Youth Political Participation and Employment: a case study of Ghana

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Examining the influence of employment on the political participation of youth in Ghana

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Executive summary

This study examines how employment status influences the level and strategies of political participation among youth in Ghana. The context of Ghana's high youth unemployment rate and declining political engagement calls for a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between youth employment conditions and political participation in an African context. The study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with Ghanaian youth from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, as well as interviews with youth-focused organisations.

The study identifies two sociological groups: youth in advantaged positions, characterised by formal employment or tertiary education, and youth in vulnerable positions, lower-educated youth in vulnerable employment or unemployment. Findings reveal that while Ghanaian youth generally show profound political interest, employment status fundamentally shapes how and to which extent their political attitudes translate into participation.

Formally employed youth benefit from structural advantages, including civic skills, political knowledge, social capital and financial security, enabling them to engage in diverse strategies of political participation, with a strategic approach.

In contrast, vulnerable youth face structural barriers that restrict their ability and opportunities to effectively engage in political acts. Their political participation is typically driven by urgent desires for improved living conditions. The two sociological groups are therefore characterised by distinct pathways of political participation: agency-driven participation and constrained participation.

This study contributes to a complex understanding of youth political participation in an African context, by highlighting internal political inequalities caused by socio-economic conditions. The study identifies structural inclusive representation challenges to Ghana's democratic processes, providing valuable insights targeted interventions to promote inclusive political participation among Ghanaian youth.

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Chapter 1.

1.1 Introduction

Youth political participation in democracies is a global concern (Norris, 2004; Kitanova, 2020). The increasing disengagement of young people from institutional democratic processes form a challenge to established and emerging democracies worldwide (Anlar et al., 2025; The Commonwealth, 2023; European Commission, 2013). This trend is also witnessed on the African continent: in the last decade, young Africans have become less inclined to participate in democratic processes, such as voting, joining a demonstration or attending a community meeting (Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny et al., 2023). The political disengagement of youth is particularly concerning for African democracies, given that their rapidly growing youthful demographic often comprises the majority of the population. Therefore, youth's increasing disillusionment from the political system poses challenges to African democracies' inclusive representation and legitimacy.

Ghana presents an exemplary case for examining youth political participation within this context. Since its return to democratic governance in 1992, the Republic of Ghana has successfully held nine consecutive presidential and parliamentary elections. Ghana's multiparty elections have been highly competitive and their outcomes generally trustworthy. Within West Africa, Ghana holds a good reputation for its peaceful transfer of power from incumbent to opposition parties, as observed after the most recent elections of 2024. During these elections, Ghana witnessed a landslide victory for the opposition party: the National Democratic Congress (NDC) won the majority of seats in parliament and with 56% of the vote, the party's presidential candidate John Dramani Mahama was elected president (EC, 2025).

A determining factor in these recent elections was the influence of the youth vote. Similar to other African countries, Ghana's youthful population is growing rapidly, increasing at an average annual rate of 2.1 percent between 2010 and 2021 (GSS, 2022). In 2021, the youthful population (15-35 years) accounted for approximately 38% of the countries' population (GSS, 2022). Young Ghanaians therefore form an influential constituency within democratic processes. Yet, this young constituency is becoming increasingly disengaged from Ghana's political system, as indicated by declining levels of youth political participation (Torsu & Boateng Asiamah, 2023). The low voter turnout of Ghana's elections in December 2024 reflects youth's discontent with government performance: just 63% of registered voters cast their vote, a substantial decrease from the 79% turnout recorded in 2020 (CODEO, 2024; CODEO, 2022). While disaggregated data on

youth turnout remains unavailable, research indicates that young Ghanaian voters participate less in elections than older generations (Torsu & Boateng Asiamah, 2023; Resnick & Casale, 2014). Beyond electoral participation, young Ghanaian's participation in other political activities has also steadily declined (Torsu & Boateng Asiamah, 2023). The growing political disengagement of young people poses serious implications for the legitimacy of Ghana's democratic processes, as well as challenges for the nation's inclusive development.

In this broader context of political disengagement, young Africans are struggling to find employment. In Ghana, the youth unemployment rate amounts to 21.7% (15-35 years, 2023), compared to the country's average unemployment rate of 14,7% (GSS, 2024). The country's formal market fails to employ the growing youthful population, leaving many young people unemployed or seeking vulnerable employment in the informal economy. The state's inability to provide sufficient employment opportunities for youth has fostered widespread dissatisfaction with the government's performance among youth (Torsu & Boateng Asiamah, 2023).

It has been established that formal employment is an important facilitator of skills and resources that drive political participation (Schur, 2003). Therefore, unemployment poses a potential challenge to youth's political participation. Indeed, some studies find that unemployment can hinder African youth's engagement in political activities (Nkansah, 2025). The underrepresentation of these young people's voices in governance can ultimately undermine the legitimacy of Ghana's democracy and constrain inclusive youth development.

The existing academic literature on youth political participation presents several limitations that this study seeks to address. Academic literature regarding this topic lacks three specific perspectives: an African perspective, a complex understanding of 'youth' and a qualitative approach. First, most theoretical models explaining political participation that consider the influence of employment are based on non-African cases, with limited applicability to African societal and economic structures (Brady et al., 1995; Verba & Nie, 1972, Schlozman, 2015). The African context calls for an employment-approach that goes beyond the simple division of 'employed' or 'unemployed', but also considers vulnerable employment and the informal sector.

Second, existing literature often adopts a generic understanding of 'youth', which fails to encompass the disparities within this population, based on socio-economic conditions such as employment (Biney and Amoateng, 2019). Therefore, there is a need for a more complex understanding of 'youth'.

Finally, the literature on youth political participation is dominated by quantitative studies, which lack the in-depth exploration on how employment conditions shape the capacity and motivations for youth's political behaviour (Nkansah, 2025; Giungi & Lorenzini, 2013). A qualitative approach allows to address the before-mentioned limitations and provide a thorough understanding of how various employment conditions affect youth political participation.

1.1.1 Research question and objectives

In order to address these three limitations of current literature, this research aims to examine the relationship between employment status and the political participation of young people in an African context. Therefore, the main research question is as follows: 'How does employment status influence the level and strategies of political participation exercised by young people in Ghana?'

In order to address this question, the study pursues three main objectives. First, the study aims to determine the state of political participation of youth in Ghana, considering the level of participation and strategies employed. Second, it seeks to investigate the incentives and disincentives that shape young people's decision to participate in or refrain from political acts. Finally, it investigates the influence of employment status on young people's motivation and ability to participate in political acts

To achieve this, this study employs a qualitative design and data consisting of individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with Ghanaian youth, as well as interviews with Ghanaian youth organisations. Data collection was conducted over a period of ten weeks, from February to April 2025, in five regions across Ghana.

1.1.2 Contribution

This research contributes both to academic knowledge and policy development by providing nuanced insights into the motivations of political engagement of youth in Ghana. This case study contributes to the existing literature on the relationship between employment and political behaviour among youth in an African context, by adopting a qualitative approach and socio-economic perspective. It reveals that employment plays a determining role in shaping structural political inequalities within the youthful demographic. The findings give insight to the structural advantages and barriers caused by socio-economic conditions, reinforcing social inequalities among youth. These are valuable insights for the design of targeted interventions to promote

inclusive youth participation and representation in governance. This will ultimately strengthen the legitimacy of Ghana's democratic institutions and contribute to inclusive development.

This first chapter has introduced the context, objectives and research questions of this study. The following chapter further elaborates on the existing literature and theoretical framework, as well as the study's methodology. The third chapter provides the thematic analysis of the data and presents the study's findings. The last chapter gives a discussion and conclusion of the findings, as well as recommendations for further research and policy development.

Chapter 2.

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the topic of the study, discussing key areas: the conceptualisation of youth political participation, three theoretical models that explain political participation and the relationship between employment status and political engagement. Furthermore, this chapter will elaborate on the structure of Ghana's labour market and examine how youth employment is defined within this particular context. Finally, an overview of the study's methodology and research sample is presented.

2.1 Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1.1 Defining Political Participation

This research relates to the broader academic debate on the definition of political participation and its changing nature. Within the concept, a widely used distinction is made between *institutionalised* and *non-institutionalised* political participation. The institutionalised definition of political participation considers the "legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take." (Verba et al., 1978, p.1). These 'legal acts' take place within the institutional framework and consist of voting, campaign activity, contacting public officials and cooperative or communal activities (Verba et al., 1978). Non-institutionalised political participation considers political acts that take place outside of the institutional framework. These non-institutionalised political acts can include protesting, signing of petitions, strikes, boycotts or online participation (Weiss, 2020; Dim & Schafer, 2024).

2.1.2 Youth political participation

This distinction is particularly important for research considering youth political participation, as young people are disproportionately more likely to engage in non-institutionalised forms of political participation than adults (Quintelier, 2007). Youth often create their own spaces for political self-expression, outside of formal governance structures (Gyampo, 2019). Therefore, young people favour more 'informal' ways of participation, including wearing badges, signing petitions or attending demonstrations (Quintelier, 2007). Although these non-institutionalised forms of participation might seem less 'political' than institutionalised forms like voting, they are considered valuable indicators of young people's political participation (Quintelier, 2007). Yet in

political science, quantitative studies on political participation often only partially consider these non-institutionalised ways of engaging in political acts. This narrow understanding of political acts fails to encompass the diverse political activities that young people undertake, often leading to the conclusion that young people are politically apathetic or uninterested (Henn et al., 2002). Yet, a vast amount of academic literature finds that when considering a variety of non-institutionalised forms of political participation, young people are not as politically disengaged as is often popularly suggested (Henn, 2002; Quintelier, 2007; Biney and Amoateng, 2019).

The use of non-institutionalised forms of political participation by youth is also seen in Ghana. Biney and Amoateng (2019) state that while Ghanaian youth show a lower level of engagement through institutionalised ways of political participation, they do demonstrate well-formed political attitudes and a significant level of political interest (Biney & Amoateng, 2019). These attitudes often don't translate into institutionalised participation due to youth's diminishing trust in political institutions and their exclusion from political spaces when they attempt to engage. Therefore they argue that Ghanaian youth can be politically disengaged and engaged simultaneously (Biney & Amoateng, 2019).

Instead, youth political participation in Ghana increasingly takes place in the online space (Stephine & Nwogwugwu, 2022). The internet, through social media, has created an alternative political space, where online posts serve as strategies of political engagement (Stephine & Nwogwugwu, 2022). Also, Berckmoes and Kyei (2021) state that youth political vigilante groups in Ghana, which are often only affiliated with violence and conflict around elections, actually create their own political space within an elite-filled political field. By forming a political group identity, youth escape the limits impeded by their economic, social and political environment. In doing so, they construct their own political channel through which their voices are heard. Berckmoes and Kyei (2021) argue that this strategy of political participation contributes to Ghana's democratic governance and development.

Clearly, young Ghanaians employ various non-institutionalised strategies of political participation. The extent to which and why youth become engaged in political activities is driven by various factors that can be explained through three existing theoretical models.

2.1.3 Explaining Political Participation

Indeed, what explains political participation? Why do people engage in political acts? And why are some people more engaged than others?

Political participation is driven by many factors that can be explained through different models as described in academic literature. For this study, this chapter will discuss three theoretical models that build on one another. Beginning with the socio-economic status model (SES), which explains political participation based on individuals' socio-economic status. Thereafter, the resource-model elaborates on this, by incorporating the importance of resources in explaining political engagement. Lastly, the civic voluntarism model (CVM) combines and broadens these two models, by dividing the factors affecting political participation into three categories: resources (do you have the capacity to participate?), psychological engagement (are you motivated to take part?) and recruitment (were you asked to take part?) (Schlozman et al, 2018). Finally, this section examines the role of employment within these theoretical explanations and assesses how these, predominantly non-African-derived, models may apply to Ghana's reality.

2.1.4 Socio-Economic Status Model

Firstly, a common explanation to why some people are more politically engaged than others, is based on the difference in socio-economic status between people (Verba & Nie, 1972). From research based on the American context, it is established that citizens with a higher social and economic status are more engaged in political acts (Verba & Nie, 1972). The simple socio-economic status model (SES) explains this positive relationship based on components related to social status, including education, income and occupation (Verba & Nie, 1972; Brady et al., 1995). It is argued that individuals of a higher social status, with higher education or income, develop certain civic attitudes that lead to more political engagement. While socio-economic disparities are a predictor of political inequalities, the SES model does not specifically explain how a higher socio-economic status leads to more political participation.

