



Government by the people?

Kenyan citizens views and experiences on democracy and participation

1. Introduction

Democracy has famously been defined as government of the people, by the people and for the people. In practice, this means that the government decisions should reflect the interests of citizens, and that citizens should have opportunities – not just by voting – to influence government actions. Kenya's constitution is designed with exactly this in mind: placing constraints on government to ensure they listen to citizens' views and do not infringe on citizens' rights, and putting mechanisms in place that empower citizens to participate in the processes of government.

This brief explores how citizens experience democracy and participation in Kenya. Do they feel it is working well, and why? How much do they value democratic rights such as freedom of expression, and the constitutionally protected opportunities for citizen participation? In what ways are citizens participating in governance matters in practice, and do they see opportunities

to do so as meaningful? Which groups and individuals do they trust most to act in the interests of citizens? And how satisfied are they with the country's direction on important elements of democracy?

Data for the brief come from Twaweza's Sauti za Wananchi mobile-phone panel survey. The panel was created randomly sampling from an existing database of over 250,000 contacts to establish a nationally representative panel. For this brief, data were collected from 3,658 respondents in the thirteenth round of the special *Sauti za Wananchi* panel, conducted between 3 and 30 March, 2025.

Key findings include:

- A majority of citizens are dissatisfied with how democracy is working in Kenya
- Among the main reasons for dissatisfaction with democracy are abductions of government

- critics and lack of respect for freedom of expression
- Citizens strongly agree that they should be allowed to criticise the government, and that democracy and rights are an important factor in whether development happens
- Most citizens feel that the public should be more active in questioning the actions of their leaders, but feel a little less confident in their ability to engage in political debates
- Citizens are split on the handling of public participation meetings
- Most citizens have engaged in political conversations in the past year, but fewer have engaged in other ways
- 2 out of 3 citizens have contributed towards the construction or maintenance of a public facility in the past year
- 4 out of 10 citizens attended a public participation meeting in the last year; 2 out of 10 asked a question or raised an issue at such a meeting
- The most commonly discussed topics at public participation meetings are infrastructure/roads, water and the environment
- Most citizens report that they are given space to speak at public participation meetings
- Most citizens say it is difficult to influence county decisions and to access details of county government matters
- Citizens see public input to planning processes as a means to inform the public on what has already been decided, rather than truly allowing citizens to influence decision-making
- Most citizens have never seen or heard of any consultations taking place about county government planning
- Citizens have more trust in Gen Z to act in citizens' interests than in formal governance institutions
- Citizens are more likely to trust their own MCA and MP than in national and county parliaments as a whole
- There are large demographic differences in levels of trust for particular groups and institutions in civic society
- Trust in elected representatives is also highly linked to demographic factors
- The main reason given for trusting particular groups and institutions is that they actively advance citizens' interests
- Citizens see the country as not doing well at respecting the constitution, but doing better at devolution
- Citizens are divided on whether the country is doing well on citizen participation and freedom of speech

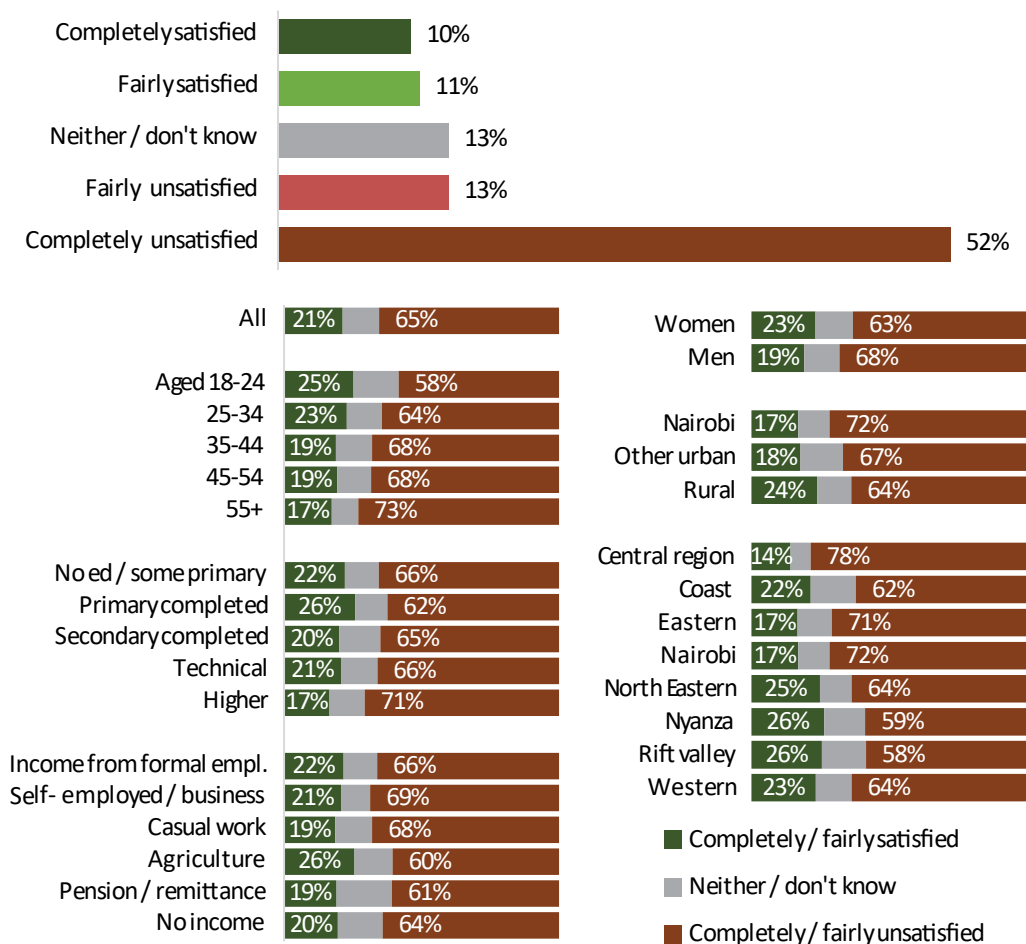
2. Twenty insights on Kenyans' experiences and opinions on democracy and participation

Insight 1. A majority of citizens are dissatisfied with how democracy is working in Kenya

Well over half of citizens (65%) are either fairly (13%) or completely (52%) unsatisfied with the way democracy has been working in Kenya in recent years. This compares to one out of five (21%) who are satisfied.

Dissatisfaction with how democracy is working is higher among older citizens, men, residents of Nairobi and Central region, and those with higher level of education.

Figure 1. How satisfied are you with the way democracy has been working over the past three years?



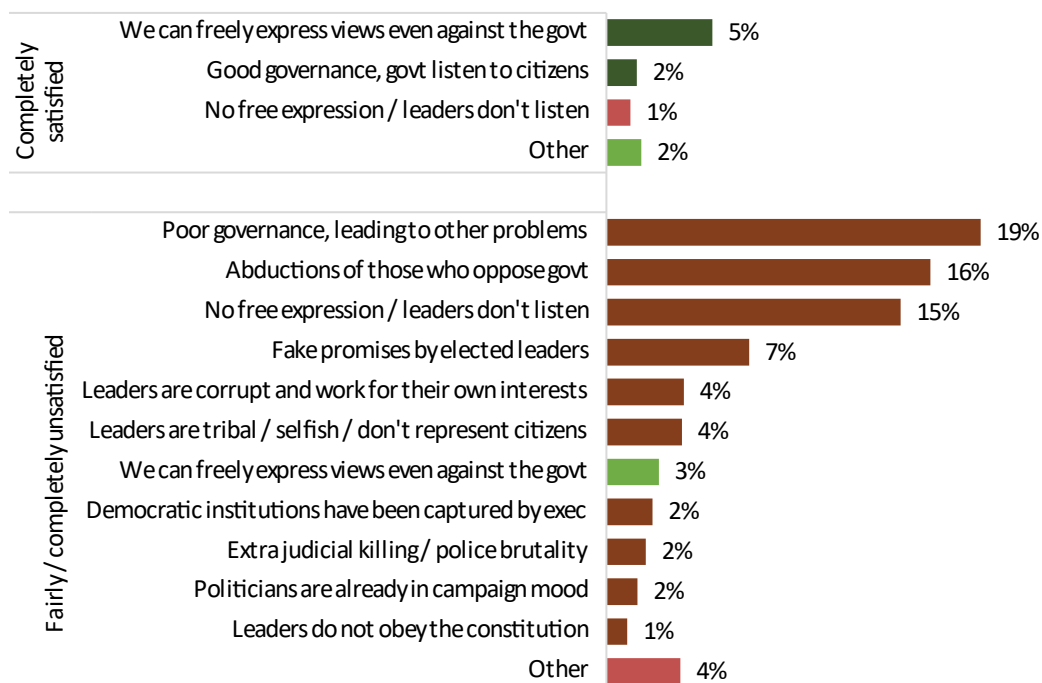
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 2. Among the main reasons for dissatisfaction with democracy are abductions of government critics and lack of respect for freedom of expression

Citizens’ main reasons for dissatisfaction with democracy are poor governance, abductions of government critics and lack of respect for freedom of expression. These three issues stand well ahead of any other reasons.

The biggest reason for satisfaction with how democracy is working is the view that citizens can freely express their views even against the government.

Figure 2. Why are you satisfied / unsatisfied with how democracy is working?



