

International Youth Day: Despite interest, African youth not connecting with political processes

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 41 | Sibusiso Nkomo and Eleanor du Plooy

Summary

A majority of African youth are interested in public affairs and discuss politics with those around them, but relatively low levels of civic engagement and political participation suggest a disconnect between the continent's "youth bulge" and democratic processes.

These results of a new Afrobarometer analysis are being released in observance of International Youth Day (12 August), whose 2015 theme focuses on youth civic engagement and its implications for development. (For more on International Youth Day, please visit <http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2015/06/join-international-youth-day-2015-celebrations/>.)

Data from six rounds of Afrobarometer surveys in more than 30 African countries suggest that African youth are not fully engaged in formal political processes, such as voting in elections, as well as in more informal modes of engagement, such as meeting with community members and contacting political representatives. Youth participation in protests or demonstrations seems to vary with in-country conditions, and youth overwhelmingly reject the use of violence for political ends.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted circa 2000, 2002, 2004, 2008, and 2012, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents. These sample sizes yield country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% (for samples of 1,200) or +/-2% (for samples of 2,400) at a 95% confidence level. Analysis of smaller subsamples, such as youth, increases the margins of uncertainty around numerical results.

Afrobarometer surveys target adults ages 18 years and older. In line with Afrobarometer categories, this analysis uses "youth" to refer to adults ages 18-29, which differs from the United Nations definition (ages 15-24) and the African Union definition (15-35 years) of "youth."

Key findings

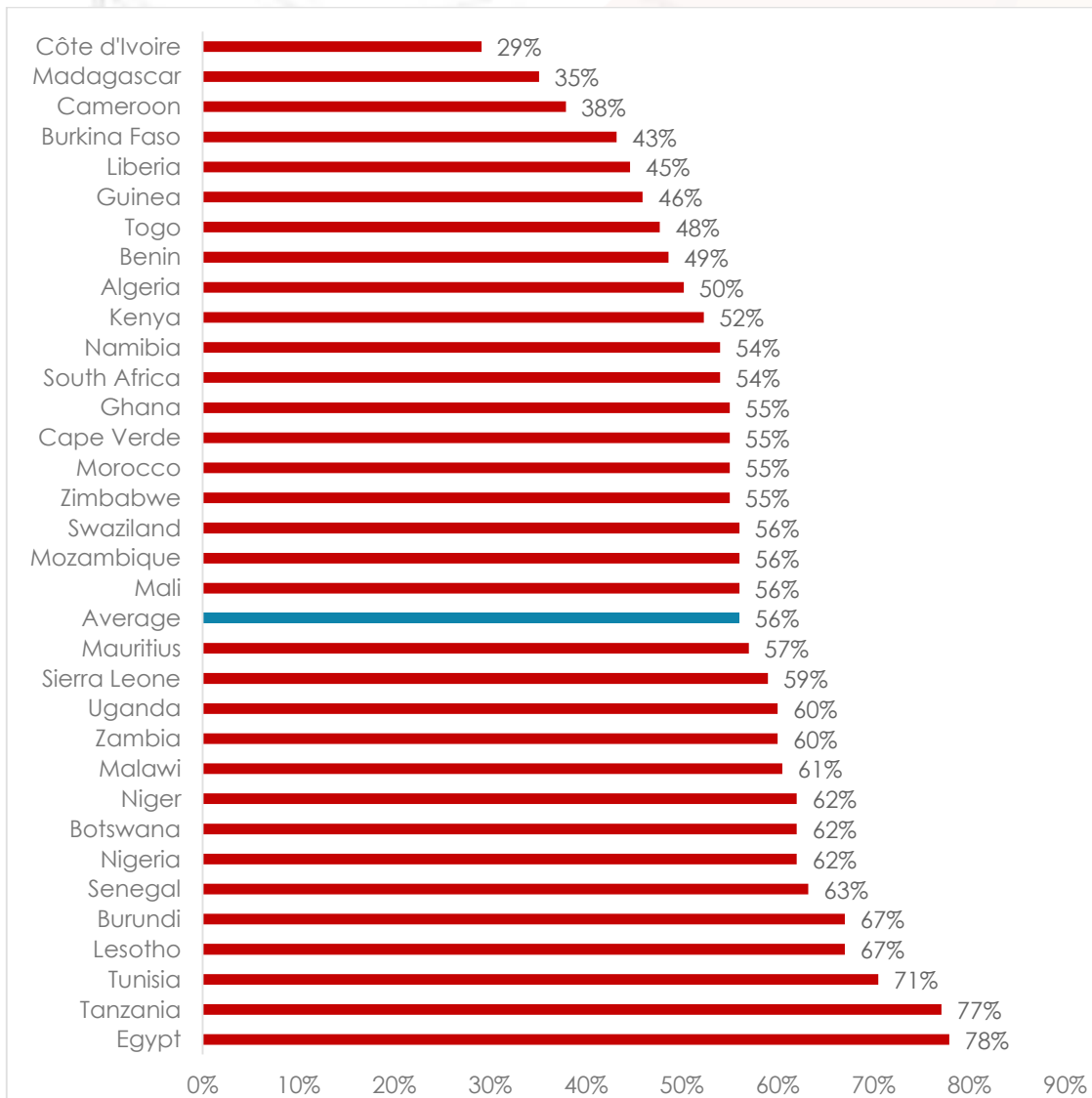
- More than half (56%) of Africa's youth say they are "somewhat" or "very" interested in public affairs, but one-third (34%) say they never discuss politics.
- A majority (55%) of African youth voted in their last national election, and one-third (34%) attended election campaign meetings.

