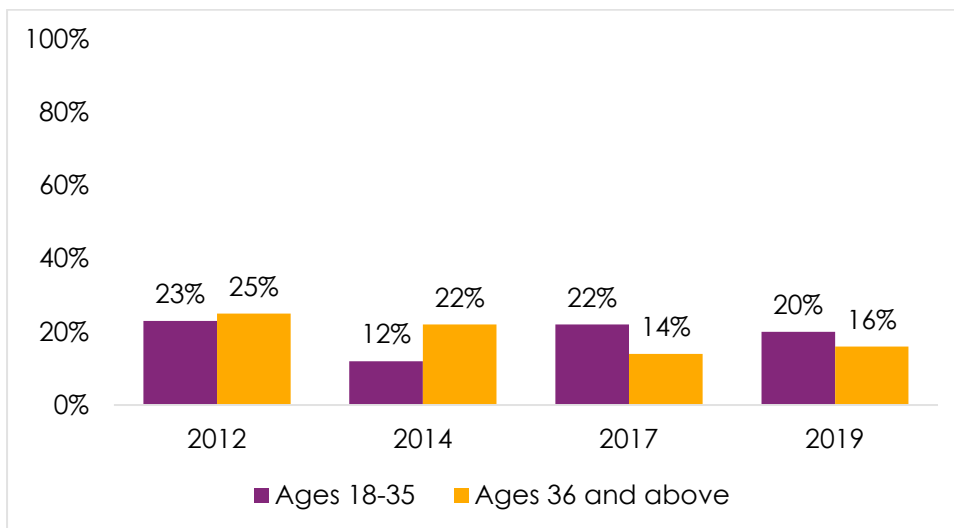
Figure 8: Contacted political leader | by age group | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views: A member of Parliament? A local government councillor? (% who say “only once,” “a few times,” or “often”)

Another avenue through which youth can actively participate is by working for a political party or candidate during election campaigns. In 2019, one in five young citizens (20%) said they did so during that year’s campaign, slightly more than their elders (16%) (Figure 9). Similar numbers of young respondents reported working on campaigns in earlier surveys except in 2014, when the share dropped to 12%.

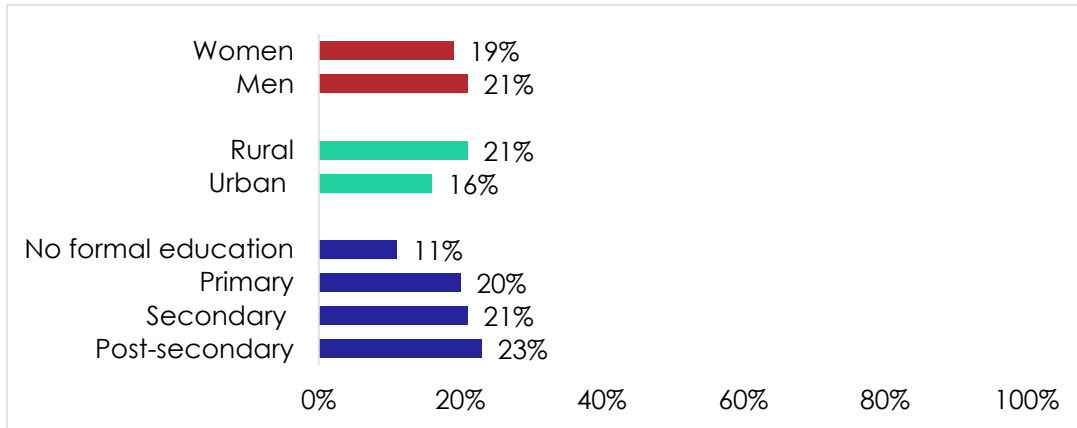
Figure 9: Worked for a party or candidate | Malawi | 2012-2019



Respondents were asked: Thinking about the last national election, in [year], did you work for any party or candidate? (% “yes”)

Rural youth were slightly more likely than their urban counterparts to report working for parties or candidates (21% vs. 16%), and young citizens with no formal education (11%) were about half as likely as those with formal schooling (20%-23%) to do so (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Worked for a party or candidate | 18- to 35-year-olds | by demographic group | Malawi | 2019



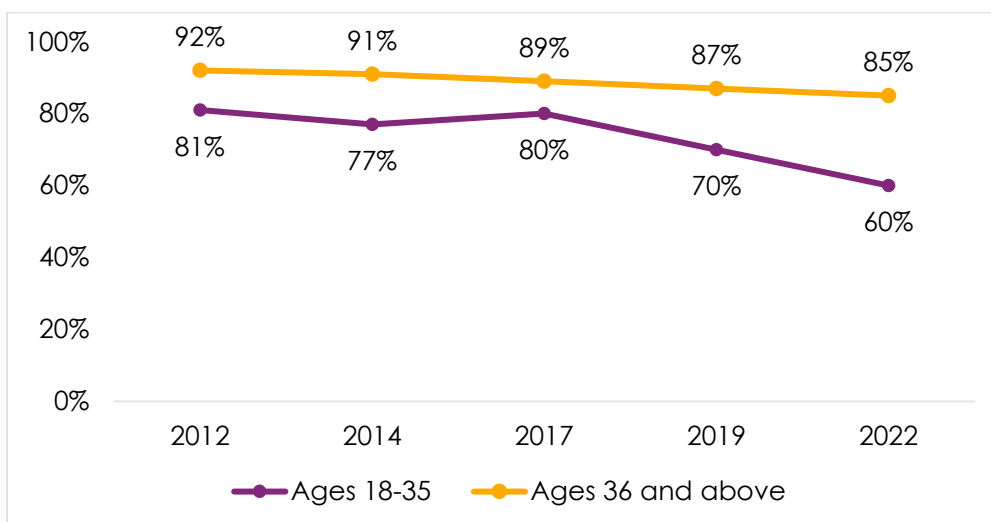
Respondents were asked: Thinking about the last national election, in 2019, did you work for any party or candidate? (% of 18- to 35-year-olds who say “yes”)

Turnout during elections

Studies on voter turnout face the problem of over-reporting, as typically more respondents report that they voted than actually did (Zeglovits & Kritzing, 2013). In the 2022 survey, 60% of youth say they voted in the 2020 national election (excluding those who were too young to vote), compared to 85% of respondents aged 36 and above. For the youth, this represents a substantial drop from self-reported voting in 2019 (70%) and 2017 (80%, referring to the 2014 election) (Figure 11).

Self-reported voting rates by respondents aged 36 and above have also declined somewhat over the past decade but have consistently remained significantly higher than voting rates among the youth.

Figure 11: Voted in the most recent election | by age group | Malawi | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: People are not always able to vote in elections, for example, because they weren't registered, they were unable to go, or someone prevented them from voting. How about you? In the last national election, held in [year], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted)

Conclusion

Scholars have long portrayed the youth bulge as a tool for regime change, a game changer in modern politics (Clapham, 2006). But if democracy is a game of numbers, young people have yet to operationalise their numbers.

Survey findings suggest that barriers include the mind-set – even among youth themselves – that fresh ideas are secondary to the wisdom of the elders, as well as young people's fairly limited levels of political participation. Both may reflect, in part, young people's disadvantaged economic position, which makes it harder to participate effectively (Verba & Nie, 1972; Adebayo, 2018).

To reap the benefits of youth engagement, the government and civil society may need to support sensitisation and advocacy to help young people believe in themselves and their choices, and to prioritise opportunities for young leaders to showcase what they are capable of contributing.

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