

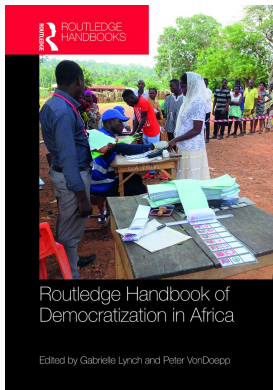
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### **Political parties and party systems**

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## 16

# POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEMS

*Alexander Stroh*

Political parties are indispensable for democratization (Lipset 2000, 49). However, because they are meant to represent groups or collective interests, political parties often become associated with division and conflict. This is particularly evident in “divided societies,” which in sub-Saharan Africa usually refers to countries divided along ethnic or religious lines where the fear of the centrifugal forces of party competition often exceed trust in the centripetal capacities of organized interests.

Despite the central role that political party organization plays in democratization, the variance in types of party systems and in political party organization across sub-Saharan Africa has attracted relatively little attention. Instead, three broad generalizations have tended to dominate the debate. The first is the idea that ethno-regionalism structures party competition, with parties representing individual ethnic groups or, more frequently, coalitions of competing ethnic groups (see Elischer 2013; Mozaffar, Scarritt, and Galaich 2003; Mustapha 2004). Second, African parties are often cast as purely personalistic vehicles for ambitious politicians who use opportunistic and corrupt practices for their own good (see Chabal and Daloz 1999, 151; Monga 1999; Mwangi 2008). Third, the very existence of meaningful parties is sometimes questioned due to their perceived organizational weakness (Erdmann 2004a; Randall and Svåsand 2002; Cooper 2018).

This chapter goes beyond these three conventional assertions to consider how parties and party systems have been examined in the empirical research, as well as the limits of this research. The chapter uses two levels of analysis. First, it focuses on the party system, exploring fragmentation, polarization, and institutionalization. Although some have argued that these variables shape the prospects for democratic consolidation, research on this issue has faced the challenge of comparatively observing these characteristics and has proved inconclusive as to their impact. With this in mind, it is argued that a relatively flexible party system, which can accommodate and balance interests, may be more important for democratization than blueprint models of “ideal” party-system characteristics (cf. Doorenspleet and Nijzink 2014).

The second focus is on individual political party organizations, which—while the subject of a number of careful studies (e.g., Beck 2008; Lebas 2011; Osei 2012; Elischer 2013; Riedl 2014; Stroh 2014)—have rarely been studied closely over time. South Africa’s African National Congress (ANC) is the only noteworthy exception (see Booysen 2017; Southall 2014; Suttner 2012; Darracq 2008; Prevost 2006; Lodge 2004). The discussion highlights and critiques the

strong impact and persistence of the “ethnic narrative” in party typologies and the relative neglect of ideologies, platforms, and policy proposals in academic studies. The prospects for research on programmatic aspects of party politics in Africa will then be considered.

The chapter concludes with a call for three developments in African party research. First, the generation of better data on individual parties. Second, further research on the importance of flexibility in African party systems, in the context of deep social and political change, that goes beyond the current emphasis on stability and institutionalization. And third, for more attention to be paid to the variance in the programmatic foundations of individual party organizations as well as in the meaning of their programmatic and manifesto discussions.

### **Party system characteristics**

In multiparty contexts, party systems reflect the interactions and relations between relevant individual parties that create discernible patterns of competition. African multiparty systems have been described using a standard set of three characteristics: the degree of fragmentation or number of relevant competitors; the level of polarization or ideological distance between the relevant competitors and their willingness to cooperate; and the level of party institutionalization or combination of stability and recognition in society (Sartori 1976; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006, 206–7). The conventional wisdom suggests that modest levels of fragmentation, low degrees of polarization, and well-institutionalized systems are the most advantageous for democratization (Basedau 2007; Karvonen and Anckar 2002; Kuenzi and Lambright 2005). However, individual empirical studies also suggest that dominant or highly fragmented party systems can make positive contributions to democratization (Lindberg and Jones 2010; Basedau and Stroh 2011).

Fragmentation and, more recently, the institutionalization of party systems have attracted greater attention than polarization due to the general impression of programmatically weak political parties. The influential work of Mozaffar and Scarritt (2005, 416), for instance, shaped the general picture of a “puzzling combination of low party system fragmentation and high volatility.” They argued that dominant parties were the norm in Africa due to the need to form multiethnic alliances. They further argued that opposition parties are often unstable and weak, which lowers the number of relevant parties in the system.<sup>1</sup> Scholars such as Bogaards (2008) have criticized these findings for looking at continental averages and ignoring regime variance over time and space.