2.1.5 Resource Model

The resource model provides an explanation for this. Brady et al. (1995) elaborate on the SES model, by focusing on the role of resources in explaining political participation. They argue that

the resources of time, money and civic skills are helpful factors in explaining political participation. The presence and absence of these resources contribute significantly to differences in political participation between individuals (Brady et al., 1995). In order to participate in political acts, one must have either money or free time. Money contributes to one's ability to donate to political or social campaigns and free time enables the opportunity to participate in other time-consuming activities (joining a demonstration, writing a letter to an assemblyman, joining a community meeting). The amount of free time is not necessarily determined by someone's income or socio-economic status, but more related to one's "life circumstances" (Brady et al., 1995). For example, an unemployed mother of three can have the same amount of free time as a full-time working man, who is childless. It should be noted that these two models (SES and Resource Model) are based on the American case, concluding that citizens with limited resources are less active in politics than their richer and more educated neighbours. One's decision to participate would thus be restricted by their available resources.

In the African context of developing economies and democracies, one would suspect that, on average, citizens face higher participation costs due to less available financial resources and poorer infrastructure (both in political and electoral infrastructure, as well as physical infrastructure enabling citizens to reach political spaces) (Issakson, 2010). In a developing country with widespread poverty and infrastructural challenges, a lack of time and money might restrict individuals from travelling to the polling station to cast their votes.

Yet, studies on African cases paint an alternative picture, suggesting a different direction of the relationship: Bratton (2008) finds that African citizens of poor financial background are actually more likely to vote in elections, attend community meetings and contact informal leaders. Similarly, Isaksson's (2010) study across 20 African countries also finds that resource-poor citizens participate to a greater extent than their resource-rich counterparts. Although these findings confirm the relationship between resources and political participation, they find a different direction as described in the model based on American data.

Next to time and money, Brady et al. (1995) argue that civic skills, including organisational and communication capabilities, form the third resource for political activity (Brady et al., 1995). Individuals who are well-spoken, able to write and read political information and comfortable with organising themselves or others, are likely to be more successful in engaging in political activities. Civic skills can be derived from a great variety of sources, including one's upbringing, education,

the workplace, voluntary associations and religious institutions, like the church (Brady et al., 1995). Citizens who are involved in a job, a voluntary association or religious community are more likely to acquire civic skills related to political acts (Brady et al., 1995).

In Ghana, where the adult literacy rate is 72% and 2.2 million young people (15-35 years; GSS, 2022) can't read, one would expect that disparities in education and literacy level might hinder some citizens from understanding democratic processes and voicing out their concerns (Isaksson, 2010). Yet, a study on African cases finds that income and education level (related to civic skills) are not associated with voting (Isaksson, 2010). Although, education attainment was found to matter in explaining other forms of participation, such as attending a community meeting (Isaksson, 2010).

Brady et al. (1995) confirm that resources are a less determining factor in explaining why citizens turn up to vote. As voting requires relatively little effort and resources (depending on a country's electoral system), this political activity is likely more driven by one's political interest (Brady et al, 1995). However, for time-consuming political activities, such as contacting government officials or joining a campaign, resources are more influential.

In conclusion, resources such as time, money and civic skills can be regarded as relevant factors affecting political participation. As resources are acquired throughout the life cycle, from various institutional sources, it allows us to understand disparities in political activity between social groups. This is particularly relevant for examining the Ghanaian youthful population, as this demographic knows great variation in education level and employment situations, from an early stage in life (Torsu & Boateng, 2023). Although, findings on the direction of the relationship remain ambiguous. Studies on African cases often find a different direction of the relationship than described in the American-based model. This highlights the importance of African-based research aimed at investigating underlying motivations of political participation.

2.1.6 Civic Voluntarism Model

The civic voluntarism model (CVM) builds upon the SES and resource model, by combining them with two additional factors (Schlozman et al., 2018). The CVM divides the variables that influence political participation into three categories: resources, psychological engagement and recruitment. As discussed earlier, resources include time, money and civic skills, the latter derived from education, voluntary association and employment (Brady et al., 1995).

Additionally, in order to engage in political acts, one needs some sense of psychological engagement with politics. Psychological engagement with politics is related to several factors, including political interest (how interested are you?), political efficacy (do you believe that your engagement will make a difference?), political information (how informed are you?) and party identification (do you feel strongly partisan with a party?) (Schlozman et al, 2018). Generally, citizens with a high level of interest in political affairs and much knowledge of politics and government, are more active in political activities (Schlozman et al., 2018).

Political efficacy relates to whether individuals believe that their engagement will make an impact. This belief of political efficacy can be internal (the belief that the individual is qualified and capable of participating), as well as external (the belief that the governmental system is responsive to the individual's acts) (Schur, 2003). As to be expected, citizens who have a strong belief of internal and external efficacy will be more likely to engage in political acts than individuals who are sceptical about the impact of their engagement. The aspect of external efficacy is especially relevant when studying political participation in Ghana, given the widespread skepticism of government effectiveness. Recent Afrobarometer data reveals that a great majority of youth give a negative evaluation of the government's performance in key issues, such as managing the economy (Torsu & Boateng, 2023). Additionally, the majority of Ghanaians believe corruption has increased over the past four years (Afrobarometer, 2025). This conviction can undermine people's confidence that their political involvement will actually make a difference.

Finally, the last psychological factor concerns party identification: citizens who strongly identify and affiliate with a certain party, will likely engage in more political activities than individuals who are non-partisan (Schlozman et al., 2018). This aspect is particularly interesting in the case of Ghana, where the political system is dominated by two political parties and where strong patterns of partisanship are embedded in society (Stoecker, 2022). Additionally, given Ghana's diversity of ethnic groups across regions, ethnicity still plays an important role in determining party identification (Stoecker, 2022). Although partisanship and ethnicity are prevalent in Ghana's society and politics, the extent of their influence on individual's motives for political engagement remains contested (Stoecker, 2022; Lindberg & Morrison, 2008). Furthermore, existing literature remains unclear to which extent these factors apply to youth's motives for political engagement.

Next to psychological engagement with politics, often people don't become politically active by spontaneous action, but because they were asked to. Therefore, the third category in the Civic Voluntarism Model relates to recruitment. Requests to become engaged in a political affair can range from an email by a relative asking to sign a petition or a member of a political campaigner asking to support their candidate (Schlozman et al., 2018). Not everyone is equally likely to receive such a request: people with many social connections are more likely to be recruited for political activities (Schlozman et al., 2018). This dynamic is closely related to the concept of social capital: "the ability of individuals to secure benefits through social networks or other social structures" (Portes, 1998, p. 6). The 'benefits' in this context constitute the opportunities and invitations for political participation, acquired through an individual's social network. In other words, people with more social capital receive more opportunities to engage in political activities. Social capital can be derived from a number of sources, through work, family, religious associations or other voluntary associations (Portes, 1998).

Requests for political activity are disproportionately aimed at individuals who are already more likely to participate in such acts, based on their socio-economic status and social capital (Schlozman et al., 2018). As a result, disparities in political participation based on social capital are reinforced by recruitment efforts. The influence of social capital on political recruitment is also found in Ghana: a study on the political participation of Ghanaian nurses finds that nurses involved with the professional nursing organisation, are more likely to become politically involved than their colleagues who are non-member (Alhassan et al., 2020).

Alternatively, one could argue that in the context of Ghana, clientelism could be considered a form of recruitment. Clientelism is an exchange of material resources, often between political actors and citizens, leading to political support (Van Walle, 2007). Unlike other types of recruitment, clientelism is disproportionately targeted at citizens in poverty (Jensen & Justesen, 2014). In a sense, clientelism operates as a form of political recruitment, particularly targeted at those in vulnerable financial situations, including youth. However, the direct effect of clientelism on political behaviour in Ghana appears to be weak (Andrews & Inman, 2009).

In sum, the Civic Voluntarism Model highlights the importance of resources, psychological engagement and recruitment as factors in shaping political participation. It is clear that some of these factors, including recruitment and resources, are partially determined by an individual's socio-economic conditions. This underscores the importance of examining political participation

from a socio-economic perspective. Applying this framework to the Ghanaian context helps in the analysis of how employment, among other socio-economic conditions, shapes political participation.

2.1.7 Employment and political participation

This study investigates the influence of employment on political participation among youth. How then does employment fit into these models explaining political engagement? Employment plays a role in these previously discussed models in several ways.

Schur (2003) finds that, in the United States, employed people are more engaged in political activities than unemployed people. Employment facilitates important factors that drive political participation, including civic skills, income and internal efficacy (Schur, 2003). Most expectantly, employment leads to higher levels of income, which contributes to one's resources to become politically active (Schur, 2003; Brady et al, 1995). Secondly, employment is positively related to citizens' attainment of civic skills (Schur, 2003). Skills learned at the workplace, such as drafting an email or attending meetings, are valuable for facilitating political acts, such as contacting a representative or designing a petition. Schur (2003) also finds that employed people show higher levels of internal efficacy, motivating them to participate in political acts, as they are more confident in their political capabilities. Lastly, union members (often incidental to employment) are more likely to be recruited for or asked to participate in political acts, such as voting, signing a petition or writing a letter (Schur, 2003). Thus, being employed gives individuals important tools and opportunities that drive political engagement.

On the other side of the coin, unemployment might lead to exclusion from these resources and opportunities, which could hinder citizens from participating in politics. A study based on 39 African countries finds that unemployed youth are less likely to turn up to vote or to join a demonstration (Nkansah, 2025). Participation in protests increases when young people are secured with financial stability and jobs (Nkansah, 2025).

Giungi and Lorenzini (2013) also argue that being excluded from the labour market can lead to exclusion in other spheres of life. Their research on youth unemployment in Geneva, shows that unemployed and employed youth do significantly differ in terms of social, economic and political exclusion (Giungi & Lorenzini, 2013). First, they find that unemployed youth experience greater economic exclusion than their employed peers, facing substantial financial difficulties. The

study finds that economic exclusion encourages young unemployed to become politically active, suggesting that economic hardship can fuel participation in political activities, such as protests (Giungi & Lorenzini, 2013). Second, unemployment leads to social isolation of youth, resulting in smaller social networks and fewer involvement in voluntary associations (Giungi & Lorenzini, 2013). Their social exclusion seems to hinder political engagement, confirming the importance of social capital in facilitating political engagement, as described in the civic voluntarism model (Giungi & Lorenzini, 2013; Schlozman et al., 2018). Lastly, unemployed youth show higher levels of political distrust and feelings of political inefficacy, displaying their political exclusion (Giungi & Lorenzini, 2013). Political exclusion makes unemployed youth less likely to participate in institutional forms of politics, such as voting (Giungi & Lorenzini, 2013).

To conclude: although the direction of the relationship is contingent on the context of the study, these studies demonstrate the importance of employment in facilitating or abstaining tools for political participation.

2.1.8 Employment in Ghana

In order to understand the influence of employment on political participation of youth, one has to understand the concept of employment in Ghana's context. As illustrated earlier, most literature on this topic is based on non-African cases, where labour market structures differ substantially from Ghana's market conditions. In a labour market where informality is dominant, what does it mean to be unemployed or employed?

For this study, I adopt the categorisation of Ghana's labour market depicted by Baah-Amaoteng (2015). Baah-Baoteng (2015) provides a framework of a labour market typical for African economies. They argue that the working-age population in Ghana is categorised in two groups: 1) within the labour force and 2) outside the labour force. Firstly, citizens who are outside of the labour market include students, people unavailable for work and 'discouraged' workers (Baah-Boateng, 2015). 'Discouraged' workers are those who are available, but for various reasons fail to seek employment (Baah-Boateng, 2015). 'Discouraged' workers are often referred to as 'hidden unemployment'. Together with jobless citizens who are actively seeking employment, they account for 'broad unemployment' (Baah-Boateng, 2015).

Secondly, citizens within the labour force can also be categorised, including those in 1) formal employment, 2) informal employment and 3) job-seeking. Those in formal employment are

either in wage employment or self-employed, with employees or formal contracts (Baah-Boateng, 2015). These workers benefit from stable income, formal regulations and social benefits.

