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GHANA'S DEMOCRACY UNDER THE FOURTH REPUBLIC

GEORGE OFOSU, DANIEL ARMAH-ATTOH,
MAVIS ZUPORK DOME, AND EDEM SELORMEY

AUTHORS

GEORGE OFOSU is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Government, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom. Email: g.ofosu@lse.edu

DANIEL ARMAH-ATTOH is a Senior Research Manager, Ghana Center for Democratic Development

MAVIS ZUPORK DOME is a Research Analyst, Ghana Center for Democratic Development

EDEM SELORMEY is the Director of Research, Ghana Center for Democratic Development

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Ghana's democratic trajectory under the Fourth Republic, focusing on the extent of democratic consolidation, the sources of its resilience, and emerging threats. While Ghana earns high marks in international democracy indices, much of this reflects the strength of its liberal institutions rather than deep-rooted electoral democratic norms. Despite regular multiparty elections, political elites often rely on undemocratic practices, and the dominant parties function more as patronage networks than democratic organizations. Consequently, party membership and activism are driven more by patronage than by policy commitments, weakening parties' roles as institutions of democratic accountability. At the population level, although most Ghanaians express support for democracy, survey evidence reveals weak commitment to core liberal principles. A sizable minority approve of authoritarian policies, such as restrictions on the media or non-electoral leadership selection. These dynamics reveal vulnerabilities in both elite and citizen support for democracy. To safeguard democratic resilience, reforms must strengthen party finance regulation, promote internal party democracy, and deepen civic engagement and liberal norms.

Introduction

At 9:35 a.m. on December 8, 2024, Ghana's vice president and flagbearer of the incumbent New Patriotic Party (NPP), Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia, held a press conference to concede electoral defeat to the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) candidate, Mr. John Dramani Mahama. This concession followed Bawumia's phone call congratulating his rival. Speaking before the country's vibrant media, which extensively covered the December 2024 elections, Bawumia affirmed the outcome, stating, "The people have voted for change at this time, and we respect that decision with all humility." (JoyNews 2024) Notably, his concession was based on the party's internal tabulation of results, underscoring the fact that both the incumbent and opposition parties had completed their internal vote tally before the independent Electoral Commission (EC) could officially announce the results.

On December 9, 2024, the EC officially declared Mr. John Dramani Mahama of the NDC as the winner of the 2024 presidential election, securing 56.55% of the valid votes cast (Ghan News Agency 2024). The largest domestic election monitoring group, the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers, supported the official results through its parallel vote tabulation. The election also marked a historic milestone with the election of Ghana's first female vice president. Following the announcement, the country experienced a peaceful transition, culminating in the inauguration of the newly elected leaders on January 7, 2025, as mandated by the 1992 Constitution.

The peaceful transfer of power reinforced Ghana's commitment to democratic stability, a trend observed since the country's transition to multiparty democracy in 1992. Prior to this transition, Ghanaians overwhelmingly endorsed a relatively liberal constitution, which guarantees civil and political liberties, supports competitive multiparty elections, and establishes a system of checks and balances among governmental branches (Owusu 2006, 3–25; Gyimah-Boadi and Joseph 1999). Over the past three decades, Ghana has conducted nine general elections, with four peaceful transfers of power (2001, 2009, 2017, and 2025)

between its two dominant political parties: the NPP and NDC. Ghana's two-party system remains robust, with both major parties demonstrating strong capacities to contest elections, monitor electoral processes nationwide, and tabulate polling station results. These consistent electoral transitions highlight the commitment of political elites to respecting term limits and adhering to the basic principles of electoral democracy. Moreover, Ghana benefits from a vibrant media landscape, an engaged civil society, and strong public support for democratic governance, positioning it as one of Africa's most stable democracies (Oduro et al., 2023; Cheeseman 2015).

Despite these democratic achievements, the 2024 elections also exposed persistent vulnerabilities within Ghana's electoral system. Concerns regarding an uneven playing field (i.e., the rising cost of campaigning), the abuse of state resources by incumbents, and vote buying were widely reported (K. Asante and Oduro 2016). Additionally, allegations of electoral fraud and election-related violence further tainted the process, resulting in at least six deaths and multiple injuries. In the pre-election phase, multiple youth-led protests escalated into violent clashes, while supporters of the NDC and NPP engaged in physical confrontations, heightening political tensions (Agbove 2025). In the post-election period, reports emerged of attacks on election officials and violent confrontations at results aggregation centers, disrupting the collation process in some instances. The severity of these disruptions led to the resignation of an Electoral Commission official, citing frustration over the chaotic conditions surrounding the vote count (GhanaWeb 2025). Political party supporters and activists remain deeply involved in election-related fraud and violence, often motivated by expectations of patronage jobs (Asunka et al. 2019; Armah-Attoh 2017; Bob-Milliar 2012). These undemocratic practices, coupled with the persistence of political vigilantism, underscore the enduring challenges of electoral integrity and security in Ghana despite its international reputation for democratic stability (Jockers et al.; Asante and Van Gyampo 2021; Armah-Attoh 2017; Distinguished 2024). Beyond electoral challenges, other structural and societal issues continue to constrain Ghana's democratic progress. While the election of a woman as vice president in 2024 marks a

significant milestone for gender representation, broader concerns persist regarding women's political inclusion. Despite incremental progress, women remain underrepresented in Parliament, with only 41 of the 276 parliamentary seats occupied by women in 2025—the highest number since the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in 1992 (Bauer and Darkwah 2024). This persistent gender disparity reflects structural barriers, including the financial and political costs of running for office, entrenched gender norms, and weak institutional commitments to affirmative action. In August 2016, the cabinet approved an Affirmative Action Bill aimed at increasing women's political representation, yet nearly a decade later, no substantial progress has been made in its implementation.

Another challenge concerns press freedom and the broader media landscape. Ghana's relatively open media environment has been instrumental in fostering political accountability and amplifying citizen voices, yet journalists continue to face harassment, arrests, and physical attacks, particularly when reporting on politically sensitive issues (Kwode, et al., 2024). Despite the constitutional guarantee of press freedom, state and non-state actors have increasingly targeted investigative journalists, resorting to intimidation, lawsuits, and, in some cases, violence. These threats not only erode media independence but also stifle investigative journalism, limiting the public's access to critical information on governance and corruption.

Concerns also persist regarding judicial independence and perceptions of corruption within the judiciary. While the judiciary remains constitutionally autonomous, growing public skepticism regarding political influence over judicial processes raises concerns about equal access to justice and the rule of law. High-profile corruption scandals, allegations of judicial bias, and delays in adjudicating politically charged cases have reinforced perceptions that the judiciary is vulnerable to political interference (British Broadcasting Corporation 2015). The erosion of judicial credibility undermines public confidence in democratic institutions and weakens horizontal accountability, making it difficult to hold political elites accountable through legal means.

The contrasting narratives of the 2024 elections—peaceful transitions alongside election-related violence, a lack of gender parity, and questionable judicial independence—raise critical questions about Ghana's democratic consolidation and progress that we seek to explore in this paper. In particular, we explore two fundamental questions. First, has Ghana's democracy consolidated? In this paper, democracy is defined as a political system that guarantees civil and political rights, ensures fair, competitive, and inclusive elections, and upholds horizontal accountability, pluralism, the rule of law, and constitutional supremacy (Dahl 1971; Diamond 1999). Consolidation, in this context, refers to the minimization of risks that could lead to democratic erosion, reversal, or decay (Schedler 1998; O'Donnell 1992). If democratic consolidation has been successful in Ghana, what factors explain the country's democratic resilience? And second, what gaps remain in the current democracy building process? How can the country make further progress?

While Ghana's record of electoral alternation and peaceful power transitions suggests progress toward consolidation, significant obstacles undermine its democratic trajectory. Ghana's two dominant parties (NPP and NDC) have developed strong organizational capacities, which are crucial for electoral democracy and political accountability. However, these parties function primarily as electoral machines, often engaging in vote buying (Ichino and Nathan 2012; Daddieh and Bob-Milliar 2012; Brierley and Nathan 2022). At the grassroots level, party supporters tend to prioritize personal gain over democratic norms (Bob-Milliar 2012), often engaging in partisan violence and electoral fraud (Asunka et al. 2019). Political leaders have exhibited inconsistent commitments to press freedom, association rights, and minority protections (Gyimah-Boadi 2015; Freedom House 2023). While Ghana's media landscape remains vibrant, state actors have occasionally suppressed dissenting voices and curtailed press freedoms.