### **Fragmentation**

In particular, Bogaards (2008) reveals how low fragmentation is most apparent in nondemocratic regimes, a theme echoed by Erdmann and Basedau (2008), who demonstrate that dominant-party systems are most often found in authoritarian regimes. At the risk of oversimplifying the issue of fragmentation, Table 16.1 confirms that two-thirds of the dominant-party systems exist under clearly authoritarian conditions. This includes cases such as Ethiopia, Uganda, and Rwanda, whose ruling parties—the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the National Resistance Movement (NRM), and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), respectively—look to draw legitimacy from their “liberation” narratives. All of these parties claim to have liberated their respective countries from previous despotism and are in conflict with an opposition cast as dangerous to the peace and order achieved.

However, the correlation of party-system fragmentation and regime types tells us little about causality. In fact, the number of dominant-party systems has increased during the 2000s and

Table 16.1 Fragmentation of African party systems, simplified summary, as of beginning of 2018

Freedom House status	<i>Dominant-party systems</i>		<i>Non-dominant-party systems</i>		N
	Enduring	Recent breakdown	Moderately fragmented	Heavily fragmented	
Free (clearly democratic)	Botswana* Namibia* South Africa		Cape Verde* Ghana* Mauritius* São Tomé and Príncipe* Senegal*	Benin*	9
Partly free (electoral democracy)	Tanzania	Burkina Faso* Lesotho* Seychelles	Madagascar* Malawi		6
Partly free (no electoral democracy)	Togo Uganda Mozambique	Gambia Nigeria Zambia*	Kenya* Mali* Niger		9
Not free (clearly autocratic)	Angola Cameroon* Congo-Brazzaville Djibouti Ethiopia Equatorial Guinea Gabon* Mauritania* Rwanda Zimbabwe*				10
N	17	6	10	1	34

Note: Dominant-party systems according to Sartori as used by Bogaards (2004), extrapolated by the author. Bogaards' original sample (marked with \*) included eighteen country cases based on elections up to the year 2002. The author added another sixteen cases that conducted at least three regular multiparty elections up to the year 2017, mounting the overall N to thirty-four. All other sub-Saharan country cases have been excluded for massive irregularities in the sequence of elections or because they conducted fewer than three multiparty elections in a row. The author's estimation of moderate fragmentation includes the very cases that may be considered two-party systems, in particular Cape Verde and Ghana.

2010s, mainly due to the expansion of competitive authoritarianism. More and more authoritarian polities have conducted multiparty elections, which satisfy Sartori's (1976) definition of a party system as requiring three consecutive elections for systematic patterns to be observed. The second-largest group is made up of moderately fragmented party systems. They exist across all regime types except for closed autocracies. Party systems that have recently been shifting across categories of fragmentation tend to move away from one-party dominance.

Yet this should not lead us to conclude that party dominance is always associated with authoritarianism. Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa, which are all relatively solid electoral democracies as of 2018, continue to come closest to Mozaffar and Scarritt's (2005) general picture of one dominant party plus volatile opposition parties. South Africa's ANC, Namibia's South West African People's Organization (SWAPO), and the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) share the same background as independence movements in a geographic zone that has

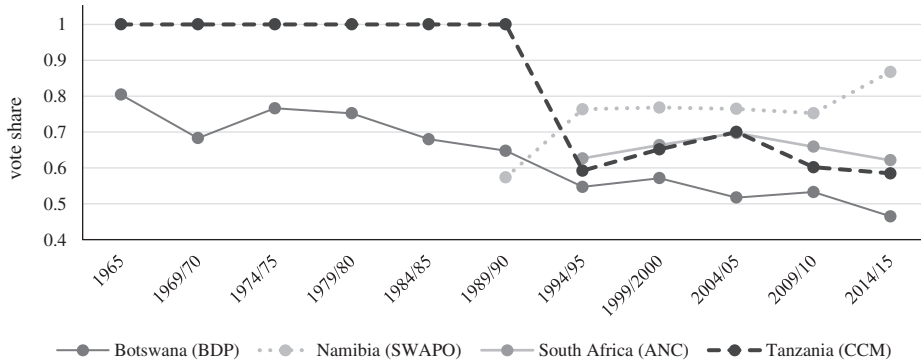


Figure 16.1 Democratic dominant-party systems in Africa

Note: Author's compilation of parliamentary vote shares as officially reported. Elections in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa always took place in the same year, with Tanzania always holding elections in the subsequent year.

been particularly shaped by European settlers, and as parties that are still able to exploit liberation narratives. One might argue that Tanzania's *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (CCM) works on a similar basis, although CCM's Southern African counterparts never ruled a single-party state and therefore lack the resources of an authoritarian past.

