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SHAPING DEMOCRACY FROM THE MIDDLE

PARTY GRASSROOTS AND GHANA'S DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT

The organizational strength and commitment of Ghana's two major parties to multiparty elections and peaceful executive turnover have supported the country's democratic development. Yet party-aligned grassroots activists remain a persistent source of democratic weakness. Many of the undemocratic practices that characterize elections—such as vote buying, voter roll manipulation, and election day violence—are carried out by these foot soldiers who constitute the frontline of party mobilization. In internal party contests, grassroots actors are frequently reported to sell their votes to the highest bidder, undermining their representative role and weakening accountability between elites and rank-and-file members. Despite this, reform efforts to strengthen democracy have focused largely on voters and elites, neglecting the pivotal role of grassroots actors. We argue that fostering democratically oriented parties where both leaders and grassroots members subscribe to and practice democratic ideals is essential to sustaining Ghana's democratic gains. Drawing on focus groups and an original survey of local party executives across twelve constituencies, we demonstrate that grassroots actors embody both risks and opportunities. They can entrench undemocratic practices in the country's politics, but they also recognize their democratic responsibilities and articulate demands for stronger and inclusive intra-party democracy. Strengthening democratic norms among grassroots actors would therefore be central to consolidating Ghana's democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Ironically, one central weakness in Ghana's democratic consolidation lies in the attitudes and actions of its political parties in elections. Despite political parties' contributions to the country's reputation as a democratic success story, a closer examination of party trajectory over the past three decades reveals a more mixed picture. On the one hand, the two dominant political parties—the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP)—have developed robust organizational structures and largely performed their duties of recruiting and fielding candidates, civic and political education, and holding their opponents accountable. Their national leaders have largely adhered to core democratic norms, including respect for term limits and the peaceful concession of electoral defeat. On the other hand, these same parties routinely engage in undemocratic practices such as vote buying, registration fraud, election day manipulation, and politically motivated violence and vigilantism. As a result, while political parties remain indispensable to Ghana's democratic system, citizens are becoming increasingly skeptical of their role.

Recent data from an Afrobarometer survey (Round 10) illustrate this trend (Afrobarometer 2024). Nearly one-third of Ghanaians (29%) now believe that political parties foster division and confusion, up from 18% in Round 5 (Afrobarometer 2012). Moreover, 52% of respondents report feeling no affinity with any political party—a 15-point increase from Round 5—indicating growing partisan dealignment. Trust in both ruling and opposition parties has also declined markedly. Trust in the ruling party has fallen from 47% in Round 5 to 23% in Round 10, while trust in opposition parties has declined from 54% to 28%.¹ These patterns raise serious concerns about the credibility and legitimacy of party-based democracy in Ghana. Indeed, 38% of Ghanaians surveyed by the Afrobarometer in 2024 said that their country is “a democracy with major problems” or “not a democracy,” while only 23% believed that Ghana is “a full democracy.”

A significant share of the undemocratic practices associated with elections is carried out by local party members and activists, commonly referred to as “foot soldiers.” These individuals are the mostly mobilized and visible agents of party activity at the grassroots level (Owusu-Mensah, Debrah, and Mathapoly-Codjoe 2024; Gyimah-Boadi and Debrah 2008). As the micro-foundations of Ghana's democratic system, their actions are central to the consolidation or erosion of democratic norms. Often portrayed as being drawn from marginalized populations—“peasants, farmers, unemployed people, and those with low educational attainments”—foot soldiers may be highly susceptible to manipulation by political elites who rely on them for electoral mobilization (Owusu-Mensah, Debrah, and Mathapoly-Codjoe 2024, 542). Alternatively, however, other scholars see party grassroots agents as sophisticated political entrepreneurs who leverage their unique position to extract rents from higher-level officials and candidates (Acheampong 2020; Bob-Milliar 2012; Armah-Atttoh 2017). Irrespective of one's view, the undemocratic actions carried out by footsoldiers in elections can undermine

1 Afrobarometer measures trust in political parties by asking, “How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? Ruling political parties.” Respondents may choose “Not at all,” “Just a little,” “Somewhat,” or “A lot.” Here, we combine “Somewhat” and “A lot.”

electoral accountability and the country's democracy-building efforts.

We argue that fostering democratically oriented parties whose leaders and grassroots actors both subscribe to and practice democratic ideals is essential for sustaining Ghana's democratic gains. Existing reform efforts to democratize parties have largely focused on voters—seeking to reduce their susceptibility to electoral malpractice through civic education and issue-based campaigns, thereby shaping parties' incentives to act democratically—and party elites. We propose reorienting these interventions to directly target grassroots party foot soldiers, thereby transforming them into agents of democratic reform.

Specifically, we propose three interlinked initiatives: (1) fostering liberal democratic norms among grassroots party members, (2) enhancing the policy content of intra-party elections, and (3) institutionalizing mechanisms for inclusive policy engagement between party elites and rank-and-file members.

The first initiative seeks to instill democratic values—electoral and liberal—among party members. While Ghanaian partisans broadly support elections as a mechanism for leadership selection, recent research suggests that their support for foundational democratic institutions, such as media freedom and civil liberties, may be conditional and often influenced by whether their preferred party is in power (Stoecker 2023; Bartels and Kramon 2020). Among Ghanaian party activists, we observe a far more acute democratic deficit (as we report below).

The second proposal aims to reshape the relationship between party executives and the members who elect them, as well as their connections to party elites seeking support in primaries and conventions. By emphasizing policy-based leadership selection, this approach would shift incentives away from clientelist strategies and toward programmatic engagement.

The third plan calls for sustained interaction between local party actors and elected officials, particularly on national policy debates such as budget formulation and parliamentary bills. This could be facilitated through existing informal institutions—such as party sheds—which already serve as spaces for intra-party debate and civic engagement among members (Bob-Milliar 2019).

These proposals represent a departure from dominant reform strategies that rely on elite bargains, mass education, or citizen-led monitoring. Most current efforts to curb electoral malpractice have focused either on strengthening institutional capacity or promoting civic engagement at the national and community levels. Civil society organizations have spearheaded campaigns encouraging voters to reject candidates who engage in vote buying or violence (Brierley, Kramon, and Ofosu 2020), and have organized election observation missions to deter fraud during registration and voting (Asunka et al. 2019; Ichino and Schündeln 2012). The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), through the Ghana Political Parties Programme, has supported party development by enhancing organizational capacity and promoting issue-based campaigns (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah 2012). The National Peace Council, along with traditional authorities and religious leaders, has helped broker peace agreements among party elites before elections (Bekoe and Burchard 2021). International donors have also provided technical support to national institutions such as the Electoral Commission (EC) and the judiciary (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah 2012).

While valuable, these efforts tend to neglect the critical role of grassroots party foot soldiers—executives, brokers, and activists—who are instrumental in shaping the character of electoral competition. These actors are deeply embedded in the day-to-day mechanics of electoral mobilization. Their behavior can either reproduce or challenge undemocratic practices. Engaging them directly, therefore, constitutes a necessary “mid-range” strategy for democratic consolidation for three main reasons.

