



Kenyans value multiparty democracy, but fewer feel close to a political party

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 954 | Daniel Iberi and Mercy Kaburu

Summary

With more than three decades of multiparty democracy, Kenya has established itself as a political powerhouse in the region (Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, 2024; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2010). Since one-party rule ended with competitive elections in 1992, the country's 2010 Constitution has further entrenched the multiparty principle by explicitly guaranteeing every Kenyan the right to form, join, and participate in the activities of any political party (Republic of Kenya, 2022; Ichim, 2017; Githinji & Holmquist, 2011). Currently, there are 90 fully registered political parties in Kenya (Office of the Registrar of Political Parties, 2024).

Like many African countries, Kenya contends with the challenges of weak political and democratic institutions, electoral malpractices, civil society suppression, patronage, and corruption (Branch & Cheeseman, 2009). But perhaps the most significant challenge for its multiparty system stems from tribalism, as political leaders and parties often mobilise support based on ethnicity (Wambua, 2017). In the past, this has led to a divisive political landscape and polarised politics, undermining national unity and cohesion (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2018; Shilaho, 2023), most notably in election-related violence in 1992 and 2007/2008 that killed hundreds and displaced thousands (Kagwanja & Southall, 2013).

How do ordinary Kenyans see their multiparty system?

Afrobarometer survey findings show that Kenyan citizens have consistently and strongly supported multiparty democracy while rejecting one-party rule. However, a majority say it is acceptable for one party to dominate politically as long as it wins power through free and fair elections.

Political party affiliation has declined significantly in Kenya. And popular trust in political parties remains low, with confidence in the ruling party declining steadily while trust in opposition parties has been on an upward trajectory.

While most Kenyans say they voted in the last election, few have engaged directly with political party officials.

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 more than 40 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Kenya, led by the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Kenyans in April-May 2024. 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 Kenya in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019, and 2021.

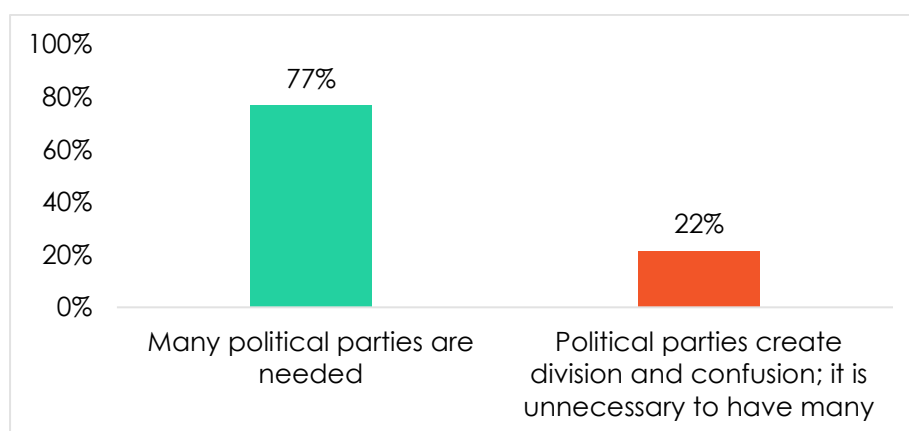
Key findings

- More than three-fourths (77%) of Kenyans say many political parties are needed to give voters real choices.
 - More than eight in 10 (82%) reject one-party rule.
 - Support for multiparty competition has increased by 15 percentage points since 2011.
- While 43% of Kenyans think it is better for political power to change hands occasionally, a majority (56%) deem it acceptable for one party to dominate so long as it wins power in free and fair elections.
- Fewer than half (47%) of Kenyans say they “feel close to” a political party, a significant drop from 68% in 2003.
- About four in 10 citizens say they trust opposition political parties (43%) and the ruling party (38%).
 - Popular trust in the ruling party has declined from 65% in 2003, while trust in opposition parties has risen from 16%.
- About one in seven Kenyans (14%) say they contacted a political party official during the previous year to discuss a problem or share their views.
- Three-fourths (75%) of respondents say they voted in the 2022 election, though self-reported voting rates are far lower among youth (61%).

