

# Ghanaians want fair and competitive elections, but mistrust the electoral commission

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 781 | David Kofi Asante-Darko

## Summary

On 7 December 2024, Ghanaians will head to the polls to elect a new president as well as 275 members of Parliament. This will be the country's ninth general election since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1992. In the turbulent West African subregion, which has seen six successful coups d'etat since 2020 (Duzor & Williamson, 2023), Ghana remains a model democracy characterised by peaceful regular elections and smooth transitions of power.

While the slate of smaller-party flagbearers and the electoral calendar had not been finalised as of early March (Mohammed, 2024; Joy Online, 2024), the stage is set for a fierce contest to replace the term-limited President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, pitting Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) against former President John Mahama of the main opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) (Naadi, 2023).

Amid democratic backsliding and heated disputes around recent elections in the subregion (Siegle & Cook, 2024; Onubogu, 2023; Yusuf, 2023), Ghanaian civil society organisations have criticised two of Akufo-Addo's appointments to the Electoral Commission of Ghana as partisan and likely to intensify public mistrust of the commission (Center for Democratic Development, 2023; Kenu, 2023). Debate about the ethics and implications of these appointments has raged (Metro TV, 2023; Citi Newsroom, 2023) as concerns about election management bodies in the subregion gain momentum in light of their widely panned performance in recent elections in Nigeria and Sierra Leone (Lewis, 2023; Osaji, 2023).

Although Ghana has often received praise for the quality of its elections (Ezeamalu, 2020; Nyavi, 2016), Electoral Commission appointments have repeatedly threatened to derail the country's progress on its democratic journey in recent years (Graphic Online, 2015; Modern Ghana, 2020).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that while a vast majority of Ghanaians support elections as the best way to choose their leaders, public trust in the election management body is at a 23-year low. Citizens' perceptions of the freeness and fairness of the 2020 election are mostly positive, but they fall well short of assessments of the prior national election in 2016.

## 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. Nine rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 42 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer conducts 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

- An overwhelming majority (84%) of Ghanaians support elections as the best way to choose their leaders.
- About three in five citizens (62%) say elections work well to ensure that members of Parliament reflect the views of voters, and an even larger majority (80%) say elections enable voters to remove leaders who don't do what the people want.
- More than seven in 10 Ghanaians (72%) say many political parties are needed to give voters real choices, and 89% reject the principle of one-party rule.
- Most citizens (69%) say it is better in a democracy if power sometimes changes hands in elections from one political party to another rather than having one party continuously govern the country.
  - More than half (57%) of respondents say that once an election is over, the losing side should accept defeat and cooperate with the government to help it develop the country, rather than monitor and criticise the government to hold it accountable.
- A majority (64%) of citizens say the 2020 election was generally free and fair, a decline compared to assessments of the 2016 election recorded in 2017 (87%).
- More than four in five respondents (83%) say they had little or no fear of being a victim of political intimidation or violence during the 2020 election campaign.
- Only one-third (33%) of Ghanaians say they trust the Electoral Commission of Ghana "somewhat" or "a lot," the lowest trust level recorded in more than two decades of Afrobarometer surveys.

## Views on elections

More than four out of five Ghanaians (84%) endorse elections as the best method for choosing their leaders. Support for elections has remained above 80% over two decades of Afrobarometer surveys, though it has declined from a peak of 93% in 2012 (Figure 1).

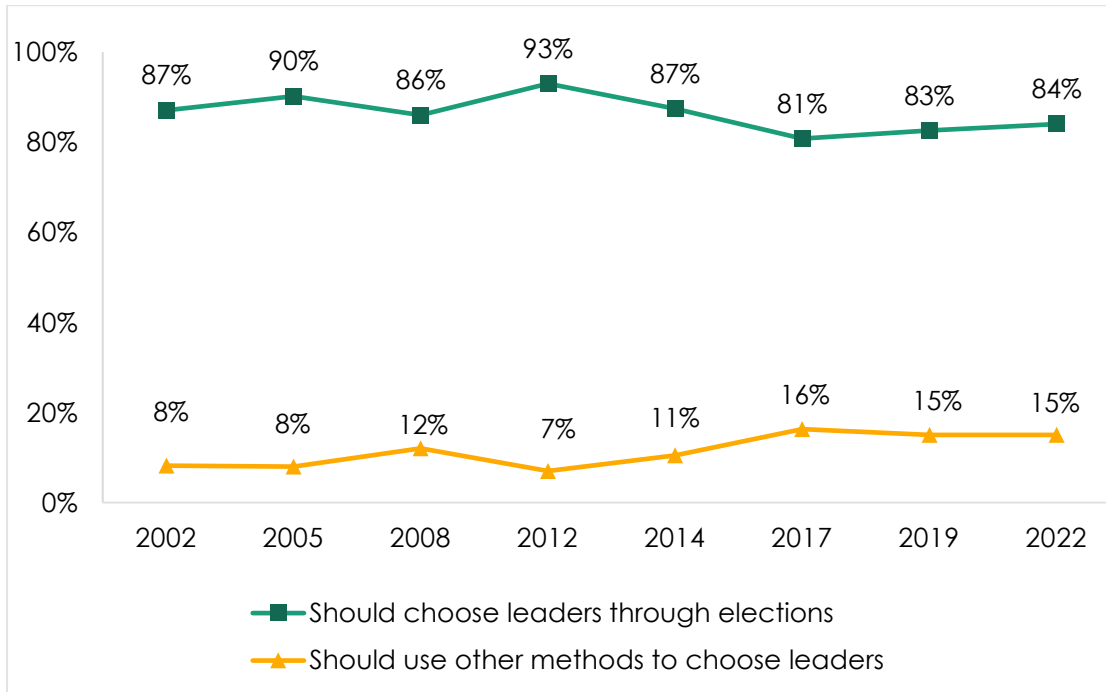
Most Ghanaians think their elections work pretty well: More than three in five (62%) say elections ensure that members of Parliament reflect the views of voters, while an even stronger majority (80%) say elections enable voters to remove leaders from office if they don't do what the people want (Figure 2).

