

# EXPLORING THE SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF INDEPENDENT SWING VOTERS IN GHANA

*Michael Kpessa-Whyte*

Michael Kpessa-Whyte is a senior research fellow in the History and Politics Section at the Institute of African Studies (IAS), University of Ghana, Legon

## ABSTRACT

*Ghana has become a two-party state by default, with the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) emerging as the only political parties with sufficient national appeal to win elections and form governments. Through the power of the ballot, each of them has had the chance of being in government as well as serving as the official opposition. Notwithstanding their dominance in Ghana's democratic politics, neither party has the support of more than forty percent of the country's electoral population. This leaves a significant proportion of the electorate unaligned to any political party. Given that candidates in presidential elections in Ghana can only win with more than 50% of valid votes cast, swing voters undoubtedly hold the balance of power. Yet, scholarly attention to this category of voters in emerging democracies has been marginal. Using a Ghana national opinion poll survey conducted in 2019 in which 27% of respondents self-identified as independent voters, this paper explores the social and demographic characteristics of these voters. The result is surprising and indicates that the regions and ethnic categories considered as strongholds of the two major parties also hold the highest proportion of independent swing voters.*

**Keywords:** swing voters, elections, realignment, Ghana, electorates, political parties

## INTRODUCTION

The electoral performance of the smaller political parties in Ghana has been in decline since the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections. In 1993, the

smaller parties collectively obtained 11% of total valid votes cast in the presidential polls; however, results of the 2016 presidential election show that these parties cumulatively obtained only 1% of total valid votes. Similarly, the portion of parliamentary seats held by the smaller parties has reduced from 4% to nothing within the same period (Bob-Milliar 2019). The persistence of this trend even after the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections indicates that Ghana has become a two-party state by default. This means that the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) have become the only parties with a chance of winning presidential elections and majority parliamentary seats (Addae 2019; Daddieh & Bob-Milliar 2014). The smaller parties were instrumental in shaping the chances of winners of presidential elections, especially in situations where such parties forced elections into a second round. This they do through improving their own electoral performance in a manner that prevents either of the two major parties from being able to obtain more than 50% of valid votes cast in the first round of voting. However, the 2012 and 2016 elections produced outright winners (the NDC in 2012, and NPP in 2016) thus depriving the smaller parties of their role as kingmaker.

The results of the 2020 presidential elections as announced by the Electoral Commission followed a similar pattern, although several questions have been raised about the credibility of those results. Thus, as the electoral topography of the country's democracy takes shape, the NDC and the NPP have established themselves not only as dominant political parties but also as the only ones to have been successful at winning elections and forming governments. Records from successive election results show that both parties have a core membership and support base of not less than 35% of the electorate. But like all electoral democracies, in Ghana there are always voters who are neither affiliated nor committed to any political party. Given that the two major political parties have almost equal support bases, unaffiliated or swing voters undoubtedly play crucial roles in deciding electoral outcomes. Although there is growing literature on Ghana's democratic processes, very little is known about the unaffiliated swing voter in terms of social and demographic characteristics, especially from the perspective of nationwide survey data.

The study addresses this gap by analysing the socio-demographic background of respondents who claimed to be independent voters. Using data from the Ghana Opinion Survey involving 35%, 37% and 27% of self-identified members of the NDC, NPP and independents respectively, the paper made a surprising discovery. This is that the two regions, Ashanti and Volta, traditionally known as the strongholds of the NPP and the NDC respectively (Fridy 2007) are also the regions with the highest proportion of respondents who self-identified as independent voters. Proportionately, this is also consistent with findings that there

are more independent voters among Akans and Ewes than in other ethnic groups. Among those who described themselves as independent, persons without higher education and urban (city and town) dwellers constitute a significant proportion.

Beyond the implications for the two parties, the topic and findings in this paper contribute significantly to an understanding of the changing dynamics and emerging patterns in Africa's young electoral democracies. They thus provide researchers and policy makers with insight into the relationship between demographic factors and electoral choices. Although this study focuses on Ghana, it has considerable relevance for other African countries and beyond, and opens up possibilities for similar research in other national or cross-national jurisdictions. Such further research can lead to the development of a more comprehensive theoretical perspective on the interface between socio-demographic factors and partisan affiliations, as well as political behaviour in general.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section situates the study in the broader theoretical reflections on independent swing voters, while the second section briefly discusses the research design and methods of data collection and analysis. The third section explains the findings based on the disaggregation of respondents who self-identified as swing voters. In section four, the paper discusses the findings in relation to what is known about the socio-demographic characteristics of the two major parties. Finally, the concluding section highlights the relevance of the study and points to some areas for future research to unravel the complexities embedded in the independent swing voter phenomenon.

#### INDEPENDENT SWING VOTER IN CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE

Political parties are founded on the belief that in democratic societies, the electorate needs institutional vehicles through which shared interests and ideas can be aggregated and articulated with the ultimate goal of fielding candidates to public office through elections (Maclvor 2009). Political parties thus serve as a platform for people who share similar ideas and interests to converge and find expression of their worldviews. Yet, in most democracies a substantial number of voters are not affiliated to, nor support or hold membership of a political party. This is particularly true of democracies that have evolved into two-party systems, where a segment of the electorate that does not necessarily subscribe to the principles, ideologies, and policy platforms of the two dominant parties is often left in limbo between elections. Such voters have been variously described by political commentators and journalists as swing voters (Mayer 2007; 2008), unaffiliated voters (Alvarez & Sinclair 2013; Gerber & Green 1999), independent voters (Girvan, Weaver, & Snyder 2010), undecided voters (Schill & Kirk 2017)), unaligned (Rohrschneider 2002) and floating voters (Zelle 1995). The multiplicity

of terms and concepts used in relation to the phenomenon has led to conceptual stretching resulting in definitional ambiguity. Lindberg and Weghorst (2010), for instance, expressed concerns about the lack of precision in the usage, application, and definition of the voting behaviour these concepts seek to capture. This notwithstanding, these concepts are used to refer to individuals within an electoral population who hold no cemented support or affiliation to any political party, and whose electoral choices are open, uncertain and unpredictable. In other words, such electorates include those

...who are not firm supporters of either major party candidate, who cannot be reliably counted on to march behind either party's banner, perhaps it would make more sense to think of swing voters simply as political independents, as those respondents who, in answer to the standard party identification question, express no affiliation with either party.