In turn, some evidence suggests that longer experience with democracy is linked to decreasing party dominance. Botswana has the longest record of democratic competition and BDP's electoral share has decreased from three-quarters of the vote in the 1970s to a slight majority in the first decade of this century. The party even dropped below 50 percent in the 2014 election, but continued to hold a majority of seats in parliament due to a plurality voting rule in single-member constituencies. South Africa's ANC is much further away from losing its status as the dominant political party. While it lost over 7 percentage points during Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009–18), the party still received more than three out of five votes in 2014. Namibia's SWAPO took a different path. The party held the highest vote share of all three dominant parties at a constant level with a surge to above 85 percent in 2014 (see Figure 16.1). In sum, it is difficult to estimate the exact impact of longer democratic experience on the chance that one-party dominance declines. Botswana seems to support the claim, whereas the gap between Namibia and South Africa makes clear that historical context is required to explain the difference. Tanzania further underlines the need to include political history in the analysis of party-system fragmentation in Africa (Bogaards 2008). Freedom House and others who assess regime qualities show that South Africa's record of democratic governance is much better than Tanzania's. The ruling CCM can look back at decades of authoritarian single-party government, which makes a decline in support harder for ruling parties to accept (Paget 2017). The case suggests that dominant-party decline under less democratic conditions might incite anti-democratic reactions from the ruling party.

While approximately half of party systems are of the dominant-party variety, the other half seems to converge around moderate fragmentation (see Table 16.1). Yet, the respective country cases still cover a broad range of regime qualities and dynamics. A closer look at the cases suggests that electoral democracy is possible under all levels of party-system fragmentation and that party-system change is rare. If change occurs it tends to increase fragmentation, but this does not necessarily coincide with further democratization. Abrupt political change in Burkina Faso and The Gambia, for example, saw the former ruling parties—the Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) and the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction

(APRC)—lose their electoral majorities in 2015 and 2016, respectively, while the new strongest parties obtained less than 50 percent of the vote. However, even before this, the CDP's and APRC's winning margins had been shrinking for years, with each party's position increasingly reliant on autocratic practices that weakened opposition parties (Loada 2006; Saine 2010). Meanwhile, the Seychelles serves as a good example of democratic progress in the context of an incremental breakdown of the dominant-party system. However, we also observe that the incremental dissolution of one-party dominance in Zambia coincides with arguably decreasing democratic quality. Similar illustrations of variance could be made for the group of constantly non-dominant-party systems. The only two enduring two-party systems in Africa—Cape Verde and Ghana—are consolidating democracies, but they only represent two out of a set of nine democratic cases in the sample that range from the abovementioned dominant-party systems to Benin's extreme fragmentation. In sum, the emergence of more authoritarian multiparty elections increased the number of dominant-party systems, while moderate fragmentation is not a reliable indicator of democracy.

### Institutionalization

The second major characteristic of party systems is institutionalization. The most influential concept of party-system institutionalization (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006) incorporates four dimensions—namely, stable patterns of party competition (including enduring levels of fragmentation) with parties that exist as effective organizations, which are strongly rooted in society and enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate or, at least, the political elite. In short, we can also speak of stability-related aspects of institutionalization and aspects of societal recognition or “value-infusion” (Randall and Svåsand 2002). Several authors have tried to operationalize and quantify the level of party institutionalization, but this entails major challenges that make it difficult to draw conclusions about how this factor affects democracy. For example, Kuenzi and Lambright (2001) look at vote shares, vote shifts (volatility), and party age to capture stability. To measure value-infusion, they ask three questions (2001, 447): Did any major party boycott the election? Did the losers accept the results? Was the election free and fair? However, all three questions arguably relate more to the overall quality of democracy than to the level of party institutionalization (Lindberg 2006). At the time of Kuenzi and Lambright's study, limited data was available. Only nine out of thirty countries in their sample had gone through two full cycles of multiparty elections. However, according to Coleman (1960), Sartori (1976), and Mainwaring (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006), having experienced two elections is insufficient to speak of a “system,” much less the system's institutionalization. This situation has now changed, however, and it is increasingly clear that the 1990s was a period of exceptional political change in Africa, when democratic transitions required party-system change at the expense of institutionalization.