- A majority (55%) of youth did not contact their local government councillor in the year preceding the survey.
- Youth participation in protests declined in South Africa and Zimbabwe but rose dramatically in Nigeria. Nine in 10 (92%) African youth say they would not use force for a political cause.

Interest in public affairs

More than half (56%) of African youth say they are “somewhat interested” or “very interested” in public affairs. Interest was highest in Egypt (78%) and Tanzania (77%) and lowest in Côte d’Ivoire (29%) and Madagascar (35%) (Figure 1). One possible explanation for the low levels of interest in Côte d’Ivoire and Madagascar may be those countries’ recent experiences with, respectively, a post-electoral civil war and a coup d’état (Nossiter, 2011).

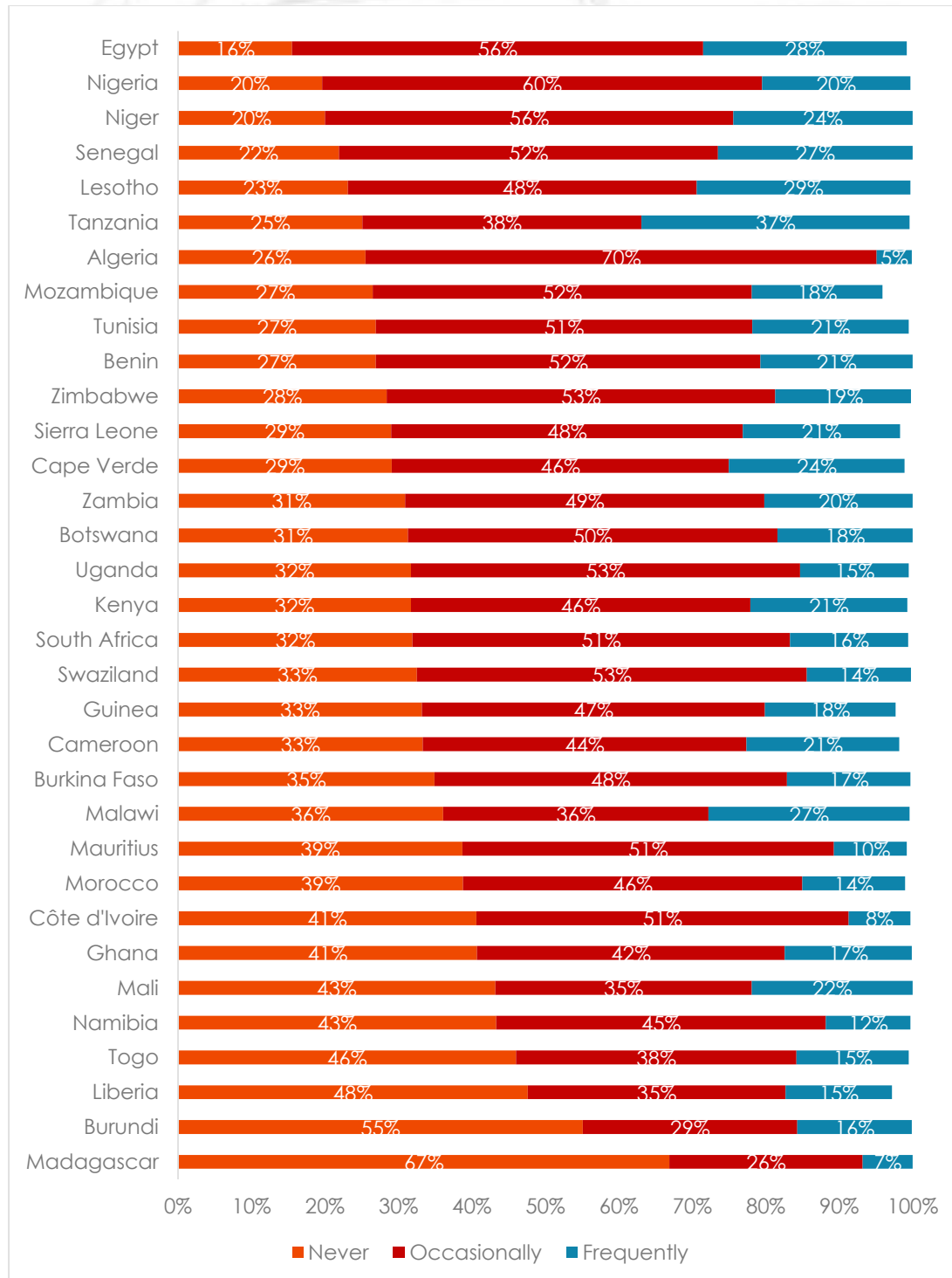
Figure 1: Youth interest in public affairs | 18-29 years old | 33 countries | c. 2012