While the proportion of Ghanaians who say elections enable voters to remove leaders from office is a clear majority across all key demographic groups, it is highest among citizens who feel close to the ruling party (85%) and lowest among those experiencing high lived poverty (67%) (Figure 3).<sup>1</sup>

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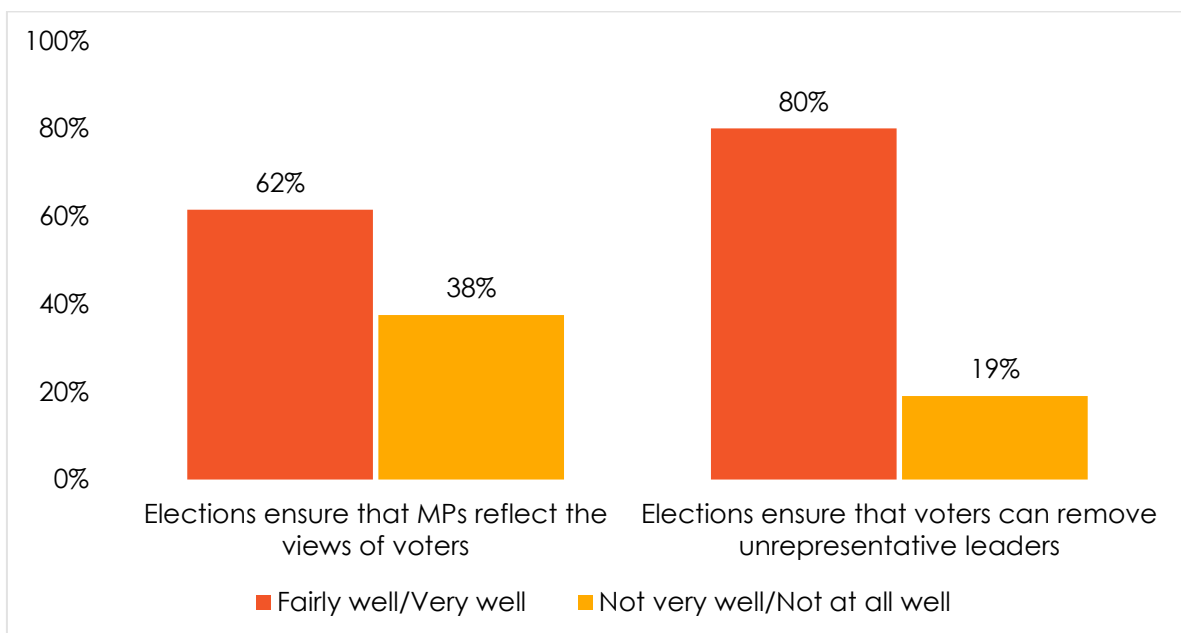
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived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

**Figure 1: Support for elections as the best way to choose leaders | Ghana | 2002-2022**



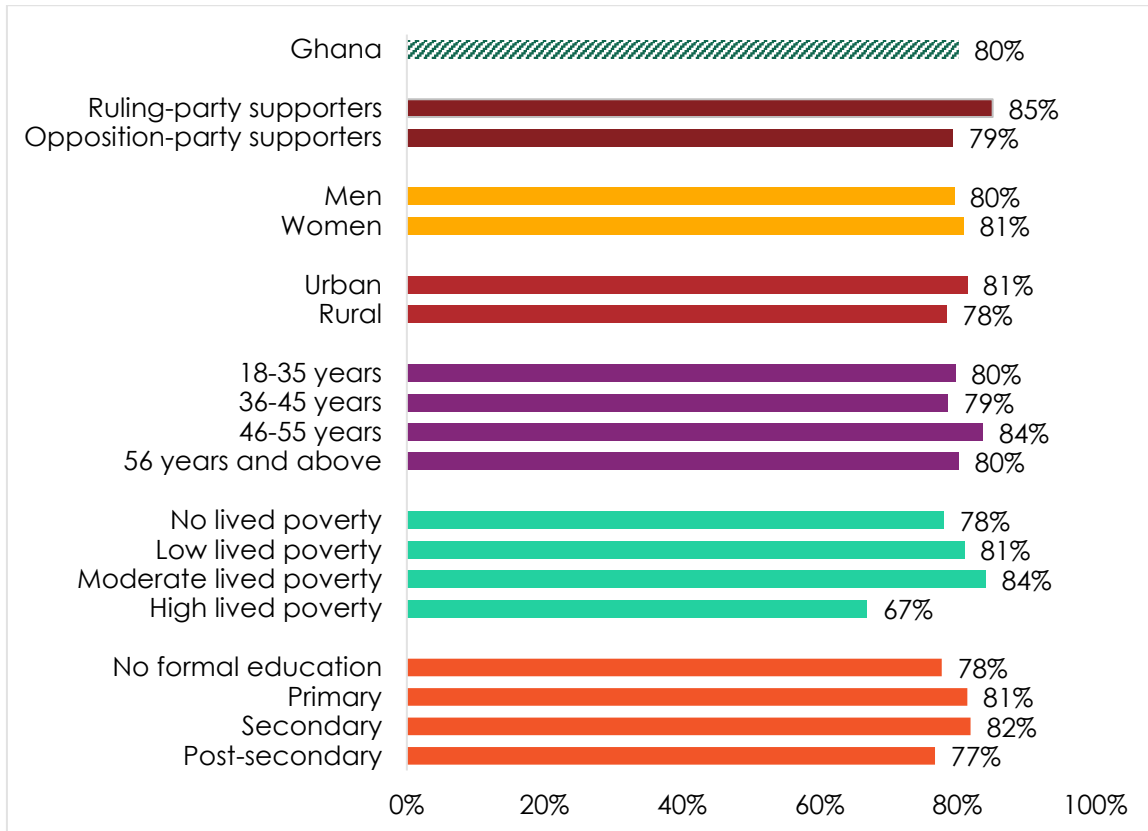
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.  
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.  
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement).