(Mayer 2007, p. 366)

In Eldersveld's view (1952), this group includes voters who transfer their allegiance over time, those with no clear partisan disposition, as well as those who waver when making voting decisions.

Some concerns have been raised about the extent to which persons who identify themselves as independents or as unaffiliated to political parties can be trusted. In the US where the two-party system is most exemplified, the number of independent voters has been increasing since the 1970s and is now estimated to surpass those who self-identified with each of the major parties (Mayer 2008). According to the American National Election Studies (ANES), in 2016 38% of Americans were independent, while only 33% identified as Democrats and 29% as Republican. The rise in the number of persons who profess to being independent or unaffiliated to any of the major political parties meant that electoral victory depends significantly on the extent to which parties appeal to the interests or are successful in persuading this category of the electorate. There are, however, other arguments that persons who profess to be floating or independent voters often hide their partisan affiliation. In one study in the US, it was discovered that approximately two-thirds of self-declared independents share some hidden partisan sympathies, and thus have strong political leanings that only become obvious after careful analysis (Keith et al. 1992). While this concern is legitimate, the idea of an independent, floating and undecided voter should not necessarily be taken to mean that such voters are blank slates without any ideological disposition or leanings. Rather, they must be understood as persons who are flexible in their dispositions, open to persuasion, and more pragmatic than dogmatic. As Mayer (2008, p. 2) observed:

In simple terms, a swing voter is, as the name implies, a voter who could go either way, a voter who is not so solidly committed to one candidate or the other as to make all efforts at persuasion futile. If some voters are firm, clear, dependable supporters of one candidate or the other, swing voters are the opposite: those whose final allegiance is in some doubt all the way up until election day. Put another way, swing voters are ambivalent or, to use a term with a somewhat better political science lineage, cross-pressured. Rather than seeing one party as the embodiment of all virtue and the other as the quintessence of vice, swing voters are pulled – or repulsed – in both directions.

Eldersveld (1952, p. 732) argued that independent voters ‘can swing the balance of power and decide elections’, yet a methodological and theoretical study of this group of political actors remains largely underdeveloped. For the most part, the study of swing voters has focused mainly on the American political system and has been characterised by a reliance on multiple sources of data. While some of these data sources drew on inferences from election statistics in the hope of obtaining ‘some measure of the amplitude of independent voting in the aggregate, in terms of transference of party allegiances overtime’ (ibid.), others rely on official records of straight and split voting. For example, Chapin (1912) examined election results data in the US between 1856 and 1905 to analyse voting trends, and argued that the number of independent voters was on the rise. Ogburn and Jaffe (1936) used similar data to explore the factors that shape swing voting in the same country. Other scholars including Burden and Kimball (1998) and Ames, Baker and Lucio (2009) used data from single elections to explore the issue of split-ticket voting, in which electorates vote for a candidate on one party’s ticket for particular office, and for a different candidate on a different party’s ticket for another office. This type of study usually focuses on the differences between the percentages of major party votes secured by candidates of the same party whose candidates run for different offices. Split-ticket voting, which is known in Ghana as skirt and blouse voting, occurs when a voter casts his or her vote for a presidential candidate on the ticket of one party, and for a candidate of a different party on the parliamentary ballot.

Public opinion surveys have also become one of the main mechanisms through which the choices and voting behaviour of independent voters are assessed. Since the 1930s, voters in the US have consistently been asked to declare their affiliation or otherwise to political parties as a way of ascertaining those who are partisan as well as those who profess no party identity. The survey was the method of choice of Weghorst and Lindberg (2013) in one of their early articles on swing voting in Ghana, and as a tool the survey has thus been judged as the most valuable especially because:

... [it] can provide more than aggregative information; it can identify the independents and discover their characteristics (demographic, social, political); and it can relate independence to factors such as attitudes, group membership, community integration, and perceptions of the party system and political process.

(Eldersveld 1952, pp. 733-34)

Although there is generally nothing that obliges a citizen to profess political affiliation, existing knowledge on swing voters is imprecise. Persons in this category may be many or few, clever or fickle, informed or uninformed, and it is against this background that more needs to be known about their likely impact on the electoral system and democratic process as a whole. This challenge is even more pronounced in terms of relatively young democracies like Ghana where most of the scholarly attention is focused on other aspects of electoral behaviour. For instance, it is not known whether citizens change their voting behaviour because they are less informed, are unengaged, or are well informed but unimpressed by both political parties and their choice of candidates. In particular, knowing who the swing or independent voter is in emerging democracies in terms of their location and demographic characteristics can be instrumental in shaping the campaign behaviour of political parties and candidates. Hotelling (1929), for instance, argued that when parties compete for the votes of electorates on one specific policy issue, there is a likelihood that they will converge on the preferred policy position of the median voter in that policy domain.

Studies by Cox and McCubbins (1986) and Lindbeck and Weibull (1987) present two interesting but contrasting perspectives on independent voters as far as their relevance in electoral mobilisation processes is concerned. Cox and McCubbins (1986) are of the view that swing voters are obviously unreliable and so should not be the focus of politicians. Instead, politicians should focus campaign investments on mobilising their core supporters because that is safe, and the probability of getting their votes is almost certain. In contrast, Lindbeck and Weibull (2010) suggests that for parties to invest substantial campaign efforts in core supporters may be a waste of time and effort since those individuals are less likely to leave parties and will vote for them regardless. Stoke (2005, p. 317) emphasises this perspective by arguing that 'voters who are predisposed in favor of a party on partisan or programmatic grounds cannot credibly threaten to punish their favored party if distributive rewards are withheld. Therefore, parties should not waste rewards on them'. By this logic, the swing or independent voter becomes a prime target in electioneering campaigns. There have been empirical studies that focused on both the swing (Dahlberg & Johansson 2002) and core (Calvo & Murillo 2004) models of voting behaviour. But with the exception of few articles (for example Fridy 2012; Lindberg & Weghorst 2010) most of what is known

about independent voters in the literature is shaped by data and experiences from democracies outside Africa. Multi-ethnic countries like Ghana are faced with multiple and competing priorities ranging from socioeconomic transformation, democratisation and human welfare, to nation-building. The lack of attention to this category of voters who often switch their votes in terms of the choices they make in elections is troubling, given that such voters arguably hold the balance of power.

