

I

A Theory of Party System Variation

Faced with a transition to multiparty democracy, many assume that breaking the power of incumbents is necessary to develop a stable, highly institutionalized party system. But, in fact, across Sub-Saharan Africa, the incumbent's demise is sufficient to ensure a highly volatile, weakly institutionalized party system in the democratic era. A strong authoritarian incumbent produces a more coherent, stable party competition, with the unintended consequences of promoting national territorial coverage, stronger partisan identities, opposition cohesion, and, ultimately, democratic accountability.

In Ghana, for example, the incumbent military leader and authoritarian revolutionary J. J. Rawlings and his National Democratic Congress (NDC) party swept the founding elections in 1992. Since that time, Ghana has developed a highly institutionalized party system with low levels of volatility and an alternating majority between stable parties. Ghana has experienced two democratic turnovers, and the two major parties – the NDC and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) – are deeply connected to their constituencies: they organize across the national territory to compete in every constituency, they mobilize participation during and beyond elections, and they aggregate coalitions of diverse citizens and interests. The NDC and the NPP are both enduring entities that help shape individual partisan identities and structure national, regional, and local competition.

In Benin, the authoritarian Parti de la Révolution Populaire du Bénin (PRPB) was led by a similar military and authoritarian revolutionary, Mathieu Kérékou. From a macro perspective, the authoritarian regime trajectory was identical to Ghana's: both leaders took power through a military coup, rapidly developed a single party to rule for the indefinite future, and maintained a high degree of personalist control. But the PRPB was disbanded during the democratic transition and did not compete in the founding multiparty elections. The field was wide open, and twelve parties were elected to the first National

Assembly, with the largest party garnering less than 19 percent of the vote. Kérékou himself ran for president as an independent and in a subsequent election was returned to the presidency, still as an independent candidate. Political parties in Benin remain fluid, lack internal cohesion or organization, and are active in only a particular region rather than the entire national territory. Political affiliations are constantly in flux, and electoral competition is volatile. Since the transition, Benin has maintained a weakly institutionalized party system.

Benin and Ghana present two poles at the ends of a large spectrum of party system institutionalization. These differences are replicated to varying degrees in democracies across the entire continent, and across the world. Following dramatic regime change across much of the developing world at the end of the twentieth century, new parties have proliferated and new practices of democratic competition abound. This book explains why each country developed the party system it has in Africa's democracies.

Party systems can vary on a number of dimensions, which are not mutually exclusive.¹ Party systems differ according to the degree of regional fragmentation or national concentration of each party.² Whereas some party systems demonstrate extreme volatility, with new competitive parties constantly springing into action, others are characterized by overall stability or adjustments between existing parties.³ And party systems have significant differences in the number of effective parties present in the legislature, ranging from greater than one in the case of dominant-party systems to upward of ten in multiparty systems.⁴ Within a given party system, the individual parties may vary in terms of their internal regulations, external structure, and intraparty cohesion.⁵ All these dimensions contribute to the overall degree of party system institutionalization (PSI), which encompasses the regularity of patterns in party competition (or electoral volatility), the attachment of voters to parties and the connection that the party has to voters and interest groups across the country, the legitimacy political actors accord to parties and party competition, and the organization and autonomy of the party beyond any particular leader or coterie.⁶ Measuring PSI across a range of countries provides a rich metric of comparison and makes apparent the diversity in how democratic party systems are actually functioning (Figure 1.1).

Although parties are central to organizing political life and have immense influence on a range of outcomes in democratic practice, political economy, public policy, and regime survival, we lack a sufficient explanation for how

¹ Hicken 2009.

² Brancati 2007; Chhibber, and Kollman 1998, 2004; Hicken 2009.

³ Powell and Tucker 2009 distinguish between these two types: volatility among stable parties and volatility created by party entry and exist of existing parties.

⁴ Duverger 1954; Taagepera and Shugart 1989; Cox 1997.