**Figure 2: Efficacy of elections | Ghana | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Thinking about how elections work in practice in this country, how well do elections: Ensure that members of Parliament reflect the views of voters? Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

**Figure 3: Elections enable voters to remove unrepresentative leaders** | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Thinking about how elections work in practice in this country, how well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want? (% who say “fairly well” or “very well”)

Nearly three-quarters (72%) of Ghanaians endorse multiparty competition, agreeing that “many political parties are needed to ensure that voters have real choices in who governs them,” while 26% instead think that political parties create division and confusion and it is therefore unnecessary to have many of them (Figure 4). Support for multiparty competition climbed to 81% in 2012 but has hovered around 70% since then.

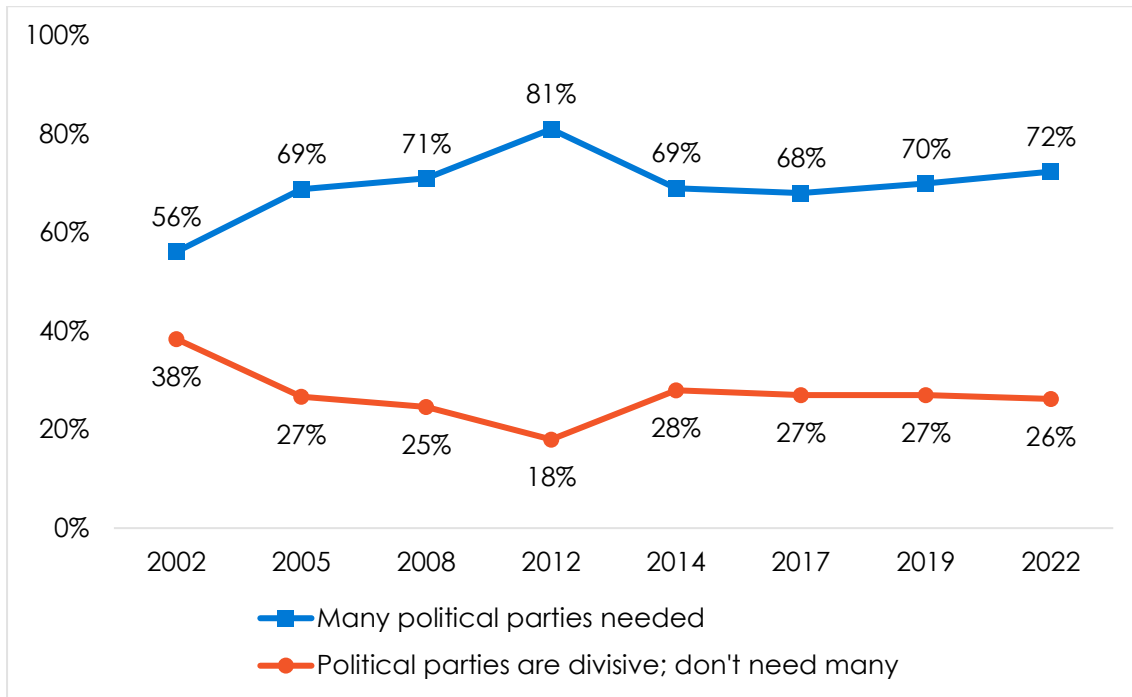
In line with their support for having a choice of political parties, Ghanaians overwhelmingly (89%) reject the principle of one-party rule. Opposition to being ruled by a single party climbed to 90% in 2012 before dipping to 80% in 2017 and 2019, then rebounded in the most recent survey (Figure 5).

In general, and not specifically in relation to the upcoming elections, seven in 10 Ghanaians (69%) say that in a democracy, it is better if power sometimes changes hands in elections from one political party to another. This includes 53% who feel strongly about this issue.

Three in 10 (30%) say that as long as a government is elected in a free and fair contest, it doesn’t matter if one party always wins and continuously governs the country (Figure 6).

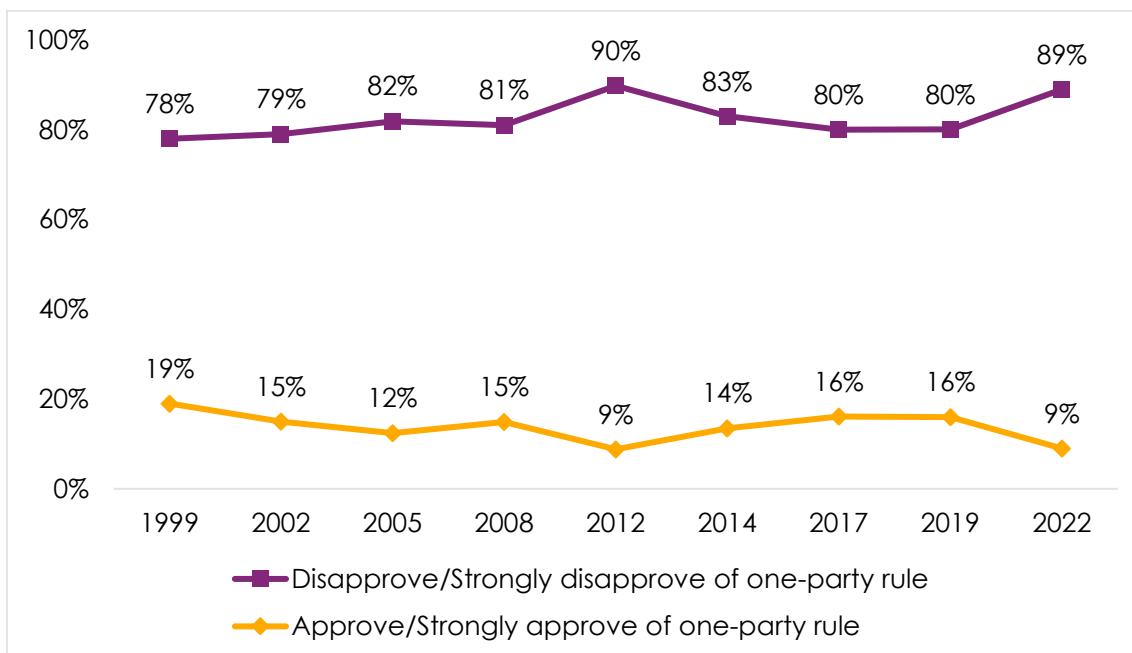
As for the role that opposition parties should take between elections, more than half (57%) of respondents say they should cooperate with the government to help it develop the country. But a substantial minority (41%) say the opposition’s primary role should be to monitor and criticise the government in order to hold it accountable (Figure 7). These views have been fairly consistent since 2008.