Currently in Ghana neither of the two major parties (the NDC and the NPP) can boast of cemented membership or support above the required constitutional formula for presidential victory. Swing voters here are crucial in shaping an understanding of political campaign strategies and electoral outcomes for a number of reasons. First, swing voters are deemed persuadable (Mayer 2008) which means they are very important in the electoral calculations of political parties and candidates canvassing for support. Knowing who these categories of voters are, and their challenges and policy preferences, can be instrumental in shaping the cognitive position of parties and their candidates insofar as the development of election mobilisation strategies are concerned. Second, in one of the very few studies that touches on swing voters in Ghana, Fridy (2012) contends that these voters are mainly non-Asante Akan of Central, Western and Brong Ahafo Regions. They filter their electoral calculations through pre-colonial and colonial political experiences. Other swing voters engage in retrospective voting by reviewing the performance of parties and candidates. The findings on retrospective voting as a major reference point for swing voters is consistent with conclusions drawn by Lindberg and Morrison (2005, p. 577) who observed that ‘all “swinglers” voted for the NPP in 2000, and of those 62.5% said they did so to “throw the rascals out”’.

Although these findings are instructive, they remain silent on who the swing voters actually are. The use of election results by Fridy (2012) for drawing such a conclusion has the potential to blur the actual situation, especially as neither study reveals anything about the social and demographic characteristics of the swing voters. In addition, given the demographic changes occurring in Ghana as well as the overall political experience since independence, conclusions associating non-Ashanti Akan with swing voting on account of historical memory, can at best be seen as anecdotal. The current study therefore builds on these pioneering researches about swing voters in Ghana by attempting to understand and situate them within appropriate socio-demographic contexts.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was collected across the country in April and May of 2019 using an instrument designed to ascertain the national mood on a series of

socio-economic and political issues. The processes involved the face-to-face administration of questionnaires. Data was collected and submitted through a computerised system that enables enumerators to capture and submit data instantly through an online database. In doing so, each enumerator's mobile device – smartphone, tablet, or iPad – was fitted with an application developed for the survey, and linked directly to the central database of the study for the purposes of ease in submitting data collected in real time. For quality assurance purposes, each enumerator's gadget was also fitted with a GPS tracker, making it possible to ascertain whether data submitted at any given time was collected from the designated communities. Although all the enumerators had previous experience in field data collection, additional training was organised for them to acquaint themselves with the context and expectations of the research, and also to improve their skills. The process served as a unique opportunity for enumerators to share their experiences and for the researchers to clarify concerns and issues raised by the field agents. The questionnaire covered a broad range of issues designed to ascertain the perceptions and preferences of voters about major political, economic, and social issues, as well as biographical information about the respondent. The instrument was administered on the basis of a probability sample of 8 800 persons, and the sampling was done in a manner intended to ensure fair representation of respondents from both rural and urban areas.

Based on historical voting patterns, the original ten administrative regions were divided into six clusters consisting of Greater Accra and Central regions as cluster one; Western Region as cluster two; Ashanti and Eastern regions as cluster three; Brong-Ahafo Region as cluster four; Northern, Upper East and West regions cluster five; and Volta Region as cluster six. In all, 216 administrative districts and 275 constituencies make up these clusters. The cluster model also took into account the total number of electoral constituencies as well as the rural-urban dynamics associated with each cluster. So, for instance, in selecting the specific communities for the data collection, where a constituency is considered to be rural, data collection was directed at ensuring that two-thirds of the sampled communities come from the rural areas while one-third is reserved for urban. Overall, more sampling occurred in the urban areas than in the rural areas. From the clusters, twenty-two administrative districts were covered in terms of data collected for the study. The administration of the survey involved sampling 400 individuals aged seventeen years and above from each of the twenty-two selected districts. The individuals for the survey were randomly selected from communities in the chosen constituencies.

To ensure standardisation within the national framework, four communities were selected in each constituency for the study. In each community, four



enumeration areas were selected based on the updated 2010 sampling frame of the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS). Based on the 2010 population census, the total projected population to 2018 for the 22 districts is 1 655 062. Thus, the sample size estimated for each district was approximately 400 of the targeted population, making a total of 8 800 for the 22 districts. The total response received from the survey is 8 659. The dependent variable for this study is the political affiliation of the respondent. The question asked was: *'Generally speaking, do you see yourself as an NDC, NPP, Independent or something else?'*

Table 1 below indicates how the sampled respondents identified themselves as far as political party affiliation in Ghana is concerned. With the exception of the major political parties, that is the NDC and the NPP, and those who self-identified as independent, responses in respect of all other parties are classified under Others. A total of 2 301 representing 27% of the population sampled self-identified as independent voters.

**Table 1: Self-identified Party Affiliations in Ghana**

Affiliation	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Independent</b>	<b>2301</b>	<b>27%</b>
NDC	2947	34%
NPP	3260	38%
Others	146	2%
Total	8654	100%

Source: Ghana Survey Data, 2019

In terms of the analytical approach, the study employed descriptive statistics to explore the sociodemographic distribution of persons who self-identified as independent voters. In Table 1 above, of the 8 654 sampled, 38% representing 3 260 of the sample population described themselves as NPP, and 34% representing 2 947 of the same said they are NDC. Given that the number of self-identified members in both NDC and the NPP falls below what is constitutionally required for victory in the presidential election, independent voters become crucial in deciding the outcome of elections. Thus, we proceed further to extract and analyse the independent voter category to understand how they are distributed within specific sociodemographic variables such as educational status, place of residence, region, religion, employment status, employment sector, ethnicity, marital status, and gender, using a simple descriptive statistic based on SPSS.