⁵ Cox and McCubbins 2001.

⁶ Mainwaring and Torcal 2006.

A Theory of Party System Variation

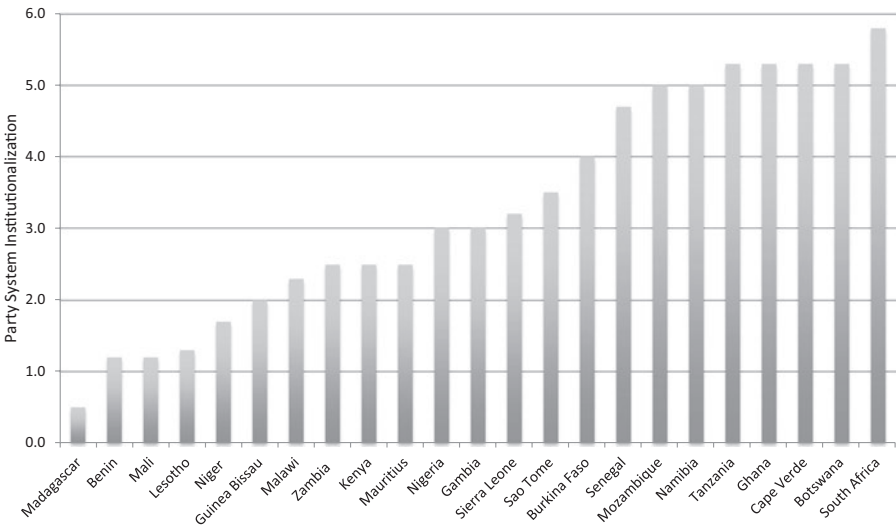


FIGURE 1.1. Variation in Party System Institutionalization in African Democracies. *Note:* Party System Institutionalization (PSI) has a possible range of 0–6, with 0 indicating the lowest level of institutionalization and 6 being the highest. The mean PSI of all African democracies is 3.3. This data is a composite measure of the period from the founding elections through 2011 in each country (see Chapter 2).

new party systems develop and why they exhibit particular, enduring, and extremely varied characteristics across the developing world. To advance the study of party system development, as well as our understanding of competitive representation in new democracies, this book addresses the question of why political party systems have developed and sustained varied degrees of party system institutionalization.

Because the level of party system institutionalization has important repercussions for democracy, it is critical to explain the puzzling variation across African party systems. Rather than assuming correlation between the level of party system institutionalization and overall democratic quality, as some critics have done, this study finds that the party system form has differential impact on key elements of democracy: participation, representation, accountability, and contestation. Whereas high party system institutionalization bodes well for democratic accountability, contestation, and stability, low party system institutionalization offers more direct opportunities for participation and greater options for descriptive and potentially substantive representation.

Highly institutionalized party systems can clearly contribute to greater electoral stability, not least because voters know which parties are competing, and can rationally calculate the likelihood of any given party winning subsequent elections. Well-established party systems also contribute to electoral accountability because voters can identify the main parties and what they

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Excerpt

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stand for, and can vote for or against clearly distinguishable and differentiated entities.⁷ Opposition parties can articulate a critique of the ruling party and offer an alternative. Furthermore, more institutionalized party systems can actually help structure the political field: organized and coherent parties have the potential to aggregate interests and disseminate information to and from the top echelons of the government hierarchy and the citizens at the mass level. This clear contestation and potential for coherent opposition critique provides the opportunity for alternation or even the defeat of what may have seemed a dominant party. By reducing uncertainty and providing a mechanism for holding elected officials accountable, highly institutionalized party systems contribute to democratic stability overall.

In Ghana, parties are indeed playing these roles, organizing competition and channeling interests into broader constituencies. Party affiliation is strong and may serve as an important social identity. Citizens follow party activity closely and remain informed about political events through their local party representatives. Voters know that dissatisfaction with the ruling party can be expressed through an opposition vote (which has led to alternating majorities). In brief, parties are strong and vibrant organizations, with meaningful and enduring connections to the population.