With this said, close and context-sensitive analysis of several cases suggests two important insights about the relationship between institutionalization and democratization as it has operated in Africa. The first insight is that party-system flexibility—which corresponds to low or even decreasing levels of institutionalization—can actually support democratization. One good example is Senegal. In the 1980s and 1990s, Senegal's *Parti Socialiste* (PS) led a dominant-party system that had resulted from the country's incremental political liberalization since the end of the one-party state in 1978. In 2000 and 2001, respectively, the *Parti Démocratique Sénégalais* (PDS) won the presidency and a parliamentary majority in alliance with several other parties. When trust in the PDS government decreased, PS could not fill the gap; fragmentation increased and the party system's stability declined. However, this de-institutionalization

can also be read as the necessary flexibility required to adapt the party system to democratic dynamics.

The second insight is that democracy can persist with both an institutionalized two-party system and a volatile party system, at least if they are anchored in political history. For example, the party systems of Benin and Ghana had to reconfigure in the 1990s after years of military rule and ultimately took different paths shaped by their respective historical contexts. In Ghana, relevant competition is focused on two major political parties that managed to establish enduring party structures able to survive government turnover and changes in party leadership (Nugent 2001). In contrast, Benin's inchoate party system has shown neither durability nor independence from individual politicians. None of the four presidents elected so far in the current multiparty phase was voted into office with the support of a strong political party. Two created their parties after assuming office, whereas the other two avoided being associated with one specific party but rather enjoyed the support of a broad party alliance.<sup>2</sup> This party-system instability, however, also prevented falling back into the devastating political instability of the 1960s, which resulted from the inability of three inflexible ethno-regional party blocks to cooperate (Staniland 1973). This historical context suggests that democracy might have survived in Benin since the country returned to multiparty competition in 1991, not despite low party-system institutionalization but rather because of it. As a matter of fact, the democratic regime, with its very flexible party system, has lasted longer in Benin's postindependence history than any other political experiment. What is still lacking, however, is an up-to-date comparative assessment of party-system institutionalization across Africa.

### **Polarization**

The third main characteristic of party systems is polarization, which describes the way in which the relevant parties compete and cooperate. Classically, party-system polarization is measured using ideological distance. How different are the parties' programmatic positions? Are they different enough to be distinguishable? Are they reconcilable enough to make coalitions possible? This take on polarization implies that ideas about public policies are the main driver of how political parties interact and that parties should have ideas that are different, but not so different as to hinder the organizing of an effective government. This approach has been questioned with regard to Africa from at least two angles.

The first critique generally discards polarization as a useful characteristic because programmatic positions have been weakly developed (van de Walle 2003, 304–5; Médard 2007, 15), are hardly distinguishable (Wanjohi 2003; Erdmann 2004a, 65; Randall 2006, 392), or are insignificant for political competition (Manning 2005). Critically, studies that have compared party platforms tend to find both differences between them and programmatic weaknesses (e.g., Cheeseman and Paget 2014; Debrah and Gyampo 2013; Elischer 2012; Stroh 2014, 152–77), and very few studies have actually empirically inquired into African party-system polarization. One exception is Basedau and Stroh's (2011) analysis of four countries in West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), which distinguishes between ideological and behavioral polarization. These authors suggest that polarization is an important characteristic of African party systems if we go beyond ideological distance. From this second angle, patterns of cooperation and distance are often anchored in regime history and personal relations. The authors also find that ideological distinctness might be less important for democratization than flexible cooperation because "fluid coalition politics are apparently typical of the democratic cases" (Basedau and Stroh 2011, 190). In sum, the general observation that parties are programmatically weak is usually based on eclectic data as it matches the overall narrative that compares African parties

to an idealized European model. Hence, comparative research on the programmatic and behavioral differences within African party systems has been largely neglected and systematic data on polarization have remained scarce.

### The reliability of flexible party systems

Do party systems matter for democracy? The above discussion suggests that focusing attention on the issues of fragmentation, institutionalization, and polarization, as conventionally understood, may not allow us to effectively answer this question. On the one hand, although moderate fragmentation represents the most frequent category in sub-Saharan African democracies and partially free regimes that hold elections at regular intervals, the evidence also indicates that democracy can operate at varying levels of party fragmentation. On the other hand, institutionalization and polarization are difficult to capture and operationalize through empirical research, and the available evidence does not point to obvious clear-cut relationships with democratic success, failure, or development.