Citizens in informal employment are often self-employed without employees or contributing to family work. These citizens engage in *'vulnerable employment'*, as they don't enjoy formal work arrangements, don't have access to social benefits and are more vulnerable to changing economic circumstances (Baah-Boateng, 2015). In 2010, 71,5% of working-age citizens in Ghana were working under *'vulnerable employment'* in the informal market (Baah-Amoateng, 2015).

Clearly, Ghana's labour market is highly dependent on the informal market, referring to "economic activity that largely operates outside the legal employment framework" (Baah-Boateng, 2015, p. 659). As described earlier, work in the informal market is characterised by vulnerable employment, including family work, self-owned businesses and other casual work that don't have access to social security. In countries like Ghana, where the formal market is not yet developed enough to sufficiently employ the labour force, the informal sector serves as an employer of 'the last resort' (Baah-Boateng, 2015). Jobseekers who fail to find employment in the formal sector, due to its limited availability, turn to the informal sector as a survival strategy. In this sense a trade-off between unemployment and informality takes place. This trade-off results in a lower unemployment rate, but a high level of informality (Baah-Boateng, 2015).

The informal market is an attractive sector for youth, as they struggle to enter the space of formal employment due to limited vacancies and high competition. Many youth turn to 'survival businesses': small self-owned enterprises that require little start-up financing, like street vending or services (Fox et al., 2016). However, these youth working in these businesses often deal with unstable income, poor working conditions or have limited growth potential (Fox et al., 2016). Youth working in informality are more at risk for economic changes, such as high inflation or recession. Thus, although Ghana's vibrant informal sector serves as a safety net for many job-seeking youth, it does not provide sustainable means of livelihood.

Turning to the contextualisation of the financial situation of those in employment: being employed in Ghana, does not necessarily provide sufficient income to escape financial distress. The minimum wage in Ghana at time of this study stands at GHS19,97 per day, accounting for 1,68 euros per day and 543,04 euros (GHS6,470,28) per year. To compare, the mean annual income per capita stood at GHS11,694 in 2017, accounting for 981,46 euros per year (GLSS,

2017). The highest income quintile contributes half of the total household income, with an average of GHS24,748 (2077,05 euros) per capita annually. In contrast, the lowest quintile earns only GHS1,320 (110,79 euros), reflecting significant economic inequality in Ghana (GLSS7, 2017). When comparing income to expenditure, the average annual per capita spending is GHS4,574 (374,15 euros). Economic inequality remains clear, with the highest income quintile spending ten times more (GHS8,987) than the lowest quintile (GHS872).

Additionally, in the context of this study, Ghana's economy faced severe challenges, with high inflation rates and economic recession. This will be further elaborated in section Chapter 3.1. This context of widespread income inequality and insufficient wages helps to understand the financial conditions of youth in informal and formal employment.

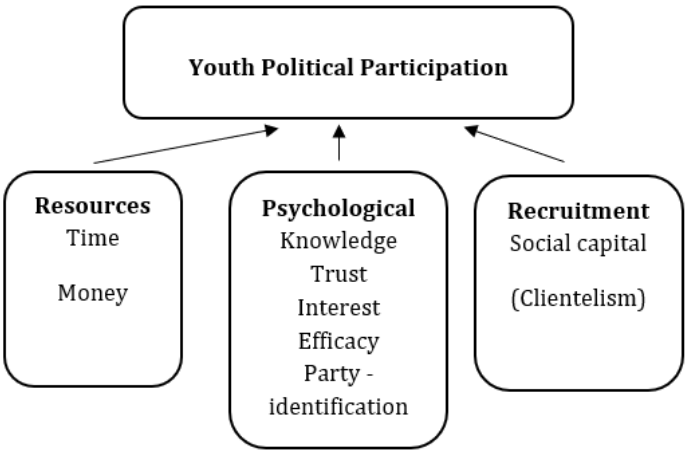
2.1.9 Synthesis theoretical concepts

In the first part of this chapter, I have set out three models that explain political participation; explored the influence of employment in these models and given an overview of the labour market and youth employment in Ghana. In this section, I give a brief overview of the concepts relevant for the thematic analysis of this study's qualitative data, drawing on the Civic Voluntarism Model (Schlozman et al., 2018)

First, I consider resources, time and money, to be relevant concepts in enabling or restricting youth political participation in Ghana. Second, the psychological factors that could affect youth participation include political interest, political knowledge, political trust, party identification and political efficacy. Lastly, recruitment, primarily in the form of social capital, is considered in the interview-analysis. Given the presence of clientelism in Ghana's society and academic literature (Andrews & Inman, 2009, Stoecker, 2022), this factor is also held into account. A visual overview of these concepts is presented in Figure 1.

These concepts are deemed relevant in explaining youth's political behaviour and show interaction with this study's second variable, employment. For employment, this study adopts the categorisation as presented by Baah-Baoteng (2015): formal employment, vulnerable employment and unemployment.

Figure 1.



Note. Categorisation of factors shaping political participation, drawn from the Civic Voluntarism Model (Schlozman et al., 2018).

2.2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the role of employment on young people's motivations and strategies of political participation. A qualitative approach was adopted in order to explore individual motivations driving and discouraging political participation. This approach is suitable to investigate the complex interaction between employment and political engagement through several spheres of individuals' lives, including the economic, political and social sphere.

The data collection included individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with youth, as well as interviews with youth organisations. In total, ninteen individual in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions were conducted. The focus group discussion consisted of five to six participants, from a great variety of employment and educational backgrounds. Additionally, three interviews with youth organisations were held. Participants were recruited through outreach via youth organisations (National Youth Authority, YEfL), local organisations and personal networks, ensuring access to diverse profiles within the target demographic.

Research sample

Individual interviews were held with young Ghanaians (18 - 35 years) from various backgrounds, to explore individual-level motivations for political participation in relation to the respondent's employment status. In order to reach a representative sample of the research population, Ghanaian youth, respondents were selected through purposive sampling, based on specific demographic criteria. Considering the heterogeneity of the youthful population in Ghana, the research sample was purposely selected to represent the diversity of the research population. For this purpose, respondents were selected based on age, gender, geographical locality, educational background and employment status. A full overview of the research sample per demographic characteristic is presented in Table 1.

Regarding age, the definition of youth varies across national and international levels and institutions: the United Nations defines youth between 15 and 24 years, while the African Union and Government of Ghana adopt the definition of 15 to 35 years (Youth Charter, 2006; National Youth policy, 2022). Yet, the legal active voting age in Ghana stands at 18 years, while the passive voting age (to become member of parliament) is 21 years (Constitution Republic of Ghana, 1992, Art. 42; Art. 94). Several studies considering youth political participation in African cases refer to

youth from the age of 18 years, as young people become politically active in electoral processes at this age (Resnick & Casale, 2011; Dim & Schafer, 2024). Therefore, this study adopts an age range of 18 to 35 years, aligning with Ghana's official youth definition while accounting for the minimum legal voting age.

In terms of geographical locality, the scope of this research extends to five regions well-distributed across the country, including Greater Accra, Central Region, Volta Region, Ashanti Region and Northern Region. While the sample is not statistically representative of the national population, it reflects an effort to include voices from across the country and from both urban and rural contexts. It is acknowledged that Greater Accra and Volta region are somewhat overrepresented in the sample relative to their share of the national population, while some regions in the Northern and Western part of the country are not or underrepresented. It is also recognised that youth living in rural areas are underrepresented in this study, including three respondents from one rural locality. This is due to practical considerations regarding travel and accessibility within a limited time frame. These limitations are taken into account in the analysis and interpretation of findings.

Regarding level of education, this study purposely selected youth from all attained education levels (Junior High School (JHS), Senior High School (SHS), Higher National Diploma, University Bachelors and University Masters), in order to approach a representative sample of Ghanaian youth. As outlined in earlier chapters, education plays a determining role in employment attainment, as well as in shaping and facilitating political participation (Brady et al, 1995; Verba et al., 1972). Including respondents from various educational backgrounds ensures the findings reflect a broad spectrum of perspectives across different socio-economic groups within the demographic.

Lastly, as discussed in earlier chapters, this study employs the categorisation of employment as presented by Baah-Boateng (2015). Therefore, this study selected individuals in formal employment, vulnerable employment and unemployment. A great effort was made to select respondents from all kinds of sectors, including the public sector (teacher, government official, nurse), private sector (lawyer, consultant) and informal sector (vendor, tailor). Two respondents were employed as National Service Personnel (NSP): a compulsory one-year service for Ghanaian citizens above 18 years and who completed tertiary education (National Service Authority, 1980). In the context of this study, National Service is considered as formal employment, as these youth

enjoy monthly allowances, social regulations and the professional environment of public institutions (National Service Authority, 1980). The diverse selection of employment backgrounds ensures the study captures a wide range of economic experiences and work conditions among Ghanaian youth.

For the interviews with youth related organisations, three organisations were selected: National Youth Authority, YEfL and Youth Bridge Foundation. These organisations were selected due to their great experience with youth development in Ghana. These interviews incorporate an outsider-perspective to the findings and help to contextualize the responses from individual interviews.

Table 1.

	Categories	**Frequency (n)**
Gender	Male	9
	Female	10
Locality	Accra (urban)	7
	Cape Coast (urban)	2
	Ho (urban)	4
	Tamale (urban)	3
	Bosomtwe (rural)	3
Education	JHS (Junior High School)	4
	SHS (Senior High School)	6
	Tertiary (Higher National Diploma, University Bachelor, Master)	9
Sector	Informal sector	11
	Formal sector	5
	Unemployed	3
Employment	Vulnerable employment	9
	Employed (incl. NSP employed)	7
	Unemployed	3
TOTAL		**19**

Note. Overview research sample individual in-depth interviews per demographic sampling criteria.

Interviews

In-depth individual interviews followed a semi-structured design to maintain flexibility while ensuring key topics are covered systematically across all respondents. The interviews were held in various locations, including the respondent's work- or living place, in order to limit participation costs. Conversations were held predominantly in English, apart from three interviews held in a local language (Twi or Dagbani). Generally, the English proficiency of respondents was more than adequate for the interview, which minimised information from getting lost in translation. However, in three cases, the interviews would have benefited from a translator to enable respondents to express themselves in their preferred language. This limitation is acknowledged and may have affected the responses from some participants.

Focus groups

Two focus group discussions were organised, in Accra and Tamale, in order to explore participants' perspectives in an interactive setting that encouraged discussion with peers. The focus groups consisted of five to six participants, with a total of eleven. The participants were from various youthful ages and reflected a good gender balance. The two focus groups were designed slightly differently: the focus group in Accra involved a diverse group of participants from various education and employment backgrounds, ranging from JHS tot University Master and unemployed to formally employed. The selection of these participants was done through purposive sampling. In contrast, the participants in Tamale were selected with the assistance of YeFL, due to time constraints and unfamiliarity with the region. This led to a snowball sampling approach, resulting in a group with similar educational backgrounds but varied employment statuses. The differences in participant composition influenced the dynamics and direction of the discussions in each focus group.

Data management and analysis

All interviews and focus groups were recorded with informed consent and transcribed for analysis. Recordings and transcriptions were kept on personal external drives. The interview transcripts were analysed with the use of ATLAS.ti software. The interview analysis followed an inductive and thematic approach: this involved assigning codes to relevant phrases, which were later grouped under a related theme. These themes were closely related to the concepts summarised in Section

2.1.9. These themes were closely examined in order to gain a thorough understanding of youth's incentives and barriers to political participation. Interviewees' responses were anonymised in order to safeguard confidentiality.

Chapter 3

This chapter provides an overview of the findings of the data analysis. The chapter begins by outlining the study's economic and political context to provide relevant background for understanding its findings. In the following sections the key findings of the data analysis are presented, beginning with a depiction of the state of youth political participation in Ghana. Thereafter, I identify two sociological groups that emerge from interview-analysis, in relation to their employment conditions: youth in vulnerable positions and those in more advantaged positions. Following this distinction, the analysis continues by examining the incentives and disincentives for youth political participation, related to youth's employment situations. It concludes with the establishment of two pathways of youth political participation, in relation to employment status: constrained participation and agency-driven participation.

3.1 Context of study

This section gives a brief overview of the study's political and economic context, from the last decade. This research was conducted from February to April 2025, just a few months after Ghana's ninth consecutive presidential and parliamentary election. Ghana's Fourth Republic, since 1992, adopts a presidential democracy with a multi-party parliamentary system. Despite the formal adoption of a multi-party system, Ghana's political landscape is dominated by two political parties: the social democratic National Democratic Congress (NDC) and liberalist New Patriotic Party (NPP) (Obeng-Odoom, 2013). Ghana's political culture is highly competitive and characterised by strong partisanship (Stoecker, 2022).

