

# Subjective well-being and political participation: Empirical evidence from Ghana

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## Abstract

A large, extant literature examines the effect of political factors on individual subjective well-being. These studies have treated political factors as a cause and subjective well-being as an effect. A sparse but growing literature now advances the argument that subjective well-being is a cause and voting or political participation an effect. In this paper we examine whether subjective well-being influences voting and political participation in Ghana. Using data from Wave 6 of the World Values Survey in Ghana, we find that subjective well-being influences neither voting nor protest behavior.

## JEL CLASSIFICATION

I31, D72

## KEYWORDS

Africa, Democracy, Ghana, political participation, subjective well-being, voting

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Political scientists have learned much about how politics influences public policies, but far less attention has been given to the political determinants of subjective well-being (Radcliff, 2001).<sup>1</sup> Over the past few decades, there has been growing scholarly interest in the relationship between individual life satisfaction as a measure of subjective well-being and a wide range of political factors, including political culture, nature and structure of government and democratic institutions, level of freedom, civil rights and liberties, political participation (e.g. voting and protest), and corruption (Veenhoven, 1988; Frey & Stutzer, 2000a, 2000b; Radcliff, 2001; Di Tella & MacCulloch, 2006; Dorn, Fischer, Kirchgässner, & Sousa-Poza, 2007; Helliwell & Huang, 2008; Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2008;

Tavits, 2008; Ott, 2010). Among these factors, the relationship between political participation and subjective well-being distinguishes itself as an important area of research (Pirralha, 2017), especially during the past decade.

On the one hand, the evidence suggests that people tend to be happier in countries that have democratic governments and where opportunities exist for people to participate in democratic processes than in countries where such liberties do not exist (e.g. Radcliff, 2001; Frey & Stutzer, 2000a; Di Tella & MacCulloch, 2006; Tavits, 2008). On the other hand, recent studies in Europe and Latin America have found that political participation has no direct effects on individuals' subjective well-being (Dorn, Fischer, Kirchgässner, & Sousa-Poza, 2008; Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2011; Pirralha, 2017). More recently, an emerging strand of research has modeled life satisfaction as an independent variable and considered how it affects politics (Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2011; Flavin & Keane, 2012; Lorenzini, 2015). An important research question that has concerned scholars in this area is whether subjective life satisfaction engenders politically active citizens or whether it breeds political apathy. For instance, in a study focusing on the United States, Flavin and Keane (2012) found that life satisfaction influences participation in conventional activities such as voting, but not in conflictual engagements such as protest. These studies indicate that people who are satisfied with their lives are more likely to engage in political activities, suggesting that the direction of the relationship flows from life satisfaction to political participation and not the other way around (Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2008; Flavin & Keane, 2012). Thus, the evidence from the two strands of research is inconclusive about the nature of the relationship between political participation and subjective well-being. Our study, however, follows the example of Flavin and Keane (2012) by examining the influence of life satisfaction on voting and protest activity in Ghana.

Most of the extant cross-national and country-specific studies examining the linkages between political participation and well-being have focused on developed democracies in Western Europe and the United States (e.g. Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Tavits, 2008; Frey & Stutzer, 2000a; Flavin & Keane, 2012). Some have also examined countries in Latin America (e.g. Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2011). However, there is a dearth of empirical research on the topic for sub-Saharan African countries. The question remains whether or not life satisfaction and political participation are related in Africa. This study contributes to the extant literature by providing empirical evidence from Africa, focusing specifically on Ghana. This is important considering the level of attention given to democratic processes, good governance, and socioeconomic development on the continent. Therefore, an empirical investigation of whether and to what extent life satisfaction and political participation are related in Africa is necessary.

In particular, Ghana is an interesting case because of its democratic reputation in the sub-Saharan Africa region. Since it attained independence from British colonial rule in 1957, Ghana has had a checkered political history. The country had three short-lived civilian governments and a protracted period of military rule between 1966 and 1992.<sup>2</sup> Ghana returned to constitutional rule in 1993 and has since enjoyed stable democratic processes, including seven successful elections and three alternations in political power between the two dominant political parties: the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). Although Ghana is only one of the successful democracies in sub-Saharan Africa, its democratic achievement in elections has been touted as a model on the continent (Afari-Gyan, 2009; Gyimah-Boadi, 2009), especially in the economically and politically volatile West African sub-region. Therefore, Ghana makes an interesting case to examine the linkages between subjective well-being and political participation in Africa.

## 2 | BACKGROUND LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The term “political participation” refers to any activity “that has the intent or effect of influencing government action—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995, p. 38). Political participation may also be construed as any “Action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes” (Brady, 1999, p. 737). Verba et al. (1995) advanced voting, campaigning, contacting public officials, and involvement in communal activities as dimensions of political participation. More recently, scholars have constructed typologies of political participation to include electoral participation (voting), consumer participation (e.g. engaging in boycotts, signing petitions), party activity (e.g. membership in a political party, doing work for or donating money to a political party), protest activity (e.g. joining in strikes, protests, and demonstrations), and contact activity including contacting elected officials (Teorell, Torcal, & Montero, 2007; Ekman & Amnå, 2012).

