AFRO BAROMETER
Let the people have a say

African insights 2025

Citizen engagement, citizen power: Africans claim the promise of democracy

Afrobarometer

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 40 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, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

Vision

A world in which Africa's development is anchored in the realities and aspirations of its people

Mission

To make citizen voice a key pillar of Africa policy and decision making

Afrobarometer provides high-quality data and analysis on what Africans are thinking. With a data bank of more than 430,000 interviews in 43 African countries, we are leading the charge to bridge the continent's data gap. Our data inform many global indices, including the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer, and the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators.

All Afrobarometer data and analysis are public goods, available at www.afrobarometer.org, and may be analysed free of charge using our online data analysis tool.

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On the cover

Left to right: Town hall meeting in Gauteng, South Africa (photo: Ihsaan Haffejee/GroundUp); community engagement forum in Somalia (photo: AMISOM); farmworkers in Cape Town, South Africa (photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp).

On the back cover

Participants in CORAGEM community radio training programme in Mozambique (photo: USAID Mozambique)

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See last year's report online

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Foreword »

Citizen engagement, our greatest hope

Afrobarometer's 2025 flagship report explores a theme – citizen engagement – that is central to every thriving democracy and lies at the heart of our mission "to make citizen voice a key pillar of Africa policy and decision making." At its core, democracy relies on people who are willing, able, and empowered to contribute their time, talents, and resources to shaping the civic and political life of their communities and countries. Such acts of engagement, whether quiet or bold, formal or informal, are the lifeblood of any society that seeks to govern itself justly and grow inclusively. Today's citizen participation carries forward an ethos that is deeply embedded in Africa's political heritage.

> "By capturing the voices of everyday Africans, including those too often marginalised, our surveys empower citizens to contribute their lived realities to policy-making processes.

Personally, I can attest to the transformative power of engagement by individuals and institutions from the vantage point of a lawyer who has served as an executive in several sectors of the Nigerian and African economies, including banking, oil and gas, and telecommunications, as well as several not-for-profit undertakings. Examples abound of good corporate citizens who actively shape more inclusive and resilient communities through their philanthropic foundations and corporate social responsibility interventions on the continent. And WISCAR (Women in Successful Careers), a leadership and mentoring initiative that I founded, has demonstrated the importance – and the viability – of ensuring that women are seen and heard in boardrooms, in policy spaces, and in public life. It has worked to break down systemic barriers and equip women with the tools, networks, and confidence to lead. Its mission is rooted in the belief that true democratic participation must reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of all citizens, especially those who have historically been excluded.

Afrobarometer's work aligns closely with all the foregoing ideals. Guided by the vision and creative leadership of my predecessor as board chair, Prof. E. Gyimah-Boadi, our research is grounded in the belief that citizen engagement is not only a right but a cornerstone of effective governance. By capturing the voices of everyday Africans, including those too often marginalised, our surveys empower citizens to contribute their lived realities to policy-making processes. It is this commitment to centring African voices that drew me to Afrobarometer and continues to inspire my fervour for its work.

As this report shows, Africans are engaging politically and civically in diverse and dynamic ways, often at levels that compare favourably with other global regions. And yet gaps remain. Many voices have remained muted, and several patterns of participation require urgent attention. Our findings reinforce the truth that wherever democratic institutions are strong and political freedoms are protected, citizen engagement flourishes.

At a time when news about the health of our democracies can be sobering, the resolve of citizens to engage, to organise, to build, to vote, and generally to speak out remains a powerful source of hope. It is, I believe, our greatest hope for securing democratic, accountable, and inclusive governance across the African continent.

Amina Oyagbola
Afrobarometer board chair

Executive summary

Citizen engagement is a cornerstone of democratic governance. By making their voices heard as they vote, organise with their neighbours, contact their leaders, or join a public protest, citizens express their needs and preferences while helping to ensure government accountability, transparency, and effectiveness. In Africa, where community participation is deeply rooted in traditional decision-making processes, protections for citizen participation are increasingly codified in national constitutions as well as continental acts and charters.

Afrobarometer public-attitude surveys have been tracking citizen engagement on the continent for 25 years. This report, the second in an annual series on high-priority topics, draws on data spanning the past decade, including the latest round of nationally representative surveys in 39 countries, representing the views of more than three-fourths of the continent's population.

The analysis focuses on key indicators of citizen engagement: voting, political party affiliation, political discussion, attending community meetings, joining with others to raise an issue, contacting leaders, and protesting. We look at current levels of engagement, trends over the past decade, demographic patterns of engagement, and key factors that drive citizens to make their voices heard.

We find that most Africans participate in multiple political and civic activities, demonstrating engagement at levels that compare favourably with other world regions. Contrary to theories and findings from the Global North, in Africa it appears that need fosters participation, rather than disengagement: The least-wealthy citizens, and the least-wealthy countries, report higher rates of engagement than their better-off counterparts.

Importantly, we also find that more democracy, especially in the form of high-quality elections and responsive leadership, appears to foster more participation. This positive feedback has critical implications for strengthening citizen engagement – and with it, the effectiveness of political systems and the quality of governance – across the continent.

The scope of political and civic participation

Voting in elections is the predominant, but by no means the only, form of political and civic engagement for African citizens. Specifically, based on respondents' self-reported behaviours:

- Nearly three-quarters (72%) ***voted*** in their country's last national election preceding the Afrobarometer Round 9 survey, including nine out of 10 in Liberia (89%), Sierra Leone (90%), and Seychelles (91%).
- Four in 10 (41%) ***"feel close to" a political party***.
- More than six in 10 (62%) "occasionally" or "frequently" ***discuss politics*** with family or friends.
- Almost half (47%) ***attended a community meeting*** at least once during the previous year, ranging from 11% in Tunisia to 85% in Madagascar.
- More than four in 10 (42%) ***joined with others to raise an issue***.
- More than one-third (37%) ***contacted a traditional leader***, 28% a ***local government councillor***, 15% a ***member of Parliament*** (MP), and 20% a ***political party official*** during the previous year.
- ***Protesting*** is the least common form of engagement, but even so, nearly one in 10 respondents (9%) participated in a demonstration during the previous year.

Looking across these indicators, we see that almost everyone gets involved: A mere 6% did not join any of the 10 forms of engagement examined here. And very few stop with just voting: On average, individuals engaged in 3.6 forms of participation.

The Gambia, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe record some of the highest levels

Afrobarometer indicators of citizen engagement

- Voted in last national election
- Feel close to a political party
- Discuss politics occasionally/frequently

During the previous year:

- Attended a community meeting
- Joined with others to raise an issue
- Contacted traditional leader
- Contacted local government councillor
- Contacted political party official
- Contacted member of Parliament
- Participated in protest/demonstration

of citizen engagement. In contrast, Tunisians appear to have largely withdrawn – whether out of fear or frustration in the wake of political crises and authoritarian crackdowns – from most forms of political participation (see Page 13). We illustrate country findings on key indicators of citizen engagement in our scorecards for 39 African countries (see Page 45).

When we compare engagement in 2021/2023 to levels recorded in 2011/2013 across 30 countries, there is no consistent pattern. Some indicators are down, especially party affiliation, as well as collective engagement in community meetings and raising issues. But others appear to be holding steady (voting and protesting), and still others have increased (contacting). While analysts and citizens have raised concerns about the possible stifling impact of closing civic space and declining freedoms, factors such as the effects of pandemic lockdowns, accelerating urbanisation, and the spread of new information and communications technologies may also be shaping these changing levels of citizen engagement.

> "These findings suggest that initiatives aimed at boosting citizen engagement should focus on political factors, especially fostering open and responsive democratic institutions and improving election quality.

Who participates?

Afrobarometer Round 9 data confirm that women continue to engage at substantially lower rates than men across all indicators included in the survey. And youth (aged 18-35) are less engaged than older generations on all types of political and civic participation except protest; the disparity is largest for voting, where an 18-percentage-point gap separates youth from their elders. But as last year's massive protests against Kenya's Finance Bill demonstrate, once motivated, youth engagement can carry impressive weight. It may also take new forms: In response to a question asked in 28 countries in 2024 (Round 10), 7% of young Africans say they used social media during the previous year to "post about politics or community affairs" – a still-nascent form of political participation that has shown remarkable impact and is likely to grow.

Compared to citizens with post-secondary education, those with no formal schooling are more likely to vote, to identify with a political party, to attend community meetings, and to contact traditional leaders, and are about equally likely to contact an MP, local government councillor, or political party official.

Similarly, the poorest citizens are more likely than the well-off to identify with a political party, attend a community meeting, join with others to raise an issue, and contact traditional leaders, local government councillors, and political party officials, and are about equally likely to vote, protest, discuss politics, and contact MPs.

Drivers of citizen engagement

Analysis of factors that drive or inhibit political and civic participation at the country level indicates that:

- ***Need fosters engagement:*** Rates of participation, particularly in community meetings and joining with others to raise an issue, are higher in countries with lower levels of economic well-being. Confronting the unmet needs of individuals, households, and communities may be a major motivator for citizen engagement.
- ***Government responsiveness promotes engagement:*** Countries where citizens perceive local government councillors as responsive to their needs generally have higher rates of contact with these officials. However, this pattern does not hold for national legislators, who are less accessible to ordinary citizens.
- ***More democracy means more engagement:*** Electoral participation is higher in countries where citizens are satisfied with the way democracy works; believe that elections are free, fair, and effective; and feel free to cast their ballots as they wish. In contrast, when these conditions are not present, protests are more common. Put another way, the factors that drive conventional forms of participation tend to reduce rates of participation in protest, and vice versa.

These findings suggest that initiatives aimed at boosting citizen engagement should focus on political factors, especially fostering open and responsive democratic institutions and improving election quality.

Democracy's promise is built not only on elections, but on the broader ability of citizens to participate in shaping their political future. Afrobarometer data show that Africans remain determined to make their voices heard, even in the face of political constraints. Their engagement represents a wealth of commitment and skills that can strengthen government effectiveness and legitimacy if leaders are willing to listen and respond.

Introduction » Citizen engagement in Africa: Many ways to have a say

Citizen engagement matters. It has saved lives in South Africa and democracy in Senegal (Heywood, 2009; Al Jazeera, 2024). It is shaping policies, securing accountability, and improving well-being on a daily basis across the continent.

Whether they are voting ineffective politicians out of office, demanding accountability through a participatory school budgeting process, or taking to the streets to protest an unpopular new e-levy, citizens' voices are an essential component of democratic governance and effective policy making (Al Jazeera, 2021; United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2008; Gallien, Hearson, & Abounabhan, 2025; Dahl, 1971, 1998; Schmitter & Karl, 1991). While non-democratic regimes may permit certain forms of public participation, democratic engagement uniquely empowers citizens to shape the government agenda (Lauth, 2015).

Civic engagement and political participation are essential for building democratic and effective societies, allowing citizens to express their needs and preferences while increasing government accountability, transparency, and effectiveness. Engagement is also good for individual citizens, who build political skills and confidence, gain a sense of control over their lives, and are more likely to see their needs met through these activities. And although political leaders may sometimes find the exercise of citizen voice to be a nuisance or even a threat, it can also benefit governments by building legitimacy, trust, and stability. Absent citizen participation, the very essence of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people will be lost.

Citizen engagement is nothing new in Africa. Community participation in decision-making processes is deeply rooted in indigenous traditions that include the *barazas* of East Africa, the *palava trees* of West Africa, and the *kgotlas* (Botswana), *pitsos* (Lesotho), and *citizen juries* (Malawi) of Southern Africa. These practices have long provided platforms for citizens to debate issues facing their communities, communicate their needs to their leaders, and contribute to decisions on issues that impact their lives.

Practices of consultation and engagement have of course extended into the modern era. Even before the political openings that swept across Africa in the early 1990s, analysts described associational life across the continent as "vibrant" (Bratton, 1998), encompassing engagements ranging from ethnic welfare associations and "hometown associations" to emerging labour, political, and advocacy movements (Barkan, McNulty & Ayeni, 1991; Logan, Sanny, & Han, 2020). As democratic political space has opened over the past three decades, the scope of engagements has grown to include women's groups, human-rights advocacy, and grassroots activism that promotes democracy, good governance, and the fight against corruption (Tripp, 1994, 2019).

"Although political leaders may sometimes find the exercise of citizen voice to be a nuisance or even a threat, it can also benefit governments by building legitimacy, trust, and stability.

Promises of and protections for citizen participation are increasingly codified in national constitutions and continental instruments. The African Union (2000) Constitutive Act emphasises citizens' participation, and the union has established institutions such as the Pan-African Parliament and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council to facilitate participation in its activities and decisions. Article 13 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights ("the Banjul Charter") promises that "Every citizen shall have the right to participate freely in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives in accordance with the provisions of law" (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 1981).

The scope of "citizen engagement"

Voting has long been regarded as the foundational form of political engagement. Early analysts thus focused their attention on citizen actions aimed at either choosing or directly influencing elected or political leaders through elections, campaigning, and direct contacts (Verba & Nie, 1972).

But over the past five decades, we have evolved toward a much more expansive understanding of what constitutes citizen engagement. Among other things, today's definitions also often include:

- Engagement that takes place between elections as well as during elections
- Actions that are taken both individually and as part of larger groups of citizens
- Efforts to influence not just elected leaders, but a wide array of societal leaders (e.g. media, economic and social elites), as well as fellow citizens
- Behaviours that reveal attention to politics as well as deliberate political actions (Ekman & Amnå, 2012)

Turning to the data

Afrobarometer has been tracking citizen engagement for 25 years. Over that time, we have asked respondents about many types of participation, recording whether, and how often, they have engaged in behaviours such as joining or leading community groups, contacting media, voting, or protesting. For our purposes here, we will focus primarily on Afrobarometer's most recent data on 10 indicators of citizen engagement collected in Round 9 surveys in 39 countries between late 2021 and mid-2023. We will also examine trends in participation for 30 countries where our data extend back to Round 5 (2011/2013).

Stretching across the key modes of citizen engagement, our 10 core indicators will be grouped according to four functional categories:

Electoral participation – **Some of the many ways in which individuals engage with parties and elections:**

- ***Voted in the last election*** – The quintessential indicator of individual political participation
- ***Feel close to a political party*** *(party affiliation)* – Signals attention to politics and reveals political preferences, although it does not require direct action

Collective action – **Actions involving coordinated engagement with fellow citizens that vary in the degree of required initiative:**

- ***Discuss politics*** – An "entry-level" form of engagement that may reflect anything from interest in politics to an intentional effort to persuade others
- ***Attended a community meeting*** – May reflect anything from fairly passive attendance at an informational meeting to an active effort to pursue a political goal
- ***Joined with others to raise an issue*** – A more clearly action-oriented form of collective participation seeking change

Contacting leaders – **Usually seen as an individual action in pursuit of a public good, although it may sometimes be done collectively and/or in pursuit of private goods such as jobs:**

- ***Contacted local government councillor*** – Like voting, one of the most long-recognised forms of political participation
- ***Contacted member of Parliament (MP)*** – Same as above, except that MPs tend to be much less accessible to ordinary citizens than local government councillors
- ***Contacted political party official*** – Party officials may serve as intermediaries to elected officials, especially to less-accessible MPs, and may be contacted for many of the same reasons as politicians themselves.
- ***Contacted traditional leader*** – Traditional leaders are unelected, so they fall outside the rubric of electoral or party politics, but in many communities they serve multiple social and political roles and can have a major influence on political outcomes, either directly or through their influence on elected political leaders.

Activism – **Includes actions that fall outside the traditional bounds of voting and contacting leaders, including things such as signing petitions, organising boycotts, and demonstrating (Ekman & Amnå, 2012):**

- ***Participated in a protest or demonstration*** – Often a contentious form of engagement, high-risk but potentially high-impact, usually aimed at drawing attention to an issue and/or bringing about significant change

This wider scope extends our zone of interest far beyond electoral politics to the many ways in which citizens try to make their voices heard in the long intervals between elections.

Regarding the terminology we will use in the remainder of this report, we note that analysts have offered varying definitions and categorisations of concepts such as "civic engagement" and "political participation." As there is considerable conceptual overlap across these modes and categories, we see different forms of citizen engagement as existing on a broad spectrum of dispositions and actions that are "civic" or "political" in nature. Given this fluidity, we will use the terms interchangeably. Our emphasis will be on identifying the defining characteristics of each type of engagement and what they reveal about how and why citizens engage.

Structure of the report

The remainder of this report will examine these forms of citizen engagement in some detail. We will begin with a review of how, and how much, citizens participate, then discuss how rates of participation have changed over the past decade, often in the face of growing restrictions on individual freedoms.

The final two sections will address questions about who participates and why. We will first consider the role of socio-demographics in shaping the likelihood of individuals' engagement, reflecting on which kinds of engagement attract people with different endowments of skills and resources. The last section will examine some of the key drivers of engagement at the country level, focusing on socioeconomic conditions, collective beliefs about political efficacy, and the implications of democratic performance, especially election quality.

In brief sidebars interspersed among these sections, we will look at how Africa compares to other regions in terms of citizen engagement, the impact of social media, citizen engagement in election campaigns, case studies of powerful citizen engagement in Kenya and Senegal, and levels of engagement among youth and women. "Country scorecards on citizen engagement" on Page 45 introduces our one-page graphic illustrations of key indicators of citizen engagement in 39 African countries.

Afrobarometer methodology

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 43 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys, conducted between late 2021 and mid-2023, cover 39 countries. Round 10 surveys were launched in January 2024 and are expected to be completed in mid-2025.

Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice. Nationally representative samples yield country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points (for N=2,400) to +/-3 percentage points (for N=1,200) at a 95% confidence level.

Data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Due to rounding, a few total percentages may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of reported sub-categories.

For more information on Afrobarometer's methodology, visit www.afrobarometer.org/surveys-and-methods.

An overview of engagement: 10 ways Africans get involved

In Afrobarometer Round 9, we interviewed 53,444 respondents across 39 countries about their political preferences, experiences, and behaviours. Our indicators offer a rich view across the modes and categories of political engagement described in the introduction.

Electoral participation

2024 was often described as a "year of elections" for the African continent as 22 countries held some type of election (Resnick & Signé, 2024; EISA, 2025). Another 17 are slated to cast ballots during 2025.

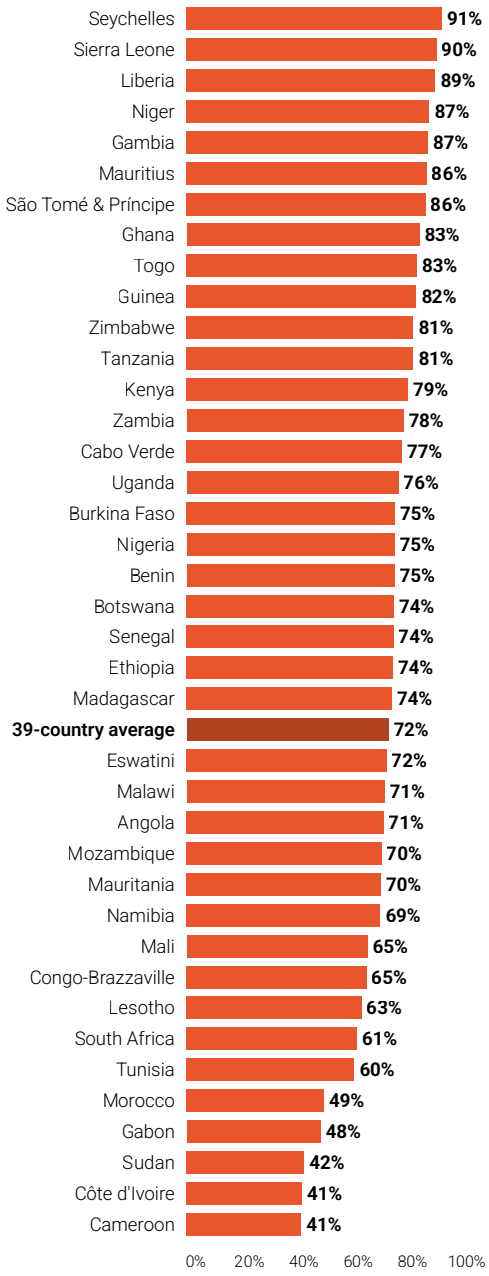
Voting is the most recognisable and common form of political participation, and competitive elections are one of the practices most closely associated with democracy. Even in countries that are only partially democratic or non-democratic, an election or referendum may offer citizens some opportunity to express their views and preferences, either by casting a ballot among limited choices or even by boycott.

Election environments vary considerably across the continent. On the positive side, across 39 countries, a resounding 85% of Afrobarometer respondents report that they feel free to vote as they choose. A narrower majority (59%) say the last national election in their country was mostly or completely free and fair, though one in three (34%) say it had major problems or was not free and fair, including majorities in Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea, Morocco, and Sudan, and an overwhelming 72% in Gabon.

Even if elections are generally free and fair, a lack of public confidence in election efficacy may undercut people's motivation to vote. When asked how effective elections are in ensuring that legislators reflect the views of voters, a slim majority (51%) say they are not effective, while only 41% say they are. Similarly, by a 50%-to-45% margin, citizens say they are not confident that elections effectively enable voters to remove leaders from office if they are not doing what the people want.

Still, for the most part Africans claim to take advantage of this foundational opportunity to engage. Excluding those who were too young to vote, nearly three-quarters (72%) say they voted in their country's last national election preceding the Afrobarometer Round 9 survey, including an impressive nine out of 10 in Liberia (89%), Sierra Leone (90%), and Seychelles (91%) (Figure 1). While research has shown that self-reported turnout numbers may be inflated (Karp & Brockington, 2005) due to "social desirability," as citizens want to appear to be "doing their part," these numbers are at minimum indicative of the importance that people place on this opportunity to make their voices heard.

Figure 1: Voted in last election | 39 countries | 2021/2023



**Reported voting among those who were old enough to vote; "too young to vote" were excluded. For question texts, see Page 44.*

Voters queue up to cast their ballots in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (photo: MONUSCO/John Bopengo).

There are exceptions: Only about four in 10 report voting in Sudan (42%), Côte d'Ivoire (41%), and Cameroon (41%).

Another measure of electoral engagement is affiliation with a political party. Although association with a political party does not reflect any specific action on the part of citizens, at its simplest, partisan identification serves as a valuable indicator of political interest and a signal of preferences, and may be a precursor to other forms of electoral engagement such as voting, attending rallies, and working on campaigns, as well as contacting political leaders (Mattes & Krönke, 2020). (See sidebar about Round 8 (2019/2021) findings on attending rallies and working for campaigns on Page 17.)

Across 38 countries where this question was asked in Round 9, 41% say they "feel close to" a political party (Figure 2). Sierra Leoneans are the most engaged, with nearly three-quarters (73%) reporting a party affiliation, and at least half say the same in 10 other countries. But in Mauritius (18%), Burkina Faso (18%), Sudan (11%), and Tunisia (7%), fewer than one in five identify with a party.