The 2024 elections marked an end to the two four year-terms of a NPP administration, led by President Nana Akufo-Addo. While President Akufo-Addo introduced the popular Free Senior High School policy in 2017, enabling thousands of youth to enjoy secondary education, his terms were characterised by economic crisis and high inflation (Egbejule, 2024). During his two terms, the inflation rate skyrocketed to 54% in 2022, while the national currency, the Cedi, was among the worst-performing currencies in the world (Akorlie, 2023). This economic crisis fostered great frustration among Ghanaian citizens, burdened with high cost of living and economic hardship (France-Presse, 2024).

Additionally, Ghanaian youth were highly impacted by the economic crisis, as they increasingly struggled to secure employment. During Akufo-Addo's second term, Ghanaian youth

perceived the management of the economy and unemployment as the two most important problems facing the country, underscoring their dissatisfaction with the government's economic performance (Torsu & Boateng, 2023).

Other prevalent concerns during the latest NPP administration were the government's management of corruption and widespread illegal mining (galamsey) (Torsu & Boateng, 2023; Egbejule, 2024). Galamsey leads to severely polluted water bodies, affecting the agriculture and clean water supply for neighbouring villages (Egbejule, 2024). These issues fueled youth demonstrations across the country from 2021 onwards, under the trending hashtags as #FixTheCountry and #FreeTheCitizens (Al Jazeera, 2021)

In the background of these social and economic problems, the 2024 election took place between NDC's John Dramani Mahama and NPP's Mahamudu Bawumia. Both candidates are well-known politicians, as Mahama already served as president from 2012 to 2017 and Bawumia served as vice-president under President Nana Akufo-Addo. During the 2024 elections, citizens clearly voted for a change of government, as John Dramani Mahama was elected president with 56% of the vote (EC, 2025). The incumbent NPP was voted out of office and lost a third of its seat in parliament (EC, 2025). The country witnessed a peaceful transfer of power, confirming its good reputation in the West-African region.

This context, of economic turmoil and political competitiveness, is helpful in understanding youth's political attitudes and economic realities.

3.2 State of youth political participation in Ghana

This section explores the state of youth political participation in Ghana, both in terms of level of participation as well as the strategies employed. Analysis of the interviews reveals that young Ghanaians are relatively active in various forms of political participation. Every respondent claimed to have engaged in at least one form of political participation, either an institutional or non-institutional form. For example, those who did not vote in the latest elections, did post their political views online. The youth employ a wide range of strategies to voice their political views: from voting and joining a demonstration, to even becoming a District Assembly member themselves. Other strategies include signing or organising petitions, joining a town hall meeting, serving as an election observer and joining their University's Parliament House.

The most common strategy employed by the respondents was voting: from the nineteen individual interviews conducted, thirteen young people had voted in the latest elections and six had not. This proportion reflects Afrobarometer data (Round 9, 2022), which finds that 73% of Ghanaian youth stated to have voted in the latest election. From the individuals who did not vote, three individuals stated that they did want to vote, but were restricted due to practical reasons (such as missing voters-ID or work). Among these young voters, a slightly higher turnout among young women was detected. Urban respondents made up a higher share of voters, with 60.6% of those who voted coming from urban areas compared to 39.4% from rural areas. Among those who voted, those with full-time jobs were most represented.

Turning to joining demonstrations, the Afrobarometer data aligns with the respondents of this study: demonstrations are not popular among young Ghanaians. From this study's respondents, only four respondents stated to have ever joined a demonstration. Afrobarometer data finds even a lower proportion: nine out of ten youth stated that they had never attended a demonstration, of which the majority indicated that they never would. Of those who were young activists, urban youth are more likely to join a demonstration.

Instead, this study shows that posting on social media is to be considered a popular method of voicing out political perspectives. Half of the respondents stated that they had posted their political views, either through replying to other posts, putting up a Whatsapp story or posting on X.

Finally, attending community meetings as a strategy of political participation seems to hold potential: while only three out of ten youth had ever attended, most young Ghanaians would if they were given the chance (Afrobarometer, 2022). Of those who had ever attended a community meeting, rural youth and those without jobs were most represented.

These findings already suggest that Ghanaian youth employ a variety of participation strategies, yet notable differences exist within the young demographic regarding which strategies are chosen and to which extent. It appears that these differences could partly stem from socio-economic conditions, such as locality and employment status. This dynamic is further explored through the analysis of this study's interviews.

3.3 Two sociological groups

From interview analysis two distinct sociological groups emerge, related to their employment conditions and political engagement: youth in more advantaged positions and youth in more vulnerable positions. The first group derive their more advantaged position from tertiary education or formal employment, or both. These two formative experiences serve as structural advantages that enhance their capacity for political engagement. Advantaged youth's political engagement is facilitated and characterised by their attainment of civic skills, political knowledge, social capital and financial security.

On the other hand, youth in more vulnerable positions lack these structural social and financial advantages, which restrict their opportunities for effective participation. This group of vulnerable youth is characterised by a lower education level (primary or secondary education) and informal employment or unemployment. Their political participation is motivated by financial insecurity or economic hardship and desires for better living conditions. Yet, their efforts for participation are restricted by barriers such as the costs of participation, distrust in politics and limited social capital and civic skills.

Of course, these are broad categories that allow heterogeneity within. For example, some respondents did enjoy higher education, but had not yet succeeded in securing formal employment. Other respondents in formal employment still face economic hardship, due to low salary, high inflation rate and delayed or incomplete payment of allowances by their employer. Several respondents stated that they worked several informal jobs for extra sources of income or were still reliant on their parents' financial support, when possible. Next to this, personal circumstances, such as supporting their own children or other family members, can further strain employed youth's financial resources. Participants' responses indeed reveal that even those with jobs experience financial distress.

> "In my sector it's like this. So we're always anticipating that we should get some allowances, which we have tabled and nothing has been done to it. So that's their suffering. And then sometimes you even ask yourself why in the first place did you get yourself employed? So a lot of people in other sectors too, like the nurses, they're also complaining about that."
>
> Man, employed, teacher, 27, Tamale

> “We are being paid monthly. But for two months now, we haven't received our pay. So we are not being paid according to how they are supposed to pay us. And the money too is not enough. It's just something small.”
> Woman, 24, NSP employed, midwife, Ho

It could be argued that these youth in unemployment or economic hardship are also in vulnerable positions, which shapes their motivation and ability to participate in political acts. Indeed, standard of living and financial insecurity are important factors influencing political participation. However, my argument goes beyond the economic dimension of employment and beyond youth’s material circumstances. While these youths might be in financial insecurity, their higher education or formal employment form structural capital that enable political engagement. In contrast, youth who don’t enjoy these advantages, are structurally restricted in their ability to translate their political attitudes into effective political engagement.

3.4 Incentives

Now that I have established two distinct sociological groups of youth, I continue the analysis of how these two groups of youth differ in their political participation, influenced by their employment conditions. I do this by delving into the incentives (what factors motivate and enable youth participation) and the disincentives (what factors discourage and hinder youth participation) related to youth political engagement.

To start with the factors that serve as an incentive for political engagement: what motivates youth in Ghana to participate in politics? First, two common incentives for political engagement are established: political interest and dissatisfaction with incumbent government performance. Second, desires for improved standard of living are also found to drive participation among both groups, but are exercised in different ways. Finally, I set out the distinct sets of incentives that are specific to the two sociological groups of youth.

3.4.1 Common incentives

To start with the factors that drive political activity among Ghanaian youth, regardless of employment status.

Political interest

Interview analysis reveals that young Ghanaians generally demonstrate significant interest in national politics. Generally, young people hold well-formed opinions and attitudes towards the current political developments in the country, which is in line with the findings of earlier research (Biney & Amoateng, 2019). Interview responses indicate that interest in national politics cuts across education and employment backgrounds. This widespread political interest appears to stem from the direct impact of political decisions on Ghanaian youth's daily lives. To illustrate, in the context of this study, the newly elected government was in the process of abolishing the E-Levy, a 1.5% tax on all electronic transfers of money. The E-Levy is a contested measure that affects young Ghanaians' finances daily (Rogan et al., 2023). The measure particularly affects youth seeking to establish their own business in the informal sector, in order to escape unemployment (Rogan et al., 2023).

Such developments foster political interest among young citizens and drive them to engagement, as they have a direct stake in the outcomes. This cuts across employment backgrounds: youth from all employment backgrounds showed political interest on a variety of

topics, related to their personal lives. Therefore, the findings suggest that no major disparities exist between youth in terms of political interest, based on employment status. To what extent these political attitudes are translated into political participation, is contingent on other incentives and barriers, which are explored in later sections.

Dissatisfaction with incumbent government's performance

The second incentive for political participation that active youth have in common relates to their dissatisfaction with the incumbent government's performance. Youth's frustrations with the incumbent NPP government served as a prime motivator to engage in political acts, such as voting, demonstrating and posting online. This is reflected in the following quotes:

> "The past government was my main motivation. I felt like they just messed up every single sector, so I just wanted to vote for another option. Maybe they would do better than the past, so that was my main motivation."
> Woman, 22, NSP employed, administrative work, Cape Coast

> "My motivation was, I didn't like how the previous government was, because of certain policies they kept in place, certain activities we saw that were not common while growing up. So it wasn't something we really wanted to continue with."
> Man, 29, employed, communication staff local government, Tamale

The rising inflation, poor management of galamsey and corruption were cited as primary reasons for youth dissatisfaction with the NPP government. For electoral participation, it appears that dissatisfaction with the current government leads to negative retrospective voting: 'punishing' the governing party by voting for the opposition party, with the purpose to change the government (Ellis, 2014). This finding corresponds with prior research, revealing that Ghanaian citizens largely base their vote on retrospective evaluation of the incumbent government's economic performance and corruption (Andrews & Inman, 2009).

Next to influencing the electoral participation, incumbent government performance can also drive other forms of political engagement, such as online engagement and demonstrations. One respondent stated to have joined a #FixTheCountry protest: a youth activist movement, started

in 2021, highlighting the country's economic issues and governmental mismanagement. The respondent joined the protest to voice his criticism on the government's failure to handle the rising inflation:

> "I want to show the government like... Things are going in the wrong direction. So we should look after the youth. So that they can make things more efficient."
> Man, 24, vulnerable employment, vendor, Tamale

As reflected by these quotes, retrospective evaluation of government's performance cuts across socio-economic backgrounds: youth from all kinds of employment statuses stated to have been mobilised by their discontent with the NPP administration. These findings also demonstrate that dissatisfaction with the incumbent government's performance serves as a driver for various forms of political participation.

This incentive is of course not limited to youth: adult citizens are also likely to be driven by retrospective evaluation of the sitting administration. However, young voters, particularly those who have recently reached the voting age, seem to have limited reference points to compare political parties and leaders. In the context of this study, some respondents only actively recall the latest two terms of the NPP administration. Whereas older citizens may be more influenced by party loyalties or memories of previous governments' performance. This dynamic relates to the *life-cycle effect*, as described by Norris (2004): patterns of political behaviour are expected to alter as citizens pass through stages of life. Regarding retrospective voting, this could implicate that young citizens, due to their little political experience, might be more likely to engage in negative retrospective evaluation of the incumbent party, when they are unsatisfied. Older generations, who may hold party loyalties or political habits, might refrain from this.

Standard of living

Another incentive that drives political participation among Ghanaian youth, is their standard of living. A key motivation for political activity among Ghanaian youth is the desire to achieve better living conditions, often linked to expectations of financial improvement or increased employment opportunities:

> "It's standard of living. So if their standard of living is poor, they would engage. If their standard of living is okay, they would engage to maintain their one in charge. If their standard of living is poor, they would engage to take you out."
> Representative of National Youth Authority, Ho

As indicated by this quote, the desire for an improved standard of living is an incentive for youth across socio-economic backgrounds. However, youth's financial position influences the way this motive translates into political activity. Youth differ in the degree of existential urgency they associate with political participation: financially secure youth engage from a position of agency, while their peers in financial insecurity often act out of urgency and dependency.

3.4.2 Incentives: Vulnerable youth

Standard of living: urgency and dependency

To start with the youth in vulnerable positions, for whom their economic hardship often serves as the main driver for their participation in political acts. The desire to improve one's personal standard of living is a particularly relevant incentive for those in economic hardship.