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

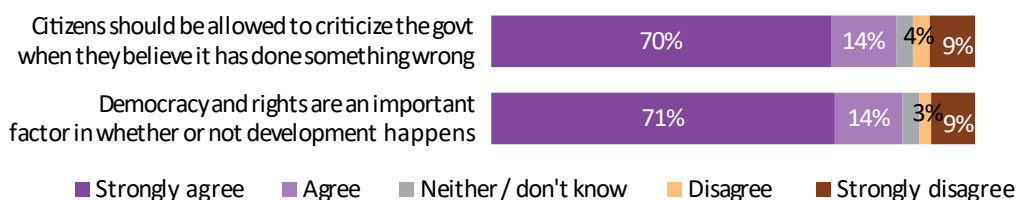
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

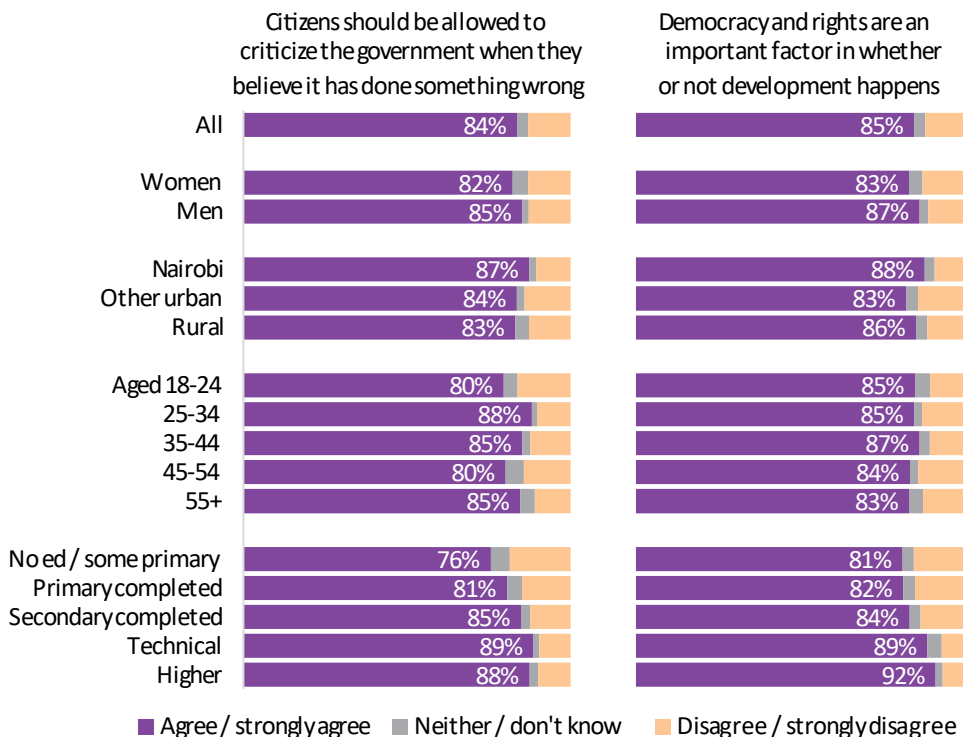
Insight 3. Citizens strongly agree that they should be allowed to criticise the government, and that democracy and rights are an important factor in whether development happens

Large majorities of citizens strongly agree that citizens should be allowed to criticise the government (70%), and that democracy and rights are an important factor in whether or not development happens (71%).

These views are held consistently across all major demographic groups. Support for pro-democracy statements is even higher among those with higher levels of education and residents of Nairobi. There are only small differences between women and men and between citizens of different ages.

Figure 3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?





Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

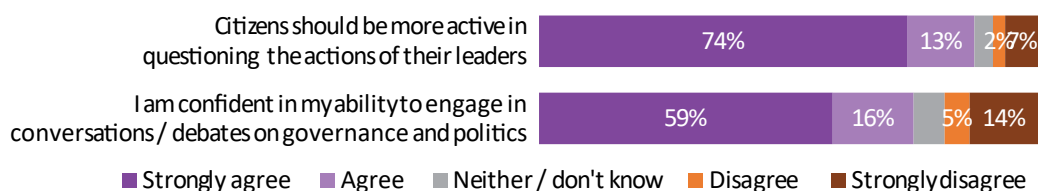
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

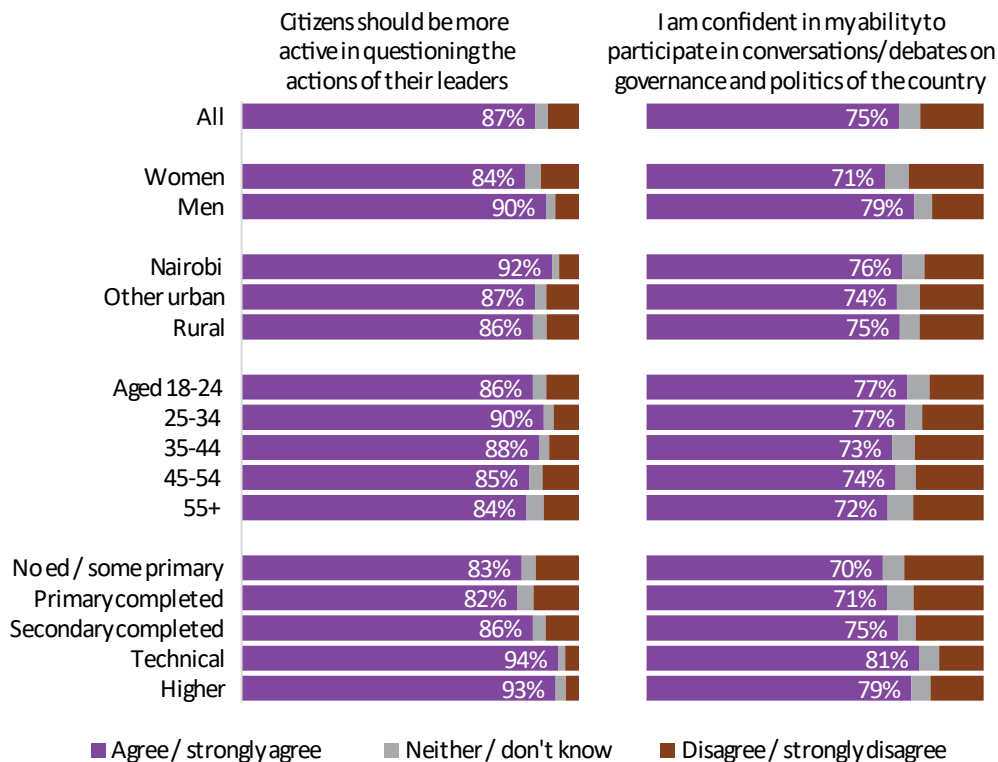
Insight 4. Most citizens feel that the public should be more active in questioning the actions of their leaders, but feel a little less confident in their ability to engage in political debates

Most citizens (74%) feel strongly that the public should be more active in questioning the actions of their leaders, but slightly fewer (59%) feel very confident in their ability to engage in political debates and conversations.

These views are broadly consistent across all demographic groups. Men are more likely than women to support more active questioning of leaders, as are residents of Nairobi and those with higher levels of education. Similarly, men and those with post-secondary education are more likely to feel confident in their own ability to engage in political conversations.

Figure 4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?





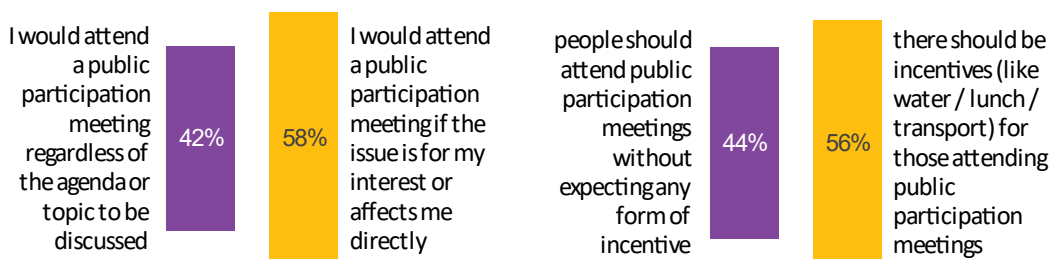
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