Collective action

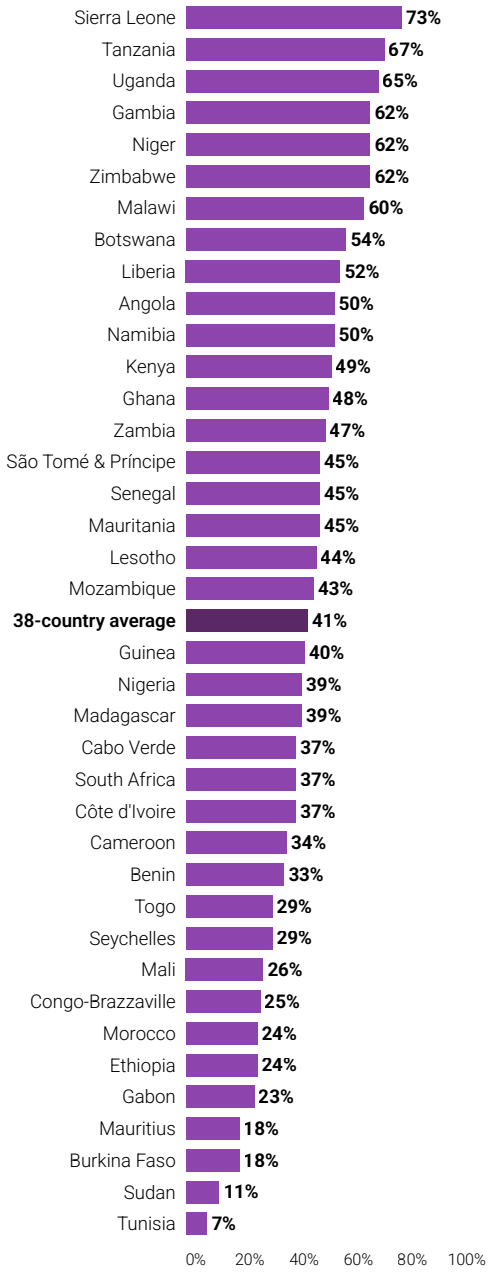
Voting may be a cornerstone of democracy (Bratton, 1998), but it is an imperfect tool for expressing citizen voice. Elections generally occur only once every few years, and they force voters to compress myriad needs, preferences, and evaluations into just a few choices. How do citizens engage their leaders, make demands on them, and hold them accountable between elections?

Non-electoral forms of citizen engagement can take a variety of forms. Here we will focus on several collective forms of engagement, starting with the simple act of discussing politics with friends and family.

While not as common as voting, discussions about politics are a common pastime for many Africans. On average, more than six in 10 say they discuss politics occasionally (44%) or frequently (18%) (Figure 3). Nigeriens are the most outspoken (76% at least occasionally), followed by Senegalese (74%), Nigerians (74%), and Cameroonians (73%). In contrast, citizens are more reticent about engaging in political conversations in Angola (48%), Mozambique (47%), and Côte d'Ivoire (44%). If we focus in on just those who say they discuss politics *frequently*, Kenyans emerge as the most politically engaged (32%), along with Malians (31%) and Basotho (29%).

Another form of collective engagement that is potentially – although not always – political is attendance at community meetings. Community meetings may take place in many forms and for many reasons. Communities may have regularly scheduled meetings that members are expected or required to attend; government officials may call a community

Figure 2: Feel close to a political party | 38 countries* | 2021/2023



**Question was not asked in Eswatini.*

meeting to share information about a new policy or project; or a group of concerned neighbours may call a meeting to present a collective demand to local authorities, e.g. for improved garbage collection or water supply.

Participation in community meetings may be voluntary, mobilised, or even coerced. The likelihood of attendance may also be shaped by local cultural practices, such as the regular community gatherings known as *pitsos* in Lesotho, *kgotlas* in Botswana, or *barazas* in the Swahili-influenced cultures of East Africa that serve the broad purposes of sharing information, discussing community problems, or resolving conflict.

This ambiguity appears to be reflected in the particularly wide variation across countries on this indicator (Figure 4).

On average, 47% say they attended a community meeting at least once in the past year, but this ranges from a high of 85% among Malagasy (including 52% who did so frequently) and 79% among Tanzanians (45% frequently) to fewer than one in five in Seychelles (13%) and Tunisia (11%).

Those who attend community meetings may do so as activists or merely to listen, but Afrobarometer also asks about a more reliably active form of collective engagement: joining with others "to raise an issue." On average, 42% say they engaged in this way during the previous year, including 20% "several times" and 11% "often" (Figure 5).

Malawians lead the way by a sizeable margin – 42% say they made collective demands frequently, and 77%

Figure 3: Discuss politics | 39 countries | 2021/2023

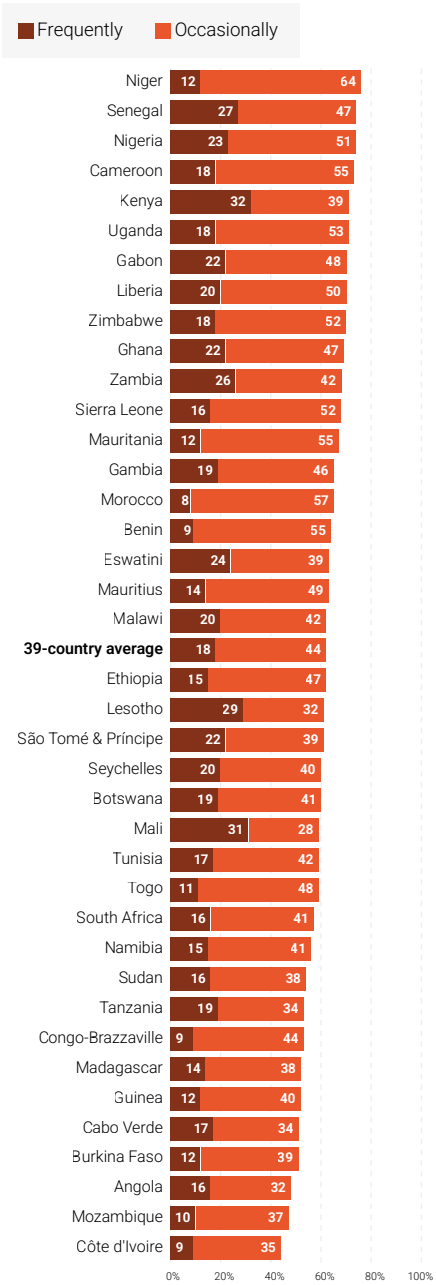


Figure 4: Attended a community meeting | 39 countries | 2021/2023

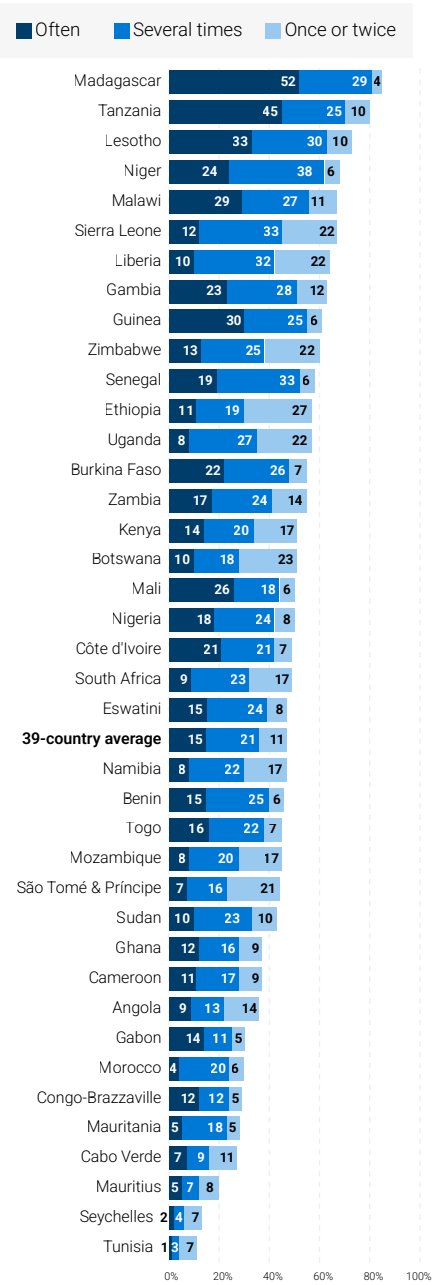
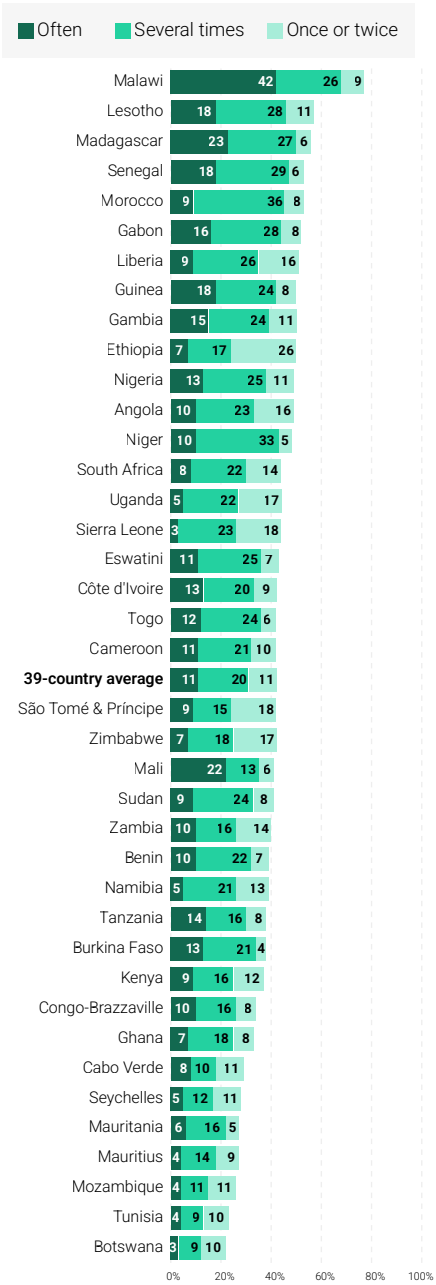


Figure 5: Joined with others to raise an issue | 39 countries | 2021/2023



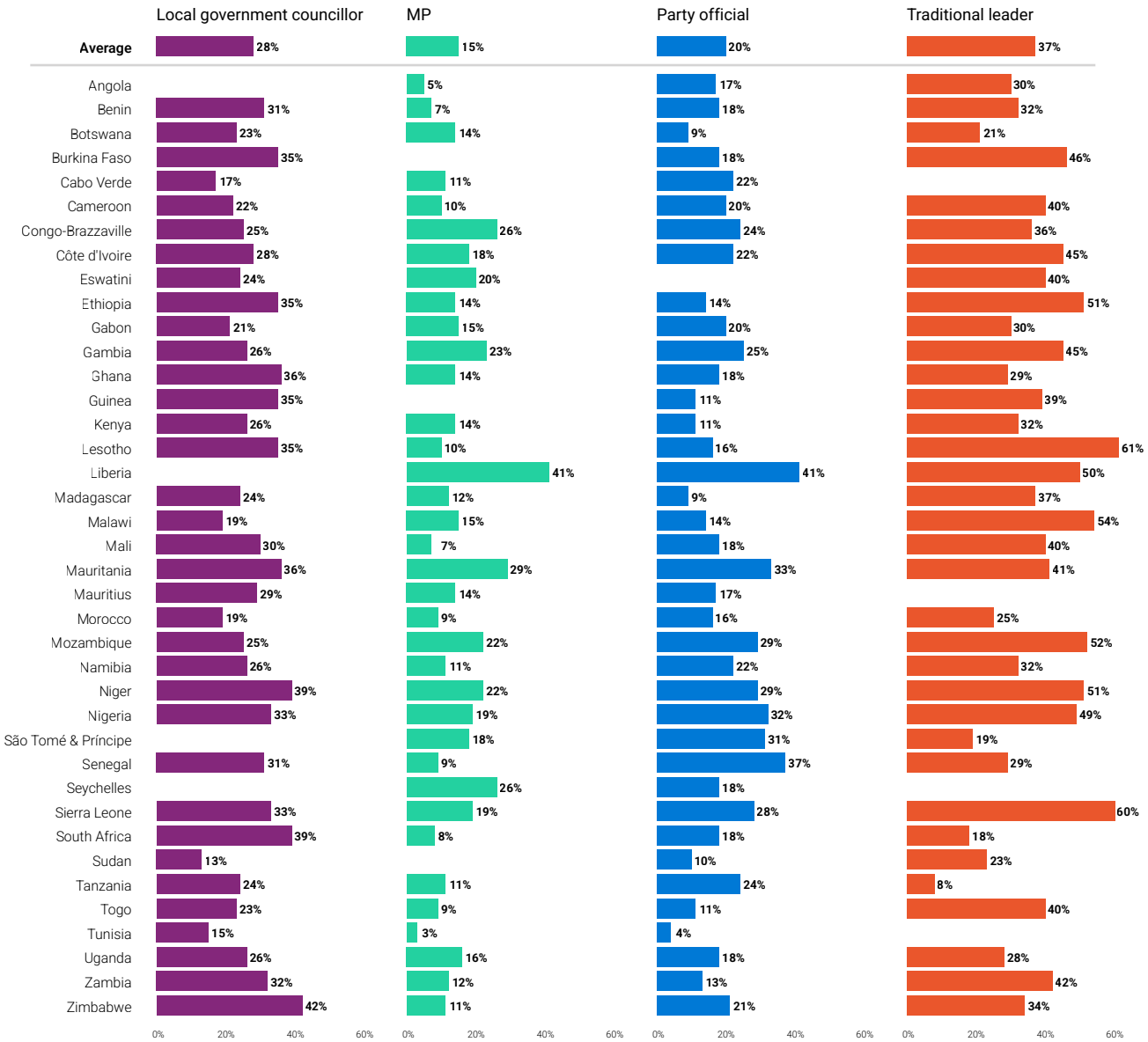
did so at least once. At least half of citizens took this step in 10 countries, while just one in four did so in Mozambique (26%), Tunisia (24%), and Botswana (22%).

Contacting leaders

We now turn to a more individualised approach to civic and political participation: directly contacting leaders[1]. People may approach their leaders for many reasons, including to request assistance with personal or community problems; look for jobs, donations, or other favours; or resolve conflicts. Afrobarometer focuses on political contact, asking respondents whether they contacted leaders "about some important problem or to give them your views."

Contacting is a relatively common practice, though how common depends on which leaders we ask about. More than one in three

Figure 6: Contacted leaders | 35-38 countries* | 2021/2023



**35 countries for traditional leaders and local government councillors, 36 countries for MPs, 38 countries for party officials*

1 Although contacting is often treated as an individualised form of participation, and we describe it that way here, previous Afrobarometer data reveal that the reality is more complex. In Round 4 (2008/2009) surveys in 20 countries, after asking respondents about contact with several types of formal leaders, we asked whether they had gone alone or with a group, and whether they had discussed a personal or a community problem. A similar pair of questions was asked about contacts with informal leaders. Among those who had contacted a formal leader such as a local government councillor or an MP, 68% had gone with others (32% alone), and 72% had gone about a community issue. In the case of informal leaders such as traditional or religious leaders, 49% went alone (50% in a group), and about half (49%) discussed a personal problem, while the other half (50%) discussed an issue affecting the community. These questions were not asked in Round 9, but the earlier findings indicate that "contacting" may not always be individual, and may have either political or non-political purposes (or both).

respondents (37%) say they contacted a traditional leader in the past year, led by Lesotho (61%) and Sierra Leone (60%); half or more contacted a traditional leader in seven countries (Figure 6).

Elected leaders may be somewhat less present in the community, but even so, 28% of citizens contacted a local government councillor and 15% a member of Parliament (MP), while 20% contacted a political party official.

In 11 countries, at least one in three citizens contacted a local government councillor, led by Zimbabwe (42%), South Africa (39%), and Niger (39%). Liberians did not have local councillors at the time of the Round 9 survey, but MPs seem to be available to fill the void, as 41% of Liberians contacted an MP, far surpassing the level in any other country. Even so, more than one-quarter contacted an MP in Mauritania (29%), Congo-Brazzaville (26%), and Seychelles (26%).

Across 29 countries where respondents were asked about contacts with all four types of leaders, an impressive 51% report contact with at least one, and 7% had contact with all four (not shown). Contact rates were highest in Lesotho (68% contact with at least one), Sierra Leone (68%), Ethiopia (61%), and Niger (60%). A remarkable 20% had contact with all four types of leaders in Mauritania.

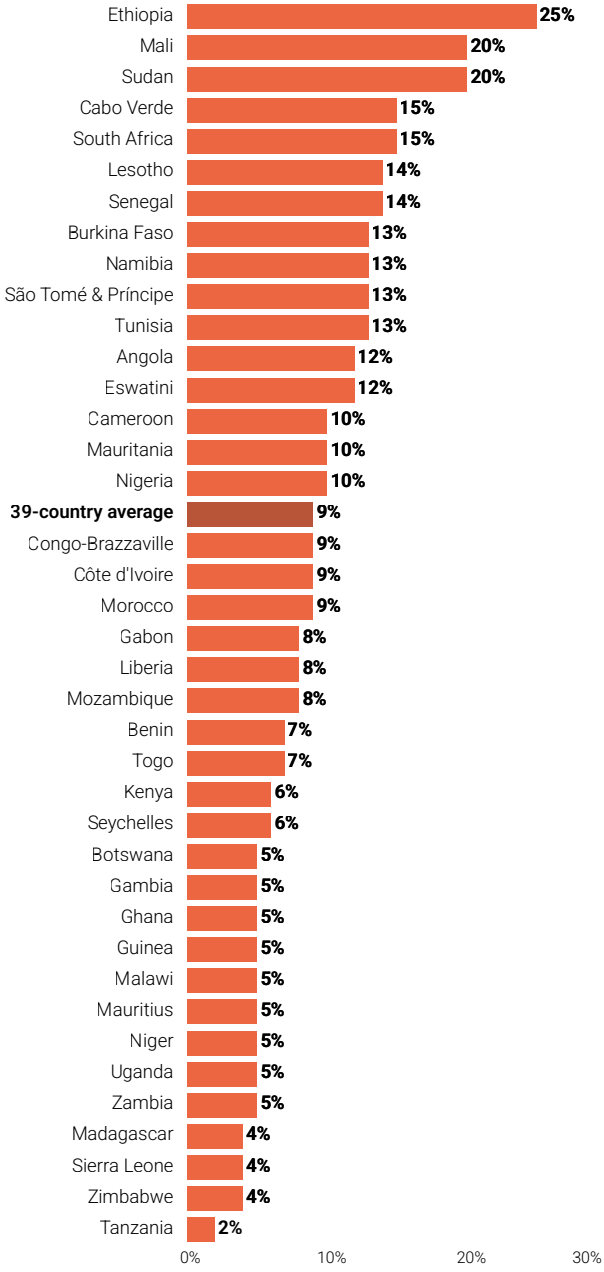
Protesting

Finally, we consider the most contentious form of political engagement measured by Afrobarometer: protest (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). There is perhaps no more assertive way of making one's needs or opinions known than taking to the streets. (The survey question does not capture the nature of the protest, e.g. whether it is non-violent or violent, state-sanctioned or not.) While protests often seem like exceptional events, they have occurred quite frequently across the continent and globally.

Just since 2024, major demonstrations have erupted in Senegal in response to President Macky Sall's attempted self-coup (Noyes & Sall, 2024), in Kenya to protest corruption and the government's Finance Bill (Opalo, 2024), in Mozambique to condemn suspected election fraud (Human Rights Watch, 2024), in Uganda to resist a planned oil pipeline (International Federation for Human Rights, 2024), in Ghana to protest government inaction on illegal mining (*galamsey*) (Reuters, 2024), in the Central African Republic to object to inadequate health care (Koena, 2025), and in Guinea to protest the junta's failure to launch a return to democracy (Associated Press, 2025). Protesters often risk heavy-handed or even deadly responses from their governments, and they don't always succeed, but there can be little question that they have frequently changed the course of national or even continental politics.

Given the risks, it is not surprising that protests are the least common mode of political engagement: About one in 10 respondents (9%) say they participated in a protest or

Figure 7: Participated in a demonstration or protest | 39 countries | 2021/2023



demonstration during the previous year. Nonetheless, we find that a remarkable one in four Ethiopians (25%) joined a protest, along with 20% of Malians and Sudanese (the Sudan survey was conducted in December 2022, after pro-democracy protests that started in September 2019 and just months before the onset of the current crisis and civil war). Tanzanians, in contrast, are the least inclined to protest: Just 2% took to the streets in the previous year (Figure 7).

Country summaries of participation and civic engagement

Table 1 summarises engagement levels across all 10 modes of participation by country. The shading offers an indication of the

least and most engaged citizenries. Cells are colour-coded based on whether participation in a given country is at the lowest, the highest, or an intermediate level in comparison to other countries.

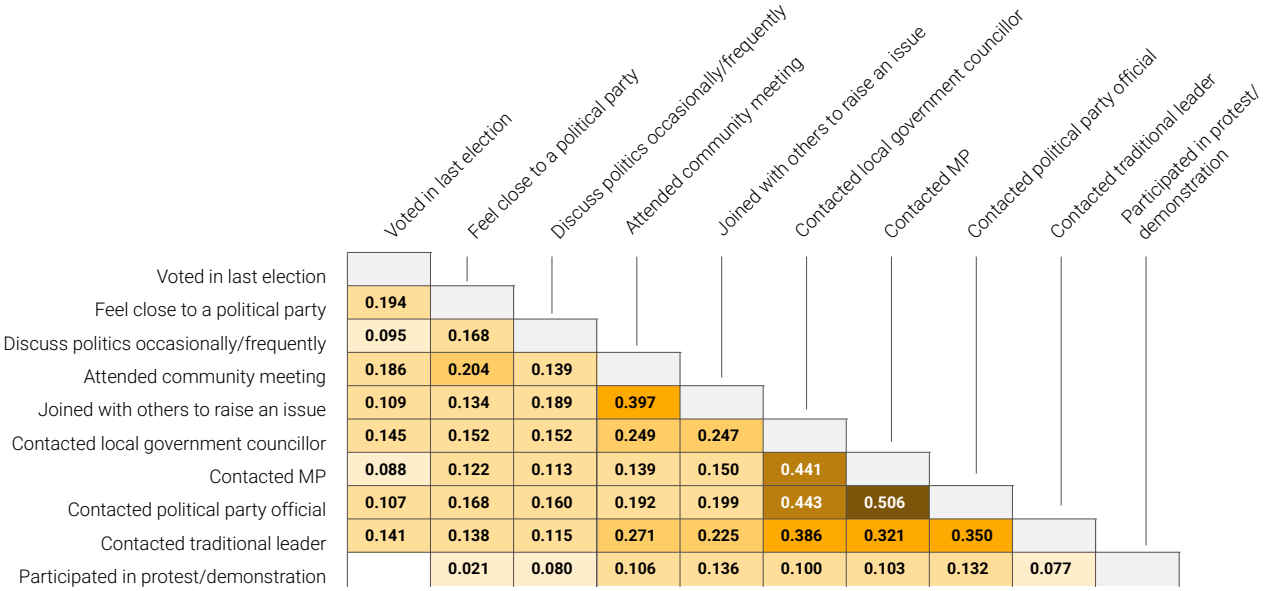
A number of countries stand out as having consistently high levels of participation across many if not all indicators. These include the Gambia, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe. Nigeriens, in particular, are well above average in participation on every indicator except protest, and Liberians and Sierra Leoneans follow closely.

