

Youth priorities in Ghana: Economy and employment take center stage

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 694 | Alfred Kwadzo Torsu and Gildfred Boateng Asiamah

Summary

Their sheer numbers have made youth the centrepiece of continental and national policy discussions (African Union Commission, 2022; Asiamah, Sambou, & Bhoojedhur, 2021). In Ghana, young people aged 15-35 constitute 38% of the population, while children under age 15 make up another 35% (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021).

Like its predecessors, the current government has launched a variety of policies and programmes aimed at meeting youthful aspirations, ranging from free secondary school and vocational training to entrepreneurship promotion and job-matching programmes (see, for example, Youth Employment Agency, 2023).

Still, unemployment, underemployment, and limited opportunities for skills development remain key challenges for Ghana's youth (Dadzie, Fumey, & Namara, 2020). More than one-fifth of 15- to 35-year-olds are not in education, employment, or actively involved in training (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic slowed economic growth, forced businesses to lay off workers, and weakened the capacity of government and the private sector to create employment opportunities for youth (World Bank, 2020).

Youth advocates argue that meaningful participation by young people in governance processes is necessary for the development of effective policies and programmes that respond to the challenges facing today's youth (Government of Ghana, 2022). But youth are often invisible in policy making (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2017), even in the political manifestos that give rise to interventions targeting young people, and costs associated with election campaigns block most young people from entering political office.

The Afrobarometer Round 9 survey (2022) offers some insights into the situation of Ghana's youth. Findings show that young people are more educated than their elders, but also more likely to be unemployed. The economy and unemployment are topmost on the minds of young Ghanaians, who think their government is doing a poor job on job creation, economic management, and education.

Most think the country is headed in "the wrong direction," and few are optimistic that things will get better in the near future. Despite their dissatisfaction, young citizens are less likely than their elders to engage in political processes.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ghanaians in April 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

- Seven in 10 young Ghanaians (70%) have secondary or post-secondary education, far outstripping previous generations.
- But youth (aged 18-35) are also more likely than their elders to be unemployed: 27% say they are not employed and are looking for jobs, compared to 20% of 36- to 55-year-olds.
- Management of the economy and unemployment top the list of most important problems that Ghanaian youth want their government to address, followed by infrastructure/roads and education.
- Fewer than four in 10 young Ghanaians say the government is doing a good job of addressing educational needs (39%), managing the economy (16%), and creating jobs (14%). Approval ratings on these issues have plummeted since 2017.
- Like their elders, large majorities of youth say the country is going in “the wrong direction” (87%) and offer negative assessments of the nation's economy (86%) and their personal living conditions (70%). Only one in four youth (24%) expect things to improve over the coming year.
- Young citizens are less likely than their elders to engage in political and civic activities such as voting in elections, attending community meetings, joining with others to raise an issue, and contacting elected officials, though their contact with assembly members has been increasing in recent years.

Education and employment status

Ghana's youth have more education than their elders. Seven in 10 young respondents (70%) report having secondary or post-secondary education, compared to 51%, 45%, and 44% of the older cohorts (Figure 1). One in 10 youth (9%) have no formal education – less than half as many as in the other age groups (20%-26%).

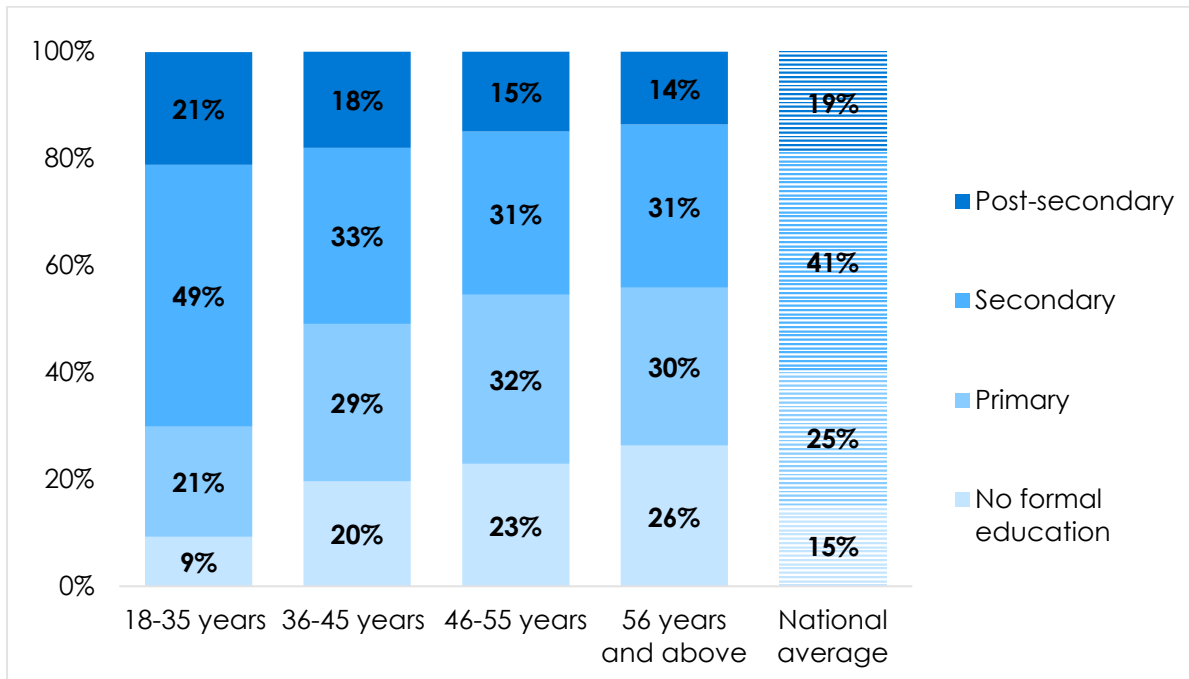
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While they are more educated than their elders, young Ghanaians are also more likely to be unemployed. More than one in four youth (27%) say they are not employed and are looking for a job, compared to 20% of middle-aged and 11% of senior citizens (Figure 2). These youth who are unemployed (i.e. not employed and looking for work)

include 5% who identify as students (Figure 3).