**Figure 4: Views on multiparty competition | Ghana | 2002-2022**



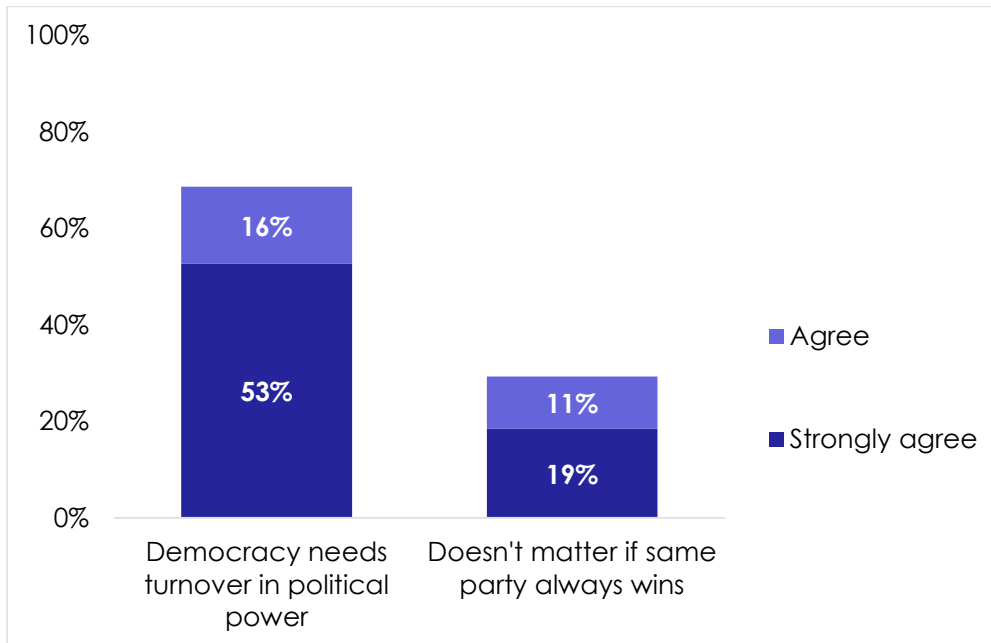
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view:  
 Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Ghana  
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Ghanaians have real choices in who governs them.  
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

**Figure 5: Views on one-party rule | Ghana | 1999-2022**



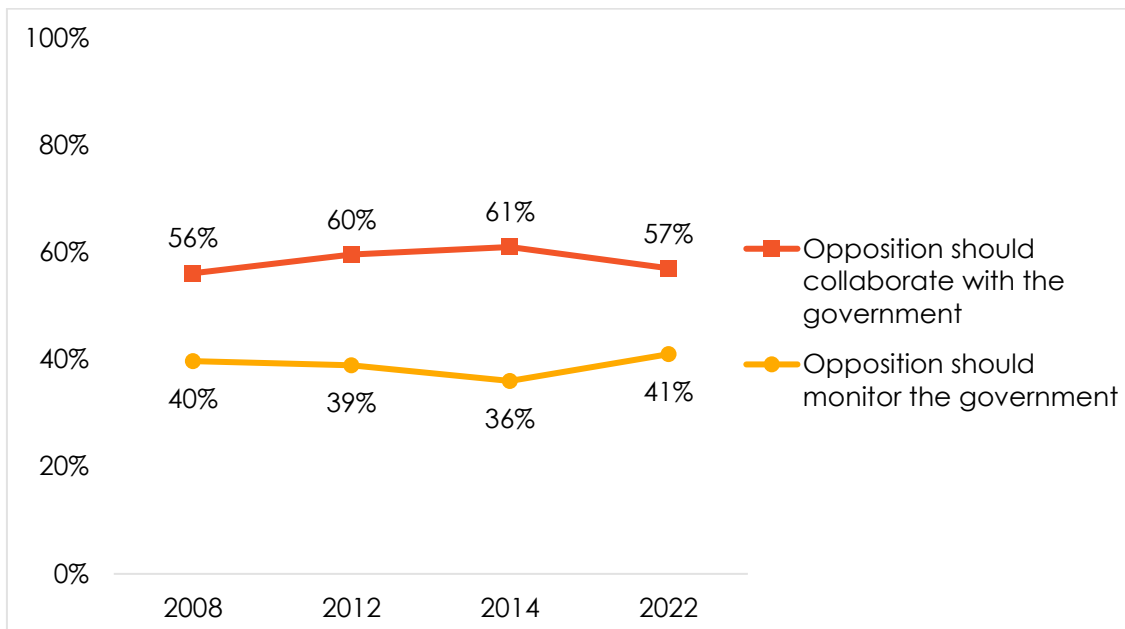
**Respondents were asked:** There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office?

**Figure 6: Views on alternation of political power | Ghana | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: In a democracy, it is better if power sometimes changes hands in elections from one political party to another.  
 Statement 2: In a democracy, as long as a government is elected by the people in a free and fair election, it doesn't matter.