Tracing Ghana's democratic evolution, this study examines the extent of democratic consolidation, the resilience of electoral democracy, and emerging fault lines. Using data from Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) and Afrobarometer (AB), the study explores Ghana's

level of democracy including measures of elites' behaviors and mass attitudes toward democracy over the past three decades. The findings indicate that Ghana's high democratic ratings stem from strong liberal institutions rather than fully consolidated electoral norms. Despite the persistence of multiparty elections, political elites continue to engage in non-democratic practices, raising concerns about the depth of democratic consolidation. Second, although Ghanaians broadly support democracy, survey data suggests a weaker commitment to certain liberal democratic norms. Afrobarometer data indicates a significant minority of Ghanaians express authoritarian preferences, such as supporting media restrictions or non-electoral means of selecting leaders. These patterns raise concerns about the resilience of democratic norms among citizens and the potential for elite-led democratic backsliding.

Consolidating recent advances and building Ghana's democracy would require addressing these challenges through institutional reforms and enhanced electoral security, while greater citizen engagement would be crucial for sustaining a democratic trajectory. In particular, we suggest that three significant obstacles need attention for the country's democratic progress. Strengthening party finance regulations, fostering democratic norms and practices within parties, and reinforcing civic engagement will be essential to ensuring the resilience of Ghana's democratic order in the years ahead.

This paper is split into three sections. In section one, we outline prevailing scholarly theories and methods for assessing democracy that we will utilize throughout our analysis. Section two opens with a brief history of Ghana's Fourth Republic elections and an exploration of progress that has been made in building and consolidating Ghana's democracy thus far, while section three describes challenges still to be overcome. Section four looks to the future of democratic consolidation and provides actionable recommendations for bolstering and fortifying gains made, and section five concludes.

Approaches to assessing democratic consolidation

Democracy building is a multi-stage process, according to many scholarly definitions of democratic development. The initial stage involves establishing what analysts describe as electoral democracy, characterized by regular, multiparty elections that are relatively free and fair in selecting policymakers (Schumpeter 1943). This "minimalist" procedural requirement provides the foundation for deeper democratic consolidation. The next stage focuses on strengthening civil and political liberties, institutionalizing checks and balances, and upholding the rule of law (Dahl 1971; Schmitter and Karl 1991). Countries may also undertake constitutional reforms to eliminate residual authoritarian structures, such as reserved domains of power (Valenzuela et al. 1990; Linz and Stepan 1996). The final stage of democracy building is the establishment of an "advanced democracy," marked by further entrenchment of liberal democratic norms (Schedler 1998).

Schedler (1998) argues that at each stage, democracy advocates prioritize different objectives. In newly democratizing states, the focus is on preventing democratic breakdown (or "negative" consolidation) while progressing toward a fully liberal democracy ("positive" consolidation). Over the past thirty years, Ghana has embarked on this democratic journey, navigating the challenges of institutionalizing multiparty elections, deepening democratic norms, and consolidating liberal democracy.

Democratic consolidation refers to the expectation of regime continuity (Schedler 1998). Assessing Ghana's democratic development requires determining whether the country's current democratic regime is likely to endure (O'Donnell 1996) and identifying the key institutional, behavioral, and structural reforms necessary for further consolidation. This involves evaluating the

state of Ghana's core democratic structures, including political parties, legislative institutions, state bureaucracies, judicial independence, and mechanisms for interest representation.

THREE MAIN APPROACHES

Scholars employ three broad strategies to assess democratic progress: behavioral, attitudinal, and structural approaches (Schedler 2001). While all three approaches contribute to understanding democratic consolidation, behavioral evidence is often prioritized, as past actions under stress provide the strongest predictors of future democratic stability (Burnell and Calvert 1999). Each approach is explained in more detail below.

The behavioral approach evaluates political actors' adherence to democratic norms, particularly their rejection of anti-democratic behavior such as electoral fraud, political violence, or military intervention. Burnell and Calvert (1999) argue that a democracy is considered consolidated when (1) major political actors abstain from anti-democratic actions, including threats of coups, voter intimidation, or election boycotts; (2) executive power remains constrained by democratic institutions, with leaders respecting judicial independence, legislative oversight, and constitutional term limits; and (3) electoral competition remains peaceful, with ruling parties accepting electoral defeats and transferring power without resorting to extra-institutional means. Scholars prioritize behavioral indicators because consistent compliance with democratic norms suggests a high likelihood of regime endurance (Burnell and Calvert 1999). The attitudinal approach examines whether political elites and the public view democracy as the only legitimate form of government (Diamond 1999). This involves assessing (1) normative support for democracy, ensuring that major political actors do not question its legitimacy; (2) public confidence in democratic institutions, such as electoral commissions, courts, and legislatures; and (3) elites' willingness to accept electoral defeats and engage in democratic competition. Scholars frequently rely on public opinion surveys to capture these attitudinal indicators. While these measures provide valuable insights, they are often difficult to quantify

with precision.

The structural approach considers economic and institutional factors that shape democratic resilience. Scholars argue that democratic stability correlates with certain broader socioeconomic conditions, including higher economic development (Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Treisman 2020), a decrease in income inequality (Boix 2006), and strong state capacity (Schedler 2001). Indicators include GDP per capita as a proxy for economic strength, the Gini coefficient to measure income inequality, and institutional effectiveness measures such as judicial independence and electoral commission autonomy.

These three approaches—behavioral, attitudinal, and structural—form an interconnected causal chain in democratic development. Behavioral compliance with democratic norms is the proximate determinant of regime stability. However, elite and public attitudes toward democracy shape behavioral choices, while structural conditions influence both attitudes and political behavior.

In assessing Ghana's democratic consolidation and future trajectory, this study integrates insights from these scholarly approaches, drawing on behavioral evidence, public opinion data, and institutional analyses to evaluate the country's progress toward a resilient and liberal democratic order.

Democracy building and consolidation in Ghana

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GHANA'S MULTIPARTY ELECTIONS AND THEIR OUTCOMES

Ghana's Fourth Republic, an effort to establish constitutional and democratic governance, began in January 1993. The transitional presidential and legislative elections that ushered in this new era were held on November 3 and December 29, 1992, respectively.

Before these elections, Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings, leader of the military-personalistic regime Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) since 1981, announced the transition in his 1991 New Year's Eve message and oversaw the process of drafting the country's 1992 Constitution (Gyimah-Boadi 1991). On May 10, 1991, he announced that Ghana would return to constitutional rule in 1992. On April 28, 1992, the Constitution was approved with an overwhelming 92% of the vote and a turnout rate of 43.7% (Owusu 2006).¹ The ban on political parties was lifted on May 17, 1992.

The new civilian democratic administration of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), still led by President Ft. Lt. J.J. Rawlings, was inaugurated into office on January 7, 1993. But the transition was roundly denigrated by the opposition as "transition without change." (Gyimah-Boadi 1994, 80)² Rawlings had founded the National Democratic Congress (NDC) in June 1992 and resigned from the military in September to run for president. He won the presidential election—which some observers and opposition parties deemed neither free nor fair—with 58% of the vote and was inaugurated as the first president of the Fourth Republic on January 7, 1993 (Lyons 1997, 70; also see Freedom House 2001a). His party also secured 189 out of 200 seats in the National Assembly in legislative elections (Jeffries 1998; Inter Parliamentary Union 1992), which were boycotted by opposition parties protesting alleged fraud in the presidential elections (Gyimah-Boadi 1994; Oquaye 1995).

1 Owusu (2006) reports that while the turnout was low, it was a marked improvement over the voting rates for the 1978 referendum on the proposed Union Government (40.3%) and the 1979 parliamentary elections (35.2%).

2 The reasons for this assessment was twofold. First, some provisions of the 1992 Constitution retained some of the autocratic power of the erstwhile quasi-military ruler and his regime. Rawlings was still the head of state and government, and many of the PNDC ministers were retained after the transition. Second, Parliament was largely a de-facto one-party body dominated by NDC legislators. Moreover, the Parliament's Speaker was the ex-deputy chairman of the PNDC. (See Gyimah-Boadi 1994).

Despite the turbulent start, Rawlings' regime is credited with establishing a fairly liberalized media space (though criminal libel laws were vigorously enforced); ushering in an expansion of human rights, and allowing vibrant extra-parliamentary opposition (Gyimah-Boadi 1994; Jeffries 1998). The opposition that boycotted parliament staged multiple street demonstrations protesting the harsh economic situation (Gyimah-Boadi 1994). One example is the "Kume Preko" demonstration against the attempt to introduce a value-added tax (see GhanaWeb 2022). The Ghana Bar Association also contested executive excesses and scored major legal battles and victories in the courts, appealing to the provisions of the 1992 Constitution (See Gyimah-Boadi 1994).