### SELF-IDENTIFIED DISTRIBUTION OF VOTERS IN GHANA

The tables below show the distribution of independent voters in Ghana within various sociodemographic variables. In terms of regional distribution, Ashanti Region has the highest (17.5%), followed by Volta (15%) and Greater Accra (14.8%). Central and Northern regions have more than 10% each of those who described themselves as independent voters. Upper West has the least number of independent voters followed by Western Region, which indicate 3.7% and 5.1% respectively. Eastern, Brong Ahafo and Upper East regions constitute a third category of regions with independent voter populations of 8.6%, 7.7%, and 6.4% respectively.

In terms of employment status, 51% of the employed and 26% of the unemployed (in that order) described themselves as independent voters. Similarly, when the data of independent voters is analysed against the religious backgrounds of the respondents, about 71% of Christians and 25% of Muslims consider themselves not affiliated to any political party. In terms of levels of educational attainment, 33.6% of those who self-identified as independent voters had up to secondary education, and 31% had less than secondary education. In addition, respondents with college level education; tertiary graduates consisting of respondents with university and polytechnic qualification; and those with technical and vocation levels of educational attainment, represent 16.6%, 10.2% and 8.6% respectively.

**Table 2: Distribution of Voters' Party affiliation in Ghana**

<i>Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as an NDC, NPP, or Independent</i>												
	NDC		NPP		Independent		Other		None		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
SG94. Sex												
Male	1,938	65.8	2,045	62.7	1,360	59.1	44	72.1	49	57.6	5,436	62.8
Female	1,008	34.2	1,214	37.3	941	40.9	17	27.9	36	42.4	3,216	37.2
Total	2,946	100.0	3,259	100.0	2,301	100.0	61	100.0	85	100.0	8,652	100.0
AGE												
15-19	102	3.5	164	5.0	177	7.7	4	6.6	5	5.9	452	5.2
20-24	311	10.6	387	11.9	379	16.5	9	14.8	6	7.1	1,092	12.6
25-29	610	20.7	675	20.7	620	26.9	11	18.0	31	36.5	1,947	22.5
30-34	538	18.3	582	17.9	397	17.3	10	16.4	17	20.0	1,544	17.8
35-39	488	16.6	578	17.7	296	12.9	10	16.4	12	14.1	1,384	16.0
40-44	311	10.6	324	9.9	160	7.0	8	13.1	2	2.4	805	9.3
45-49	225	7.6	249	7.6	111	4.8	5	8.2	3	3.5	593	6.9

50-54	184	6.2	135	4.1	66	2.9	2	3.3	2	2.4	389	4.5
55-59	79	2.7	80	2.5	58	2.5	0	0.0	2	2.4	219	2.5
60 +	99	3.4	86	2.6	37	1.6	2	3.3	5	5.9	229	2.6
Total	2,947	100.0	3,260	100.0	2,301	100.0	61	100.0	85	100.0	8,654	100.0
MARITAL STATUS												
Single	1,044	35.4	1,240	38.0	1,159	50.4	23	37.7	40	47.1	3,506	40.5
Married	1,543	52.4	1,630	50.0	908	39.5	28	45.9	27	31.8	4,136	47.8
Separated/ Divorced	97	3.3	88	2.7	51	2.2	4	6.6	4	4.7	244	2.8
Widowed	69	2.3	62	1.9	41	1.8	1	1.6	1	1.2	174	2.0
Co-habitation	177	6.0	232	7.1	123	5.3	5	8.2	12	14.1	549	6.3
Never Married	16	0.5	8	0.2	19	0.8	0	0.0	1	1.2	44	0.5
Total	2,946	100.0	3,260	100.0	2,301	100.0	61	100.0	85	100.0	8,653	100.0
HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION												
Secondary	956	32.4	1,108	34.0	773	33.6	23	37.7	17	20.0	2,877	33.2
Technical/ Vocation	265	9.0	272	8.3	198	8.6	2	3.3	10	11.8	747	8.6
College	418	14.2	657	20.2	383	16.6	8	13.1	10	11.8	1,476	17.1
Polytechnic /university	228	7.7	303	9.3	234	10.2	5	8.2	5	5.9	775	9.0
Up to JHS	1,080	36.6	920	28.2	713	31.0	23	37.7	43	50.6	2,779	32.1
Total	2,947	100.0	3,260	100.0	2,301	100.0	61	100.0	85	100.0	8,654	100.0
ETHNIC BACKGROUND												
Akan	679	23.0	1,850	56.7	814	35.4	19	31.1	37	43.5	3,399	39.3
Ewe	687	23.3	243	7.5	472	20.5	13	21.3	9	10.6	1,424	16.5
Ga-Adangbe	447	15.2	289	8.9	212	9.2	6	9.8	13	15.3	967	11.2
Mole-Dagbani	574	19.5	412	12.6	401	17.4	8	13.1	4	4.7	1,399	16.2
Guan	65	2.2	89	2.7	57	2.5	0	0.0	3	3.5	214	2.5
Gurma	29	1.0	37	1.1	23	1.0	0	0.0	1	1.2	90	1.0
Grunsi	118	4.0	75	2.3	86	3.7	5	8.2	8	9.4	292	3.4
Other	348	11.8	265	8.1	236	10.3	10	16.4	10	11.8	869	10.0
Total	2,947	100.0	3,260	100.0	2,301	100.0	61	100.0	85	100.0	8,654	100.0