> "(Interviewer: what was your motivation to vote?) To choose the better government and just to have a comfort zone. To have a comfort zone in our places and just some challenges we are facing and just minimise it."
> Woman, 20, vulnerable employment, clothing vendor, Accra

> "When the living system is getting hard, then we have to change the government. To see who is coming and how he can also help."
> Woman, 26, vulnerable employment, shopkeeper, Bosomtwe

The last quote clearly demonstrates how vulnerable youth are mobilised by their financial insecurity. The statement also illustrates how economic hardship and limited social capital can foster a sense of dependency on the state, as individuals look to the government's "help" for improved living conditions. This demonstrates that vulnerable youth are often driven by a sense of urgency and dependency, rather than full agency.

The motivation for improved living conditions is closely related to youth's concerns about their ability to afford education. Several respondents indicated that their motivation to vote stemmed from hopes for better accessible education, for themselves, their peers or their own children. After the introduction of free secondary education (SHS), enrolment increased with about 50% (African Education Watch, 2023) Yet, many parents and youth still struggle to afford additional material costs. Between 2019 and 2023, after the introduction of free SHS, almost 200 thousand students eligible for SHS were unable to honour their admission due to financial constraints (African Education Watch, 2023). Because the affordability of education is closely tied to financial circumstances and living conditions, it serves as an important driver of political engagement among youth.

This incentive, the desire for improved living conditions, also reveals that many vulnerable youth see politics as a zero-sum game, a situation where one group's gain is seen as another's loss:

> "The way the now country is, if you don't choose the right candidates, you'll be suffering for four good years."
> Woman, 20, vulnerable employment, clothing vendor, Accra

This perception suggests that young vulnerable voters perceive elections as their primary opportunity to influence their material conditions, especially when other forms of political engagement seem inaccessible or ineffective. It also reveals the high stakes that youth, especially those in economic hardship, relate to electing the "right" candidate. The emphasis on "choosing the right candidate" highlights the urgency with which vulnerable youth engage in elections, as consequences of governance are directly felt in everyday life.

3.4.3 Incentives: Advantaged youth

Standard of living: agency

Youth in more advantaged positions can also be driven by the desire for improved living conditions, but their approach is more likely to depart from a position of agency:

> "So, I'll be a bit more comfortable than another person who's not employed … They will be more agitated, more frantic, more uncomfortable with anything happening with the

government. But I wouldn't be as uncomfortable as they are. So, yes, my employment settles me a bit. That's not to say that it's blinded me to what's happening. No, I see what's happening. It's affecting me and all that. But I cannot compare how it affects me to how it affects another person."

Woman, 26, employed, lawyer, Accra

"But I do want more. Like, pay for my guilty pleasure sometimes. So, right now, at this point, it really motivates me to participate in politics because I want better for myself.

So, any government that can provide that for me, I am, like, heavily interested in looking into certain prospects in order to help me choose a proper presidential candidate or a government that could help me increase my finances."

Woman, 22, NSP employed, administrative worker, Cape Coast

The first quote illustrates that financial security reduces personal vulnerability and forms a certain 'buffer' to political developments. This sense of security allows for a more considered and strategic approach to political engagement. This is illustrated by the second quote, in which the respondent's engagement is driven by rational choice and strategic motivations to achieve her desire for improved finances. These findings suggest that financial security, as a result of formal employment, allows youth to participate from a position of personal agency.

This is not only attributed to financial security and formal employment, but also to education level. Well-educated respondents in unemployment or financial insecurity demonstrate similar motives as their financially secured peers. Even in financial insecurity, these youths show considered participation (or disengagement), instead of acting out of urgency. This suggests that structural advantages (education or formal employment) are a prerequisite of facilitating strategic participation. The following quote illustrates this dynamic: while this university graduate has not yet secured formal employment, his position allows for considered participation. He is not only motivated by his own living conditions, but also those of others and national development:

> “My main motivation was because of the way the economy is being handled and the way we borrow much, but we are not able to actually let the borrowing that we did impact the economy. So that there will be jobs. A lot of people are suffering. A lot of people are coming out from the university, they are not getting jobs. When you are using your own little money to invest in something, you don't get much return on the money. So that is my major motivation.”
>
> Man, 29, unemployed, university bsc, Accra

Additionally, youth in financial security might feel less urgency to engage in political acts, as they are generally less dependent on governmental support and less impacted by governmental economic management. While for some youth this sense of security might lead to political apathy, this was not witnessed among the respondents of this study. Suggesting that this sense of security does not necessarily lead to disengagement or apathy. It rather allows for more measured involvement, without the same existential pressure experienced by their peers in financial insecurity.

Civic skills and political knowledge

Civic skills and political knowledge are also factors particular to advantaged youth, that facilitate their ability to engage in politics. Advantaged youth attained these skills and knowledge either through tertiary education or formal employment. Regarding political knowledge, youth who have enjoyed tertiary education are likely to have acquired a better understanding about the political system and decision-making processes, than youth without such educational background.

Secondly, it appears that young employees in the formal sector benefit from working in a professional environment. Respondents in formal employment indicated that their professional experiences improved their understanding of the governance system, either through conversations with colleagues or through working with government procedures. This suggests that in a professional environment, youths get exposed to administrative procedures and policy implementation, which enhance their understanding of democratic processes. This understanding serves as useful tool for young individuals to translate their political attitudes into political acts, as they are more likely to find their way to available platforms of engagement:

> "So, the difference would be that the one in the formal sector may know who to address his issues with, or may know the procedures. The one in the informal, if they are not taught, might not know who to address their issues to. But it doesn't mean the two of them do not voice out."
>
> Representative of National Youth Authority, Ho

Thirdly, youth in more privileged positions typically derive relevant civic skills for political participation from their education or employment. As described in Chapter 2, civic skills refer to communicative and organisational capabilities that enable individuals to effectively engage in political acts (Brady et al, 1995).

Communication and organisational skills are very important for youth to be able to effectively express themselves on political matters. For example, communication skills enable youth to write effective letters to Assembly representatives and organisational skills help them to organise a petition or demonstration. These skills can be derived from a variety of sources, including employment.

Indeed, it appears from interview responses that formally employed youth are more equipped with communication and organisational skills. These skills are partly derived from their job, through regular meetings and administrative work. Indeed, a respondent working as a communication staff for the local government clearly attained relevant communicative skills related to governance issues. This respondent then used these skills to translate his political attitudes into online engagement.

Next to formal employment, civic skills are also related to education level. Interview responses reveal that youth who have enjoyed tertiary education are more comfortable and equipped to articulate their political concerns. Well-educated youth that did not succeed in securing formal employment, clearly still profit from their articulative and organisational abilities. To illustrate, one respondent with vulnerable employment in agriculture and tertiary education, used his civic skills to engage in community meetings on national development. He also organised a petition, informing the Municipal Chief Executive about the rent issues experienced by university students:

> "Also, I write petitions. For instance, over here, I think there's a rent issue that is worrying students a lot. So, personally, I want to add a petition to the MCE asking that I think we have the office of the rent control. They have to enforce this rent out issue. Planners are taking advantage of students, taking huge amounts of money from them and it's not making sense. The rule says that you have to take rent no more than six months. But people are taking two years advance. And they are increasing every year. Which is going against the law that we have in this country. So, I want to take that charge so that it will be long overdue"
>
> Man, 28, vulnerable employment, university bsc civil engineering, Ho

While this individual might not be formally employed yet, this is a clear example of how education fosters civic skills that facilitate political mobilisation. Youth without knowledge of such procedures like petitions, or without sufficient writing abilities, would not be able to mobilise themselves as effectively.

These findings suggest that formal employment, alongside education level, is an important avenue of fostering civic skills and political knowledge that facilitate political participation.

Social capital

Social capital is another facilitator of political participation that advantaged youth enjoy, due to their social networks acquired through their employment. To recall, social capital relates to the ability of individuals to secure benefits through social networks (Portes, 1998).

Formal employment facilitates the acquisition of social capital: social networks that shape opportunities for youth to engage politically. In this dimension, a stark contrast exists between youth employed in the formal sector and youth in vulnerable employment situations. The respondents in formal employment clearly benefit from their professional environment, in terms of acquiring social opportunities and connections that are useful in channeling their voices to political spaces.

> "I get the opportunity to connect with other people from all kinds of backgrounds. … Get to know about what people are going through. So it's really motivating to speak about my views."
>
> Woman, 20, employed, administrative worker, Ho

This quote illustrates how the respondent's job exposed her to various social issues and people outside her own point of reference, which motivated her to express her political views. Next to motivation, her employment requires interaction with the local government and other civil society organisations. The respondent's employment thus goes beyond its own realm, connecting her to other social and political spaces.

The latter respondent did not enjoy tertiary education, but acquired relevant social capital through formal employment. In contrast, youth who have graduated tertiary education but have not yet secured formal employment, still benefit from social capital acquired through their educational career. For instance, one respondent mentioned his active involvement in several student associations, through which he built a large social network. This social capital has proven useful in his search employment and his political engagement, as reflected in the following quotes:

> "So my social circle is large, I have a large base. I have people who are interested in different areas of social life, economic business, academia. If I want to help in, let's say for example, how to enter into agriculture, I'll definitely get someone who will help me. If I want to enter into law, I'll definitely get someone who'll show me the way."

> "Recently I learned there should be a demonstration against galamsey. When it comes, I will join because I'm also very much interested in protecting our environment. And I will definitely get that information from friends. So when those opportunities arise, I'll see where I'm supposed to get it from."
> Man, 29, unemployed, Accra

These findings demonstrate how youth in advantaged positions enjoy access to social networks, which enables them to translate their political attitudes into meaningful political engagement and advocacy.

3.5 Disincentives

Turning to the factors that discourage youth's political engagement. What barriers do youth experience that limit their ability and motivation to engage in politics? First, some constraints that most youth experience will be highlighted: the risks of political participation, low belief of external efficacy and political distrust. Secondly, the constraints and disincentives particular to vulnerable youth are set out. These are particularly relevant for youth in vulnerable positions, who are constrained by their standard of living, their position in society, participation costs and limited social capital.

3.5.1 Common disincentives

Risk of participation

Firstly, it is clear that young Ghanaians widely perceive some forms of political activity, including demonstrations, voting or online political engagement, as being risky. Interview analysis reveals that political activism is deemed to be risky in the physical and social sense.

Physical risk

The physical risk of participation is most related to the least popular strategy of political participation: joining a demonstration. Afrobarometer data (2022) finds that nine out of ten Ghanaian youth have never attended a demonstration. In this study, the great majority of respondents stated that they had never attended a demonstration and never would, due to the dangers associated with them:

> "I just feel I don't want to be part of a demonstration. Especially with what happened last year, the demonstration where people were abused physically, people were harassed and all that. I don't think I would ever be interested in that."
> Woman, 24, employed, NSP midwife, Ho

> "Very risky. So, I would like to go and risk my life on something that at the end of the day probably will not have a solution to it."
> Woman, 20, employed, administrative worker, Ho

> “No, I will never do that. Some of the demonstrations don't end well. Some get, I don't know, some get hurt. And the police can attack them and all that.I'm always busy, I don't even have time to go and do that.”
>
> Man, 35, vulnerable employment, trader, Accra

These quotes illustrate respondents’ worries about demonstrations in Ghana. Almost all respondents mentioned the physical risk that comes with joining a demonstration in Ghana. In their view, demonstrations are likely to provoke violence and police brutality, potentially leading to physical harm or fatalities. Their worries are justified: several recent demonstrations have escalated into the obstruction of public order, violence and police brutality (Mensah, 2024). In 2024, during a protest against the government’s mismanagement of illegal mining, 54 protesters were arrested and detained for two weeks (Mensah, 2024). In other instances demonstrations lead to fatalities: in 2021 two protesters were killed in clashes with police forces (Akorlie, 2021). These examples serve as discouragement for young Ghanaians to participate in demonstrations. Next to this, youth often believe that demonstrations won’t yield the desired results, as indicated in the second quote. Ghana’s youth have not yet seen successful examples in which the government has been responsive to protesters' demands. Therefore, based on their risk assessment, the potential risks of participating in protests outweigh the expected benefits.

