

## **POLICY BRIEF**

# **Democracy without Dividends? Rethinking Ghana's Democratic Gains**



*Safeguarding Ghana's democracy requires more than holding elections; it must include tangible improvements in economic and social wellbeing that affirm the everyday value of democratic governance.*

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Ghana's Fourth Republic has celebrated thirty years of electoral democracy, representing the longest period of uninterrupted constitutional governance in the country's history. However, this democratic resilience is contrasted by growing public dissatisfaction with the performance of elected officials and the delivery of public goods and services. Approval ratings for political leaders have declined steadily, particularly during periods of economic crisis, suggesting a widening disconnect between democratic participation and its material dividends.

This brief explores the disconnection between

democratic commitment and developmental disappointment, drawing on longitudinal data from Afrobarometer surveys. It argues that this disconnect is not simply the result of poor governance but reflects deeper structural constraints rooted in Ghana's subordinate position within the international economic order. While Ghanaians continue to uphold elections as a cornerstone of political legitimacy, the lack of tangible progress in livelihoods and public welfare undermines the transformative potential of democracy.

Without a shift towards a more substantive form of democracy that centres citizen welfare and restructures the global conditions of economic dependency, public discontent is likely to intensify.

INTRODUCTION

Established in 1993, Ghana’s Fourth Republic has been praised for its resilience and stability as a liberal democracy, particularly when contrasted with earlier republics which were interrupted by military coups (Myjoyonline, 2022). Yet, recent developments point to a growing erosion of political legitimacy, largely driven by a perceived gap between government actions and citizens’ wellbeing (Asante et al., 2024).

Public protests, such as #FixTheCountry and Occupy Jutorbi House (Nartey and Yu, 2023), reflect this growing disenchantment and signal a critical juncture for Ghana’s democracy. Against this backdrop, this policy brief offers a retrospective analysis of citizen–state relations under the Fourth Republic, examining trends in public trust, attitudes toward democracy, and approval of elected leaders, while locating these shifts within broader political and economic structures, both national and global.



A sitting of the Legislative arm of government in Ghana’s parliament.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This brief draws on data from the Afrobarometer survey, which tracks public attitudes towards governance across Africa. In Ghana, nine rounds of the survey were conducted between 1999 to 2022 using nationally representative samples, with questions framed as Likert scale items.

The analysis focuses on three key dimensions: (1) citizens’ commitment to the norms of multiparty democracy, (2) trends in approval ratings for elected leaders, and (3) public satisfaction with the government’s economic and service delivery

performance. The data are triangulated with macroeconomic indicators and contextual analysis of national and global political developments.

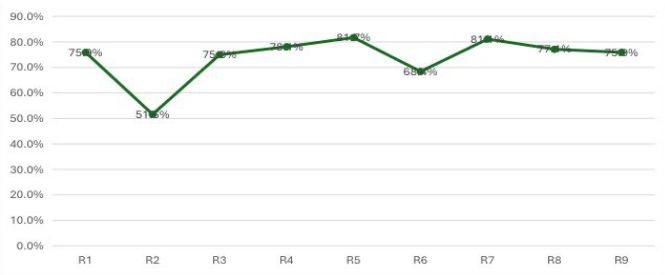
FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. Strong endorsement of democratic norms, but cracks emerging

Support for multiparty democracy remains high, with approximately 75.9% of Ghanaians expressing a preference for democratic governance (Afrobarometer, 2022). This enduring commitment suggests that, despite mounting dissatisfaction with government performance, liberal democratic principles continue to enjoy broad legitimacy among the Ghanaian public (see figure 1). However, a notable shift is occurring: tolerance for military rule is gradually increasing, particularly since 2014.

This trend reflects growing disillusionment with the democratic process, not in principle but in practice — citizens support democracy but are frustrated by its perceived inability to deliver results. Safeguarding Ghana’s democracy will therefore require more than holding elections; it must include tangible improvements in economic and social wellbeing that affirm the everyday value of democratic governance.