First, foot soldiers are often the implementers of undemocratic campaign tactics. They distribute cash, food, and other inducements to voters (Bob-Milliar 2012; Brierley and Nathan 2021); they mobilize support through rallies, events, and door-to-door canvassing (Brierley and Kramon 2020; Paller 2019); and in tightly contested races, they may participate in voter intimidation and violence, illegal registration of unqualified voters, and ballot manipulation (Asunka et al. 2019; Ichino and Schündeln 2012). In the post-election period, foot soldiers of the victorious party have also often illegally seized control of public services as booty (Armah-Attoh 2017). Such criminal acts often go unpunished. Despite their importance, what motivates their actions in electoral contests on their parties’ behalfs remain underexplored (notable exceptions include Bob-Milliar 2012; Brierley and Nathan 2021).

Second, grassroots activists play a pivotal role in intra-party democracy. Both the NDC and NPP have decentralized candidate selection processes, empowering local delegates and executives to choose party nominees. These internal selections shape the composition and character of party leadership (Ichino and Nathan 2022). If activists prioritize patronage over accountability, internal reform is unlikely to succeed. Encouraging the adoption of democratic norms among party activists could therefore yield broader gains for elite accountability and party responsiveness.

Third, local party actors function as intermediaries between citizens and political elites. They transmit resources, messages, and grievances across levels of the political system. As key nodes in the accountability chain, their commitment to democratic values—such as tolerance, nonviolence, and electoral fairness—has implications for how parties govern and how citizens experience democracy.

Despite their essentiality, we still know little about the political attitudes and the democratic orientation of party grassroots actors in Ghana. Most reform agendas continue to bypass these actors, even though they are the ones most actively engaged in shaping electoral outcomes. Without attention to these micro-foundations of electoral malpractice and violence, reforms risk remaining superficial. However, designing such a strategy to focus on party grassroots requires a deeper understanding of their democratic attitudes and values and how they understand their roles in the country’s democratic experiment.

We took a step in this direction by conducting a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) and an original survey of local party executives (n= 58) from Ghana’s two major parties from a stratified random sample of twelve constituencies in the Greater Accra Region. However, our participants were suggested by party leaders and civil society contacts within these constituencies and are not representative of all grassroots, rendering this as a pilot study. The FGDs and survey explored why grassroots actors join parties and how they see their roles within their parties and the broader democratic system. We also examined their preferences, atti-

tudes, and behaviors with respect to intra-party decisionmaking, inclusivity in policy processes, and support for democratic versus undemocratic campaign practices. We inquired into their views on party reform—including candidate selection procedures, internal governance, policy formulation, and leadership accountability.

It is not evident from existing research that grassroots actors in Ghana can serve as effective agents of democracy. Scholars and observers often portray them as materially motivated, primarily engaged in electoral malfeasance with little contribution to democratic deepening. Our study, however, reveals a more complex picture of their motivations, orientations, and potential contributions to democratic development.

Party grassroots actors describe their roles in three broad domains: electoral functions, organizational and representational duties, and community and welfare responsibilities. They see their core tasks as campaigning and mobilization, safeguarding the party's vote, and making the party attractive to community members. Many also see themselves as responsible for selecting and holding party leadership to account, emphasizing the need for independence from side payments to play this role effectively. Crucially, they view themselves as intermediaries between local communities and party elites, tasked with conveying individuals' and communities' concerns upward.

However, as we expected, the democratic commitments of grassroots actors fall short of the ideals of liberal democracy. Our survey evidence highlights important concerns: Nearly seven in ten believe critical media reporting is harmful, almost half regard multiparty competition as unnecessary, and over one-third support banning organizations that oppose government policy. Tolerance for bending electoral rules is widespread, and a sizable minority believe only those knowledgeable of policy issues should vote, which suggests a qualified support for universal suffrage. On the liberal dimension, while few openly endorse bypassing parliament, large shares accept executive disregard for judicial rulings or suspending laws in the name of expediency. Moreover, grassroots members openly acknowledge engaging in undemocratic practices—including vote buying, intimidation, and voter roll manipulation—justified as necessary to “match the other side.” Such informal norms risk entrenching illiberal practices at the heart of Ghana's competitive politics.

At the same time, grassroots members are motivated by more than material incentives. Many join parties due to family socialization (“born into it”), parties' professed ideologies, commitments to good governance, or charismatic founding leaders. They also demonstrate an aspiration to strengthen party democracy: advocating for internal inclusivity measures (e.g., gender quotas), regularized consultation of members, financing through member dues rather than state subsidies, and credible internal elections. Importantly, grassroots actors themselves emphasize the need for civic education to better equip them for their democratic roles.

Taken together, these findings underscore both the risks and opportunities posed by Ghana's party grassroots actors. While their attitudes and practices can undermine democratic norms, their awareness of their responsibilities and their demands for reforms point to avenues for positive intervention. Building democratically oriented parties will require targeted efforts to reshape grassroots incentives, improve democratic education, and institutionalize internal accountability mechanisms. Building democratic norms and strengthening the capacity of party

grassroots actors is therefore one of the key avenues to sustaining Ghana's democratic gains. Our study contributes insights into the motivations and role orientation of party grassroots actors in Ghana and the depth of their support for democratic norms.

HISTORICAL EFFORTS TO BUILD STRONG AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL PARTIES IN GHANA

Ghana's 1992 Constitution guarantees the freedom to form political parties (Article 55(1)), affirming their central role in a multiparty democracy. Article 55(3) further states that political parties are entitled to participate in shaping the political will of the people; disseminating political, social, and economic programs of national character; and sponsoring candidates for all public offices except District Assemblies and other lower local government units. Additionally, the Constitution mandates that political parties possess a national character; be open to all citizens regardless of ethnic, religious, or regional affiliation; and adopt internal organizational practices that reflect democratic principles. In short, Ghanaian law envisions democratically oriented political parties as foundational to building a robust and enduring multiparty democracy.

Scholars generally agree that Ghana's major political parties—alongside smaller parties that make up the broader system—have broadly fulfilled these constitutional expectations and contributed meaningfully to the country's democratic transition and consolidation (Owusu-Mensah, Debrah, and Mathapoly-Codjoe 2024; Gyimah-Boadi and Debrah 2008).

First, Gyimah-Boadi and Debrah (2008) argue that since Ghana's democratic transition in 1992, political parties have actively shaped public opinion, sponsored candidates for national office, and educated citizens on political values and issues. Second, parties have promoted civic engagement, especially during elections, helping to sustain high voter turnout. This effort has been particularly crucial given the limited reach and capacity of constitutionally mandated civic education institutions such as the National Commission for Civic Education and the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, thereby enabling political parties to fill an important gap (Paalo and Van Gyampo 2019). Campaign activities often generate localized enthusiasm and provide platforms for citizens to articulate their concerns and policy preferences (Gyimah-Boadi and Debrah 2008).

Third, political parties have played a role in strengthening democratic institutions and promoting electoral integrity. For instance, although opposition parties boycotted the 1992 transitional elections, they successfully pushed for the inclusion of their views in the drafting of the new Constitution. Gyimah-Boadi and Debrah (2008) argue that the liberal character of the 1992 Constitution reflects the influence of prominent opposition figures, such as Mohammed Mumuni and Osafo Marfo, who participated in the Committee of Experts and the Constituent

Assembly. After the 1992 elections, opposition parties channeled their grievances into a written report, “The Stolen Verdict,” which helped to institutionalize electoral contestation through peaceful and legal means (Boahen 1995). More recently, parties have challenged election outcomes in court, helping to entrench judicial mechanisms for electoral dispute resolution (Oduro, Selvik, and Dupuy 2022). In addition, key electoral reforms—such as transparent ballot boxes, polling station-level vote tabulation, and certification of results—have been driven by party engagement through platforms like the Inter-Party Advisory Committee convened by the Electoral Commission.

Fourth, political parties serve as vehicles for elite recruitment. Both the NPP and NDC have established youth branches on university campuses to identify and train future party leaders. Some parties have also created ideological schools aimed at instilling party values, although access is often skewed in favor of university graduates (Paalo and Van Gyampo 2019, 137–138).

Despite these contributions, political parties have also undermined democratic development in several important ways. One major concern is the widespread use of clientelist practices, including vote buying in both inter-party and intra-party contests. Unfortunately, this phenomenon has permeated within university campuses, where parties engage student groups with material incentives to secure their loyalty, thereby “sowing the seeds of electoral clientelism from below.” (Paalo and Van Gyampo 2019, 134)

Second, while some steps have been taken to democratize internal party governance, candidate selection remains largely dominated by national elites—such as party executives, Members of Parliament, founding members, and patrons. Internal decisionmaking processes often reflect centralized control, with policy platforms and campaign messages crafted by top leadership rather than through consultation with grassroots members (Osei 2016; Ichino and Nathan 2012). Factionalism within parties is frequently driven more by personal ambition than by ideological contestation or policy disagreements (Gyimah-Boadi and Debrah 2008).

Third, party financing is largely opaque and poorly regulated. Most parties do not rely on membership dues but are instead funded by wealthy individuals—often described as “people with high pedigree in community life and from the top echelon of the socio-economic ladder”—who, while not involved in day-to-day operations, exert considerable influence over party strategy (Owusu-Mensah, Debrah, and Mathapoly-Codjoe 2024, 541). Although Ghana’s Constitution restricts political financing to citizens, it does not cap donation amounts, and existing regulations are either weakly enforced or circumvented through off-book financial arrangements.

Finally—and most relevant to our argument—the democratization of internal party structures has produced unintended consequences for democratic accountability. Ghana’s two major parties maintain nearly identical organizational hierarchies, with multiple layers of elected officials extending from the polling station to the national executive. As of 2024, there were approximately 40,650 polling stations across the country (Ghana Electoral Commission 2024). The NPP elects at least five officials per polling station, while the NDC elects nine (Brierley and Nathan 2021), which would translate to an estimated 203,250 and 365,850 local party executives, respectively.

In efforts to enhance grassroots representation and internal party democracy, both parties have empowered these local actors (i.e., foot soldiers) to participate in candidate selection through internal primaries (Paalo and Van Gyampo 2019; Ichino and Nathan 2013). In contrast to earlier practices during the Fourth Republic, when candidates were often handpicked by national elites, local executives now play a decisive role in nominating parliamentary and presidential candidates, as well as internal party leaders. These reforms have lowered barriers to entry and expanded opportunities for previously excluded groups to participate in formal politics (Ichino and Nathan 2022). They have also contributed to building trust in political parties by institutionalizing transparent candidate selection processes and internal dispute resolution mechanisms (Bob-Milliar and Lauterbach 2021).

However, internal primaries have also created new challenges. Scholars observe that primaries often serve as opportunities for local executives to extract rents and personal benefits from aspirants (Ichino and Nathan 2012). Evidence suggests that candidates with strong connections to local government officials who control access to patronage are more likely to be selected—indicating a prioritization of personal gain over public interest (Brierley and Nathan 2021, pg. 899). In this context, democratization within parties has sometimes intensified vote buying and electoral misconduct, further complicating efforts to consolidate democratic norms (Acheampong 2020).

Thus, political parties appear to be playing positive and negative functions in Ghana's democracy building efforts. While reinforcing parties' salutary impacts on the country's democracy, efforts are needed to counter its antidemocratic effects.

Existing democratic party system building initiatives

Since Ghana's return to democracy in 1993, independent state institutions and civil society organizations, supported by international donors, have pursued two primary strategies to strengthen political parties and enhance electoral integrity. Despite significant investment, these efforts have often bypassed grassroots party activists who are central to everyday political mobilization and often involved in undemocratic practices.

TOP-DOWN INSTITUTIONAL AND PARTY-BUILDING INITIATIVES

The first approach comprises top-down initiatives aimed at enhancing the technical and operational capacities of political parties and electoral institutions. These initiatives seek to professionalize party organization, improve political communication, support manifesto development, and foster inter-party consensus on key democratic norms. It is often hoped that building elite support for democracy will trickle down to the grassroots level.

One of the most ambitious early interventions was the Ghana Political Parties Programme, funded by the Dutch government and implemented jointly by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy and Ghana's IEA (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah 2012). The program provided grants and technical assistance to parliamentary representation parties, including under-re-

sourced groups such as the Convention People's Party and the People's National Convention, enabling them to maintain viability and compete in elections on a more equitable basis (Gyimah-Boadi 2010). According to Gyimah-Boadi (2010), although the program potentially contravened Ghanaian laws prohibiting foreign funding of political parties, it enabled crucial activities: party manifesto development, the adoption of a code of conduct, and the drafting of a transition bill. It also facilitated the organization of presidential debates beginning in 2008, enhancing issue-based campaigning and inter-party civility. However, these gains have been concentrated at the national level, with limited trickle-down to grassroots structures, where compliance with codes of conduct remains weak.

German political foundations such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, and Friedrich Naumann Foundation have also supported leadership training and technical assistance to strengthen party organizational capacity. These programs have targeted party elites and urban-based leadership structures but have made few inroads into re-shaping grassroots mobilization practices (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah 2012).

Donors have similarly invested in building the capacity of electoral institutions. For example, in the 1996 elections, USAID provided \$9 million in support to the Electoral Commission, which included technical assistance and procurement of election materials. The Danish government contributed \$3 million to replace opaque ballot boxes with transparent ones and to fund voter education and staff training, while the U.K. provided equipment and forms for voter registration (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah 2012). These investments reduced opportunities for incumbent manipulation and improved the EC's ability to manage elections independently.

The creation of the Inter-Party Advisory Committee in 1994, chaired by the EC, institutionalized regular dialogue among parties and improved consensus on election management issues, such as counting votes at polling stations, transparent ballot boxes, and the presence of party agents.

BOTTOM-UP MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

The second approach focuses on bottom-up accountability, emphasizing oversight of political parties and election-day behavior. These initiatives aim to promote rule adherence and deter electoral malpractice by increasing transparency and citizen engagement.