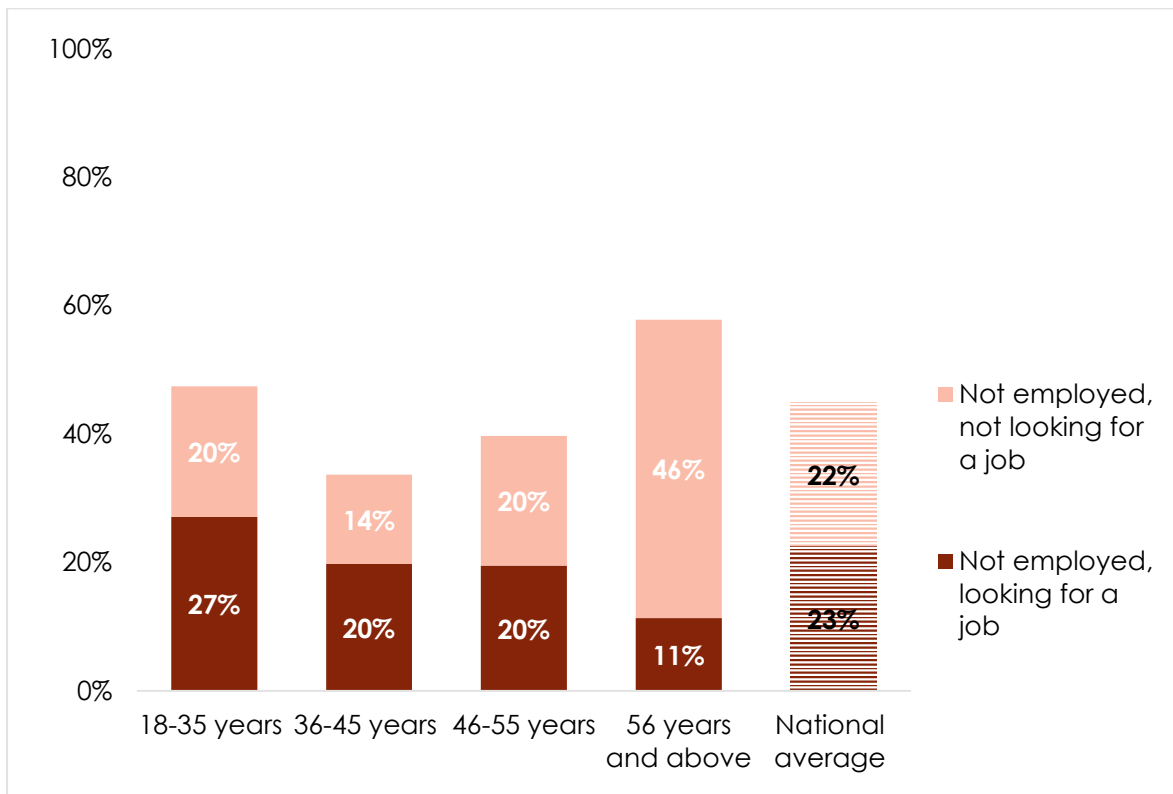
In addition, 20% of young respondents say they are not employed and are not looking for work, including 10% who identify as students.

Figure 1: Level of education | by age group | Ghana | 2022



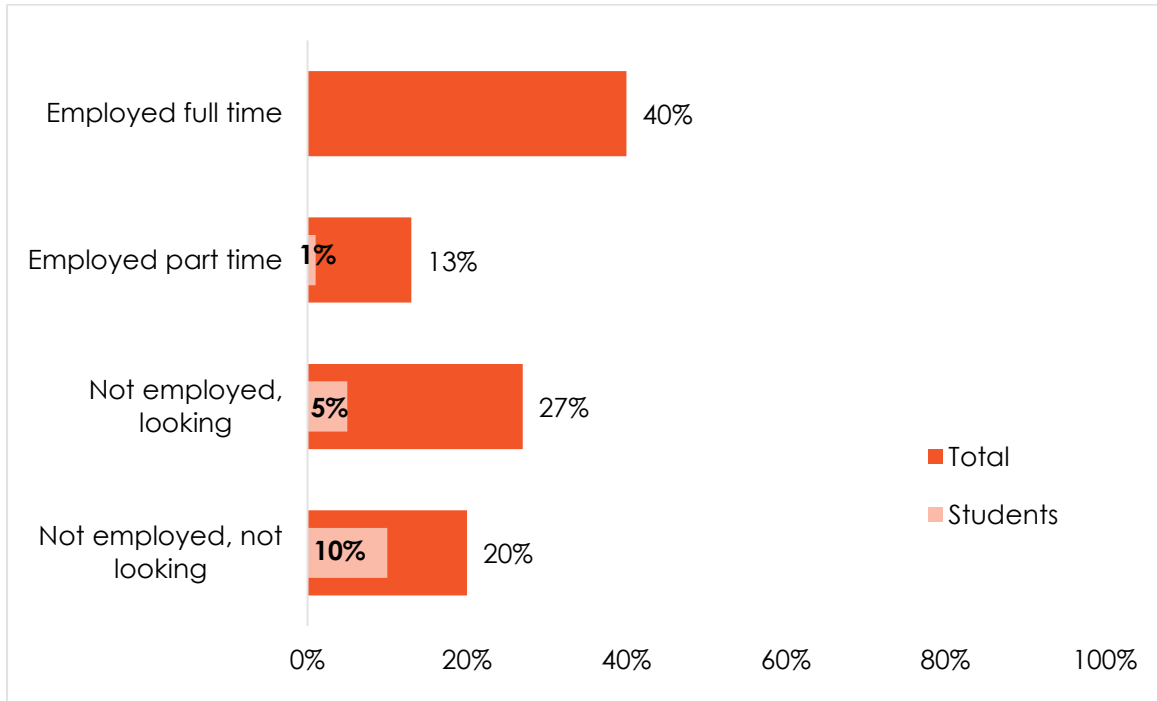
Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Figure 2: Unemployment rate | by age group | Ghana | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?