There were also significant improvements in election administration during Rawlings' regime (including the introduction of transparent ballot boxes, permitting independent election observation, and having party agents presence allowed at polling stations), making the second transition elections more competitive (Gyimah-Boadi and Joseph 1999; Jeffries 1998).

With these significant electoral reforms, Ghana's democracy continued to make progress in December 1996, organizing fairly competitive general elections (Gyimah-Boadi and Joseph 1999; Jeffries 1998; Lyons 1997). The presidential race had two main contenders: Rawlings' Progressive Alliance (comprised of the NDC and other parties), and John Kofi Agyekum Kufuor's Great Alliance (comprised of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and People's Convention Party (PCP)). Rawlings was re-elected as president with 57% of the vote on December 7, 1996, and the NDC won 133 of the 200 parliamentary seats, forming the Progressive Alliance with the EGLE and DPP parties. However, the opposition made significant gains, winning 60 seats in the country's unicameral legislature and Kufuor securing 39.67% of the presidential vote (Jeffries 1998; Gyimah-Boadi and Joseph 1999). The 1996 elections were considered a significant improvement over those of 1992 in terms of fairness and competitiveness. The elections were judged by international observers as free and fair (Freedom House 1998). However, in the run-up, the ruling NDC party had used the state media to promote its campaign and used patronage to sup-

port incumbent politicians' reelection bids (Freedom House 2001b).

On December 7, 2000, Ghana held its third elections of the Fourth Republic, the first without an incumbent on the ballot, as Rawlings respected the Constitution's two-term limit. His vice president, John Evans Atta Mills, was nominated as NDC's new presidential candidate. The opposition, NPP, was highly energized in the 2000 election, building their campaign around issues of economic hardship. It also focused on building an effective party machinery to campaign, police the balloting at polling stations, and withstand intimidation from the incumbent party (Gyimah-Boadi 2001). NPP's candidate, 2016's Kufuor, edged out Mills in a tightly contested race. The party secured 100 of the 200 parliamentary seats. Ultimately, Kufuor won 57% of the vote in the second round of the presidential race, securing his presidency and marking a crucial step in Ghana's democratic journey given the behavior of the incumbent party.³ First, Rawlings did not run in the election, respecting the two-term limit. Second, his party and its presidential candidate accepted defeat, allowing for the first democratic transition of power between two elected leaders (Gyimah-Boadi 2007).

This marked the beginning of the post-Rawlings era in Ghanaian politics. Kufuor was re-elected with 52% of the vote on December 7, 2004, and his NPP won 128 out of 230 parliamentary seats, while the NDC won 94 seats (Gyimah-Boadi 2001).

In 2008, Ghana's democracy was put to the test once again. Presidential and legislative elections were held on December 7, 2008, and the opposition NDC won 115 out of 230 parliamentary seats (Inter Parliamentary Union 2008). The NDC's presidential candidate, former Vice President Mills, narrowly won the presidency with 50.23% of the second-round vote (Gyimah-Boadi 2009; GhanaWeb 2008). Mills was inaugurated on January 7, 2009. This peaceful transfer of power marked

3 Ghana operates a majoritarian electoral system for its presidential elections. In the first-round presidential election, the opposition NPP received 48.3% to NDC's 43.8% (with 3% for a third party). In the absence of a majority, a second round of polls ensued (Gyimah-Boadi 2001).

the second time in Ghana's history where political power was democratically transferred between two elected governments, a signal that Ghana's democracy was consolidating, passing Huntington's "two turnover" test of democratic stability (Huntington 1991, pp 267).

President Mills died in Accra on July 23, 2012, and Vice President John Dramani Mahama was sworn in as acting president in compliance with Article 60(6) of the 1992 Constitution. Four months later, Ghana held its fifth general elections in the Fourth Republic. President Mahama won re-election with 50.72% of the vote, and his party, the NDC, secured 148 out of 275 parliamentary seats, while the NPP won 122 seats (Brierley and Ofosu 2014). Mahama was sworn in on January 7, 2013 (Graphic Online 2025). The NPP challenged the election results, alleging fraud, but the Supreme Court rejected their petition on August 29, 2013 (GhanaWeb 2013). With the opposition accepting the Court's verdict, the outcome of the process served as another milestone in the country's democratic development.

In 2016, Ghana's democratic reputation was further strengthened when incumbent President Mahama lost the election to opposition candidate Nana Akufo-Addo of the NPP. Akufo-Addo was elected with 53.9% of the vote, and the NPP won 169 out of 275 parliamentary seats (Ayee 2017). It was the first time an incumbent president lost an election and handed over power smoothly to an opposition candidate (Bob-Milliar and Paller 2018). Akufo-Addo was re-elected with 51.6% of the vote in the December 7, 2020 elections (British Broadcasting Corporation 2020). In the closely contested legislative race, both the NPP and NDC won 137 seats each, with an independent candidate deciding to caucus with the NPP, giving them a slim majority in Parliament (Inter Parliamentary Union 2020). President Akufo-Addo was sworn in for his second term on January 7, 2021. The NDC rejected the election results and filed a petition with the Supreme Court on December 30, 2020, alleging irregularities, but the Court dismissed the petition on March 4, 2021 (Frimpong 2021). This marked another milestone in the country's democracy building where elites chose to resolve their electoral disputes using lawful means and to abide by the verdicts of the court.

Finally, in 2024, Ghana saw another transfer of power from the incumbent party to the opposition. Akufo-Ado was replaced on the NPP ticket by Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, while Mahama was on the ticket again for the NDC. Ultimately, Mahama, got 6,591,790 votes, which represented 56.42% of valid votes cast. The NPP candidate, Bawumia, had 4,877,611 (41.75%) votes. Accordingly, Mahama was inaugurated as President in December (Graphic Online 2024). As described in the introduction, the transfer of power was remarkable, with political elites from both sides demonstrating maturity and mutual respect.

EVALUATING GHANA'S DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS AND CONSOLIDATION

Our brief account of Ghana's electoral processes over the past thirty years demonstrates the country's significant progress in building and consolidating its democracy since 1992. In particular, achievements have been made in enhancing electoral integrity, political competition, and civil liberties.

While the 1992 elections were contentious, with opposition parties boycotting the parliamentary elections, electoral processes and political rights have since become more firmly institutionalized. The Electoral Commission (EC) has played a crucial role in administering elections fairly, implementing electoral laws, and carrying out reforms that enhance inclusiveness, voter autonomy, and transparency. These reforms include the adoption of transparent ballot boxes, biometric voter registration, and tactile ballots for visually impaired voters (Gyimah-Boadi and Joseph 1999; Jeffries 1998; Lyons 1997). Additionally, the EC has recently enforced some of the financial disclosure laws for political parties, promoting greater accountability in campaign financing.⁴ Despite the dominance of two major parties—the NPP and the NDC—Ghana maintains a competitive multiparty system that ensures political pluralism and voter autonomy. For example, in the 2024 presidential elections, eight additional parties competed in the presidential race (Graphic Online

2024).

Looking at the hallmarks of the aforementioned behavioral approach, several indicators of political elites' behaviors provide optimism about the prospects of democratic consolidation. First, political elites have passed some of the stress tests associated with democratic consolidation. Constitutional term limits have been respected three times and political power have been transferred from an incumbent party to opposition candidates. Such transfers have also included an acceptance of defeat where the incumbent lost by a razor-thin margin. Disagreements over election results have also been settled in the country's Supreme Court (for the 2012 and 2016 elections).

Second, political and civil liberties and press freedom have been defining features of Ghana's democracy, with a vibrant media landscape and robust political debate. Political elites' behaviors have allowed for these conditions to be cultivated freely. Regarding press freedom, the country's repeal of libel laws in 2001 bolstered free speech and media freedoms eased the "culture of silence" that characterized the initial years of democratic transition (Gyimah-Boadi 2009; Prempeh 2008b). Furthermore, the passage of the Right to Information Act in 2019 has strengthened legal access to government data, promoting greater transparency in government functions. Multiple rounds of Afrobarometer surveys corroborate the enjoyment of civil and political liberties of citizens. In the 2024 round of the survey, 84% of Ghanaians reported that they felt free to express their opinions, 92% stated that they felt free to join any political organization of their choice, and 94% affirmed that they were free to vote for their preferred candidate in national elections (Afrobarometer 2024).

Third, the judiciary functions fairly independently, with constitutional protections against arbitrary arrests and habeas corpus provisions. Ghana's economic and personal freedoms have seen gradual improvements over the years, with the Constitution guaranteeing equal legal rights for women and protecting religious and academic freedoms. Business operations are also legally protected, and workers have the right to unionize.