International support has enabled the development of robust domestic election observation. A 1996 U.S.-funded project supported Ghana's first non-partisan election monitoring effort, led by the IEA and Ghana Alert (Gyimah-Boadi 2010). The Westminster Foundation for Democracy

and the European Democracy Hub have implemented programs to integrate grassroots voices into party structures and promote active citizenship.

The media has also been a key focus of bottom-up reform. In the 2000 elections, The Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and the Ghana Journalists Association systematically monitored media coverage, highlighting biases and promoting balanced reporting (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah 2012). These efforts addressed opposition grievances about unfair state media coverage and contributed to improving the electoral information environment.

Other civil society-led initiatives include monitoring the abuse of incumbency, civic education campaigns, and peacebuilding interventions. For example, CDD-Ghana monitored state resource abuse during the 2004 elections, while the United Nations Development Programme, the U.K.'s Department for International Development, and others supported peace campaigns and conflict mediation led by traditional leaders, artists, and civil society groups. Presidential debates hosted by the IEA in 2004 and 2008 provided platforms for candidates to articulate their policy positions and engage with the electorate (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah 2012).

A “mid-range” approach to building democratic parties in Ghana

While top-down and bottom-up initiatives have enhanced the credibility of Ghana's electoral system and reinforced party structures at the elite level, they have largely overlooked the behaviors and incentives of grassroots actors. Yet local party activists remain the frontline agents of political mobilization and campaigning—actors whose practices directly shape the quality of democratic competition. Few initiatives have directly engaged these actors or addressed their pivotal role in either sustaining or undermining democratic norms.

We argue that donor strategies should adopt a “mid-range” approach: Targeting grassroots party members and activists to complement institutional reforms and elite-focused dialogue. By reshaping local political behavior, such an approach can strengthen democratic accountability from the ground up. To design effective interventions, however, a deeper understanding of party grassroots actors is essential. We provide initial insights to suggest that, under the right conditions, party grassroots activists can serve as effective agents of democratic development.

RESEARCH METHOD: ASSESSING PARTY ACTIVISTS' ROLE AND DEMOCRATIC ORIENTATIONS

We pursued three objectives in our study: (1) to examine how party activists perceive their roles within their parties and Ghana's democratic system, (2) to assess their orientations toward liberal democratic principles, and (3) to identify reforms that activists themselves consider necessary and would support.

We focused on polling station-level executives, who lead grassroots activists and play a central role in party mobilization. As key actors in Ghana's democratic process, their attitudes and behaviors shape how democratic principles are enacted in daily political life. Illiberal orientations risk normalizing anti-democratic practices, while liberal orientations position activists as potential agents of democratic strengthening.

We employed two methods: surveys and focus group discussions (FGDs). Because no roster of party activists was available, we drew a stratified sample of twelve constituencies in the Greater Accra Region—three NPP strongholds, three NDC strongholds, and six competitive constituencies.² In each constituency, we aimed to recruit five polling station-level executives with the assistance of constituency leaders and representatives of the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers. In strongholds, we surveyed the dominant party; in competitive constituencies, we alternated between NPP and NDC.

Thus, four FGDs were held in August 2025, each with about 15 participants from a single party. To avoid contamination from group discussions, participants first completed a close-ended survey. The authors facilitated the FGDs using a structured guide and follow-up probes as needed. Appendix A provides the discussion guide.

We explored several themes in the FGDs: motivations and pathways to party leadership, campaign behaviors, internal party democracy and primaries, party financing, and democratic norms. Specifically, we examined participants' reasons for joining their parties, strategies for mobilizing support, and perspectives on reforms or support needed to enhance effective

2 The Greater Accra Region was selected for its mix of competitive and non-competitive constituencies as well as its history of electoral disputes and violence.

participation. We also assessed their commitment to democratic norms, including attitudes toward tolerance, inclusiveness, the rule of law, and political institutions. Finally, we investigated views on political party and electoral reforms in Ghana—covering party financing models, executive and candidate selection, membership structures, and policymaking processes—and asked participants about training needs to strengthen grassroots activism as a vehicle for democratic reform.

Survey design

Our survey measured support for liberal democratic principles, adopting a framework that integrates both electoral and liberal institutional dimensions (Coppedge et al., 2016). Inspired by Claassen et al. (2024), we developed a concise battery of questions to capture grassroots attitudes toward democracy, with seven bespoke survey questions.

ELECTORAL COMPONENT

1. Free expression (FreeExp2: media independence): “Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, by the media only harms the country.”
2. Freedom of association (FreeAssc1: one-party rule): “Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Ghana.”
3. Universal suffrage (UniSuff1: voter competence): “All people should be permitted to vote, even if they do not fully understand all the issues in an election.”
4. Free and fair elections (FFElect2: bending rules): “The President should be justified in removing an Electoral Commissioner they did not appoint if their opponents have also done so in the past.”

LIBERAL COMPONENT

5. Judicial constraints (JudCnstr2): “The President should be able to ignore court rulings that they believe are politically biased.”
6. Legislative constraints (LegCnstr1): “Since the President represents all of us, he should pass laws without worrying about what Parliament thinks.”
7. Equality before the law (EqLaw1): “When there are pressing social and political problems that need urgent attention, the President should be allowed to suspend some laws to solve them quickly.”

This design provides a compact, theoretically grounded measure of grassroots support for liberal democracy. We also included questions on the primary roles of party activists, party organization, and perceptions of undemocratic or illegal electoral practices.

Descriptive statistics of survey respondents

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics of our survey respondents. Our respondents comprised

58 local party executives participating in FGDs, surveys, or both. Participants were on average 42 years old (range 30–70), and 66% were male. Educational attainment was high: 33% had a first or postgraduate degree and 51% had completed secondary school. Approximately 40% held formal-sector jobs, 19% ran personal businesses, and 5% were unemployed. Ownership of assets was common: 95% had phones, 74% televisions, 40% laptops, and 24% cars.

Participants were fairly balanced across parties, with 55% from the incumbent NDC. While 60% were members of a religious group, only 35% and 15% participated in community and economic associations, respectively. Respondents held various branch positions: 21% branch chairpersons, 19% secretaries, 12% organizers, and 21% women organizers. About 40% had held prior branch positions, and 74% intended to seek reelection. Notably, nearly 90% aimed to contest higher office within their parties, with 80% planning to seek leadership at the constituency level. These findings suggest that interventions targeting this group would not only impact electoral mobilization tactics by these grassroots but also shape the democratic norms and behavior of future higher officeholders, which would enhance Ghana's democratic trajectory.