In a single case, the risk of participation is also associated with voting. Although Ghana enjoys relatively peaceful elections within the West-African region, at least 6 fatalities were recorded during the 2024 elections (CDD Ghana, 2024). For some youth, this serves as a discouragement for electoral participation. As the respondent indicates:

> “Because if I go vote for them and at the voting station, I get hurt. Maybe I get shot. I'll just die there because no one is going to help.”
>
> Woman, 20, vulnerable employment, housekeeper, Accra

In sum, the physical risks of joining a demonstration serve as profound disincentives for Ghanaian youth across all employment backgrounds.

Social risk

Next to the physical risk of political activism, political activity is also deemed risky in the social sense. Several respondents indicated that they refrained from participating in public political acts, such as demonstrating and online posting, because of the fear of party affiliation and social repercussions. Posting political views online is deemed to incite negative comments and cyberbullying, as well as repercussions for employment opportunities.

> "No, I don't do politics on social media. Because if you are doing politics, it's dangerous nowadays. Because one party will say you are not on his or her side, and the other one will say you are not on his or her side. So if they are coming to give something, (e.g. sewing machine, hairdryer) to some of the young people that want to do some trading. They won't give you some because you are on the other party's side"
> Woman, 24, employed, hotel staff, Bosomtwe

> "But amongst my friends, I've heard someone say that she wouldn't demonstrate because if she wants to apply for the job, she doesn't know who her employer is or which side the employer folds. … She was at the forefront of one of the demonstrations and hinted at the fact that it has affected her career in the sense that it has limited her options for employment because people don't want to employ."
> Woman, 26, employed, lawyer, Accra

These quotes illustrate the implications of Ghana's highly partisan and polarised political culture. Youth refrain from engaging in public political acts to prevent being associated with a particular party. In their view, public party affiliation can lead to restriction of economic opportunities, such as securing employment or receiving benefits. These quotes illustrate that this applies to youth in vulnerable positions, as well as advantaged youth. Youth in precarious conditions don't want to risk their opportunities for securing employment or benefits, while advantaged youth don't want to risk their comfortable employed position.

Therefore, the social risks associated with public political activity serve as a discouragement for participation.

External efficacy and political trust

The second major factor that discourages young Ghanaians from engaging in political acts refers to external efficacy. As described in Chapter 2, external efficacy relates to the belief that the government is responsive to the demands of its citizens (Schur, 2003). External efficacy thus relates to 1) the government's performance in listening to citizens' demands and to 2) its performance in translating these demands into policy implementation. Interview analysis reveals that across socio-economic and employment backgrounds, Ghanaian youth hold generally low beliefs of external efficacy and political trust. However, the intensity of these perceptions varies between sociological groups, with some expressing these views more strongly than others.

First, regarding the government's performance in listening to youth's demands, responses reveal that youth perceive their voices to be inconsistently received by the Ghanaian government. Across the board, respondents believe that the government is not sufficiently responsive to youths' voices:

> "Our voices... I don't think they think about us. Our voices are not really heard.That's what I would say. Most of the leaders don't think about us, the youth. … They think about their people close to them, their family, and those really involved, close to them. They don't really think about people."
> Man, 35, vulnerable employment, vendor, Accra

> "Sometimes they hear our voices but they refuse to do it. They do whatever they want."
> Woman, 24, employed, hotel staff, Bosomtwe

The belief that Ghanaian politics neglects youth's voices, is catered by high levels of political distrust. Interview responses indicate that political distrust stems mostly from perceptions of self-serving leadership. Respondents generally hold the perception that Ghanaian politicians serve their own interest first, rather than those of citizens. This is fueled by stories of corruption and broken campaign promises. These quotes illustrate the low level of trust that young citizens attribute to their political leaders and system:

> “I would be a fool to say I trust. Yeah, I wouldn't be wise to say that I trust our political institutions a hundred percent.”
> Woman, employed, lawyer, 26, Accra

> “(Interviewer: Do you trust them (red. politicians)?) No, no, no. They always have their individual, let's say, agenda. Always. I mean, to some extent, maybe you will get some small benefit out of it, but a major part of it actually goes into someone's pocket in terms of money.”
> Man, employed, entrepreneur and driver, 29, Accra

> “When reaching the time for campaigning, to vote for them, they may send their leaders to come and just confuse us with their fake promises to vote for them. But when they get to power, they don't really remember. So we have some saying: when they are in a campaign, they speak the same language with you. But when they get to power, then they change their language.”
> Woman, 26, vulnerable employment, shopkeeper, Bosomtwe

> “There is no faith in the government because the politicians are only interested in themselves. So they take decisions that will favour them every day. Their children get to be the bosses. Their family members get to sit on top of issues. And they just don't care about the normal Ghanaian.”
> Man, 29, employed, communication staff local government, Tamale

Second, youth also attribute little confidence in the government’s performance in translating youth demands into policy implementation. Youth perspectives are unanimous that the Ghanaian government lacks efficient management and implementation of policies. This is also reflected in Afrobarometer data, which reveals that only a small minority of youth give a positive evaluation of the government’s performance on key priority issues, such as managing the economy or fighting corruption (Sarpong Owusu & Vellinga, 2025). The discontent with government performance in implementation of policies is illustrated by the following quote:

> "Probably, they have nice policies that they want to implement. But when it comes to implementing, it becomes a problem. Instead of them, there is no proper monitoring and evaluation of implementation of these policies. Sometimes the negative aspect of it is very huge. And we as citizens, we suffer the most as citizens."
> Woman, 20, employed, administrative worker, Ho

In sum, it appears that youth generally have little confidence in the government's responsiveness to youth's demands. Many perceive Ghanaian politicians as primarily motivated by self-interest, and unfulfilled government promises further foster political distrust among young people.

3.5.2 Disincentives: Vulnerable youth

External efficacy and political trust

Although low levels of external efficacy and political trust are common across the youth population, stark disparities exist along socio-economic lines. Interview analysis indicates that vulnerable youth are particularly affected by feelings of political inefficacy, stemming from their dependent and marginalised position.

Respondents in vulnerable situations often feel that their voices are less likely to reach the government compared to their more advantaged peers. These youths often believe that in order to be heard, one needs either "money" (a certain social status) or the "right" connections. This indicates that young Ghanaians from a lower socio-economic class believe that government responsiveness is conditional and unequal. The perception is closely linked to the ingrained belief that relevant social networks and a certain socio-economic status are a prerequisite of political influence, which will be further elaborated later in this chapter.

This sense of exclusion is even more profound in rural areas, where government institutions are physically further removed. Indeed, governmental and civil-society organisations are often situated in urban areas, reinforcing feelings of marginalisation among rural youth. Respondents in rural areas indicate that they feel excluded from governance, more than their peers in major cities such as Accra or Kumasi:

> “If you want your voice to be heard, you have to do it on social media. That's a hard place. Because the government agencies are far away from us. Like the MPs, members of parliament and the district chief executives. They are all living far from us.
> (Interviewer: How do you think it is for young people living in Kumasi?) It's easy because they are living with them. You know their house. So you can easily walk there and tell them what you want and what you need.”
> Woman, 24, employed, hotel staff, Bosomtwe

> “In Kumasi their roads are better. So they can get access to their government or maybe the member of parliament and the regional ministers. They can get access to them easier.”
> Man, 18, unemployed, Bosomtwe

Thus, the perception exists that the demands of vulnerable youth and rural youth are less likely to reach the government, due to limited social capital and physical isolation.

Additionally, vulnerable youth are more directly affected by the government's unresponsiveness. Given their greater dependence on government support and vulnerability to mismanagement, the government’s failure for effective implementation has a deeper impact. The consequences of unfulfilled campaign promises, such as providing jobs or repairing roads, are felt directly and deeply everyday. The inability of the government to meet their demands reinforces their political distrust. When the government betrays their trust, youth might become disengaged from the political system.

These findings illustrate that vulnerable youth are more susceptible for political distrust and beliefs of political inefficacy, forming a structural disincentive to political participation.

Participation costs and accessibility

Another disincentive for young Ghanaians relates to the costs and accessibility of political participation. Young Ghanaians in vulnerable employment or unemployment are often discouraged by practical and accessibility barriers associated with engagement. Several respondents indicated that they abstain from participating in democratic processes due to such obstacles. This constraint is mostly felt by young Ghanaians in vulnerable positions: young citizens

with little resources (money or time) or low belief of political efficacy are more likely to refrain from participating, when participation costs are high.

For instance, skipping work to vote or traveling long distances to obtain a voter ID are perceived as high costs associated with participating in elections. To illustrate, a male respondent stated that he prioritised his work over participating in the elections in order to secure his income. His decision was also influenced by his low confidence in the government's performance:

> "It's just that I got something going on and I had to travel (red. work) that time. Because if the politicians are not putting food on my table, I don't have to cancel something important in my life to vote."
>
> Man, 28, vulnerable employment, mechanic and tourism guide, Accra

For others, participating in elections counts as their main opportunity to influence their living conditions. Youth without employment or living in rural areas face limited resources and restricted access to political spaces. From their point of reference, voting is the most accessible avenue of political participation. Other forms of engagement are either too costly or inaccessible for these youths, due to their limited financial and social capital.

Regarding accessibility, some political acts (demonstrations, joining community meetings, online posting) require adequate infrastructure, including both physical and internet infrastructure. Youth living in rural areas particularly deal with higher participation costs due to poorer infrastructure and travel expenses. Certain political spaces, such as protests and community meetings, are therefore less accessible for them. The costs of participation (time and money) thus form a structural barrier for these youth to engage.

Furthermore, all respondents living rural areas stated not to be in possession of mobile devices or active on social media. Although the proportion of citizens without a mobile device has significantly declined over the past decade, in 2021, one in ten young citizens (15 - 35 years) had not used a mobile device in the last three months (GSS, 2023). Additionally, almost 20% of youth had not accessed the internet during the same period. Citizens in rural areas, particularly the five Northern regions, notably have the highest proportions of digital exclusion (GSS, 2023). Digital exclusion limits youth's opportunities to partake in online acts of political engagement, forming a significant barrier to political participation.

These findings on the costs and accessibility of political participation underscore how regional disparities and socio-economic inequalities fundamentally shape young people's opportunities to engage in political processes and access political spaces.

Standard of living: self reliance

As established in Section 3.4.2, economic hardship can mobilise youth to political engagement, through desires of improved living conditions. Yet, economic hardship can also lead to political disillusionment. Influenced by political distrust and inefficacy, vulnerable youth can turn away from the political system, towards self-reliance:

> "I feel I have to work hard because no party will help me out. You understand? Yeah, so I have to work hard to get my money and do my other stuff."
> Man, 35, vulnerable employment, vendor, Accra

> "Because, as I said, I don't really rely on politics. I don't really rely on it because I think I work on my own and I don't know for others, but for me, I do work on my own."
> Woman, 20, vulnerable employment, housekeeper, Accra

These quotes demonstrate how one's standard of living can lead to political disengagement: young individuals experiencing economic hardship that become disenchanted with the political system. These young people believe that they have not profited from governmental policies, as the government has failed to provide them with employment or financial security. They feel ignored by the government and skeptical about future government support. This group then turns inwards: turning to self-reliance as a survival strategy, as they don't expect the government to provide for them. With this turn to self-reliance they withdraw their participation in traditional forms of political participation.

> “Now I'm employed and I'm working. I don't feel like voting anymore. No, I don't feel like voting. Because if I vote, they won't give me anything. They won't provide. If you request for something, like the school needs something and you send a letter to the office, they will ignore you for almost one to two years before they will provide the things you need. So there's no need for me to vote anymore.”
>
> Woman, 24, employed, hotel staff, Bosomtwe

The last quote illustrates an interesting phenomenon: the respondent resides in a rural area where poverty and unemployment levels are high. In previous elections, her primary motivation to vote was her desire for improved living conditions, through more employment opportunities and an improved economy. However, after securing employment and becoming financially self-sufficient, enough to support herself and her son, she no longer felt compelled to engage in political activities. She expressed a lack of confidence in the government’s ability or willingness to support her.

This case illustrates how economic hardship can initially foster a sense of dependence on the state, as individuals look to government intervention for improved living conditions. Yet, once little confidence in the government remains or a certain degree of financial stability is attained, there may be a shift toward political disengagement and increased self-reliance. This tendency is especially likely when individuals no longer expect meaningful support from the government, and is therefore closely linked to low belief of external efficacy and political distrust.

Civic skills

As established, civic skills serve as a major facilitator of political participation, for those who have attained them. However, for vulnerable youth these skills and capital are not as obvious, due to their lack of formal employment and lower education. Their lack of civic skills form a critical constraint to their ability to mobilise themselves and translate their political attitudes into effective participation.