Overall, Ghana has made significant strides in demo-

⁴ A complete list of reforms enacted by Ghana's Electoral Commission is listed on their website at <https://ec.gov.gh/election-reforms/>.

cratic consolidation under its 1992 Constitution, particularly in electoral integrity, political competition, and civil liberties. However, recent trends indicate backsliding in key areas, such as press freedom violations, judicial independence concerns, political violence, corruption, and declining civil liberties. We investigate these potential threats to democratic resilience in section 4. Before examining potential challenges, we discuss factors that may account for the current progress that has been seen in Ghana's Fourth Republic.

EXPLAINING GHANA'S DEMOCRATIC ENDURANCE: INSTITUTIONS, POLITICAL CULTURE, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The literature on Ghana's democratic resilience over the past three decades presents a range of explanations that can be broadly categorized into institutional factors, political culture, and civil society engagement. While some scholars also highlight the role of international donor support, the primary focus for this paper remains on domestic factors that have fostered Ghana's democratic stability.⁵

Many institutional factors explaining Ghana's democratic resilience can be found within the 1992 Constitution, which, despite its imperfections, provides a normative and legal framework that guides political elites, state institutions, civil society organizations, and the general public in their efforts to build and sustain a liberal democratic order (Prempeh 2008b). The Constitution guarantees civil and political liberties, establishes a system of electoral democracy, and ensures checks and balances among the executive, legislature, and judiciary branches of government. It mandates regular, multiparty elections to facilitate vertical accountability while also instituting mechanisms for horizontal accountability, such as judicial oversight and parliamentary scrutiny of executive actions. Additionally, it provides for the creation of independent governmental bodies—such as the Electoral Commission, the National Media Commission, and the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice— all of which play vital roles in election management, media

regulation, and state accountability (Arthur 2010; Gyimah-Boadi 2009; Prempeh 2008b).

Further reinforcing Ghana's liberal democracy is the constitutional empowerment of the media to serve as a watchdog. Article 162(5) of the country's Constitution states that the media "shall uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people of Ghana." (Republic of Ghana 1992) With the repeal of the Criminal Libel Law in 2001 and the passage of the Right to Information Act, the legal environment has increasingly favored freedom of expression and access to information, strengthening citizens' ability to demand government accountability (Abdulai and Crawford 2010).

Beyond institutional arrangements, Ghana's political culture has been a crucial factor in democratic consolidation. The country's elites and citizens broadly exhibit latent support for liberal democracy, viewing it as the only legitimate form of governance. Scholars argue that for democracy to endure, constitutional provisions alone are insufficient; rather, societal actors—including political elites, civil society, and ordinary citizens—must actively uphold democratic principles (e.g., Diamond 1999).

Evidence of elite commitment to democratic norms can be observed in the regularity of competitive elections, the acceptance of electoral outcomes (with the exception of 1992), and the use of legal channels to contest election disputes. Additionally, political parties have progressively democratized their internal processes, allowing broader party membership participation in presidential and parliamentary candidate selection (Ichino and Nathan 2012). Similarly, public opinion surveys consistently show a preference for democracy and multiparty elections over any alternative system of governance (Afrobarometer 2024b). These factors create a political environment where attempts to undermine democratic rule would likely face strong resistance.

Ghana's historical identity as the "Black Star of Africa" also contributes to democratic resilience. The country was a model British colony and the first African nation to gain independence, setting the stage for decoloniza-

⁵ We report analysis of data on Ghana processed by <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu>.

tion across the continent. In a region characterized by frequent democratic failures, Ghanaian political elites and the public maintain a strong desire to uphold the country's democratic reputation (The Economist 2008). This aspiration serves as a powerful deterrent against authoritarian backsliding.

The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) and the media in strengthening democratic accountability has been widely acknowledged. Bolstered by the protections given in the Constitution and other Acts and the repeal of criminal libel laws, Ghana's media landscape has facilitated both vertical and horizontal accountability. The media serves as a platform for citizen engagement, government scrutiny, and electoral transparency (Selormey 2013; Gadzekpo 2007; Arthur 2010).

Through radio and television call-in programs, citizens directly voice concerns and demand government responsiveness, contributing to Ghana's "culture of loudness." (Prempeh 2008b, 100) Additionally, the media plays a critical role in election monitoring, exposing vote buying, electoral violence, and fraud while fostering a culture of free and fair electoral competition (Arthur 2010; Gyimah-Boadi 2001). Investigative journalism has further strengthened horizontal accountability, prompting state agencies to investigate allegations of corruption and electoral misconduct (Gadzekpo 2007).

Similarly, CSOs have played a significant role in Ghana's democratic transition and consolidation. Since 1996, CSOs have engaged in election observation to deter fraud (Asunka et al. 2019) and have organized presidential and parliamentary debates to encourage policy-oriented voting (Brierley, Kramon, and Ofosu 2020). Moreover, they contribute to policy research and public opinion studies, increasing the democratic content of governance and legislative decision making (Prempeh 2008b; Arthur 2010).

While Ghana's electoral process has been relatively stable, it has not been without challenges. Scholars describe electoral disputes as potential "democratic ruptures"—moments where flaws in the electoral process could trigger constitutional crises (Bob-Milliar and Paller 2018). However, rather than undermining

democracy, such disputes have strengthened Ghana's democratic development by encouraging electoral reforms through the exposure of weaknesses in election administration, educating citizens on electoral procedures and democratic rights, and providing opposition parties with lessons on electoral strategy and the importance of polling station vigilance. Notably, electoral petitions have consistently been resolved through legal mechanisms, reinforcing the legitimacy of judicial arbitration in political disputes. A well-functioning legal framework for contesting election results is an essential feature of democratic resilience.

Challenges to democracy building and consolidation in Ghana

We now consider potential challenges to Ghana's democracy building efforts. We adopt the behavioral and attitudinal approaches, analyzing the behavior of political elites regarding democratic norms and rules, and the beliefs and attitudes of political elites and masses towards democracy (democratic culture). Our goal is not to establish whether Ghana's democracy is consolidated, but to examine potential fault lines and what efforts might be required in completing Ghana's democratic journey. In other words, we examine whether there are signs of weakness in the country's democratic progress.

To do so, we analyze the behaviors and norms of political elites and political parties and the democratic attitudes and beliefs of citizens toward the ideals of liberal democracy, drawing on two principal sources of data. For elites and institutions such as political parties, we use data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) project, which provides measures of countries' progress in both electoral and liberal democracy, along with constituent indices that ultimately determine an overall country democracy score. Our focus is on V-DEM's measures of liberal democracy and its electoral and liberal components (Coppedge

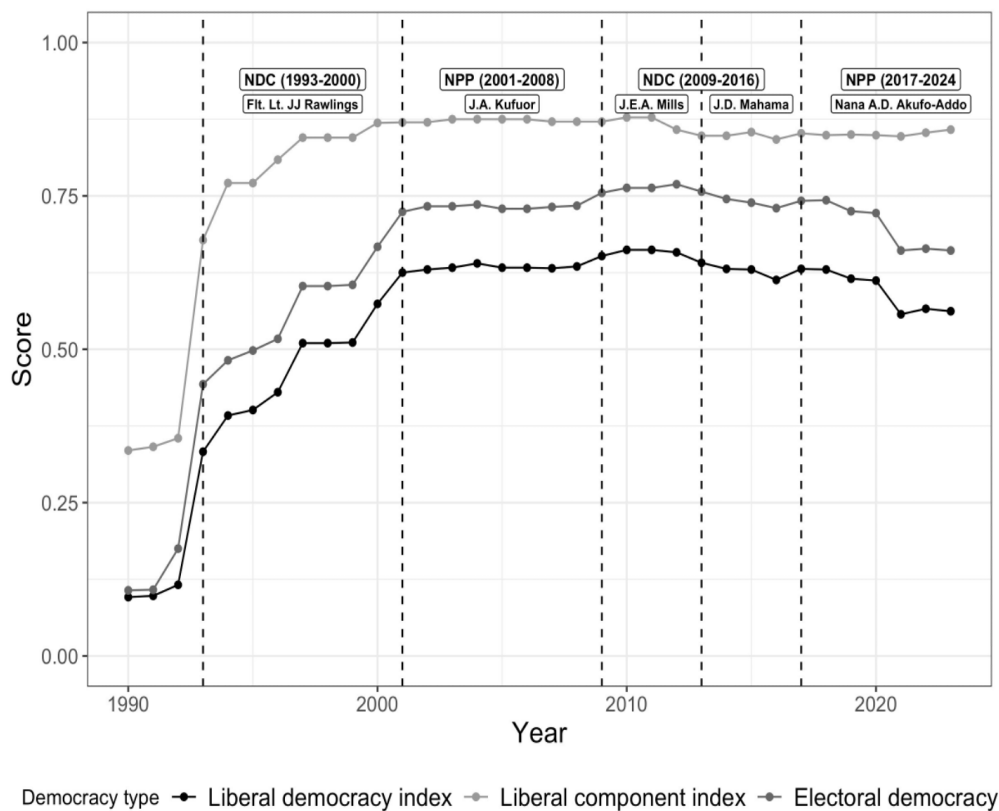
et al. 2021). The indices provided by V-DEM and used within this analysis are composed of variables that provide objective and subjective data points. The subjective data points are informed by the perceptions of a cohort of experts and cover topics that assess institutional and elite behaviors at the national level. We believe that expert judgements on V-DEM about countries are informed by their perceptions about behavior of elites and political organizations at the national level (Coppedge et al. 2021). Accordingly, these data, which measure quality of these components of democracy, provide a good indication of elite attitudes toward democracy given the political will they demonstrate to implement policies, laws, and protections to defend these components—or the lack thereof. We complement our analysis with scholarly accounts and our observations of Ghana’s democratic process. We also use Afrobarometer data, which has been collected in Ghana since 1999, to assess citizens’ perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward democracy.