Respondents were asked: How interested would you say you are in public affairs?" (% who said “somewhat interested” or “very interested”)

A majority (56%) of youth in surveyed countries say they talk about politics “occasionally” or “frequently” (Figure 2), but 34% say they never discuss political matters. Those who “never” discuss politics are in the majority only in Madagascar (67%) and Burundi (55%). North African countries have the highest proportions of youth who discuss politics, with an average of 73%.

Figure 2: Youth discussion of politics | 18-29 years old | 33 countries | c. 2012



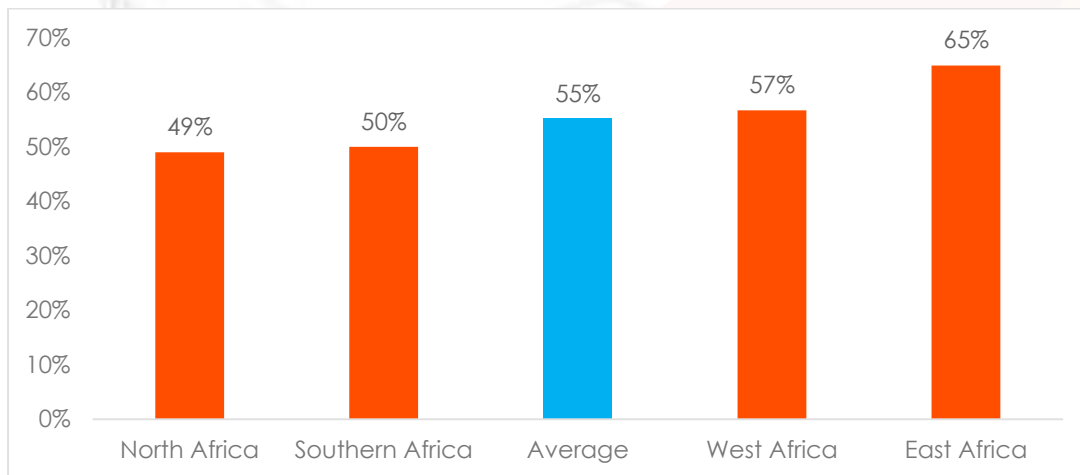
Respondents were asked: When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters?

Youth voting and campaigning

On average, more than half (55%) of Africa's youth say they voted in the last national elections held in their countries (Figure 3). East Africans were at the forefront, with two-thirds (65%) saying they voted. The smallest proportion was in North Africa, where fewer than half (49%) say they voted. (For more on election patterns, see Ellis, 2014.)

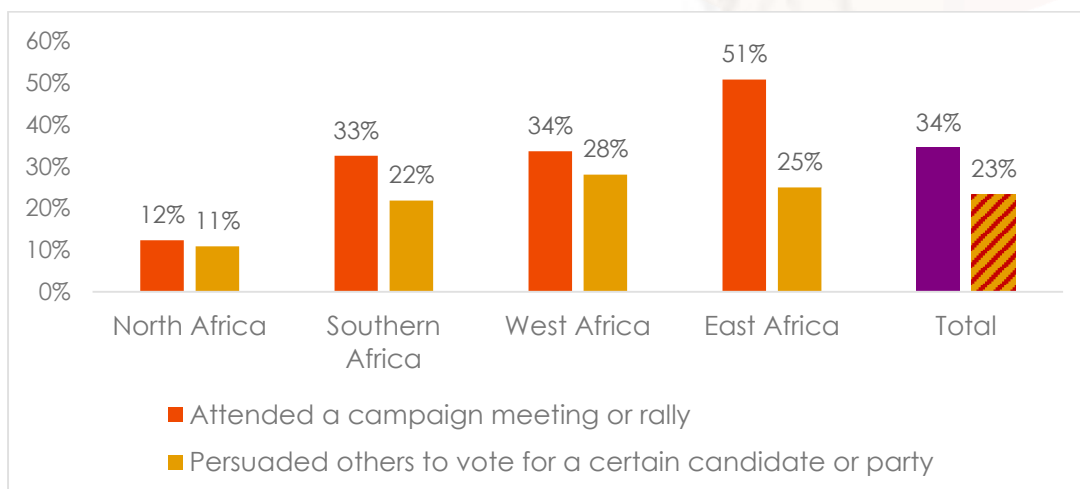
Beyond voting, youth participation in election campaigns was limited: On average, one-third (34%) of youth attended campaign rallies or meetings in the year preceding the survey, and two in 10 (23%) tried to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party (Figure 4). In East Africa, 51% of youth say they attended campaign rallies or meetings. North Africans had by far the lowest levels of participation: 12% attended a campaign event, and 11% tried to influence other voters.