> “You might know who to send it to, but how do you communicate it? If you don't communicate it well, it might not catch the attention or the eye of those at the level. So it's about educating them and teaching them how to communicate it. So that whatever they receive could influence what policy basically does.”
>
> Representative of the National Youth Authority, Ho

This quote highlights the importance of education and professional experiences in building communication skills. As this respondent argues, vulnerable youth miss crucial experiences in developing civic skills, due to limited exposure during their schooling and working-life. Young citizens who only managed to graduate Junior High School, often due to the unaffordability of secondary education, struggle with articulating and writing their political views. They find this particularly challenging in English, the official political language in Ghana.

Additionally, youth who find refuge in the informal sector are less likely to develop civic skills through their occupation. Although setting up a self-owned business promotes the development of certain entrepreneurial skills, these are incomparable to the communication and organisational skills acquired through formal employment. The skills acquired through formal employment are better connected to governance and interaction with public institutions. Limited capability to express oneself, makes it more challenging to effectively participate in deliberative democratic processes, such as community meetings or writing to a representative.

Moreover, observations during interviews suggest that vulnerable youth, particularly in informal employment under an employer, struggle to articulate their opinions due to their subordinate position within the workplace. This is especially apparent among young apprentices, for instance involved in tailoring or hairdressing. It appears that these youths are not often invited by their employer to share their views and thus struggle with articulating themselves. Another respondent elaborated on this dynamic and the broader position of youth in Ghana's society:

> "There's a reason young people find it difficult to express their views in Ghana. In a typical traditional society in Ghana even if you are 50 so long as your father is present at the meeting you can't say anything. They still see you as a child. And they tell you you shut up. We don't be speaking. When the elderly speaks you don't speak. You are a child." Man, 34, employed, teacher, Accra

This quote reflects the perception of youth's subordinate position in Ghanaian society and limited agency within workplaces. From interview responses, this constraint seems to be most prevalent among youth in lower socio-economic classes. Youth in formal employment, such as a lawyer or self-employed entrepreneur, are likely given more agency in the workplace, which promotes their skills development.

Although, this problem also seems to extend even to advantaged youths who try to access decision-making spaces, but are not given the opportunity by established adults due to their youthfulness:

> "There are a lot of times that we have engagements with organisations, we have political parties, and we ask them, what do young people have to bring to the table? They don't believe in the ability of young people. And young people, from my own perspective, I have got to realise that the adults don't encourage us enough to go in. They feel that when they give us the opportunity, we misuse it. … Definitely, it will even discourage me from coming out to say that I want to go in for this. So young people are not taking seriously the conversation."
>
> Woman, 24, NSP employed, Tamale

This quote illustrates the societal barriers that youth with political ambitions perceive: in order to successfully enter and take part in decision-making processes, one has to overcome their youthful image. When even youth with structural advantages struggle to enter certain political spaces, one can imagine the difficulties that youth without this capital face.

In sum, limited civic skills constrain the ability of young Ghanaians, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds, to effectively participate in politics. Their limited civic skills are caused by education and employment status. The subordinate position of youth in Ghana's society and workplaces forms an additional barrier for these youth to attain these skills and access political spaces. The latter barrier is felt across social backgrounds, but seems more impactful for vulnerable youth.

Social capital

Vulnerable youth's limited social capital forms another constraint to effective political participation. Youth without employment or working in informality tend to be less connected to social and political networks, than their formally employed peers. Youth in these employment situations, without union membership and collaborations with second parties, remain relatively isolated from governance institutions due to their limited social capital. Their marginalised position in society presents them fewer opportunities to channel their grievances. The following

quote illustrate youths perception on their limited access to political spaces, due to their employment status and locality:

> "If I had a problem and I speak out, maybe they would help. But it is not easy to get closer."
> Woman, 18, vulnerable employment, tailor apprentice, Tamale

To illustrate, a young girl selling clothes at the market might have many political attitudes that she shares with other vendors, but these conversations rarely extend beyond the market's boundaries and are unlikely to reach political spaces. While a girl working at a civil-society organisation might engage in similar conversations with colleagues who are better positioned to share these concerns to relevant institutional platforms. In that sense, the limited social capital related to informality or unemployment constrains youth's opportunities for broader political participation.

This constraint gets amplified for youth living in rural areas: youth living in rural areas experience an additional physical exclusion from political networks. As mentioned earlier, youth in rural areas feel physically isolated from governance, as governmental institutions and civil-society organisations are further removed from them. For youth without formal employment, this physical barrier is even more difficult to overcome, as they lack jobs that facilitate connections and access to governance institutions. As a result, the government feels distant and inaccessible, limiting both their ability and motivation to engage in decision-making processes.

Whom you know

Lastly, interview analysis reveals that the Ghanaian saying 'whom you know' is deeply ingrained in youth's belief on the importance of social connections. 'Whom you know' is a common saying in Ghana, referring to the relevance of social networks in order to secure employment or achieve effective political engagement (Baah-Boateng, 2019).

For securing employment, many respondents feel that connections in professional sectors are more determining than good qualifications. Across sectors, from nursing to government institutions, youth state that without the right connections opportunities of securing employment are unlikely. This perception is also tied to partisanship: for example, individuals affiliated with the NPP are seen to have a better chance of getting employed during an NPP-led government than under an NDC administration. A similar view exists for the private sector, where political

affiliation between job seekers and employers is believed to influence hiring decisions. This is illustrated by this anecdote of a job-seeking graduate:

> "Since I'm into student politics, I know some people, some government officials. It's just that those that I know are in different political parties. For example, the recent political party NPP, I know some people over there. But because we are in election year and they also lost power, they don't have the power to employ people in any area again. So, they lost that opportunity to get us in."
> Man, 29, unemployed, Accra

The same rationale exists regarding political participation: most respondents underlined the importance of the right social connections, in order to let your voice be heard in Ghana. The perception exists that without connections to political spaces, such as government officials, assembly members or members of parliament, your voice falls onto deaf ears.

> "The more you are connected, the more you are heard in Ghana. If you aren't connected, there's no way anybody will hear you. "
> Man, 29, employed, communication staff local government, Tamale
> "You know, when you are on social media and you are not known, you have no position in Ghana. You are unknown. Meaning you have no position in Ghana. It seems to be like you talk nonsense. Nobody admires your speech."
> Woman, 26, vulnerable employment, shopkeeper, Bosomtwe

This conviction is highly related to the perception that money and social status are conditions for political influence. Some respondents felt that before their political participation would be taken seriously, they would have to gain a certain level of financial and social status:

> "I believe for my voice to be heard I should be able to match up those who are in higher positions. I wouldn't be able to stand in front of the MPs and politicians and be shouting. And when they check my pockets I'm driving their boats over. I mean, I wouldn't be able to match up."
> Man, 29, employed**,** entrepreneur and driver, Accra

These findings indicate a problematic perception that the effectiveness of political participation is conditional and largely based on socio-economic status. Although this perception is felt across socio-economic backgrounds, vulnerable youth are most constrained by this phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, these youth have less financial and social capital to successfully enter these social and political spaces. When young people feel that their social or economic position limits their political influence, they may become discouraged from engaging in political processes altogether. This dynamic might reinforce already existing disparities in political participation, further marginalizing those from less privileged backgrounds.

3.6 Notion on clientelism and ethnicity

As mentioned in Chapter 2, an often chosen analytical lens to explain political participation in African democracies centers around clientelism and ethnicity. Although some studies indeed find that ethnic ties and clientelism are factors in shaping political participation in Ghana, it is also acknowledged that it is only one among other essential determinants (Andrews & Inman, 2009; Lindberg & Morrison, 2008).

In the context of this study, no respondent claimed to be motivated by ethnic ties or clientelism. Yet, these factors did not go unmentioned: some respondents remarked on instances in their environment, where ethnic ties to a certain party or candidate were the main driver of participation. Additionally, some respondents claimed to have witnessed instances of clientelism and vote-buying in their environment. These respondents came from poorer neighbourhoods, including Bosomtwe and Jamestown, Accra:

> "Money motivates them. Money. When they are given money, they participate. I'll take my area for an example, like Jamestown. They give you a t-shirt and you give 100 cedis or 50 cedis, in campaign times."
> Woman, 33, unemployed, Accra

However, while young citizens notice these factors to be present during electoral processes, this study does not find ethnicity or clientelism to be determining factors in motivating political participation. Rather, it appears that young citizens make a well-considered evaluation of which party can provide the most improvements on their personal lives. This reflects earlier research, finding that evaluative behaviour is more determining than ethical or clientalist reasoning (Andrews & Innman, 2009; Lindberg & Morrison, 2008). Rather, respondents of this study appear to condemn acting out of 'tribalism' and suggest that their generation is increasingly distancing themselves from ethnic motivated political behaviour:

> "We have people using tribal acts to justify their reasons for supporting a particular party. So once I see such posts, my comments are mostly positive. To preach unity, not tribalism. Because it has never gotten us anywhere. It's always conflict when it's tribal. It brings

differences."

Man, 28, vulnerable employment, mechanic and tourism, Accra

"However, I have noticed that young people have moved away from the time of considering tribalism and the homes they grew up in, the political affiliation they are. They are interested in which government can actually meet their basic needs, which government can actually help them based on their interests, and who can help them develop themselves as young people. And solve the problems of the nation. And that's why they voted massively for the NDC government this year, to bring change. Yes, so young people are moving away from that (i.e. tribalism) and understanding that the government that can do better should be brought to power, despite their ethnical background."

Woman, 24, NSP employed, Tamale

Therefore, while this study acknowledged the presence of ethnic and clientelist motivations for political participation, I argue that socio-economic conditions, as employment, provide a more structural explanation for political participation. Additionally, the employment perspective is instrumental in identifying disparities in opportunities and motivations for participation within the youthful population. While research on clientelism has established that poorer citizens are more likely to be targeted by clientelist effort, its focus misses the structural mechanisms underlying political behaviour.

3.7 Synthesis: two pathways of youth political participation

Interview analysis has revealed two pathways of political participation among Ghanaian youth, fundamentally shaped by their employment and socio-economic positions: agency-driven participation and constrained participation. These two pathways are characterised by their distinct structural advantages and barriers.

Agency-driven participation

The first pathway represents agency-driven participation among advantaged youth, characterised by their attainment of higher education or formal employment. Their professional experiences and socio-economic standing influence both their ability and motivation to participate in Ghana's political processes. Regarding their abilities, advantaged youth profit from several assets attained through their professional experiences or education, that enable them to effectively engage in politics. By acquiring relevant civic skills, political knowledge and social capital, these youths have access to structural advantages and tools to navigate the political system and mobilise themselves. Also, their professional environments foster social networks that facilitate access to governance institutions and decision-making processes. As a result, advantaged youth are able to articulate their political views through diverse participation strategies, from organising petitions and engaging in community discussions, to becoming a representative themselves.

Their motivation for political participation is characterised by agency: measured and strategic engagement, not only driven by desires for personal improvements, but also for national development. For those in financial security, their financial situation provides a buffer to political and economic fluctuations, enabling participation driven by rational choice rather than urgency.

Constrained political participation

In contrast, the second pathway reflects constrained political participation among youth in vulnerable positions. These youth are either in vulnerable or unemployment, and typically did not enjoy tertiary education.

These youths, particularly those in economic hardship, are primarily motivated by desires to enhance their living conditions. Other than their financially secure peers, their motives depart from a position of urgency and dependency.

Driven by economic hardship and material needs, these youth perceive voting as their main accessible avenue of influencing their personal situation through politics. Other forms of political participation are often deemed inaccessible or costly. Due to limited civic skills, financial and social capital, these young citizens face significant barriers to effective political engagement, outside of the electoral process.

Political disengagement among vulnerable youth is often fueled by political distrust, feelings of marginalisation and external inefficacy. These feelings can drive youth inwards: disengaging themselves from the political system and focusing on self-reliance. This reflects a problematic phenomenon, when those most in need of governmental support are no longer involved in the governance system. Moreover, it sets a troubling precedent for Ghana's democratic development and representation, when young citizens become disillusioned with the political system at an early stage of life.