The debate on what constitutes political participation has existed for several decades and mostly centers on what activities can be considered political participation and how those activities can be classified (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). In the pre-internet era, the conceptualization of political participation was mostly based on physical participation in political activities or processes (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Scholzman, Brady, & Nie, 1993; Verba et al., 1995; Parry, Moysen, & Day, 1992). However, modern forms of political participation now incorporate the involvement in political activities online (e.g. Bimber, 2001; Krueger, 2002; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Nevertheless, in this paper, we are more concerned with and focused on the former form of conceptualization. Specifically, we operationalize political participation by examining questions about whether the individual votes in national elections (i.e. electoral participation), has signed petitions and engaged in boycotts (i.e. consumer participation), and joined in strikes, protests, and peaceful demonstrations (i.e. protest activity).

A significant portion of the empirical literature that examines the relationship between subjective well-being and political participation has modeled the former as a function of the latter. Political theorists have suggested several reasons why political participation can affect subjective well-being (e.g. Dhal, 1989; Inglehart, 1977; Putnam, 2000). Participation in various forms of political activity can have psychological benefits by “enhancing the participating individual's sense of efficacy, political knowledge, and feeling of empowerment” (Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2011, p. 103). Additionally, participation is a means to self-development, self-expression, and self-actualization, all of which can foster a higher sense of well-being (Teorell, 2006; Pichler & Wallace, 2009; Pirralha, 2017). More significantly, scholars have argued that participation in direct democracy has “procedural utility” that is independent of public decision-making outcomes (Frey, Benz, & Stutzer, 2004). Thus, citizens derive a sense of satisfaction from the opportunity to participate and influence decisions that directly affect them and from transparency in the political process even when the outcomes are not favorable to them.

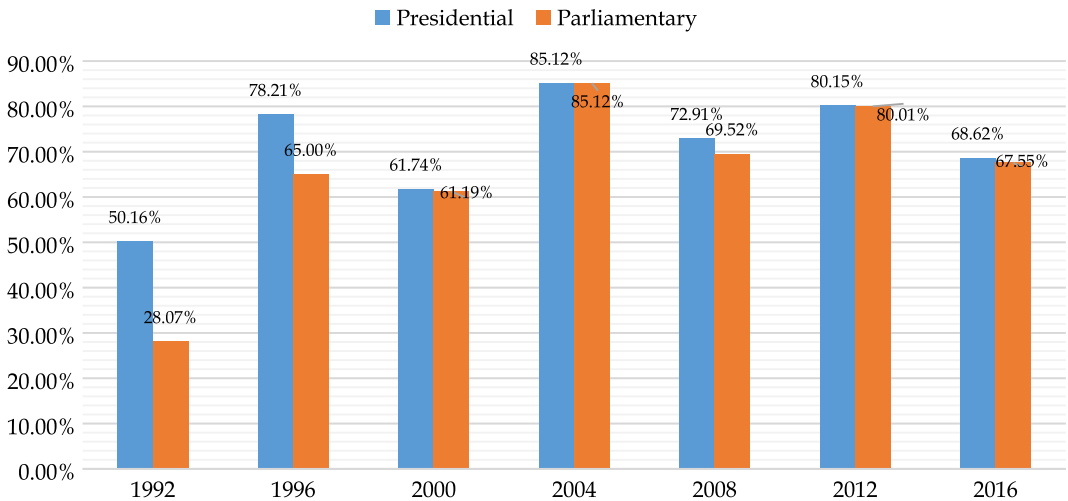
To date, empirical evidence for the direct influence of political participation on subjective well-being has been anything but conclusive. In a series of studies that focused on Switzerland, Frey and Stutzer (2000a, 2000b, 2005) examined how institutional opportunities for political participation (e.g. an initiative to change a canton's constitution) influence subjective well-being. The authors found that an increase in the direct democracy index raised respondents' evaluation of their life satisfaction by 2.8 percentage points on a 10-point scale (Frey & Stutzer, 2000a). Dorn et al. (2008) reassessed the impact of political participation on subjective well-being in Switzerland using new panel data from the Swiss Household Panel. Controlling for language and religion, the authors found no significant

effect of political participation on subjective well-being. In another study based on data from the 2006/2007 European Social Survey, Pacheco and Lange (2010) found that political participation had a statistically significant, strong, and positive effect on life satisfaction, after dealing with endogeneity problems through a two-step regression modeling procedure. Similarly, using data from the 18 AmericasBarometer country surveys, Weitz-Shapiro and Winters (2011) initially found a positive association between voting and life satisfaction in Latin America, albeit that the relationship was attenuated in countries with enforced compulsory voting. The authors also explored the causal direction of the relationship using three different strategies. In all three approaches, their results indicated that voting had no effect on life satisfaction. More recently, Pirralha (2017) employed structural equation modeling to examine panel data from the Dutch Longitudinal Internet Studies for Social Science. The author did not find a direct effect of political participation on well-being.

Given the inconclusiveness and mixed nature of the evidence in the foregoing discussion, some scholars have explored the possibility that life satisfaction influences political participation. In a recent study that focused on Switzerland, Lorenzini (2015) examined whether life dissatisfaction fostered participation of unemployed youth in contacting and protest activities. Using primary data on unemployed youth in Geneva, the author found that life dissatisfaction rather influences participation of employed youth in contacting activities. However, for protest activities, life satisfaction rather than dissatisfaction influences participation of the unemployed youth, thereby contradicting the findings by Flavin and Keane (2012).