Multiparty competition vs. one-party rule

Kenyans value their democracy with many political parties. More than three-fourths (77%) say that many political parties are needed to ensure that citizens have real choices in who governs them (Figure 1). About one in five respondents (22%) say political parties create division and confusion, and it is therefore unnecessary to have many.

Figure 1: Views on multiparty competition | Kenya | 2024



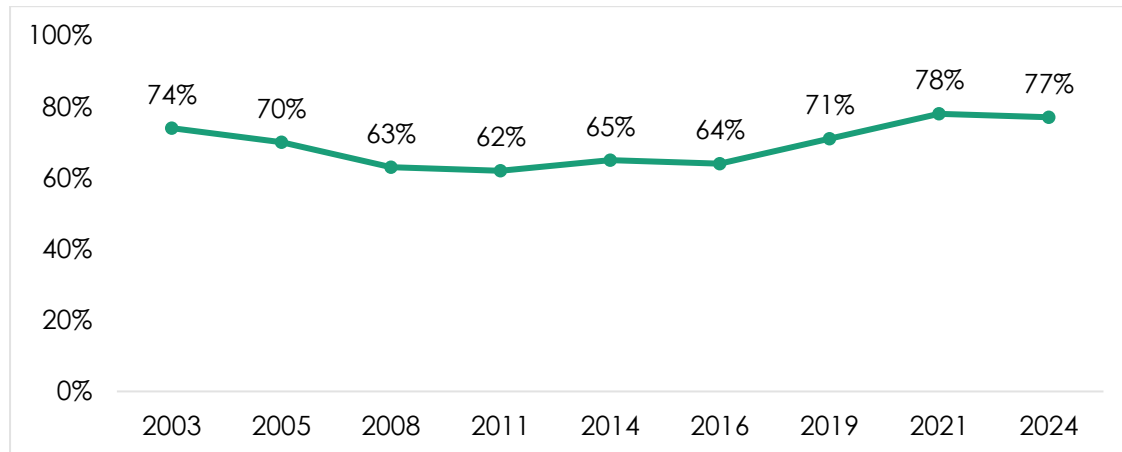
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Kenya.

Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Kenyans have real choices in who governs them.

Support for multiparty competition has been strong for the past two decades and has risen by 15 percentage points since 2011 (62%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Support for multiparty competition | Kenya | 2003-2024



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

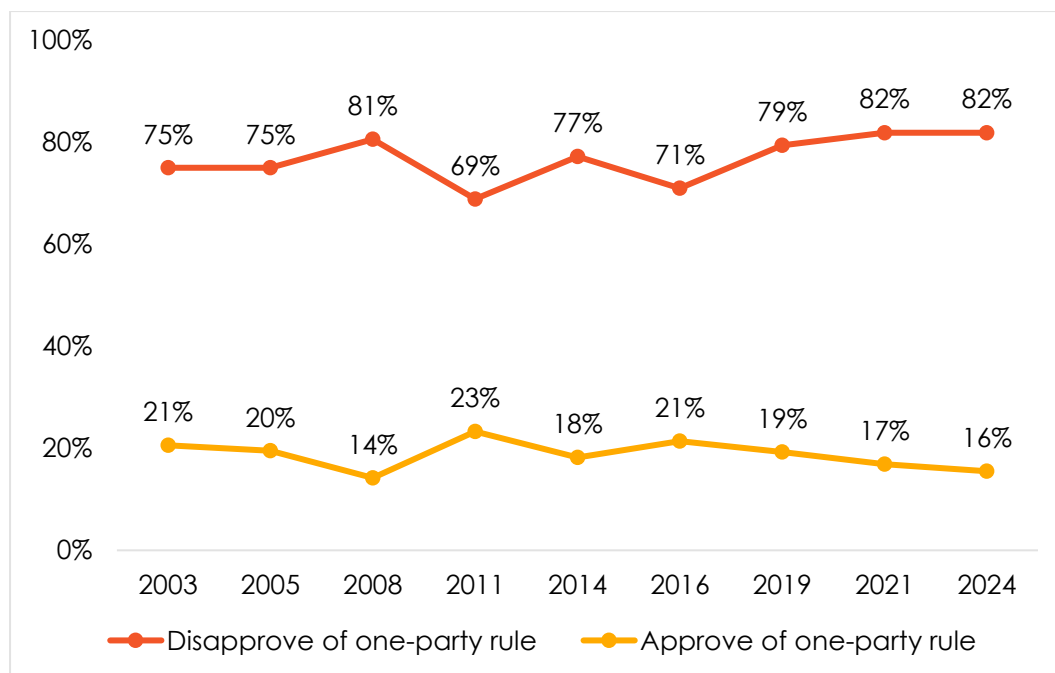
Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Kenya.

Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Kenyans have real choices in who governs them.

(% who agree with Statement 2)

Consistent with their desire for multiparty democracy, Kenyans overwhelmingly (82%) reject the idea of one-party rule. Opposition to one-party rule has consistently exceeded two-thirds of adults and is currently at its highest level of the past two decades (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Views on one-party rule | Kenya | 2003-2024

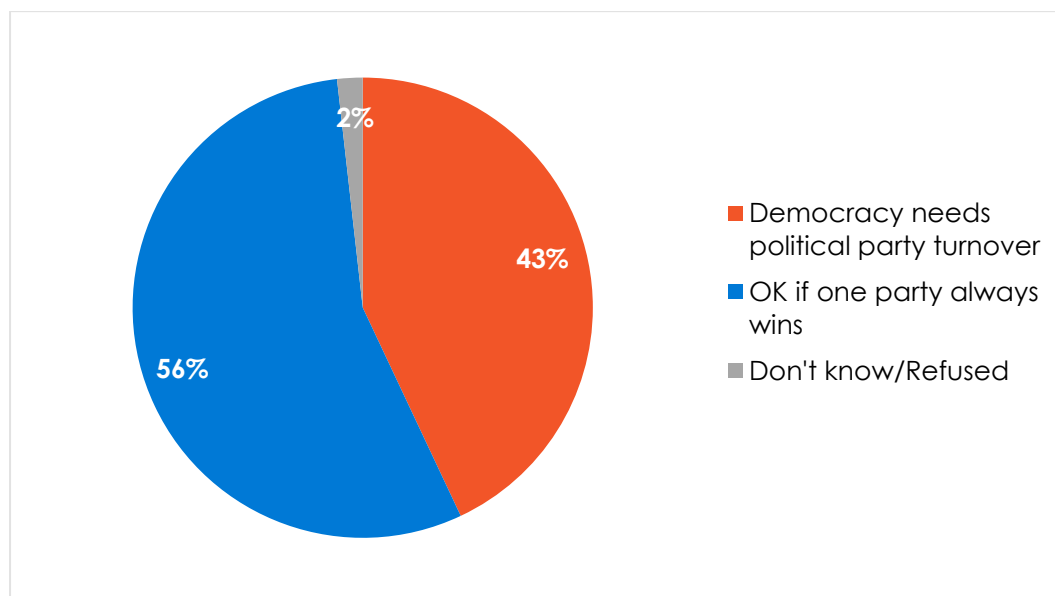


Respondents were asked: Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternative: Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office?

The alternation of power, or peaceful turnovers of power from one party to another, is a feature of mature democracies that scholars and activists argue nurtures democratic legitimacy and participation and avoids the concentration of power in the hands of a single group or individual (Huntington, 1991; Cho & Logan, 2014). Kenya has experienced political power alternation in 2002, after the 24-year rule of the late Daniel arap Moi, as well as in 2013 and 2022 (Cheeseman, Kanyinga, Lynch, & Willis, 2024).

Only 43% of Kenyans say it is better if power sometimes changes hands, while a majority (56%) consider single-party dominance acceptable so long as elections are free and fair (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Views on political party turnover | Kenya | 2024¹



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.