In contrast, Tunisians appear to have largely withdrawn – whether out of fear or frustration in the wake of political crises and authoritarian crackdowns – from most forms of political participation (Luck, 2022). In Afrobarometer's Round 9 survey, conducted eight months after President Kais Saied's 2021 self-coup, the country scores well below average on all indicators except protest. This is particularly striking given that it was Tunisia's widespread 2010 demands for democracy that launched the Arab Spring. But withholding their participation may, for the moment, be Tunisians' preferred option for expressing their voice: Many spoke by staying home during both their 2022 constitutional referendum (estimated 30.5% turnout) (Amara, 2022) and their 2022-2023 parliamentary elections, in which turnout barely passed 10% (Amara & Mcdowall, 2023).

Table 1: Summary of participation levels, by country | 39 countries | 2021/2023

	Voted in last election	Feel close to a political party	Discuss politics occasionally /frequently	Attended community meeting	Joined with others to raise an issue	Contacted traditional leader	Contacted local government councillor	Contacted political party official	Contacted MP	Participated in protest/ demonstration
Angola	71%	50%	48%	36%	49%	30%		17%	5%	12%
Benin	75%	33%	65%	46%	39%	32%	31%	18%	7%	7%
Botswana	74%	54%	60%	50%	22%	21%	23%	9%	14%	5%
Burkina Faso	75%	18%	51%	55%	38%	46%	35%	18%		13%
Cabo Verde	77%	37%	51%	27%	30%		17%	22%	11%	15%
Cameroon	41%	34%	73%	38%	42%	40%	22%	20%	10%	10%
Congo-Brazzaville	65%	25%	54%	29%	34%	36%	25%	24%	26%	9%
Côte d'Ivoire	41%	37%	44%	48%	42%	45%	28%	22%	18%	9%
Eswatini	72%		63%	47%	43%	40%	24%		20%	12%
Ethiopia	74%	24%	62%	57%	50%	51%	35%	14%	14%	25%
Gabon	48%	23%	70%	30%	53%	30%	21%	20%	15%	8%
Gambia	87%	62%	65%	63%	50%	45%	26%	25%	23%	5%
Ghana	83%	48%	68%	36%	33%	29%	36%	18%	14%	5%
Guinea	82%	40%	51%	61%	50%	39%	35%	11%		5%
Kenya	79%	49%	71%	50%	36%	32%	26%	11%	14%	6%
Lesotho	63%	44%	61%	72%	58%	61%	35%	16%	10%	14%
Liberia	89%	52%	70%	64%	51%	50%		41%	41%	8%
Madagascar	74%	39%	52%	85%	56%	37%	24%	9%	12%	4%
Malawi	71%	60%	63%	67%	77%	54%	19%	14%	15%	5%
Mali	65%	26%	59%	50%	40%	40%	30%	18%	7%	20%
Mauritania	70%	45%	67%	28%	28%	41%	36%	33%	29%	10%
Mauritius	86%	18%	63%	19%	26%		29%	17%	14%	5%
Morocco	49%	24%	64%	30%	53%	25%	19%	16%	9%	9%
Mozambique	70%	43%	46%	45%	25%	52%	25%	29%	22%	8%
Namibia	69%	50%	57%	47%	39%	32%	26%	22%	11%	13%
Niger	87%	62%	76%	67%	47%	51%	39%	29%	22%	5%
Nigeria	75%	39%	74%	50%	49%	49%	33%	32%	19%	10%
São Tomé & Príncipe	86%	45%	61%	44%	42%	19%		31%	18%	13%
Senegal	74%	45%	74%	58%	53%	29%	31%	37%	9%	14%
Seychelles	91%	29%	60%	13%	27%			18%	26%	6%
Sierra Leone	90%	73%	67%	66%	43%	60%	33%	28%	19%	4%
South Africa	61%	37%	57%	48%	44%	18%	39%	18%	8%	15%
Sudan	42%	11%	55%	43%	41%	23%	13%	10%		20%
Tanzania	81%	67%	53%	79%	38%	8%	24%	24%	11%	2%
Togo	83%	29%	59%	45%	42%	40%	23%	11%	9%	7%
Tunisia	60%	7%	59%	11%	24%		15%	4%	3%	13%
Uganda	76%	65%	71%	56%	44%	28%	26%	18%	16%	5%
Zambia	78%	47%	69%	56%	40%	42%	32%	13%	12%	5%
Zimbabwe	81%	62%	70%	59%	42%	34%	42%	21%	11%	4%
39-country average	72%		62%	48%	42%					9%
38-country average		41%						20%		
37-country average										
36-country average									15%	
35-country average						37%	28%			
Lowest	0-60%	0-25%	0-50%	0-30%	0-30%	0-30%	0-25%	0-10%	0-10%	0-5%
	61-70%	26-40%	51-60%	31-45%	31-40%	31-40%	26-30%	11-20%	11-15%	6-10%
	71-80%	41-55%	61-70%	46-60%	41-50%	41-50%	31-35%	21-30%	16-20%	11-15%
Highest	>80%	>55%	>70%	>60%	>50%	>50%	>35%	>30%	>20%	>15%

Figure 8: Individual-level correlations across different types of political engagement | up to 39 countries | 2021/2023



All correlations shown are significant at the p<.01 level (2-tailed).

Participate in one, participate in all?

Before we examine how engagement has changed over time (Page 19), who participates (Page 25), and what drives participation (Page 33), we consider the extent to which different types of participation are either independent of one another or mutually reinforcing. Do individuals who vote also assemble, contact, protest, and demand? Or do different types of participation attract different individuals?

The answer to both questions is, to some extent, yes: Most forms of engagement appear to be at least somewhat interconnected, but while some connections are quite strong, many are weak. In short, there does not appear to be a single common thread linking all forms of engagement. This is to be expected. The various modes of engagement require different skills and resources, draw on different motivations, pursue different outcomes, apply different levels of pressure, require different levels of cooperation, and involve different levels of effort and risk (Dalton, 2017; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). These factors shape the ways people choose to engage and help to explain, for example, why individualists may choose different forms of engagement from organisers, or why youth might act differently from their more risk-averse elders.

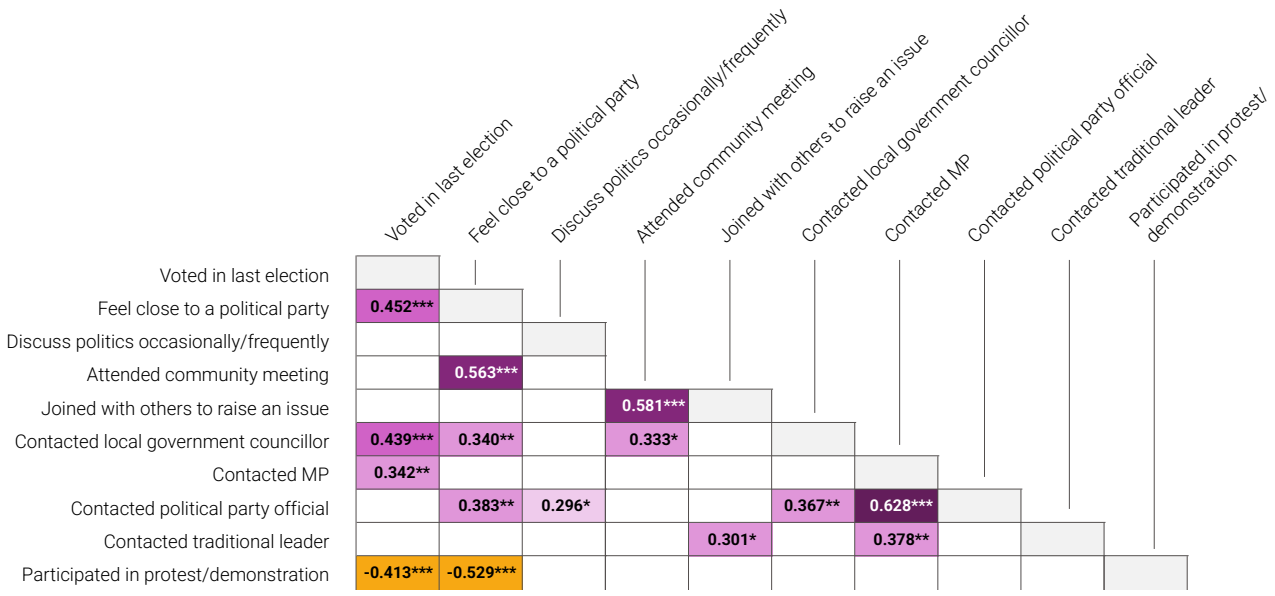
In Figure 8, we show the links at the individual level between any two types of participation. For example, the figure shows the extent to which an individual who votes is also more likely to contact a leader, and whether someone who attends a community meeting is more or less likely to also participate in a protest. For each pairing, the strength of the association is captured both by the shade of the cells (darker shades indicate a stronger relationship) and the size of the correlation coefficient (known as "Pearson's r"), which can range from .000 (no relationship) to 1.000 (a perfect relationship). Associations can be either positive (i.e. if participation of one type increases, participation of the other type is also likely to increase) or negative (as one increases, the other is likely to decrease). But for these indicators of engagement at the individual level, there are no negative correlations. Blank cells indicate that the association between the two modes of participation is too weak to achieve statistical significance.

The strongest interconnections are among the group of four contacting indicators. If an individual contacts a local government councillor, an MP, or a political party official, there is a relatively high likelihood that he or she will also contact one of the others as well (coefficients of 0.441, 0.443, and 0.506).[2] Contacting a traditional leader is also correlated with all three, although at slightly lower levels (coefficients of 0.386, 0.321, and 0.350, respectively).

Elsewhere, we see a strong positive association between two forms of collective action: attending a community meeting and joining with others to raise an issue (0.397). In almost all other cases, positive and significant correlations are present but weaker. So while all the modes are positively linked, the much stronger connections among some pairs or groups of indicators suggest that to some extent, collective action and contacting operate as *alternative* rather than *complementary* forms of engagement: In general, citizens seem inclined to choose one mode or the other, rather than both. In other words,

2 Since it is possible that some people think of an MP as also being a "political party official," some respondents may have reported the same contact with an MP in response to both questions, so this correlation may be somewhat inflated.

Figure 9: National-level correlations across different types of political engagement | up to 39 countries | 2021/2023



** p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01 (2-tailed).*

citizens may specialise in the modes of engagement that are best matched with their resources, motivations, and preferences.

Before moving on, it is worth also taking a quick look at *national-level* correlations, which will help set the stage for the discussion of national-level drivers of engagement that follows (Page 33). In Figure 9, we report the interconnections among various modes of participation *at the country level*. This tells us, for example, whether a country that reports higher levels of voting is also likely to report higher levels of contacting MPs or discussing politics.

Some of the patterns are similar to those described above for the individual level, especially the strong country-level correlations among the contacting indicators as well as the strong connection between attending a community meeting and joining with others to raise an issue.

But there are also several key differences. The first is that many cells in this chart are blank, meaning there is no significant association, positive or negative, between the two indicators at the country level. For example, countries that have higher levels of discussing politics are not more likely to report higher levels of voting, attending meetings, or contacting local government councillors or MPs.

A second important finding is that at the country level, rates of voter turnout are strongly associated with several other forms of engagement, including political party affiliation (0.452), contacting of local government councillors (0.439), and contacting of MPs (0.342).

The other notable distinction arises with respect to protest, which stands out from all other forms of citizen engagement as it is strongly and *negatively* correlated with voting and party affiliation (as indicated by the orange shading for the cells in the chart) while having no association with any of the others. In other words, countries with higher voter turnout and higher levels of party affiliation are likely to have lower levels of protest, and vice versa. At the country level, protest appears to offer an outlet for citizens to voice their views that is fundamentally different from engaging in electoral politics, one they may take advantage of when other options are not available. We will examine some of the unique features and drivers of protest in the "Drivers of citizen engagement in Africa" section starting on Page 33.

Summation: The scope of citizen engagement

Voting is the predominant, but by no means the only, form of political and civic engagement for African citizens. Almost all Africans are joining in: A mere 6% did not join in any of the 10 forms of engagement examined here. And very few stop at just voting: 92% of those who say they voted also engaged in at least one other form of political or civic participation. Across the continent, individuals engaged in an average of 3.6 forms of participation, and 21% report engaging in five or more modes.

In short, despite the daily challenges of surviving and thriving faced by many Africans, the vast majority are finding multiple opportunities to engage to make their voices heard. This level of engagement represents an enormous wealth of commitment and skills, and a potential source of energy that can strengthen government effectiveness and legitimacy if leaders are willing to listen and respond.

Focus » Africans lead the way in working together for change

If 9% of Africans participated in a protest during the past year and 15% contacted their member of Parliament (MP), is that a lot of participation or a little?

Comparing Afrobarometer data with findings (where available) from other regional survey organisations offers a glimpse of the variation in levels of political and civic engagement around the world.

Overall, Africans are acquitting themselves relatively well (Figure 10), especially when it comes to collective action and contacting leaders.

In self-reported voter turnout, Africa (72%) trails Asia (81%), matches Latin America (71%), and is well ahead of the Middle East/North African (MENA) countries (55%).

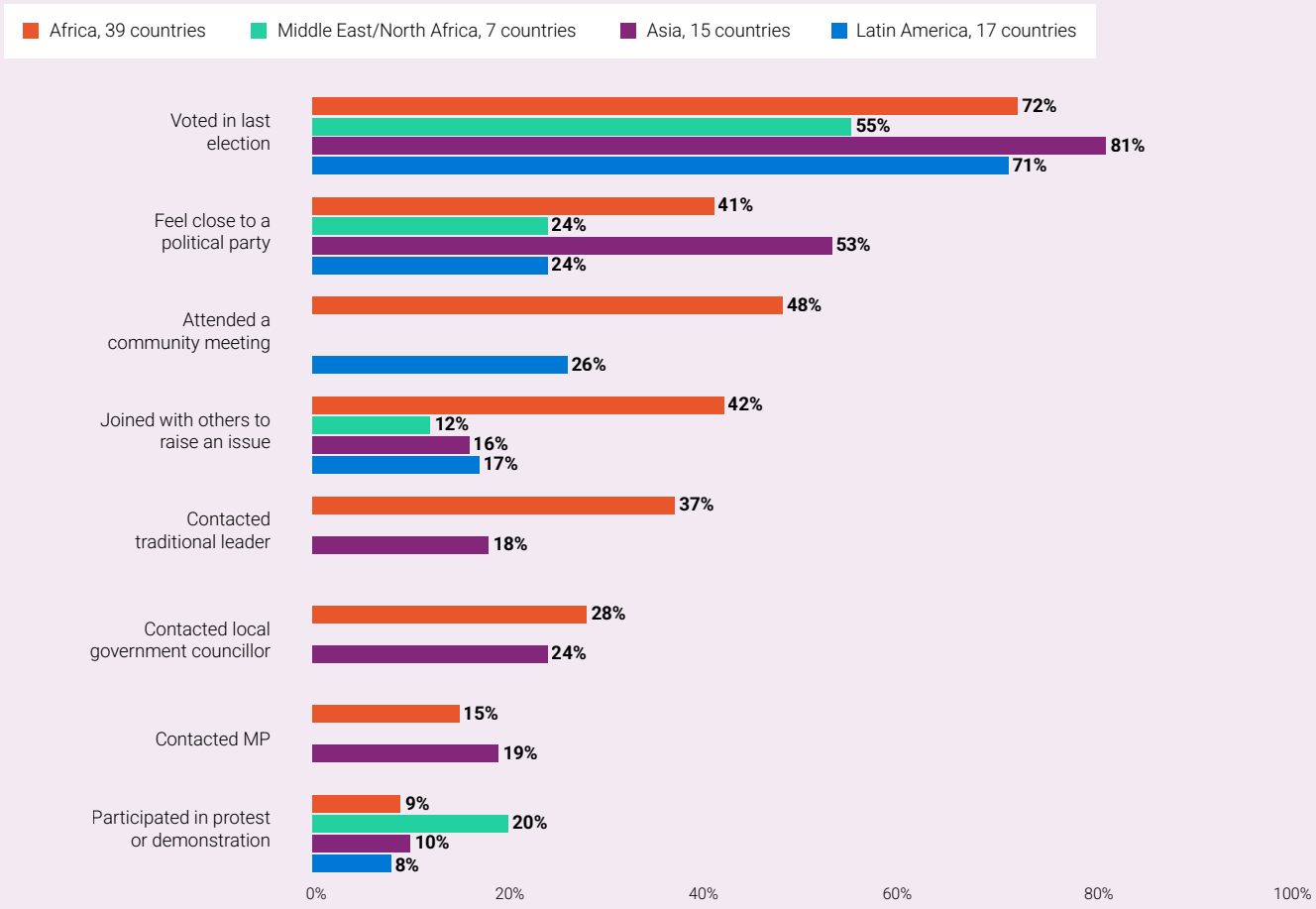
Similarly, Africa comes second to Asia in party affiliation (41% vs. 53%), ahead of the other two regions (24% each).

Africans lead the way – by wide margins – in working together for change. Perhaps reflecting the continent's long history of participatory/local democracy, they are far ahead of other regions when it comes to attending community meetings (48%, vs. 26% in Latin America) and in joining with others to raise an issue (42%, vs. 12%-17% in the other regions).

Africans are also ahead of Asians with regard to contacting their traditional and elected local leaders, while Asians are slightly ahead on contacting members of Parliament (MPs).

When it comes to hitting the streets in protest, the MENA countries dominate the other regions.

Figure 10: Political and civic participation around the world



Sources: *Afrobarometer Round 9, Arab Barometer waves III and VIII, Asian Barometer waves 3 and 5, LAPOP Lab Round 10, Latinobarómetro 2021*
Note: *MENA averages include four countries that are also part of Afrobarometer Round 9 (Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia).*

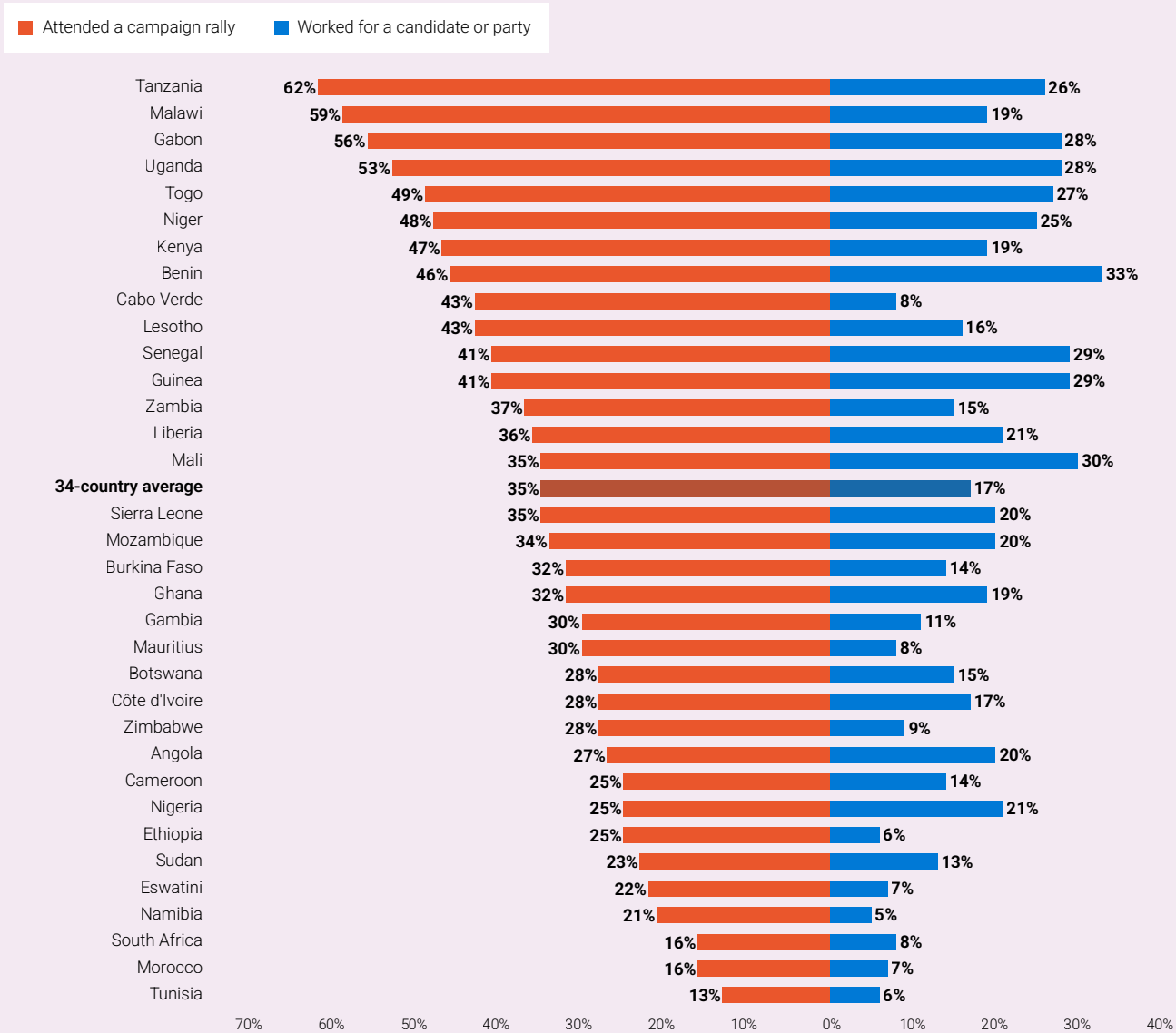
Focus » Not just voters: Election engagement at the next level

For some people, electoral engagement goes well beyond turning out on Election Day, as demonstrated by responses to two questions that were included in a special module on elections included in Afrobarometer's Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) but not asked in Round 9.

About one in three respondents (35%) across 34 countries report attending a campaign rally prior to their country's last election. Although we do not know an individual's purpose for attending – whether to satisfy their curiosity, socialise, gather information, or show support – at minimum, attending a rally reveals a significant level of interest in and attention to politics. As many as six in 10 attended campaign rallies in Tanzania (62%) and Malawi (59%), but fewer than one in five did the same in Morocco (16%), South Africa (16%), and Tunisia (13%) (Figure 11).

Less ambiguous is the choice to work for a candidate or party, a clear indicator of high-level political engagement: On average, about one in six citizens (17%) say they did so during the last campaign, and at least one-quarter did so in nine countries, led by Benin (33%). But in another nine countries, this form of engagement was relatively rare, with fewer than one in 10 citizens reporting that they worked for a candidate or party during campaign season.