Figure 3: Employment and student status | respondents aged 18-35 years | Ghana
 | 2022



Respondents were asked:

Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?

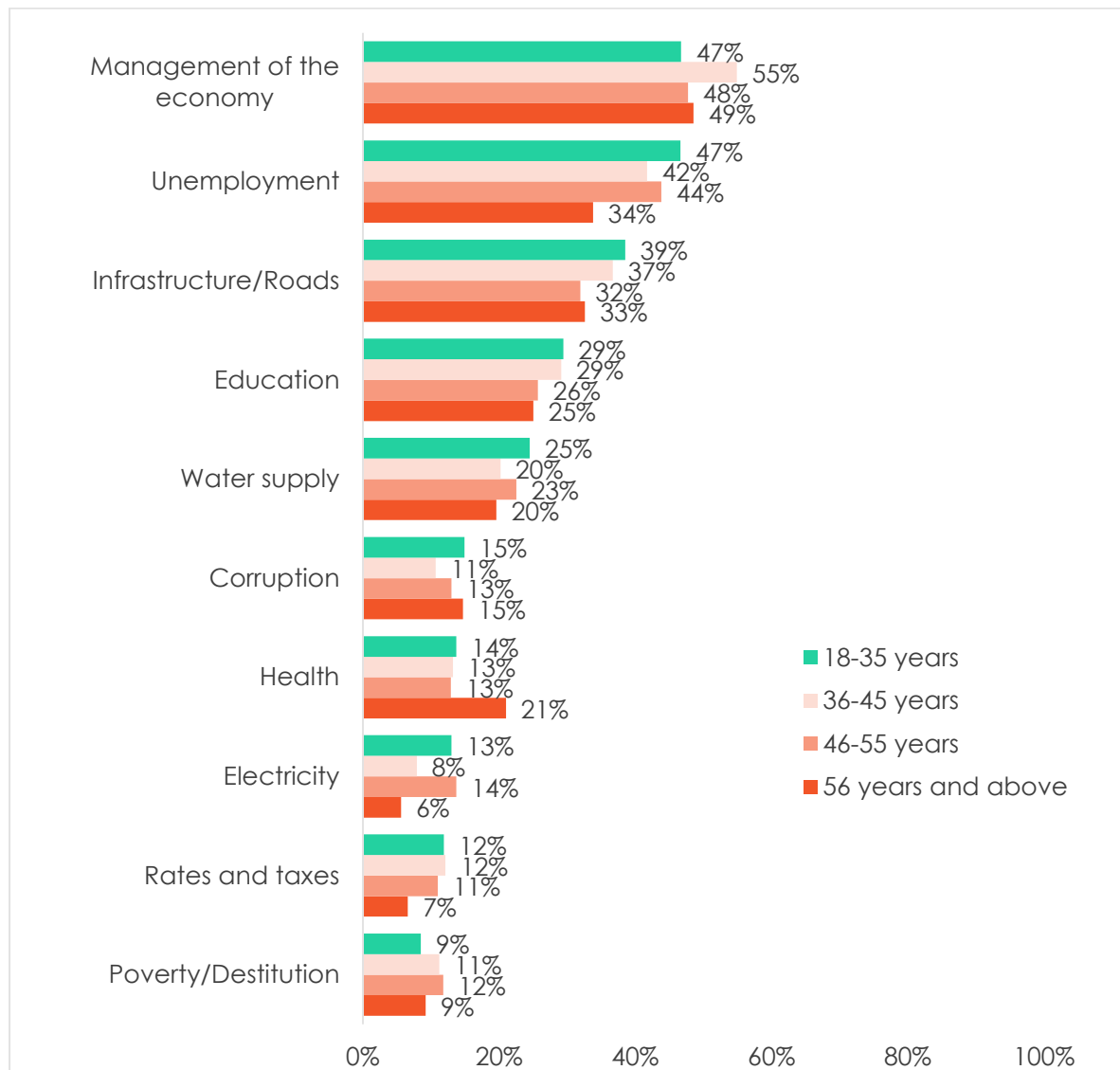
What is your main occupation? [If not currently working:] What was your last main occupation? (% who say "student")

Priorities for action

For young Ghanaians, management of the economy and unemployment (each cited by 47%) are the two most important problems that the government must address (Figure 4). These are followed by infrastructure/roads (39%), education (29%), and water supply (25%).

Youth don't differ hugely from their elders in their priorities for government action, though compared to those over age 55, young respondents are significantly more likely to focus on unemployment (by a 13-percentage-point margin); somewhat more likely to emphasise infrastructure, education, and water; and less likely to cite health as a top problem.