**Figure 7: Role of opposition parties after elections | Ghana | 2008-2022**



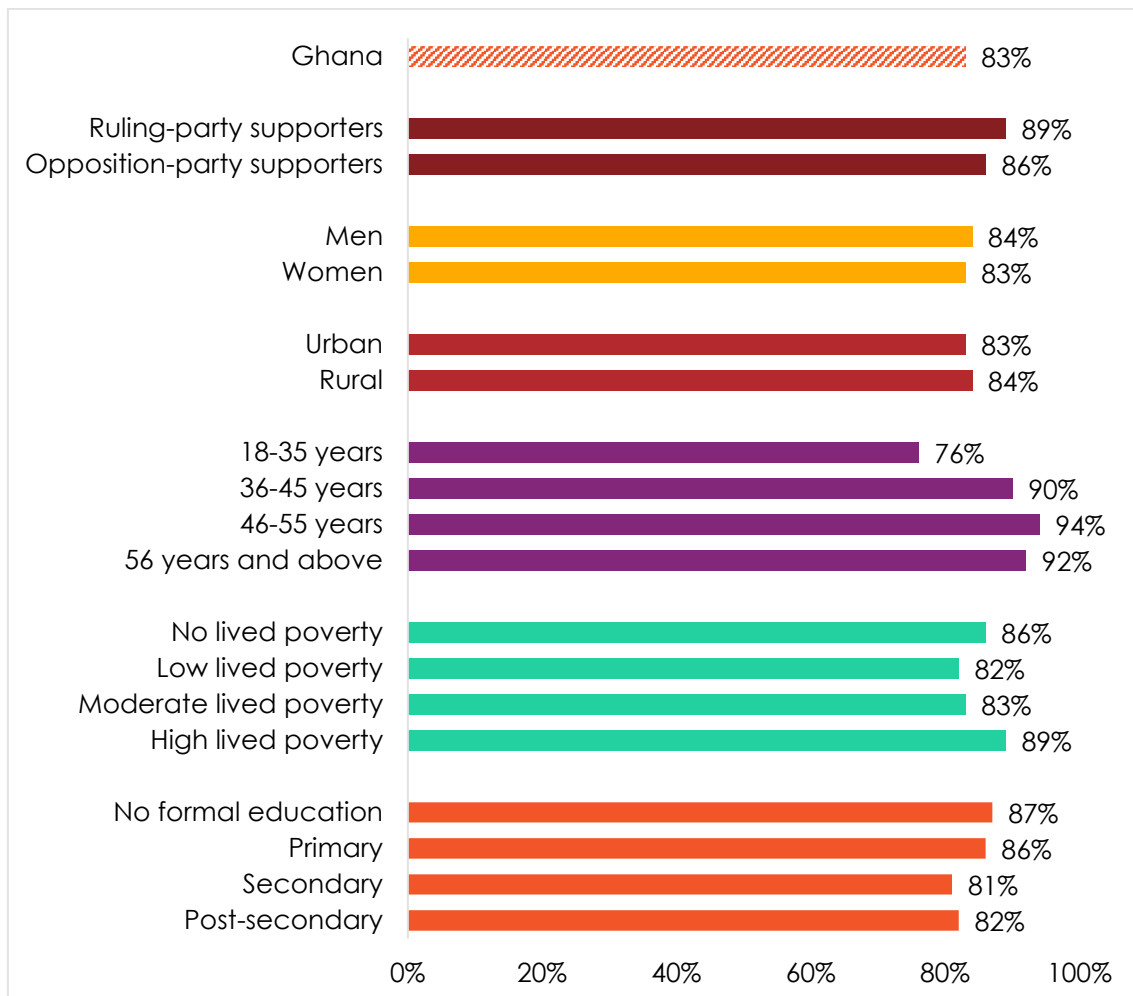
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view:  
 Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticise the government in order to hold it accountable.  
 Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country?  
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

### Participation in the 2020 election

The degree of involvement of the electorate in elections can serve as an indicator of the level of faith people have in the electoral process, of the effectiveness of elections in providing representative leaders, and ultimately of the strength of a democracy. Excluding respondents who were too young to vote at the time, more than eight in 10 Ghanaians (83%) say they voted in the most recent national election in 2020 (Figure 8).

Self-reported voting rates are considerably lower among young citizens (76% of 18- to 35-year-olds, compared to 90%-94% among their elders). Respondents with secondary (81%) or post-secondary (82%) education are less likely to say they voted than their counterparts with less schooling (86%-87%).

**Figure 8: Voted in 2020** | by demographic 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? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2020 are excluded.)

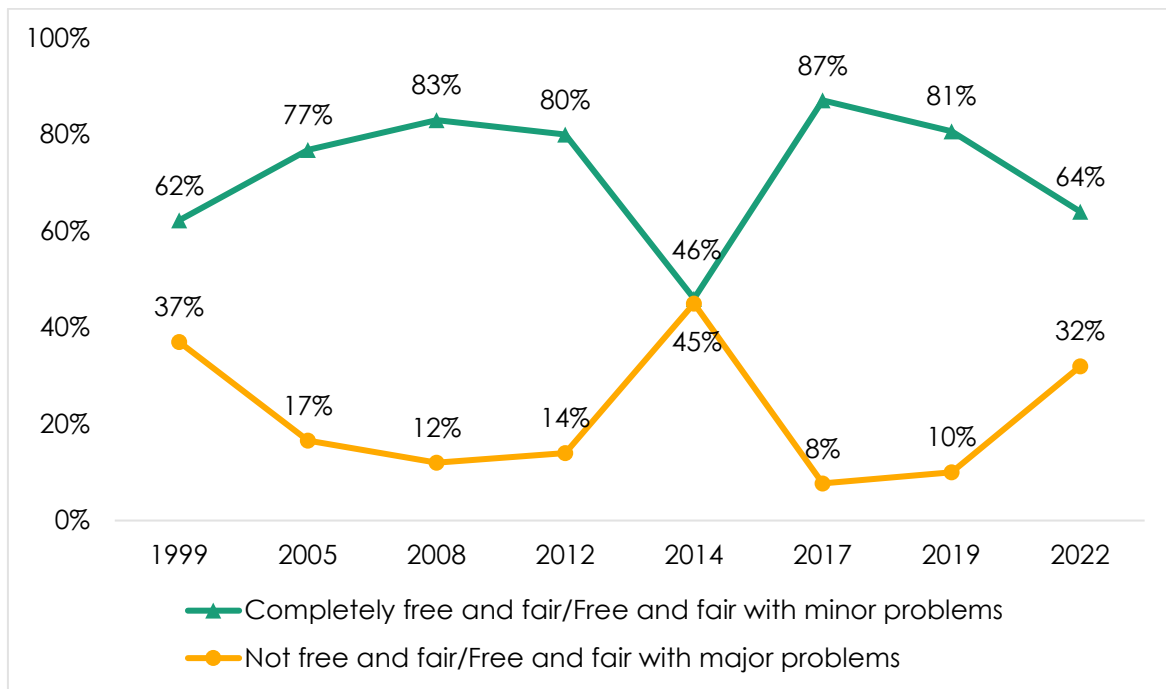
### Election quality

Ghanaians' assessments of the quality of their elections have varied considerably over the years (Figure 9). While majorities (64% in 2022) have generally described their most recent national election as either "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems," favourable assessments dropped to 46% in the 2014 survey. This was most likely a response to

the disputed 2012 presidential election, which led to the first election petition filed in Ghana's Supreme Court to contest the results of a presidential election during the Fourth Republic (Frimpong, 2012).