How may life satisfaction influence political participation? The empirical literature has shown that the answer is indeterminate. Specifically, the effect of life satisfaction on political participation depends on what form of participation is being examined (Flavin & Keane, 2012; Lorenzini, 2015). One argument is that improved well-being would eventually drain democracy because “contented idleness would result in easy conservatism and political apathy” (Veenhoven, 1988, p. 342). The implication is that, having had their essential needs met, people who are satisfied with their lives would disengage from politics, resulting in a negative effect of life satisfaction on political participation. This is at variance with the withdrawal hypothesis which predicts that people suffering from economic hardship may withdraw from the political process in order to focus on their survival needs (Rosenstone, 1982, p. 25; Fried, 1969). Accordingly, participation may be construed as a higher-order need in that people only participate in the political process after their basic survival needs have been met (Maslow, 1954; Inglehart, 1990). Another argument that has been advanced is the mobilization theory of political participation which hypothesizes that people under economic duress may mobilize or become active in the political process in order to change the status quo (Schlozman & Verba, 1979; Kernell, 1977). Thus, discontentment drives political engagement (Schlozman & Verba, 1979; Kernell, 1977; Veenhoven, 1988). In this regard, life dissatisfaction may compel people to participate in the political process, resulting in a negative effect of life satisfaction on political participation.

It is also possible that people who are satisfied with their lives are more likely to participate in politics as a way to advance the interests of others (Veenhoven, 1988). In this regard, life satisfaction “broadens perception, encourages active involvement, and thereby fosters political participation” so that improved well-being would not drain democracy (Veenhoven, 1988, p. 333). Other scholars agree that satisfied individuals are more concerned about broader societal and political issues in their community (Flavin & Keane, 2012; Pirralha, 2017) and may seek to address these issues through political participation (Inglehart, 1990). Thus, the expected effect of life satisfaction on participation would be positive. Finally, proponents of the “no effect hypothesis” of political participation hold the view that economic hardship or circumstances may not affect political participation at all (e.g., Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979; Rosenstone, 1982; Lorenzini, 2013). In this case, the expected effect of life satisfaction



**FIGURE 1** Voter Turnout Rates for Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in Ghana, 1992–2016

on political participation would be null. Taken together, the foregoing discussion implies that, *a priori*, the effect of life satisfaction on political participation may be indeterminate.

Since much of the literature has focused on Europe and the Americas, we do not know the extent to which the extant findings reflect conditions in developing democracies, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. We are cognizant of the argument that there could be a bidirectional causality between life satisfaction and political participation. That is, while people who participate in the political process (e.g. voting) may derive some procedural utility, it could be that people who are satisfied (or dissatisfied) with their life may be more (or less) likely to participate in the political process (Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2008; Flavin & Keane, 2012). However, Weitz-Shapiro and Winters (2008) have demonstrated, using data from Costa Rica, that any relationship between life satisfaction and voting runs from life satisfaction to voting and not vice versa. Furthermore, this problem can be addressed by implementing an instrumental variable two-stage least squares or probit estimation procedure. However, our results do not show a significant effect of life satisfaction on political participation. Hence, we follow Flavin and Keane (2012) and focus on whether life satisfaction influences political participation in Ghana without having to address a potential endogeneity problem.

### 3 | THE STATE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN GHANA

Since attaining independence from British colonial rule in 1957, Ghana has had a checkered political history, interspersing democratic regimes with military juntas and experiencing five coups d'état and one failed coup attempt (Teye, 1988; Owusu, 1989). Ghana restored democratic rule in 1993, after many years of military dictatorship under President Jerry John Rawlings and his Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), which later metamorphosed into the NDC in 1992. The current 1992 Constitution marked the inception of Ghana's Fourth Republic.<sup>3</sup> Although 13 political parties registered to contest the 1992 presidential and parliamentary elections (Ninsin, 2006), the two main political contenders since 1992 have been the NDC and the NPP.

The most important and dominant form of political participation in Ghana is voting (Gyampo, 2013). Data on actual voter turnout provided by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral

Assistance (2018) indicate a business-cycle-like pattern for electoral participation in Ghana's Fourth Republic. Figure 1 illustrates the voter turnout rates for the seven presidential and parliamentary elections held from 1992 to 2016. For the 1992 presidential elections, 50.16% of eligible voters turned out to vote. This proportion increased significantly to 78.21% in 1996, and declined to 61.74% in year 2000. It then increased to 85.12% in 2004, fell to 72.91% in 2008, rose again to 80.15% in 2012 and then declined to 68.62% in 2016. The turnout rates for parliamentary elections mirrored the pattern for the presidential elections. The unusually low turnout (28.07%) in 1992 was largely because the NPP and other opposition parties boycotted the parliamentary elections.