Figure 11: Campaign engagement | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Focus » Africans online: Social media and digital activism

Access to the Internet and social media may be fundamentally changing the way African citizens engage in politics. Across 28 countries surveyed so far in Afrobarometer Round 10 (2024/2025), 49% of all respondents say they use the Internet frequently ("a few times per week" or "every day"), and equal numbers say they regularly get news from social media. Internet use reaches 57% among youth aged 18-35 years. But continental differences are vast: 99% of young adults regularly access the Internet in Mauritius, compared to just 19% in Madagascar. Still, in 18 of 28 countries at least half of youth can be reached via the Internet and social media.

Reports abound of the critical role that social media has played in mobilising citizen action, including in movements such as #FeesMustFall in South Africa (Nhedzi & Azionya, 2025), #RejectFinanceBill in Kenya (Munga, 2024), #OccupyGhana (Nartey, 2022), and #EndSARS in Nigeria (Ekoh & George, 2021).

Social media has served as a vital tool during protests, sharing real-time information about locations, actions, events, and government responses. It has even served as a tool of protection when activists have posted their own arrests. Organising via social media has allowed the emergence of seemingly leaderless, "bottom-up" movements, revolutionising the way protest is done in some countries (Nyamweya, 2024).

But social media isn't only used to organise protests. Before taking to the streets in Kenya, for example, social media enabled those opposed to the Finance Bill to share and translate documents, answer questions (including through the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools), educate, coordinate, discuss, and pressure leaders (Mwaura, 2024).

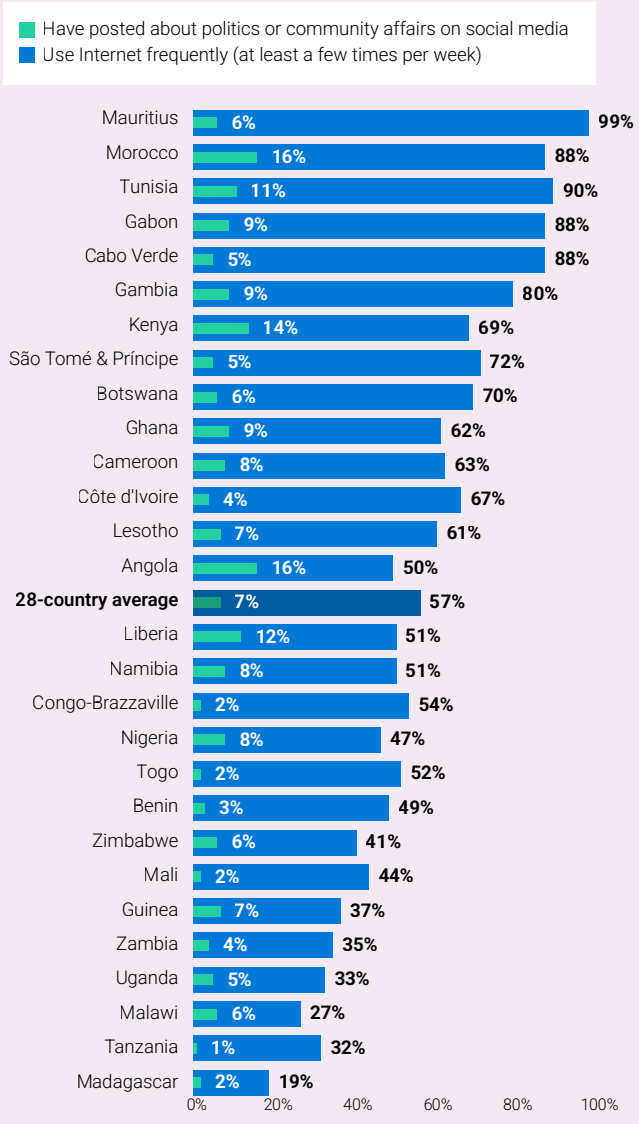
Of course, social media can have downsides as well: It makes it as easy to share disinformation as information. And governments have used the same tools to surveil and control citizens, or have even cut the cord entirely. 2024 was a record year for government-imposed Internet blackouts across the continent, with 21 shutdowns in 15 countries – including Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, and Uganda – usually in response to protests, instability, or elections (Egbejule, 2025; Access Now, 2025).

As social media emerges as a tool of engagement, Afrobarometer has added a new question to its most recent (Round 10) surveys, asking respondents specifically about use of social media to "post about politics or community affairs."

As shown in Figure 12, this is still a nascent form of political participation. Among all adults, just 6% say they posted during the previous year, and even among 18- to 35-year-olds, the figure only rises to 7%. Across all countries, only a small fraction of youth using the Internet have used it to address political or community issues, led by Moroccans (16%), Angolans (16%), Kenyans (14%), and Liberians (12%). But while few are posting, their audience is growing, and the impact of social media as a tool of citizen engagement is sure to grow.

> "Social media has served as a vital tool during protests, sharing real-time information about locations, actions, events, and government responses.

Figure 12: Using Internet vs. posting about politics or community affairs on social media | 18- to 35-year-olds | 28 countries | 2024

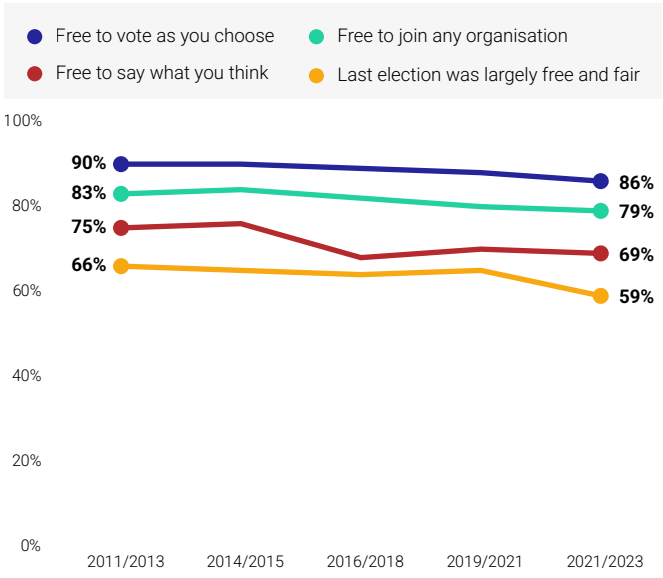


Engagement in transition: A trend toward individualism?

Alongside mounting concerns about democratic backsliding, activists and observers in recent years have voiced alarm about closing civic space on the continent (Yusuf, 2024; CIVICUS Monitor, 2024; Smidt, 2018). While their criticism often targets restrictions on more formal forms of collective action, e.g. by non-governmental organisations, a brief look at how levels of civic engagement have changed might also signal whether political participation by ordinary citizens is being stifled.

Focusing on 30 countries included in both Afrobarometer Round 5 (2011/2013) and Round 9 (2021/2023), we find some evidence that the views and experiences of citizens align with analysts' assessments of shrinking civic space. The proportion of Africans reporting that they are "somewhat free" or "completely free" to say what they think has dropped by 6 percentage points over the past decade, and assessments of their freedom of association and voting freedom have decreased by 4 points each (Figure 13). Despite these declines, Africans remain quite confident of their ability to speak freely (69%), associate with others (79%), and vote as they choose (86%).

Figure 13: Trends in freedoms and election quality | 30 countries* | 2011-2023



*29 countries for "Free to join any organisation"; the question was not asked in Eswatini.

At the same time, perceptions of election quality have fallen by 7 points, from 66% to 59% who see their last national election as mostly or completely free and fair.

But are these modest declines in perceived freedoms reflected in a withdrawal from political and civic participation? We do not find consistent evidence that this is the case. Some forms of participation have declined over the past decade, while others have increased. Other factors, such as urbanisation and adoption of new information and communications technologies, may also be playing an important role in shaping changing levels of citizen engagement.

A withdrawal from party politics, but not from elections

The form of engagement that has shown the largest change over the past decade is political party affiliation: Across 29 countries, identification with a party – once a form of engagement reported by a majority – has declined by 14 percentage points since Round 5 (2011/2013), and by 16 points since its peak in Round 6 (2014/2015). Just four in 10 Africans (42%) now claim a party affiliation (Figure 14). Given the modest but positive relationships between party affiliation and many other forms of engagement (see pages 14 and 15), this finding could be a sign of trouble for political engagement more broadly.

Affiliation with a party dropped in every country except Morocco, which showed a modest gain of 4 percentage points, and Malawi, Sierra Leone, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, where small shifts (2 points or less) are within the survey's margin of error (Figure 15). In sharp contrast, party affiliation in Burkina Faso plummeted by 45 points; most of the drop, from 63% in 2012 to 35% in 2015, occurred long before the 2022 military coup

and closing of political space in the country. In seven other countries, party affiliation dropped by 20 points or more.

We can point to several factors that may explain this substantial decline in party affiliation.

One is a growing disaffection with ruling parties across the continent at the same time that opposition parties in many countries have yet to convince their publics that they are a viable alternative. Trust in ruling parties declined by 15 percentage points between 2011/2013 and 2021/2023, reaching a low of 33% who say they trust the ruling party "somewhat" or "a lot." Meanwhile, trust in opposition parties started at just 36% in 2011/2013 and declined another 7 points to 29% in 2021/2023 (Adaba & Boio, 2024). Dissatisfaction with the ruling party's performance in countries such as South Africa may thus lead disaffected voters to withdraw from party engagement rather than switch their allegiance to an opposition party (Schulz-Herzenberg & Mattes, 2023).

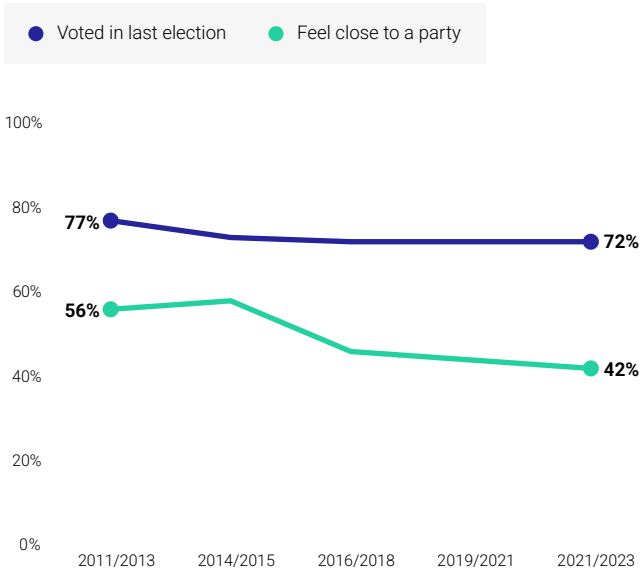
Closing space for competing parties in countries such as Benin and Tanzania may also be constraining opposition parties from operating and campaigning freely, making it more difficult for them to meet, engage with, and attract new supporters. And the election violence and intimidation we have witnessed in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Uganda may discourage citizens from engaging (or admitting to engaging) in opposition politics (Asunka, Gyimah-Boadi, & Logan, 2022).

In addition, in several West African countries that have experienced recent coups and are now under military governments, political parties are no longer able to operate freely. Parties were suspended in Burkina Faso after the September 2022 coup and in Niger after the military takeover in July 2023 (Freedom House, 2024a, b). In Mali, political party activities were suspended for several months in 2024, and again in May 2025, after protests against the government's postponement of promised elections (CNN, 2024; Njie, 2025).

While party affiliation is clearly weakening, a 5-percentage-point decline in the share of citizens who report voting in the last election (see Figure 14 above) may in fact not be further evidence of withdrawal from politics.

Occurring primarily between Round 5 (2011/2013) and Round 6 (2014/2015), the drop coincides with a modest change in the Afrobarometer question wording that was specifically designed to make it easier or more acceptable for people to admit that they had not voted. Voting is seen as a socially desirable behaviour, and it is a commonly recognised challenge in survey research that it may be over-reported (Karp & Brockington, 2005). In Round 6, we added a preface to the question stating

Figure 14: Changes in electoral participation | 29 countries* | 2011-2023



**"Voted in last election" does not include Senegal; "feel close to a party" does not include Eswatini.*

Figure 15: Change in party affiliation (percentage points) | 29 countries* | 2011-2023

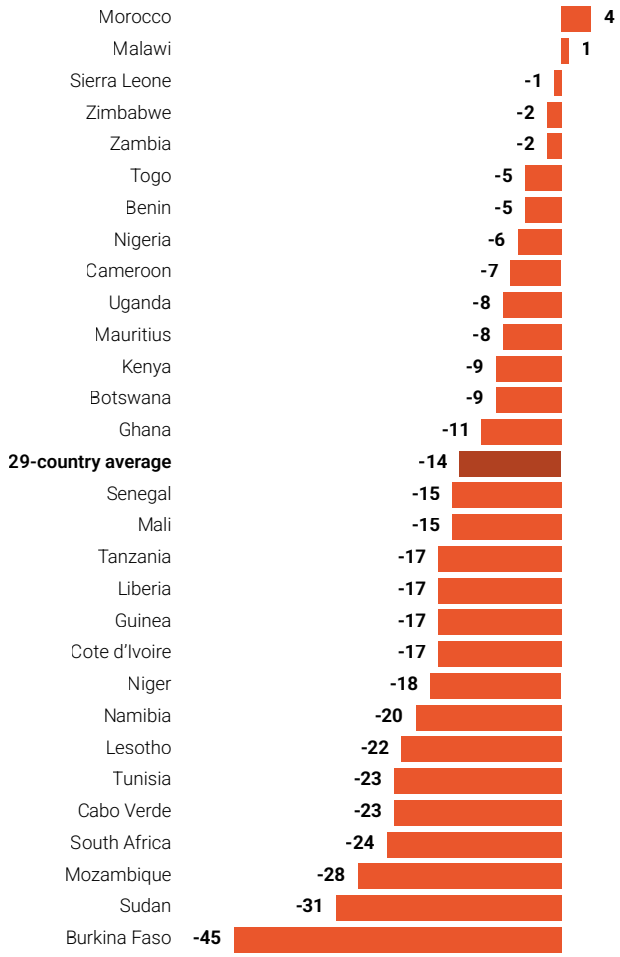


Figure shows change, in percentage points, between 2011/2013 and 2021/2023 in the proportion of respondents who say they "feel close to" a political party.
** Question was not asked in Eswatini.*

that it is understood that some people are unable to vote.[3] This change may help explain the decrease in reported voting as a reduction in over-reporting rather than an actual decline in voting behaviour. This explanation is reinforced by the fact that reported levels of voting have stayed constant since Round 6, while the decline in party affiliation has occurred since that time. It appears that despite whatever ails party politics on the continent, commitment to voting remains robust.

Less collecting, less action?

Changes in the frequency of collective action have not yet revealed clear trends. Individuals' propensity to discuss politics has declined by 6 percentage points between 2011/2013 and 2021/2023, attendance at community meetings is down 8 points, and joining with others to raise an issue has dropped 11 points (Figure 16). However, the patterns of participation in these activities are not consistent, and for both attending meetings and joining with others, we do not see evidence of long-term steady declines as we did in the case of party affiliation. In fact, both of these forms of participation increased after Round 6 and peaked quite recently in Round 8 before dropping sharply going into Round 9. We will need additional observations before we can ascertain whether the recent changes are part of a long-term trend of either increase or decline.

One factor that may affect some forms of participation, especially attendance at community meetings, is the trend toward urbanisation across the continent. These meetings are more common in rural than in urban areas (see Page 28), and the urban share of Afrobarometer samples – which are designed to reflect national population profiles – has increased slightly, from a 41-59 split in 2011/2013 to 44-56 in 2021/2023. Another factor affecting all three types of collective action could be increasing access to the Internet and online interactions that may displace in-person interactions. In addition, we may be seeing some effects of social openings and closings related to the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020-2021.

Importantly, not all forms of participation are in decline. Reaching out to leaders – of all types – has increased over the past decade (Figure 17). Contacts with traditional leaders have increased by 5 percentage points, as have contacts with local government councillors (from 24% to 29%). And contacts with party officials are up by 6 points, from 14% to 20%, despite the substantial declines in party affiliation described above. Contacts with MPs have only increased by a more modest 2 points, likely reflecting the relative inaccessibility of MPs to many ordinary citizens.

Finally, we find that protest has held relatively steady over the past decade, reported by 10% in Round 5 and 9% in Round 9. However, like collective action, it spiked in Round 8 (to 16%) before dropping back to pre-COVID levels in Round 9 (not shown).

Figure 16: Changes in citizen engagement | 30 countries | 2011-2023

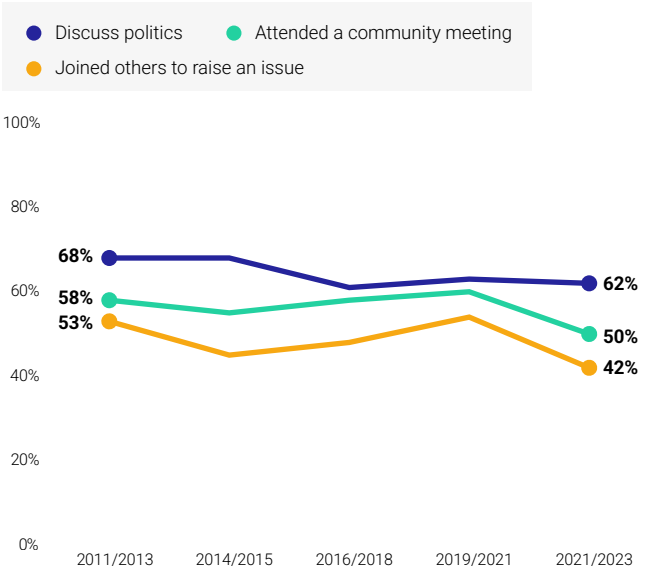
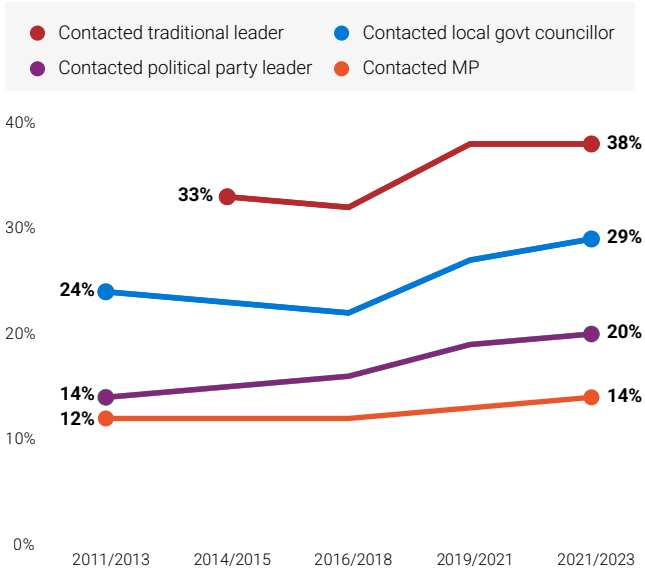


Figure 17: Changes in contacting | 27-29 countries* | 2011-2023



**"Contacted local government councillor" does not include Liberia, Malawi, and Sudan. "Contacted political party official" does not include Eswatini. "Contacted MP" does not include Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Sudan. "Contacted traditional leader" does not include Cabo Verde, Mauritius, and Tunisia.*

3 The specific question wordings were: Round 5: "With regard to the most recent national election in [insert year], which statement is true for you?" A list of response options included "You were not registered," "You voted in the election," You decided not to vote," and "You were prevented from voting." Round 6: "Understanding that some people were unable to vote in the most recent national election in [insert year], which of the following statements is true for you?" with the same response options. In Round 8 (2019/2021) the preface was adjusted slightly again to read: "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?" and then followed with the same question and response options.

Table 2 summarises the changes across all 10 indicators of political and civic participation by country, with cell colours used to show the direction of the change (blue for increase, red for decrease) and shading representing the magnitude of change (darker shades indicating greater increase or decline).

A few general findings stand out from this visualisation. First, almost all countries have seen declines on both the electoral and the collective-action indicators. In fact, many countries show double-digit drops across three or more of these indicators. The largest average declines are in Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Mozambique, South Africa, Sudan, and Tanzania.

Only a very few countries show major gains (+6 percentage points or more) on any of these variables. Liberia has seen a 23-point increase in discussing politics, and Moroccans report modest gains in several types of participation and a very substantial increase (+27 points) in joining with others to raise an issue. Self-reported voting shows gains in Sierra Leone (+10 points), Zambia (+9 points), and Zimbabwe (+9 points) despite the question-wording changes that were expected to minimise over-reporting in electoral turnout.

In contrast, almost all countries have seen either stasis or increases in contacting. The greatest average gains are in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. In contrast, Malawi records a very large decline in contact with local councillors, and Sierra Leone and Tanzania also show large average decreases.

In sum, our disparate findings regarding trends in participation show no consistent pattern over the past decade. Some indicators are down – especially party affiliation, but also the various forms of collective action – while others have held steady (voting, protesting) and still others (contacting) have increased. This may reflect a variety of push-and-pull factors – from urbanisation and shifting modes of social interaction and communication to the effects of pandemic lockdowns and democratic closure – that are beyond the scope of this analysis. It also suggests a field of action that is fluid and evolving, and potentially amenable to growth in response to strengthened incentives, which we will explore further below (see Page 33).

Table 2: Change in participation rates (percentage points) | up to 30 countries | 2011-2023

Change in rounds	Voted in last election R9-R5	Feel close to a political party R9-R5	Discuss politics occasionally /frequently R9-R5	Attended community meeting R9-R5	Joined with others to raise an issue R9-R5	Contacted traditional leader R9-R6	Contacted local government councillor R9-R5	Contacted political party official R9-R5	Contacted MP R9-R5	Participated in protest/ demonstration R9-R5
Benin	-16	-5	-8	-11	-12	1	8	8	-2	-5
Botswana	5	-9	-6	-14	-10	-3	-7	-4	0	-9
Burkina Faso	4	-45	-10	-12	-26	21	5	5		0
Cabo Verde	-4	-23	-16	-13	-19		-2	6	2	0
Cameroon	-18	-7	6	-16	-21	2	1	2	0	1
Côte d'Ivoire	-32	-17	-18	-10	-22	16	19	14	11	-3
Eswatini	5		-2	-24	-15	6	9		-6	7
Ghana	-3	-11	8	-6	-4	7	4	4	1	1
Guinea	-5	-17	-13	-8	-15	8	15	2		-1
Kenya	-3	-9	2	-18	-30	-9	-8	2	-3	-5
Lesotho	-12	-22	-11	-4	2	4	6	4	1	2
Liberia	-1	-17	23	-8	-3	-3		21	18	1
Malawi	-14	1	-3	-11	-18	7	-25	0	0	1
Mali	-8	-15	-2	-8	-12	12	7	8	3	13
Mauritius	-3	-8	-2	-15	5		11	8	4	2
Morocco	-5	4	9	7	27	-5	-1	6	2	-1
Mozambique	-11	-28	-24	-30	-49	14	7	14	15	-1
Namibia	-11	-20	-8	-5	0	-2	12	12	8	5
Niger	-1	-18	-7	10	-3	23	19	19	13	-3
Nigeria	-6	-6	-5	6	6	18	20	16	12	1
Senegal	-1	-15	-7	-9	-5	7	11	19	1	0
Sierra Leone	10	-1	-4	-5	-16	3	-13	-8	-21	-5
South Africa	-17	-24	-13	-10	1	2	13	6	4	4
Sudan	-13	-31	-16	-13	-8	-7	2	-3		6
Tanzania	-3	-17	-25	-1	-33	-9	-10	-6	-11	-14
Togo	-3	-5	6	-10	-21	18	14	3	2	-7
Tunisia	-11	-23	-20	-1	2		-1	1	0	1
Uganda	-9	-8	-2	-13	-20	-5	-10	-1	-4	-7
Zambia	9	-2	-1	2	-9	7	10	5	2	-1
Zimbabwe	9	-2	-5	-15	-14	0	0	-5	-10	-1
30-country average	-5		-6	-9	-11					-1
29-country average		-14					4	5		
28-country average										
27-country average						5			2	

>+20 points	+16-20 points	+11-15 points	+6-10 points	+3-5 points	-3-5 points	-6-10 points	-11-15 points	-16-20 points	>-20 points

Country case » Mobilised on social media, Gen Z protests in Kenya achieve core goals, but at a high price

Young Kenyans are *not* among the continent's most active protesters: In 2021, just 5% said they had participated in a demonstration or protest in the previous year, half the continental average of 10% (see Page 29 on youth engagement).