TABLE 1

Descriptive statistics of participants (local party executives)

Variable	Mean (1)	Std. Dev. (2)	N (3)	Min (4)	Max (5)
Demography					
Age	42.207	7.991	58	32	70
Male	0.655	0.479	58	0	1
Education: university and postgraduate	0.333	0.476	57	0	1
Education: secondary	0.509	0.504	57	0	1
Marital status: married	0.534	0.503	58	0	1
Asset: mobile phone	0.948	0.223	58	0	1
Asset: laptop	0.379	0.489	58	0	1
Asset: television	0.741	0.442	58	0	1
Asset: car	0.241	0.432	58	0	1
Asset index (0-4)	2.310	0.995	58	1	4
Job: business	0.190	0.395	58	0	1
Job: unemployment	0.052	0.223	58	0	1
Formal sector job	0.397	0.493	58	0	1
Politics and associational life					
Party affiliation: National Democratic Congress	0.552	0.502	58	0	1
Group membership: community (ethnic, neighborhood, sports, women's)	0.345	0.479	58	0	1
Group membership: economic (farmers' association, market association, trade)	0.155	0.365	58	0	1
Group membership: religious	0.603	0.493	58	0	1
Years since joining party	19.362	10.080	58	0	45
Polling station executive position: chairperson	0.211	0.411	57	0	1
Polling station executive position: secretary	0.193	0.398	57	0	1
Polling station executive position: organizer	0.123	0.331	57	0	1
Polling station executive position: women organizer	0.211	0.411	57	0	1
Held past position	0.397	0.493	58	0	1
Plan to contest for reelection	0.737	0.444	57	0	1
Plan to contest higher office	0.895	0.310	57	0	1

NOTES: Mean values below 1 indicate a proportion of respondents (e.g. 66% male respondents). Not all respondents answered all questions, hence the variation in N.

SOURCE: Authors

FINDINGS

Motivation for seeking grassroots party leadership positions

A central theme in the literature on grassroots party activism highlights the material or patronage benefits that activists expect to receive if their party wins office. From this perspective, activists are willing to expend significant effort to secure electoral success, and their loyalty may be shallow, with the possibility of shifting allegiance to whichever party offers the most attractive returns. Our FGDs and survey data suggest that such motivations are indeed present but neither exclusive nor dominant among grassroots activists. When asked to describe their parties, explain their decision to join, and reflect on why they contested local leadership positions, participants articulated a range of motivations.

From the FGDs, six main themes emerged as explanations for why activists chose to affiliate with and remain in a particular party: (1) family tradition and socialization, (2) party ideology and policies, (3) attraction to particular leaders, (4) inclusivity of the party, (5) commitment to good governance (e.g., accountability, honesty, probity), and (6) material benefits such as patronage jobs and contracts.

Many participants in both the NPP and NDC described their political engagement as an extension of family legacy and early socialization. Several claimed to have been “born into” their party, with parents or grandparents having long-standing active involvement at the grassroots level. Activists claim that their attachment to their parties acquired through their early socializations was reinforced by the influence of charismatic leaders who shaped their parties. For NDC respondents, Jerry Rawlings and the party’s revolutionary origins featured prominently, while NPP respondents referenced the Danquah-Busia-Dombo tradition—a shorthand for the political ideologies espoused by the party’s founders/leaders—and the impact of John Kufuor and Mahmudu Bawumia. Others emphasized ideological motivations: NDC activists pointed to inclusiveness and nondiscrimination, whereas NPP respondents highlighted the party’s orientation toward liberal economic policies. While some participants acknowledged that material gains mattered, these were typically framed as secondary to family or ideological commitments.

Running for local executive office was similarly justified in affective and instrumental terms. Some framed their ambition as a continuation of family loyalty to the party, while others stressed service, leadership, and commitment to community and national development. In both parties, encouragement from senior figures and recognition of one’s capacity to “serve the grassroots” were important triggers. Participants noted that success in internal contests often depended on trust, familiarity, and long-standing relationships within local branches rather than on material inducements. Still, several acknowledged that sustaining loyalty over time required attention to both individual welfare and community needs.

The survey results reinforced these themes. When asked why they contested local party positions, respondents offered six broad categories of motivations:

- 1. Love and loyalty to the party (~40%):** The most frequent response, centered on deep affection and lifelong dedication to the party (e.g., “I love the party,” “For the love of the party,” “Because I like the party,” “Faithfulness in party.”)
- 2. Service to the party and its growth (~25%):** A desire to help the party win, strengthen its base, and defend its interests (e.g., “serve the party,” “help the party win,” “work for the party,” “build the party base.”)
- 3. Commitment to party ideology and tradition (~10%):** Attachment to the Danquah-Busia-Dombo tradition or to the inclusive, democratic ethos of the NDC.
- 4. Community and national development (~10%):** Service beyond the party, framed as advancing community and national progress (e.g., “to help develop the community where I am,” “to bring on board my knowledge in helping national growth and political development.”)
- 5. Desire for leadership and influence (~8%):** Ambition to lead, make strategic contributions, or correct perceived incompetence (e.g., “I want to become a leader in Ghana,” “I observed something ... I think I’m better in it,” “to make key strategic inputs.”)
- 6. Passion, dedication, and competence (~7%):** Emphasis on personal qualities such as hard work, expertise, and commitment.

Taken together, these findings suggest that grassroots activism in Ghana cannot be reduced to a logic of patronage. Rather, it reflects a mix of affective motivations (love, loyalty, family legacy) and instrumental commitments (service, leadership, development). Expressions of devotion to the party were especially strong among NDC activists, who often linked their attachment to family history, regional ties, and the party’s revolutionary heritage. For many, allegiance was portrayed as an obligation inherited from households that had benefited from the party’s time in government. Yet beneath these affective narratives, participants also recognized the importance of recognition and opportunities that accompanied their party’s electoral victories. Finally, even as loyalty was depicted as unquestionable, several participants voiced frustration at the limited influence grassroots activists had in shaping party decisionmaking beyond the local level.

Roles orientation of local party activists

How do grassroots party executives understand their roles in Ghana’s democratic process? In our survey, we asked participants to describe what they perceived as the main responsibilities of polling station executives. While their responses were diverse, they clustered around three broad categories: electoral functions, organizational and representational roles, and community and welfare responsibilities.

1. Electoral functions: A core set of roles focused directly on elections. Participants highlighted responsibilities such as mobilizing members, persuading voters, and building the party base at the polling station level. They also stressed vigilance during elections: serving as party agents, monitoring the vote, maintaining order at polling stations, and protecting the integrity of results through tallying and collation. These functions underscore the centrality of grassroots actors in sustaining party competitiveness during elections.

2. Organizational and representational roles: Beyond election-day activities, respondents emphasized their role in sustaining the internal life of the party. They described themselves as intermediaries between grassroots members and higher party structures, with responsibilities to communicate local concerns upward and to participate in decisionmaking processes such as candidate selection and internal elections. They also stressed the importance of transparency, accountability, and integrity in party activities—rejecting bribery and intimidation and demanding that party leadership remain responsive to the people at the local level.

3. Community and welfare responsibilities: Finally, grassroots executives conceived of their role in terms that extended beyond narrow partisan concerns. They saw themselves as educators who informed citizens about democracy, electoral processes, and party ideology, thereby contributing to civic awareness. They also described responsibilities in fostering peace, unity, and inclusivity within both the party and the wider community. In addition, they pointed to a welfare function: supporting members financially, socially, or emotionally, and modeling the values of the party in everyday life.