An interesting observation is that, each time the presidential voter turnout rate fell, the incumbent party lost the elections to the main opposition party. For instance, when the voter turnout rate fell in 2000 to 61.74% from 78.21% in 1996, power changed hands for the first time in the Fourth Republic from the NDC to the NPP. Similarly, with a fall in 2008 to 72.91% from 85.12% in 2004, power changed hands from the NPP to the NDC, and so forth. The years 2000 and 2008 coincided with the term limits for President John J. Rawlings and President John A. Kufuor, respectively. Although 2016 marked the end of a second term for the NDC, it was President John D. Mahama's first full term as President. Nonetheless, one wonders whether term limits could account for the erratic voter turnout.<sup>4</sup> The evidence from prior studies is mixed. While Hajnal and Lewis (2003) found no effect of term limits on voter turnout, Nalder (2007) found that term limits reduce voter turnout in the USA. More recently, Veiga and Veiga (2018) observed that term limits increase voter turnout in Portugal. Thus, it is unclear whether the erratic voter turnout in Ghana was caused by term limits.

Protest activities are not common in Ghana, but when they occur they are usually organized by opposition party activists in response to government policies perceived as not being in the interest of the general public (e.g. Bob-Milliar, 2012; Gyampo, 2013). Such party activists (popularly called "foot-soldiers") are usually disgruntled young people whose main aim is to criticize the incumbent government in order to make it unpopular (Gyampo, 2013). They do this by frequently appearing on television or calling in to radio discussion programs to criticize the government (Bob-Milliar, 2012). Protest activities are also undertaken by civil society organizations and student groups such as the Tertiary Institution Network and the Tertiary Education and Students' Confederacy formed by the NDC and the NPP, respectively (Gyampo, 2013). In recent times, protest activities in Ghana have been dominated by urban workers (through trade unions), students (especially nursing trainees) and citizen groups protesting increasing economic hardship caused by removal of subsidies on goods and services, increased taxation, rising unemployment, high inflation rates, depreciation of the local currency, as well as erratic power supply (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2014; Asante & Helbrecht, 2018). Thus, most contemporary protest activities in Ghana have been fueled by welfare concerns especially when they emanate from government policies.

## 4 | DATA AND EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

In order to empirically examine the influence of subjective well-being on political participation, we draw on data from the Wave 6 of the World Values Survey conducted in 2012 in Ghana. The World Values Survey is a global project involving a series of national surveys conducted in many countries around the world on public attitudes, economic conditions, democracy and governance, among others. In Wave 6 of the surveys, a nationally representative sample of 1,552 respondents aged 18 years and above was interviewed in Ghana. The surveys were conducted in January 2012 using face-to-face interviews in English, Twi, Ga, Ewe and Hausa.



## 4.1 | Dependent Variables

The surveys contained questions on voting behavior and some political participation activities related to protests that we used to construct our dependent variables. First, respondents were asked to indicate whether they vote in national elections: “When elections take place, do you vote always, usually or never?” The responses were 1=Always; 2=Usually; and 3=Never. Therefore, we constructed a binary response variable “Votes in national elections” taking the value 1 if the respondent indicated “Always” or “Usually” to the question, and 0 otherwise.

Our second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth dependent variables were constructed from a question that asked respondents to indicate their participation in various political actions. It was worded as follows:

Now I'd like you to look at this card. I'm going to read out some forms of political action that people can take, and I'd like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have done any of these things, whether you might do it or would never under any circumstances do it: [1=Have done; 2=Might do; 3=Would never do].

These activities included signing a petition, joining in boycotts, attending peaceful demonstrations, joining strikes, and participating in any other act of protest. For each of these, we coded the activity as 1 if the respondent indicated that they had done it and 0 otherwise. Finally, we constructed a composite index “Political participation” by simply summing the six political activities above. Therefore, political participation ranged from 0 (lowest) to 6 (highest). The interpretation is that a respondent who scored 6 on political participation was more involved in the political process than someone who scored, say, 2.

## 4.2 | Independent Variables

The explanatory variable is life satisfaction (i.e. subjective well-being) and is based on the oft-used survey question “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Using this card on which 1 means you are ‘completely dissatisfied’ and 10 means you are ‘completely satisfied’ where would you put your satisfaction with your life as a whole?” There is some considerable debate on what measure of subjective well-being is appropriate. Scholars have used different questions to measure subjective well-being. The commonest include “Taking all things together, would you say you are: very happy, quite happy, not very happy, not at all happy” and “Taking all things together, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Are you very satisfied, satisfied, not very satisfied, not at all satisfied?” (e.g. Schyns, 1998; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). However, because subjective well-being refers to “people's cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives” (Diener, 2000, p. 34), and because this question is arguably the standard subjective well-being measure in the literature, we focus on it.<sup>5</sup> We control for sociodemographic characteristics that could influence voting behavior and political participation. Specifically, we control for age, gender, employment status, education, religious denomination, ethnicity, and size of town of residence of the respondent.

