

Ghanaians denounce mob ‘justice’ and political-party vigilantism, endorse rule of law instead

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 186 | Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye and Daniel Armah-Attoh

Summary

Two forms of lawless violence dominated headlines in Ghana in 2017, though neither was new: mob “justice” applied to suspected criminals and vigilantism by disgruntled political-party thugs.

A national outpouring of grief and anger followed the gruesome killing in May 2017 of Maxwell Mahama, a 32-year-old military officer and father of two who was lynched in the Upper Denkyira West District of the Central Region by a mob that mistook him for an armed robber (Citifmonline, 2017a). While the prevalence of “mob justice” in Ghana is not known, condemnations by Ghanaians from all walks of life often suggested a “surge” in such violence in recent years (Citifmonline, 2017b).

Similarly, political leaders, news media, civil-society groups, and citizens have widely commented on increased political-party vigilantism during and after the 2016 national elections. After the new government assumed office in January 2017, vigilante groups affiliated with the ruling party allegedly attacked government appointees whose appointment they disagreed with, locked up government offices, and destroyed state property in protest of unfulfilled expectations of employment (Citifmonline, 2017c). Some group members even forcefully freed colleagues facing prosecution in court. President Nana Akufo-Addo publicly pledged to bring the violence under control (Business Ghana, 2017), and the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers conducted a series of regional roundtable discussions on this “pressing” issue (CODEO Ghana, 2017).

According to Afrobarometer’s latest national survey, Ghanaians overwhelmingly reject both mob “justice” and the lawless activities of political vigilante groups. An overwhelming majority of Ghanaians call for vigilantes to be prosecuted, irrespective of their political-party affiliation.

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 35 countries in Africa. Six rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys (2016/2018) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), interviewed 2,400 adult Ghanaians between 9 and 25 September 2017. A sample of this size yields results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

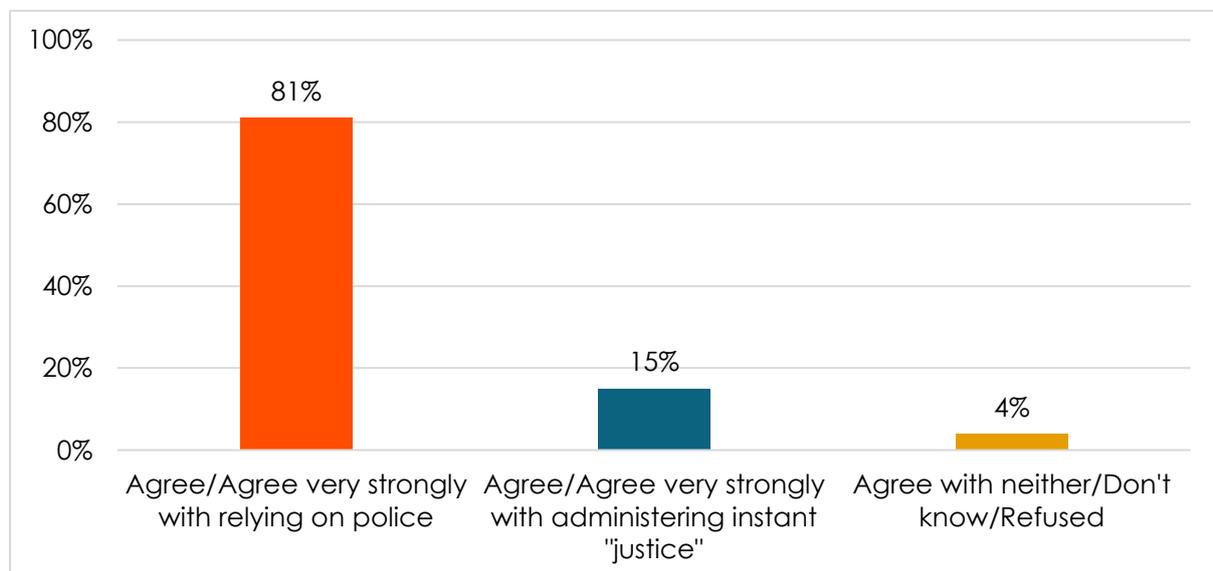
Key findings

- Eight of 10 Ghanaians (81%) say citizens should always rely on the police to deal with suspected criminals. About one in seven (15%), however, think it is sometimes acceptable for citizens to administer instant “justice” – a view that is shared by 39% of residents in the Upper West and Northern regions.
- Most Ghanaians believe it is “wrong and punishable” for party vigilantes to attack government appointees whose appointment they disagree with (88%), to lock up government offices to protest unfulfilled expectations of employment (87%), and to destroy state property (91%).
- Almost nine of 10 Ghanaians (88%) “approve” or “strongly approve” of government prosecuting and punishing political-party vigilantes who engage in acts of lawlessness, irrespective of their party affiliation.
- A slim majority (53%) of Ghanaians say the government has performed “fairly well” or “very well” in handling the criminal activities of political-party vigilante groups.

Ghanaians denounce mob ‘justice’

Eight out of 10 Ghanaians (81%) are against citizens’ administering instant “justice” to suspected criminals, including 68% who “agree very strongly” that citizens should always rely solely on the police in dealing with suspected criminals. However, about one in seven Ghanaians (15%) think it is sometimes acceptable for citizens to administer instant “justice” (Figure 1).