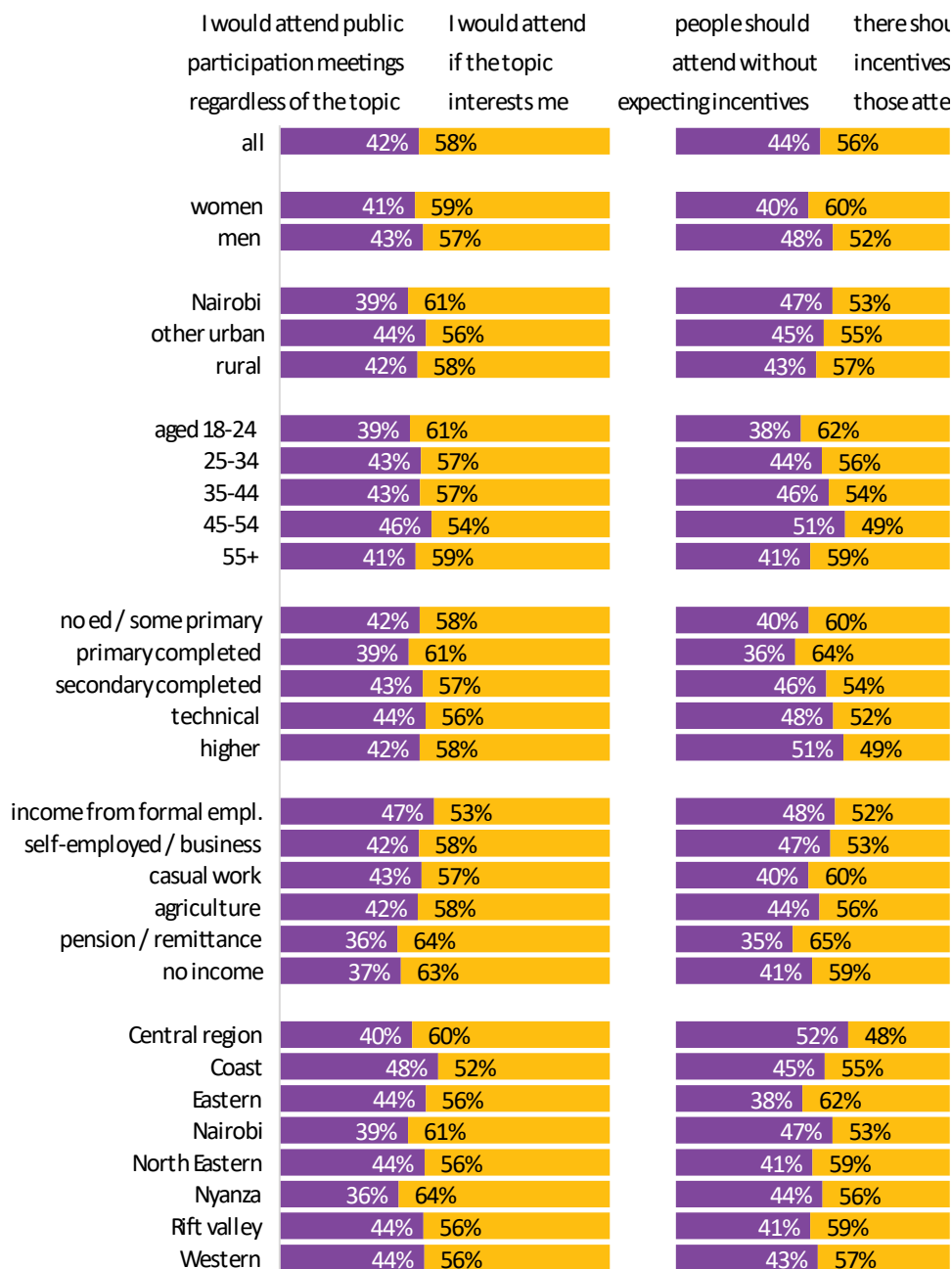
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 5. Citizens are split on the handling of public participation meetings

A little over half of citizens (58%) would be more likely to attend public participation meetings if the topic is of particular interest to them, and a similar number (56%) support providing small incentives to participants. In each case, a substantial number hold different views.

Figure 5. Please tell me which statement you mostly associate with?





Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

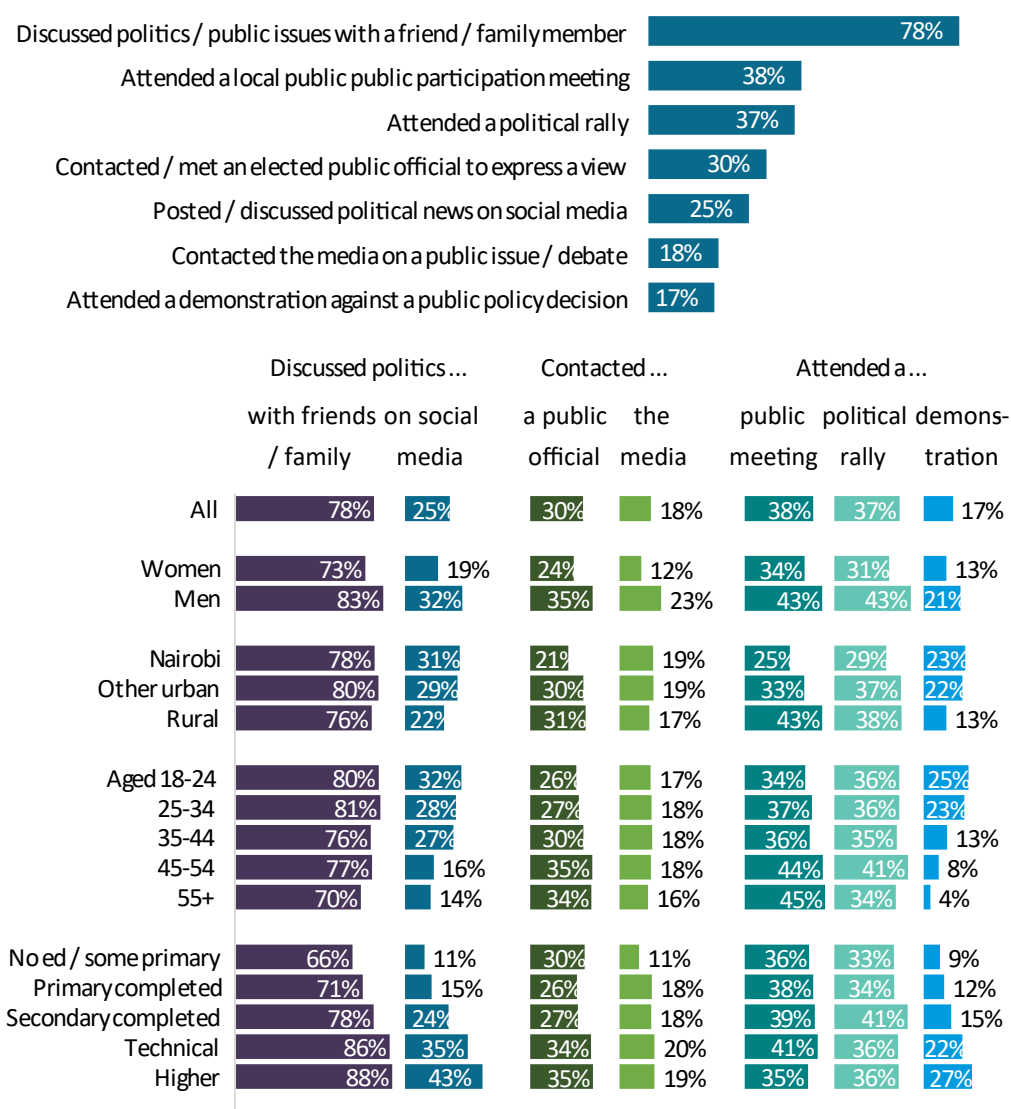
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

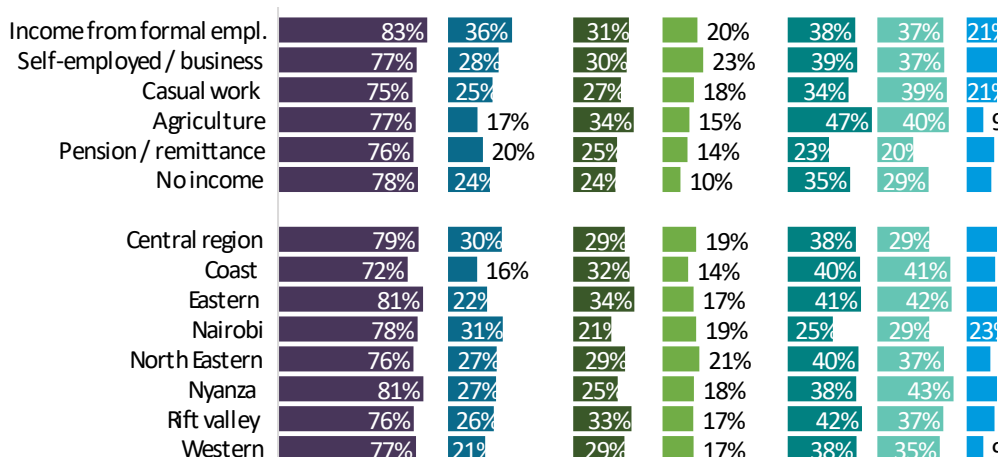
Insight 6. Most citizens have engaged in political conversations in the past year, but fewer have engaged in other ways

Three quarters of citizens (78%) have discussed politics or public issues with a friend or family member in the past year. However, fewer than half have taken other political actions such as attending public participation meetings (38%) or political rallies (37%), contacting public officials (30%) or attending a demonstration (17%).

Younger citizens and those with higher education are more likely than others to be more engaged in public affairs across a number of possible actions.

Figure 6. Which of the following have you done/participated in, in the last year?





Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

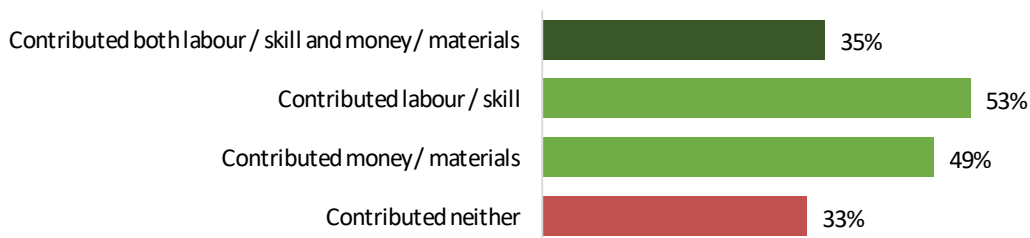
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