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND												
ATR	84	2.9	55	1.7	70	3.0	1	1.6	1	1.2	211	2.4
Christian	1,901	64.5	2,521	77.3	1,645	71.5	44	72.1	64	75.3	6,175	71.4
Muslim	947	32.1	663	20.3	566	24.6	16	26.2	20	23.5	2,212	25.6
Atheist	15	0.5	21	0.6	20	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	56	0.6
Total	2,947	100.0	3,260	100.0	2,301	100.0	61	100.0	85	100.0	8,654	100.0
PLACE & LOCATION												
City	831	28.2	1,156	35.5	687	29.9	15	24.6	27	31.8	2,716	31.4
Town	1,674	56.8	1,832	56.2	1,284	55.8	34	55.7	51	60.0	4,875	56.3
Village	412	14.0	238	7.3	304	13.2	10	16.4	2	2.4	966	11.2
Other	30	1.0	34	1.0	26	1.1	2	3.3	5	5.9	97	1.1
Total	2,947	100.0	3,260	100.0	2,301	100.0	61	100.0	85	100.0	8,654	100.0
PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND												
Teacher	369	12.5	505	15.5	355	15.4	11	18.0	10	11.8	1,250	14.4
Lawyer	6	0.2	9	0.3	8	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	23	0.3
Doctor	14	0.5	21	0.6	14	0.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	49	0.6
Nurse	142	4.8	227	7.0	109	4.7	0	0.0	2	2.4	480	5.5
Engineer	97	3.3	117	3.6	60	2.6	1	1.6	3	3.5	278	3.2
Farmer	357	12.1	272	8.3	175	7.6	6	9.8	6	7.1	816	9.4
Banker	28	1.0	43	1.3	32	1.4	0	0.0	1	1.2	104	1.2
Accountant	65	2.2	74	2.3	59	2.6	3	4.9	2	2.4	203	2.3
Administrator	42	1.4	66	2.0	45	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	153	1.8
Pharmacist	21	0.7	29	0.9	16	0.7	1	1.6	1	1.2	68	0.8
Business	703	23.9	848	26.0	523	22.7	12	19.7	16	18.8	2,102	24.3
Others	1,103	37.4	1,049	32.2	905	39.3	27	44.3	44	51.8	3,128	36.1
Total	2,947	100.0	3,260	100.0	2,301	100.0	61	100.0	85	100.0	8,654	100.0
EMPLOYMENT STATUS												
Employed	1,655	56.2	1,906	58.5	1,174	51.0	35	57.4	34	40.0	4,804	55.5
Unemployed	769	26.1	681	20.9	599	26.0	9	14.8	24	28.2	2,082	24.1
Student	202	6.9	304	9.3	276	12.0	9	14.8	6	7.1	797	9.2
Unpaid house work	20	0.7	25	0.8	24	1.0	1	1.6	1	1.2	71	0.8
Wife/man	51	1.7	74	2.3	32	1.4	0	0.0	4	4.7	161	1.9

Others	250	8.5	270	8.3	196	8.5	7	11.5	16	18.8	739	8.5
Total	2,947	100.0	3,260	100.0	2,301	100.0	61	100.0	85	100.0	8,654	100.0
SECTOR OF WORK												
Public Sector	466	21.4	712	27.6	409	24.0	11	21.2	6	9.8	1,604	24.4
Formal private sector	211	9.7	267	10.4	166	9.8	5	9.6	10	16.4	659	10.0
Informal sector	205	9.4	206	8.0	95	5.6	1	1.9	2	3.3	509	7.7
Self-employed	898	41.2	853	33.1	592	34.8	21	40.4	20	32.8	2,384	36.3
Other	398	18.3	541	21.0	440	25.9	14	26.9	23	37.7	1,416	21.5
Total	2,178	100.0	2,579	100.0	1,702	100.0	52	100.0	61	100.0	6,572	100.0

Source: Ghana Survey Data, 2019

In the professional category, the study shows that there are more independent voters among blue-collar workers than among white-collar workers. With the exception of the teaching profession which recorded 15.4% self-identifying as independent voters, only a small number of respondents in each of the white-collar professions (such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, bankers, accountants, administrators, pharmacists, and nurses) self-identified as independent voters. On the other hand, about 70% of the respondents in the blue-collar workforce self-identified as independent voters. These consist mainly of individuals in manual labour in sectors such as agriculture, construction, mining, artisanal, cleaning and maintenance, and petty trading. In terms of age, the data shows that the majority of the independent voters are under 40 years with a high 27% within the 25-29 age bracket, followed by 13% for those in the 30-34 cohort. Overall, these two cohorts, plus those in the 20-24 age cohort, constitute about 60% of those who described themselves as independent voters in Ghana. Most of those independent voters reside in cities (30%) and towns (56%) compared to 13.2% in the villages. Measured by religious background, only 7.5% of the independent voters are Christians, and 24.6% are Muslims. The remainder are believers in African Traditional Religion (3%) and atheists (0.9%). The distribution of independent voters in the marital status variable also indicates that those who are single or have never married are in the majority (51.2%), followed by married respondents who constitute 40%, making the two categories very important in electioneering strategies. In addition, as far as the employment sector is concerned, the self-employed and those employed in the public sector have 34.8% and 24% respectively of independent voters. The

formal private sector and the informal sector have fewer respondents describing themselves as independent, but there are also 25% the respondents in this category who consider themselves as plying trade in either of these sectors.

## DISCUSSIONS

Politicians, campaign strategists and political science scholars have long been interested in the characteristics of swing voters in the hope that once identified, messages can be developed to target their concerns and mobilise their support in elections. The importance of independent or swing voters is illustrated by Spiro Agnew, a former vice president of the United States in the late 1960s, in his description of this category of voters as a 'silent majority' (Campbell 2008). As the label suggests, independent swing voters tend to cast their votes without the influence of membership of political parties; on the contrary, it is assumed that their choices are based on a critical evaluation of the choices available within the broader context of interests and socio-economic circumstances. To this extent, they are not only persuadable, they also hold the key to electoral success, especially in a democracy like Ghana in which party affiliation and membership are evenly distributed among the major political parties.