Taken together, these findings suggest that grassroots party executives perceive their responsibilities as encompassing more than electoral mobilization. They see themselves as central actors in building party strength, transmitting citizen concerns, and sustaining democratic participation. Their self-understanding highlights the ways in which local party leaders operate simultaneously as electoral agents, organizational representatives, and community intermediaries.

Performance of roles: Democratic and undemocratic electoral behaviors

We argue that party activists engage in both democratic and undemocratic forms of vote mobilization on behalf of their parties. Drawing on data from our focus group discussions and surveys, we examine what campaign activities, democratic and undemocratic, participants undertake on the party's behalf as well as their views on electoral malpractices.

When asked how they contribute to their party's campaigns, participants affirmed these dual roles. On the democratic side, activists described mobilizing voters through door-to-door canvassing, rallies, and community engagement that emphasized party visibility, storytelling, and solidarity. They emphasized their role as their party's eyes and ears on the ground.

Yet they also acknowledged the prevalence of undemocratic and illegal practices, including vote buying, intimidation, and electoral fraud. Inducements such as money or material goods

were frequently reframed as “support” rather than outright vote buying, while violence, manipulation of voter rolls, and other illicit practices were attributed to “others” or to pressure from higher party levels. Importantly, these behaviors were widely recognized as routine features of Ghanaian politics, often justified as necessary to “match the other side,” reflecting how informal rules normalize and perpetuate the erosion of democratic norms.

Important for our purposes, our data further show that local party executives and activists are simultaneously perpetrators and victims of electoral malpractices. On the one hand, in national and local elections, they reported helping their parties distribute material benefits to voters, intimidate opponents, and manipulate voter lists and election results. In internal party contests, participants cited widespread vote selling among grassroots executives, consistent with scholarship that views such elections as opportunities for rent extraction (e.g., Ichino and Nathan 2022; Acheampong 2020).

On the other hand, participants bemoaned their own vulnerabilities to electoral manipulation in intraparty contests. First, activists described being targeted by what they called “Mafia” tactics.

These strategies involved covert tactics used by higher-level elites such as aspiring parliamentary candidates and constituency executives to limit competition. They included misinformation, disinformation, and technical maneuvers designed to exclude certain candidates from contesting local positions. Second, activists expressed a broader sense of a lack of electoral efficacy in party primaries to select parliamentary candidates. They suggested that primaries are neither fully fair nor transparent, with candidates routinely engaging in vote buying and manipulation that undermine activists’ capacity to select leaders or hold them accountable.

These accounts provide support for our view that electoral malpractices, including vote buying, intimidation and violence, and fraud, remain part of Ghana’s electoral processes and that party grassroots actors participate in them. What we find interesting is that some realized the potential negative impact of these practices as they often experience them in their bid to contest for office. It provides an avenue to teach at the grassroots level the wider implications of these undemocratic practices in the country’s democratic building process.

Attitudes towards electoral malpractice

VOTE BUYING

In our survey, we find party activists are deeply polarized when it comes to the acceptability of vote buying in elections. Nearly four in ten respondents (39%) consider the practice either very acceptable (23%) or acceptable (16%), while a similar proportion (37%) view it as very unacceptable (21%) or unacceptable (16%). Perhaps most telling is that nearly a quarter of respondents (23%) see vote buying as neither acceptable nor unacceptable, suggesting they view such practices as simply an inherent part of the Ghanaian political process. This normalization of what many would consider corrupt behavior highlights the complex relationship

between democratic ideals and electoral realities in the minds of party activists.

The partisan lens through which respondents view vote buying becomes even more apparent when examining their tolerance for such practices by their own versus opposition candidates. Nearly half of all respondents (47%) indicated they would “definitely” or “probably” still vote for their party’s candidate even if that candidate engaged in vote buying, with only a quarter (25%) saying they would “definitely” or “probably” refuse to support such a candidate. However, when it comes to opposition politicians, respondents adopt a markedly different standard: One-half (50%) believe that opposition candidates who engage in vote buying should face serious consequences, either disqualification from the contest (39%) or prosecution (11%). This double standard reveals how partisan loyalty can override democratic principles, with respondents applying stricter moral standards to political opponents than to their party’s representatives. Despite the tolerance many show for vote buying, the majority of respondents (80%) indicated they would not lose respect for fellow party members who refuse to engage in such practices. This suggests that while vote buying may be seen as acceptable or necessary by some, there remains widespread respect for those who choose to maintain higher ethical standards, indicating that democratic values have not been entirely eroded even among those who tolerate undemocratic practices.

VOTER INTIMIDATION AND VIOLENCE

In contrast to the divided views on vote buying, respondents demonstrate much clearer opposition to the use of violence and intimidation in electoral contests. An overwhelming majority (80%) consider it very unacceptable (42%) or unacceptable (38%) for parties to use agents to intimidate opponents or voters. This strong rejection of electoral violence suggests that while voters may be willing to tolerate certain forms of corruption, they draw a firmer line at practices that directly threaten physical safety and democratic participation.

However, even this seemingly clear consensus contains troubling exceptions. More than one in ten respondents (13%) view the use of intimidation as very acceptable, while an additional 8% see it as neither acceptable nor unacceptable. These minorities represent pockets of support for practices that fundamentally undermine free and fair elections. The acceptance of electoral violence by any significant portion of the electorate poses serious risks to democratic stability and voter safety.

The consequences respondents believe should result from electoral violence are more closely aligned with their expressed disapproval of such practices than those related to vote buying. Approximately 70% of respondents would report violent candidates to authorities, and nearly two-thirds (62%) believe that candidates who use violence cannot be effective political leaders. These responses suggest that unlike vote buying, electoral violence carries clearer reputational costs and is less likely to be overlooked by grassroots actors, regardless of partisan affiliation.

ELECTORAL FRAUD

Regarding electoral fraud, survey responses reveal patterns similar to those seen with violence and intimidation. A significant majority of respondents (77%) consider the manipulation

of the voter register or election results by parties to be very unacceptable (41%) or unacceptable (36%). This strong opposition to fraud suggests that most respondents recognize result manipulation as a fundamental violation of democratic principles that undermines the entire electoral process.

Yet, consistent with findings across other undemocratic practices, meaningful minorities maintain more permissive attitudes toward electoral manipulation. 9% of respondents characterized fraud as very acceptable, while 10% adopted a neutral stance, potentially viewing result manipulation as a legitimate competitive strategy within contemporary electoral contexts. While these proportions remain smaller than those tolerating vote buying, the combined 19% who either endorse or remain indifferent to electoral fraud represent a substantial constituency whose attitudes toward democratic governance warrant serious scholarly and policy attention.

This persistent tolerance for practices that directly subvert electoral outcomes raises fundamental questions about democratic consolidation and suggests that significant segments of the electorate may prioritize partisan victory over procedural legitimacy.

How supportive of liberal democratic norms are grassroots party activists?