Where political party systems are weakly institutionalized, parties may quickly arise and disappear, representing shifting coalitions of candidates in response to changing strategic incentives – legislative elections following a presidential vote or preparations for municipal level polling, for example. A greater number of effective parties and nimble responsiveness to shifting conditions can increase representation by allowing very nuanced and direct appeals to particular constituencies. It may also allow the average citizen greater opportunity for active participation in party formation and competition. Because of the low barriers to entry for party formation and the lack of coherent internal organization, political parties rely on the mobilization of their immediate community, engaging citizens in direct democratic participation.

This is the case in Benin, where the rapid rise, decline, and transformations of new parties mean that accountability is limited but direct participation and representation are high. Benin's democratic electoral record of three presidential alternations – all victories by independent candidates who wooed numerous existing parties to mobilize on their behalf – reflects a different party system logic altogether. Alternation is possible in this highly volatile system, too – even likely – but alternation does not guarantee that current officeholders will not reappear in a new governing coalition of parties. The stark contrast between Benin and Ghana illustrates how systems of political parties can play very different roles and have very different meanings in the context of new democracies.

⁷ Mainwaring and Torcal 2006.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*A Theory of Party System Variation*

5

These apparent trade-offs between accountability and representation echo debates from advanced industrial democracies that focus on electoral systems (Carey and Hix 2011). However, the vastly greater amount of political, economic, and institutional uncertainty facing the developing democracies of the third wave requires new analysis to explore how these differences in context shape democratic practice.⁸ The third wave of democratic transitions created new imperatives to explore questions about party system diversity across the developing world. The plurality of these transitions occurred in Africa, and although democratization pressures were largely similar across the continent,⁹ the political party systems emerged as remarkably varied and remain so throughout Africa today.

This book explains the differential development of party systems in African democracies as the result of the modes of power accumulation strategies of authoritarian rulers in decades prior, which determines the power of incumbent authoritarians in the initial stages of democratic opening to define the rules of democratic competition, models of party building, and the relevant conceptualization of party rivalry. This power is based on the incumbent's ability to harness support from a host of social and economic local elites and their vast networks of followers. The power of the incumbent party (or the void created by its relative weakness or absence) determines the relevant players, the incentives and strategies in the transition period, and, therefore, who has the capability to create the formal rules of competition in their perceived favor. Where authoritarian incumbents are strong, they tightly control the transition to restrict the entry of new challengers, create a focal point to propel the opposition to coalesce in an anti-incumbent cleavage, and provide an organizational model that challengers can emulate. Where authoritarian incumbents are weak, potential new political players possess a greater degree of freedom to shape the transition agenda and to press for reforms that allow newcomers greater access. More open, participatory, and transformative transitions produce less institutionalized party systems, whereas more controlled and limited transitions provide for a more highly structured competitive party system.

The balance of power between the incumbent authoritarian and the opposition at the time of the democratization has enduring effects on shaping the nature of the multiparty system. The authoritarian incumbent's dominance or weakness in controlling the transition dynamics continues to play out over time through the influence of formal rules, organizational modeling, and anti-incumbent cleavages that define the terms of competition and resultant collective identities. The competitive pressures of the democratic marketplace

⁸ Lupu and Riedl 2013.

⁹ Broadly speaking, democratization across the African continent corresponded with the end of the Cold War and a neoliberal agenda to minimize the state, which jointly produced very similar international pressures and simultaneous domestic socioeconomic crises, resulting in political liberalization and multiparty competition (Herbst 2001).

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reproduce and maintain the initial party system that developed during the democratic transition even after shifts in the external environment.