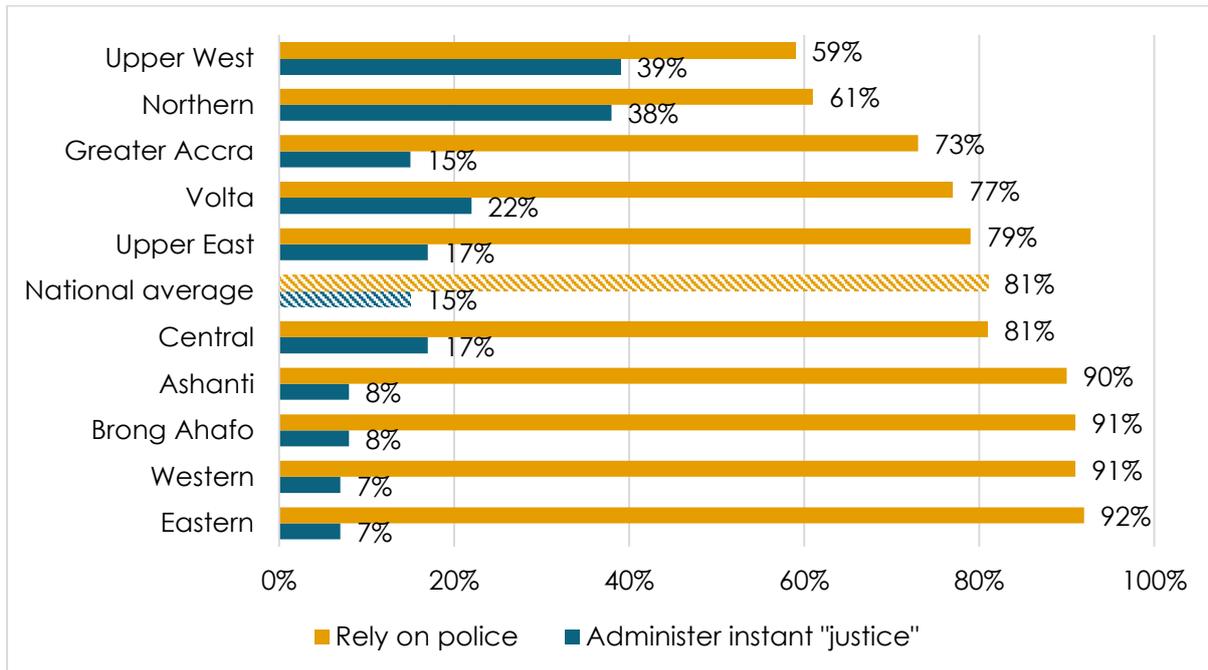
Figure 1: Rely on police vs. instant ‘justice’ to deal with suspected criminals | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Sometimes it is acceptable for citizens to administer instant justice to suspected criminals.
 Statement 2: Citizens should always rely solely on the police to deal with suspected criminals.

While relying on the police to deal with suspected criminals is the majority preference in all regions of Ghana, it is far less dominant in the Northern (61%) and Upper West (59%) regions, where about four in 10 residents endorse mob “justice” (Figure 2).

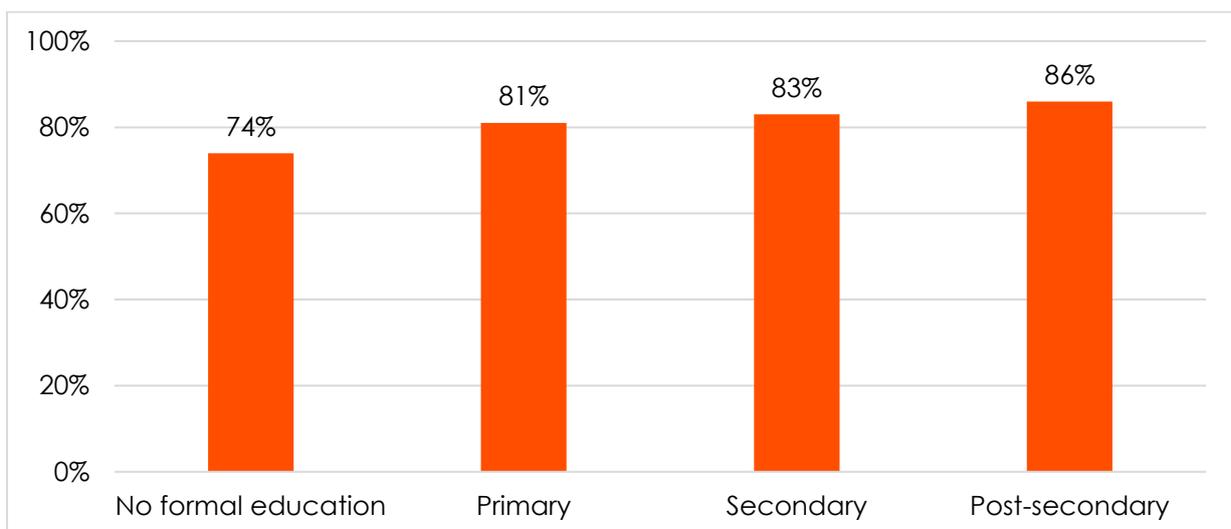
Figure 2: Rely on police to deal with suspected criminals | by region | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Sometimes it is acceptable for citizens to administer instant justice to suspected criminals.
 Statement 2: Citizens should always rely solely on the police to deal with suspected criminals.