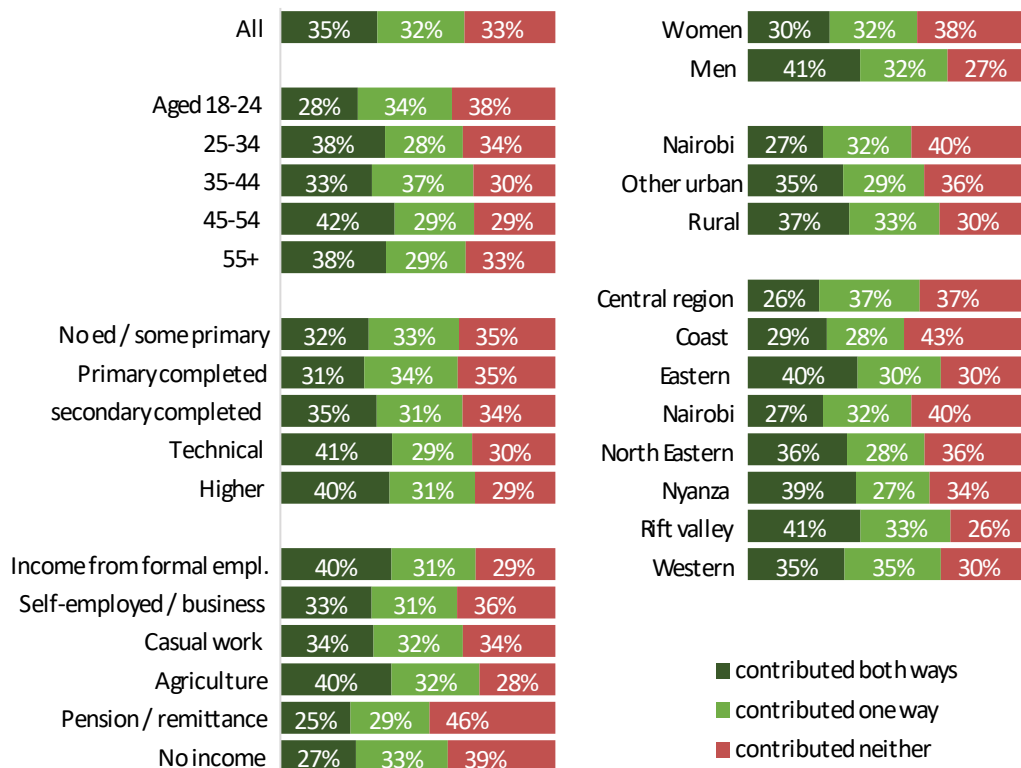
Insight 7. 2 out of 3 citizens have contributed towards the construction or maintenance of a public facility in the past year

Two out of three citizens have contributed in some way towards the construction or maintenance of a public facility (such as a school or clinic) in the past year, including half (53%) who contributed their labour or a skill, half (49%) who contributed money or materials and one third (35%) who contributed in both ways. Overall, two out of three citizens made some form of contribution, while one out of three (33%) did not.

Contributing in some way is more common in rural areas than urban areas, especially Nairobi. It is also more common among those with technical or higher education than those with no more than primary education, and among those either in formal employment or who earn their income primarily from agriculture.

Figure 7. In which of the following ways have you contributed towards the construction of maintenance of a public facility, in the last year?





Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

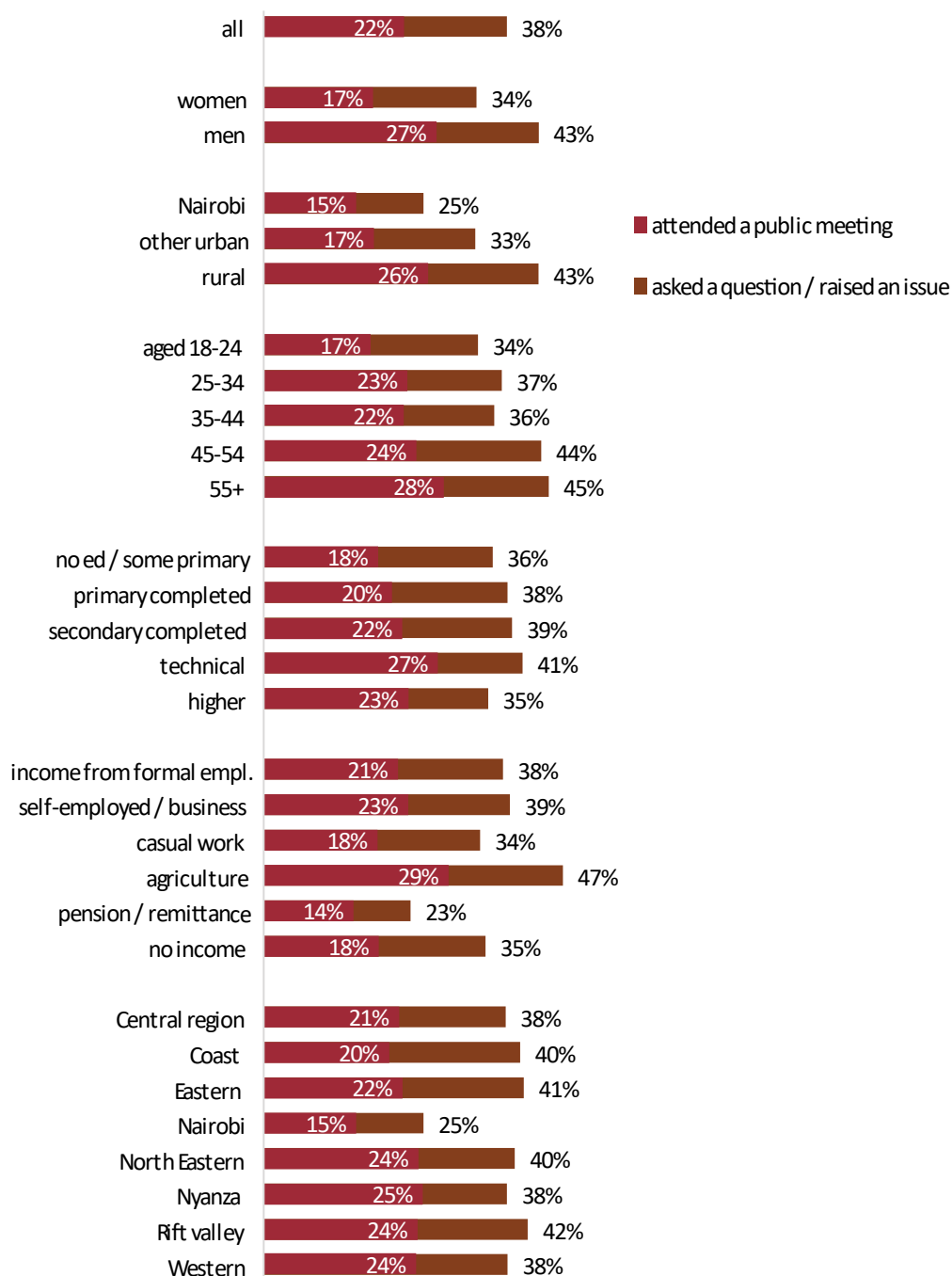
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 8. 4 out of 10 citizens attended a public participation meeting in the last year; 2 out of 10 asked a question or raised an issue at such a meeting

Four out of ten citizens (38%) attended a public participation meeting in the past year, including two out of ten (22%) who asked a question or raised an issue at such a meeting.

Attendance and active participation in public participation meetings is higher among men than women, and higher in rural areas than urban, especially Nairobi. Attendance and participation is also higher among older citizens and those who earn their income from agriculture.

Figure 8. Percentage who attended a local public participation meeting in the last year, and % who asked a question or raised an issue:



Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

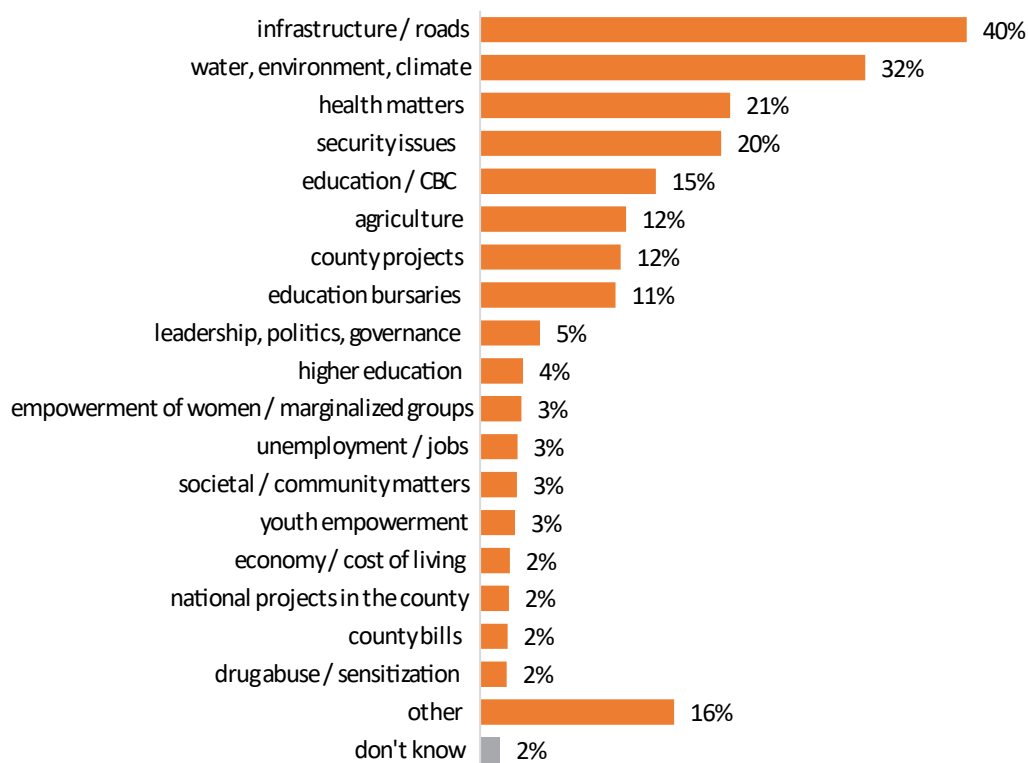
Insight 9. The most commonly discussed topics at public participation meetings are infrastructure / roads and water and the environment

The most commonly discussed topics at public participation meetings are infrastructure / roads (cited by 40% of those who attended a public meeting in the past year), and water, the environment and climate (32%).