Competing Explanations

My argument departs from leading explanations of party systems emerging from advanced industrial democracies. These explanations have primarily focused on the effects of the electoral system (in particular) and the importance of formal institutions (more generally) in establishing and maintaining the form of party systems.¹⁰ My argument also diverges from the conventional wisdom about politics and representation in the developing world, which has emphasized the primacy of social cleavages and levels of economic development as crucial explanations for the nature of the party system.¹¹

These alternative explanations, which are considered in detail in Chapter 3, are insufficient for several reasons. First, democratization must be understood, in large part, as an opportunity to establish rules for future rounds of competition; those with political influence during the transition from autocracy to democracy are involved in the establishment of these rules, the very rules according to which they hope to compete and be selected to hold office. Therefore, a compelling theory of party system formation must analyze how such rules were themselves formulated and, in particular, how the abilities of the players involved influenced the creation of those rules.¹² The approach to institutional explanation I employ also advances our understanding of whether, why, and which formal rules matter and how their effects are transmitted across later rounds of elections. Finally, empirical testing shows that, when considering democratic countries across Africa, the electoral system has no significant effect on the number of parties competing for and attaining seats in legislative elections (Bogaards 2008) or, as I demonstrate, on the level of party system institutionalization.¹³

Social and economic cleavages have also been at the core of party system theory. This book draws on an important literature on ethnicity and politics that has demonstrated the impact of political engineering and institutional

¹⁰ Duverger 1954; Downs 1957; Rae 1971; Lijphart and Grofman 1984; Cox 1997.

¹¹ Regarding social cleavages, see Migdal 1988; Ferree 2004; Mozaffar and Scarritt 2005. Regarding economic development, see Lipset 1959; Haggard and Kaufman 1995, among others.

¹² See also Boix 2007: 511.

¹³ Lindberg (2005) has argued that majoritarian systems do not seem to provide clearer accountability for voters than do Proportional Representation (PR) systems in Africa, given that we have not seen greater levels of electoral turnovers or shifting majorities in the legislature in majoritarian systems. All studies of the effects of the electoral system on accountability, participation, governing capacity, number of parties, and overall levels of institutionalization underscore the need for a prior understanding of how the electoral systems are determined and whose interests they are meant to serve.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*A Theory of Party System Variation*

7

contexts on identity voting.¹⁴ My theory assumes the importance of affinitive or ethnic ties as a basis for mobilizing party supporters and organizing political constituencies, and these vertical linkages have limited the causal role for labor organization or civil society mobilization more generally as a catalyst for change and constrained programmatic or ideological debates in party competition.¹⁵ Additionally, I assume the centrality of group competition over access to the state as the driving motivation for strategies of party competition for national elites that form parties and endeavor to shape the rules of competition to maximize their access while limiting other entrants, for local elites who seek to maintain their autonomous following and reap benefits from their relations to the state, and for the masses who see their access through the conduit of their local patron.

Given these important features of the political and social landscape, I find that the politicization of ethnic groups does not translate directly into a particular type of political behavior, much less a distinct form of political party system formation; party systems do not mirror ethnic divisions in society. Instead, the institutional context and broader political incentives help define strategic group representation and action. In the case of political party systems, this means that in some places an “ethnic congress” party forms, which can bring together a number of ethnic groups under a common umbrella, whereas in other places political party mobilization remains localized and particularistic. It is essential, given the prevalence of strong ethnic bonds between national leaders, local elite, and groups of followers, to understand the ways in which ethnicities are initially politicized and become partisans in response to the institutional incentives at hand.

Ethnicity often serves as a source of mobilization, particularly in the context of rapid organization and the strategic incentives that surround the emergence of a multiparty competitive environment.¹⁶ The combination of centralization of power around the presidency and the pervasive clientelism that structures the relationship between the state and the citizenry contributes greatly to the important role of ethnic mobilization in building political party support, and serves as a linking mechanism between potential candidates and voters (van de Walle 2003).¹⁷ The nature of the linkage mobilized during the democratization period is “structured by the institutional legacies of authoritarian regimes” (Mozaffar and Scarritt 2005: 399). Authoritarian legacies, however,

¹⁴ Posner 2005; Wilkinson 2006; Ferree 2011.