Similarly, popular rejection of mob “justice” cuts across all other key demographic groups. While differences are slight across genders, age groups, employment status, and urban-rural residence, more-educated citizens are more likely than their less-educated counterparts to insist on leaving it to the police to deal with suspected criminals (Figure 3). (See Appendix Figure A.1 for breakdowns by socio-demographic group.)

Figure 3: Rely on police to deal with suspected criminals | by education level | Ghana | 2017

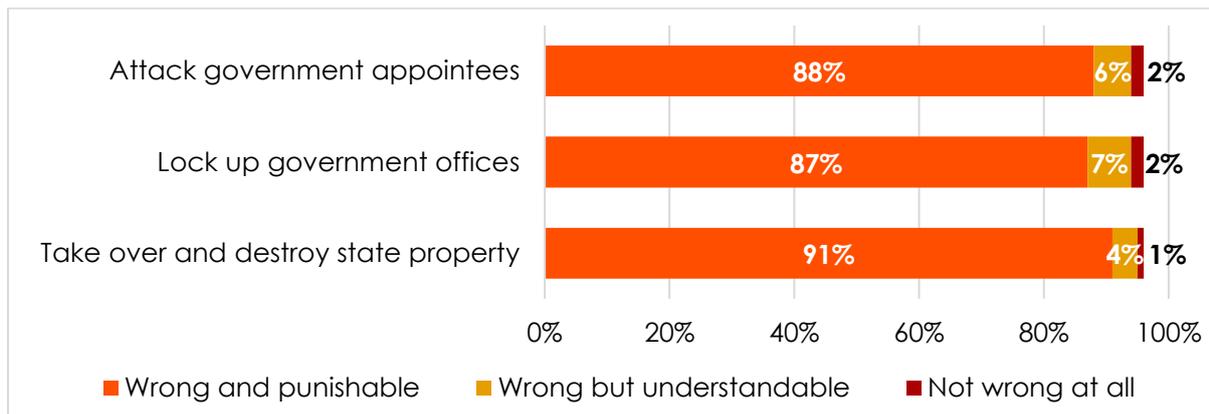


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Sometimes it is acceptable for citizens to administer instant justice to suspected criminals.
 Statement 2: Citizens should always rely solely on the police to deal with suspected criminals.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that citizens should rely on the police)

Ghanaians roundly disapprove of political-party vigilantism

Overwhelmingly, Ghanaians disapprove of lawless actions by political-party vigilante groups. As indicated in Figure 4, about nine of 10 citizens believe it is “wrong and punishable” for party vigilantes to attack government appointees whose appointment they disagree with (88%), to lock up government offices (87%), and to destroy state property (91%).

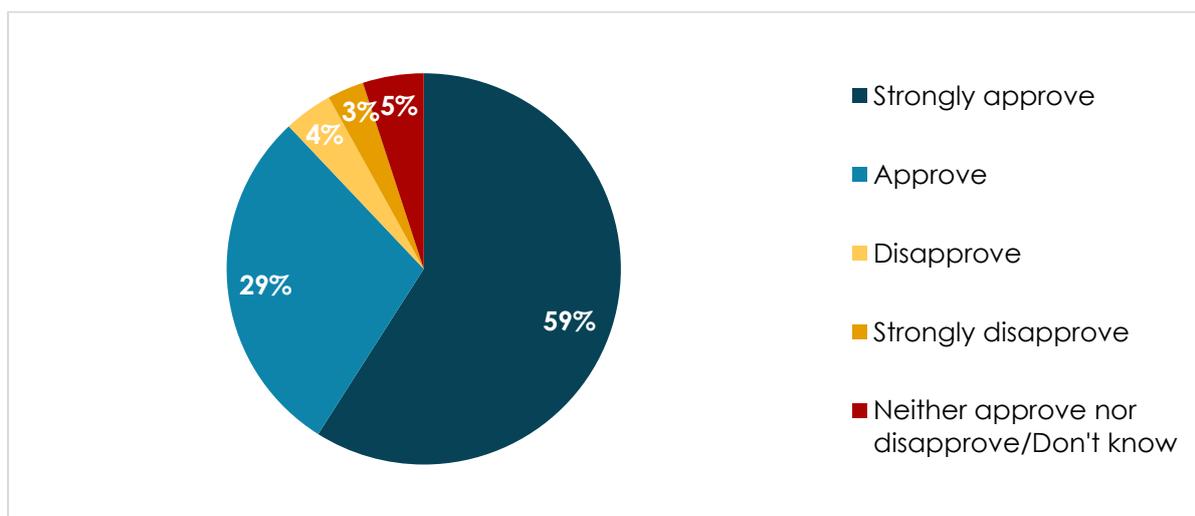
Figure 4: Disapproval of actions of political-party vigilante groups | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: In Ghana, political-party vigilante groups engage in some activities during the election and post-election periods. Please tell me whether you think the following actions of these vigilante groups are not wrong at all, wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable: Members of a political-party vigilante group: a) Attack government appointees whose appointment they disagree with? b) Lock up government offices because their expectation of getting employment with those institutions are not met? c) Take over and destroy state properties such as offices, tollbooths, public toilets, and car parks?

