PART I

INTRODUCTION

1

Urban Politics in a Trap

Cities across the developing world are growing rapidly. The urban population in sub-Saharan Africa has increased by 250 million people since 1990.[1] Many African countries are now approaching – or have already passed – a critical threshold: a demographic transition to becoming majority urban societies. Scholars and policymakers often expect several features of contemporary urban areas to be conducive to an additional, political transition – a move away from the ethnic competition and clientelism that are thought to hinder democratic accountability in many of these countries. But broad political transformations should not be expected to follow from the demographic transformations underway across urban Africa.

Two aspects of urban life in particular are held up as potential sources of political change: the emergence of a large urban middle class; and high levels of ethnic diversity and interethnic social contact. Decades of economic growth have created a burgeoning middle class in Africa, concentrated in urban areas. The middle class is now estimated to include 120 million people in sub-Saharan Africa, comprising a potentially pivotal share of the electorate in the continent's more developed cities.[2] Higher incomes and higher levels of education are thought to change the demands that voters place on politicians, reducing voters' susceptibility to clientelism and creating a constituency for policy-based elections. Middle-class voters in cities are also expected to place less emphasis on

---

[1] United Nations (2014).
[2] African Development Bank (2011). In Chapter 2, I discuss different conceptualizations of the urban middle class and competing approaches to estimating its size.

3

ethnicity. In addition, contemporary African cities can be incredibly eth-
nically diverse, to a far greater extent than most rural areas. Sustained
contact with other groups is thought to reduce the salience of ethnicity.
Living in ethnically diverse areas has also been argued to reduce voters'
instrumental incentives to support co-ethnic parties and politicians.

I examine the electoral effects of the growth of the middle class and
high levels of ethnic diversity on political behavior in cities using the
case of urban Ghana. I focus on the country's largest metropolitan area,
Greater Accra, an economically booming, diverse, politically competitive
metropolis of four million people. Ghana is a majority urban country
at the leading edge of recent trends in urban growth across Africa and
provides structural conditions – well-institutionalized parties, a peaceful
history, and a relatively well-educated population – that should be among
the most conducive of any in Africa to the emergence of programmatic,
policy-based electoral competition.

At first glance, I find some evidence consistent with these expected
transformations: many middle class voters in Greater Accra have dif-
ferent preferences and place different demands on politicians than poor
voters; clientelism is virtually nonexistent in most of the city's middle-
and upper-class areas; ethnicity is not a significant determinant of vote
choice in diverse, middle- and upper-class neighborhoods of the city, in
contrast to much of the rest of Ghana.

But evidence from other neighborhoods in the same city suggests that
the expected transformations are not happening. Instead, ethnic com-
petition and clientelism are thriving. Voters, even those in the middle
class, still expect the government resources they receive to depend on
ethnicity. Ethnicity strongly predicts vote choice in most of the city
– including in middle and upper class neighborhoods when they are
ethnically segregated. Wealthier and better educated voters are no less
likely overall to support ethnically aligned parties than poor voters. In
urban slums, individual-level clientelistic relationships between parties
and voters appear even more extensive than in most rural areas.

No transition to programmatic politics appears to be occurring. Elec-
toral competition is not becoming more programmatic as the middle
class grows, with Ghana's major parties instead converging on effectively
identical platforms that often bear little correspondence to how they gov-
ern. Politicians are differentially ignoring policy-motivated voters on the
campaign trail while concentrating on nonprogrammatic forms of mobi-
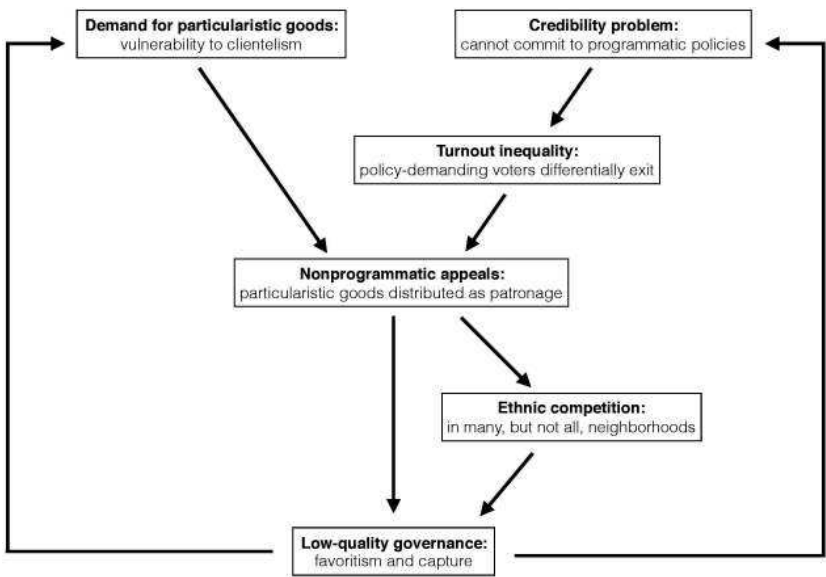lization. Urban middle-class voters who demand programmatic policies