¹⁵ Inter alia, van de Walle 2003; Erdmann 2004; Hyden 2005; Salih and Nordlund 2007.

¹⁶ Posner 2005; Wilkinson 2006.

¹⁷ I argue, however, that what seemed like dominant parties established in the founding multiparty elections have been susceptible to alternating majorities (see also Bogaards 2008), and that the centralization of power around the presidency and the accompanying temporary electoral majorities are not all indicative of enduring party dominance (see also Bogaards 2004; Erdmann and Basedau 2007; Doorenspleet and Nijzink 2011).

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Excerpt

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did not create identical coordination constraints across the continent. I demonstrate that the varied strategies of incorporation or state substitution employed by autocratic rulers created differential implications for the ways in which ethnic identities are linked to partisan identities and interparty competitive strategies.

An alternative explanation links the overall level of economic development with the potential for more institutionalized party systems. Whereas modernization theory predicts that greater economic development facilitates more complex social structures and, therefore, stronger linkages between parties and citizens as they form constituencies based on horizontal, class-based linkages, I highlight the ways in which informal patterns of politics prevalent across the developing world, such as clientelism, undergird the newly established formal democratic institutions and potentially provide a basis for stable democratic governance.¹⁸ Although underdevelopment and economic crises present challenges to sustaining democracy, the patronage networks that contribute to these economic conditions can and do coexist with democratic party competition in a great range of countries that exhibit a variety of party system forms. Democracies in Benin, Mali, and Mozambique, among others, continue to function despite the very low levels of development and with annual gross domestic product (GDP) per capita ranging between \$900 and \$1,200.¹⁹ Where parties mobilize voters on a clientelistic basis, there are indeed likely to be associated costs for economic development policy and programmatic debate,²⁰ yet these relations are not necessarily inimical to democracy itself. Rather than being understood as temporary “democratic anomalies,” wherein such linkages between voters and parties must be replaced with new modes of representation that transform political patrons and their followers into party candidates and autonomous voters, clientelist linkages often remain constant across the variety of party systems and undergird competitive politics, particularly in such challenging environments as low economic development and largely vertical social structures.²¹

A final alternative explanation has to do with the passage of time. Whereas scholars of democratic transition and party system formation might expect that volatile competition and incoherent party relations would increasingly institutionalize over time (Converse 1969), this research suggests that, to the contrary, initial divergences across national party systems from the critical moment of democratic transition have exhibited a “lock-in.” Numerous rounds of competition certainly provide opportunities for increased coordination and learning,

¹⁸ Galvan 2004; Helmke and Levitsky 2006; Stokes 2006, 2007; Galvan and Sil 2007; MacLean 2010.

¹⁹ In 2008 U.S. dollars. CIA Intelligence Report. Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>.

²⁰ Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes 2004; Hagopian 2005, 2007; Murillo and Calvo 2005.

²¹ See also Koter 2009.

A Theory of Party System Variation

9

yet the party systems across the spectrum of institutionalization continue to operate in the same fashion as they did in the founding elections.²² The stasis suggests that legacies of the distribution of power in the critical juncture have long-reaching impact on democratic party systems, particularly given the persistence of these varied party systems in the face of many forces that would seemingly disrupt the patterns established in the transition period.

A New Theory of African Party System Variation

This book argues that the legacies of authoritarian leaders' attempts to consolidate support and bolster their power have significant impact on party system formation and electoral strategies in the initial stages of democratic opening. The competitive pressures arising in the period of party system formation have an enduring impact over future rounds of party competition. The model of party system institutionalization builds from the premise that all political actors seek access to the state and assumes that they try to maximize their own likelihood of being in power while limiting other challengers.