Figure 3: Youth voting in the last election | by region | 33 countries | 18-29 years old | c. 2012



Respondents were asked: Thinking about the last national election in [20xx], did you vote? (% who said "yes")

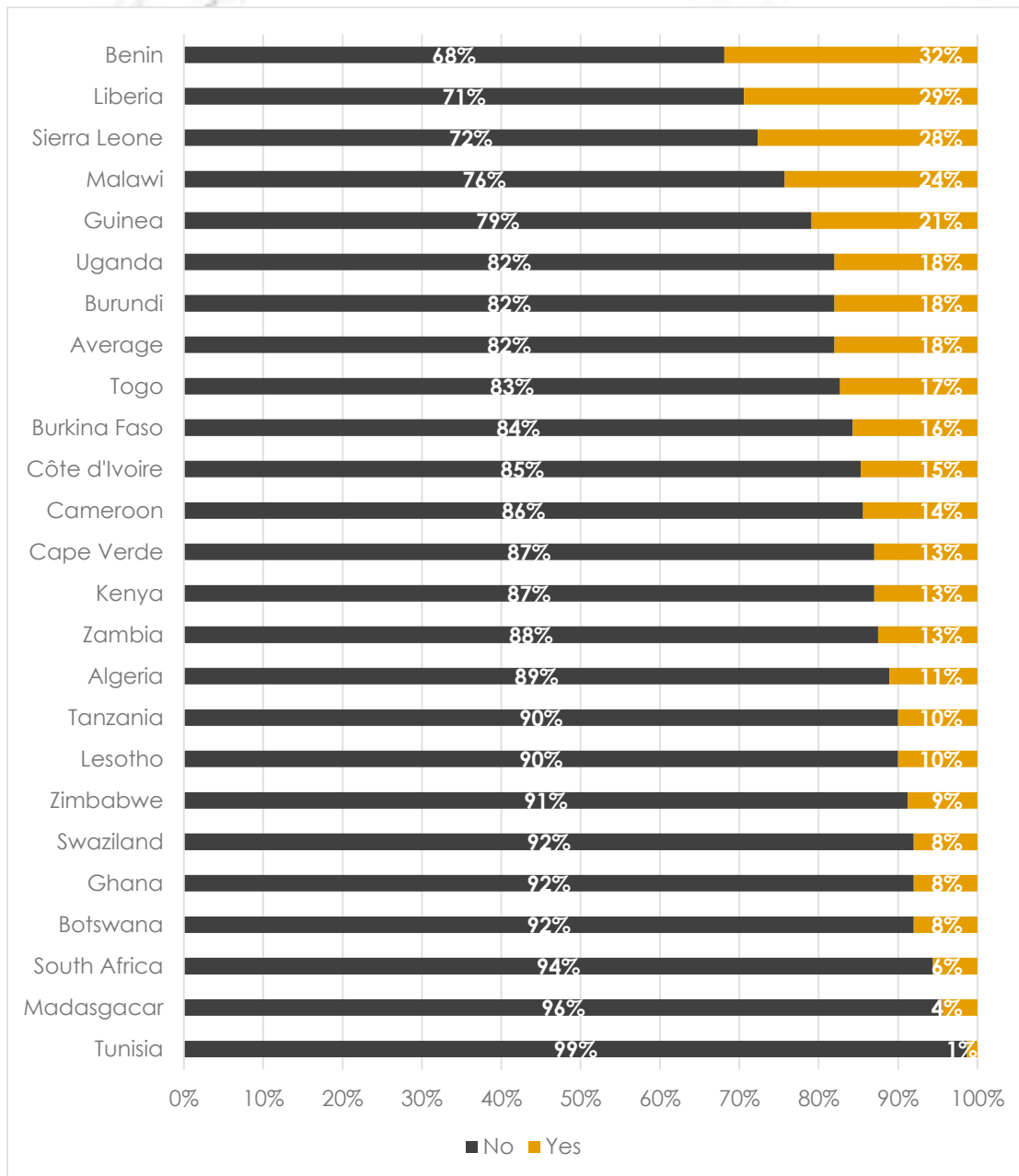
Figure 4: Youth involvement in electoral campaigns | by region | 33 countries | 18-29 years old | c. 2012



Respondents were asked: Thinking about the last national election in [20xx], did you: Attend a campaign meeting or rally? Persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party? (% who said "yes")

Across 24 countries where the question was asked, on average 15% of youth say they worked for a candidate or party during the year preceding the survey (Figure 5). In Tunisia, only 9% of youth say they worked for a candidate or party. Tunisia's low levels of voting and campaigning may be explained by the country's dictatorship until the citizen-led Arab Spring uprisings leading to multiparty elections in October 2011 (Chatora, 2012).