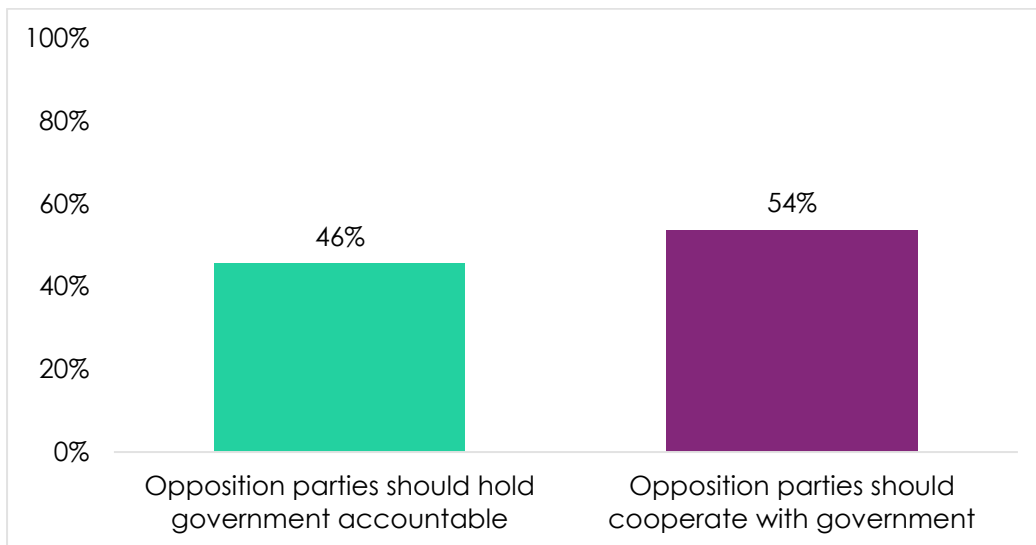
Statement 2: In a democracy, as long as a government is elected by the people in a free and fair election, it doesn't matter if one party always wins and continuously governs the country.

Additionally, more than half (54%) of respondents say opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with the government to help it develop the country once an election is over (Figure 5). Nearly half (46%) instead want opposition parties to focus on monitoring and criticising the government to hold it accountable.

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¹ Due to rounding, percentages may not always add up to exactly 100%.

Figure 5: Role of opposition parties after elections | Kenya | 2024



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

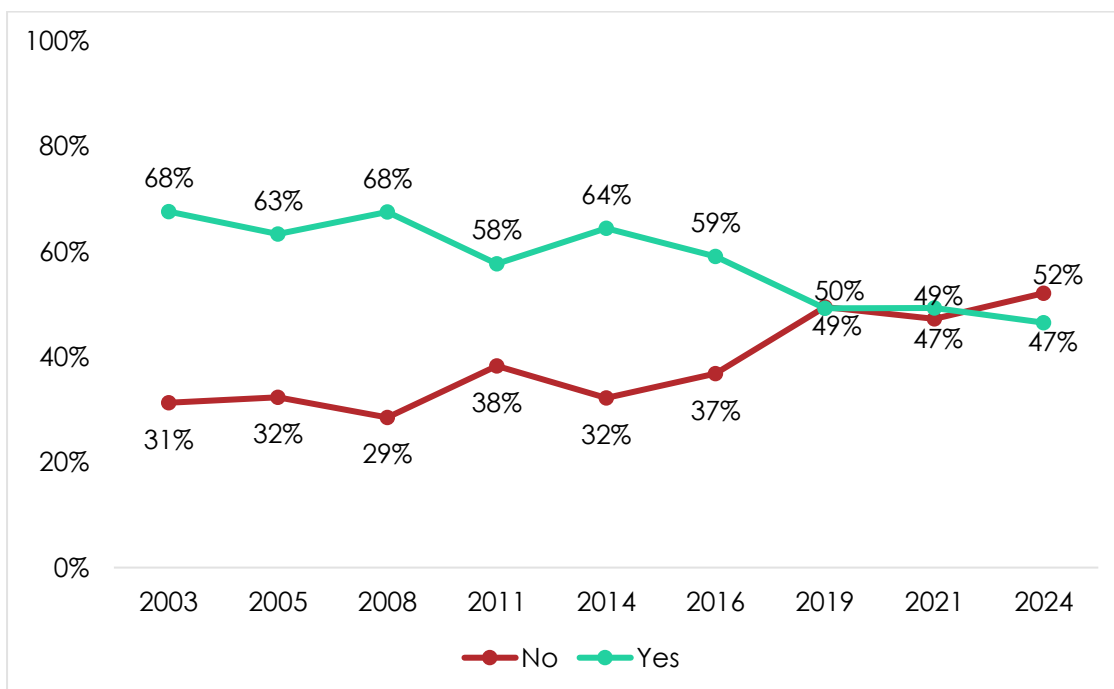
Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticise the government in order to hold it accountable.

Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country.

Political parties: Affiliation and trust

Fewer than half (47%) of respondents say they “feel close to” a political party. The share of Kenyans who identify with a political party has been declining steadily over the past two decades, dropping by 21 percentage points since 2003 (68%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Feel close to a political party | Kenya | 2003-2024

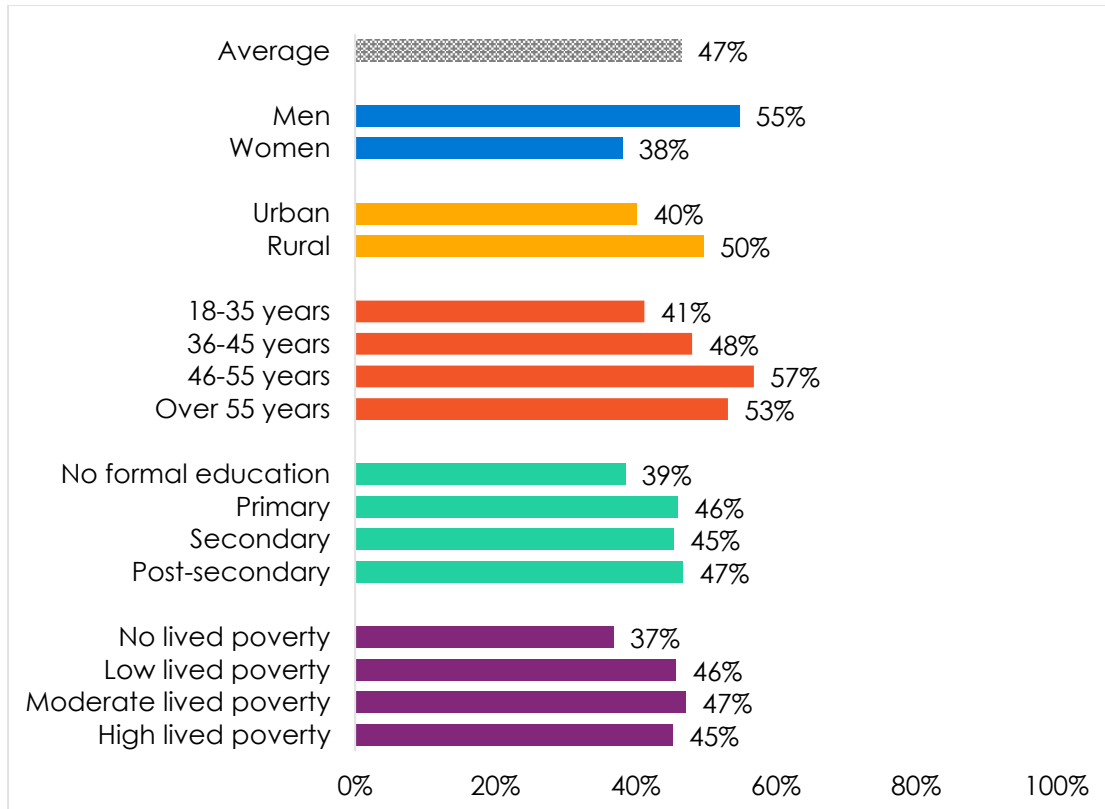


Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any political party?

Identification with a political party is more common among men than women (55% vs. 38%) and in rural areas than in cities (50% vs. 40%) (Figure 7). It increases with age, ranging from 41% of 18- to 35-year-olds to more than half (53%-57%) of older citizens.

Party identification is less frequent among Kenyans without formal education (39%) than among those with formal schooling (45%-47%), and less common among economically well-off citizens (37%) than among those experiencing some level of lived poverty² (45%-47%).