Other widely discussed topics including health matters (21%), security issues (20%), education (15%), agriculture (12%), county projects (12%) and education bursaries (11%).

Topics discussed much less frequently at public participation meetings include economic matters and the empowerment of women and young people.

Figure 9. What topics were discussed in the public meeting you attended?
(multiple responses permitted)



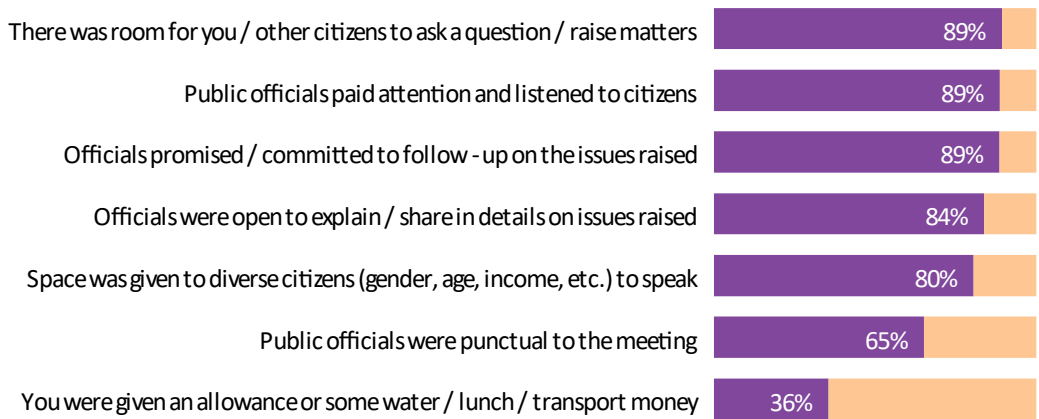
Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 10. Most citizens report that they are given space to speak at public participation meetings

Among those who attended a public participation meeting in the past year, the majority (89%) say they were given space to raise an issue, and the same number say the public officials listened attentively (89%) and committed to take action based on the issues raised (89%).

Figure 10. Which, if any, of the following were the case during the last public village/street/ward meeting that you attended ...?



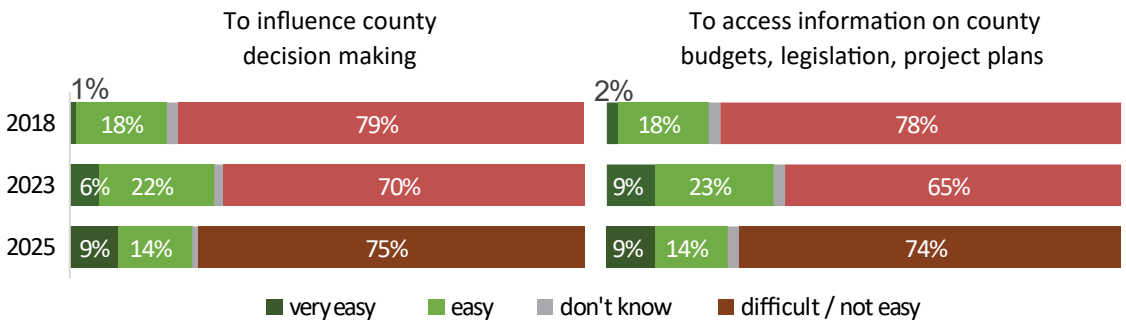
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 11. Most citizens say it is difficult to influence county decisions and to access details of county government matters

Most citizens say it is difficult to influence county decision making (75%) and to access information on county budgets, legislation and project plans (75%).

Citizens are currently a little less likely to say these things are difficult than was the case in 2018, but more likely than in 2023.

Figure 11. Thinking about public participation as enshrined in Kenya’s constitution, how easy or difficult would you say it is ...?



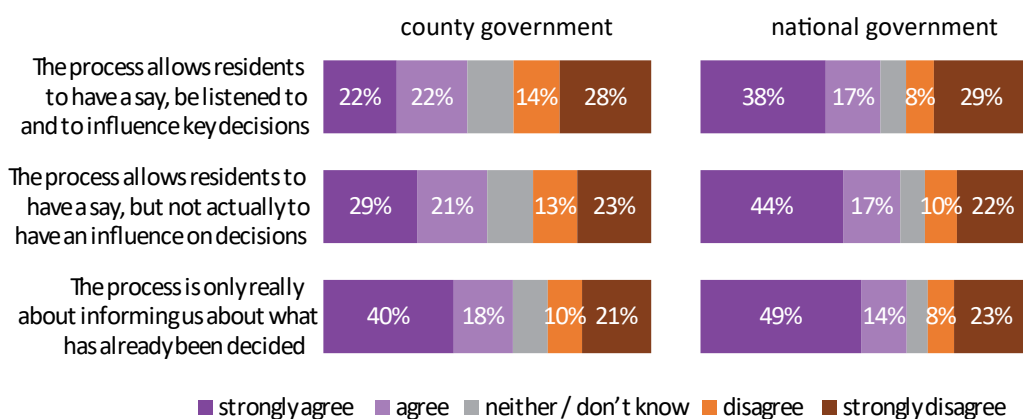
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 12. Citizens see public input to planning processes as a means to inform the public on what has already been decided, rather than truly allowing citizens to influence decision-making

Six out of ten citizens (58%) say that public input to county decision making processes is only really about informing citizens of what has already been decided. This is well ahead of the number (44%) who say the process allows residents to have a say, be listened to and to influence key decisions.

Similarly, six out of ten (63%) say public input to national planning processes is really only a process of informing citizens about decisions that have already been taken – ahead of the number (55%) who say this process allows for citizens to truly influence decisions made by the national government.

Figure 12. How much do you agree / disagree with the following statements about public input to county / national government planning processes?



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

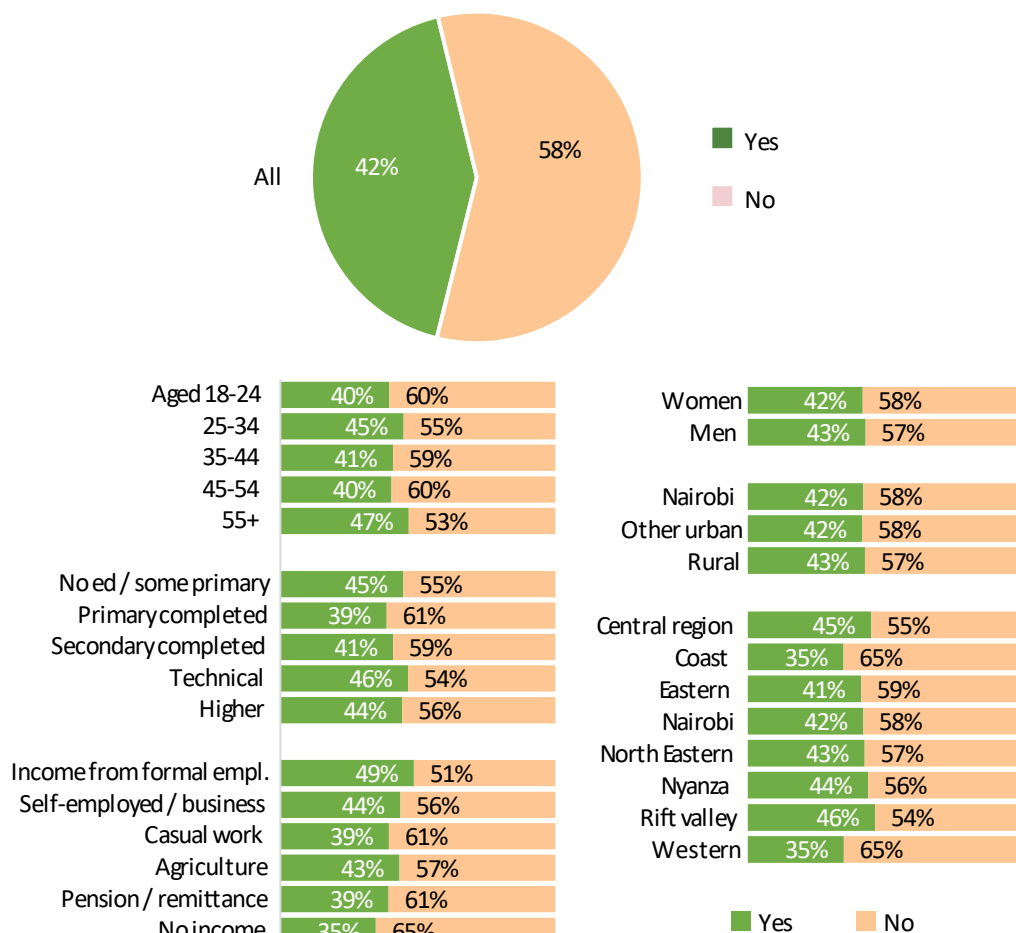
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 13. Most citizens have never seen or heard of any consultations taking place about county government planning

Six out of ten citizens (58%) have ever seen or heard of any consultations taking place about county government planning, leaving four out of ten (42%) who have seen or heard about such consultations.

Awareness of public consultation meetings on county planning is similarly low across all major demographic groups. Awareness is a little higher among those in formal employment, but is consistent across women and men and between urban and rural areas.