Our FGDs and surveys reveal an acute deficit in support for democracy's tenets among party grassroots actors in Ghana. During the FGDs, participants generally defined democracy in participatory terms, emphasizing freedom of choice, inclusiveness, tolerance, and fair competition, alongside peaceful coexistence and the avoidance of violence, particularly given Ghana's history of electoral tensions. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that parties often fall short of these principles in practice, reflecting broader concerns in the literature on African party politics, where informal norms and clientelist practices frequently undermine democratic ideals.

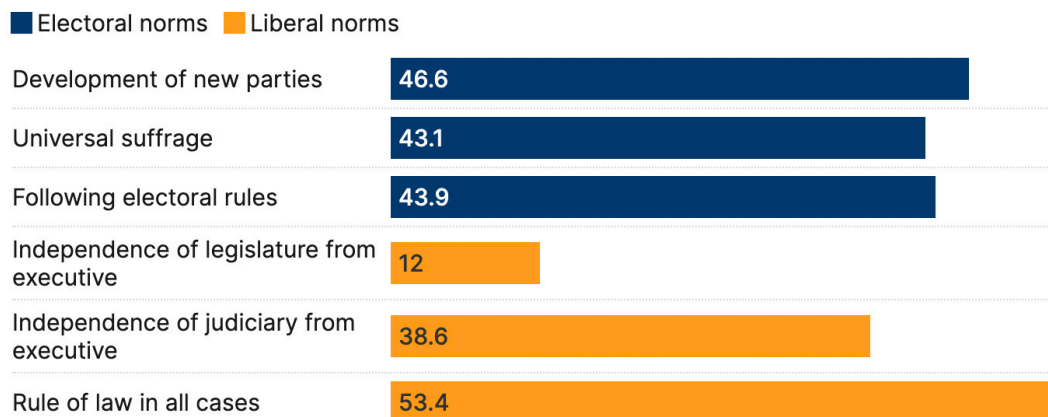
Importantly, participants' responses to our survey suggest a tension between support for electoral participation and willingness to constrain the exercise of state power. Figure 1 shows the percentage of participants who were supportive of the negative attitudes toward the various indicators of electoral and liberal components of democracy.

On the electoral dimension, party activists express limited tolerance for the pluralistic institutions that sustain democracy. While there are slight majorities supporting three out of four of our indicators, there is nonetheless a significant minority of grassroots actors who held negative views towards electoral democratic institutions. Nearly seven in ten respondents believe that frequent media reporting on corruption and government failures harms the country, revealing weak support for free expression and the watchdog role of the press. Perhaps expressing a desire to maintain their parties' dominance in the current two-party system, almost half (47%) of respondents view having more parties as divisive and, thus, unnecessary, which suggests a significant opposition to the freedom of association. In line with this, we also asked respondents whether "the government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies." More than one-third supported banning organizations that oppose

government policy, a further indication of a lack of full support for the freedom of association.

FIGURE 1

Respondents' negative attitudes toward liberal democratic norms (percent expressing lack of support)



SOURCE: Authors

Confidence in universal suffrage is also qualified: 43% of respondents reject the idea that all citizens should vote regardless of their political knowledge. In addition, 44% of respondents condone bending electoral rules, justifying the dismissal of an electoral commissioner if presidents of the opposing party have done so before. These findings highlight that commitment to competitive, rules-based electoral politics is neither universal nor deeply rooted at the grass-roots level.

The liberal constitutional dimension reveals similarly mixed orientations. While only 12% endorse allowing the president to bypass parliament, far more respondents accept other forms of executive overreach. Roughly 39% support allowing the president to ignore judicial rulings deemed politically biased, and more than half (53%) approve of suspending laws when urgent problems demand swift solutions. Also regarding equality before the law, nearly 40% subscribe to the view that men make better political leaders than women, pointing to gendered hierarchies in political attitudes. This combination of selective institutional deference and openness to executive aggrandizement suggests a shallow commitment to checks and balances.

Interestingly, when asked about the extent to which Ghana is a democracy today, about 66% of activists said that the country is “a democracy with major problems,” while only 16% believed that Ghana is a full democracy. This stands in sharp contrast to the general population: In Afrobarometer’s 2024 round, just 32% of Ghanaians described the country as a democracy with major problems and 23% believed it was a full democracy.

Together, these findings suggest that while Ghanaians broadly recognize the shortcomings of their democracy, such concerns are especially acute among party grassroots who are themselves duty bearers in the country’s democratic project. This heightened awareness under-

scores both the paradox and potential of activists: Despite their own illiberal leanings, they may nonetheless serve as important agents for propagating democratic norms.

Grassroots actors' views on how political parties should be organized

Finally, in our survey and FGDs, we explored how activists would like their parties to be organized. Respondents expressed clear preferences for greater inclusiveness and transparency in party organization, suggesting a latent and deeper support for further democratization of political parties in Ghana. However, party activists appear to prefer restriction in participation to party members (and, perhaps, paid-up members) than further extension to the broader electorate. We summarize the responses of our 58 survey respondents below:

- **Selection of party leaders:** Nearly half of respondents (48%) believed that only registered party members should select party leaders. 24% supported polling station executives, and another 24% endorsed an open primary involving all citizens. Only a small proportion suggested that MPs, party financiers, or senior “elders” should take the lead.
- **Crafting party manifestos:** 43% preferred that appointed experts draft the party’s manifesto. 24% suggested that party leaders should draft it and submit it for member approval, 15% favored drafting by party delegates at conferences, 12% supported authorship by party members, and only 3.5% thought party candidates should draft it.
- **Selection of parliamentary candidates:** A plurality (47%) wanted all registered party members involved in selecting parliamentary candidates. 26% supported polling station executives, 21% favored open primaries for all eligible voters, and 7% believed constituency or national executives should decide.
- **Selection of presidential candidates:** Almost half of respondents (47%) wanted registered party members to have the primary role in selecting presidential candidates. 28% favored polling station executives, 12% each supported open primaries or constituency/national executives, and only 1.7% preferred financiers or party “elders.”
- **Membership types:** 48% favored open membership with no fees, 38% preferred a tiered system differentiating paid and unpaid members, and 14% wanted a single paid membership category.
- **Quota systems for inclusiveness:** More than half of respondents (53%) supported quotas for both internal positions and national election candidates, while about 14% favored quotas limited to either internal positions, national candidates, or none at all.
- **Financing of political parties:** A majority (62%) preferred that party operations and campaigns be funded mainly through membership dues. Smaller shares supported funding by wealthy members or businesspersons (17%), state funding (10%), or MPs (7%).

- **Decisionmaking on important party policies:** 64% favored inclusive decisionmaking. Specifically, 42% preferred member consultation via referendums or surveys, 22% favored input from grassroots delegates at party conferences, and only 30% supported decisions made solely by leadership or expert committees.