Figure 4: Most important problems | by age group | Ghana | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities)

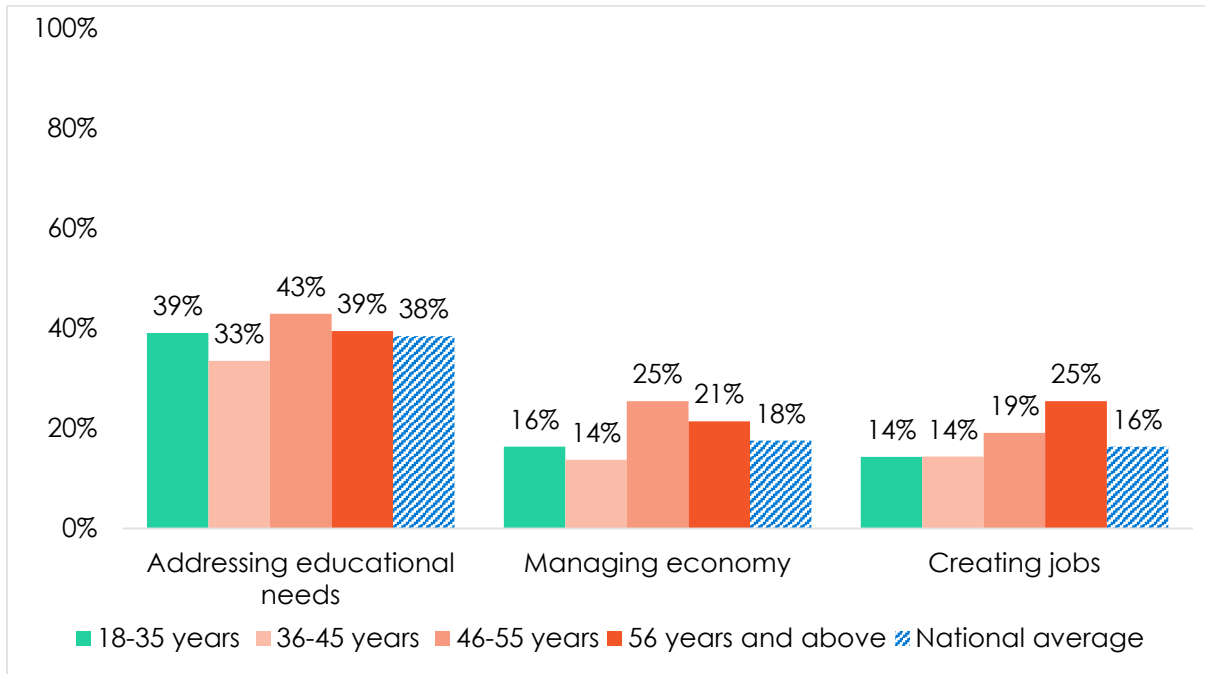
Evaluation of government performance

Like their elders, young Ghanaians are highly critical of the government's performance on some of their core priorities. Only four in 10 youth (39%) say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" on addressing educational needs, and fewer than half as many give the government passing marks on managing the economy (16%) and creating jobs (14%) (Figure 5).

While certain age cohorts are somewhat more charitable in their ratings – such as 25% approval on economic management among 46- to 55-year-olds and 25% approval on jobs among those over age 55 – the youth assessments differ little from the national averages.

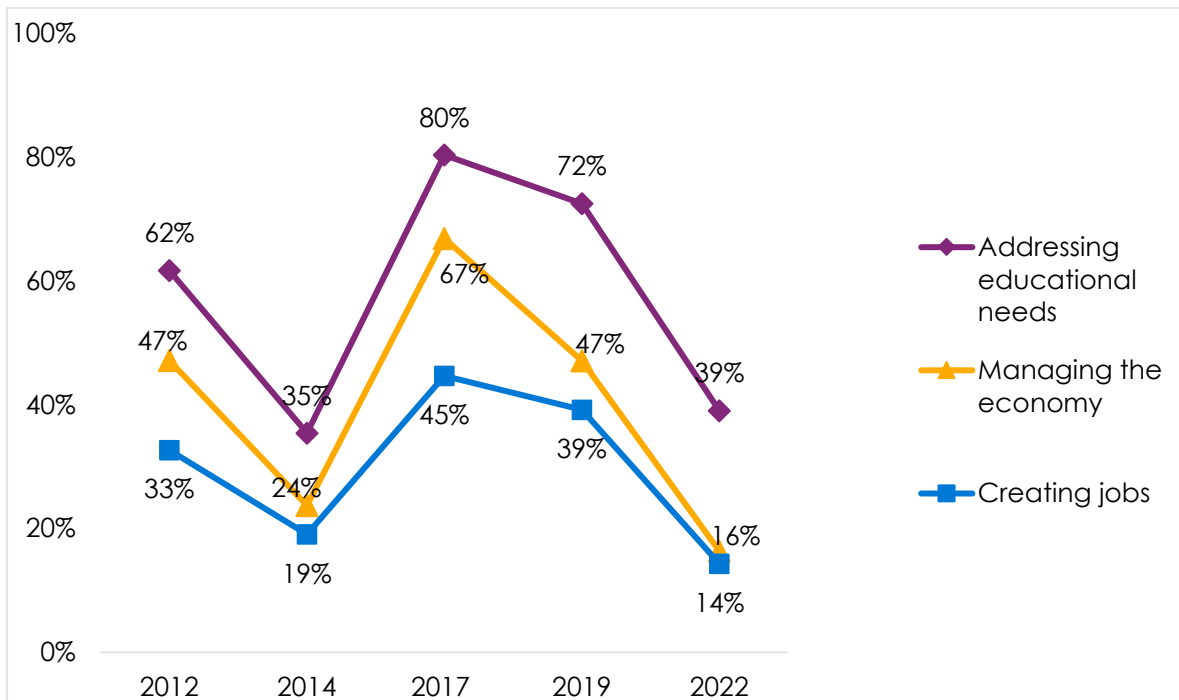
Young Ghanaians' assessments of the government's performance on these three key issues have varied widely over the past decade, hitting highs point – overwhelming approval – in the 2017 survey and dropping to low points – overwhelming disapproval – in 2022 (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Approval of government performance on education, the economy, and jobs | by age group | Ghana | 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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 6: Youth approval of government performance on the economy, jobs, and education | respondents aged 18-35 years | Ghana | 2012-2022