But that did not stop Kenya's Gen Z from making their voices heard in 2024, not just in Kenya, but across the continent.

Economic discontent among youth has been rising for some time in Kenya, but the breaking point was the tabling of Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill, which would have imposed a host of new taxes on citizens to fund the country's debt obligations (Munga, 2024). The bill was presented at a time when economic mismanagement, corruption, and unemployment were at the top of the public – and especially the youth – agenda, as documented in the Afrobarometer survey (Figure 18).

With the cost of living rising, young people struggling to find jobs, parliamentarians caught flaunting their wealth on social media, and corruption scandals making frequent headlines, new taxes proved too much for Gen Z to stomach (Lewis & Inveen, 2024).

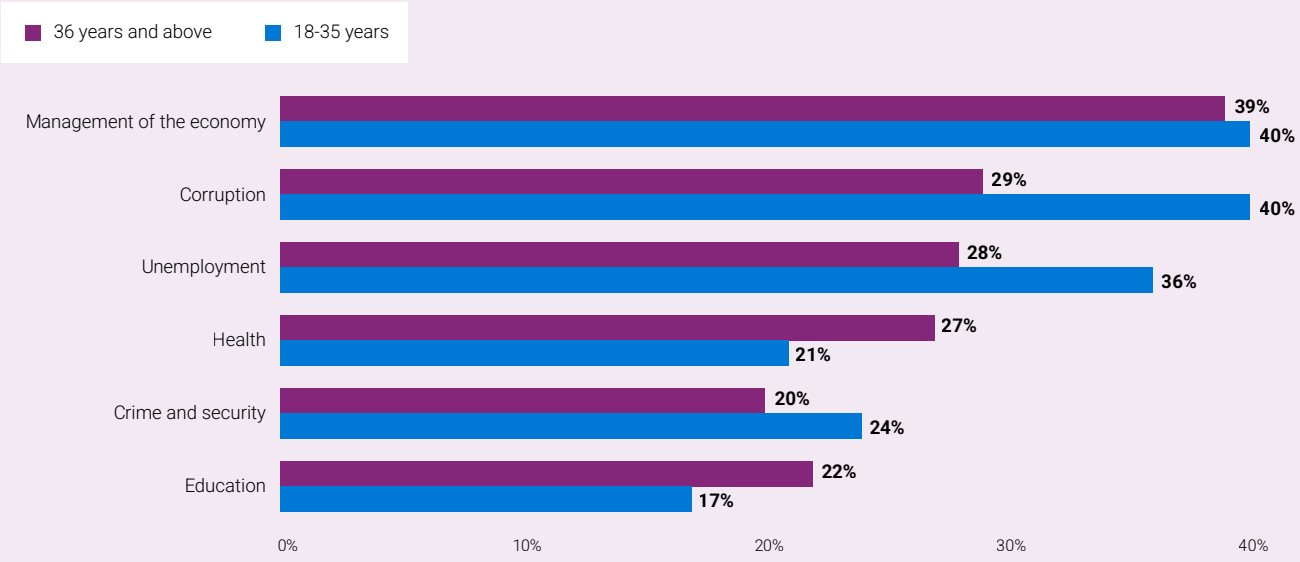
Kenya's youth are pretty plugged in: 57% say they get news from social media frequently ("a few times a week" or "every day"). Mobilised by their peers on TikTok, Instagram, and X (see Page 18 on social media participation), young Kenyans took to the streets on 18 June. Kenya's security forces soon responded with lethal force, and escalating tensions culminated in the storming of Parliament on 25 June.

With the entire continent watching, Gen Z protesters prevailed: President William Ruto, though initially defiant, was forced to back down, withdrawing the Finance Bill on 27 June.

Both the government and Kenya's youth paid a high price. Protests continued as Gen Z shifted their demands to calls for Ruto's resignation and a change of government. And at least 60 young protesters were killed during the weeks of protests, while others have been abducted and even disappeared (CIVICUS, 2024).

In the end, this "extraordinary demonstration of people power" (Usher & Chothia, 2024) not only changed Kenya, but perhaps the shape of youth engagement elsewhere on the continent as young people in Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Uganda took to the streets in the months that followed to demand jobs, better economic management, and good governance (CIVICUS, 2024).

Figure 18: Most important problems in Kenya, youth vs. elders | 2021



Country case » Senegal: Protests + votes = democratic renewal (x2!)

A long-simmering political crisis in Senegal finally came to a head on 3 February 2024, when then-President Macky Sall announced his intention to postpone national elections, scheduled for 25 February. Many Senegalese had long feared that Sall was angling to run for a third term, a concern bolstered by the fact that several key opposition leaders – including the man who eventually became president – were languishing in prison and/or barred from running (Yabi & Holman, 2024).

The response to Sall's efforts to postpone the elections was swift and widespread. Religious leaders, youth, labour unions, women, academics, journalists, civil society organisations, and opposition parties joined the calls for Sall to adhere to the election schedule and eschew a third term (Eblotié, 2024; Aikins, 2024), and thousands took to the streets to voice these demands. The government pushed back, initially banning protests, cutting Internet access, and attempting violent suppression, resulting in the deaths of three protesters (Al Jazeera, 2024; Ba & Dione, 2024).

But ultimately citizens' demands were met when the Constitutional Council, bolstered by the public outcry, rejected Sall's efforts and reversed the order for postponement (Sany, 2024). The elections went ahead on 24 March, with opposition leader Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who had been released from prison just 10 days earlier, declared the winner with 54% of the vote in the first round. He was sworn in on 2 April 2024.

Protest is not new to the Senegalese. In Afrobarometer's Round 9 survey in 2022, one in seven citizens (14%) report participating in a protest or demonstration in the previous year, placing Senegalese near the top of protest politics, well above the continental average of 9% (see Page 12).

In fact, Senegalese have used the combination of protest and voting-for-change to save their democracy more than once. Many took to the streets in a previous "third-term crisis" instigated by then-President Abdoulaye Wade in 2012. Wade still ran, and made it to the second round, but was trounced in the runoff – by Macky Sall – by a 66%-34% margin (Ba & Felix, 2012).

A combination of protest and voting may have helped save Senegal's democracy (photo: Annika Hammerschlag).

Who participates? The demographics of engagement

Research on citizen engagement is grounded in the idea that these activities come at a cost to individuals. Engaging in political and civic processes requires varying levels of time, knowledge, civic skills, financial resources, and confidence in one's ability to do so effectively (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Citizens are therefore more likely to participate when the perceived benefits outweigh the costs. Benefits can be material, such as electing officials who implement favourable economic policies, securing better health or education services for one's community, or holding leaders accountable to stop waste or corruption, or they can be non-material/psychological, such as the personal satisfaction derived from fulfilling one's civic duty or the benefits of social interaction.

How do the resources available for citizen participation vary across different socio-demographic groups, and how does this play out for different forms of engagement? This section will examine whether socio-demographic factors influence *individuals'* propensity to participate. The subsequent section will examine drivers of participation at the national level, including both country-level socioeconomic factors and the effects of political and democratic context.

Education, wealth, and (dis)incentives for engagement

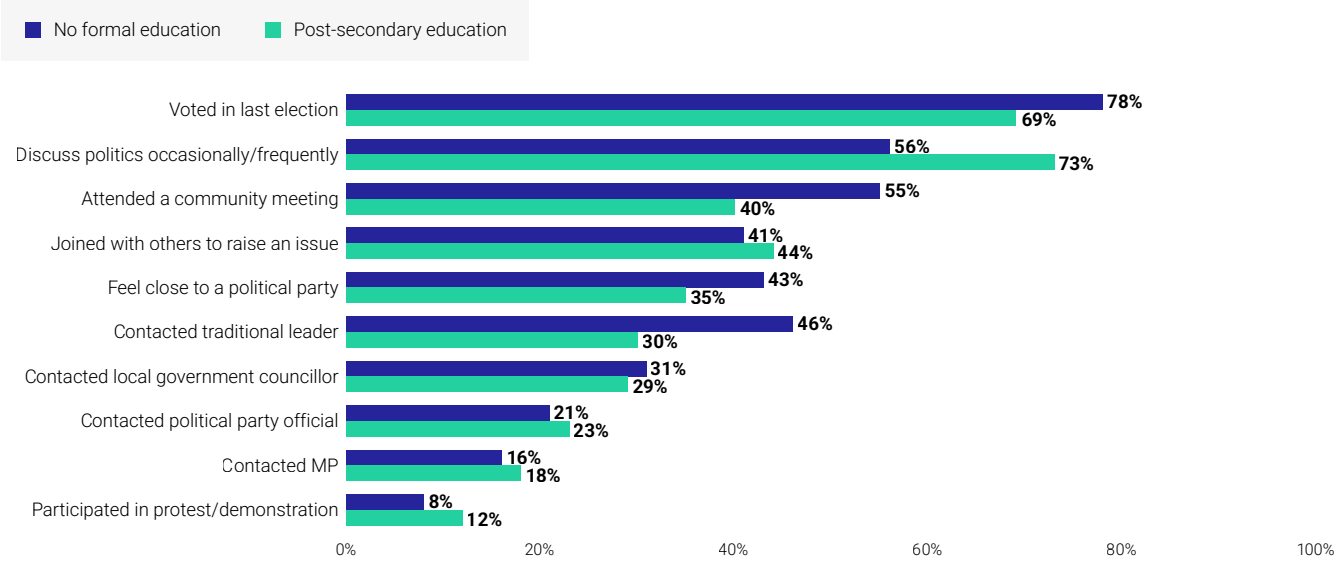
Many studies in Western democracies have linked individuals' socioeconomic status to political and civic participation. In these contexts, wealthier and more highly educated citizens are more likely to vote (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Lijphart, 1997), to participate in civic associations and community meetings (Badescu & Neller, 2007), and to contact their political representatives (Bartels, 2009; Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992). They are also more likely to hold political office (Lindquist, 1964).

Resource-based explanations of participation suggest that individuals with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to have the time, knowledge, and civic skills needed to assert their rights, voice opinions, or make demands (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013; Dalton, 2017). Additionally, it is expected that they will have stronger material incentives to participate in order to safeguard their income or assets (Hirschman, 1970; Kasara & Suryanarayan, 2015; Yoder, 2020). Furthermore, political leaders might be more likely to target high-income and highly educated citizens in mobilisation efforts, thus increasing their likelihood of participation (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

Findings from previous Afrobarometer surveys, however, indicate that the relationship between socioeconomic well-being and participation is often *reversed* in Africa, and the same appears to be true in other developing regions as well (Isaksson, Kotsadam, & Nerman, 2014). Levels of formal education and income have not been consistent predictors of engagement rates on the continent (Bratton, Mattes, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005). In many cases, resource-poor individuals engage in politics at higher rates than their wealthier counterparts (Isaksson, 2014; Logan, Sanny, & Han, 2020). And in authoritarian contexts, educated Africans may choose to disengage from the political process if they view participation as futile or wish to avoid legitimising autocratic leaders (Croke, Grossman, Larreguy, & Marshall, 2016).

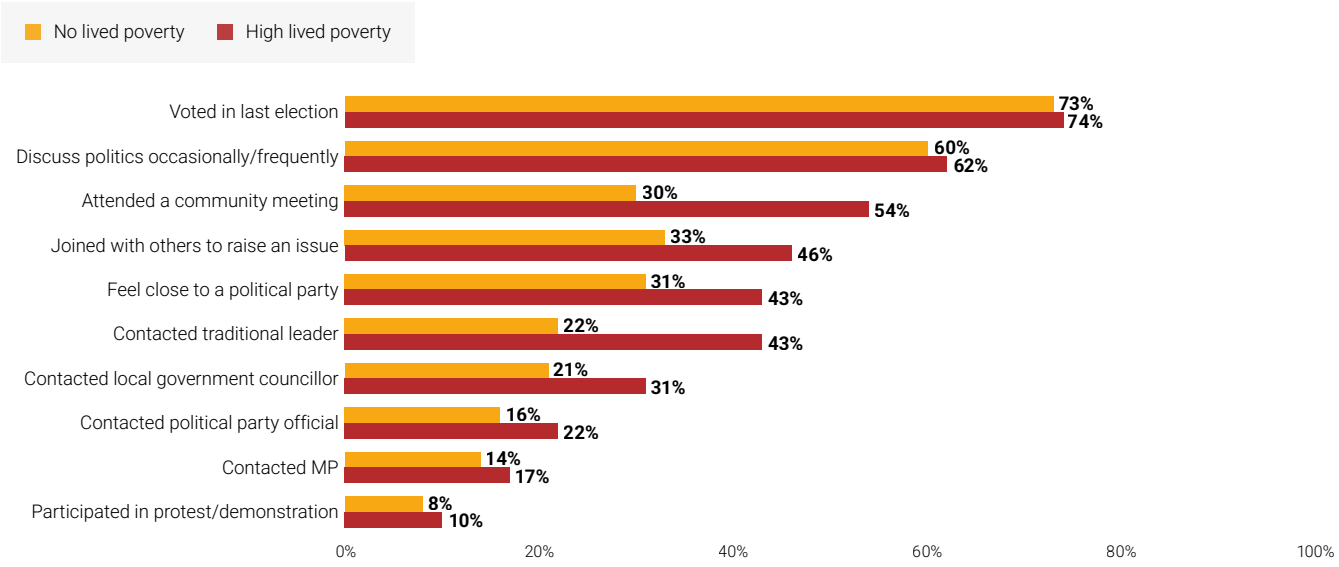
In Afrobarometer Round 9 findings, education does not correlate consistently with an individual's propensity to engage politically (Figure 19). People with post-secondary education are much more likely to discuss politics (+17 percentage points) than those

Figure 19: Education and citizen engagement | 39 countries* | 2021/2023



**For figures 19-23: "Feel close to a political party" and "Contacted political party official": 38 countries; "Contacted traditional leader" and "Contacted local government councillor": 35 countries; "Contacted MP": 36 countries.*

Figure 20: Poverty and citizen engagement | 39 countries* | 2021/2023



with no formal schooling. But across several other forms of participation, the most educated take a back seat. They are substantially less likely to vote (-9 points) or be affiliated with a political party (-8 points), to attend community meetings (-15 points), and to contact traditional leaders (-16 points). The more educated are, however, marginally more likely to protest (+4 points), slightly more likely to join with others to raise an issue (+3 points), and about equally likely to contact an MP, local government councillor, or political party official.

An assessment of the effects of economic status[4] yields a similar story. The wealthiest and the poorest are about equally likely to vote, protest, discuss politics, and contact an MP (Figure 20). But for all of the other modes of participation, it is those who experience the greatest economic hardship who participate more, often by wide margins. People with high lived poverty are far more likely to attend a community meeting (+24 points) and contact a traditional leader (+21 points), both more traditional forms of engagement. But they are also more likely to

4 Individual economic status is based on Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI), an experiential measure of poverty that captures how often people go without any of five key necessities (enough food and water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) (see Mattes, 2008; Mattes & Lekalake, 2025). Respondents are categorised as having high, moderate, low, or no lived poverty (if they never go without).

identify with a political party (+12 points), to join with others to raise an issue (+13 points), and to contact a local government councillor (+10 points) or a political party official (+6 points).

It appears that needs – for better access to services, for jobs, for economic stability, and for a better quality of life – may be a key motivator for political participation in Africa, even when resources, skills, and opportunities are in short supply.

Persistent gender gaps

Resource-based analyses also predict lower participation for women, who face a mix of distinct incentives and disincentives for engagement. On the one hand, women often feel the burden of meeting family needs for food, clean water, health care, and education most profoundly. But they have fewer resources in terms of assets, time, and education. As a result, findings from many regions show that women have historically participated at lower rates than men. Although this gap appears to be closing rapidly in Western democracies (Inglehart & Norris, 2000), it has proved much more persistent in Africa.

Stark gender differences may reflect not just resource endowments but also structural and cultural factors that constrain women's engagement (Isaksson et al., 2014; Twum & Logan, 2023). For example, although Afrobarometer has long found that in principle Africans strongly support women's equality in politics, in practice the picture is less rosy, as a majority (52%) report that women who run for office are likely to experience harassment, and many women continue to face discrimination of various types in homes, schools, and workplaces (Twum & Logan, 2023; African Development Bank Group & UNECA, 2024). Limited social tolerance for women's absence from the home or direct engagement with still predominantly male political leaders may pose significant hurdles to women's participation.

Afrobarometer Round 9 data confirm that women engage at substantially lower rates than men across all 10 indicators included in the survey (Figure 21). The smallest margins are in voting (-6 percentage points), contacting members of Parliament (MPs) (-6 points), and protesting (-3 points). The gap grows to -16 points for discussing politics and to -14 points for both attending community meetings and joining with others to raise an issue. (For more detail on gender differences at the country level, see Page 31). Women are also less likely to contact leaders, by margins of up to -13 points in the case of traditional leaders.

Growing with age

Youth engagement levels globally reflect a complex interplay of resources (more time, more education, more energy, but less developed skills and less money) interacting with life-cycle and generational effects (Isaksson, 2014). In Africa, moreover, youth often have radically different experiences of democracy than their parents and grandparents (Mattes, 2012). But ultimately most studies have expected, and found, that youth participate less than older cohorts.

This continues to hold true in Afrobarometer's most recent findings (Figure 22). For all types of political and civic participation except protest, young Africans (aged 18-35, using the African Union definition) are less politically engaged than older generations. The disparity is largest for voting, where a massive 18-percentage-point gap separates youth from older respondents: Nearly four in 10 young people (37%) are relinquishing their opportunity – or abdicating their responsibility – to select their own leaders. (For country breakdowns, see Page 29).

Youth are also less likely to feel close to a party (-8 points), to attend a community meeting (-12 points), to join with others to raise an issue (-8 points), and to contact traditional leaders and local government councillors (-10 points each).