Overall, these findings indicate strong grassroots preferences for participatory, transparent, and accountable party structures for party activists and members. Respondents consistently emphasized the importance of member involvement in leadership selection, candidate nomination, and policymaking, while also advocating for inclusive membership systems and mechanisms, such as quotas, to address underrepresentation of women and youth. Financing preferences suggest a desire to reduce elite capture through reliance on broad-based membership contributions rather than dependence on wealthy patrons or state support. Collectively, these insights underscore the need for internal party reforms that institutionalize member participation, enhance transparency, and strengthen the democratic orientation of party operations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Ghana's widely celebrated democratic success is tainted by electoral malpractice, including vote buying, electoral violence, and fraud, as well as pockets of negative support for liberal democratic norms and institutions. We suggest that while political parties have played a significant role in shaping the country's democratic development, their engagement in these anti-democratic practices poses a challenge to further democracy building. We identified local party executives and activists, who function as the "foot soldiers" of mobilization, as critical actors in sustaining these practices.

However, grassroots actors' roles extend beyond elections; they are the daily intermediaries between citizens and political elites. In theory, they also play a fundamental role in holding party leaders and candidates accountable in intraparty contests. Their multifaceted roles indicate that we need to pay attention to their values and roles orientation. We suggest that building democratic values at the party grassroots level is thus central to Ghana's democratic consolidation.

Despite their importance to democracy at large, only a minority of activists report receiving systematic training in civic or democratic responsibilities, and most grassroots mobilization continues to rely on inherited party loyalty and material inducements rather than informed engagement.

At the same time, activists express strong loyalty to their parties and a desire for greater inclusion in decisionmaking. Many emphasize that parties "should listen to us and make us a priority" and provide regular orientation for party agents. This combination—commitment to party work but weak attachment to liberal democratic norms—highlights both the challenges and opportunities for reform.

On this basis, we recommend a five-pronged strategy to strengthen the role of grassroots activists in democracy-building in Ghana:

1. Civic and political education: With support for key democratic freedoms uneven and checks on executive power especially weak, civic education targeted at party activists is essential. Modules should emphasize tolerance, nonviolence, electoral fairness, and the importance of institutional constraints. Civil society organizations such as CDD-Ghana and the Institute for Democratic Governance could collaborate with the National Commission for Civic Education to deliver localized workshops during inter-election periods. Systematic orientation for party agents on electoral rules and professional conduct would also help curb malpractice at polling stations.

2. Anti-vote buying campaigns: Anti-vote buying campaigns should focus directly on party

members and foot soldiers, stressing their responsibility to select credible leaders and the long-term costs of clientelist politics. By engaging grassroots actors—the very agents who mediate these exchanges—civil society groups can help shift incentives away from money politics.

3. Inclusive policymaking: Grassroots actors report limited voice in party decision-making, despite their central role in mobilization. Parties should institutionalize consultation with local executives and members in drafting manifestos and key policy positions. Existing “party sheds,” where activists regularly gather, could be transformed into forums for civic education and structured dialogue, channeling grassroots priorities into national debates.

4. Political party reform: Our findings suggest that grassroots activists are supportive of several reforms necessary for democratizing political parties and strengthening Ghana’s democratic consolidation. Specifically:

- Establishing transparent and accountable financing systems, with majority support for funding parties mainly through membership dues.
- Ensuring credible and fair internal elections, both for grassroots leadership and primaries to select party leaders and candidates.
- Introducing quotas for women and youth in both internal and national elections to promote meaningful inclusion in shaping party agendas and electoral processes.

5. Linking democratic behavior to responsiveness: Finally, it is crucial to strengthen the involvement of polling station executives in district-level budgeting, organizing community forums with members of parliament and district chief executives, and training activists to serve as liaisons for citizens’ concerns. Such crucial engagement can show how democratic practices translate into responsiveness. As one activist noted, democracy should be about “keeping leadership on their toe.”

Ghana’s political parties already operate ideological training institutes, but these largely target elites. Donor support could expand their reach to the grassroots level, embedding democratic values throughout the party hierarchy. By broadening training beyond elite cadres, parties can foster policy-based competition while curbing reliance on patronage and electoral violence.

We believe these strategies can foster liberal democratic norms among grassroots party members, raise the policy content and credibility of intra-party elections, and strengthen mechanisms for inclusive engagement between party elites and rank-and-file members. Collectively, these interventions would not only curb the immediate challenges of money politics, elite capture, and weak civic engagement, but also harness the mobilizing capacity of party activists to advance Ghana’s democratic consolidation.

APPENDIX

A. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: EXPLORING DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND PARTY REFORM ATTITUDES AMONG LOCAL PARTY EXECUTIVES

1. Motivations and pathways to party leadership

- Why did you choose to join the NDC or NPP?
- What motivated you to run for a local party executive position?
- How did you convince members to vote for you?
- Did anyone at the constituency or national level support your campaign financially or in-kind?

2. Campaign behavior

- What do you usually do to support your party during national elections?
- Follow-up: Can you walk us through your mobilization strategies or other activities, such as persuasion techniques?
- Have you ever been asked to: 1. Buy votes (e.g., give out money or items)? 2. Intimidate voters or opposition members? 3. Help unqualified people register?
- If yes: How common are these practices, and how are they justified or criticized within the party?

3. Internal democracy

- Do grassroots members like yourself feel involved in party decisions?
- Can you give an example of how local voices have influenced the party's direction or manifesto?
- How are major decisions—like candidate selection—made in your party?
- What makes it difficult for regular members to be heard?
- Who typically controls these decisions?
- Have you ever felt pressured to conform to party decisions even if you disagreed?
- Do you feel safe expressing your views during party meetings?
- How are women and youth treated within your party?

4. Party primaries

- Are party primaries fair and open? What challenges do you see?
- What changes would you recommend to improve the candidate selection process?

- Are results from local elections always respected by national leadership?

5. Party financing

- In your view, how should parties fund their activities?
- Where does your local party currently obtain funding?
- Should the government support parties to reduce reliance on wealthy individuals?
- Should parties be legally required to declare their sources of funding?

6. Democratic norms

- What does democracy mean to you?
- How important are values like tolerance and peaceful competition in your role within the party?
- Have you received any training on democracy or civic duties/responsibilities?
- Should political parties do more to educate their members on democratic principles and electoral ethics?

B. SAMPLE OF CONSTITUENCIES FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

TABLE A-1

Characteristics of selected constituencies by party, vote margin, and competitiveness (2012–2020)

Constituency	Party	Average Vote Margin (2012–2020)	Turnout (2012–2020)	Competitive
Ada	NDC	0.623	0.738	FALSE
Ayawaso North	NDC	0.228	0.748	FALSE
Shai Osudoku	NDC	0.386	0.722	FALSE
Trobu	NPP	0.270	0.738	FALSE
Ablekuma West	NPP	0.163	0.742	FALSE
Ablekuma North	NPP	0.280	0.740	FALSE
Tema East	NDC	0.065	0.713	TRUE
Ledzokuku	NDC	0.050	0.718	TRUE
Ablekuma Central	NDC	0.029	0.736	TRUE
Tema West	NPP	0.079	0.725	TRUE
Ayawaso West	NPP	0.077	0.719	TRUE
Wuogon				
Amasaman	NPP	0.057	0.725	TRUE

SOURCE: Authors

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BROOKINGS

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