Figure 1: support for democracy

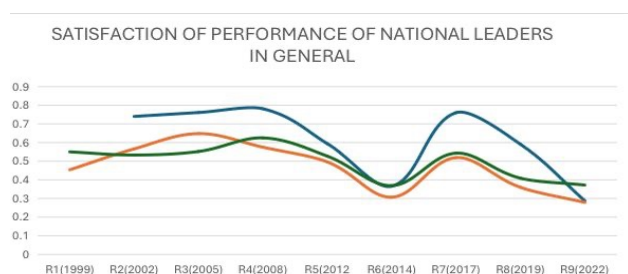


2. Declining approval of elected officials

Approval ratings for elected leaders have declined sharply, with presidential approval falling below 29% in 2022 (GhanaWeb, 2022). Such declines are closely associated with economic crises, eroding citizens’ trust in the government’s ability to meet their needs (see figure 2). Citizens increasingly feel that political leaders are disconnected from their everyday struggles and are unresponsive to their needs. To restore public trust, government institutions must demonstrate transparency, responsiveness, and a genuine commitment to service delivery, thereby rebuilding the fractured social contract.



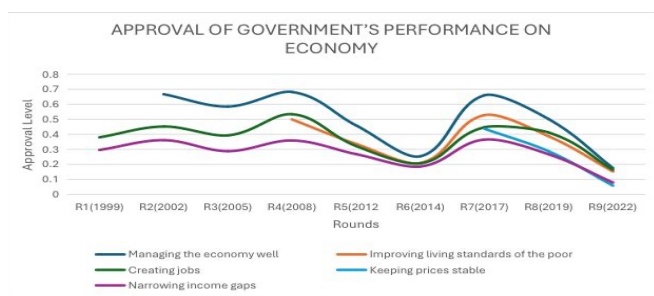
Figure 2: satisfaction of performance of national leaders in general.



### 3. Economic mismanagement and public disillusionment

Public approval of the government's economic management has historically averaged around 50% but recent surveys indicate a dramatic drop to as low as 17.6% (Afrobarometer, 2022). Contributing factors include rising inflation, unemployment, and dissatisfaction with public service delivery (see figure 3). The decline mirrors previous patterns observed in 2014, suggesting a cyclical relationship between economic hardship and public dissatisfaction with governance. These recurring downturns point not just to poor policy choices, but to a structural fragility in Ghana's economic foundations. If these economic crises continue unaddressed, they will deepen the legitimacy crisis facing democratic governance and further erode public confidence in elected leadership.

Figure 3: approval of government performance on economy.



### 4. Economic crises and political legitimacy

The sixth and ninth rounds of the Afrobarometer survey, both of which recorded historically low levels of satisfaction with government performance, coincided with periods of severe economic crisis and sharp declines in economic growth (Figure 4).

These recurring crises are symptomatic of Ghana's structural vulnerabilities: overreliance on commodity exports, limited control over natural resources, and a dependence on an extractive international economic and financial system, among others. This has produced a democracy that functions procedurally but struggles to meet the material needs of its people. As global conditions —

such as IMF austerity conditionalities — constrain domestic policymaking, Ghana's democracy risks becoming what Thandika Mkandawire termed a "choiceless democracy", where elections exist but do not offer real alternatives. Addressing this will require a bold rethinking of Ghana's development model to centre the needs and aspirations of its people.

Figure 4: GDP growth, 2004-2022.



Source: Macrotrends (2024)

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ghana's Fourth Republic has delivered durable democratic stability, but it has not translated this achievement into meaningful economic or developmental gains for its citizens. The disconnect between democratic input (voting, rights, representation) and output (public goods, equity, opportunity) has deepened. As citizen expectations rise and economic conditions worsen, the risk of political disengagement or support for authoritarian alternatives grows.

To reverse this trend, the following steps are critical:

**1. Deepen democracy beyond the ballot:** Move beyond simply going to the polls every four years to elect presidential and parliamentary candidates and the formal guarantees of political rights and freedoms. This 'thickening' of democracy must embed citizen welfare and development outcomes as central tenets of governance.

**2. Advance long-term development planning:** To deliver the dividends of democracy, it would be necessary for successive governments to pursue long-term, sustained, long-term development planning. Ghana must ask whether multiparty politics, as currently practised, enables or inhibits such consensus. This question merits discussion as Ghana considers the future of its political and developmental trajectory.

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