POLITICAL ELITES AND PARTIES’ DEMOCRATIC NORMS AS REFLECTED BY V-DEM SCORES

Figure 1 plots V-DEM’s high-level democracy indices for Ghana between 1990 and 2023. We focus on the country’s progress toward liberal democracy and its two primary components, electoral democracy and liberal institutions. For reference, we also show the relevant governing periods. Each index ranges from 0 (low) to 1 (high), representing the degree of democracy. Consistent with the narrative above, Ghana has made significant strides since the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2001, Ghana’s liberal democracy score increased from 0.10 to 0.63, a more than sixfold improvement. Since then, the country’s progress stalled and has showed signs of backsliding in the past four years. It scored 0.56 in 2023, a 13% decline from its peak score of 0.64 in 2013.

FIGURE 1

Democratic trajectory in Ghana



SOURCE: Varieties of Democracy, 2025

From Figure 1, we can highlight three key conclusions. First, Ghana has consistently scored higher on elites' commitment to liberal institutions than electoral conduct, indicating that its democracy score is largely driven by a lack of progress in organizing fairer and peaceful elections, despite certain strides made as described above. Second, much of the country's democratic progress occurred within the first eight years of its transition, with scores stabilizing or stagnating between 2001 and 2017. Third, the country appears to be on a downward trajectory following this period of stability, possibly due to a further decline in electoral democracy in the last four years despite peaceful

turnovers of power, which has, in turn, hindered further advancements toward liberal democracy.

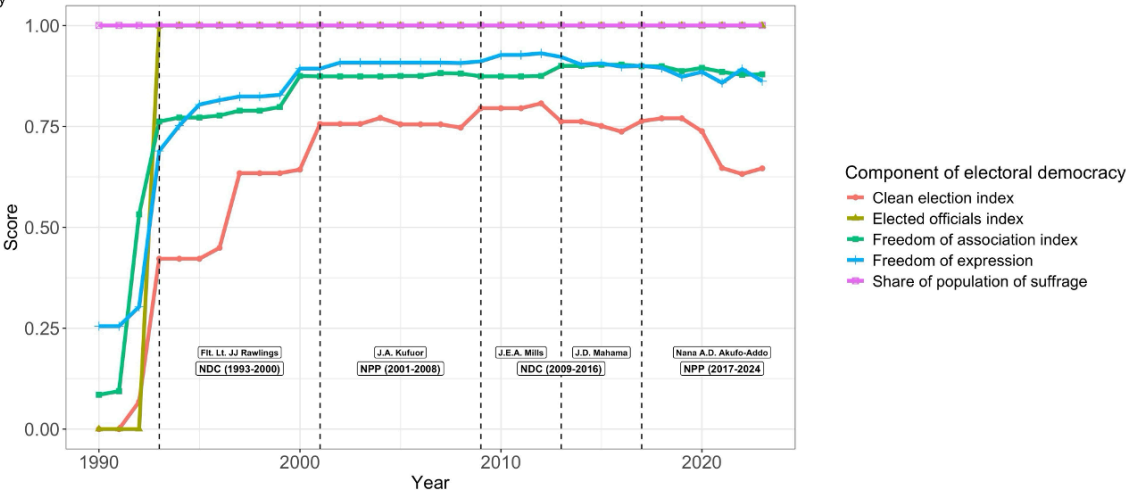
We further disaggregate the subcomponents of the electoral and liberal indices in Figure 2.⁶ The data

6 Electoral democracy scores measure whether electoral opportunities are free and fair. These are an index of the following: the weighted average of the indices measuring free of association (thick)(v2x_frassoc_thick), clean elections index (v2xel_frefair), freedom of expression (v2x_fre-exp_altinf), elected officials (v2x_elecoff), and suffrage (v2x_suffr). The liberal components of the Liberal Democracy Index comprise: equality before the law and individual liberty

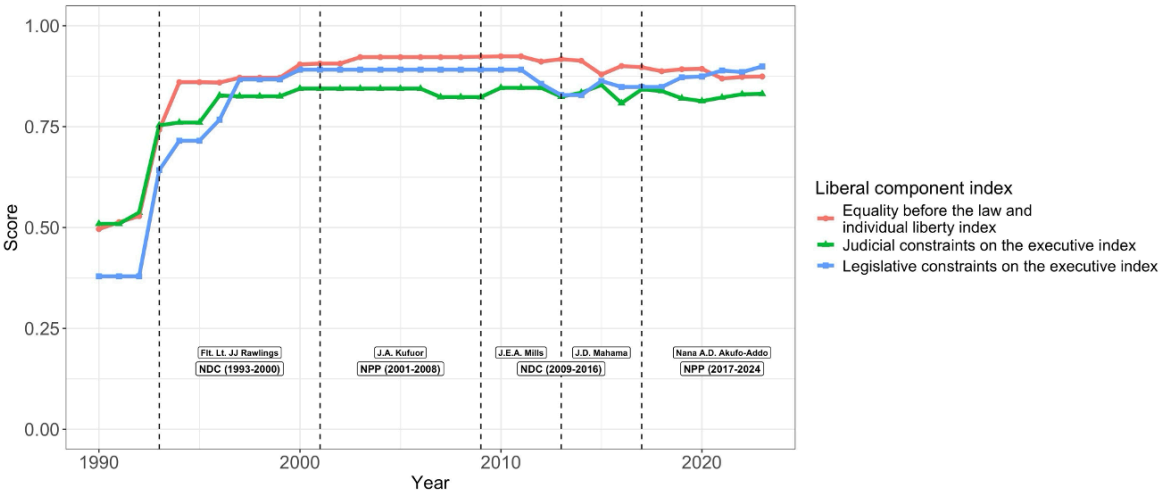
FIGURE 2

Trajectories of components of electoral and liberal democracy

Panel A: Electoral Democracy



Panel B: Liberal Institutions



SOURCE: Varieties of Democracy, 2025

suggests that Ghana has struggled to consistently ensure the integrity of its elections since its transition to democracy. As discussed in the previous section, Ghana has been successful in implementing policies to ensure election integrity and media freedom. However, elections have continued to be affected by voting irregularities, election violence, registration fraud, and vote buying perpetrated by elites. Additionally, concerns persist around freedom of expression, access to alternative sources of information, and freedom of association. On the other hand, the country still performs relatively well in terms of equality before the law, individual liberties, and judicial and legislative constraints on executive power. While the executive branch, in theory, could undermine these checks and balances, our analysis of the V-DEM data suggest that Ghana's elites generally uphold these institutions, helping to sustain the core tenets of liberal democracy.

However, we note that there is limited systematic analysis of how these institutions of horizontal accountability function in practice. For instance, while Brierley (2012) and Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah (2012) observe increasing assertiveness within the legislature, Lindberg (2009) highlights its co-option through clientelism and patronage. Additionally, citizens' assessments of Ghana's liberal democracy suggest that the positive V-DEM findings should be interpreted with caution. According to Afrobarometer survey data from Rounds 2 to 9, on average, 52% of citizens report being treated unequally under the law, a figure that rose from 28% in Round 2 (2002) to 75% in Round 9 (2022). Furthermore, between 2008 and 2022, on average, 56% of all citizens interviewed believed that officials who commit crimes often or always go unpunished, an increase from 28% in Round 4 (2008) to 77% in Round 9 (2022). Similarly, the proportion of Ghanaians who believe the president often or always ignores the courts increased from 14% in Round 2 (2002) to 31% in Round 9 (2022). The perception that the president disregards parliament also rose, from 7.7% in Round 5 to 33% in Round 9 (2022). Accordingly, deeper analyses, such as that

(v2xcl_rol), judicial constraints on the executive (v2x_jucon), and legislative constraint on the executive (v2xlg_legcon) (Coppedge et al. 2021).

by Oduro, Selvik, and Dupuy (2023), are essential to assess elites' commitment to and compliance with the country's liberal institutions in practice.