Figure 5: Youth who worked for a candidate or party in the last election
 | 18-29 years old | 24 countries | c. 2012



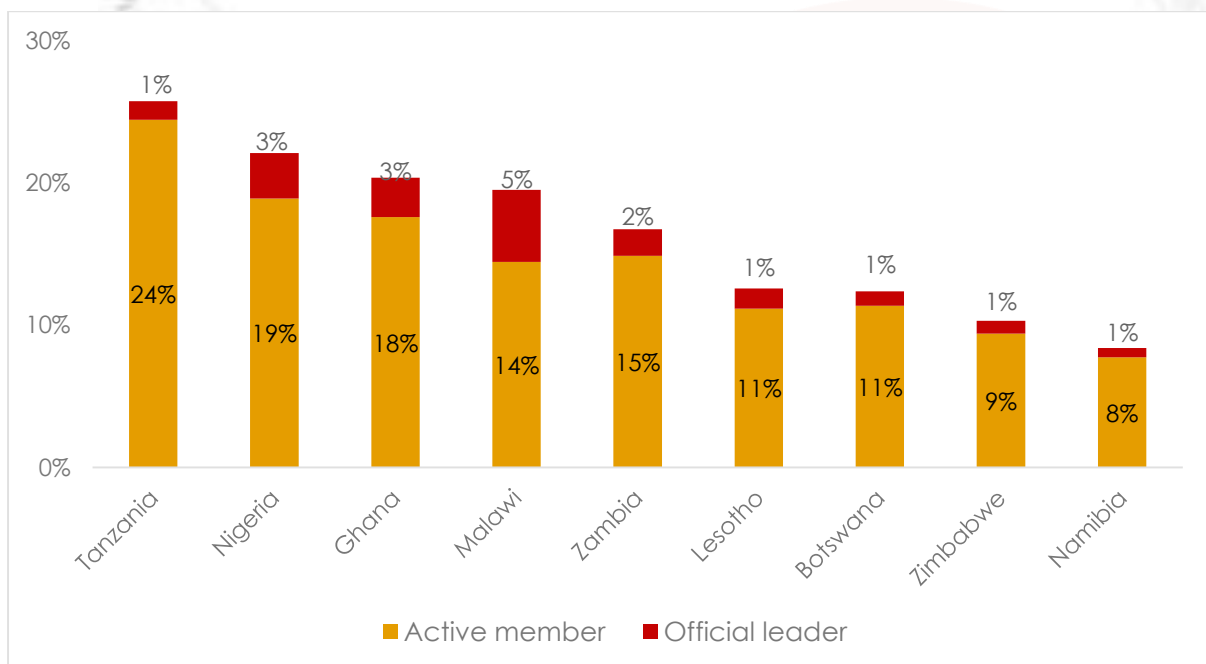
Respondents were asked: Thinking about the last national election in [20xx], did you: Work for a candidate or party?
 (% who said "no")

Participation in community organisations

Participation in community associations or organisations is an important marker of whether youth are engaged and participate in decision-making that directly affects their lives.

Looking at nine countries with relatively long histories of multi-party democracy (South Africa is not included because its 2014-2015 data are not yet available), on average about one in seven youth (14%) were active members and/or leaders of community organisations over the period 2008-2014 (Figure 6). Tanzania (26%) and Ghana (20%) have the highest proportions of youth who are members or leaders of community associations, while Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Lesotho have the lowest proportions.