Positive assessments shot back up, to 87%, following the 2016 election, but have declined significantly since then.

**Figure 9: Freeness and fairness of most recent election | Ghana | 1999-2022**



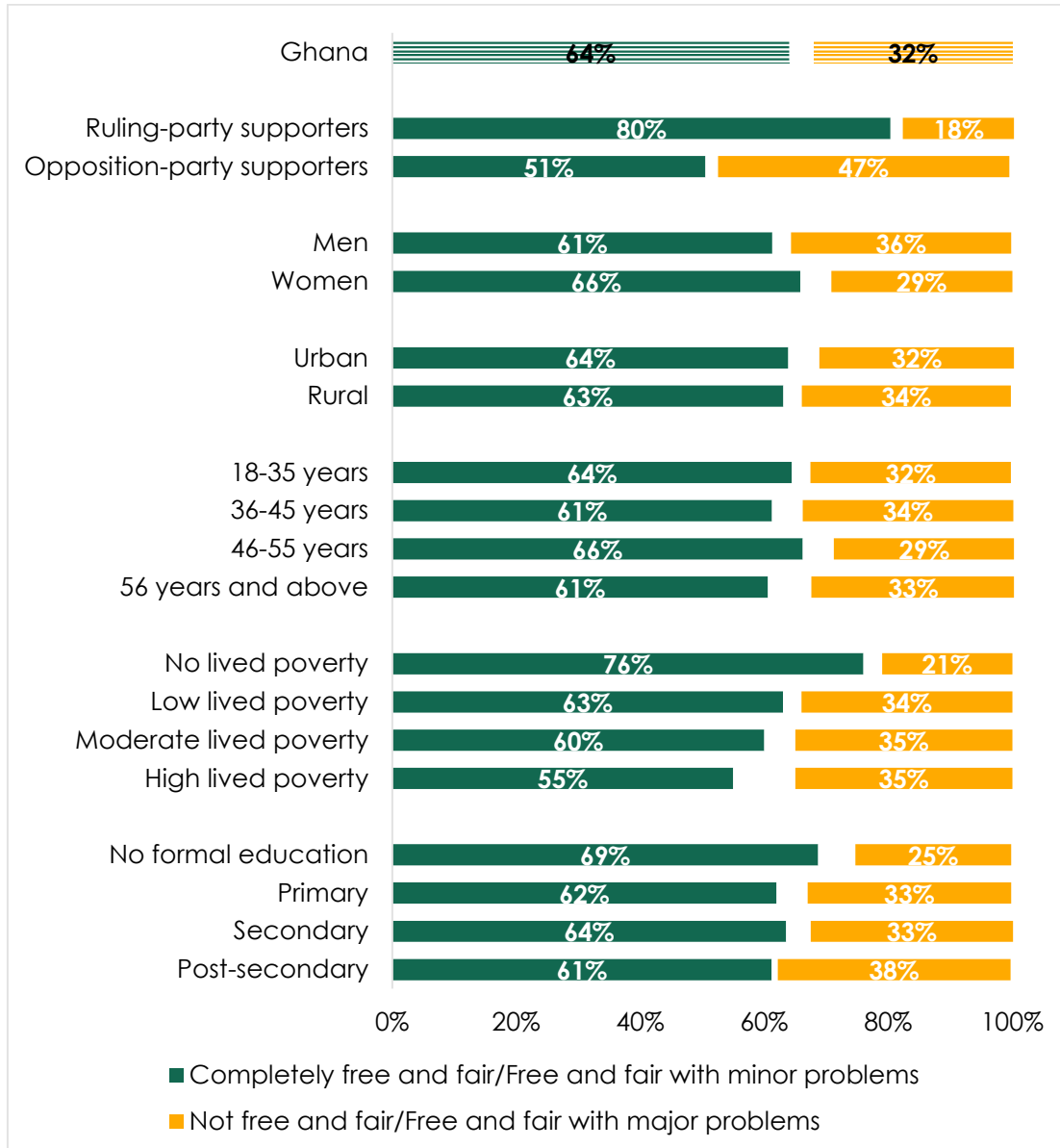
**Respondents were asked:** On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2020?

Among respondents who “feel close” to the ruling party, four in five (80%) say the 2020 election was generally free and fair, but only 51% of opposition supporters agree (Figure 10). Perceptions that the 2020 contest was free and fair increase with respondents' economic status, ranging from just 55% among the poorest to 76% among the well-off. More women than men see the election as having been free and fair (66% vs. 61%), and respondents with no formal education (69%) are more likely to agree than those with at least primary schooling (61%-64%).

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**Figure 10: Freeness and fairness of 2020 election** | by demographic group | Ghana  
 | 2022