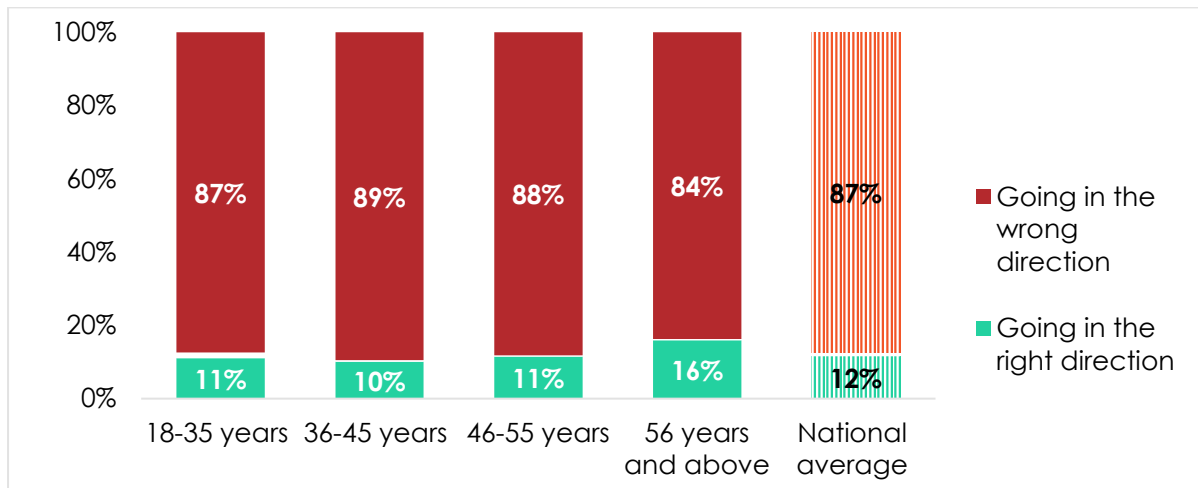


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? Creating jobs? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Views on country's direction and economic situation

Overall, young Ghanaians are just as pessimistic as their elders about their country's direction: 87% say Ghana is headed in "the wrong direction" (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Country's direction | by age group | Ghana | 2022

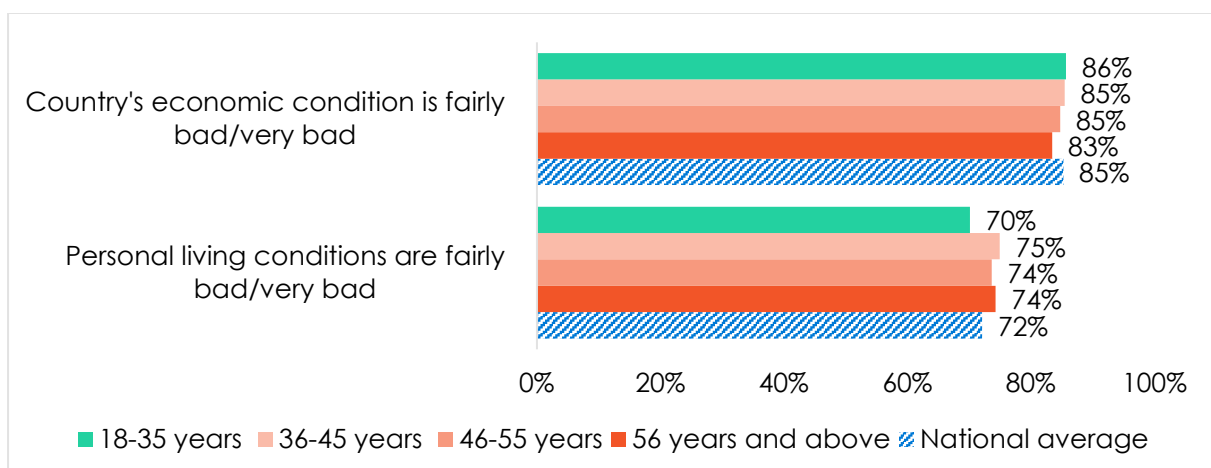


Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Almost nine out of 10 young Ghanaians (86%) describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad," roughly matching assessments by other age groups (Figure 8).

A strong majority (70%) say their personal living conditions are bad as well, only slightly less negative than 36- to 55-year-olds (74%-75%).

Figure 8: Negative assessments of country's economy and personal living conditions | by age group | Ghana | 2022