Figure 7: Feel close to a political party | by demographic group | Kenya | 2024



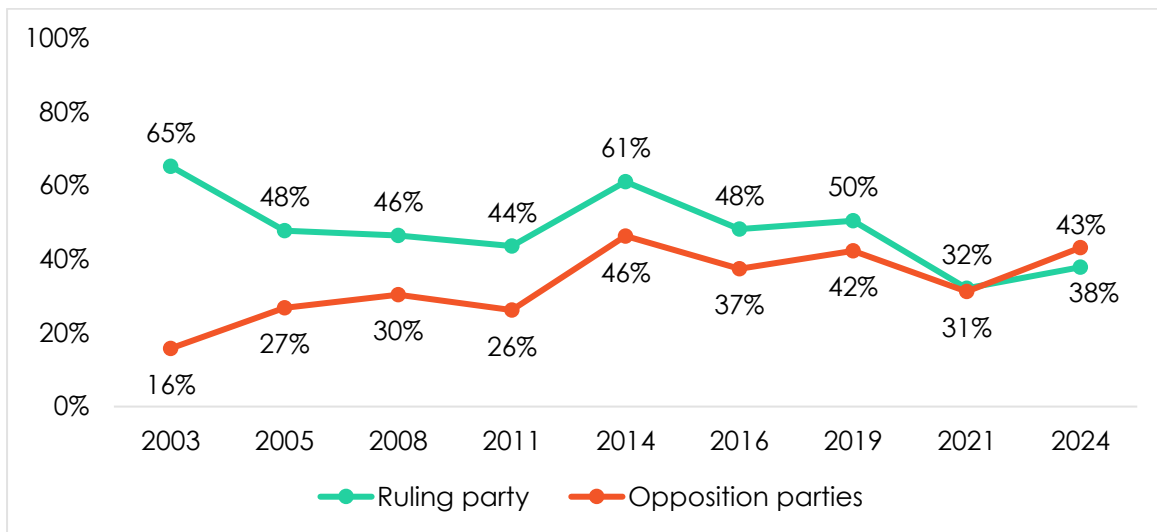
Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any political party? (% who say “yes”)

Only about four in 10 citizens say they trust opposition (43%) and ruling (38%) political parties “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 8).

Aside from a spike in 2014, popular trust in the ruling party has been on a downward slide for the past two decades, while trust in opposition parties has been increasing. In 2003, nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents said they trusted the ruling party “somewhat” or “a lot,” compared to only 16% who expressed trust in the opposition, a gap of 49 percentage points. That gap has been shrinking since then as parties have competed and alternated power in closely contested elections, and opposition parties overtook the ruling party in public trust for the first time in 2024.

² 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 to eat, enough water for domestic needs, medical care, enough fuel to cook, and cash income) during the past year. See Mattes and Lekalake (2025) for more information on lived poverty.

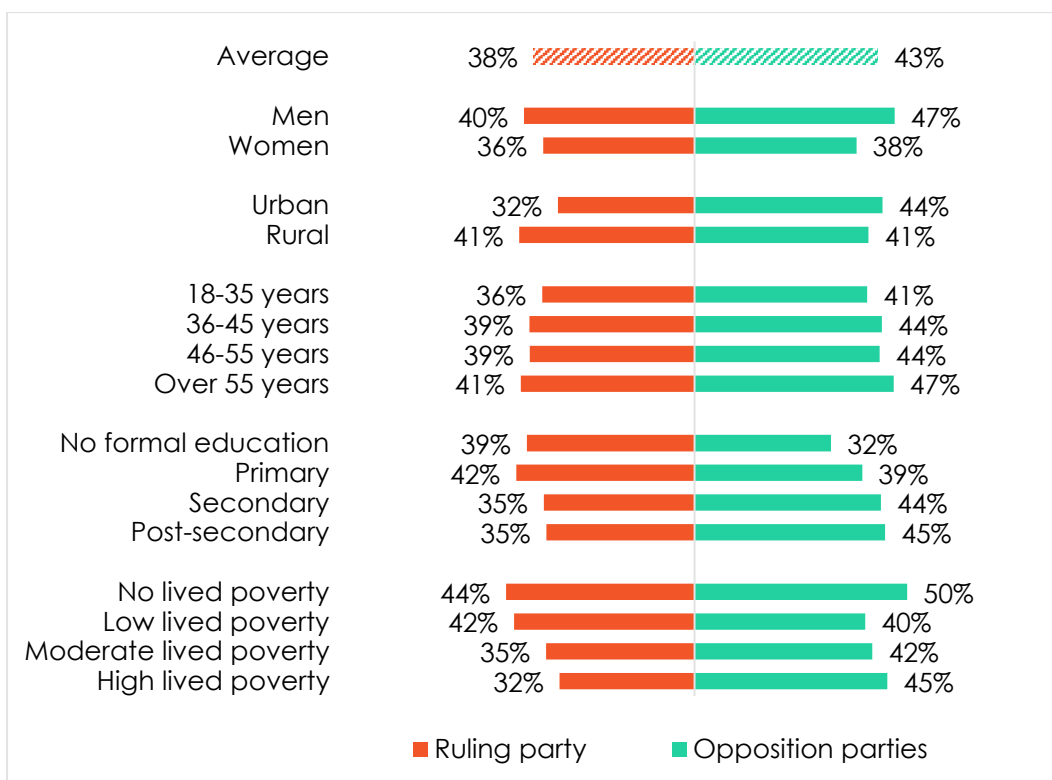
Figure 8: Trust in political parties | Kenya | 2003-2024