The thesis that independent swing voters can turn elections in the direction of particular candidates or parties means that an understanding of how these voters are distributed within the various socio-economic demographics of the voting population is key to reaching and persuading them. The ability of political parties to compete for the attention and support of independent swing voters can possibly elevate issues-based politics and minimise what has generally been described in Ghana as the 'politics of insults', and in the process enhance democratic competitiveness. In an earlier study, Lindberg and Morrison (2005) argued that 'majority of swing voters went from NDC to NPP in 2000, while a smaller number went the other way...' (pp. 978-979). Thus, this study has important implications not only for our understanding of voters and voting behaviour in Ghana, but also for political parties and candidates in terms of campaign strategies and the mobilisation of voters.

Since 1992 the Ashanti and Volta regions have voted heavily in support of the NPP and NDC respectively (Whitfield 2009; Fridy 2007). The two major parties accordingly consider these two regions as their respective electoral strongholds. Yet, as the data indicates, these are also the two regions with the highest percentages of the electorate who consider themselves as unaffiliated to any party and hence as independent swing voters. The responses point to fundamental shifts in the area of party alignments in these two regions, although this may take several years to openly manifest. While the NDC had already

experienced increases in its presidential votes in Ashanti region since 1996, the NPP has improved its performance in the Volta Region – at least from the year 2000. Nonetheless, the emergence and rise of independent swing voters in these regions means that both the Volta and Ashanti regions will remain very important in Ghana's electoral politics for the foreseeable future. As strongholds of the two parties, they are already considered the powerhouse of each party

In each election, both the NDC and the NPP have anticipated high turnouts in their respective bases to nullify the votes from other regions. On the other hand, regions such as Central, Greater Accra, Brong Ahafo, and Western regions that are relatively flexible in their electoral choices often shape the eventual outcome of the elections. Although the switch to independence in voter preference is not necessarily a bad thing, the NDC in particular must also be concerned about the slow rise in independent swing voters in regions such as Northern, Upper East, and Upper West which traditionally turn out in large numbers in support of the party during elections (Fridy 2007).

Bob-Milliar (2011) argued that voters in the Upper West in particular have consistently supported the NDC in gratitude to former President Jerry John Rawlings for creating an administrative region in that part of the country during the military era. On the basis of Whitfield's (2009) argument that founding myths are important in party identification, the perceived unhealthy relationship between the NDC and its founder, before his death, could partly account for the growth in swing voters in regions with a perceived strong affinity to Jerry Rawlings. From this perspective, although the death of Jerry Rawlings in 2020 could further exacerbate the dwindling fortunes of the NDC in the Volta Region, it also offers an opportunity for the party to revive the myths and ensure their retention in the political belief system of those who adhere to them.

Similar realignments are also observed in other demographic variables. For instance, the NDC is perceived as a mass party and is known to have a significant following among ordinary people. This is especially true of the less-educated, as well as being a home for the 'educated commoner, where people not born into elite families rise up the social ladder through education and become politicized and/or aspire to elite status' (Whitfield 2009, p. 632). Lindberg and Morrison (2005), for example, noted that the NDC also drew support from students, and evidence indicates that prominent student leaders including Haruna Iddrisu, Baba Jamal, Edem Agbana, Wonder Madilo, Samuel Okudjeto Ablakwa, and Omane Boamah, have found the NDC their party of choice in the pursuit of their national political ambitions. Yet, as the data suggests, a significant proportion of the respondents with secondary, university and pre-secondary education now identify themselves as unaffiliated to any political party. These findings are consistent with the general trend of noncommittal to any political party among persons in the youth cohort

as seen in the data. But the rise of independent voters in the voting population usually associated with the NDC could be a problem of party branding and a lack of synchronisation between ideological labelling and policies pursued by the party in government. There is a sense in which social democracy is misconstrued to mean the democratisation of poverty; hence a young person with aspirations to achieve career objectives and wealth, tends to subscribe to the NPP's claim to be a party that promotes individual ownership of property. For students and the youth, more broadly speaking, the situation is further exacerbated by the NDC's replacement of professional teacher's and nurse's training allowances with student loans – a decision many students consider insensitive and uncaring.

One of the known differences between the NDC and the NPP is that while the former is perceived as primarily rural, the latter is urban. The NDC's association with rural voters has its roots in the activities of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) from which it sprang. It was the PNDC that took several initiatives to open the rural parts of the country with basic amenities. These include road infrastructure to enable peasant farmers to cart their produce to the cities; the expansion of electricity to rural communities; and revived agricultural activities. For instance, the increased cocoa production during that time was interpreted as 'protection of rural interests ignored by previous governments' (Jeong 1998, p. 222). Although there are fewer rural respondents who identified themselves as independent voters than those in the cities and the urban areas, the general drift of population from the rural areas to urban centres could have future implications for the NDC.

The NPP, on the other hand, is known for its support from voters in towns and cities. While it may seem that the population drift towards the cities might work in its favour, the data shows that most respondents from both cities and towns self-identified as independent voters. In other words, although more and more people are moving into urban areas in Ghana, that movement does not indicate increased support for the NPP, which is known to be urban based. The position is similar with public sector workers who appear from previous studies to be structurally inclined to support the NPP (Lindberg & Morrison 2005). However, a significant proportion of these now self-identified as independent voters. This trend confirms the decline of support for the NPP in cities and towns. Overall, the battle for the attention of persuadable voters by the two major political parties will be in the cities and towns where affiliation to political parties appears fluid, relatively weak, and in endless flux.

## CONCLUSION

The extent to which structural factors define, determine or shape the political identification and electoral choices of voters remains an issue of intellectual



debate. However, the structural classification of voters has the potential to point political strategists, parties and campaign planners in directions that explore important issues for key segments of the voting population. This is particularly true in African countries where social identities are complex.