CHALLENGES TO ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY: POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTION FRAUD AND VIOLENCE

Our findings suggest that despite Ghana's record of nine elections, peaceful electoral turnovers, and the apparent commitment of political elites to democratic norms, the integrity of its elections remains a critical weakness in its democratic trajectory. While the presence of peaceful elections contributes to Ghana's democratic credentials, they do not fully capture the challenges embedded within its electoral processes. Each election has been characterized by issues of electoral fairness, fraud, and political violence, raising concerns about the quality of Ghana's democratic governance.

Electoral playing field and campaign finance.

One of the primary concerns relates to the uneven electoral playing field, which disproportionately favors the two dominant political parties—the NPP and NDC—while limiting the participation of smaller parties. Civil society organizations and election observers have repeatedly highlighted the high financial barriers to contesting elections, particularly the increasing registration fees and the rising cost of political campaigns (K. Asante and Oduro 2016). In 2020, the registration fee for presidential candidates was GHC 100,000 (\$6,500), which represented a 100% increase from 2016. In 2024, the EC maintained presidential fees at GHC 100,000 and GHC 10,000 (\$650) for parliamentary candidates, but these amounts make it difficult for less financially endowed candidates to compete (GhanaWeb 2024). Furthermore, the absence of clear campaign finance regulations exacerbates these inequalities, allowing well-funded candidates to dominate the political space. The opaque nature of party financing and the abuse of state resources and media by incumbent parties for campaigning further entrench this disparity, making Ghana's elections susceptible to elite capture and corruption.

Election management and perceptions of bias.

While Ghana's EC has been praised for its independence and professionalism, it has also faced persistent accusations of partisan bias. The EC's appointment process, which allows the president to appoint the chairperson and other commissioners in consultation with the Council of State (Article 43 of the 1992 Constitution), has led opposition parties to question the neutrality of the body. Although Article 46 of the Constitution safeguards the EC's independence, political parties—particularly those in opposition—often adopt an accusatory stance toward the Commission. Public confidence in the EC has also declined. Afrobarometer survey data indicate a steady increase in public distrust in the EC, increasing from 32% in 2000 (R1) to 67% in 2024 (R10), reflecting a growing perception of bias and inefficiency (Afrobarometer 2000, 2024).

Electoral malpractice: vote buying, fraud, and political violence. Despite the increasing institutionalization of elections, Ghana's major political parties have played a significant role in perpetuating electoral fraud, vote buying, and political violence. Analyses of Ghana's elections reveal that political elites frequently deploy undemocratic strategies, including voter registration fraud (Ichino and Schündeln 2012), election-day fraud and violence (Oquaye 1995; Jockers, Kohnert, and Nugent 2010; Asunka et al. 2019), vote buying, ethnic bloc voting (Lindberg 2003; Ninsin 2016; Nathan 2019), and leveraging traditional leaders' influence to manipulate electoral outcomes (Nathan 2019; Brierley and Ofosu 2024). Political actors also employ hate speech, further polarizing the electorate. Some scholars argue that international praise for Ghana's elections may be influenced by diplomatic and technocratic biases, which prioritize political stability and conflict prevention over the investigation of electoral irregularities (Jockers, Kohnert, and Nugent 2010). Consequently, limited efforts have been made to introduce deep electoral reforms to curb these malpractices and improve election quality.

Empirical evidence supports these concerns. For instance, reports from Ghana's 2008 presidential elections highlighted unexplained bloc voting patterns, implausibly high voter turnout in party strongholds, and suspicious voter registers. However, the EC

showed little interest in investigating these allegations, reflecting a broader trend of institutional complacency in addressing electoral fraud. Therefore, it was no surprise that these allegations, which surfaced again in 2012, led to the country's first presidential election petition. Similarly, during the 2016 elections, video evidence surfaced showing then-President Mahama distributing cash to market vendors during a campaign event (The Economist 2016). Such incidents reinforce the perception that vote buying is normalized within Ghanaian elections, undermining voter autonomy and weakening democratic accountability.

Political vigilantism and electoral violence. In addition to fraud and vote buying, political vigilantism remains a serious threat to Ghana's democratic stability (R. Asante and Van Gyampo 2021; Armah-Attoh 2017). The two major parties have become vehicles for political violence and intimidation. Reports from Ghana's 2016, 2020, and 2024 elections document clashes between NPP and NDC supporters, as well as attacks on EC officials. Beyond election-day violence, parties have also set up political vigilante groups that intimidate voters, disrupt electoral processes, and threaten election officials (Armah-Attoh 2017). Both major parties have been linked to such groups, raising concerns about partisan-backed electoral violence. Asante and Van Gyampo (2021) reference reports of violent clashes between the Azorka Boys and the Bolgatanga Bulldogs—vigilante groups affiliated with the NDC and NPP, respectively—during the Talensi by-election in the Upper East Region in July 2015.

The impact of political vigilantism extends beyond elections. Studies suggest that party activists often join political parties for personal gains rather than ideological or policy commitments (Bob-Milliar 2012; Brierley and Nathan 2022). This patronage-driven activism fuels political violence, particularly in Ghana's winner-takes-all electoral system, where access to state resources depends on electoral success. In cases where party activists feel neglected after their party wins power, they resort to violence to claim promised benefits. For example, in March 2017, members of the pro-NPP vigilante group Delta Force physically attacked George Adjei, the newly appointed Ashanti Region Security Coordinator, because they disapproved

of his appointment (Freedom House 2018a). Similarly, in October 2018, members of the same group attempted to attack a government minister at an NPP party meeting, claiming the minister had failed to deliver on a promise to recruit them into security forces (Freedom House 2018b). These incidents illustrate how patronage networks and electoral violence are deeply intertwined in Ghanaian politics.

Internal party democracy and grassroots participation. Despite these challenges, Ghana's major political parties have made some progress in democratizing candidate selection processes at the national level, allowing grassroots members to participate in primaries (Ichino and Nathan 2012). However, this apparent democratization has not translated into substantive policy engagement at the grassroots level. Instead, party mobilization strategies continue to revolve around personal incentives and patronage rather than policy debates (Ichino and Nathan 2012; Daddieh and Bob-Milliar 2012). This disconnect between party elites and grassroots members raises concerns about the depth of democratic engagement within political parties.

We argue that these informal, undemocratic electoral practices undermine Ghana's overall democratic progress as reflected in the V-DEM score. The persistent use of electoral fraud, vote buying, and violence weakens citizen control over the democratic process and reduces political responsiveness (Ofori 2019). The erosion of electoral integrity is likely to undermine public confidence in elections, one of the fundamental institutions of democracy. While Ghana has received praise for its multiparty elections, survey data indicate that public skepticism remains high. Between Afrobarometer Rounds 1 (2000) and 9 (2022), the proportion of Ghanaians who believe national elections are either not free and fair or are free and fair but with major problems has remained relatively unchanged (37% in Round 1 (2000) vs. 32% in Round 9 (2022)) (Afrobarometer 2000, 2022)

CITIZENS' NORMS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Ghanaians' commitment to democracy is evidenced by

their overwhelming approval (92%) of the 1992 Constitution, which aspires to establish the country as a liberal democratic regime (Owusu 2006, 8). However, since the Constitution comprises multiple components, including some that undermine liberal democracy, it is difficult to infer which aspects Ghanaians specifically approve or disapprove of from a single vote. Another indication of citizens' support for democracy is their high level of enthusiasm in voting, with an average turnout of 73% for presidential elections and 76% for parliamentary elections between 2004 and 2020 (Authors' calculation using data from International IDEA (2024)). However, these figures reveal little about citizens' underlying norms and attitudes toward democracy and its institutions or whether these views have shifted over time.

To assess the evolution of citizens' attitudes towards liberal democracy, we draw on Afrobarometer data. Unfortunately, Afrobarometer does not contain all indices required to build and compare citizens' attitudes over time (as specified in V-DEM). However, it includes useful variables that can be tracked over time.