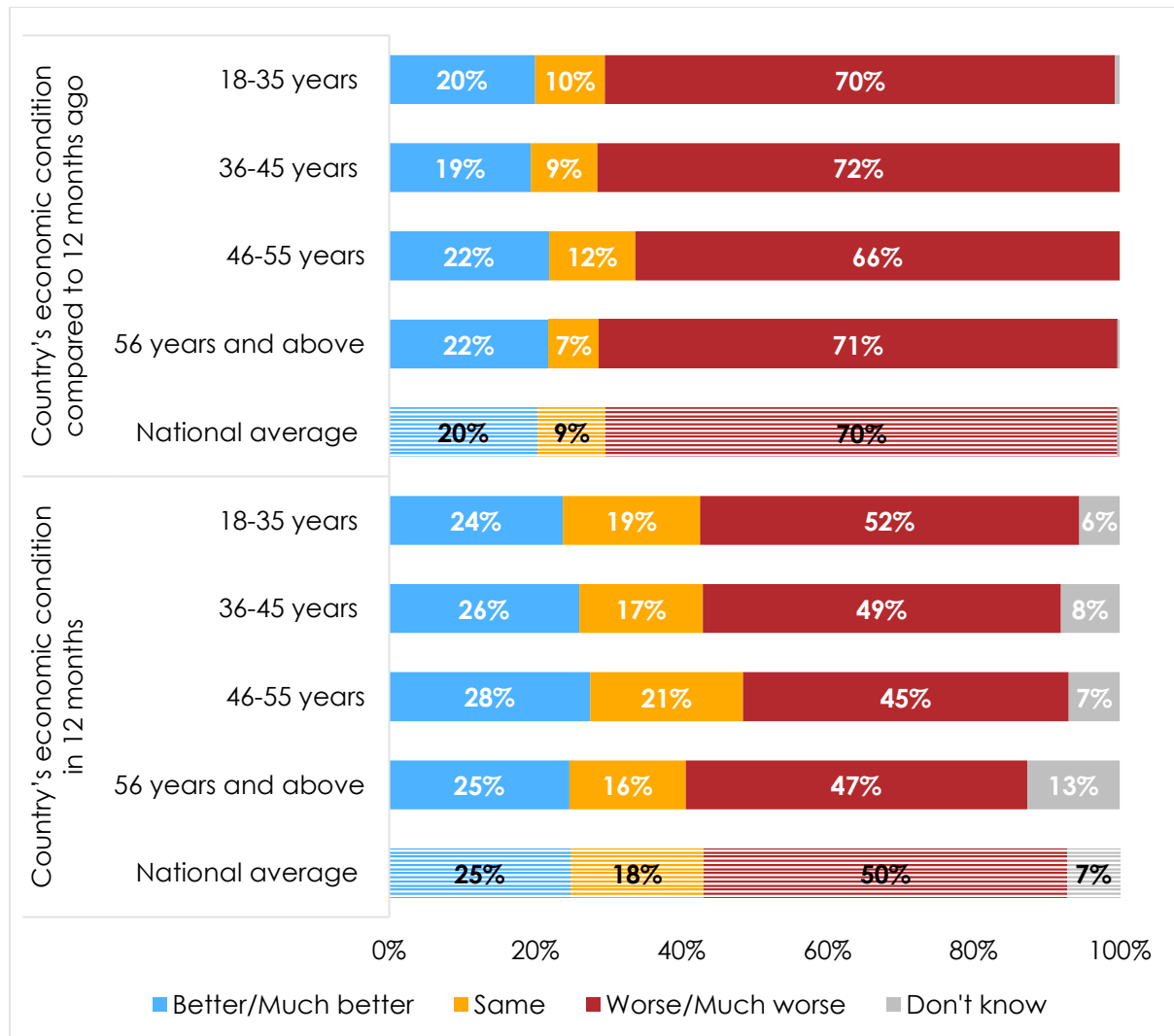


Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions? (% who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")

Moreover, only about one in five youth (22%) think the country's economic condition has improved over the past year, while 70% say it has worsened (Figure 9).

Nor are young citizens any more optimistic than their elders about the near future: 52% think things will get worse over the next 12 months, while only 24% expect improvement.

Figure 9: Retrospective and prospective assessment of country's economic conditions | Ghana | 2022



Respondents were asked: Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago? Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Political engagement

Considering young Ghanaians' dissatisfaction with economic conditions, the country's overall direction, and their government's performance, to what extent do they engage in political and civic processes in pursuit of change?

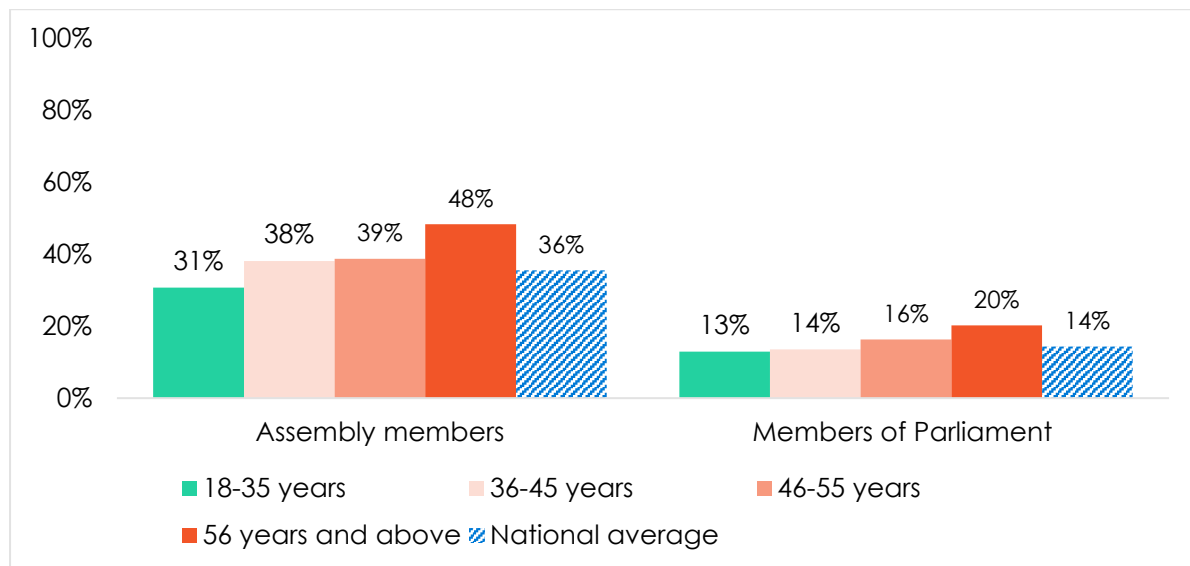
Survey findings suggest that youth have room to extend their potential influence through pathways such as contacting their elected officials, joining with others to express their concerns, and voting in elections.

About three in 10 young respondents (31%) say they contacted an assembly person about an important issue at least once during the year preceding the survey, a lower contact rate than recorded for their elders (38%-48%) (Figure 10).

Only 13% report having contacted a member of Parliament (MP) – similar to middle-aged respondents but lower than senior citizens (20%).