## 4.3 | Empirical Model

Since we are interested in knowing whether subjective well-being influences voting and other forms of political participation, we model each of the voting and political participation variables as a function of subjective well-being while controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. Therefore, the econometric model we utilize is specified as follows:

$$\Pr[\text{POLPAR}_i = 1] = \Phi \left( \alpha + \beta \text{SWB}_i + \gamma \sum_{i=1}^n \text{CONTROLS}_i \right), \quad (1)$$

where POLPAR represents political participation (including voting and the various forms of political action discussed above), SWB denotes the respondent's self-reported subjective well-being (i.e. life satisfaction) and CONTROLS are sociodemographic characteristics.  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ , and  $\gamma$  are parameters to be estimated,  $\Phi(\cdot)$  represents the standard normal cumulative density function, and  $i$  indexes the respondent. We estimated logistic regressions for Equation (1) for the binary dependent variables. However, because the composite construct, political participation, ranges from 0 to 6, it is ordinal. Therefore, ordered logistic regression is an appropriate estimation technique for estimating the model when considering the political participation index (see, for example, McKelvey & Zavoina, 1975; Becker & Kennedy, 1992; Long & Freese, 2006). Additionally, we estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions for the political participation index for ease of interpretation of the regression results.

## 5 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 reports the descriptions and summary statistics of the variables used in the study. As many as 68.49% of respondents indicated that they “always” or “usually” vote in national elections. Yet the proportions of respondents who had participated in one type of political protest or the other were very low. Specifically, 2.58%, 1.80%, and 5.22% of respondents had signed a petition, joined in boycotts, or attended peaceful demonstrations, respectively. Furthermore, only 2.38% and 1.35% had joined in strikes or any other act of protest, respectively. Thus, while electoral participation was relatively high among Ghanaians, participation in various protest activities was very low. These figures are roughly consistent with data from Afrobarometer Surveys (see Table A1 in the Appendix) and the official voter turnout rates reported above. While the overwhelming majority of Ghanaians reported having voted in national elections, very few of them had participated or intended to participate in demonstrations or protest marches. For instance, for Rounds 1 through 6 of the Afrobarometer Surveys, less than 10% of respondents indicated that they had participated in a demonstration or protest march in the past. The majority of respondents indicated that they would never participate in these protest activities. Finally, the average score for the political participation variable as an index was 0.8183 out of a possible 6. Again, this reflects the rather low political participation in Ghana.

The average score for subjective well-being was 6.4420, which is only marginally above the midpoint on the well-being scale. The average respondent was about 31 years old, about half of the respondents were female, while 14.95% reported being unemployed. The average respondent had attained less than a university education, about 13.66% of respondents were Roman Catholic, 56.31% were Protestant, while 12.18% reported being Muslim. With respect to ethnicity, the majority of the respondents were Akan (59.54%), 13.4% were Ewe, while 9.79% were Ga. Finally, the average respondent resided in a town with a population of about 5,000–10,000 people.

Table 2 reports the correlation matrix for the political participation variables. The correlations between voting in national elections on the one hand and joining in boycotts and other acts of protest on the other hand were not statistically significant. Aside from voting in national elections being correlated with signing petitions and joining in strikes at the 10% and 5% levels of significance, respectively, all the other correlations were positive and statistically significant at the 1% level. In other words, people who participated in one protest activity also participated in the other protest activities.



**TABLE 1** Summary Statistics of Variables Used in the Study

Variable	Description	Mean	Std Dev.	Range
Votes in national elections	= 1 if respondent always or usually votes in national elections; 0 otherwise	0.6849	0.4647	0–1
Signed petition	= 1 if respondent had signed a petition in the past; 0 otherwise	0.0258	0.1585	0–1
Joined in boycotts	= 1 if respondent had joined in boycotts in the past; 0 otherwise	0.0180	0.1331	0–1
Attended peaceful demonstrations	= 1 if respondent had participated in peaceful demonstrations in the past; 0 otherwise	0.0522	0.2225	0–1
Joined in strikes	= 1 if respondent had joined strikes in the past; 0 otherwise	0.0238	0.1526	0–1
Joined in other act of protest	= 1 if respondent had joined in other act of protest; 0 otherwise	0.0135	0.1156	0–1
Political participation	A summed score composite index of the voting and five protest variables above	0.8183	0.6731	0–6
Life satisfaction	A measure of the respondent's satisfaction with their life (1 = completely dissatisfied; 10 = completely satisfied)	6.4220	2.3510	1–10
Age	Age of respondent (years)	30.9246	12.7027	18–82
Age squared	Squared term for age	1117.5860	1036.3370	324–6724
Female	= 1 for female respondent; 0 otherwise	0.4974	0.5002	0–1
Unemployed	= 1 if respondent indicated being unemployed; 0 otherwise	0.1495	0.3567	0–1
Education	Respondent's highest educational attainment (1 = no formal education; 9 = university-level education with degree)	4.3344	2.1972	1–9
Roman Catholic	= 1 if respondent indicated being a Roman Catholic; 0 otherwise	0.1366	0.3435	0–1
Protestant	= 1 if respondent indicated being a Protestant (e.g. Pentecost, Anglican, Methodist); 0 otherwise	0.5631	0.4962	0–1
Muslim	= 1 if respondent indicated being a Muslim; 0 otherwise	0.1218	0.3271	0–1
Akan	= 1 if respondent indicated being an Akan; 0 otherwise	0.5954	0.4910	0–1
Ewe	= 1 if respondent indicated being an Ewe; 0 otherwise	0.1340	0.3408	0–1
Ga	= 1 if respondent indicated being a Ga; 0 otherwise	0.0979	0.2973	0–1
Size of town	Size of the town in which respondent resided at the time of the interview (1 = under 2,000 people, 7 = 100,000–500,000 people)	2.8943	1.2849	1–7