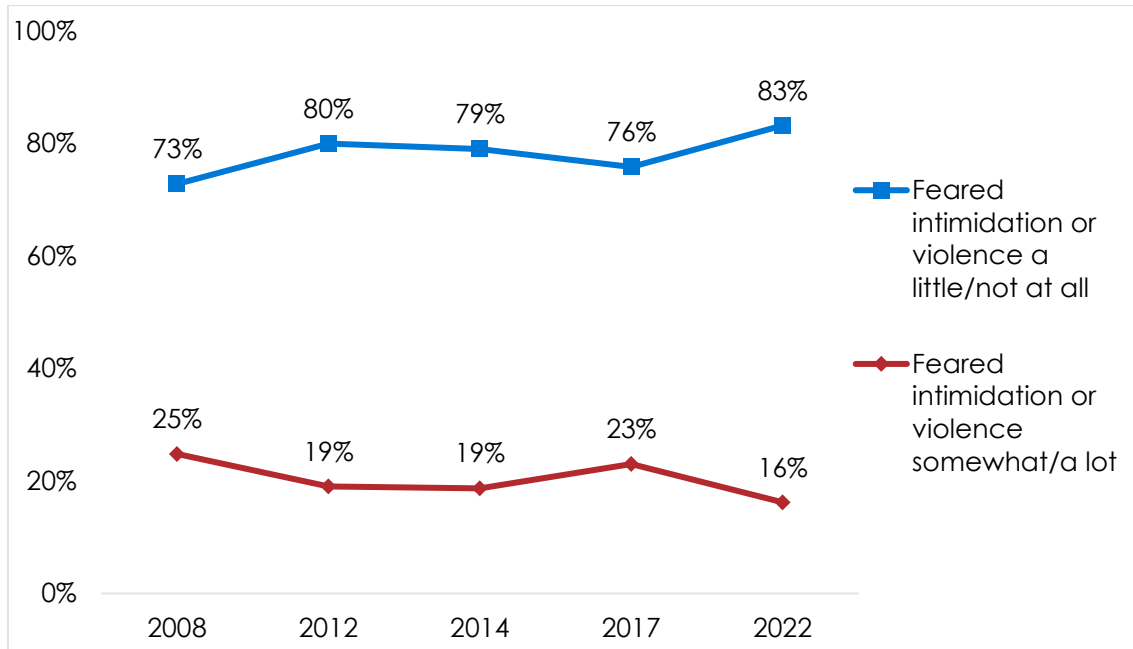


**Respondents were asked:** On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2020?

More than four in five respondents (83%) say that during the 2020 election campaign period, they experienced “a little” fear (12%) or no fear (71%) of becoming victims of political intimidation or violence, the largest such proportion recorded by Afrobarometer for elections in Ghana over the past 14 years. About one in six (16%) report fearing intimidation/violence “somewhat” or “a lot,” down from 23% during the 2016 election campaign (Figure 11).

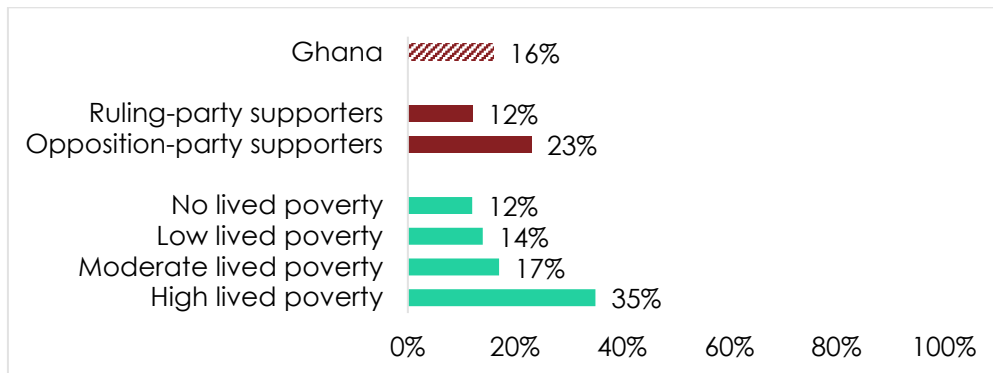
Fear of political intimidation or violence varies significantly by party affiliation and economic level (Figure 12). Opposition supporters are twice as likely as ruling-party supporters to report fearing intimidation/violence “somewhat” or “a lot” (23% vs. 12%), while the poorest respondents are three times as likely as the well-off to say the same (35% vs. 12%).

**Figure 11: Fear of intimidation or violence in the most recent national election**  
 | Ghana | 2008-2022



**Respondents were asked:** During the last national election campaign in [20XX], how much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

**Figure 12: Fear of intimidation or violence in 2020 election** | by party affiliation and lived poverty | Ghana | 2022



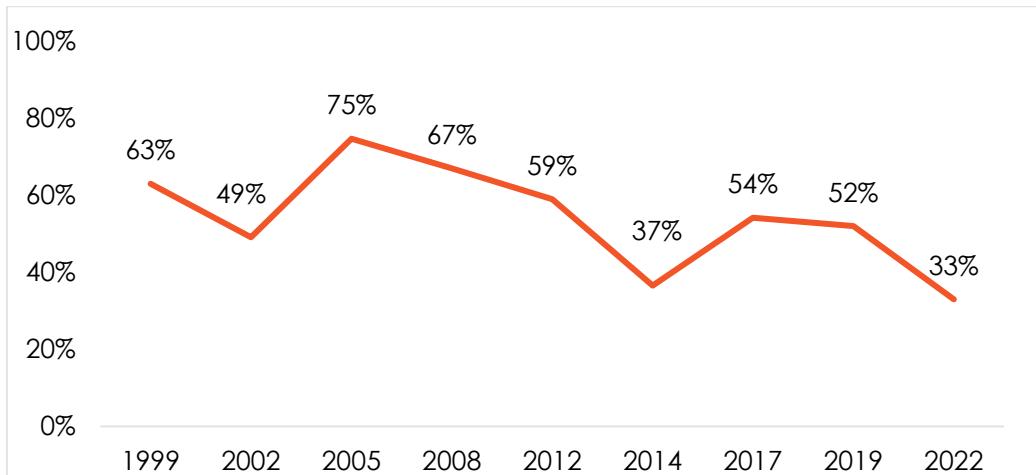
**Respondents were asked:** During the last national election campaign in 2020, how much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

### Trust in the Electoral Commission of Ghana

Although a solid majority of Ghanaians consider their last national election to have been generally free and fair, their trust in the Electoral Commission of Ghana is at a 23-year low (Figure 13). Only one-third of citizens (33%) say they trust the commission “somewhat” or “a lot,” while 67% express “just a little” (27%) or no trust at all (40%) in the election management body.