Figure 21: Gender and citizen engagement | 39 countries* | 2021/2023

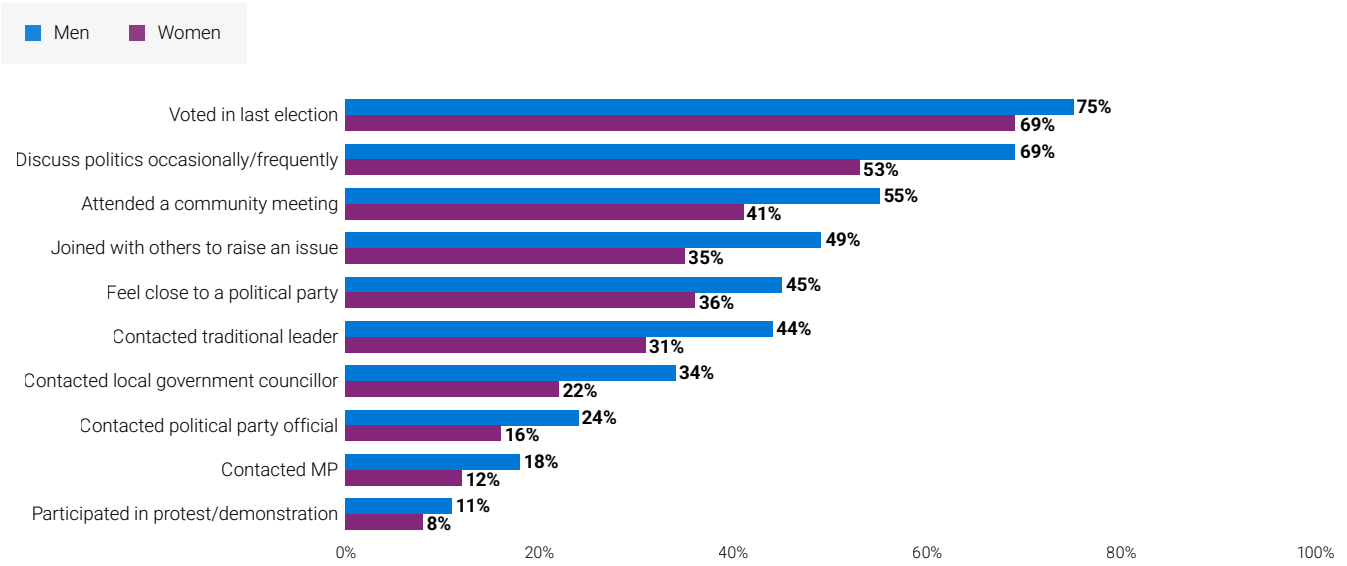


Figure 22: Age and citizen engagement | 39 countries* | 2021/2023

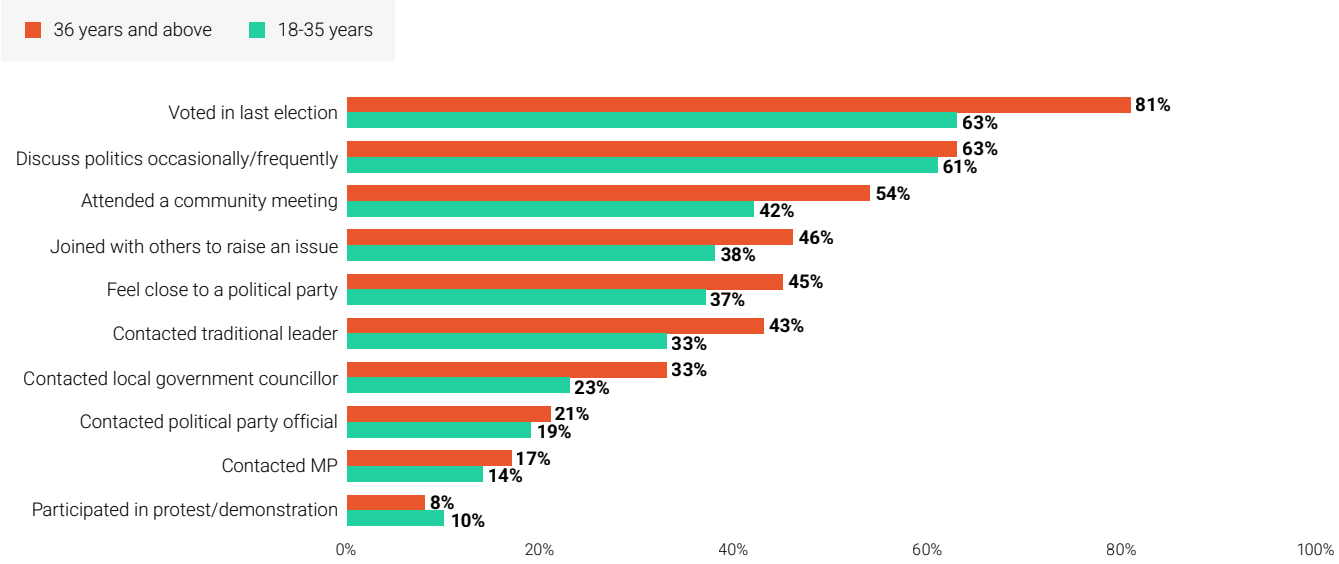
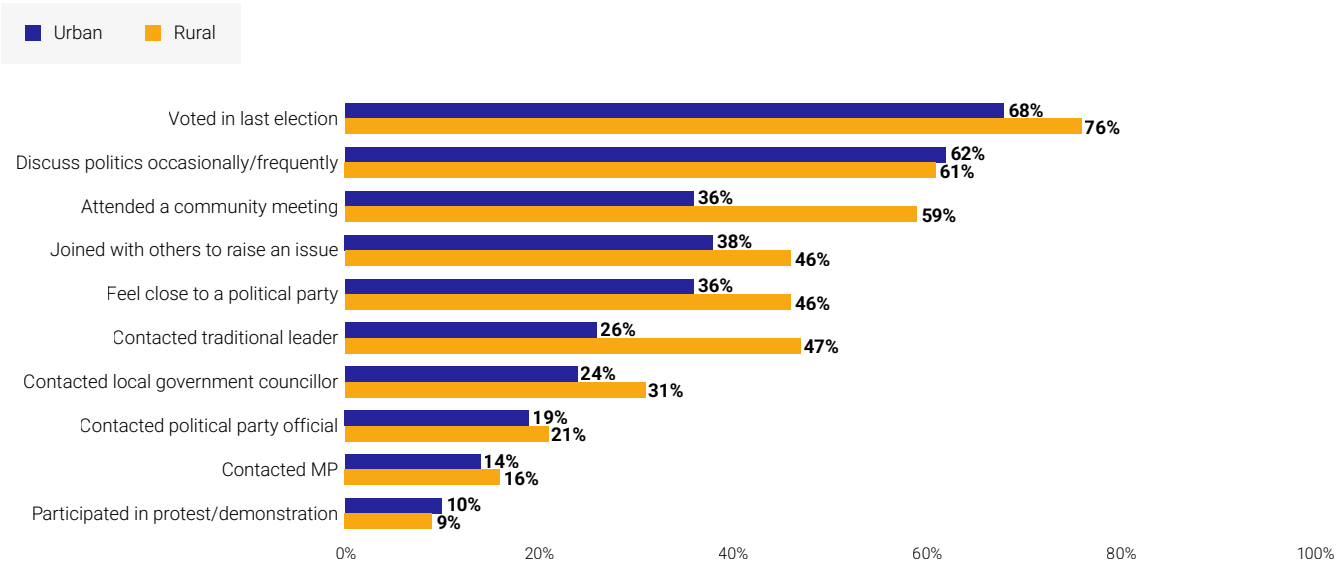


Figure 23: Urban-rural location and citizen engagement | 39 countries* | 2021/2023



The one form of participation where the young marginally surpass their elders is protest: One in 10 youth (10%) say they joined a protest during the previous year, compared to 8% among those over 35.

Urban disadvantage

The impacts of urban vs. rural location present their own conundrums. Resource-based analyses would anticipate that urbanites are generally more educated and wealthier and have better access to infrastructure, and are thus more likely to become engaged citizens. Moreover, modernisation theory would predict that those who uproot and migrate to urban areas are "agents of change" who are likely to be among the most politically active (Bratton et al., 2005). But the evidence does not always support this expectation (Isaksson, 2014).

In many cases we find that rural inhabitants are much more active than urbanites (Figure 23). The largest differences are in more rural-centric forms of engagement, such as contacting traditional leaders (rural +21 points) and attending community meetings (+23 points).

But the differences persist across several other forms of engagement, including voting (+8 points), political party affiliation (+10 points), contacting local government councillors (+7 points), and joining with others to raise an issue (+8 points). And there is no significant difference between rural and urban inhabitants with respect to the propensity to discuss politics, to contact MPs and party officials, or even, most surprisingly, to participate in protests, which is typically seen – at least in the news media – as a predominantly urban mode of engagement.

Focus » Are we hearing the voices of Africa's youth?

Young Africans have played a crucial role in shaping political change across the continent. The #EndSARS protests against police brutality in Nigeria, Y'en a Marre pro-democracy movement in Senegal, and Gen Z anti-corruption demonstrations in Kenya are notable examples of recent youth-led activism that harnesses digital platforms to advocate for social and political change (Amnesty International, 2021; Makhulo, 2024; Ndiaye, 2021). They are also part of a global trend of youth activism fuelled by frustration with traditional political processes and institutions (Carnegie, 2022; UNICEF, 2024).

Political participation by youth (aged 18-35, using the African Union definition) varies widely in Africa, with notable differences across countries in voting, civic engagement, contact, and protest rates. Niger reports the highest average youth participation rates across these four measures (48%), followed closely by Ethiopia (44%), Sierra Leone (44%), and Madagascar (43%). Youth participation is half as common in Gabon (20%), Tunisia (23%), Morocco (23%), and Cameroon (24%).

While young Africans are less likely than older generations to attend community meetings and contact political leaders (see Page 27), perhaps the most striking deficit is in voter turnout (Figure 24). Senegal (-29 percentage points), Cameroon (-28 points), and Zimbabwe (-28 points) exhibit the largest disparities in voting rates. Attendance at community

National Women's Day in South Africa marks the 1956 protest of women against apartheid policies (photo: Ebony Black).

Figure 24: Political and civic participation | by age group | 39 countries* | 2021/2023

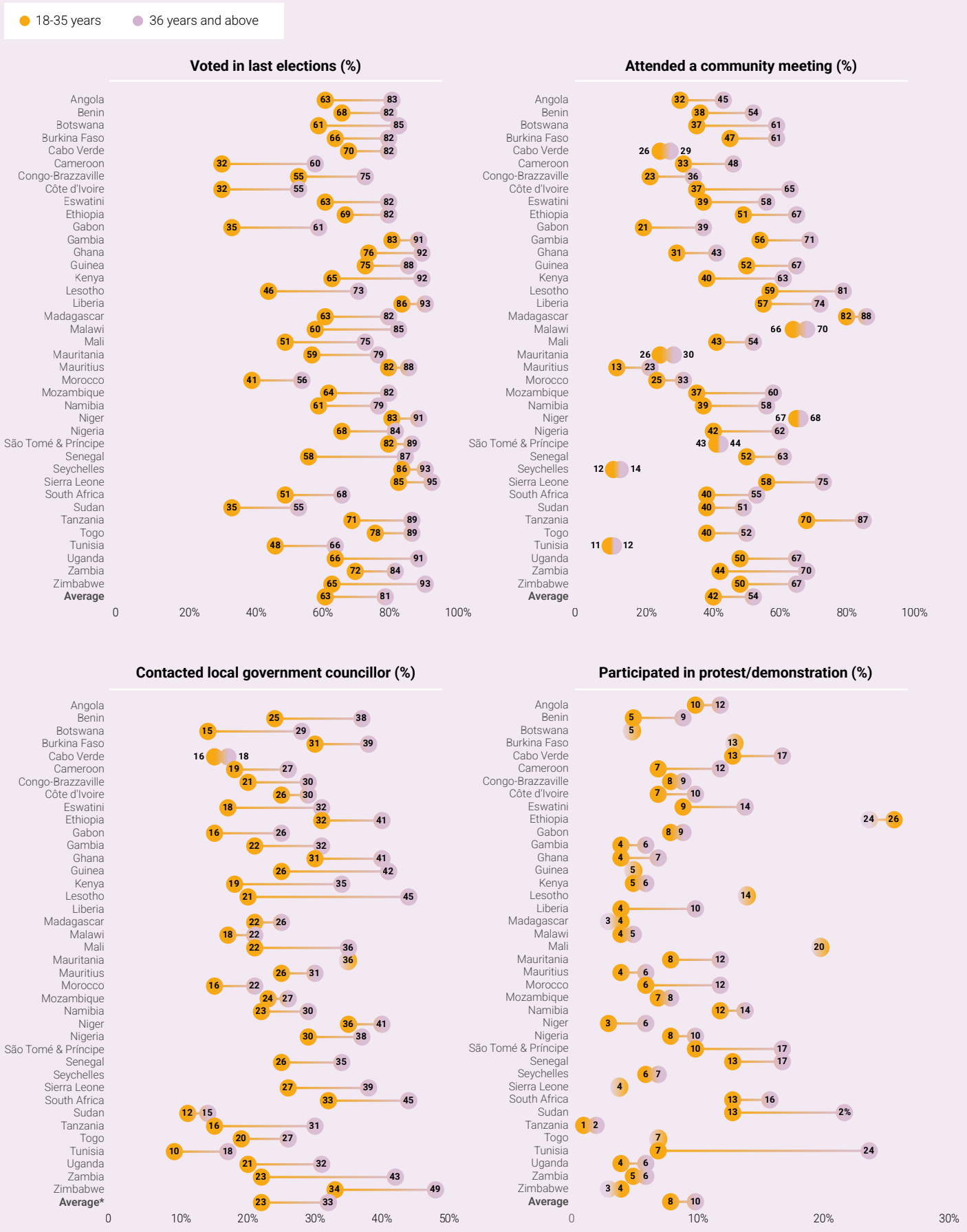


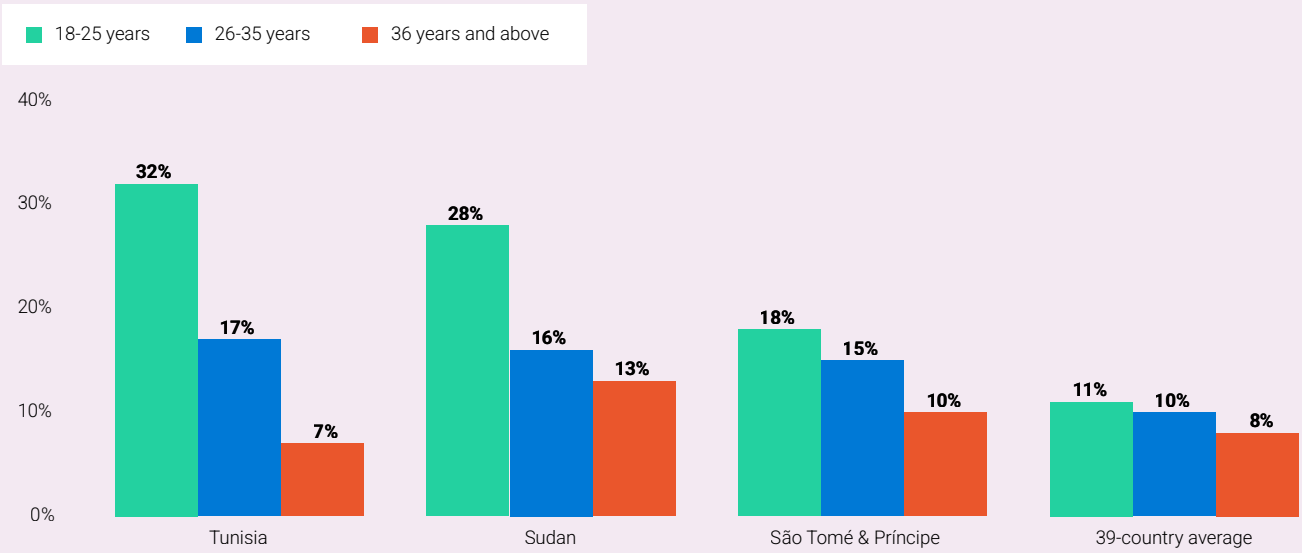
Figure shows percentage of respondents who participated aged 18-35 years and aged 36 years and above.
** The question about contact with local government councillors was not asked in Angola, Liberia, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Seychelles.*

meetings sees the widest gaps in Côte d'Ivoire (-28 points), Zambia (-26 points), and Botswana (-24 points). When it comes to direct engagement with local government officials, the largest disparities are in Lesotho (-24 points), Zambia (-20 points), and Guinea and Kenya (both -16 points).

Youth are more likely than their elders to participate in protests in many African countries, although rates in 16 countries differ by no more than 1 percentage point. Tunisia stands out with the largest gap in protest rates (+17 points), followed by Sudan (+9 points) and São Tomé and Príncipe (+7 points). These patterns are even clearer when the youth group is divided into younger youth (aged 18-25) and older youth (aged 26-35) (Figure 25).

These generational gaps underscore the opportunities and challenges of political participation on the world's most youthful continent if governments fail to create channels for meaningful engagement.

Figure 25: Participation in a protest | largest gaps by age group | 2021/2023



Focus » Gender gaps depend on what and where

Across Africa, women trail men in all forms of political and civic participation we examine in this report (see Page 27). But the gender gap varies considerably by country and by form of participation (Figure 26).

More men than women report that they voted in their country's most recent national election – a gap of 6 percentage points on average, and as large as 18 points in Cameroon and 16 points in Nigeria – but the opposite is the case in South Africa, Botswana, Seychelles, and Cabo Verde.

Gender gaps are considerably greater for attending community meetings (14 points on average), and here women's disadvantage is reflected in all surveyed countries except South Africa and Seychelles.

Similarly, fewer women than men (by 14 points on average) say they joined with others to raise an issue during the previous year. But countries differ significantly, from near-gender parity in South Africa, Seychelles, and Gabon to gaps of 20 points or more in nine countries, led by Nigeria and Sudan (each 33 points) (Figure 27).

In contacting local government councillors, countries show a wide spread, from a 2-point gap in Botswana, Gabon, and South Africa to a 26-point deficit in Guinea. Similarly, participation by contacting MPs ranges from perfect gender parity in Eswatini and Seychelles to double-digit deficits for women in the Gambia, Kenya, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

In protesting, women and men are within 3 percentage points of each other in 27 of the 39 countries, but women trail men by up to 14 points in Mali and 19 points in Sudan.

Taken together, these findings suggest that advocates for overcoming women's general disadvantage in political and civic participation will need analysis tailored to particular forms of engagement and specific countries to identify where and why women's voices are most egregiously missing.

Figure 26: Countries with the largest and smallest average participation gaps between men and women | 39 countries | 2021/2023

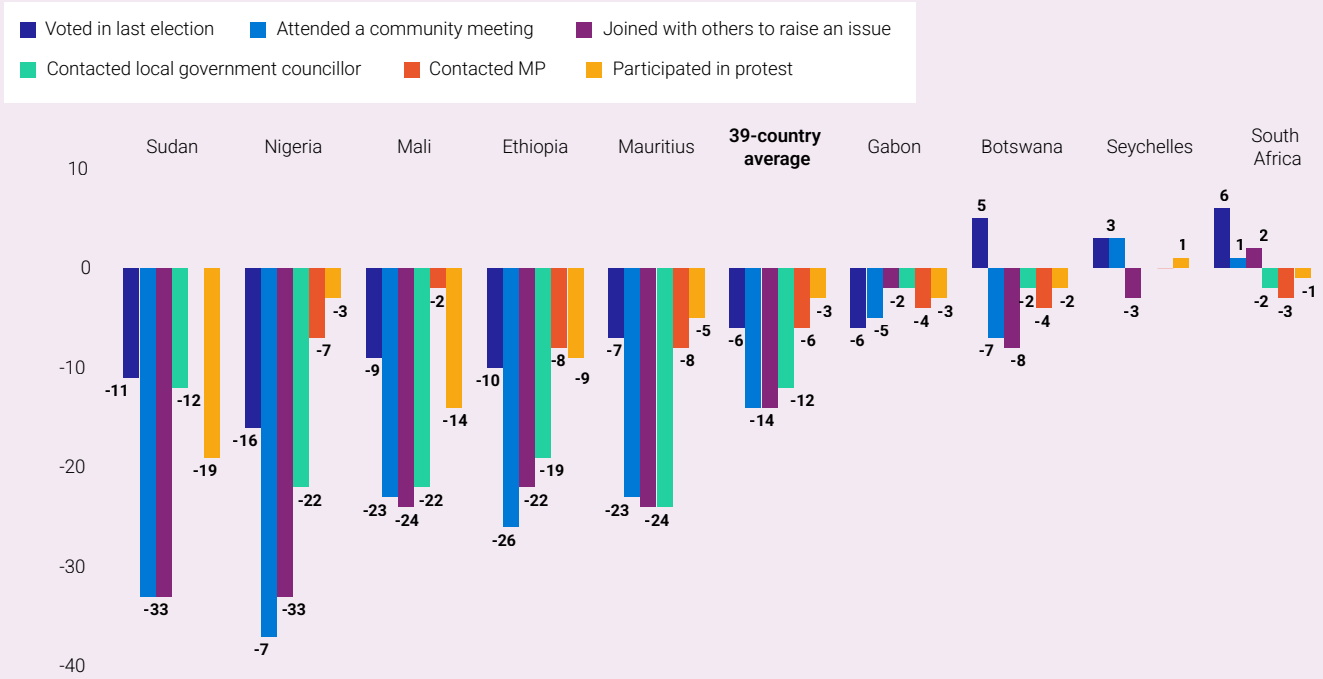
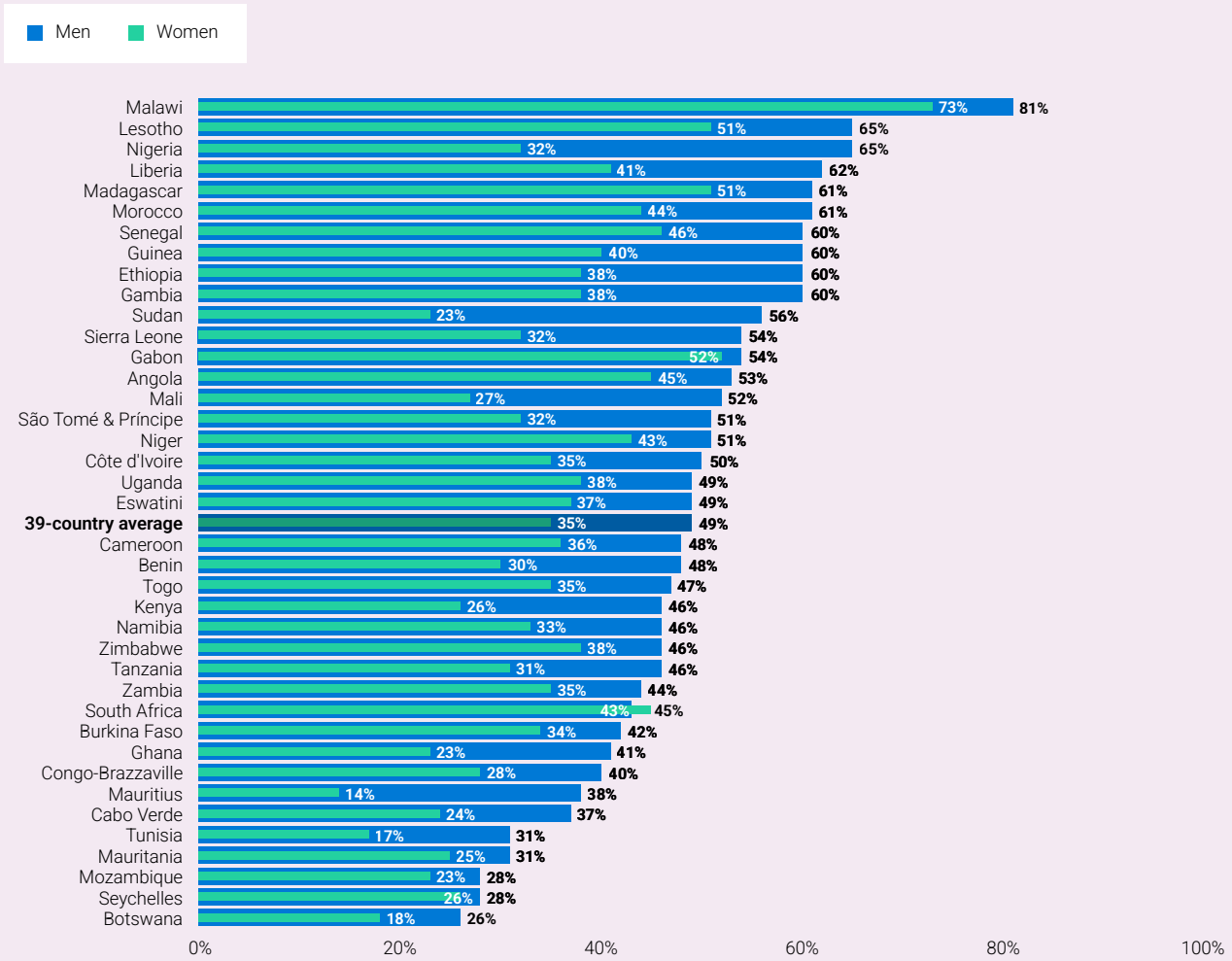


Figure shows difference, in percentage points, between the proportions of women and men who say they voted in their most recent national election and participated in selected activities during the previous year (attended a community meeting, joined with others to raise an issue, contacted a local government councillor and an MP, and protested). Negative numbers indicate fewer women than men; positive numbers indicate more women than men.

Figure 27: Gender gap in joining with others to raise an issue | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Drivers of citizen engagement in Africa

Following our analysis of socio-demographic factors associated with individual-level participation (Page 25), this section examines national-level factors that drive rates of political and civic participation at the country level. We focus on three sets of explanatory factors: socioeconomic conditions, government responsiveness and political efficacy beliefs, and measures of democratic performance. To streamline the discussion, we focus on six of the 10 modes of participation discussed in the previous sections: voting, attending community meetings, joining with others to raise an issue, contacting a local government councillor, contacting an MP, and protesting.

Together, these analyses suggest that:

1. ***Need fosters engagement:*** Rates of participation, particularly in community meetings and joining with others to raise an issue, are higher in countries with lower levels of economic well-being. Confronting the unmet needs of individuals, households, and communities may be a major motivator for citizen engagement.

