

Has Democracy Been Good for the Youth?

By John Osae-Kwapong (Ph.D)

In 2020, the Center for the Future of Democracy, published a research report titled “Youth, and the future of democracy.” The report observed among many things, the following – a) a decline in satisfaction with democracy among the youth, mentioning sub-Saharan Africa as one of four regions experiencing notable declines; b) economics explains the discontent; and c) in emerging democracies like sub-Saharan Africa, the youth are experiencing “transition fatigue.”

What has been the experience of Ghana’s youth since the transition to democracy in 1993? For answers, I turn to the Afrobarometer survey. Per the National Youth Policy, Ghanaians falling between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five are considered youth. The Afrobarometer survey samples Ghanaians who are 18 years or older. This piece therefore covers Ghanaian youth between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five.

Democracy and Ghana’s Youth

My first observation. There is strong support for democracy among Ghanaian youth. In over nine rounds (1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2022) of the Afrobarometer survey, an average, seven out of ten (71%) Ghanaian youth say they “prefer democracy to any other form of government.” The year 2012 saw the highest (82%) level of support for democracy ever among them. The years between 2005 and 2012 saw a sharp growth (+9 percentage points) in their support for democracy. Although support for democracy among them has dipped by five percentage points between survey years 2017 (80%) and 2022 (75%), the level remains strong.

My second observation. The verdict of the youth on government’s delivery of key social and economic goods has been mixed. Averaged across the nine rounds of the survey, the verdict is that government delivery in certain areas has been good (addressing education needs,

improving basic health services, and providing reliable electricity). In other areas, delivery needs improvement (providing water and sanitation services), while in other areas delivery has been poor (creating jobs, improving the living standards of the poor, and narrowing the income gaps between the rich and the poor).

Over time though, all areas of how well governments have addressed socio-economic issues show a significant decline. The four biggest areas of decline are a) improving the living standards of the poor (-37 percentage points), b) providing water and sanitation services (-28 percentage points), c) creating jobs (-26 percentage points), and d) narrowing income gaps between the rich and poor (-24 percentage points).

My third observation. The strong level of support for democracy among the youth is not reflected in how they feel about their lived experiences. I say so because of a few reasons. One, the youth’s reported level of satisfaction with the way democracy works in Ghana has not changed significantly. In the maiden edition (1999) of the survey, fifty-two percent (52%) said they were satisfied with the way democracy works in Ghana. In the most recent round of the survey (2022), only forty-nine percent (49%) expressed satisfaction.

Two, comparing Round 2 (2002) survey results to Round 9 (2022), the youth’s sentiment about the extent of democracy in Ghana signals a major concern. In the table below, you will notice that the percentage of Ghanaian youth who describe Ghana as a democracy but with major problems has almost doubled. This is concerning especially because there is certainty about the extent of democracy in the country given the percentage who answered “don’t know” in 2002 compared to 2022. There are no significant changes in the other categories over time.

Table 1: Extent of democracy, Ghana’s youth| 2002 vs. 2022|

	2002	2022
Not a democracy	2%	4%
A democracy, but with major problems	17%	33%
A democracy, but with minor problems	36%	36%
A full democracy	23%	26%
Don’t know	22%	1%
<i>Respondents were asked: “In your opinion how much of a democracy is Ghana today?”</i>		

Three, when asked about the level of democracy in five years' time during Round 9 (2022), the level of optimism was not very encouraging in the sense that – a) twenty-nine percent (29%) said the country will be somewhat/much less democratic; b) thirty-nine percent (39%) said the level of democracy will be the same; c) twenty-eight percent (28%) said it will be somewhat/more democratic; and d) three percent said “don't know.”

The 2024 Election Manifestos

There is no doubt about the strong support for democracy among the youth. The task ahead is to meet them at their pinch points – delivering on key socio-economic issues. The quality of our democracy cannot also be ignored. The youth have expressed sentiments that need attention.

I know economic issues are taking center stage in this election. However, I expect that when the political parties publish their manifestos later this year, the section on 'The Youth' will address not only the socio-economic issues, but also the gaps in their lived democratic experiences.



John Osae-Kwapong (Ph.D) is a Democracy and Development Fellow at the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana).