Activist Origins of Political Ambition

Why do people run for office with opposition parties in electoral authoritarian regimes, where the risks of running are high, and the chances of victory are bleak? In Activist Origins of Political Ambition, Keith Weghorst offers a theory that candidacy decisions are set in motion in early life events and that civic activism experiences and careers in civil society organizations funnel aspirants towards opposition candidacy in electoral authoritarian regimes. The book also adapts existing explanations of candidacy decisions derived from advanced democracies that can be applied to electoral authoritarian contexts. The mixed-methods research design features an in-depth study of Tanzania using original survey data, sequence methods, archival research, and qualitative data combined with an analysis of legislators across authoritarian and democratic regimes in Africa. A first-of-its kind study, the book’s account of the origins of candidacy motivations offers contributions to its study in autocracies, as well as in leading democracies and the United States.

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Activist Origins of Political Ambition

Opposition Candidacy in Africa’s Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

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A lesson about success is found in a number of Swahili methali that highlight the role of collaboration and cooperation: Panapo Wengi, haparibiki neno (“Where there are many, nothing goes wrong”), Mti pekee haniuengi (“One tree alone cannot build anything”), Kusaidiana ni mali (“Helping one another is wealth”), among others. There is wisdom in this view and it absolutely applies to the experience of writing this book. This manuscript is the final output of a process of intellectual growth and development that started before I attended graduate school and evolved through graduate training, a postgraduate research position, and experiences as a junior faculty member. I have been motivated by the puzzle of why opposition candidates run for office in Africa’s electoral authoritarian regimes for about ten years and this intellectual curiosity could not have resulted in a book without the sustained and countless contributions collaborators, colleagues, friends, and family have made to me and to my work. This book is a reflection of those efforts.

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