Figure 13. Percentage who have ever seen or heard of any consultations taking place about county government planning:



Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 14. Citizens have a more trust in Gen Z to act in citizens' interests than in formal governance institutions

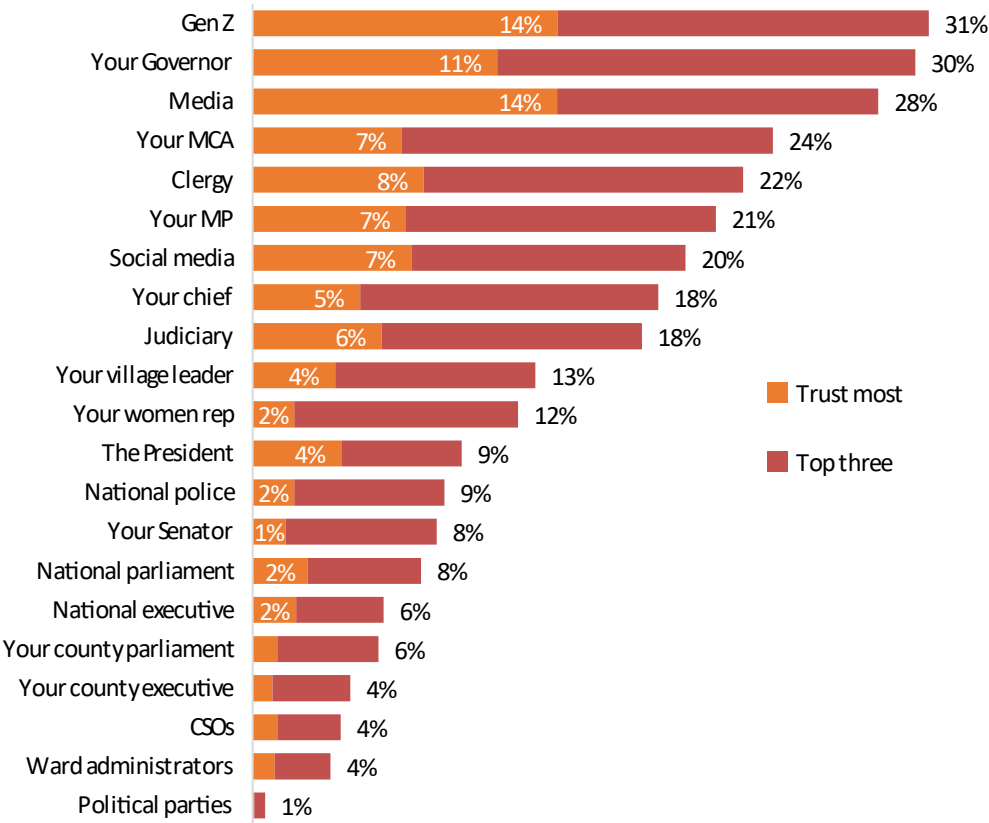
Three out of ten citizens (31%) say they have a high level of trust in Gen Z to act in the interest of citizens, more than any other listed group or institution. This includes half this number (14%) who rank Gen Z as the group or institution that they trust most.

Also high on citizens list of who they trust most to act in citizens' interests are their Governor, the media, their MCA, the clergy, their MP, social media, their chief and the judiciary.

In contrast, some institutions are seen as less likely to act in the interest of citizens, including

political parties, CSOs, county and national parliaments and executives, senators, the President and the police.

Figure 14. Which of the following do you trust most to act in citizens’ interest?



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 15. Citizens are more likely to trust their own MCA and MP than in national and county parliaments as a whole

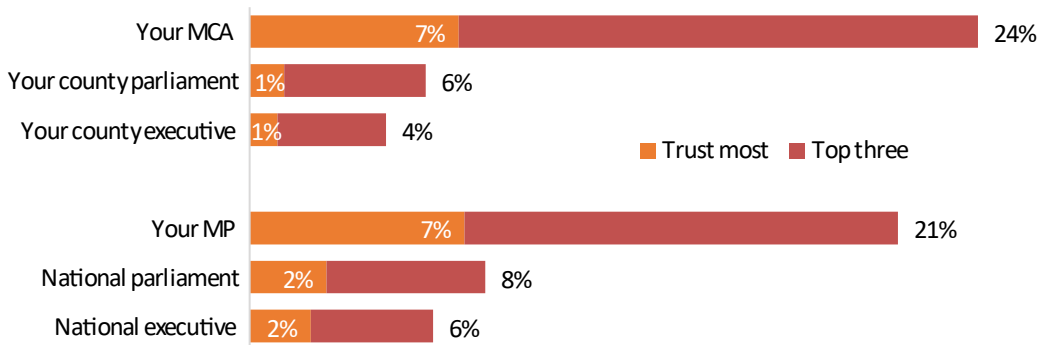
Citizens are much more likely to rank their MCA as being among the top three institutions most likely to act in citizens’ interests than they are to say this about their county parliament in general.

Similarly, citizens are more likely to trust their MP than the national parliament as a whole to act in the interest of citizens.

There is little difference between citizens’ level of trust in parliaments compared to county and national executives, though trust in the parliaments is a little higher.

These differences suggest that citizens have little respect for MPs and MCAs in general, but that many see their own MP and/or MCA – who they are likely to be more familiar with – as being better than most.

Figure 15. Percentage who say they would trust the following among the top three for acting in the interest of citizens:



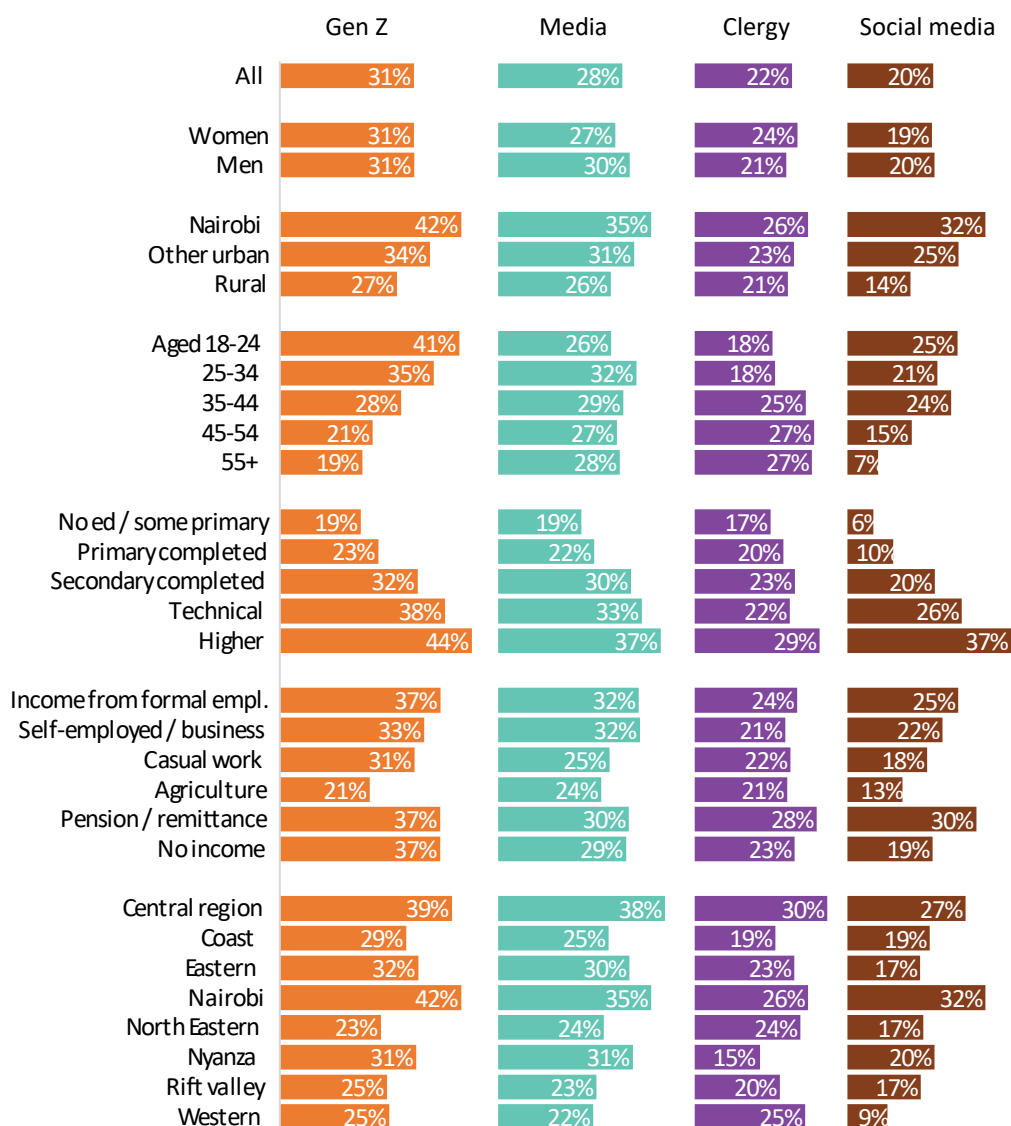
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 16. There are large demographic differences in levels of trust for particular groups and institutions in civic society

While Gen Z are the group or institution most likely to be trusted by citizens to act in their interest, this is highly dependent on demographics. Specifically, young citizens, residents of Nairobi and those with higher levels or education are much more likely than others to see Gen Z are trustworthy, while older citizens, those with lower levels of education and those who earn their living primarily from agriculture are much less likely to do so.

The same pattern applies to social media – which is relatively well-trusted by the young, better-educated and Nairobi residents, but not by others. Trust in traditional media and the clergy follows a similar pattern, though the differences are much less stark in these cases.