Table 1 provides a list of ten variables drawn from Afrobarometer, focusing data collected between 2008 (Round 4) and 2024 (Round 10). Following Diamond (1999), we evaluate citizens' support for these principles inversely—the proportion of individuals expressing a lack of support for these dimensions of electoral and liberal democratic principles in Ghana. Figure 3 shows the results. Following Diamond (1999, 2002), we adopt a 15% threshold to indicate a lack of democratic consolidation in Ghana. This benchmark reflects the view that democracy is not fully consolidated unless it enjoys near-universal support—typically at least 85% of citizens must prefer democracy over any authoritarian alternative. In the Ghanaian context, when more than 15% of citizens express support for one-party rule, media restriction, or unequal treatment before the law, it signals that democratic norms are not deeply internalized or that a sizable minority are excluded from the political process, which makes the system susceptible to erosion. The threshold also offers a practical standard for evaluating the extent to which democratic values have taken root in Ghana's political culture, beyond the formal holding of regular elections.

TABLE 1

Variables measured capturing citizens' negative views towards liberal democracy

Component	Statement
ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY	
Freedom of association	Only one party should rule
Freedom of association	Unnecessary to have many parties
Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information	Government bans organizations it disagrees with
Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information	Government controls media
Support for key decisionmakers being elected	Choose leaders through means other than elections
Support for key decisionmakers being elected	Government should get things done (i.e., should be unaccountable to citizens)
LIBERAL INSTITUTIONS	
Support for equality before the law	Men make better political leaders
Support for judicial constraints on executive	President should be free to act (no judicial constraint)
Support for legislative constraints on executive	President should be free to act (no legislative review)
Support for legislative constraints on executive	President should pass laws without worrying about Parliament

SOURCE: Afrobarometer, 2024

law, it signals that democratic norms are not deeply internalized or that a sizable minority are excluded from the political process, which makes the susceptible to erosion. The threshold also offers a practical standard for evaluating the extent to which democratic values have taken root in Ghana's political culture, beyond the formal holding of regular elections.

Across multiple indicators of the electoral and liberal components of democracy, we find that a sizable minority of Ghanaian citizens are not fully committed to liberal democratic principles. While some indicators show signs of improvement, the results suggest that significant effort is still needed to bolster citizen support for liberal democracy, even thirty years after the transition to multiparty elections.

The Ghana Round 10 (2024) Afrobarometer survey data established that for the electoral component of liberal democracy, a substantial proportion of citizens (29%) continue to express skepticism about the need for many political parties. Between 2008 and 2024, this figure declined by six percentage points, still above the threshold. Many (13%) also agree that one-party rule would suffice, an increase of four percentage points for the same period.

Additionally, support for government restrictions on the media or for banning organizations it disagrees with remains quite high above the 15% threshold (i.e. 27.5% (2008) and 30% (2024), respectively). While support for the government proscribing organizations it disagrees with declined by a substantial 8 percentage

points between 2008 and 2024, the score for media censorship or control declined by an insignificant one percentage point.

There has also been an increase in the share of Ghanaians (from 12% in 2008 to 18% in 2024) who believe that decisionmakers should be selected through methods other than elections. Moreover, for a decade (2014 to 2024), the share of Ghanaians who subscribe to a government that can get things done without being accountable to the people has remained fairly stable (31% in both 2014 and 2024) and above the threshold.

Concerning liberal components, while the proportion of citizens who expressed a lack of support for the three dimensions declined by 6% to 10% over time across

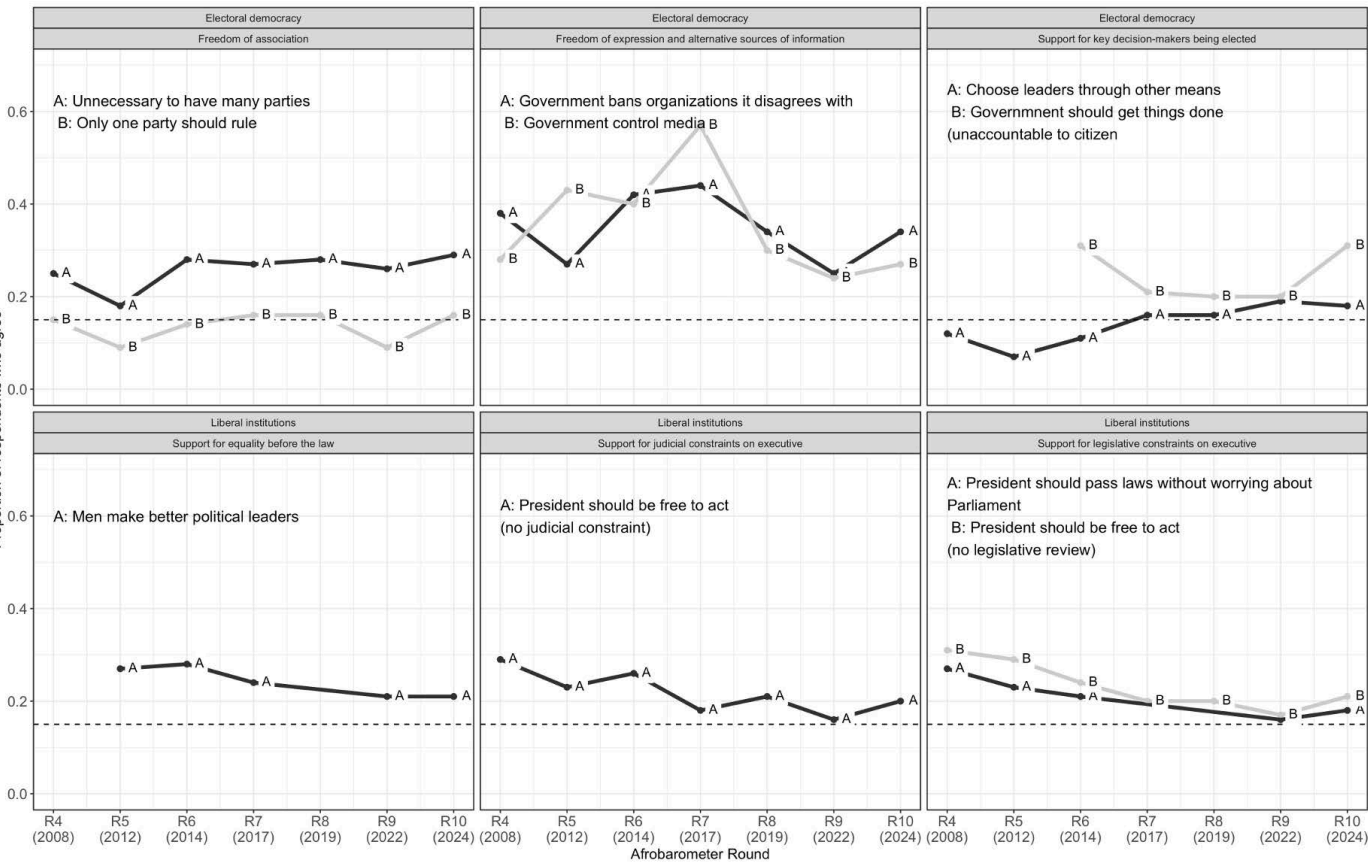
the four indicators analyzed, the yearly averages are all above the threshold (see row two of Figure 3). Specifically, the proportion of citizens who believe that men make better political leaders and that the president should be free to act without judicial or parliamentary constraints has remained high between 2008 and 2024.

Completing
Ghana's democratic
consolidation

Our analysis, drawing from expert assessments

FIGURE 3

Extent of citizens' lack of support for liberal democracy across AB rounds



SOURCE: Afrobarometer, 2024a

(V-DEM), scholarly accounts, and citizen perspectives, highlights significant progress in democratic development during Ghana's Fourth Republic. However, critical gaps remain that threaten the deepening and consolidation of democratic governance. Despite Ghana's record of peaceful electoral transitions and democratic stability, election integrity remains a weak link in its democratic trajectory. Persistent issues such as campaign finance opacity, electoral fraud, political violence, and vote buying continue to undermine the credibility of the country's electoral process. The perception of partisan bias within the EC, coupled with growing voter distrust, further exacerbates these challenges. Additionally, the limited commitment to democratic norms and principles among party members and activists presents a formidable barrier to reform as political parties consolidate their power. These dynamics underscore four key challenges: safeguarding election integrity, democratizing political parties, reforming political party financing, and ensuring sustained popular support for democracy.

Ensuring election integrity remains an urgent priority. Electoral malpractice, including vote buying, fraud, and political violence, continue to threaten democratic stability, particularly during voter registration, campaigning, and results collation. While further research is needed to assess the impact of these undemocratic party strategies on electoral integrity and political accountability, immediate reforms are necessary. Relevant state agencies must impartially enforce existing electoral laws and ensure accountability for violations. Additionally, stronger oversight mechanisms are needed to prevent incumbent parties from using state resources to tilt electoral outcomes, thereby promoting a more level playing field. Addressing these persistent challenges will require greater transparency and independence within the EC, stronger enforcement of electoral regulations, and targeted measures to deter vote buying and political vigilantism.