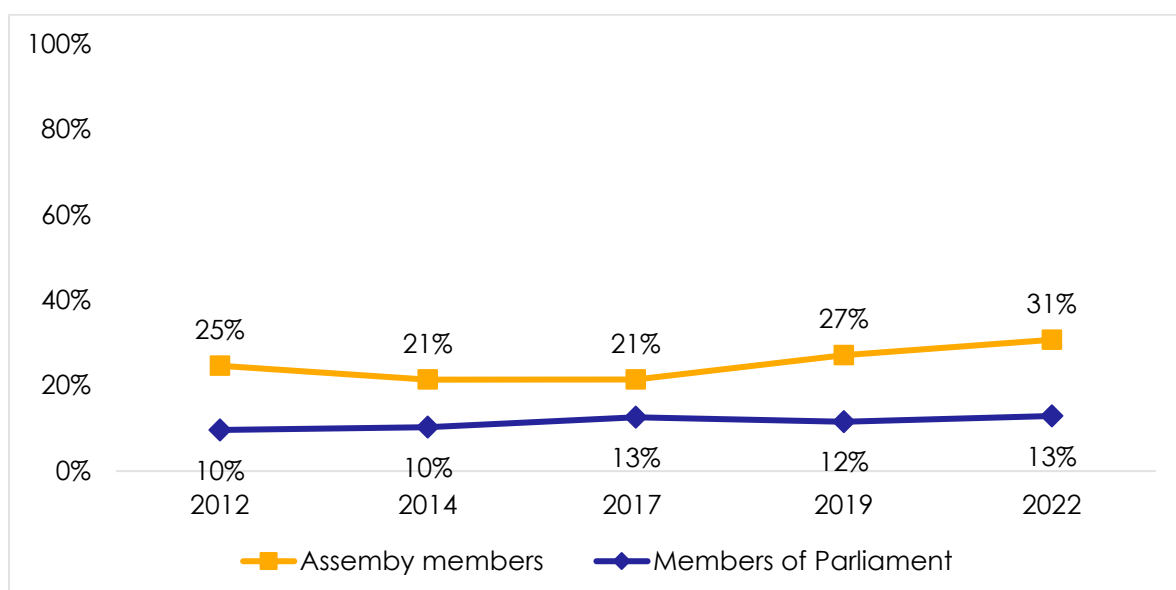
However, young people's contact with assembly members has been increasing in recent years, rising by 10 percentage points since 2017 (Figure 11). Contact with MPs does not show a similar gain.

Figure 10: Contacted political representatives during previous year | by age group | Ghana | 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? (% who say “only once,” “a few times,” or “often”)

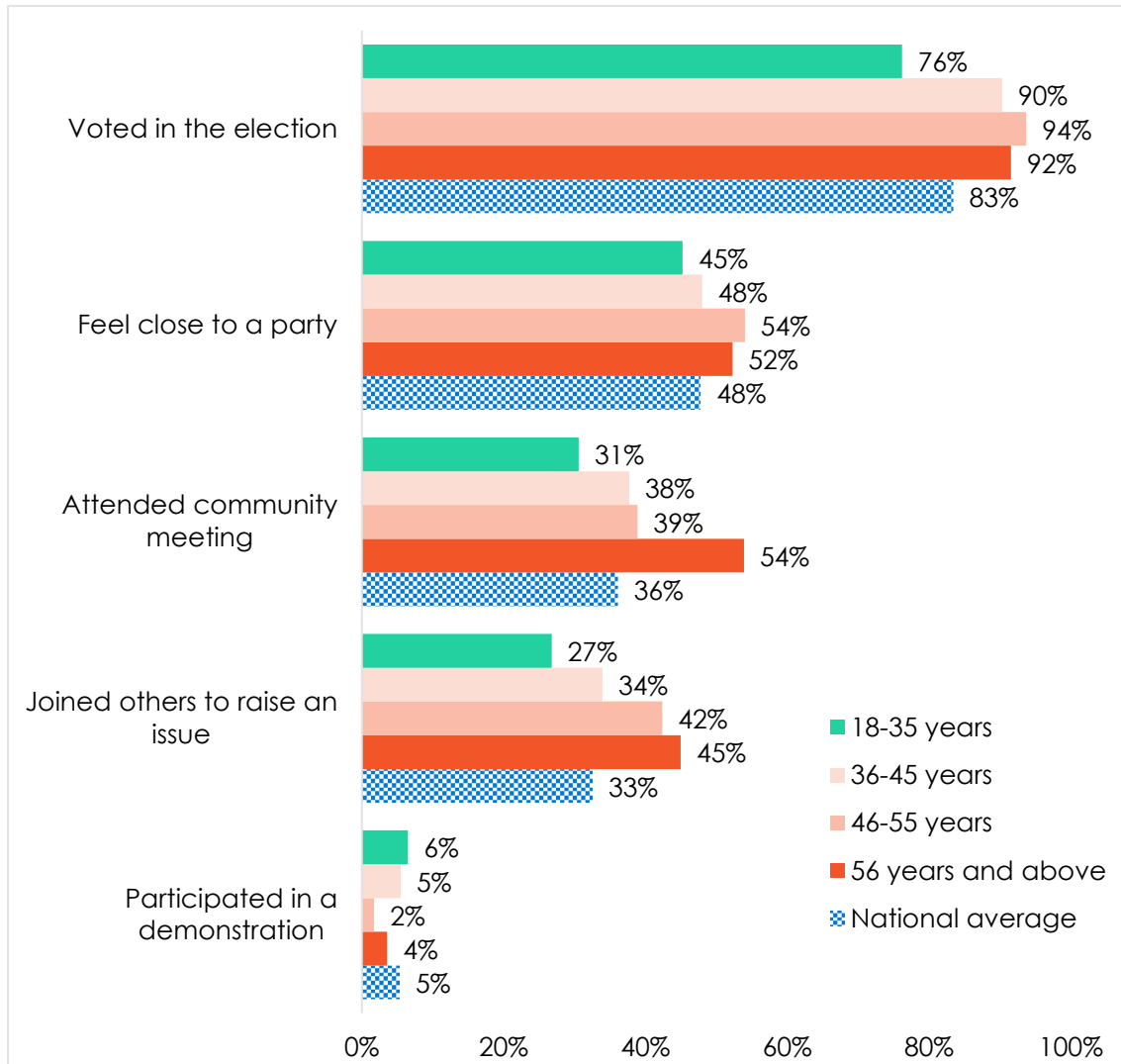
Figure 11: Youth contact with political representatives | respondents aged 18-35 years | Ghana | 2012-2022



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? (% who say “only once,” “a few times,” or “often”)

Youth also lag behind their elders when it comes to voting in elections, identifying with political parties, attending community meetings, and joining others to raise an issue (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Political participation | by age group | Ghana | 2022



Respondents were asked:

In the last national election, held in 2020, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2020 are excluded.)