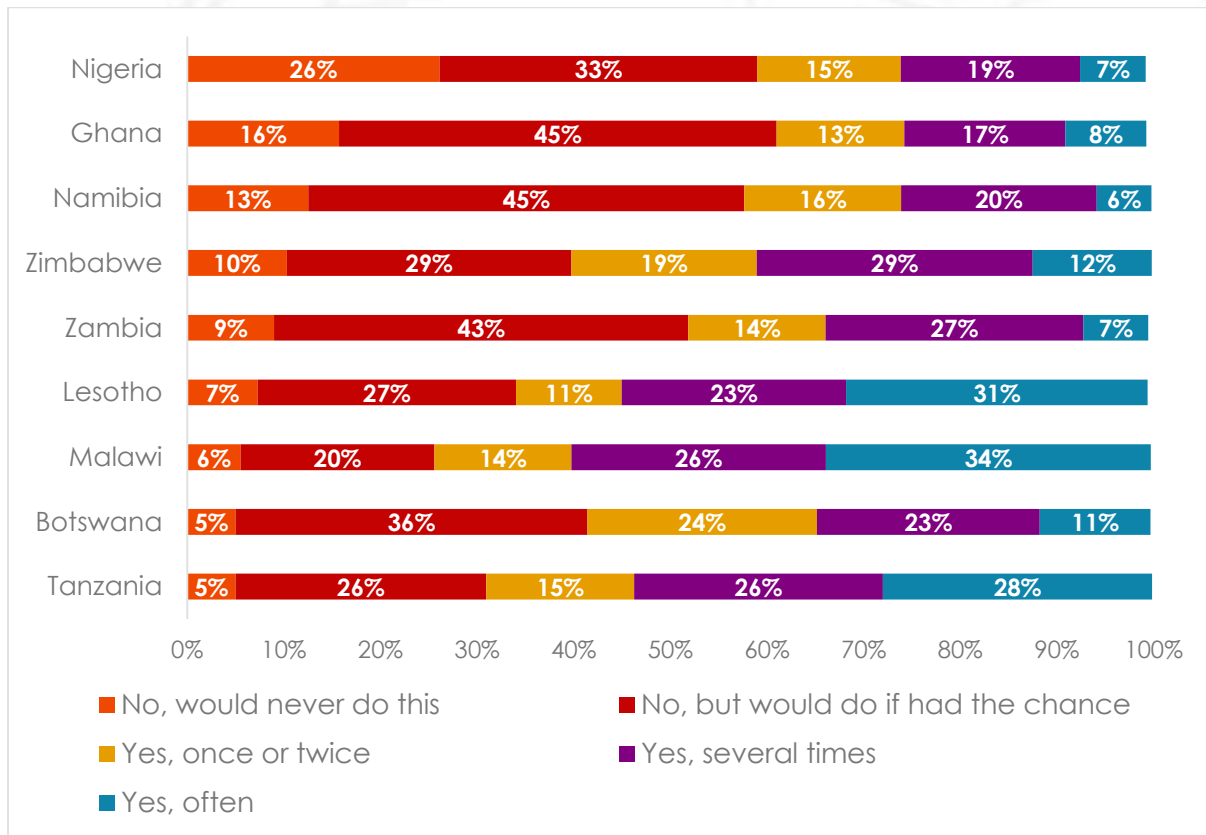
Figure 6: Average youth membership in community organisations | 18-29 years old | 9 countries | 2008-2014



Respondents were asked: Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member?

Figure 7 shows average youth attendance of community meetings in the same nine countries over the 2008-2014 period. Overall, Malawi has the highest proportion of youth (74%) who attended at least one meeting in the year preceding the surveys, while Nigeria has by far the largest proportion (25%) of youth who say they would never attend such meetings. In Namibia and Ghana, 45% of youth say they did not attend a meeting but would do so if they had the chance. In Malawi (34%) and Lesotho (31%), about one-third of youth say they attend community meetings often.

Figure 7: Average youth attendance of community meetings | 18-29 years old
 | 9 countries | 2008-2014



Respondents were asked: 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. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Attended a community meeting?