**TABLE 2** Correlation Matrix for Voting and Other Political Participation Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Votes in national elections	1					
2. Signed petition	0.0490*	1				
3. Joined in boycotts	0.0241	0.1613***	1			
4. Attended peaceful demonstrations	0.0316	0.1995***	0.1641***	1		
5. Joined in strikes	0.0512**	0.1612***	0.1692***	0.2102***	1	
6. Joined in other act of protest	-0.0063	0.0865***	0.1517***	0.1230***	0.2011***	1

Note: Voting in national elections was correlated with signing petitions and joining in strikes at the 10% and 5% levels of significance, respectively. All other correlation coefficients were significant at the 1% level.

Yet, the same inference cannot be made for the relationship between voting in national elections and some of the protest activities.

Table 3 reports the logistic and ordered logistic regression results for voting and the other political action variables. At the outset, we note that these results are conditional correlations and do not establish causation.<sup>6</sup> The results do not show a significant influence of subjective well-being on voting. We also did not find any evidence of a significant association between subjective well-being and any of the protest variables. Moreover, results from ordered logistic and OLS regressions (reported in Table 4) further show no influence of subjective well-being on political participation as an index. Therefore, our results provide no evidence that Ghanaian citizens who are more satisfied with their lives are more or less likely to vote and to participate in protest activities such as signing petitions and joining in boycotts. Thus, our findings contradict previous studies that observed that life satisfaction positively influences voting (e.g. Flavin & Keane, 2012). Furthermore, our results do not support the argument that people who are dissatisfied with their life are more likely to protest or go on strike in order to influence public policy (e.g. Barnes & Kaase, 1979). However, our results are consistent with findings of prior studies that found no significant association between life satisfaction and political participation (e.g. Pirralha, 2017).

There are several plausible explanations for the null effect of life satisfaction on political participation. Due to the pervasiveness of poverty and its concomitant economic struggles among Ghanaians (Adjasi & Osei, 2007; Booyesen, Van Der Berg, Burger, Von Maltitz, & Du Rand, 2008), it may be that dissatisfied people decide not to vote because of their focus on their survival needs (Inglehart, 1990; Maslow, 1954). However, there is replete evidence of vote buying in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa (Bratton, 2008; Kramon, 2013; Gadjanova, 2017). Because poor people are usually more disproportionately targeted for vote buying (Jensen & Justesen, 2014), these people may be lured to turn out and vote. Thus, their decision to go and vote may be unrelated to their life satisfaction. Furthermore, wealthier Ghanaians who do not face economic struggles may decide to not vote because they know that their vote may be neutralized by votes from uninformed voters who have been influenced to turn out and vote. Consistent with this view, one study finds that people who are satisfied with national economic conditions were significantly less likely to vote in Africa (Kuenzi & Lambright, 2011). Finally, as in many African countries, elections in Ghana are fraught with rigging and fraud (Haynes, 1993; Abdulai & Crawford, 2010). As a result, people who are satisfied with their lives may choose to abstain from voting. Thus, while satisfied people may be less likely to vote, unsatisfied people are also

**TABLE 3** Logistic Regression Results for the Effect of Subjective Well-Being on Voting and Other Forms of Political Participation in Ghana

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Votes in national elections	Signed petition	Joined in boycotts	Attended peaceful demonstrations	Joined in strikes	Joined in other act of protest
Life satisfaction	-0.04186 (0.02867)	0.05163 (0.0731)	0.0529 (0.0880)	-0.0806 (0.0494)	0.0693 (0.0810)	0.0075 (0.0992)
Age	0.42478*** (0.0301)	0.1465* (0.0810)	0.0116 (0.0880)	0.0956* (0.0544)	0.4190*** (0.1285)	-0.0321 (0.1053)
Age squared	-0.0042*** (0.0004)	-0.0017* (0.0010)	-0.0003 (0.0011)	-0.0011 (0.0007)	-0.0052*** (0.0018)	0.0002 (0.0013)
<i>Gender (Reference = Male)</i>						
Female	-0.2893** (0.1340)	-0.6096* (0.3548)	-2.1941*** (0.6239)	-0.9124*** (0.2607)	-0.5329 (0.3932)	-1.0585** (0.5267)
Unemployed	-0.2140 (0.1738)	0.1177 (0.4986)	0.2793 (0.5677)	0.0636 (0.3445)	-1.3329 (1.0290)	0.1501 (0.6543)
Education	0.0099 (0.0314)	0.2192*** (0.0750)	-0.0219 (0.0960)	0.1176** (0.0557)	0.4472*** (0.0829)	0.1223 (0.1070)
<i>Religious denomination (Reference = Other denomination)</i>						
Roman Catholic	0.4375* (0.2324)	0.5960 (0.5619)	-0.2314 (0.5985)	0.2918 (0.3841)	0.1137 (0.5962)	0.0034 (0.5744)
Protestant	0.3197* (0.1767)	0.2355 (0.4732)	-0.6371 (0.4729)	-0.1219 (0.3115)	-0.4667 (0.4849)	-1.2198** (0.5429)
Muslim	0.6563** (0.2982)	-1.4507 (1.1694)	-0.3193 (0.9673)	-0.3990 (0.5804)	0.0648 (0.7494)	-0.3903 (0.9730)
<i>Ethnicity (Reference = Other tribe)</i>						
Akan	0.0481 (0.2385)	0.1525 (0.6044)	1.2022 (0.9304)	0.3829 (0.4366)	0.2587 (0.6220)	-1.0172* (0.6109)