Confirming the strong disapproval of lawlessness by political-party vigilante groups, almost nine of every 10 Ghanaians (88%) approve – including 59% who “strongly approve” – of government prosecuting and punishing members of such groups for criminal acts, irrespective of their political affiliation (Figure 5).

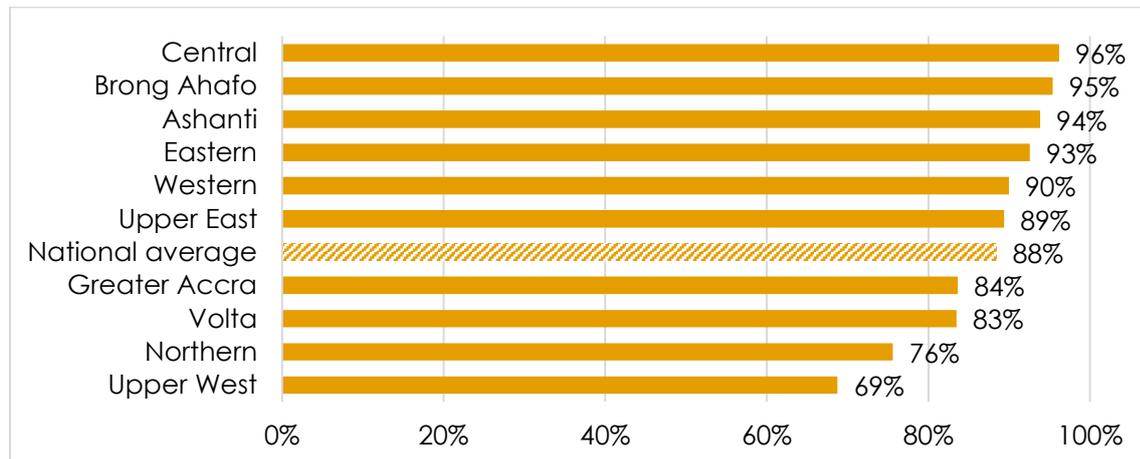
Figure 5: Demand for prosecution of political-party vigilantes | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you approve or disapprove of the following statement: Government must prosecute and punish vigilante groups that engage in acts of lawlessness irrespective of their party affiliation?

The demand for prosecution and punishment of members of political-party vigilante groups for criminal acts is strong across all 10 regions, though here again the Upper West (69%) and Northern (76%) regions rank at the bottom of the list (Figure 6). Residents of the Central (96%) and Brong Ahafo (95%) regions are almost unanimous in their support for prosecution.

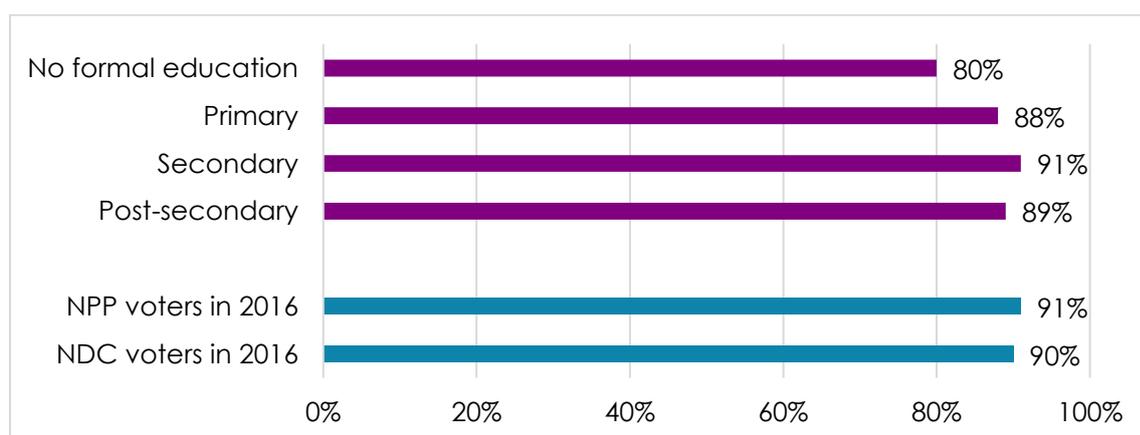
Figure 6: Demand for prosecution of political-party vigilantes | by region | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you approve or disapprove of the following statement: Government must prosecute and punish vigilante groups that engage in acts of lawlessness irrespective of their party affiliation? (% who “approve” or “strongly approve”)

Respondents with at least a primary-school education are more likely to support prosecution (88%-91%) than those with no formal education (80%) (Figure 7), but differences are negligible across genders, age groups, employment status, settlement location, political-party affiliation,¹ and voter preference in the 2016 presidential election. (See Appendix Figure A.2 for breakdowns by key socio-demographic factors.)