This study has implications for what is known about independent swing voters in Ghana. First, it confirms that there is a high 'proportion of swing voters in the system sufficient to sustain a high level of competition and the prospects of repeated changes in government in the future – a hallmark of a functioning democracy' (Lindberg & Morrison 2005, p. 583). This claim is supported by the practical experience of electoral competition in Ghana, especially since 2000, and the accompanying electoral volatility resulting in changes in government in both 2008 and 2016. Evidence from this study shows that the number of voters with loyal party identification is on the decline, and those who self-described as independent swing voters are on the increase. Thus, it is fair to argue that the levels of electoral competition and volatility are expected to increase further.

Second, it does not appear from our analysis of the data that citizens' partisan and non-partisan identifications are necessarily defined or determined by specific socio-demographic factors such as gender, levels of education, age, and socio-economic status. In other words, swing voters share the same socio-demographic characteristics as do their partisan counterparts. As the analysis shows, there are swing voters across all categories – among women, men, age cohorts, the employed, unemployed, highly-educated, those with little or low education, public sector, private sector, rural and urban communities, as well as in different ethnic groups and regions in Ghana. Yet a socio-demographic analysis of voters of this kind provides a useful guide for understanding how partisan and non-partisan citizens are structurally distributed within and across the country.

Third, the high proportion of independent swing voters in Ghana illustrates the point that the patron-client relations thesis alone cannot explain party identification and electoral politics in African countries. According to this thesis, African countries are locked in a patron-client relationship in which leaders use public resources to buy and keep the loyalty of the electorates (Bratton et al. 2012). The same cannot be said of independent swing voters who are arguably open to persuasion and thus base their electoral choices on other factors. These include an assessment of past records and a performance evaluation of parties and candidates. In another study on Ghana, Weghorst and Lindberg (2013, p. 730) observed that:

... [a] significant number of swing voters evaluate incumbent MPs in terms of collective constituency goods, lawmaking, and improvement of the economy. The greater the dissatisfaction with performance on collective goods, the more likely these citizens will support challenger MPs, and the other way around.

The very idea of evaluative voting in an environment known for clientelistic political behaviour suggests the phenomenon of swing voting in Ghana (and perhaps other African democracies) is much more complicated than generally assumed in the literature. Overall, the rise in the swing voter population has the potential to limit the proportion of confirmed supporters on whom parties can count, and this places swing voters in a position to significantly determine electoral outcomes. Neither of the two major political parties in Ghana commands an absolute majority support from the electorate, and the swing voter population is expanding. Thus, the future of electoral competition in Ghana is likely to be a fight over swing voters even as parties and candidates engineer enthusiasm among their bases. If swing voters are also evaluative voters, then it stands to reason that the future of electoral campaigns in Ghana would move the country's national electoral discourse from one of pettiness and insults to more creative solutions that appeal to the interests of such voters. As Jeong (1998, p. 228) observed:

...[voters] want more than social peace, due process in the judicial system, and political accountability. The hope for economic equity as much as legal order, improvement in opportunities to feed their children is as important as the opportunity to vote for one or another-party candidate.

Overall, with almost 30% of the voting population identifying themselves as independent swing voters, political parties in Ghana should be compelled to prioritise a deep reach into their ideational storehouses in order to creatively design and articulate policy options that resonate with the lived experiences of an otherwise unimpressed electorate.

These findings open new doors for future research. This could, for instance, unravel the increasing numbers of independent swing voters in the two main regions which both the NDC and the NPP consider as their stronghold. Such research could also scientifically ascertain the implications of such a phenomenon for the electoral politics in Ghana. Anecdotally, however, the NDC's impressive records in terms of development projects and achievements in the Ashanti Region, especially during the John Mahama era, may have been instrumental in shaping the cognitive position and preferences of voters in that region. The NPP has taken it for granted that just because the Ashanti Region is its stronghold, it has an automatic claim to votes from that region. What is lost on many observers of Ghana's democracy is that in terms of absolute numbers of votes obtained, Ashanti Region has given the NDC the second highest number of votes after Greater Accra Region in the 2020 presidential elections. In this case, following the creation of new regions, the Ashanti Region, which is generally perceived as

the NDC's weakest electoral link, also gave the party more votes than even the Volta Region which is considered the foremost stronghold of the party.

An important lesson from this study is that the rise in independent swing voters in an opponent's stronghold holds the key to a party's electoral performance – at least in that region. In that sense, the rise in independent swing voters in Ashanti Region, for instance, could be a result of the poor electoral performance of the NPP in the region compared to that of the NDC. Similarly, there are complaints that although the NDC harvests significant support from the Volta Region, it has not given that region top priority in its approaches to socio-economic development. This has caused general disaffection and frustration among voters in the Volta Region, some of whom described themselves as independent swing voters and whose electoral choices will be based on which party offers more in terms of development. For example, the 2020 parliamentary victory of Peter Amewu on an NPP ticket in the Hohoe constituency in the Volta Region suggests that the gradual rise in independent swing voters in Volta Region is due to widely held perceptions that the NDC has done less when it could do more for that region. Amewu is credited with his ability to bring development to that constituency, and he might not have won the Hohoe seat without the gerrymandering by the Electoral Commission of Ghana. This led to the electorates from the Santrokofi, Akpafu, Lolobi and Likpe (SALL) being excluded from participating in the elections (Kwawukume 2020). The conduct of the Electoral Commission in the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections is a surprising deviation from its startling performance in previous elections (Omotola 2012). Nonetheless, the mere fact that Amewu won in polling stations that have traditionally been known to vote for NDC with comfortably wide margins, supports the claim that even electorates with the most entrenched support for a party are open to persuasion and change when the need arises.

Overall, the findings from this research suggest that party affiliation preferences are not fixated on categories. Thus, the ethnicity and patronage-based explanation for party identification in Ghana and Africa is not enduring and can be mediated by other factors. What is now required is further research to understand the interests and lived experiences of persons who consider themselves as swing voters, and a broader interrogation of the factors that shape their electoral choices.

----- REFERENCES -----

Addae, AM 2019, 'The Dominance of Two Parties in the Politics of Ghana's 4th Republic: The Electoral System a Factor?', *International Journal of Science and Research*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 1800–1805.