FIGURE 1.1: *The trap.*

are disproportionately opting out of participation, rather than changing underlying patterns of electoral politics.

Rather than being pulled in a new direction by demographic and socioeconomic change, electoral competition in urban Ghana appears to be *caught in a trap*. The trap is outlined in Figure 1.1. Voter demands for particularistic goods that can be exchanged as patronage are rooted in the state's inability to meet many of the service-delivery challenges created by urbanization. These demands sustain the viability of nonprogrammatic appeals that target scarce resources selectively. At the same time, low state capacity hampers politicians' ability to credibly commit to deliver programmatic policies. In the face of this credibility problem, voters who demand policy rather than patronage – most of whom are in the growing urban middle class – differentially refrain from political participation because they do not believe politicians will ever address their preferences. This reinforces politicians' incentives to concentrate on nonprogrammatic appeals. As patronage distribution dominates elections, voters expect politicians to primarily benefit favored ethnic groups, continuing to polarize voting along ethnic lines in much of the city. In the last step, ethnic voting and the differential abstention of policy-demanding voters allows narrow interest groups to capture city governments, producing inefficient allocations of already limited state resources. This only

reinforces voter demand for scarce particularistic goods that can be targeted as patronage, forestalls investments in building local state capacity, and deepens beliefs that urban politicians cannot commit to delivering programmatic policies.

   This book explains why this trap exists, shows its effects on political behavior, and explores how societies such as Ghana can move past it. My argument explores the interplay of voters' demands for different goods and policies and politicians' incentives to supply goods and policies in return. The trap in Figure 1.1 has emerged because urban politicians' incentives to supply nonprogrammatic electoral appeals remain fixed despite changes in voters' demands. My central analytic focus is on *intra-urban variation*, exploiting the fact that there are places *within the city at the same time* where clientelism or ethnic competition are prevalent and where they are largely absent. Explaining these within-city differences demonstrates the forces underlying Figure 1.1 and shows that the main constraints on a further shift away from non-programmatic and ethnic politics are on the *supply side*, rooted in the structural incentives of politicians to offer new appeals, not in further changes to the underlying socioeconomic characteristics of urban voters.[3]

   Exploring the roots of this trap makes several contributions. It helps undercut common assumptions about urban Africa and explain how political competition operates in the continent's contemporary cities, a subject that has received little systematic study. It also provides an opportunity to refine general theories of political behavior, especially those focusing on the effects of neighborhood context on voters, the political salience of ethnicity, and the causes of class-based differences in participation. But perhaps most importantly, explaining the roots of this trap helps better understand what it takes to move away from nonprogrammatic politics in new democracies writ large. Many developing countries appear stuck in similar self-reinforcing cycles in which current clientelism and other forms of nonprogrammatic politics strengthen incentives for nonprogrammatic politics into the future.[4] Recent research suggests that countries can fall deeper into these traps as they undergo

---

[3] This echoes literature on the historical erosion of clientelism in advanced democracies (e.g., Shefter 1977, Shefter 1994), a connection I describe below and explore in depth in Chapter 9.

[4] For example, see Keefer (2007) and Keefer and Vlaicu (2008).

further socioeconomic development and enter middle-income status[5] –
in contrast to common expectations that greater wealth leads societies
away from clientelism – and that the process of extracting themselves can
be "glacially slow," lagging decades behind socioeconomic conditions
(Kitschelt et al. 2010, 4). Identifying the dimensions along which these
traps might be overcome has implications for our ability to diagnose
reforms that can improve the quality of governance in new democracies.

1.1 THE PUZZLE

This book addresses a central empirical puzzle: why are key features of
urban life – the growth of the urban middle class and high levels of ethnic
diversity – not producing the political changes that many existing theo-
ries expect? Answering this requires answering a second, closely related
question: why is there so much variation across neighborhoods within
cities in political behavior and the electoral strategies of politicians?