Figure 7: Demand for prosecution of political-party vigilantes | by education level and 2016 vote preference | Ghana | 2017



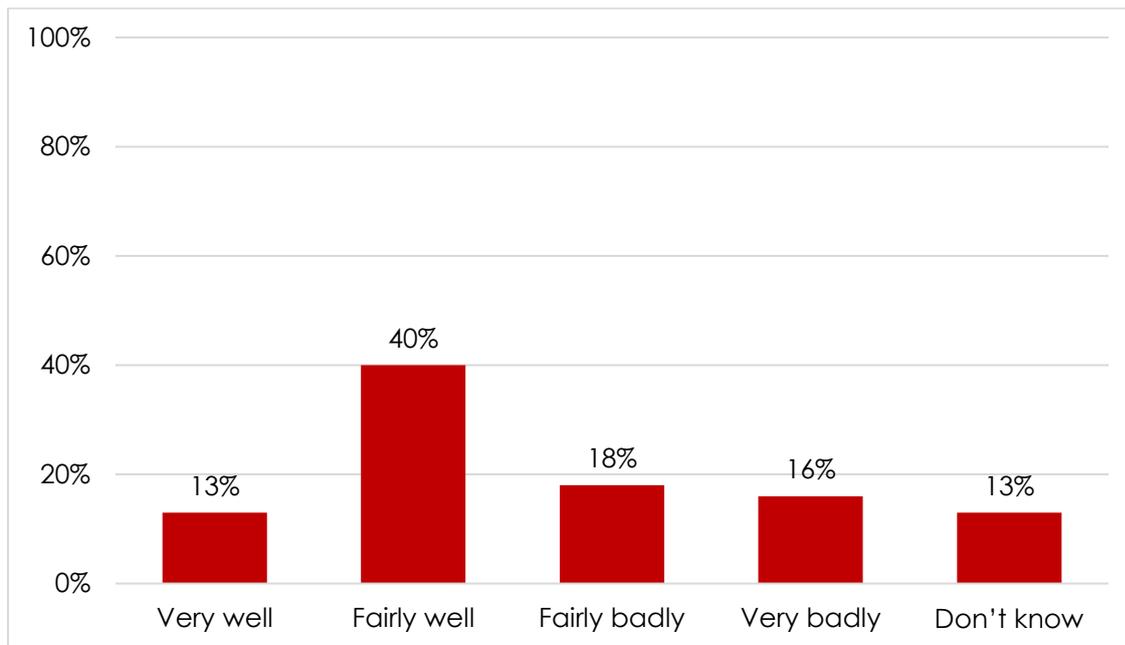
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you approve or disapprove of the following statement: Government must prosecute and punish vigilante groups that engage in acts of lawlessness irrespective of their party affiliation? (% who “approve” or “strongly approve”)

¹ Afrobarometer determines political-party affiliation by asking respondents, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

Government's handling of political-party vigilante groups

After a few months in office, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) government gets fairly positive marks for how it is handling illegal activities of political-party vigilante groups. A slight majority (53%) of Ghanaians say the government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" on the issue. However, one-third (34%) of citizens rate the government's efforts negatively (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Government handling of political-party vigilante groups | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Illegal activities of political-party vigilante groups?

The government's performance ratings on this issue are overwhelmingly favourable in the Ashanti (77%), Eastern (68%), and Brong Ahafo (65%) regions, where the ruling NPP is dominant (Figure 9). In the Northern, Volta, and Upper West regions, where the main opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) is dominant, negative reviews of the government's performance outnumber positive ones. (In Upper West, fully half (50%) of respondents say they "don't know" how the government is performing.)

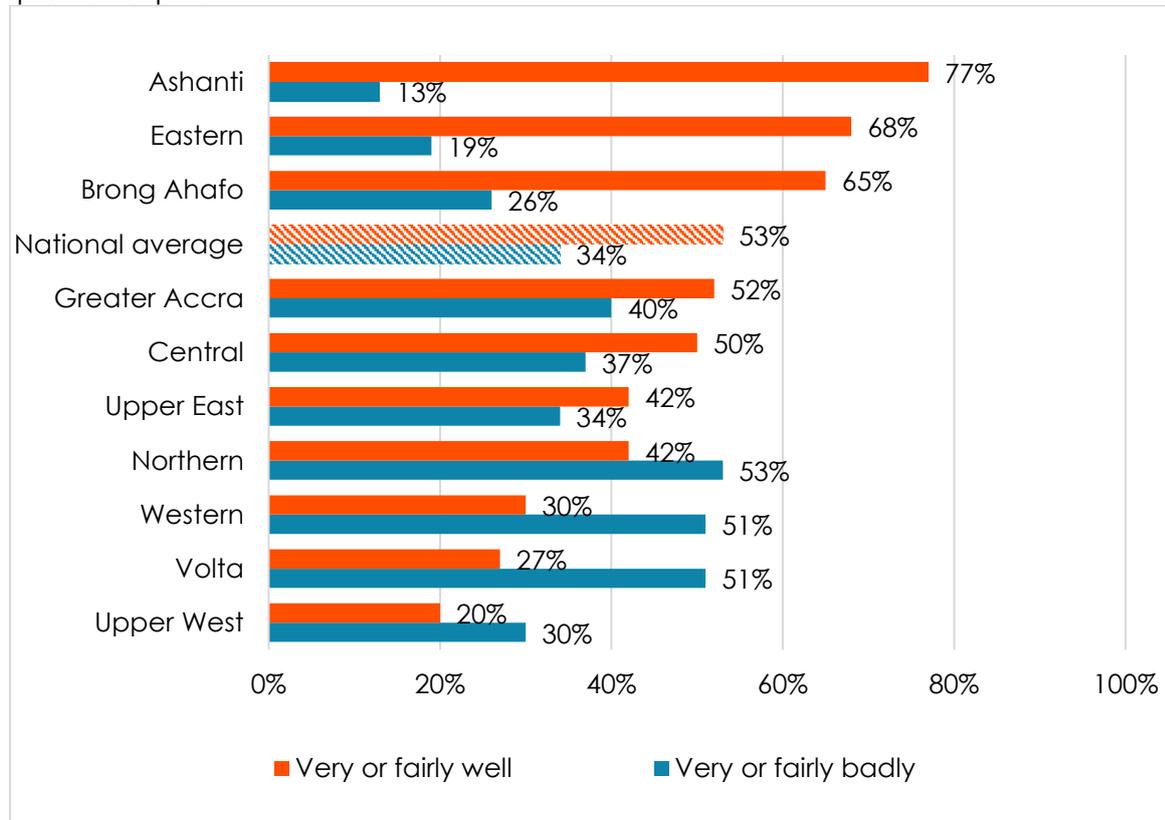
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In addition, a majority (51%) of respondents in the Western Region say the government is performing "fairly badly" or "very badly" on this issue.