2. ***Government responsiveness promotes engagement:*** Countries where citizens perceive local government councillors as responsive to their needs – which promotes a sense of *political efficacy* – generally have higher rates of contact with these officials. However, this pattern does not hold for national legislators, who are less accessible to ordinary citizens.

3. ***More democracy means more engagement:*** Electoral participation is higher in countries where citizens are satisfied with the way democracy works; believe that elections are free, fair, and effective; and feel free to cast their ballots as they wish. In contrast, when these conditions are not present, protests are more common.

Socioeconomic conditions

At the individual level, we found that contrary to expectations generated from Western democracies, Africans who are poorer and less educated tend to participate *more* in political and civic activities than their wealthier and more educated counterparts.

At the national level, we now examine the impacts of infrastructure development (access to piped water and the electricity grid) and national wealth (gross domestic product (GDP) and Human Development Index score) on the varying levels of citizen engagement we have observed at the country level.

Consistent with our individual-level findings, analysis of Afrobarometer Round 9 data shows that rates of citizen participation in various forms of political and communal action – including voting, attending community meetings, and joining with others to raise issues – are higher in poorer countries and in countries with limited public infrastructure.

Figure 28 illustrates this relationship using the example of electrification rates and participation in community meetings. The horizontal axis reports the proportion of enumeration areas (EAs) visited during the survey that have access to the national electric grid, while the vertical axis plots rates of community meeting attendance (the proportion of respondents who attended at least one meeting during the year preceding the survey). The colour and size of each point correspond to a country's wealth as measured by per-capita GDP in the survey year, based on data from the World Bank (2025).

The downward slope of the grey trend line indicates a negative association between the two indicators. In other words, higher rates of access to electricity are associated with *lower* attendance at community meetings. This form of political engagement is most prevalent in Madagascar, where 85% of citizens attend community meetings. Notably, Madagascar has the lowest GDP per capita among the 39 surveyed countries and has the lowest rate of access to electricity, at just 29%. In contrast, Mauritius and Seychelles – the wealthiest countries surveyed, where electrification is universal or nearly universal – report some of the lowest rates of community meeting participation, at 19% and 13%, respectively. They are joined by Tunisia, a country that also boasts 100% electrification (although significantly lower GDP per capita) while reporting the lowest rate of meeting attendance of any country (11%).

This inverse relationship between socioeconomic conditions and engagement is also illustrated in Figure 29, which compares data on the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI) and attendance at community meetings. The HDI, which ranges from 0 to 1, is a composite index that captures national wealth and well-being based on indicators of life expectancy, educational attainment, and standard of living (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

We again note the steep downward slope of the grey trend line, indicating that higher scores on the HDI are strongly associated with lower levels of engagement in community meetings. Here, too, Mauritius and Seychelles record the highest HDI scores (0.796 and 0.802) and the lowest levels of attendance (19% and 13%). In contrast, Niger (0.394) and Mali (0.410) rate lowest on the HDI but report meeting attendance several times higher (68% and 50%).

In Figure 28 and Figure 29, the steepness of the lines indicates the strength of the relationship – steeper means stronger – between community meeting attendance and the three socioeconomic variables (access to an electric grid, GDP, and HDI).

Figure 28: Access to the electric grid and community meeting attendance | 39 countries | 2021/2023

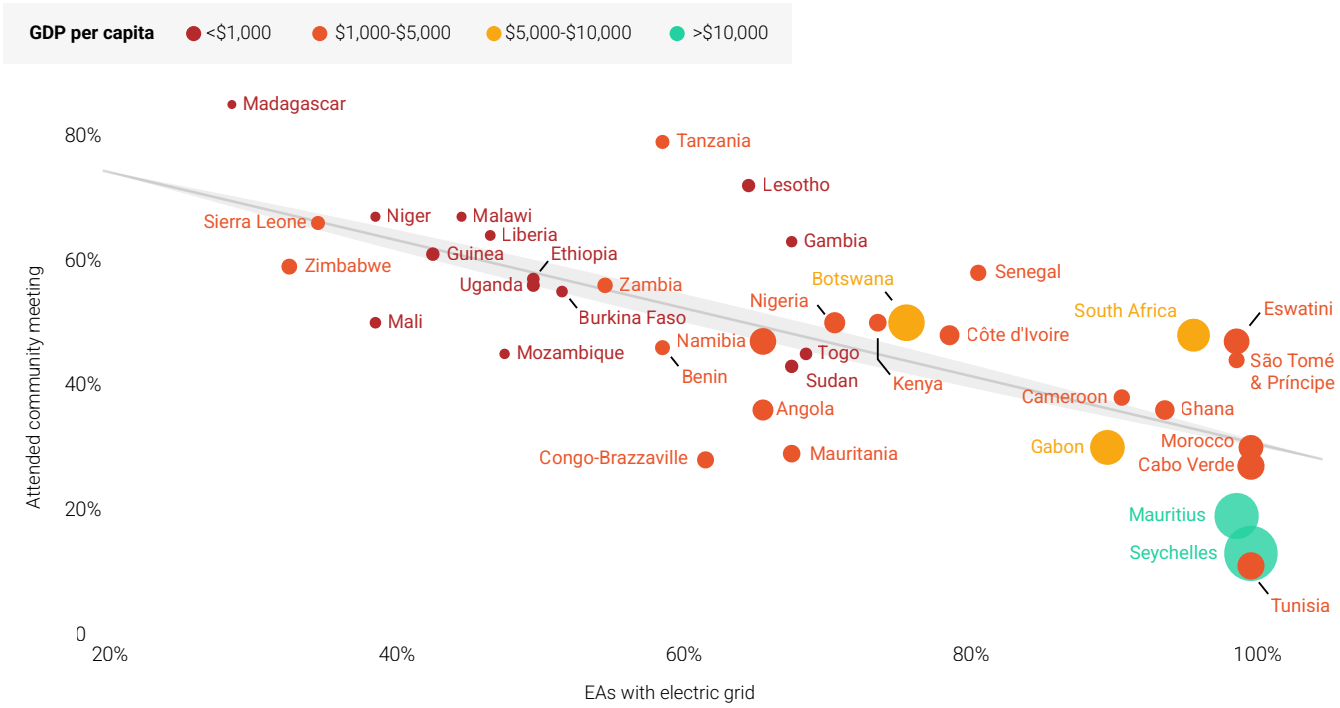


Figure 29: Human Development Index (HDI) and community meeting attendance | 39 countries | 2021/2023

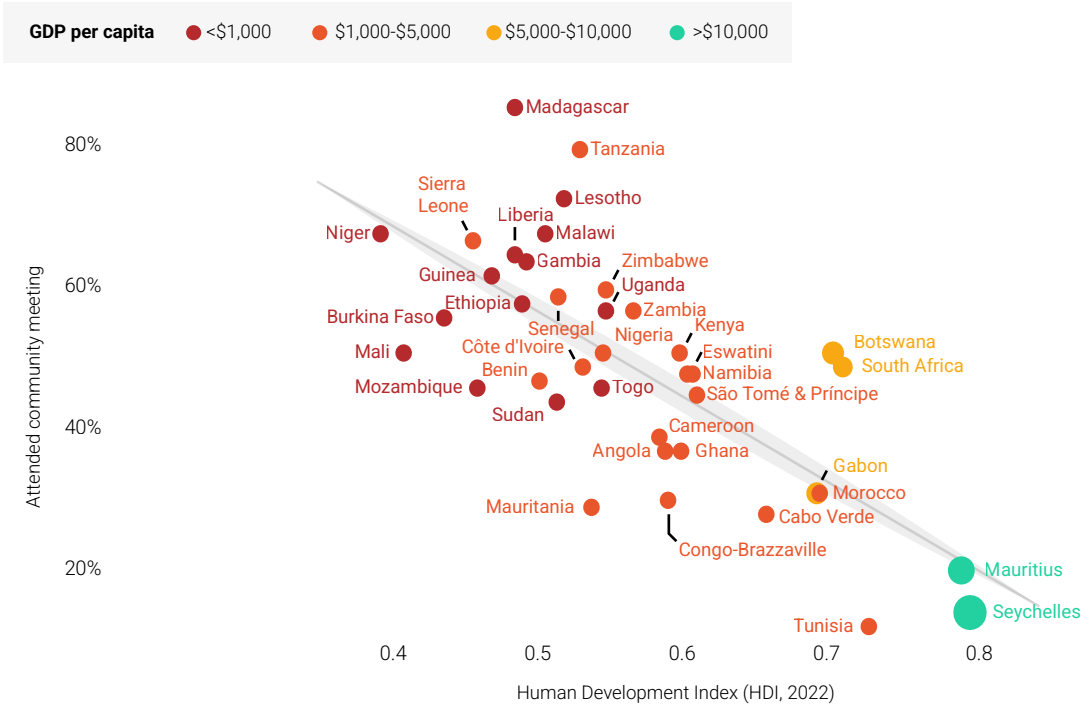


Figure 30: Socioeconomic conditions and political participation | 39 countries* | 2021/2023

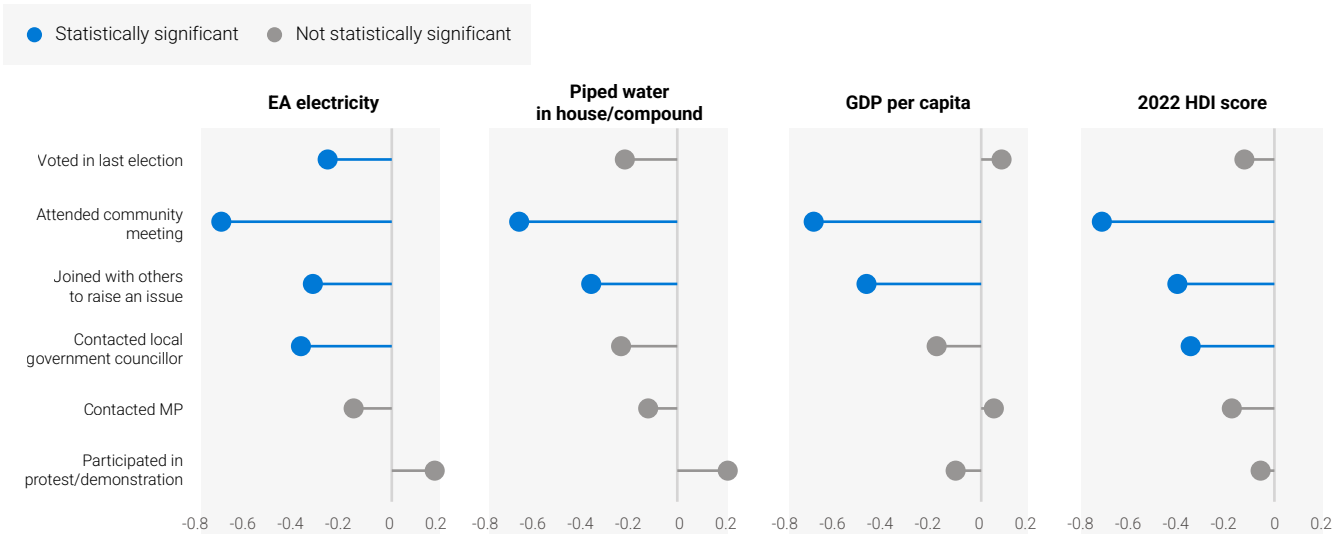


*Figure shows Pearson's correlation coefficients. * Results do not include countries where certain questions were not asked: "Contacted local government councillor" (Angola, Liberia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Seychelles) and "Contacted MP" (Burkina Faso, Guinea, Sudan).*

Figure 30 allows us to compare the strength of the various relationships, again using correlation coefficients (Pearson's r). As detailed on Page 14, larger coefficients, like steeper lines, correspond to stronger associations, either positive (+) or negative (-). In addition, the colour of the line for each coefficient indicates whether the relationship is statistically significant (blue line), meaning that it meets the conditions necessary to be considered meaningful, or not (grey line).

The first panel of Figure 30 shows the correlation coefficients for the relationships between access to electricity and all six indicators of citizen engagement. The second shows the same for another infrastructure indicator, the proportion who enjoy access to piped water in their house or compound. The third and fourth panels show the coefficients for per-capita GDP and the HDI. In all four, the relatively long and blue bars in the "Attended community meeting" rows indicate the strong and negative nature of these relationships. In all cases, we see that countries with lower levels of development also have higher rates of community meeting attendance.

As Figure 30 also shows, these socioeconomic indicators have similar relationships with other forms of political participation, including voting, joining with others to raise an issue, and contacting a local government councillor. Their strength varies across different forms of engagement, as shown again by the length and colour of the lines, including particularly weak associations with contacting legislators and protest activity.

Political efficacy

Political efficacy refers to individuals' belief in their ability to influence government actions through political processes (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). Efficacy beliefs are important for explaining political participation because they shape citizens' motivation to participate and their expectations about its impact (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

Analysts often distinguish between two types of efficacy beliefs. The first refers to a subjective sense of one's ability to understand and effectively participate in politics ("internal efficacy"). A person's upbringing and social environment may encourage the development of internal efficacy, along with a sense of civic duty and obligation to participate (Verba & Nie, 1972). A citizen may also gain a greater sense of internal efficacy through repeated interaction with government officials, which provides crucial information about how to make effective claims (Kumar, 2022).

The second refers to perceptions of political actors' responsiveness to citizen demands ("external efficacy"). This distinction helps to explain the mixed evidence on the relationship between efficacy and participation. Citizens may have a high sense of internal efficacy – for example, if they feel confident about their knowledge of the political process – but still decline to participate in politics because they have low expectations of government responsiveness (Lieberman, Posner, & Tsai, 2014). Similarly, it helps to explain differences in the types of political action that citizens take, such as the choice to participate in protests over more conventional forms of participation like voting (Pollock, 1983).

Research using Afrobarometer data has shown that Africans with a stronger sense of political efficacy are more likely to participate in voluntary associations (Logan et al., 2020). And youth with a weaker sense of efficacy are more likely than older people with similar views to engage in contentious forms of political

action (Resnick & Casale, 2011). However, these beliefs have limited explanatory power in the case of reported voting in Africa (Bratton et al., 2005; Isaksson, 2014; Kuenzi & Lambright, 2010).

Our analysis confirms the positive relationship between some forms, but not all, of political efficacy and participation.

Figures 31 and 32 show the relationship between political efficacy and participation in the form of contacting local government councillors and members of Parliament (MPs), respectively. In each case, we measure efficacy through citizens' responses to a survey question on whether they think political actors "try their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say."

The horizontal axis in Figure 31 reports the proportion of citizens in each country who say that local government councillors are "often" or "always" responsive to the public, while the vertical axis shows the share who contacted their local councillor at least once during the previous year.

The upward trajectory of the trend line shows that there is a positive association between local councillors' perceived responsiveness and contact. For instance, Burkina Faso and Niger are both close to the trend line at the upper end of the horizontal axis. This indicates relatively high rates of both perceived responsiveness and contact in these countries. In contrast, Tunisians report low levels on both indicators.

Figure 31: Perceived local government councillor responsiveness and contact | 35 countries | 2021/2023

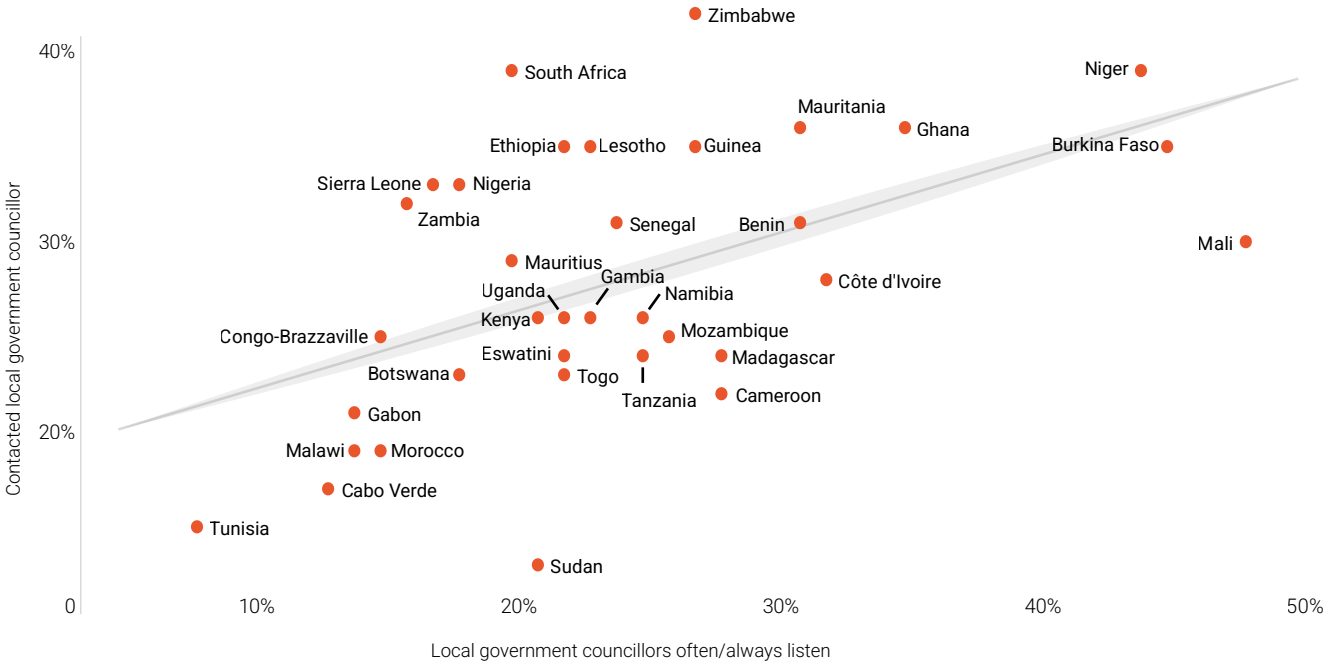


Figure 32: Perceived MP responsiveness and contact | 36 countries | 2021/2023

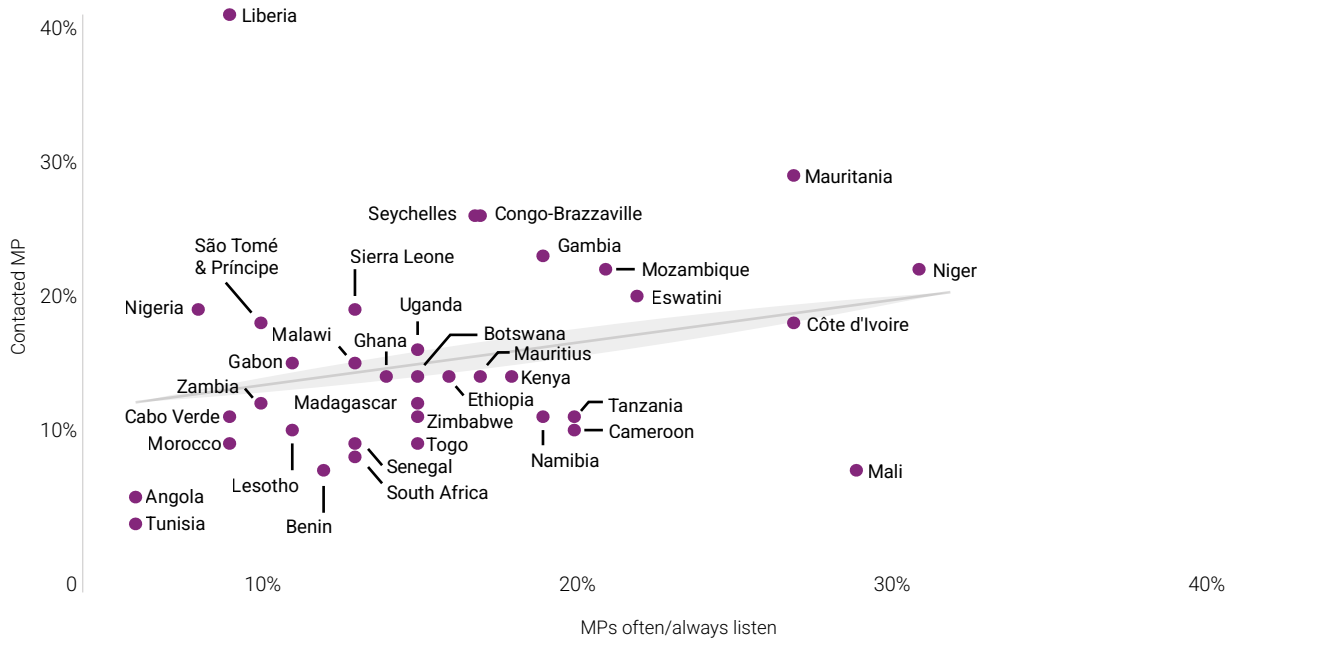


Figure 33: Political efficacy and political participation | 39 countries* | 2021/2023

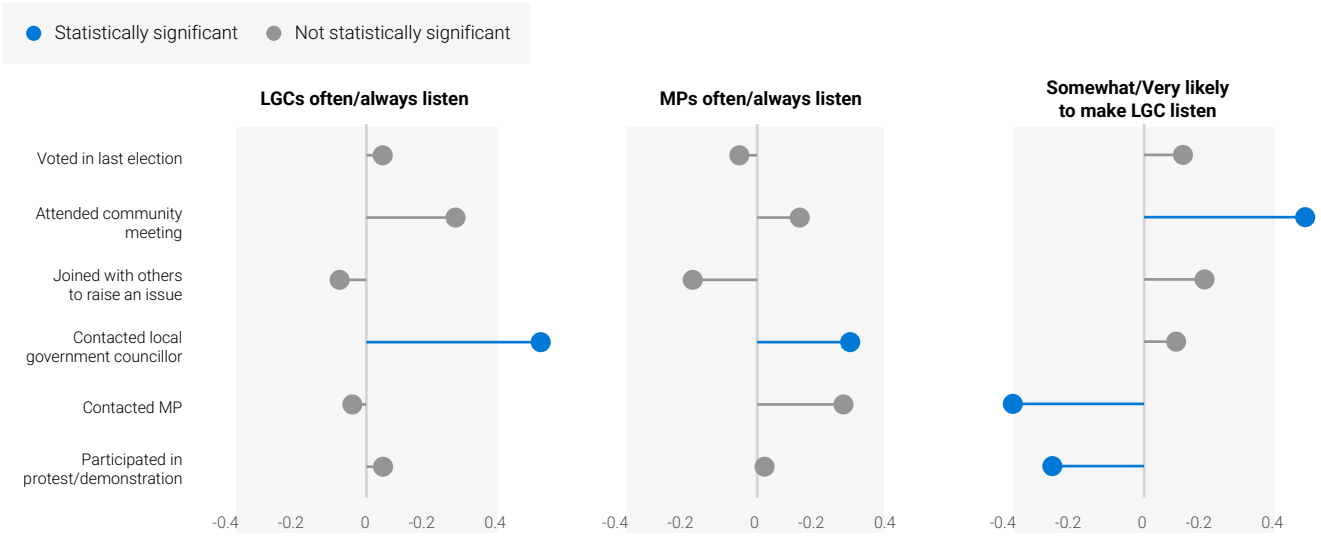


*Figure shows Pearson's correlation coefficients. * Results do not include countries where certain questions were not asked: "Contacted local government councillor" (Angola, Liberia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Seychelles), "Contacted MP" (Burkina Faso, Guinea, Sudan), "LGCs listen" (Angola, Seychelles), "MPs listen" (Guinea, Sudan), and "Make LGC listen" (Liberia, Seychelles, Sudan).*

There are, however, some exceptions to this general trend – such as Zimbabwe, where citizens report the highest rates of contact (42%) among the 35 countries in which these questions were asked, but express only middling levels of perceived responsiveness (27%).