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

More men than women say they trust the ruling political party (40% vs. 36%) and opposition political parties (47% vs. 38%) (Figure 9). Rural residents express greater trust in the ruling party (41%) than their urban counterparts (32%), while trust in opposition parties is slightly higher among urban than rural residents (44% vs. 41%).

Figure 9: Trust in political parties | by demographic group | Kenya | 2024



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

Young Kenyans (aged 18-35) are less likely than their elders to trust the ruling (36%) and opposition (41%) parties.

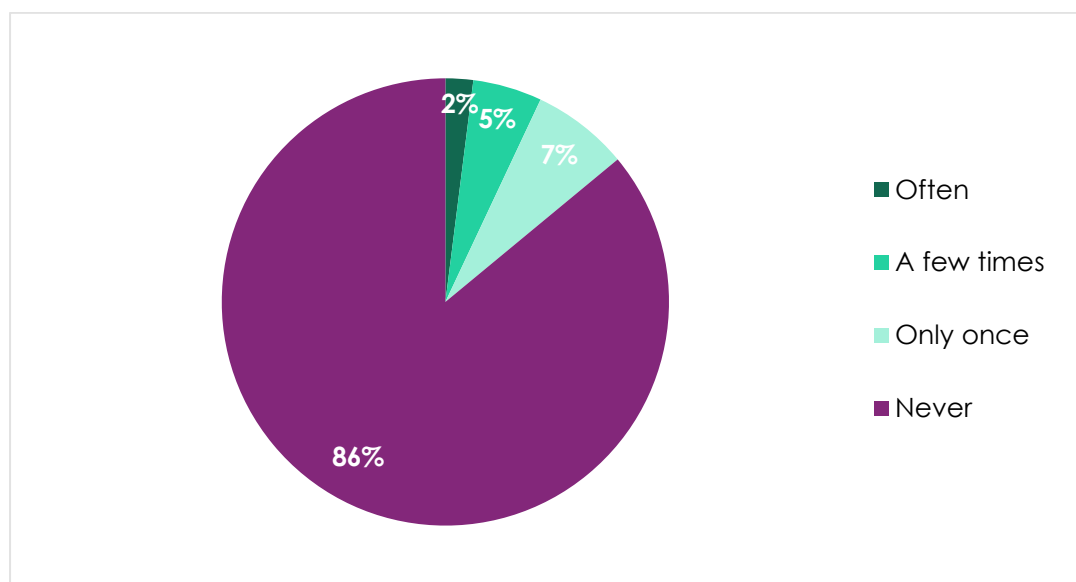
Trust in opposition parties rises with respondents' level of education, from 32% among those with no formal education to 45% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

And trust in both the ruling party (44%) and opposition parties (50%) is higher among economically well-off individuals than among those experiencing lived poverty.

Contact with party officials and voting

Most Kenyans appear not to interact directly with political parties: Almost nine out of 10 (86%) say they did not contact a party official during the previous 12 months to discuss an important problem or to share their views (Figure 10). About one in seven citizens say they contacted a party official "only once" (7%), "a few times" (5%), or "often" (2%) during the previous year.