Ghanaians with at least a primary-school education are more likely to rate the government's efforts at combating political-

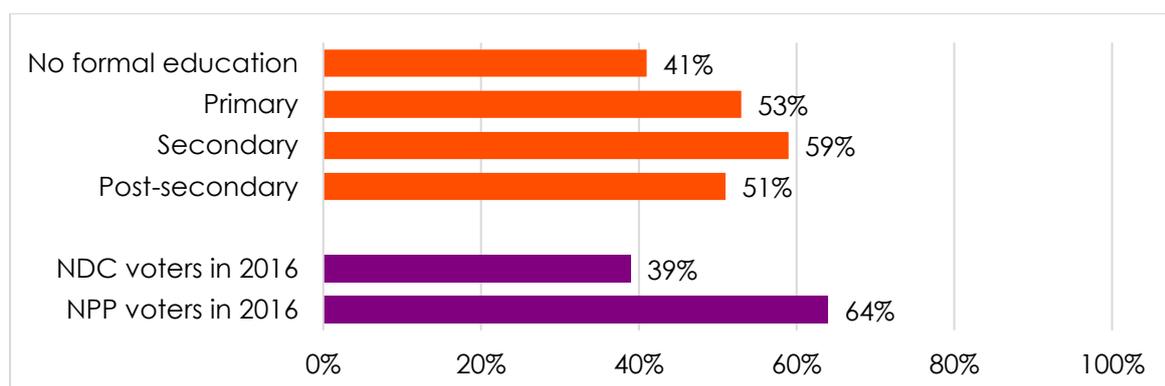
party vigilantism positively (51% to 59%) than are those with no formal education (41%) (Figure 10). Also, more NPP supporters (66%) and citizens who voted for the NPP candidate in the 2016 presidential elections (64%) rate government's efforts positively, compared to NDC supporters (35%) and NDC voters (39%) (See Appendix Figure A.3 for breakdowns by key socio-demographic group.)

Figure 9: Government handling of political-party vigilante groups | by region
 | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Illegal activities of political-party vigilante groups?

Figure 10: Government handling of political-party vigilante groups | by education level and voter preference in 2016 | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Illegal activities of political-party vigilante groups?

Conclusion

Ghanaians are overwhelmingly opposed to mob “justice” and political-party vigilantism. They want the police to handle suspected criminals and the courts to prosecute and punish those involved in unlawful acts of vigilantism. However, the fact that about one in seven

Ghanaians think it is sometimes justified for citizens to take the law into their own hands is disturbing and should be addressed. The continuous professionalization and strengthening of the capacity of the police are also key to building the confidence of Ghanaians in the ability of the police to deal with lawlessness.