1.1.1 Existing Expectations: Effects of the Middle Class and Ethnic Diversity

I focus on two distinctions between forms of electoral competition. The
first distinction is between *programmatic*, policy-based electoral com-
petition and *nonprogrammatic*, patronage-based competition.[6] I follow
Kitschelt et al. (2010) and define programmatic politics as when com-
peting politicians or parties offer voters "alternative packages of policies
that they commit to enact" (16), with benefits that are not contingent
on political support, and voters are able to make vote choices based
upon these policy proposals.[7] Under this definition, the mere existence
of policy rhetoric is not evidence of programmatic politics; voters must
have reasonable expectations that politicians' proposals at least partially
reflect what they plan to do in office. The programs offered by competing

---

[5] Kitschelt and Kselman (2013).

[6] Electoral competition could also be personalistic. But because in practice personalistic
appeals that are fully divorced from voters' expectations about policy or the distribution
of particularistic goods are rare, I simplify the exposition by not considering personalistic
appeals.

[7] Stokes et al. (2013) define programmatic politics more narrowly, as when benefits of gov-
ernment policies are distributed based on public, well-defined criteria. The noncontingent
distribution of state resources is a central element of Kitschelt et al. (2010)'s definition,
but their definition goes further in also emphasizing the importance of policy appeals in
voter decision making.

politicians must also be sufficiently distinct that they provide voters a basis for choosing among options on the ballot.[8] I contrast programmatic competition with nonprogrammatic competition. While nonprogrammatic competition takes many forms, I focus in particular on the broad category of linkages between politicians and voters in which particularistic benefits are targeted selectively based on political criteria as a form of patronage.[9] Clientelism – the contingent, iterated exchange of benefits in return for support – is one type of nonprogrammatic linkage;[10] I also examine unmonitored pre-election gift-giving and various forms of "pork barrel" politics that do not involve contingent exchanges with voters.[11] At the core of each form of nonprogrammatic appeal is the targeted delivery of excludable benefits to specific individuals or to narrow, often geographically concentrated, groups of voters, such as those in rural villages or urban neighborhoods.

The second distinction is whether or not there is ethnic competition in elections. I identify the presence of ethnic competition based on whether the ethnicity of voters strongly predicts how they vote. This means examining whether or not members of the same ethnic group cluster their support for a party that is seen as associated with the interests of their group (if such a party exists).[12] When ethnic competition is absent, ethnicity provides little or no information about vote choice.

Studies of electoral politics in rural Africa often begin with two stylized facts: first, voters are susceptible to clientelistic appeals and other forms of nonprogrammatic politics; and second, ethnicity is a central

[8] Policy rhetoric and manifestos on their own can be cheap talk. Many benefits distributed in clientelistic exchanges come via policies that politicians claim are formally programmatic in campaign messaging. Moreover, it is common even in the world's most clearly nonprogrammatic political systems for parties to make campaign appeals about valence policy issues (growing the economy, fighting corruption) about which there is no actual differentiation in their substantive proposals or behavior (Bleck and van de Walle 2012).

[9] I use "patronage" broadly, as in Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007), to describe general politicized distribution of state resources, not only the allocation of public jobs.

[10] I follow Hicken (2011) and Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007) in using "clientelism" to refer specifically to contingent exchanges between politicians and voters in which targeted benefits are given in expectation that voters reciprocate with support.

[11] For example, see Golden and Min (2013) and Kramon (2016), or the typology in Stokes et al. (2013).

[12] I justify this bloc-voting-based definition of ethnic voting in Chapter 2 amid a more extensive discussion of the nature of ethnic cleavages in Ghana's party system. Defining ethnic voting more narrowly, as only a direct match in ethnicity between a specific candidate and voter, risks understating the role of ethnicity in elections.

feature of distributive politics and voting behavior in most countries. These stylized facts are explained by common features of rural life in many countries, including poverty, the concentration of ethnic groups in distinct regions competing for government resources, and the political power of traditional ethnic elites.[13]

But African cities differ from rural areas on several dimensions that appear to undermine these stylized facts. Two are particularly important: levels of wealth, and ethnic composition. Existing narratives about politics in urban Africa often expect the growth of the urban middle class and high levels of ethnic diversity in cities to lead electoral competition away from the clientelism and ethnic politics that are so often assumed to characterize rural areas. The evidence in support of these expectations remains sparse, and earlier scholarship on independence-era urban Africa often showed the exact opposite patterns.[14] Nonetheless, these expectations are increasingly becoming their own stylized facts about urban areas.