Chapter 4

4.1 Discussion

This study set out to answer the main research question: 'how does employment status influence the level and strategies of political participation exercised by young people in Ghana?'. The findings reveal that employment status plays a determining role in shaping both the level and strategies of political participation employed by Ghanaian youth, resulting in political inequalities within the youthful demographic. In this discussion, I first present this main insight of the study. Thereafter, I elaborate on this insight through three key findings: youth's common political attitudes, youth's distinct structural barriers and advantages, and youth's varying motives for political engagement.

First, the main insight of this study is that employment status fundamentally shapes both the level and strategies of political participation among Ghanaian youth This study shows that formal employment, together with tertiary education, increases youth's opportunities for engagement, as well as the diversity of participation strategies. Conversely, youth in unemployment or vulnerable employment face structural constraints, limiting their options for effective participation. These findings reveal stark disparities between two sociological groups: advantaged youth engaging in agency-driven participation and vulnerable youth experiencing constrained participation.

Second, this study confirms that Ghanaian youth generally demonstrate profound political interest and political attitudes on a variety of political topics and developments. The high level of political interest stems from the direct impact of government management on youth's personal lives, and cuts across employment backgrounds. However, the extent to which political attitudes are translated into effective political participation is contingent on employment and socio-economic status.

Formal employment, alongside tertiary education, provides structural advantages that enhance advantaged youth's capacity for effective political engagement. These structural advantages include the attainment of civic skills, political knowledge and social capital. These advantages provide these youths with the capacity and opportunities to exercise a great diversity

of resource-consuming strategies of participation, such as organising petitions or becoming a member of university's student parliament.

In contrast, those in vulnerable or unemployment, who did not enjoy tertiary education, face structural barriers that constrain their opportunities for effective engagement. These structural barriers emerge from their limited civil skills, as well as a lack of financial and social capital. These barriers restrict their access to political spaces that either require skills, resources or social networks. As a result, these youths often rely on more accessible forms of participation, such as voting or online engagement, to express their concerns. These challenges are amplified for youths in rural areas, for whom governmental institutions are even further removed and access to online engagement is not self-evident.

A key driver of political participation among both advantaged and vulnerable youth is the desire for an improved standard of living. However, these youths associate different levels of existential urgency to this incentive. Youth with financial security are less exposed to political and economic instability, allowing them a more strategic approach to participation. In contrast, youth facing economic hardship and limited capacity for participation often engage from a position of urgency. Those who depend on government support to improve their living conditions, associate more existential urgency to their participation than their peers in financial security.

Youth's standard of living can also foster political disengagement. Youth facing economic hardship, who have little trust in the government's ability to provide support, often become disillusioned from the political system and instead turn to self-reliance. Political distrust and low belief of external efficacy are common disincentives for participation, across employment backgrounds. Yet, youth in vulnerable positions are more susceptible to these disincentives, due to feelings of marginalisation and unresponsive governance.

Finally, a common disincentive for engagement is the risks of participation. Across employment and socio-economic background, Ghanaian youth find political activism, in the form of demonstrations, to be risky in physical and social terms. The latter stems from youth's perception that political activism is closely linked to political partisanship, which may jeopardize their chances of securing employment.

4.1.1 Theoretical implications

This study's findings present several key theoretical and empirical implications. This study contributes to established political participation theory, by challenging the homogeneous conceptualisation of youth and emphasizing the relevance of an employment and socio-economic based perspective. While an abundance of academic literature adopts a generic notion of 'youth', this study underscores the complexity of this demographic (Biney & Amoateng, 2019; Quintelier, 2007). The employment-perspective reveals the importance of socio-economic conditions in determining youth's ability and motives for political engagement. Existing socio-economic inequalities translate into political inequalities: highlighting the need to incorporate socio-economic conditions into youth participation frameworks.

Earlier research already established the gap between Ghanaian youth's political attitudes and their participation in political activities (Biney & Amoateng, 2019). Biney and Amoateng (2019) also identified similar reasons for political disengagement, as this study. This study extends on their argument by highlighting participation disparities within the youthful population, caused by sociological conditions. In other words, this study elaborates on Biney and Amoateng's (2019) findings by explaining how employment and socio-economic conditions determine to which extent political attitudes translate to participation, through the identification of structural barriers and advantages. By introducing two youth-specific pathways of political participation, this study goes beyond the universal consideration of youth.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the Civic Voluntarism Model (Schlozman et al., 2018) by demonstrating what specific role employment plays in facilitating the attainment of civic skills, social capital and resources. It does so, by adopting a broad and complex understanding of employment, suitable to the Ghanaian labour market. By moving beyond the division of unemployment and employment, the incorporation of vulnerable employment allows the identification of social differences between informal and formal types of work, in terms of social capital and civic skills.

Lastly, while this study acknowledges the presence of clientelism and ethnicity as factors influencing political participation in Ghana, it argues that a socio-economic perspective provides more structural explanations for participation disparities within the youthful population. By shifting focus away from ethnicity and clientelism, often emphasised in existing literature (Andrews & Inman, 2009; Stoecker, 2022), this study contributes a socio-economic approach that

better accounts for variation within the youth demographic and systematic analysis of political engagement.

4.1.2 Empirical implications

Furthermore, this study provides key empirical contributions to the understanding of how employment shapes participation inequalities in developing democracies. This study reveals that Ghana's democratic processes face inclusive representation challenges for youth. The findings indicate that vulnerable youth, who are most benefited from inclusive representation and government support, face the most barriers to effective participation. Inclusive representation is essential to the well-functioning of any democracy. Disparities in political participation can further enlarge already existing socio-economic inequalities, when these vulnerable youth's voices are not sufficiently heard. Without effectively addressing political disengagement or the participation barriers faced by vulnerable youth, this could have implications for the quality and legitimacy of Ghana's democratic representation.

In order to lift the structural barriers to inclusive and effective participation, policy intervention should be centered around targeted education and empowerment programs for vulnerable youth. As this research also identifies an important role of education in facilitating or restricting political participation, educative programs are recommended. Already existing programs would benefit from taking a targeted approach, to reach those youths who experience the most profound participation constraints, such as youth in rural areas, unemployment or in informality. Outreach efforts could, for example, focus specifically on apprentices or informal vendors. These initiatives should prioritise providing youth with practical knowledge about where to direct their concerns, as well as developing specifc skills needed to effectively express them.

Secondly, next to equipping youths with skills, youth are in need of accessible political spaces. Government and civil society organisations should therefore prioritise creating inclusive platforms that actively engage vulnerable youth. Organising community meetings in rural areas or for specific informal sectors can reduce participation barriers and foster more inclusive representation. Next to physical engagement platforms, respondents articulated the need for meaningful online engagement. Organised online discussions with representatives or policy-makers could enhance youth's belief that the government is listening and responsive to their concerns.

Finally, political distrust due to economic hardship and limited employment opportunities serve as major factors for political disillusionment. Therefore, young Ghanaians are in need of effective policies to improve their financial and employment circumstances. In order to ensure that these policies are tailored to youth's needs, young citizens ought to be included in the policy-making and implementation evaluation process.

4.1.3 Limitations

The study acknowledges some limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. Firstly, the small sample size of nineteen individual respondents and eleven focus group participants limits the generalisability of the findings across the diverse youthful population in Ghana. Although the research sample includes participants from a wide variety of education and employment backgrounds, its small scope restricts the extent to which the findings can be applied to the wider population. Furthermore, this study only touches upon five regions in Ghana, with limited representation of the Northern and Western regions (i.g. Savannah, Upper West, Bono). Acknowledging the great diversity across Ghana's regions, in terms of language, landscape, religion, the findings might not reflect the unique experiences and issues of youth in these areas. Furthermore, rural areas are underrepresented in this study, with three respondents residing in the same rural locality. Other interviewees live in urban localities, from different sizes (Tamale, Accra, Cape Coast, Ho). Conclusions on the rural youth experience are therefore based on one locality and might fail to capture the realities of youth living in other rural areas.

Regarding language barriers, although in two cases a translator was engaged, it is admitted that in three other cases the quality of interviews would have benefited from translation. In this way, participants with less English proficiency would have been able to express themselves in their preferred language, resulting in richer and more representative data.

It is also acknowledged that the study's context, in a post-election period and in the aftermath of an economic recession, may have likely influenced participants' responses on government evaluation and their political engagement. This context may have led to the overemphasis of electoral participation over other participation strategies. Studies outside of election times or of longitudinal nature, could further investigate youth's evaluation of the government and engagement, beyond the electoral process.

Finally, while the study provides valuable insights on the Ghanaian context, the extent to which these are applicable to other African countries with similar political systems and economic contexts, requires more comparative research.

4.1.4 Future research

While this study is focused on youth's political participation, the findings raise the question to which extent these participation determinants are unique to the youth experience. Some of the incentives and disincentives are likely to hold true for adult citizens as well. A comparative study, comparing the determinants of political behaviour of youth and adult citizens, could be conducted in order to isolate the determining role of youthfulness. This would allow a more specific investigation of youth's unique determinants of political participation. For instance, such a study could investigate the influence of retrospective voting in an early stage of youth's political life.

Additionally, a longitudinal study could be conducted: following the same young individuals for a longer period of time, in order to examine the impact of employment transitions. This method could also help to identify which participation determinants are circumstantial and which are structural.

Finally, future research could specifically focus on the political behaviour of youth in informality and rural areas. Youth from rural areas are somewhat underrepresented in this study, while facing specific regional political challenges and issues. A specific case-study would effectively address the unique experiences of those youth who face the most participation barriers. Such an approach could provide valuable insights on how to design targeted interventions to effectively contribute to inclusive representation.

4.1.4 Positionality

Regarding positionality, I recognize that my position as a non-African, white, female researcher may have influenced the conduct of the research and the interpretation of the data.

On the one hand, my outsider-perspective may have been instrumental for identifying patterns that may be overlooked by native researchers, due to familiarity. My youthful age and outsider position may have also allowed participants to speak more freely.

However, I acknowledge that my position may have influenced the conduct of research and its analysis. First, lacking personal experience with economic hardship or social inequality,

may have led to misinterpretations of the lived experiences of Ghanaian youth in financial insecurity or vulnerable employment. I recognise that my perspective is tainted by my cultural and educational background, possibly overemphasising a Western political perspective that may not fully align with the Ghanaian political reality.

Furthermore, during interviews, I may have unconsciously emphasized certain themes that align with Western assumptions on African politics. During the data analysis, my position influenced which quotes and themes I selected and deemed relevant. A researcher from a different background might have highlighted other aspects, resulting in different conclusions.

Acknowledging these limitations related to my positionality, I thus present these findings as one possible interpretation of individuals' responses, from my standpoint of a non-African, white, young female.

4.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examined how employment status influences the level and strategies of political participation among youth in Ghana. Drawing on qualitative data, this study reveals that employment plays a determining role in shaping inequalities in political participation within the youthful demographic.

This study reveals that while Ghanaian youth demonstrate high political interest across employment backgrounds, the extent to which these attitudes translate to political participation is contingent on employment status, as well as education level and locality. Clear political disparities exist among youth, as two distinct pathways of participation emerge on socio-economic lines: advantaged youth engaging in agency-driven participation and vulnerable youth experiencing constrained participation.

Youth in advantaged positions, in formal employment or with tertiary education, benefit from structural advantages that facilitate the engagement of diverse strategies of political engagement. These structural advantages include civic skills, political knowledge and social capital, attained through their formal employment or education.

In contrast, youth in unemployment or vulnerable employment encounter structural barriers that limit their ability to effectively engage in political acts. Their restricted financial resources, social capital and civic skills constrain their participation to the most accessible forms of participation, such as electoral and online engagement. Furthermore, while both sociological groups may be driven by desires for improved living conditions, the nature of this incentive differs: youth in disadvantaged positions often participate from a position of urgency, while advantaged youth act out of agency.

Political disengagement among youth is often caused by political distrust, low belief of political efficacy and the perception that political influence is conditional to social standing. Youth in more vulnerable positions are more susceptible to these factors.

This study contributes to a more complex understanding of youth political participation in the African context, by emphasising the political inequalities within the youthful demographic caused by socio-economic conditions. The employment-perspective reveals the importance of considering vulnerable employment in participation frameworks, in order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of African youth's political behaviour. It highlights how the most

vulnerable youth, who have the highest stake in inclusive representation, face the most structural barriers to meaningful political participation.

To promote inclusive political participation among Ghanaian youth, policy interventions should specifically target the barriers faced by youth in vulnerable socio-economic conditions, ultimately strengthening Ghana's democratic representation and legitimacy.

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