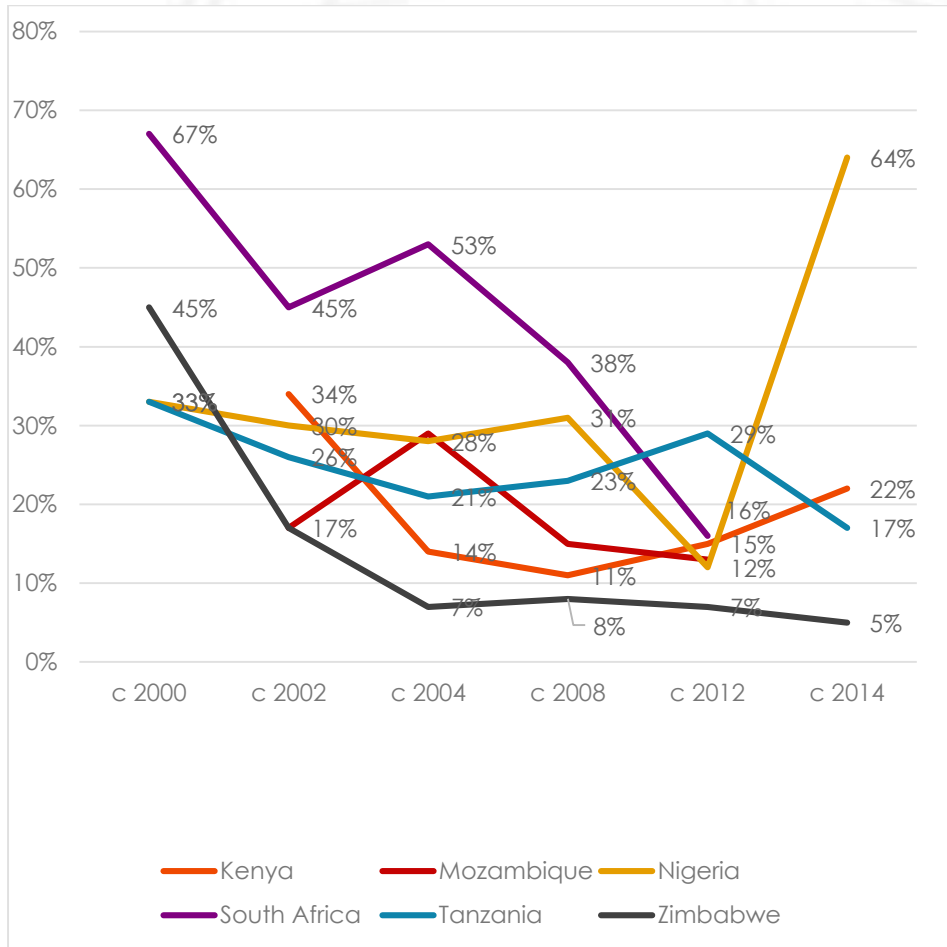
Taking to the streets

Overall, the countries where the highest proportions of youth participated in protests or demonstrations during the period 2000-2014 are Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe (Figure 8). Youth participation in protest marches or demonstrations appears to vary with developments in-country. For example, in South Africa, while the c. 2000 survey showed two-thirds (67%) of youth had engaged in protests in the previous year, that proportion dropped to one in six (16%) in the c. 2012 survey. Similarly in Zimbabwe, the proportion of youth who protested dropped from almost half (45%) in c. 2000 to one in 20 (5%) in 2014.

On the flipside, almost two-thirds (64%) of Nigerian youth say in 2014 that they engaged in protest marches or demonstrations, compared to one-third or less from 2000 to 2012.

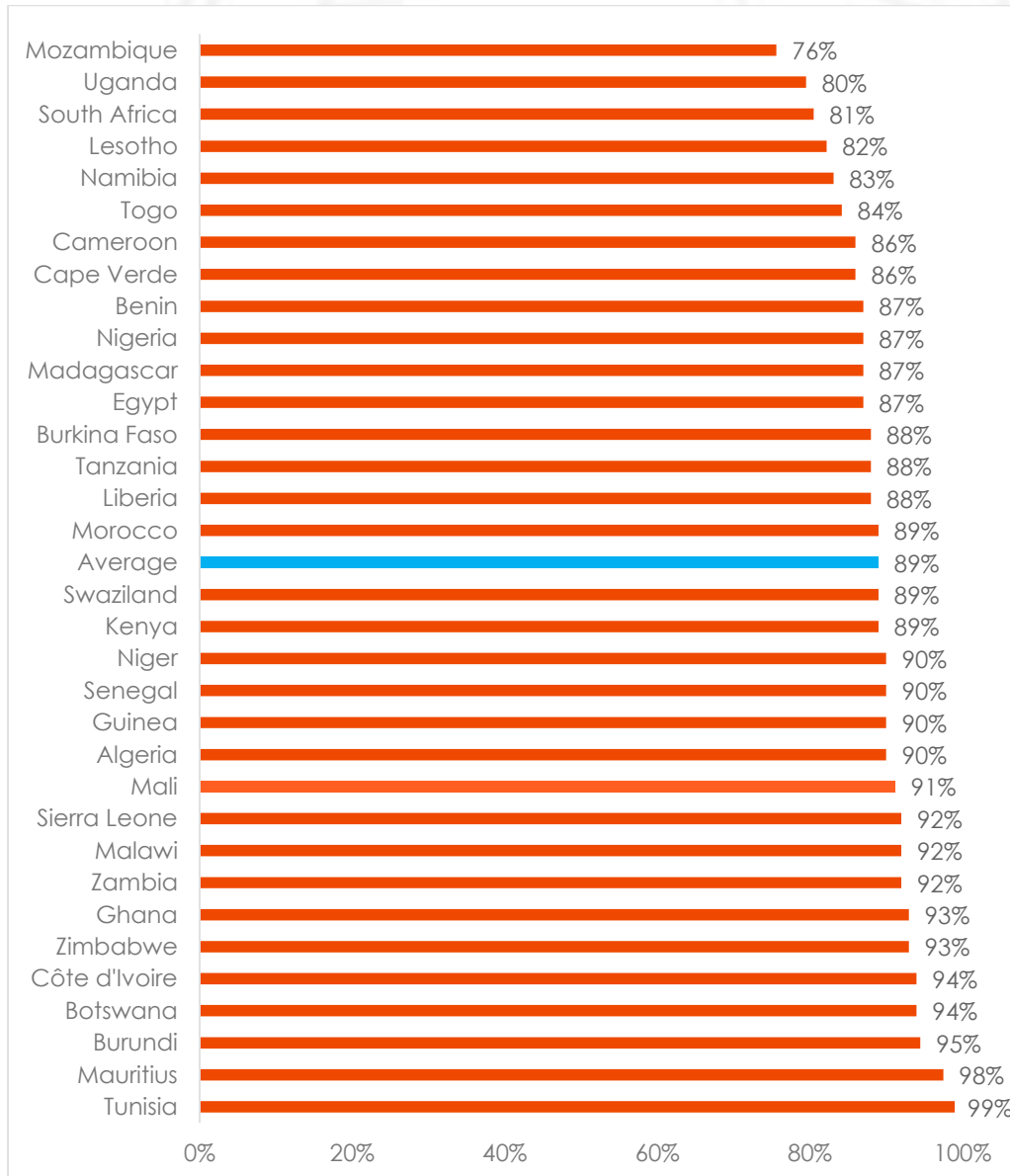
While youth engagement in protest activity varies widely, nine in 10 youth (92%) across 33 countries say they would never use force for a political cause (Figure 9). Tunisia (99%) and Mauritius (98%) top the list of countries whose youth would not use force, compared to only 76% of Mozambican youth who forswear political violence.