In contrast, when we plot the proportion of citizens who say that MPs are "often" or "always" responsive against the share who contacted them, we find no relationship, positive or negative, perhaps because MPs are less accessible to ordinary people even if they do listen to those who get through to them. As Figure 32 shows, the trend line is nearly flat. A comparison of Mali and Mauritania helps to demonstrate the absence of an association: While the two countries have similar levels of perceived responsiveness (28% and 27%, respectively), contact rates are considerably higher in Mauritania (29%) than in Mali (7%).

The first two panels of Figure 33 show that perceptions of local government councillor (LGC) and MP responsiveness are weak predictors of many other forms of citizen engagement in Africa, including voting, protest, and civic participation. The positive relationship between perceived MP responsiveness and contact with local councillors – but not contact with MPs – may reflect the larger distance that citizens feel between themselves and members of their legislature, as compared to local government representatives.

The final panel presents findings from an Afrobarometer question about the likelihood that respondents "could get together with others and make your elected local government councillor listen to your concerns about a matter of importance to the community." While we find the expected positive relationship between this indicator and community meeting attendance, it does not have a significant relationship with contacting local government councillors. This result suggests that this form of political efficacy may be associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in collective, rather than individual, political action. However, the negative relationship with protest indicates that this may only hold for conventional forms of group activism.

Democratic performance

Citizen perceptions of democratic performance are crucial for understanding who participates and how. Previous studies have shown that citizens are more likely to participate when they perceive their democracy as both responsive and effective (Verba, 1967; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Dalton, 2008). Trust in the political system – especially citizens' trust in democratically elected officials – also affects individuals' willingness to participate in the democratic process (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

Conversely, their motivation to participate in formal democratic channels diminishes when they view democratic institutions or elected leaders as ineffective, untrustworthy, or corrupt (Dalton, 2004; Kostadinova, 2003; Stockemer, 2013; Stockemer, LaMontagne, & Scruggs, 2012). In addition, citizens must feel that they have sufficient freedom to exercise their right to engage in the political process (Dahl, 1971; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007).

For some people, poor democratic performance and restricted political freedoms lead to apathy and disengagement (Norris, 2011), while others turn to non-conventional forms of political activism, such as joining social movements, participating in boycotts, and protesting (Harris & Hern, 2019; Stockemer, 2014; Tarrow, 1994).

Previous Afrobarometer findings have confirmed that democratic performance is often linked to political participation. Africans who live in countries with a higher level of political openness are more likely to engage in civic action (Logan et al., 2020). Similarly, citizens who experience restrictions on their political freedoms may reduce their engagement because they think participation won't have an effect on policy outcomes (Croke et al., 2016). At the same time, political dissatisfaction is not strongly related to protest or other non-conventional participation (Bratton et al., 2005). This may be because regular exposure to democratic failings eventually erodes both citizens' motivation and their ability to engage in collective action (Monyake, 2016).

Figures 34-36 illustrate the relationship between participation and democratic performance through three key indicators: overall satisfaction with democracy, perceptions of election freeness and fairness, and confidence in one's ability to vote freely. We thus capture this association using both broad and specific dimensions of democratic quality. In each case, we present results for voting and protest – a contrast that lets us explore how citizens' views of democracy relate to both conventional and contentious forms of participation.

Figure 34 plots the share of citizens who report being "fairly" or "very" satisfied with the way democracy works in their country on the horizontal axes. (For a more in-depth examination of these attitudes, see Afrobarometer, 2024.) The vertical axes report the share who voted in the last election (left panel) and the share who participated in a protest or demonstration at least once during the previous year (right panel).

The results show the anticipated positive association between democratic satisfaction and electoral participation/voting, while the relationship is reversed for protest participation. Tanzania is perhaps the best illustration of these contrasting trends. Around eight in 10 citizens report being satisfied with the country's democracy. While the same proportion report having voted in the last election (81%), only 2% had participated in a protest in the previous year.

Countries near the trend lines follow the general relationship between satisfaction and participation most closely. These include Benin, Ethiopia, and Senegal in the case of voting, and Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, and Liberia in the case of protest participation. But the relationship is not perfect, i.e. some countries fall much farther from the trend line.

While satisfaction with democracy captures public perceptions of how well the system functions overall, it does not speak to the performance of specific democratic institutions (Linde & Ekman, 2003). To understand how perceptions of the effectiveness of specific democratic institutions influence participation, we turn to the example of elections.

Figure 35 focuses on the quality of elections, measured as the share of citizens who say that their most recent national election was "free and fair with minor problems" or "completely free and fair" (horizontal axes). Again we see a clear positive association between election quality and voting,

Figure 34: Satisfaction with democracy and political participation | 39 countries | 2021/2023

and the opposite relationship with respect to protest. The relationship between election quality and voting is especially strong, as shown by the steeper slope of the trend line.

Figure 36 turns to citizens' ability to vote freely using a survey question about the likelihood that "powerful people can find out how you voted, even though there is supposed to be a secret ballot." The horizontal axes show the share of citizens in each country who say that this is "not very likely" or "not at all likely" to occur. Similar to the other measures of democratic performance, we find a positive association between perceptions of ballot secrecy and voting and the opposite relationship with protesting.

We find similar patterns when we employ alternative measures of political or civic freedoms, such as the share of citizens who say they are "somewhat" or "completely" free to say what they think or to join a political organisation of their choosing (not shown).

Lastly, Figure 37 illustrates the relationships between all six participation variables under study and four indicators of democratic quality or performance.

The results indicate that in addition to being linked to voting, perceptions of election quality are also positively associated with community meeting attendance and contact with

Figure 35: Last national election free and fair and political participation | 39 countries | 2021/2023

Figure 36: Ballot secrecy and political participation | 39 countries | 2021/2023

Figure 37: Democratic performance and political participation | 39 countries | 2021/2023

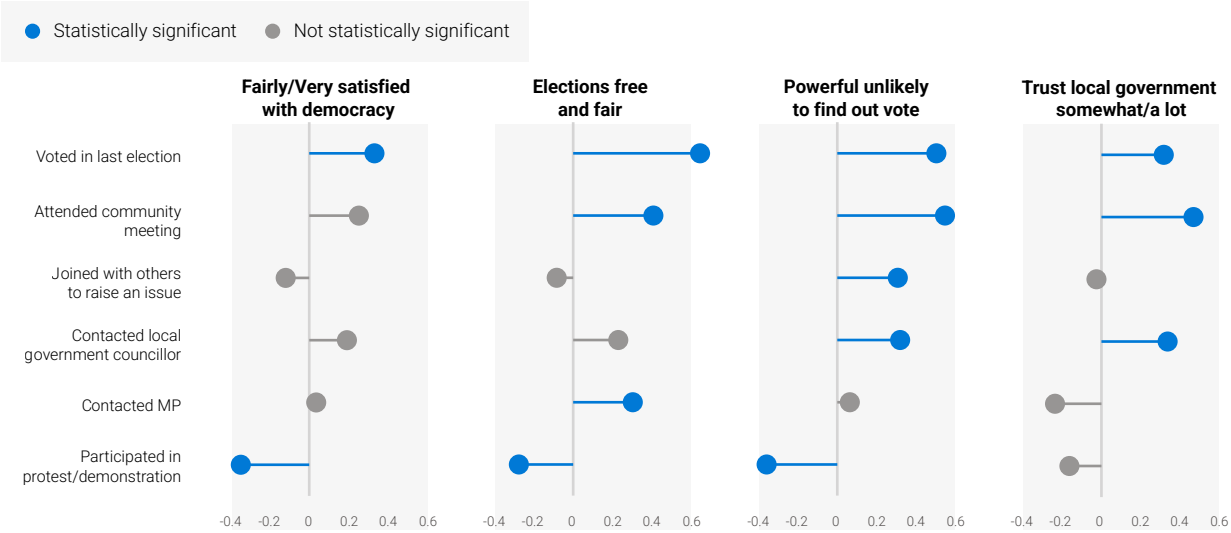


*Figure shows Pearson's correlation coefficients. * Results do not include countries where question was not asked: "Contacted local government councillor" (Angola, Liberia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Seychelles), "Contacted MP" (Burkina Faso, Guinea, Sudan), and "Trust local government" (Angola, Seychelles).*

legislators (Panel 2), and perceptions of ballot secrecy are positively associated with attending community meetings, joining with others to raise an issue, and contacting elected local government officials (Panel 3). These results underscore the critical role that election quality plays in fostering citizens' confidence in their country's democratic institutions, which in turn motivates their political engagement.

Panel 4 shows the importance of a fourth measure of democratic performance: trust in elected leaders. Belief that local government councillors are trustworthy is linked to higher voter turnout, greater community meeting attendance, and higher rates of contact with these leaders. But perhaps surprisingly, we find that external assessments of democratic quality and performance, such as a country's Freedom House (2025) score and Varieties of Democracy's electoral democracy index score (Coppedge et al., 2024), are only correlated with reported voter turnout rates (not shown).

What drives country-level engagement?

To summarise our findings about the national-level factors that promote – or inhibit – engagement, Afrobarometer data show that economic need, government responsiveness, and democratic performance are important drivers of political and civic engagement in Africa, although the strength and direction of these relationships differ according to the type of participation. In general, factors that enhance conventional forms of participation tend to undermine rates of participation in protest.

In addition, results show that the association between economic resources and most forms of engagement in Africa is the opposite of what researchers have found in other world regions. Less-resourced Africans are more – rather than less – likely to participate in politics and other forms of communal or collective action. This suggests that initiatives aimed at boosting participation should focus on political factors, namely improving the openness and responsiveness of democratic institutions.

Conclusion »
Citizen engagement: Democracy's vital signs

Democracy's promise is built not only on elections, but on the broader ability of citizens to participate in shaping their political future. Africa has a long history of communal engagement. But in today's shifting landscape – marked by the rise of social media, growing youth populations, and rapid urbanisation – are Africans engaging in the political and civic processes that frame their lives? And if so, who is participating, how, and why?

Despite concerns about democratic backsliding and a loss of political freedom, Afrobarometer survey data from 39 countries show that the overwhelming majority of Africans are finding multiple ways to make their voices heard, demonstrating engagement levels that compare favourably with other world regions. Most citizens take advantage of the opportunity to register their preferences through the ballot box, but their engagement extends far beyond the voting booth. In fact, among those who vote, a large majority are also engaged in contacting leaders, joining with others to voice concerns and demands, or other forms of participation.

Not all forms of engagement are equally resilient. Over the past decade, the proportion of citizens declaring a political party affiliation has witnessed a marked decline, and the various forms of collective action have also decreased, though the trends are not yet clear. On the other hand, contact with all types of leaders is on the rise, and the use of social media, though still a nascent form of political participation, has shown remarkable impact and is likely to grow. Meanwhile, voting and protest – both core channels of political expression – appear to have remained fairly stable, despite recent declines in perceived political freedoms. Interestingly, while some forms of engagement are strongly correlated with one another, protest stands out as a fundamentally different outlet for citizens to voice their views – one that they may choose when other options have failed or are unavailable, and that can strike with impressive force, as shown in last year's successful responses to Kenya's Finance Bill and Senegal's election crisis.

As for who engages in political and civic processes, in contrast to theories and findings from the Global North, we find that resource-poor Africans are more likely to participate in a range of activities. However, engagement lags among two of Africa's largest demographic groups – women and youth – revealing persistent gaps in resources and opportunities to participate.

What drives citizens to get and remain engaged? The data show that both economic and political factors shape the decision to participate. Lower levels of economic well-being appear to foster, rather than to diminish, engagement. At the same time, effective democratic performance and the protection of political freedoms are critical for sustaining conventional forms of participation, such as voting or attending community meetings. Where institutions are perceived as unresponsive or political space is constrained, however, citizens may disengage – or redirect their energies toward more contentious modes of expression, such as protest.

> "The overwhelming majority of Africans are finding multiple ways to make their voices heard, demonstrating engagement levels that compare favourably with other world regions.

In sum, Afrobarometer data show that Africans remain determined to have their voices heard by their governments, even in the face of economic hardship and political constraints. Their engagement represents a wealth of commitment and energy that can strengthen government effectiveness and legitimacy if leaders are willing to listen and respond. But gaps in engagement, especially among women and youth, also highlight opportunities to ensure more inclusive and meaningful participation for all citizens. As this report suggests, the challenge for governments and democracy supporters is not only to expand access to participation, but also to respond effectively to the voices that are raised. When engagement is broad and effective, it strengthens accountability, deepens legitimacy, and builds trust between citizens and the state, all of which set the foundations for a more resilient democracy.

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Survey questions

Indicators of political and civic participation

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 "I voted in the election")

Do you feel close to any particular political party?
(% "yes")

When you get together with your friends or family, how often would you say you discuss political matters?
(% who say "occasionally" or "frequently")

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")

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 [local government councillor]?
A member of [Parliament]?
A political party official?
A traditional leader?
(% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")

(Round 8) Thinking about the last national election, in [20xx]:
Did you attend a campaign rally?
Did you work for a candidate or party?
(% "yes")

Indicators of economic well-being

What is your main source of water for household use?
(% who say they have piped water into their dwelling or into their yard, plot, or compound)

(Observed by fieldworkers:) Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Electricity grid that most houses can access?
(% "yes")

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?
(% who say "just once or twice," "several times," "many times," or "always")

Political efficacy

In your opinion, how likely is it that you could get together with others and make your elected [local government councillor] listen to your concerns about a matter of importance to the community?
(% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say:
Members of [Parliament]?
Members of [local government council]?
(% who say "often" or "always")

Freedoms and democratic performance

In this country, how free are you:
To say what you think?
To join any political organisation you want?
To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured?
(% who say "somewhat free" or "completely free")

On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [YEAR]?
(% who say "free and fair with minor problems" or "completely free and fair")

Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [COUNTRY]?
(% who say "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied")

How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say:
Your [local government council]?
(% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

How likely do you think it is that powerful people can find out how you voted, even though there is supposed to be a secret ballot in this country?
(% who say "not very likely" or "not at all likely")

Internet and social media

How often do you use the Internet?
(% who say "a few times a week" or "every day")

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: Posted about politics or community affairs on social media?
(% who say "yes")

Most important problems

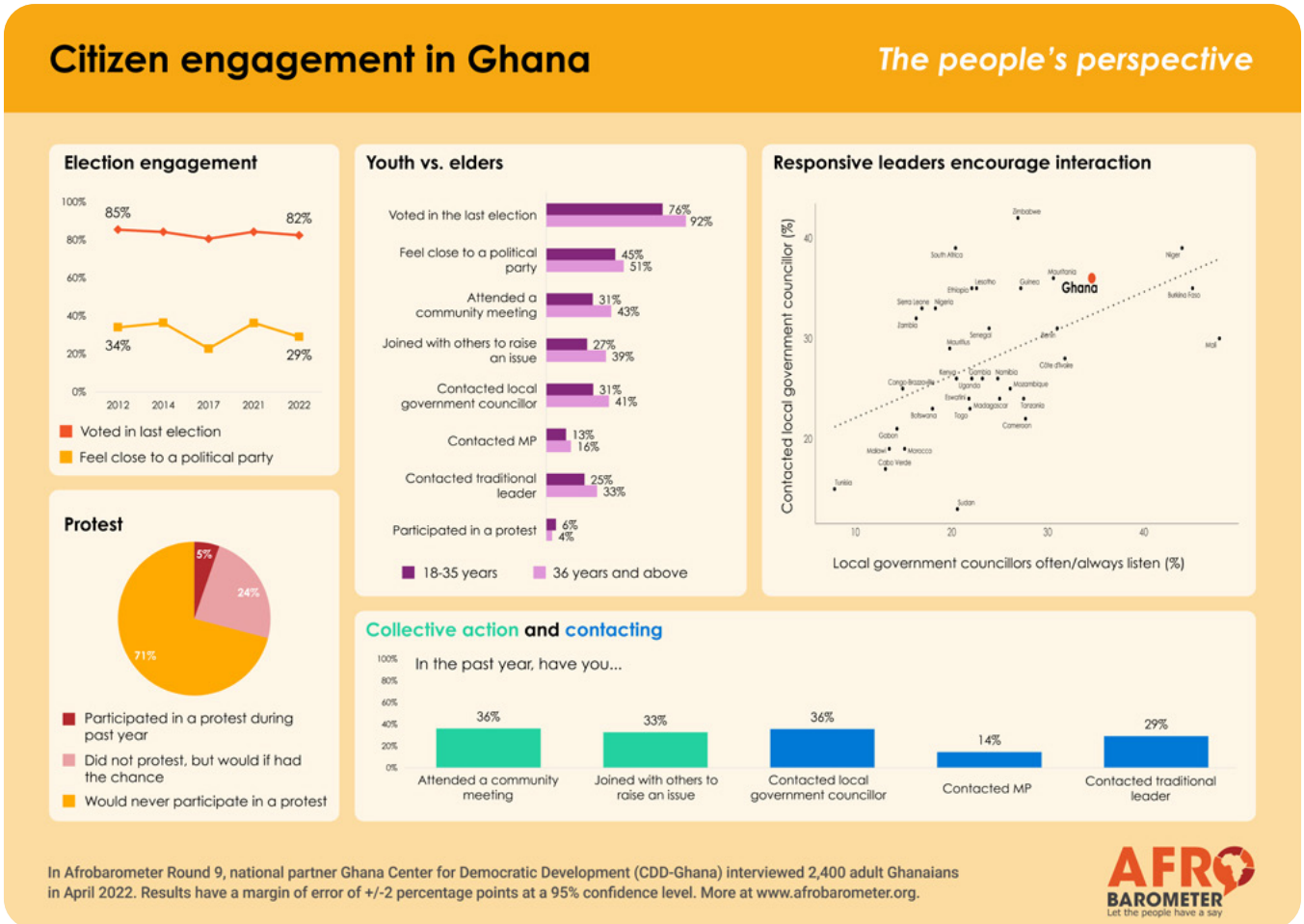
In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three answers; % of respondents who offer each response)

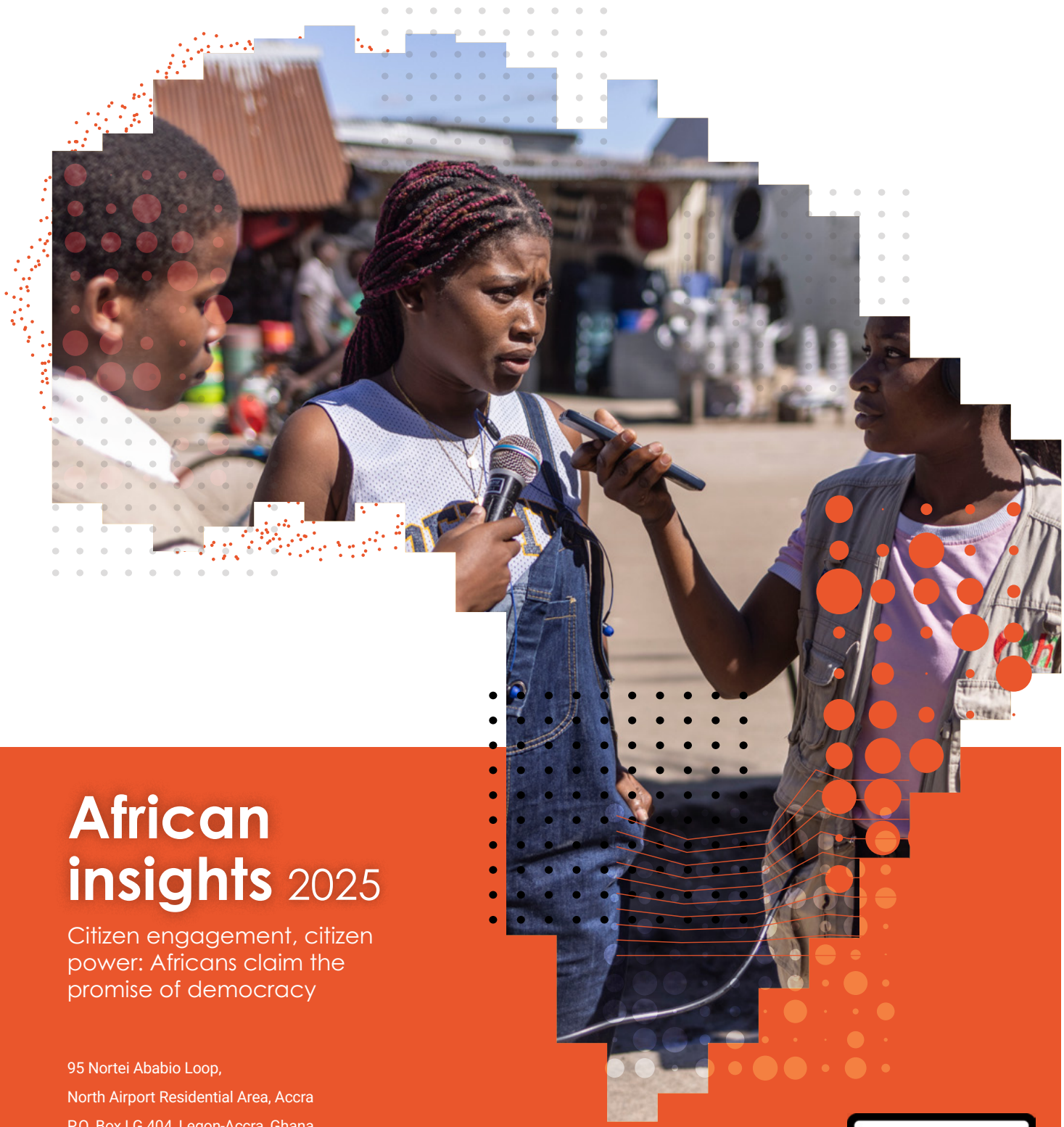
Country scorecards on citizen engagement

Afrobarometer country scorecards present graphic illustrations of our survey findings on key indicators of citizen engagement, from voting and party affiliation to collective action, contacting, protesting, youth engagement, and the correlation between socioeconomic factors and participation.

Click on this link or scan the QR code at right to see scorecards on the Afrobarometer website for all 39 African countries surveyed in Round 9 (2021/2023).

Country scorecards on citizen engagement





African insights 2025

Citizen engagement, citizen power: Africans claim the promise of democracy

95 Nortei Ababio Loop,
North Airport Residential Area, Accra
P.O. Box LG 404, Legon-Accra, Ghana
+233 (0) 302 776142/784293
info@afrobarometer.org

@afrobarometer

#VoicesAfrica

www.afrobarometer.org

See the report online