Figure 10: Contacted a political party official | Kenya | 2024



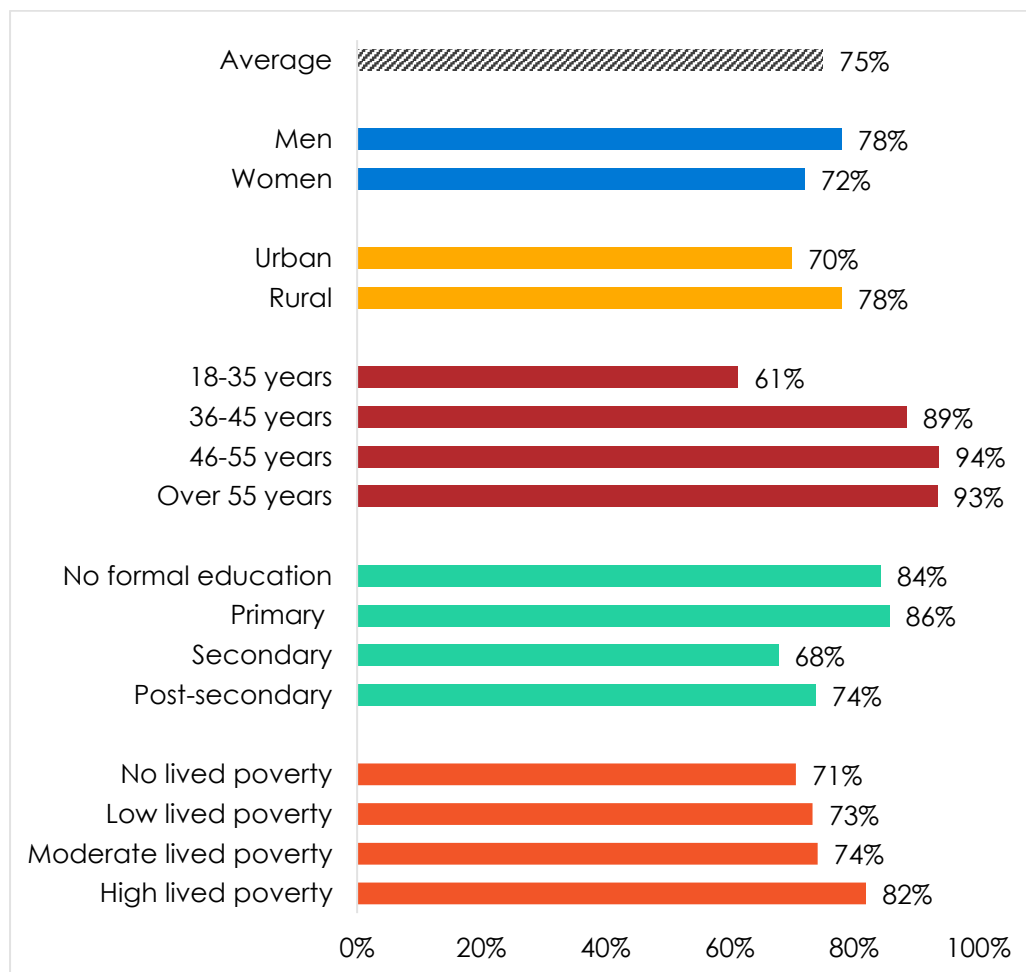
Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted a political party official about some important problem or to give them your views?

But most say they did cast their ballots at election time. Excluding those who were too young to vote, three-fourths (75%) of respondents say they voted in the 2022 election, while 25% indicate that they did not vote (Figure 11).

Self-reported voting rates are higher among men (78%) and rural residents (78%) than among women (72%) and urbanites (70%). They are particularly low among youth (61% of those aged 18-35, compared to 89%-94% of their elders).

Citizens with primary schooling or less (84%-86%) are more likely to say they voted than those with secondary (68%) or post-secondary (74%) education. And self-reported voting was more common among the poorest respondents (82%) than among their better-off counterparts (71%-74%).

Figure 11: Voted in 2022 election | by demographic group | Kenya | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In the last national election, held in 2022, 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 are excluded.)*

Conclusion

Kenyans have consistently and strongly supported multiparty democracy for the past two decades. But while most reject the idea of having only a single party, a majority don't mind having one dominant party as long as elections are free and fair.

Kenyans are divided regarding the proper role of opposition parties, with a slim majority favouring cooperation with the government in developing the country rather than focusing on monitoring and criticising the government to ensure accountability.

Identification with political parties has declined significantly, as has popular trust in the ruling party – now surpassed for the first time by trust in opposition parties.

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