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Votes in national elections	Signed petition	Joined in boycotts	Attended peaceful demonstrations	Joined in strikes	Joined in other act of protest
Ewe	-0.0637 (0.2841)	-0.3792 (0.7301)	1.1392 (1.0465)	-0.2614 (0.5558)	0.2393 (0.7045)	-0.8837 (0.7994)
Ga	0.1167 (0.3112)	-0.6082 (0.9137)	-0.0186 (1.3437)	-1.2671 (0.8228)	-1.1663 (1.1567)	-0.9791 (0.8988)
Size of town	-0.2404*** (.0508)	-0.0441 (0.1383)	0.1233 (0.1539)	0.0868 (0.0938)	-0.1461 (0.1586)	0.0730 (0.1730)
Constant	-6.5395*** (0.6455)	-7.4795*** (1.7985)	-4.7137** (2.0312)	-4.6744*** (1.2198)	-13.2483*** (2.5246)	-2.4506 (2.2273)
Pseudo $R^2$	0.2451	0.0700	0.1049	0.0652	0.1831	0.0891
Log likelihood	-730.0182	-172.8137	-125.4645	-297.3005	-142.7907	-98.7992
N	1,552	1,552	1,552	1,552	1,552	1,552

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ . Standard errors are in parentheses.

**TABLE 4** Ordered Logistic and OLS Regressions Results for the Effect of Subjective Well-Being on Political Participation in Ghana

Variable	Ordered logit	OLS
	Model 7	Model 8
Life satisfaction	-0.0261 (0.0240)	-0.0062 (0.0068)
Age	0.3332*** (0.02438)	0.0836*** (0.0064)
Age squared	-0.0034*** (0.0003)	-0.00087*** (0.0001)
<i>Gender (Reference = Male)</i>		
Female	-0.4504*** (0.1144)	-0.1575*** (0.0326)
Unemployed	-0.1555 (0.1561)	-0.0275 (0.0450)
Education	0.0801*** (0.0273)	0.0276*** (.0078)
<i>Religious denomination (Reference = Other denomination)</i>		
Roman Catholic	0.4098** (0.2006)	0.0996* (0.0574)
Protestant	0.1090 (0.1532)	0.0146 (0.0434)
Muslim	0.1922 (0.2524)	0.0197 (0.0716)
<i>Ethnicity (Ref = Other tribe)</i>		
Akan	0.0292 (0.2001)	0.0250 (0.0570)
Ewe	-0.1379 (0.2407)	-0.0280 (0.0686)
Ga	-0.1416 (0.2545)	-0.0598 (0.0727)
Size of town	-0.1748*** (0.0455)	-0.0376*** (0.0129)
Pseudo $R^2$ / adjusted $R^2$	0.1247	0.1549
Log likelihood/ $F$ statistic	-1234.6583	22.86***
$N$	1,552	1,552

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ . Standard errors are in parentheses.

unlikely to vote except when they have been incentivized to vote (e.g. through vote buying). Therefore, the decision to vote or not may be independent of the individual's life satisfaction.

We note that signing a petition, joining in boycotts, attending peaceful demonstrations, joining strikes, and participating in any other act of protest are unconventional political activities. The null effect of life satisfaction on each of these political activities is consistent with the results reported for the USA by Flavin and Keane (2012). To understand this result, one needs to understand why people protest. First, one motive is the liberal logic of protest in which people attempt to advance or

protect the interest and well-being of the marginalized in society (Sylla, 2014; Asante & Helbrecht, 2018). In this regard, it may be that Ghanaians who are more satisfied with their lives are more likely to protest because they consider fighting for the rights and living conditions of others the right thing to do (Flavin & Keane, 2012; Pirralha, 2017). But people who are satisfied with their lives may also choose to withdraw from participation because they are better-off in spite of the economic conditions or hardship that changing government policies may cause (Veenhoven, 1988). Therefore, we speculate that the observed null effect of life satisfaction on political participation is due to the counteracting effects of these two points.