Figure 16. Percentage who say they would trust the following among the top three for acting in the interest of citizens:



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

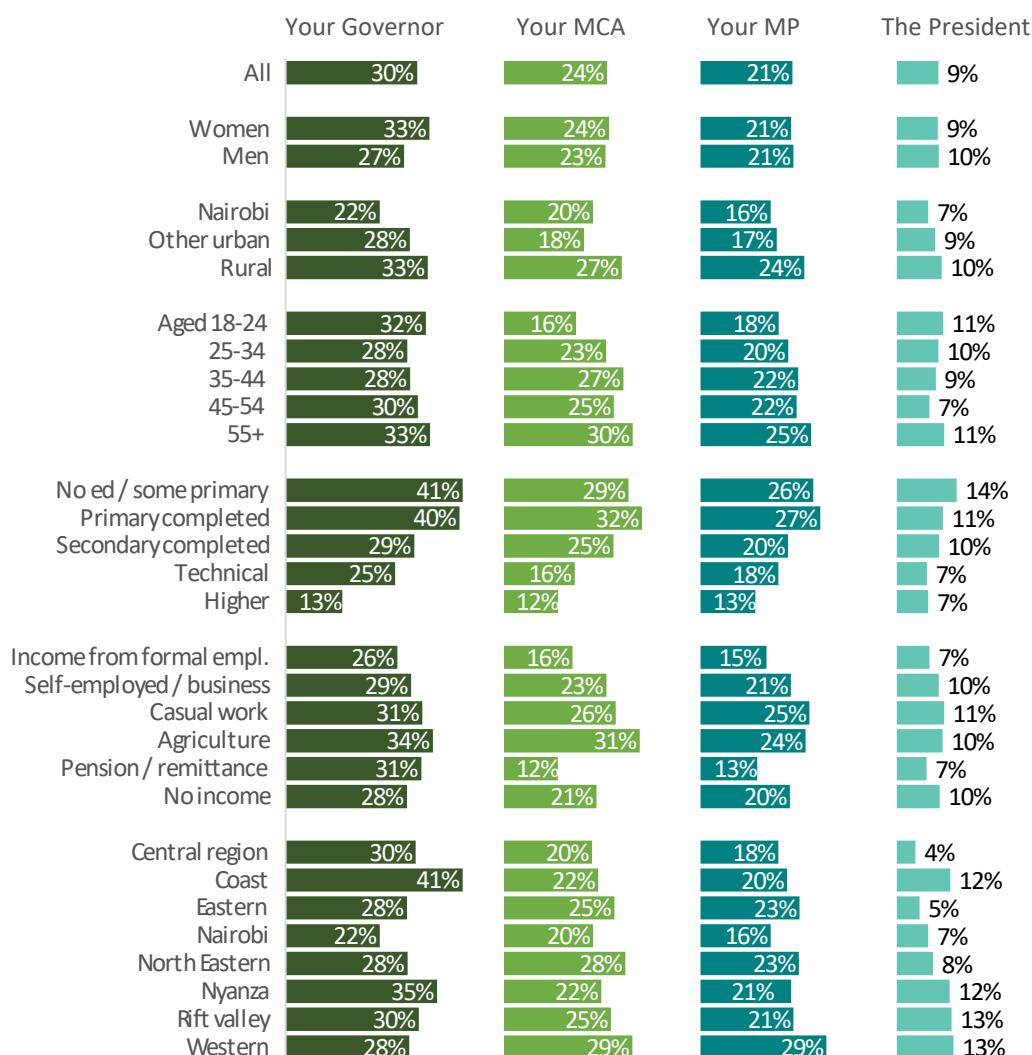
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 17. Trust in elected representatives is highly linked to demographic factors

Trust in elected representatives follows the opposite demographic pattern, with rural residents, older citizens and those with lower levels of education more likely to say that their elected representatives can be trusted to act in the interest of citizens.

This pattern is particularly clear when it comes to citizens' level of education: those with higher levels of education are much less likely than others to have a lot of trust in their Governor, MCA and MP.

Figure 17. Percentage who say they would trust the following among the top three for acting in the interest of citizens:



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

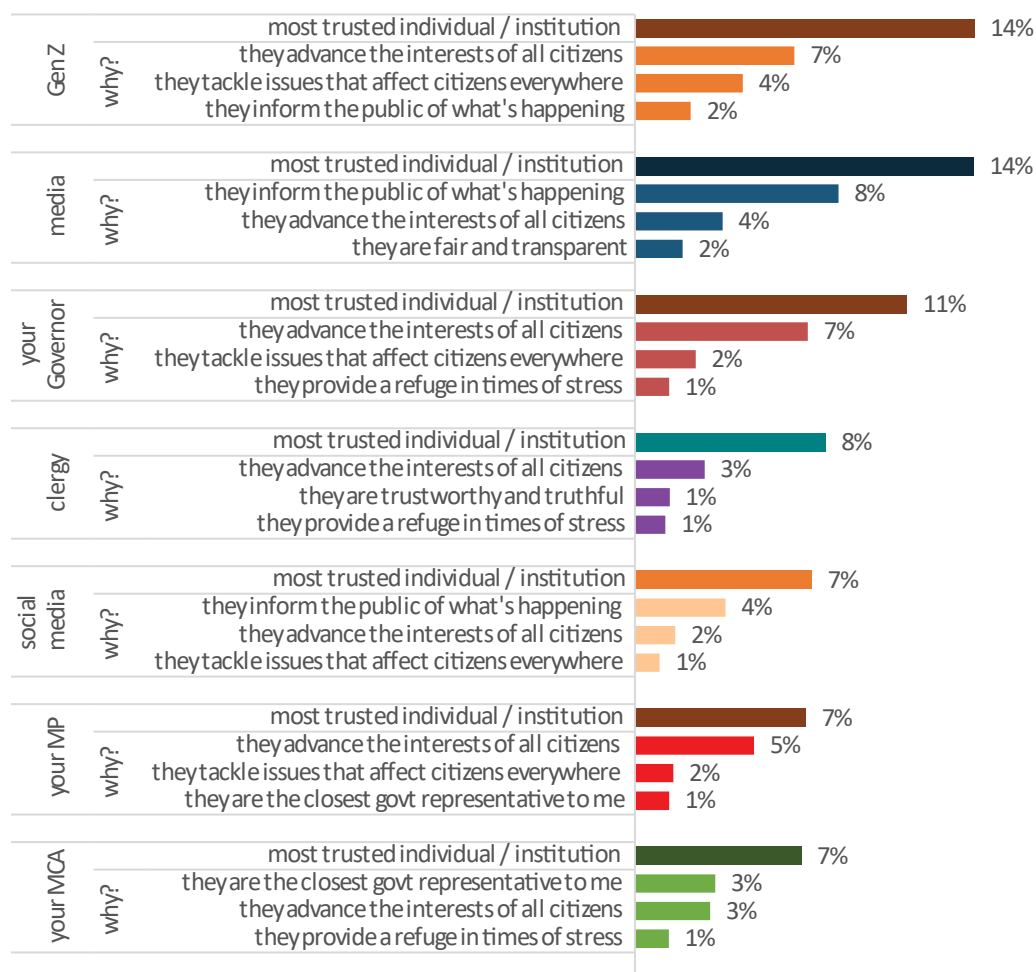
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

Insight 18. The main reason given for trusting particular groups and institutions is that they actively advance citizens' interests

The main reason given by citizens for trusting particular groups and institutions is that they can be seen to actively advance the interests of citizens. This applies to several of the most trusted groups, including Gen Z, the media, Governors, the clergy, MPs and MCAs.

Other notable reasons given for trust in particular institutions are that the media and social media inform the public of what's happening, that Gen Z tackle issues that affect citizens everywhere, and that MCAs are close to the people.

Figure 18. What are your main reasons for trusting the individual / institution you trust most?



Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

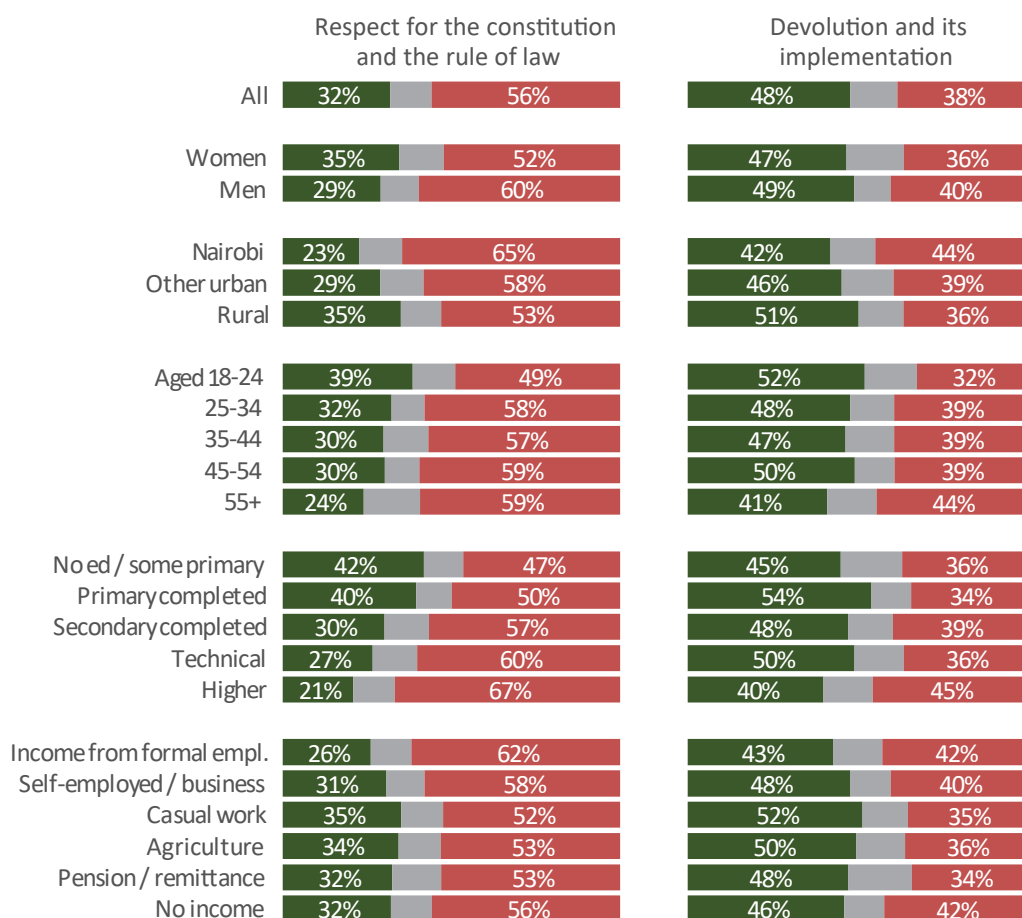
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