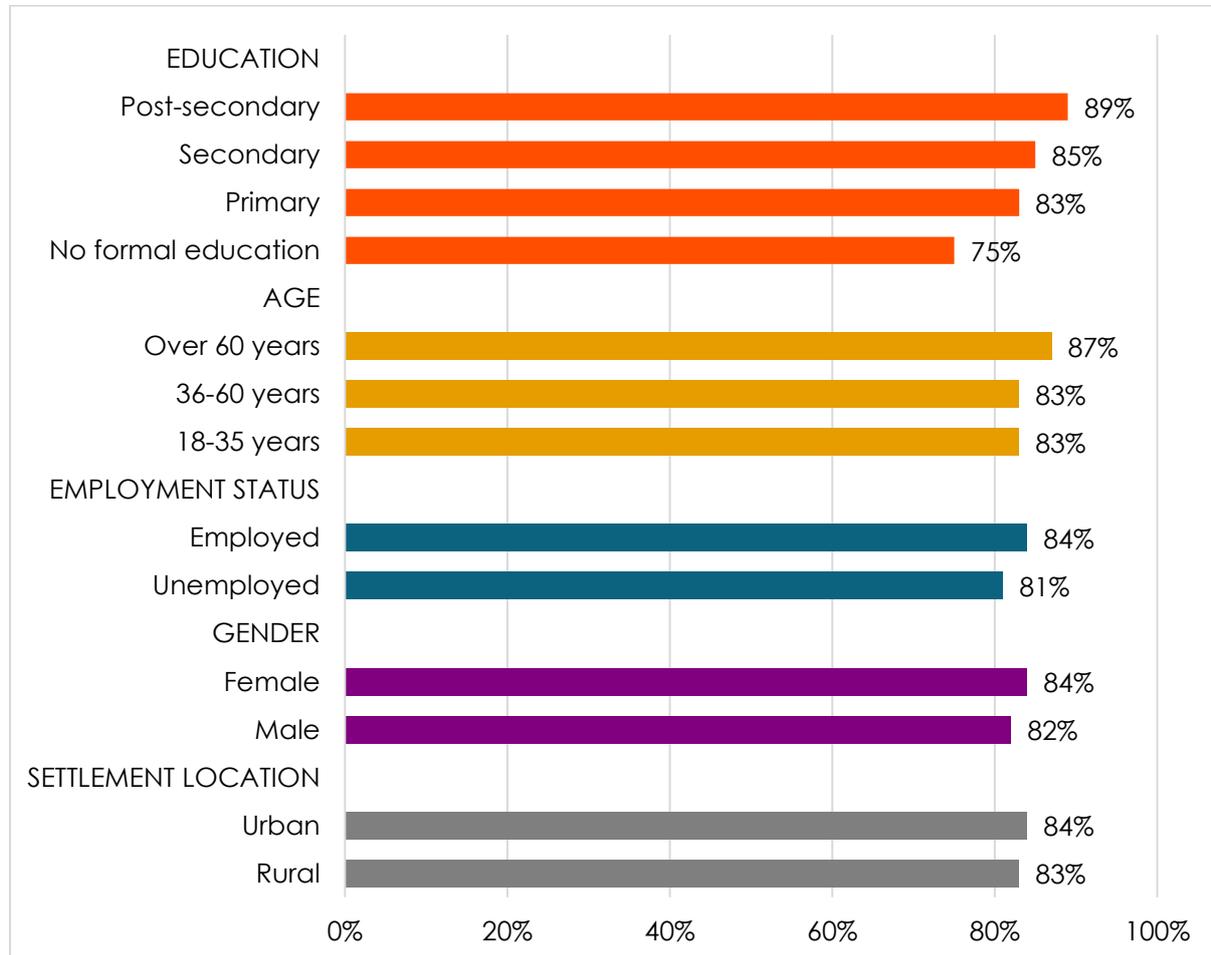
With regard to political-party vigilantes, it is common knowledge that most of them are young and unemployed. If their lawless violence stems from the disappointment of not securing jobs after the political victory of their party, that can be seen as one more reason – among many – to invest in job creation for youth.

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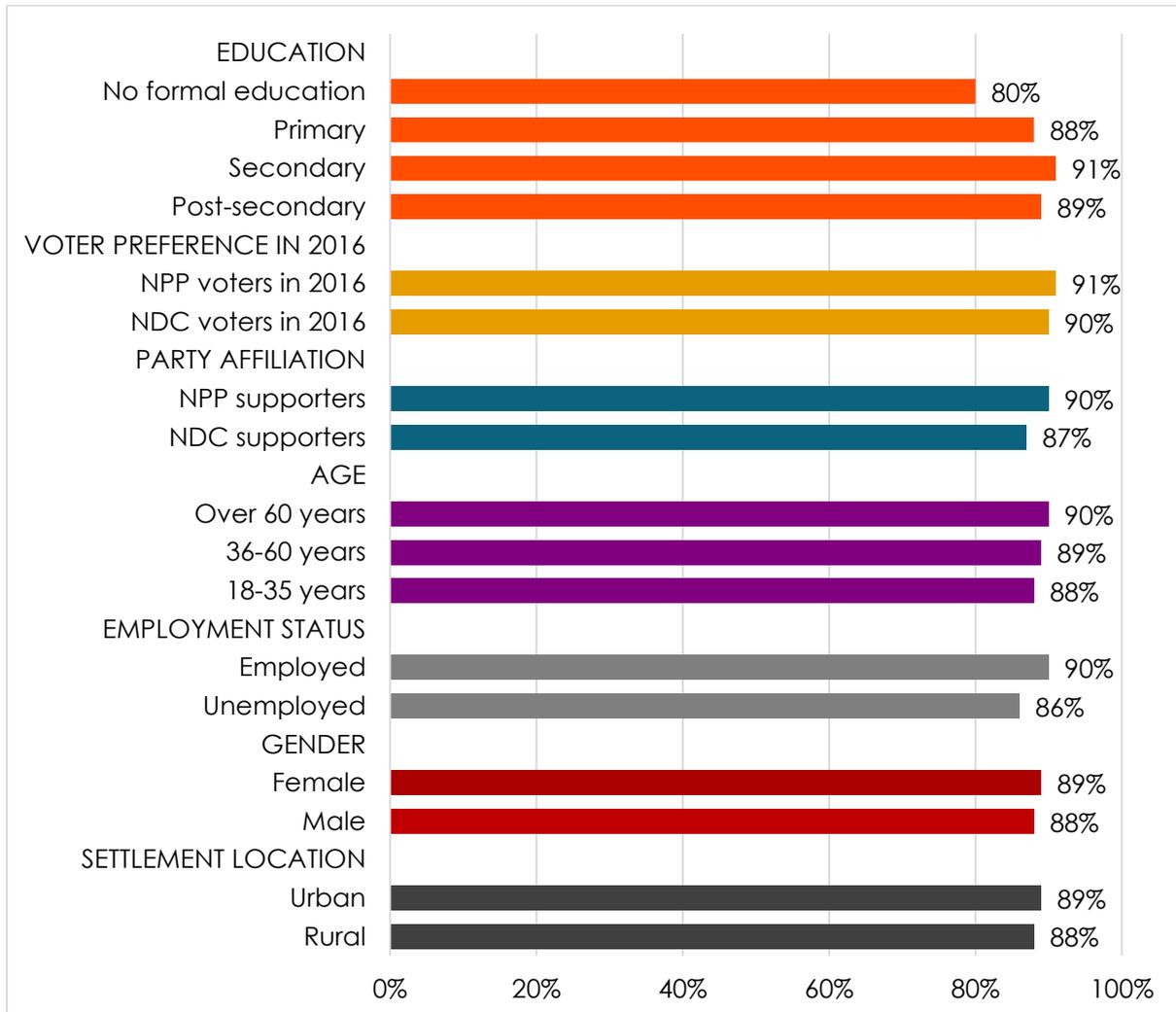
Appendix