- Alvarez, RM & Sinclair, JA 2013, 'Who Are California's "Decline to State" Voters?', *California Journal of Politics and Policy*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 47–66.
- Ames, B, Baker, A, & Renno, L 2009, 'Split-ticket voting as the rule: Voter and Permanent Divided Government in Brazil', *Electoral Studies*, vol. 28, pp. 8–20.
- Bob-Milliar, GM 2011, 'TE NYOGEYENG GBENGBENG!' (We are Holding the Umbrella Very Tight): Explaining the Popularity of the NDC in the Upper West Regions of Ghana, *Africa*, vol. 81, no. 3, pp. 455–73.
- Bob-Milliar, GM 2019, "'We run for the crumbs and not for office": the Nkrumahist minor parties and party patronage in Ghana', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*. doi:10.1080/14662043.2019.1624291
- Bratton, M, Bhavnani, R & Chen, T-H 2012, 'Voting intentions in Africa: ethnic, economic or partisan?', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 27–52.
- Burden BC & Kimball, DC 1998, 'A New Approach to the Study of Ticket Splitting', *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 92, no. 3, pp. 533–544.
- Calvo, E & Murillo, MV 2004, 'Who Delivers? Partisan Clients in the Argentine electoral market', *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 48, no. 4, pp. 742–757.
- Campbell, JE 2008, 'Do Swing Voters Swing Elections?', In WG Mayer (ed) *The Swing Voter in American Politics*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC.
- Chapin, FS 1912, 'Variability of the Popular Vote at Presidential Elections', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 222–240.
- Cox, G & McCubbins, M 1986, 'Electoral Politics as a Redistributive Game', *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 370–389.
- Daddieh, CK & Bob-Milliar, GM 2014, 'Ghana: The African Exemplar of an Institutionalized Two-Party System?'. In: R Doorenspleet & L Nijzink (eds) *Party Systems and Democracy in Africa*, Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137011718\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137011718_6)
- Dahlberg, M & Johansson, E 2002, 'On the Vote-purchasing Behavior of Incumbent Governments', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 96, no. 2, pp. 27–40.
- Eldersveld, SJ 1952, 'The Independent Vote: Measurement, Characteristics, and Implications for Party Strategy', *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 46, no. 3, pp. 732–753.
- Fridy, KS 2007, 'The Elephant, the Umbrella, and the Quarrelling Cocks: Disaggregating Partisanship in Ghana's Fourth Republic', *African Affairs*, vol. 106, no. 423, pp. 281–305.
- Fridy, KS 2012, 'Where Are Ghana's Swing Voters? A Look at the Voters Responsible for Alternating Power in One of Africa's Most Successful Democracies', *Africa Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 107–121.
- Gerber, SA & Green, PD 1999, 'Does canvassing increase voter turnout? A field experiment', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 96, pp. 10939–10942.

- Girvan, EJ, Weaver, J & Snyder, M 2010, 'Elevating Norm Over Substance: Self-Monitoring as a Predictor of Decision Criteria and Decision Time among Independent Voters', *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 321–336.
- Hotelling, H 1929, 'Stability in Competition', *Economic Journal*, vol. 39, no. 153, pp. 1–57.
- Jeong, H-W, 1998, 'Economic Reforms and Democratic Transition in Ghana', *World Affairs*, vol. 160, no. 4, pp. 218–230.
- Keith, BE, Magleby, DB, Nelson, CJ, Orr, E, Westlye, MC, & Wolfinger, RE 1992, *The Myth of the Independent Voter*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Kwawukume, ACY 2020, 'Gerrymandering and Cheating to Win Elections', *Modern Ghana* 21 December, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1051098/gerrymandering-and-cheating-to-win-elections.html> [Accessed 23 April 2021].
- Lindbeck, A & Weibull, J 1987, 'Balanced-budget Redistribution as the Outcome of Political Competition', *Public Choice*, vol. 52, no. 3, pp. 273–297.
- Lindberg, SI & Morrison, MKC 2005, 'Exploring Voter Alignments in Africa: Core and Swing Voters in Ghana', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 565–586.
- Lindberg, SI & Weghorst, KR 2010, 'Are Swing Voters Instruments of Democracy or Farmers of Clientelism? Evidence from Ghana', *APSA 2010 Annual Meeting Paper*, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1643311>
- MacIvor, H 2009, 'Political Parties: Imperfect but Essential', in R Dyck (ed) *Studying Politics: An Introduction to Political Science*, Nelson Education, [Toronto].
- Mayer, WG 2007, 'The Swing Voter in American Presidential Elections', *American Politics Research*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 358–388.
- Mayer, WG (ed.) 2008, *The Swing Voter in American Politics*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC.
- Ogburn, WF & Jaffe, AJ 1936, 'Independent Voting in Presidential Elections', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 186–201.
- Omotola, JS 2012, 'Ghana Defies the Odds Again: The December 2012 Elections in Perspective', *Journal of African Elections*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 1–12.
- Rohrschneider, R 2002, 'Mobilizing versus chasing: how do parties target voters in election campaigns?', *Electoral Studies*, vol. 21, pp. 367–382.
- Schill, D & Kirk, R 2017, 'Angry, Passionate, and Divided: Undecided Voters and the 2016 Presidential Election', *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 61, no. 9, pp. 1056–1076.
- Stokes, SC 2005, 'Perverse accountability: A formal model of machine politics with evidence from Argentina', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 99, pp. 315–25.
- Weghorst, KR & Lindberg, SI 2013, 'What Drives the Swing Voter in Africa?', *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 717–734.

- Whitfield, I 2009, 'Change for a Better Ghana: Party Competition, Institutionalization and Alternation in Ghana's 2008 Elections', *African Affairs*, vol. 108, no. 433, pp. 621–641.
- Zelle, C 1995, 'Social dealignment versus political frustration: Contrasting explanations of the floating vote in Germany', *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 27, pp. 319–345.