Second, the partisan logic of protest behavior is the idea that people in political interest groups protest in order to win some political capital for their party of interest (Sylla, 2014; Asante & Helbrecht, 2018). Third, in the corporatist logic, people protest to protect the interest of a particular group (e.g., union workers). Fourth, and finally, if people protest to safeguard the interest of the majority of the populace (as opposed to a marginalized or professional group) then the protest motive is the proletarian logic (Sylla, 2014; Asante & Helbrecht, 2018).<sup>7</sup> In Ghana, many demonstrations and protests have occurred along partisan lines without recourse to welfare considerations. But even more common are apolitical welfare-related protests and demonstrations, especially by students and union workers (Bob-Milliar, 2012; Gyampo, 2013). In spite of all these, an infinitesimal proportion of Ghanaians engage in protest activities (especially those studied here). More recently, sentiments about erratic power supply and worsening economic conditions resulted in demonstrations in the country (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2014; Asante & Helbrecht, 2018). Because protests in Ghana have mostly been politically motivated (i.e. partisan logic) or fueled by welfare concerns for students and union works (i.e. corporatist logic) and for the general public (i.e. proletarian logic), we conjecture that these unconventional political activities may be unrelated to how satisfied people are with their lives as a whole. Therefore, this may explain why we observed a null effect of life satisfaction on protest activities.

## 6 | SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The nature of the relationship between politics and subjective well-being has been the subject of an ongoing debate among scholars in the social sciences. A large section of the extant literature suggests that political participation is a strong predictor of life satisfaction. A growing strand of the literature, however, argues that subjective well-being influences the individual's level of political participation. Particularly missing from the existing literature on this topic are empirical studies that focus on democratic countries in Africa. Accordingly, we know very little about whether and how politics and subjective well-being are related in that context. In this paper, we examined the effect of life satisfaction on voting and other forms of unconventional political activities among Ghanaians using data from the Wave 6 of the World Values Survey.

Our results do not show a statistically significant effect of life satisfaction on voting or other forms of political participation (including signing petitions, attending peaceful demonstration, joining strikes, and other protest activities). In other words, our results suggest that life satisfaction is not an important determinant of voting or political participation in Ghana. Therefore, we argue that our findings do not support the idea that a higher sense of life satisfaction fosters political participation in Ghana. These findings, while limited to the context of Ghana, may be suggestive of trends in sub-Saharan Africa, especially those countries that have socioeconomic and political histories similar to Ghana. Our study contributes to the literature on the relationship between subjective well-being and political participation by providing empirical evidence from an African country perspective. Finally,



to the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to examine whether subjective well-being influences voting and political participation in Ghana.

Nonetheless, our study has several limitations that could inform future research. First, prior studies suggest that the relationship between subjective well-being and political participation may be contingent on the nature of the participatory act involved (Flavin & Keane, 2012). We have examined the effect of subjective well-being on voting and protest behavior here. However, there are other dimensions of political participation (e.g. contacting political leaders, attending campaign meetings or rallies, and donating money to political parties) that were not examined here due to data constraints. Therefore, we are hesitant to generalize our findings on the relationship between subjective well-being and political participation in Ghana. Second, our study focused exclusively on one wave of the World Values Survey. Perhaps future research could extend the analysis to cover more waves in order to provide a clearer picture of the relationships we have investigated. Finally, we focused on Ghana. It may be interesting to examine these relationships for other democratic countries in the sub-Saharan Africa region.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, we use the terms “subjective well-being” and “life satisfaction” interchangeably.
- <sup>2</sup> Ghana experienced four major coups d'état in this period, in 1966, 1972, 1979, and 1981.
- <sup>3</sup> The Fourth Republic is so named because it was Ghana's fourth attempt to become a republican democratic country since independence in 1957.
- <sup>4</sup> We are grateful to the editor for raising this issue.
- <sup>5</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that we use this variable as a measure of subjective well-being.
- <sup>6</sup> We are thankful to the editor of the journal for pointing this out to us.
- <sup>7</sup> A fifth logic is the republican protest logic in which people protest to ensure that their government complies with the tenets of liberal democracy (see Sylla, 2014; Asante & Helbrecht, 2018).

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## APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Voting and Participation in a Demonstration or a Protest March in Ghana

Category	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Round 6
	1999/2001	2002/2003	2005/2006	2008/2009	2011/2012	2014/2015
<i>Voting in last elections</i>						
You were not registered to vote			6.0%	10.3%	15.9%	6.3%
Voted in the elections	88.6%		87.2%	80.6%	75.2%	78.2%
You decided not to vote	11.4%		0.9%	3.4%	3.1%	5.4%
You could not find the polling station			1.3%	0.7%	0.3%	0.5%
You were prevented from voting			0.7%	0.1%	0.4%	0.3%
You did not have time to vote			0.3%	1.2%	0.9%	2.4%
Did not vote for some other reason			2.5%	3.5%	4.1%	5.0%
<i>N</i>	2,001		1,197	1,200	2,400	2,399
<i>Demonstrations or protest march</i>						
No, would never do this	91.5%	82.5%	67.2%	69.2%	83.5%	59.3%
No, but would do if had the chance		7.8%	21.9%	19.8%	11.8%	32.1%
Yes, once or twice	4.0%	4.0%	4.7%	5.0%	3.2%	4.1%
Yes, several times	3.2%	1.9%	2.3%	3.2%	0.9%	2.0%
Yes, often	1.3%	1.1%	0.5%	0.7%	0.3%	0.5%
Don't know		2.3%	3.4%	2.0%	0.3%	2.1%
<i>N</i>	2,002	1,200	1,197	1,200	2,400	2,398

Source: Afrobarometer (Ghana).