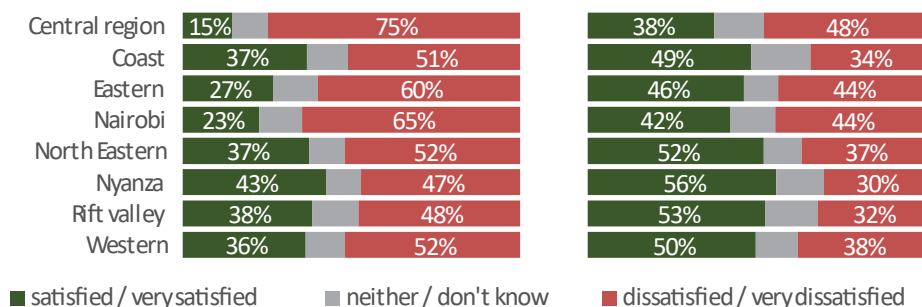
Insight 19. Citizens see the country as not doing well at respecting the constitution, but doing better at devolution

Over half of citizens (56%) say they are dissatisfied with the country's direction when it comes to the constitution and the rule of law, compared to one third (32%) who are satisfied. On the other hand, citizens are more likely to be satisfied (48%) than dissatisfied (38%) with the country's direction on devolution.

These findings are broadly shared across demographic groups, those better-educated citizens are even less happy with the country's direction on respect for the constitution and the rule of law.

Figure 19. How satisfied are you with the direction the country is headed in the following areas?





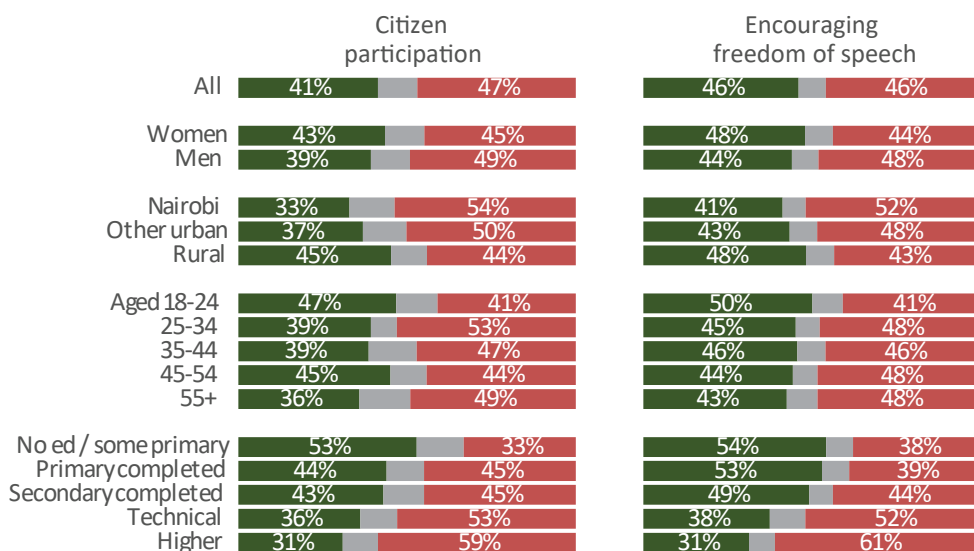
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)
Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

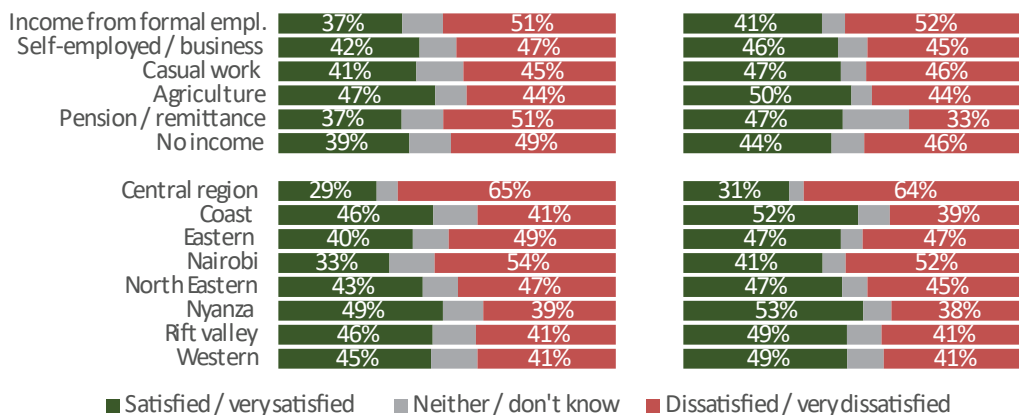
Insight 20. Citizens are divided on whether the country is doing well on citizen participation and freedom of speech

Citizens are divided fairly evenly on whether the country is moving in the right direction on matters of citizen participation (41% satisfied, 47% dissatisfied), and on freedom of speech (46% satisfied, 46% dissatisfied).

These findings are broadly consistent across key demographic groups, though better-educated citizens and residents of urban areas, particularly Nairobi, are more likely than other citizens to be dissatisfied with the country's direction in these areas.

Figure 20. How satisfied are you with the direction the country is headed in the following areas?





Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile phone survey, special r13 (March 2025)

Base: all respondents (n=3,658)

3. Conclusions

The insights from this brief paint a complex picture of the citizens' perspectives on the state of democracy in Kenya. There is a lot of public scepticism around how things are working, but also some reasons to be cheerful.

On the scepticism side, the first headline is clear: that a clear majority of citizens do not think democracy in Kenya is working well. And the data here allows us to dig a little deeper, into several contributing reasons for this: abductions of government critics and a lack of respect for freedom of expression are among the main reasons given by citizens. This conclusion is further supported by the finding that the majority also say we are not doing well at respecting the constitution and the rule of law.

There is also considerable evidence of scepticism of more specific areas of democratic governance. There is a widespread sense that public participation meetings are tokenistic or box-ticking exercises, rather than representing a real opportunity for citizens to influence actual government decisions. Most citizens say public input to planning processes is really only about informing citizens about decisions that have already been taken, and most say they have never seen or heard of any such public input processes taking place. This could mean that citizens have learned over the years to become sceptical of such opportunities, and as a result have tuned them out. Or it could be that citizens would like opportunities to participate, but that such opportunities have not been offered to them. (It is probably a bit of both.) In any case, the conclusion is the same: that government at all levels has a lot of work to do to reach citizens with opportunities to participate in decision making processes, and to ensure such processes are meaningful enough to overcome ingrained scepticism.

When it comes to trust, skepticism is also clear. Two patterns stand out. The first is that citizens are more likely to trust groups in civic society (Gen Z, the clergy, the media and social media) than government institutions (the police, judiciary, parliaments and executives) to represent citizens interests. As before, the government clearly has a lot of work to do to overcome a skeptical public. The second is that citizens are far more likely to trust individual leaders (their

own MP, MCA, Governor and chief) than the institutions they are part of (parliaments, etc.). Perhaps it is simply natural to trust more in specific (and perhaps familiar) individuals than in larger, more impersonal institutions.

Further, and beyond the skepticism, the demographic insights on trust also have much to tell us about Kenyan society and politics. There are major differences between different demographic groups' views on who can be trusted most to act in citizens' interests. For example, Gen Z and social media are very widely trusted by young people, those with higher levels of education, and residents of Nairobi, but hardly at all by residents of rural areas, older people, and those with higher levels of education. Conversely, those same groups are much more likely to trust in elected representatives (with the exception of the President).

It would be easy for those in the urban, educated, and young group to dismiss this as "ignorant and uneducated" folks not seeing the truth. But this conclusion would be a mistake. Gen Z and social media are particularly vulnerable to the echo-chamber effect of social media, where algorithms feed you opinions like your own, and as a result, you come to think that your view represents the majority. It is perfectly reasonable for older citizens in rural areas – and others – to doubt whether the very online world of Gen Z and social media truly represents their interests. After all, government initiatives like the Affordable Housing Programme, Taifa Care and tax rises for the relatively wealthy – all of which have drawn heavy criticism among Gen Z and on social media – promise potential benefits for the poor at the expense of others. For Gen Z to gain trust beyond their own echo chamber, they may need to expand the focus of their activities into things that concern the rural poor – such as hunger and the cost of living.

Finally, what were those reasons to be cheerful? There are two that stand out. First, there is clear support for the progress Kenya has made in devolution – echoing the findings of a previous [Sauti za Wananchi survey in 2023](#), which found that most citizens support devolution, most say it has led to better services, and that citizens were finding it easier to engage with governance matters. And second, even while a majority are dissatisfied with the state of Kenya's democracy, they remain believers in key elements of democratic governance: freedom of expression, respect for citizens' rights, and the rule of law. Democratic backsliding will not be easy in such circumstances.

Overall, there is a lot that can be learned from this data – from listening to citizens' views and experiences of democracy and participation in practice. But if you only take one thing from the brief, let it be this: Kenyans may see government of the people, by the people and for the people as facing major challenges, but they also see it as something worth protecting.