Figure A.1: Rely on police to deal with suspected criminals | by socio-demographic group | Ghana | 2017



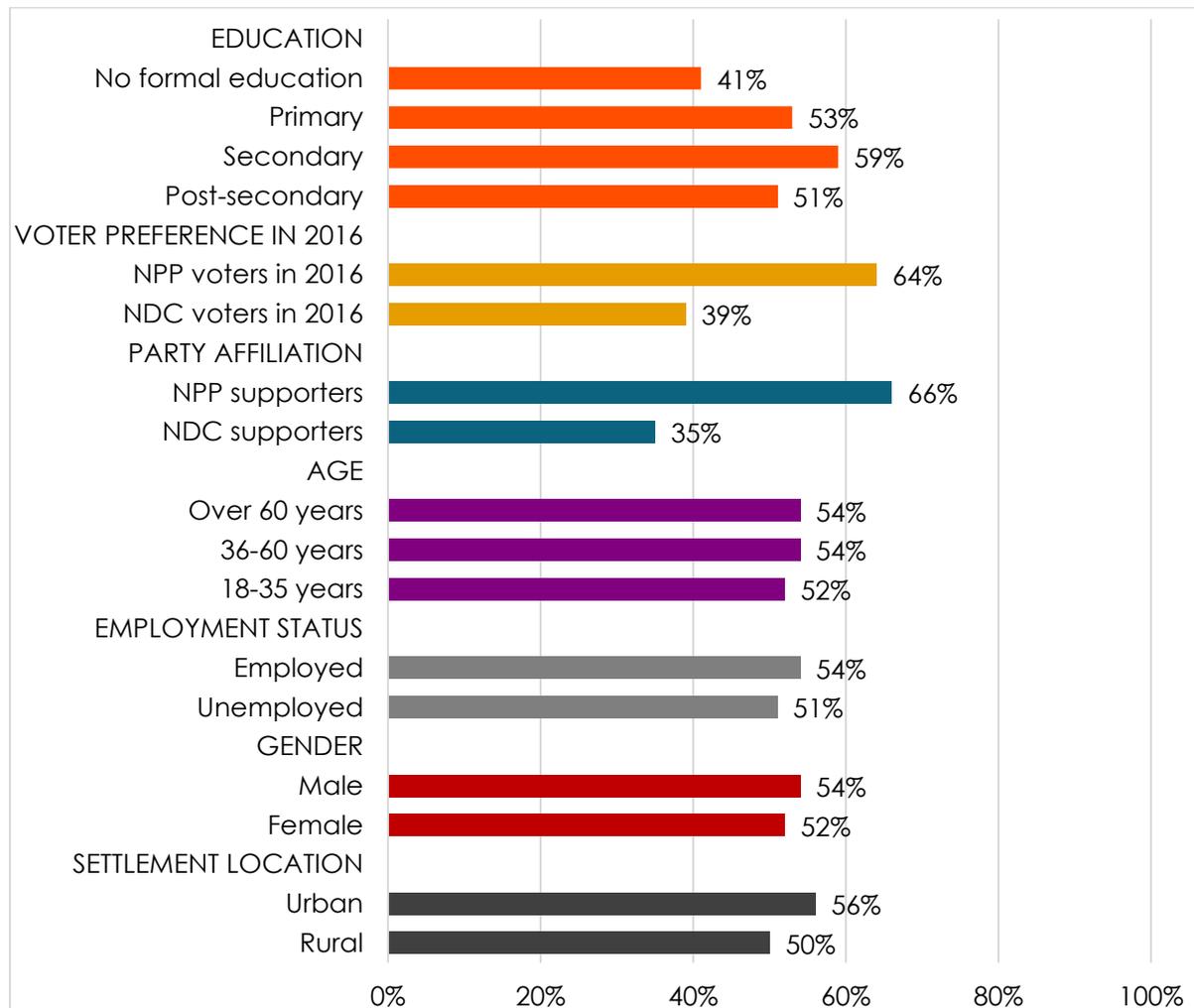
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 Statement 2: Citizens should always rely solely on the police to deal with suspected criminals.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that citizens should rely on the police)

Figure A.2: Demand for prosecution of lawless political-party vigilantes | by socio-demographic group | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you approve or disapprove of the following statement: Government must prosecute and punish vigilante groups that engage in acts of lawlessness irrespective of their party affiliation. (% who "approve" or "strongly approve")

Figure A.3: Government handling of political-party vigilante groups | by socio-demographic group | Ghana | 2017



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Illegal activities of political party vigilante groups? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

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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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