Figure 8: Youth participation in protests | 18-29 years old | 6 countries with highest levels of youth participation in protests | c. 2000-c. 2014



Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Attend a demonstration or protest march?
 (% who said "yes, often," "yes, several times," or "yes, once or twice")

Figure 9: Youth who would never use force for a political cause | 18-29 years old
 | 33 countries | c. 2012

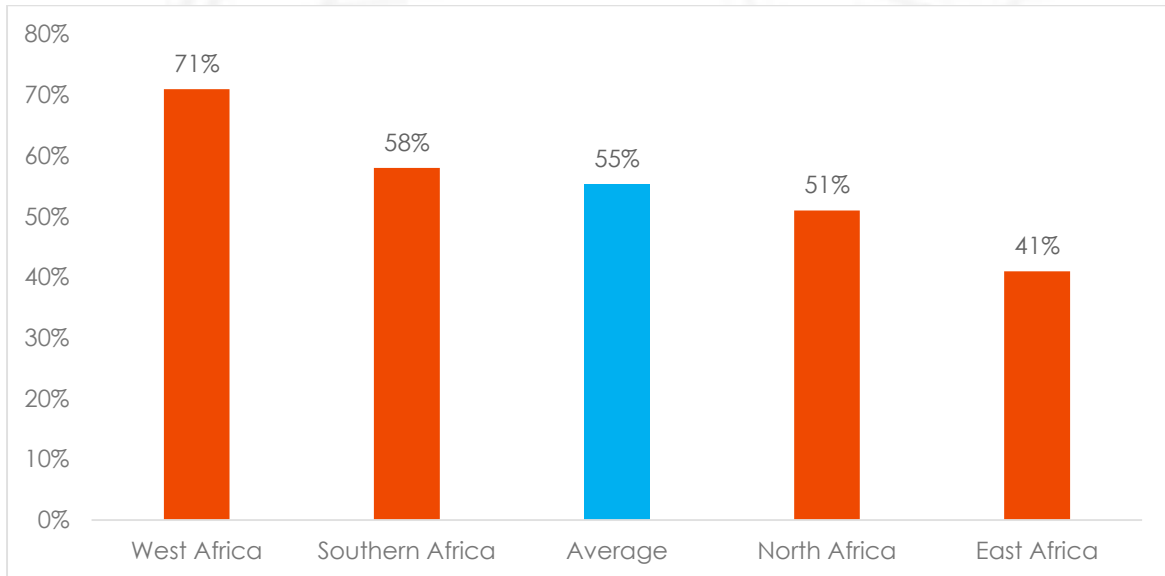


Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Used force or violence for a political cause?
 (% who "would never do this")

Contacting leaders

On average, fewer than half of African youth made contact in the preceding year with their local government councillor, the closest on-the-ground leader that average Africans would engage with regarding services or other problems (Figure 10). The highest level of contact was in East Africa, where on average about six in 10 youth (59%) contacted their local councillors about an important issue. In Southern and North Africa, 45% of youth, on average, contacted their councillors, while West Africa had the lowest frequency of contact, at 29%.

Figure 10: Did not contact local government councillor | 18-29 years old | by region | c. 2012



Respondents were asked: *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? (% who said "never")*

Conclusion

Africa is experiencing an unprecedented increase in its youth population. Many view this as an opportunity for greater economic growth, but if it is not solidly engaged in democratic processes, a youth bulge marked by unemployment, poverty, and lack of education could also be a potential threat to political stability and national security.

Youth voice and engagement are fundamental aspects of democratic consolidation, as tomorrow's leaders must be active participants in today's decision-making processes.

Youth voice and civic engagement can be improved through training in civic participation and through the creation of authentic opportunities for youth to engage with candidates and elected officials. The creation of such spaces and opportunities for engagement will go a long way in countering the disconnect between youth and their local leaders.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.

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