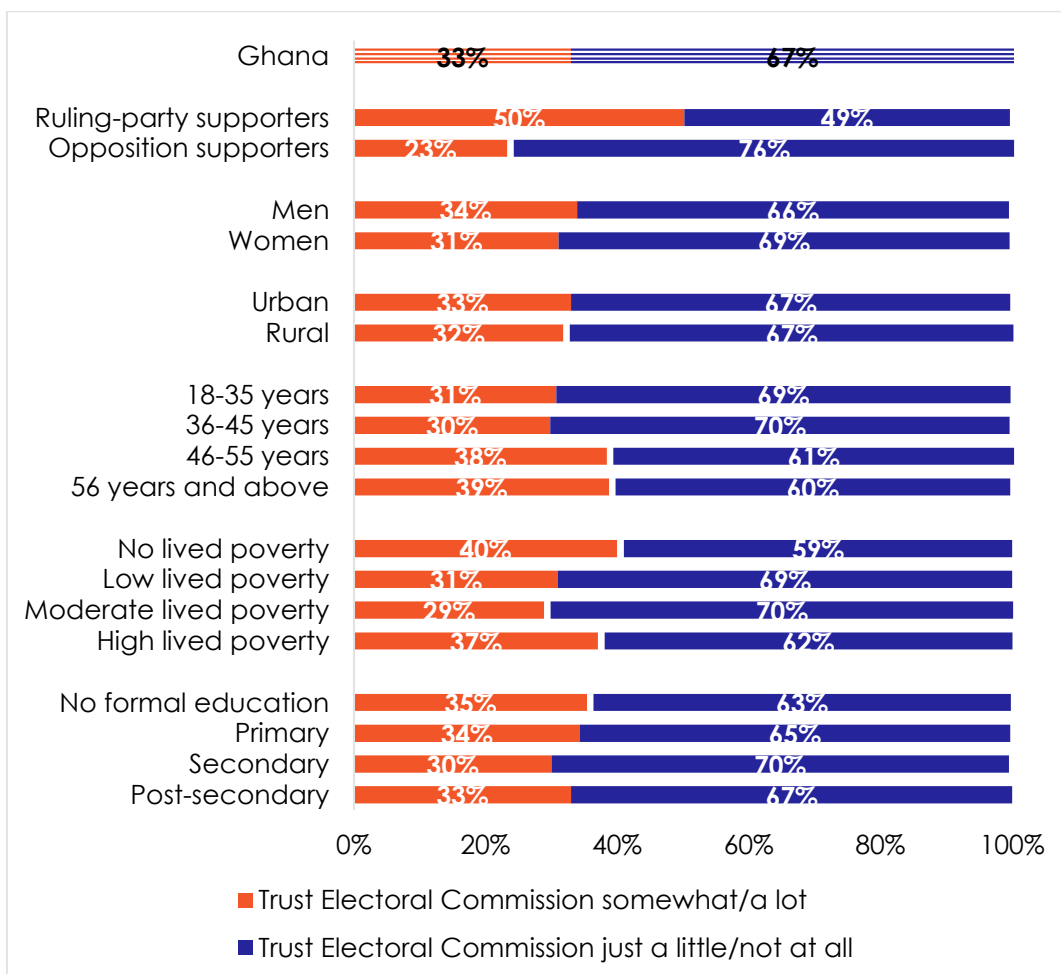
Although opposition supporters express the least trust in the Electoral Commission (23%), even respondents who “feel close” to the ruling party are split on this question, with half (49%) saying they trust the commission “just a little” or “not at all” (Figure 14). Younger citizens (30%-31%) are less likely to trust the commission than their elders (38%-39%).

**Figure 13: Popular trust in the Electoral Commission | Ghana | 1999-2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Electoral Commission of Ghana? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

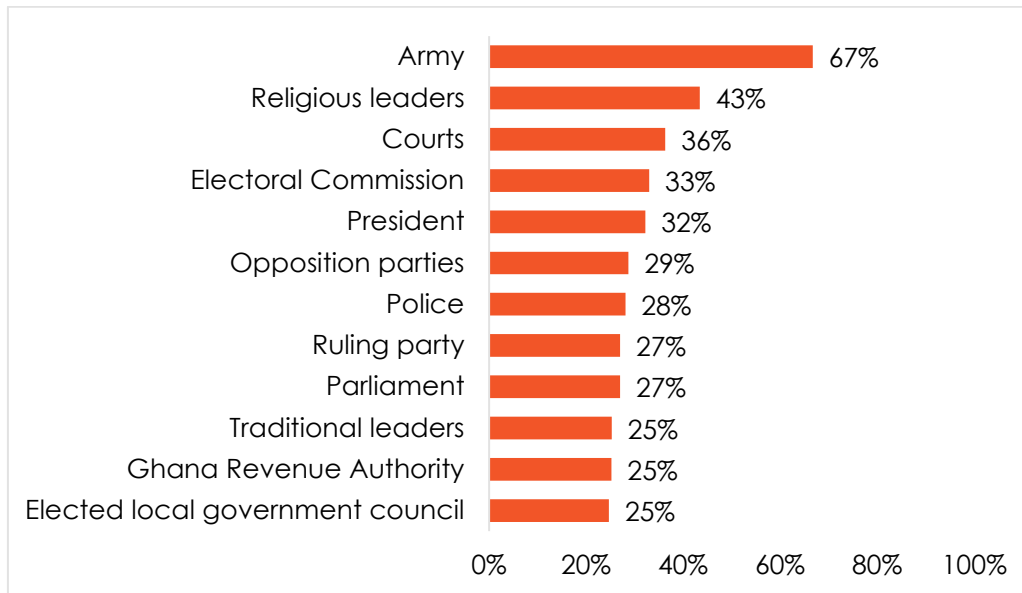
**Figure 14: Popular trust in the Electoral Commission | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Electoral Commission of Ghana?

Being trusted by 33% of respondents places the Electoral Commission at about the same level as the president (32%) in popular confidence, trailing the army (67%), religious leaders (43%), and the courts (36%). Still, more people trust the Electoral Commission than opposition parties (29%), the police (28%), Parliament (28%), the ruling party (27%), traditional leaders (25%), the Ghana Revenue Authority (25%), and elected local government councils (25%) (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Popular trust in the Electoral Commission and other institutions and leaders**  
 | Ghana | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

## Conclusion

Survey findings show that most Ghanaians want to choose their leaders through high-quality elections that feature multiple parties. A majority of citizens say the last presidential election, in 2020, was generally free and fair, and most report little or no fear of intimidation or violence.

But popular trust in the Electoral Commission is at a 23-year low, making a closely contested 2024 election both a test and an opportunity for commissioners seeking to regain public confidence.

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