Beyond election management, the internal democratization of political parties remains a critical gap. Research suggests that many Ghanaians join political parties and become activists or executives not based on shared policy objectives, but due to the selective incentives these parties provide (Bob-Milliar 2012;

Brierley and Nathan 2022). Party structures, especially at the grassroots level, often lack internal democratic accountability, making party members susceptible to inducements to engage in undemocratic practices. Many party executives, activists, and organizers anticipate government appointments, loans, or other material benefits in exchange for their loyalty and efforts (Brierley and Nathan 2022). This patronage-driven political mobilization weakens the ability of party members to hold their leaders accountable and reinforces the notion that political parties serve as electoral machines rather than platforms for articulating and implementing policy. Strengthening internal party democracy, promoting greater transparency, and fostering policy-driven mobilization are essential for enhancing party accountability and deepening democratic participation.

Political party finance reform remains another unresolved issue. Ghana's lack of a transparent and enforceable regulatory framework for campaign and political party financing has made elections highly resource-intensive and exclusionary. Recognizing their limited electoral viability, smaller parties often contest elections not to win but to leverage their role in potential run-off elections as a bargaining tool for patronage from dominant parties (Bob-Milliar 2019). This transactional nature of political competition distorts electoral incentives and reinforces the duopoly of the NPP and NDC. Without comprehensive reforms to improve transparency in political financing, limit illicit funding, and prevent excessive reliance on money in politics, Ghana's elections will remain vulnerable to corruption and undue influence by economic elites.

Sustaining popular support for democracy is equally crucial to consolidating Ghana's liberal democratic order. While Ghanaians consistently express strong support for democracy, their commitment to specific liberal democratic principles is often inconsistent. A significant proportion of citizens, for example, exhibit tolerance for authoritarian alternatives, including support for press restrictions and banning opposition parties. These illiberal attitudes, if left unchallenged, could erode public resistance to democratic backsliding and embolden political elites to undermine democratic norms. Strengthening civic education,

enhancing media literacy, and fostering greater public engagement with democratic institutions are essential strategies to reinforce Ghana's democratic culture and prevent democratic erosion.

REMAINING FORMAL (INSTITUTIONAL) CHALLENGES

While we have primarily focused on informal challenges—attitudes and behaviors—to democratic development in Ghana, other scholars have pointed to institutional design flaws that hinder the country's democratic consolidation. Analysts argue that specific provisions within the Fourth Republican Constitution create an overly dominant executive branch, weakening checks and balances and tilting the political system toward executive centralization (Prempeh 2008b; Gyimah-Boadi 2009). As in many other sub-Saharan African countries, Ghana's institutional framework dilutes mechanisms of oversight and allows incumbents to consolidate power with minimal constraints (Bleck and Van de Walle 2018).

A key structural issue is the lack of clear separation of powers between the executive and the legislature. The Constitution legally requires the president to appoint a majority of cabinet ministers from Parliament (Article 78, Clause 1). This weakens legislative oversight and erodes Parliament's role as an independent check on executive power. Presidents frequently appoint experienced legislators as ministers, depriving Parliament of institutional expertise and consolidating executive control (Lindberg 2009). Moreover, because the legislature is structurally weak, many MPs—especially backbenchers—aspire to ministerial positions, making them susceptible to executive co-option. This dynamic reinforces executive dominance, as legislators prioritize political survival and potential ministerial appointments over independent legislative scrutiny.⁷

7 For example, in the newly constituted 2025–2028 Parliament, the minority leader, Afenyo Markin, taunted the ruling party's backbenchers by suggesting they were no more likely to secure ministerial positions than opposition MPs.

Beyond legislative weakness, the executive's control over the legislative process further limits Parliament's effectiveness. Article 108 grants the president exclusive authority to introduce bills with financial implications, effectively reducing Parliament to a law-passing rather than a law-making institution (Prempeh 2008b). This structural imbalance not only weakens the deliberative function of the legislature but also further consolidates executive dominance in policy formulation and national budget decisions.

Another critical issue is the scope of executive appointments, which grants presidents vast patronage powers. Upon assuming office, the Ghanaian presidency controls at least 4,000 executive appointments, including ministers, ambassadors, heads of state agencies, board directors, presidential staffers, and district chief executives (mayors) (Debrah 2012). While appointments to constitutional bodies such as the Electoral Commission, Auditor General, and Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice require parliamentary approval, the threshold for approval remains weak, offering only limited checks on presidential discretion. Additionally, the absence of legal limits on the number of ministerial appointments allows incumbents to expand executive influence unchecked, further entrenching patronage politics and elite co-option (Prempeh 2008b, 2008a).

These provisions undermine effective checks and balances, enabling executives from both major parties to consolidate power, accumulate political rents, and dispense patronage with minimal institutional constraints. Consequently, there is little incentive for elite-led reforms, as political actors take turns to “chop” (exploit state resources) while in office (Lindberg 2003). Executive dominance also shifts the focus of political competition, making elections the primary battleground for accessing state resources, rather than a process of policy-driven governance. The result is a highly competitive yet patronage-driven political system where parties are primarily motivated by the desire to control the state's vast economic and political resources (Oduro, Selvik, and Dupuy 2023).

The limited political will to undertake constitutional reforms further reinforces these structural barriers.

In September 2012, the NDC government established a five-member Constitution Review Implementation Committee (CRIC) to act on the recommendations of the Constitution Review Commission. The CRIC proposed 97 constitutional amendments, including 41 entrenched provisions requiring a national referendum and 56 that could be revised through parliamentary procedures (Oduro et al., 2023). However, no progress has been made even on the reforms that required only parliamentary approval, demonstrating elite reluctance to alter provisions that entrench executive dominance. Similarly, a 2019 referendum to amend the constitutional requirement for presidential appointment of district chief executives—an issue that had widespread public support (Armah-Attoh and Norviewu 2018)—was abruptly canceled at the president’s request, highlighting the executive’s ability to stall democratic reforms when they threaten entrenched interests (Citi Newsroom 2019).

Addressing formal and informal democratic challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach, bringing together electoral authorities, political parties, civil society organizations, and international partners. Structural reforms must enhance electoral integrity, strengthen internal party democracy, regulate political finance, and cultivate broader democratic norms. Without these reforms, Ghana’s democracy will remain vulnerable to executive overreach, political rent-seeking, and the erosion of democratic accountability.

Conclusion

Ghana’s democratic trajectory reflects significant progress in electoral competition, institutional development, and peaceful political transitions, yet vulnerabilities remain that could undermine its long-term consolidation. As scholars argue, the consolidation of democracy requires eliminating, neutralizing, or converting disloyal actors who pose a risk to democratic survival (Schedler 1998). These actors may include military factions, business elites, violent political groups, elected officials who engage in anti-democratic tactics, or a disenchanted population that loses faith in democracy. While Ghana has largely avoided military interventions in its Fourth Republic

(Agyeman-Duah 2002), it faces a different but equally critical challenge—the potential for elected leaders to erode democratic norms from within. Instead of outright coups, democratic backsliding in Ghana may emerge through gradual institutional decay, the manipulation of electoral processes, and the entrenchment of patronage-driven governance.

Elected leaders have multiple avenues to weaken democracy. The rule of law can be eroded through state-sponsored violence or institutional weakness and election integrity can be undermined by strong parties that do not subscribe to democratic norms and principles (Schedler 1998). The continued abuse of state resources by incumbents, coupled with unregulated political financing, vote buying, and political vigilantism, distorts Ghana’s democratic playing field and undermines electoral fairness. Additionally, press freedom violations, constraints on judicial independence, and the shrinking of civil liberties threaten Ghana’s democratic resilience.

If left unchecked, these trends may gradually erode Ghana’s democratic foundations, making it more susceptible to authoritarian practices disguised within democratic institutions.

To secure the country’s democratic gains, structural reforms must be enacted to strengthen electoral laws, regulate campaign financing, and eliminate political vigilantism. Without these reforms, Ghana’s democracy will remain vulnerable to elite manipulation and gradual erosion. Addressing these challenges requires a commitment to transparency, anti-corruption measures, and enhanced civil liberties protections. The future of Ghana’s democracy will depend on the political will of elites, the effectiveness of state institutions, and the resilience of civil society in holding leaders accountable. By implementing these reforms, Ghana can ensure that its democracy remains inclusive, competitive, and resistant to both gradual backsliding and overt authoritarian threats.

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