The determinants of contemporary party system institutionalization start with much earlier modes of power accumulation by the authoritarian regime. Authoritarian regimes' strategies for amassing authority and control affect their later ability to command support among local elite power brokers. In cases in which local notables were sufficiently incorporated into the authoritarian regime, they remained loyal during the period of democratic transition and could mobilize adequate citizen backing to maintain the incumbent's control over democratic transition rule-making, thereby significantly influencing the process of early competitive party formation. Democratization provides an opportunity for both authoritarian incumbents and opposition elements to attempt to shape the rules of the new multiparty system in their own interests, but their power to do so depends on the extent of support of local elites and, by extension, their followers. The authoritarian incumbent's strategies for regime consolidation from the inception of the monopolistic regime (time 1) determine the later extent of its support from local elites at an exogenously determined democratic transition (time 2), who either remain loyal to or defect from the authoritarian's agenda of continued rule in the democratic era.

With the establishment of an authoritarian regime (time 1), leaders choose a strategy of power accumulation, categorized as either *incorporation* of local social and economic leaders through their integration into the party and state to harness their role as power brokers, or *state substitution* in which the incumbent attempts to eschew local notables and replace them with newly created organizations and committees of the party-state and regime-appointed local political representatives as superimposed extensions of the ruling party. These

²² Studies of electoral volatility in African democracies have shown no decrease in volatility over time (Lindberg and Morrison 2005; Bogaards 2008).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

contrasting strategies for authoritarian power accumulation are both viable strategies for regime consolidation and occur for a variety of reasons – in Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, these were largely personalist decisions that could not have been predicted *ex ante*.²³ The contingency of this strategic choice is highlighted by the exceedingly centralized, personalized exercise of power during the era of patrimonial authoritarianism.

In hindsight, it is apparent that, across the African continent, the social power of local notables is not easily replaced by state-engineered organizations.²⁴ Historical analysis demonstrates that the strategies of state substitution may have served autocrats well in their imperative and overriding goal of consolidating monopolistic power and limiting immediate threats to their rule; however, it could not produce the necessary support for authoritarian ruling parties to sustain themselves in subsequent periods of challenge, such as democratization. Incorporation was more suited to maintaining local-level allegiance to the ruling party when multiparty competition was initiated and opposition was allowed to canvas for support.

Authoritarian modes of power accumulation determine the extent to which local elites remain loyal or easily defect to the opposition when political liberalization commences. State substitution strategies leave the incumbent authoritarian precariously balanced at the top of an unstable party-state organization that is quickly abandoned by local elites and their communities when new alternatives to the regime become available. In contrast, where dictators largely pursue broad-based incorporation throughout the authoritarian period, they are able to maintain the support of the majority of the population through loyal local leaders and, thus, have greater regime power to implement and benefit from their preferred democratization agenda to maintain their party in power and limit opportunities for a newly formed opposition party to present a challenge to their rule.

The democratic transition is a critical moment in defining the nature of the emergent party system. Although the democratic transition provides a window of opportunity for reform, the transition dynamics are neither contingent

²³ Regime consolidation strategy resulted from unique combinations of national and local factors, which might have included the autocrat's vision of political ideology, the importance of a Marxist-Leninist academic elite in the urban capital, ethnic imbalances in the military and in society at large and their relation to the ethnicity of the newly established dictator, the historic role of chiefs as administrators of or collaborators with the colonial regime and their role in the nationalist independence movements, and the nature of the authoritarian regime's coercive capacity. These variations will be explored in the case studies, but it is important to note that the weight of these considerations was not equal across the continent. See also Young (2012: chapter 4). As the choice of incorporation or state substitution was shaped by several variant factors, the top leadership at this time could not foresee that they were choosing strategies that would form the basis for political support in the context of a democracy, precisely because democratization itself was an exogenous force that would impact their regimes more than a decade later in most cases.

²⁴ Mamdani 1996; Herbst 2000; Boone 2003; Soifer 2006; Slater 2010.