I outline the expected impacts of each of these two characteristics in turn. Among the most widely discussed transformations in urban Africa in the past decade has been the many millions of people pulled out of poverty into the middle class. There is considerable debate about how this middle class should be classified, leading to conflicting estimates of its size.[15] In Chapter 2, I justify categorizing middle-class status in Africa based on measures of formal sector employment, secondary education, and literacy, in the absence of reliable measures of income, and show that there is now a sizable urban middle class in many of Africa's new democracies. As of 2010, up to one-quarter of the adult population in Greater Accra, Ghana had achieved middle- or upper-class status.[16] Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) suggest that this urban middle class has *tripled* in size since Ghana democratized in 1992; Figure 1.2 plots growth in the size of the middle class in Ghana's four largest metropolitan areas using

[13] For example, Bates (1983), Wantchekon (2003), Posner (2005). This is meant as a general characterization. There are of course also studies showing internal variation in clientelism and ethnic competition across rural regions within the same country, including Ichino and Nathan (2013a), and also some African countries where these features are not present (Koter 2016).

[14] For example, Epstein (1958), Cohen (1969), Scott (1969), Melson (1971), Baker (1974), Bates (1974), Wolpe (1974), and Gugler and Flanagan (1978). The implications and limits of this literature are discussed in more detail in Section 1.3.1.

[15] For example, see Banerjee and Duflo (2008), Ravallion (2009), Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2013), and Thurlow et al. (2015).

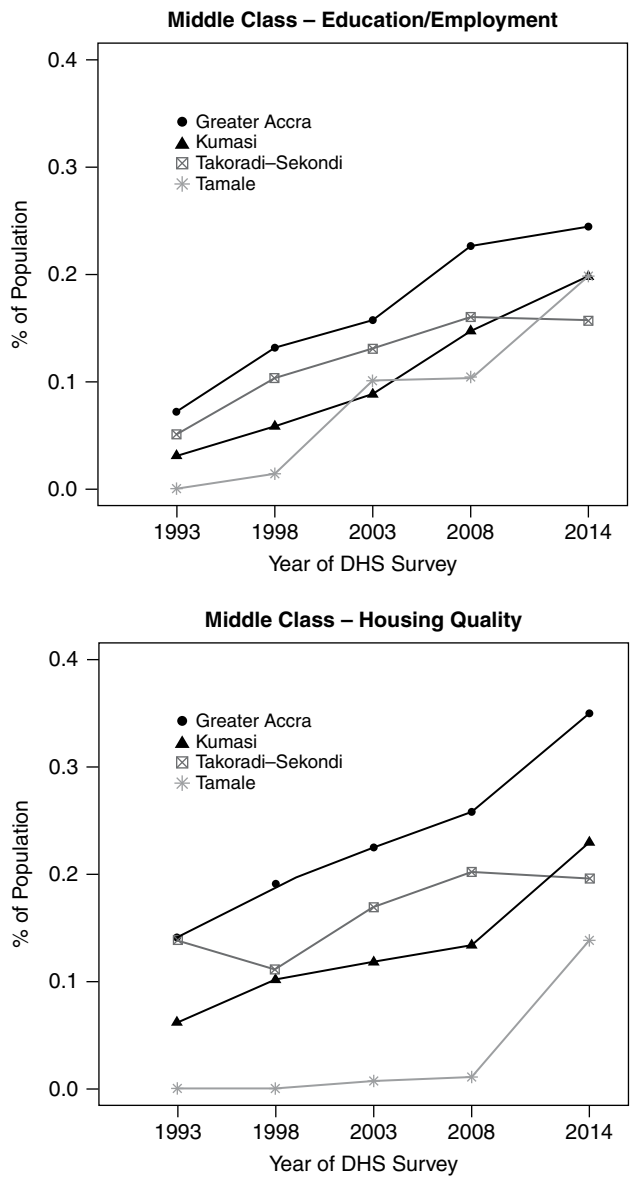[16] This figure is based on individual-level 2010 census data.

FIGURE 1.2: *Proportion middle or upper class in urban Ghana*: The top panel is the proportion of DHS respondents with secondary education, English literacy, and formal sector employment in each of Ghana's four largest metropolitan areas; the bottom panel adapts an alternative measure from Thurlow et al. (2015) to show the proportion of DHS respondents with electricity, clean drinking water, flush toilets, and at least two of the three education and employment characteristics.