Do you feel close to any particular political party?

Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Got together with others to raise an issue? Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

While three-fourths (76%) of 18- to 35-year-olds say they voted in the most recent national election in 2020 (excluding those who were too young to vote), that's a considerably lower rate than reported by older cohorts (90%-94%).

Youth are also somewhat less likely to say they "feel close to" a political party (45%, vs. 48%-54% of older citizens).

Only about three in 10 young respondents say they attended a community meeting (31%) or joined others to raise an issue (27%) at least once during the previous year – again lower rates than reported by higher age cohorts.

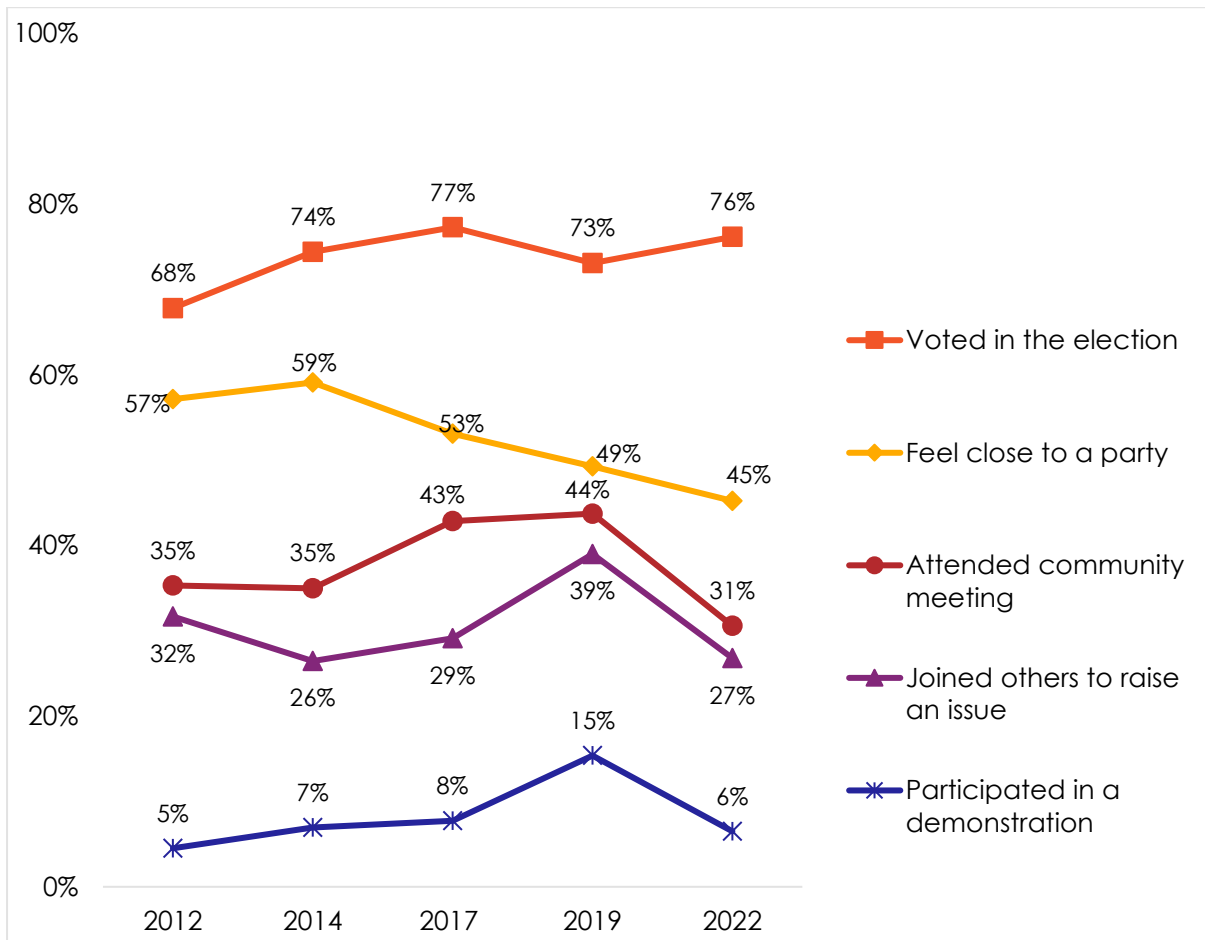
About one in 20 report having participated in a demonstration or protest march during the past 12 months, which is about average for the adult population (5%).

While self-reported voting by young Ghanaians has increased by 8 percentage points since 2012, identification with a political party has declined by 12 points over the same period (Figure 13).

Attending community meetings and joining others to raise an issue climbed to high points (44% and 39%, respectively) in 2019 before dropping to their lowest levels in the past decade.

Participation in protests hit a high of 15% in the 2019 survey but has generally stayed around its current level of 6%.

Figure 13: Youth political participation | respondents aged 18-35 years | Ghana | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked:

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? (Respondents who were too young to vote are excluded.)

Do you feel close to any particular political party?

Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Got together with others to raise an issue? Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

Conclusion

Both more educated and less employed than their elders, Ghana's youth are just as dissatisfied with their country's direction and their government's performance. As their top priorities, they expect the government to create jobs and do a better job of managing the economy.

Survey findings also suggest that young people have not fully exploited their potential in political and civic processes to ensure that their voices are heard.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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