Moreover, even where relationships can be located, causality can be very hard to establish. For instance, Basedau (2007, 132), who suggests that moderate polarization is “systematically linked to the varying success of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa,” also suggests that the direction of the relationship cannot be determined. Indeed, party-system structures and dynamics may be as much the result of regime development as a factor channeling future regime developments. In this vein, Riedl’s (2014) analysis of the emergence of party systems in Benin, Ghana, Senegal, and Zambia finds that the way in which authoritarian leaders interacted with local elites before democratic transitions helps shape the institutionalization of party systems. The major difference between the more institutionalized and the rather inchoate party systems is the survival of the previous unitary party at a relevant level. In Ghana and Senegal, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the PS, respectively, are still relevant. This reflects their authoritarian past, especially the extent to which these parties were connected to power structures at the local level. In Zambia, the United National Independence Party (UNIP) that had ruled the country since independence in 1964 rather quickly degenerated into a minor party following its defeat in 1991, and in Benin, the *Parti de la Révolution Populaire du Bénin* (PRPB) dissolved in the middle of the political transition. Coming out of the authoritarian era, neither of these parties enjoyed firm bases of local support, which contributed to their marginalization in the democratic era. Hence, past regimes shape post-transition party systems.

Further, reiterating a point made above, it appears to be an open question whether these varying degrees of party-system institutionalization matter for democracy in the way that the conventional view suggests. The democratic records of Ghana and Benin are usually considered to be better than those of Senegal and Zambia. In both Senegal and Zambia, post-transition ruling parties have tended to apply authoritarian measures whereas Senegal’s former unitary party PS has achieved the status of a widely respected democratic opposition party. Hence, associating a specific party-system configuration—in particular, moderately fragmented and well institutionalized—with positive effects on democracy in Africa might be misleading.

With this in mind, we should consider the possibility that reliably flexible party systems may prove salutary for democracy. Less party-system stability might be valuable precisely because of the accompanying capacity to overcome enduring structures, particularly if democratization accounts for this dynamism and authoritarian legacies for continuation. In other words, the advantages of party-system flexibility may outperform stability under conditions of substantial sociopolitical change. This also implies that a party system does not necessarily need



institutionalized party organizations, but rather the capacity to adapt to democratic learning processes.

In other words, the context makes the party system and the party system must be able to adapt to changing contexts. The inflexibility of “over-institutionalized” systems may be as much a political risk for changing societies as weakly institutionalized systems (Kesselman 1970). Benin’s highly fragmented party system, for example, is volatile, but this volatility mirrors the democratic dynamics in the country. Beyond this, the crucial factors are neither fragmentation nor polarization nor volatility. Weak political party organizations simply fit best with Benin’s political context. Flexibility at the party-system and party-organization levels helps guard against party competition that is dramatically gridlocked along ethnic divides.

### Party typologies and the persistence of the ethnic narrative

The above discussion reminds us of the need for contextualized research on African party systems and their relationship to democracy, especially because what appears to be an “unstable” party system from conventional viewpoints may contribute to the functioning of democracy. In the same vein, as we turn our attention to the level of party organization, much more research is needed on parties in an organizational and programmatic sense. Two issues in particular stand out.

The first is that the analysis of African party politics at the organizational level is, at best, a temporal and spatial patchwork. Academically sound and comprehensive descriptions of political parties are largely limited to a few outstanding party organizations such as the ANC in South Africa (e.g., Booysen 2017; Southall 2014; Suttner 2012; Darracq 2008; Lodge 2004). Other party organizations have been carefully described in the context of more specific studies (e.g., Osei 2012; Elischer 2013; Riedl 2014; Stroh 2014), which—while highlighting important factors such as the importance of linkage politics, historical legacies, and overuse of the ethnic-party label—are limited in their geographic and temporal scope. This is understandable but it makes comparative studies of African party organizations challenging and permits overgeneralizations to survive. Data that is easily available for Western Europe across time—such as party presidents’ names, membership size, or manifestoes—is difficult to access. Of course, some African political parties have not administered sound membership registers and some have not presented manifestoes (Erdmann 2004a), but this does not hold across time and space. In addition, the enduring notion of African parties as personalist vehicles (Chabal and Daloz 1999, 151; Monga 1999; Manning 2005; Randall 2006) must not be generalized (e.g., Stroh 2014, 111–44). Although it is true that few opposition parties in African democracies have managed to survive leadership changes, Tanzania’s *Chadema* party, for example, has done so several times, even under the difficult political conditions of a dominant-party system with authoritarian traits (Whitehead 2000, 18; Erdmann 2004b; Bakari 2010). On the other hand, a closer look at Mauritius—often labeled a democratic success story in Africa (Radelet 2010, 96; Sebudubudu and Mooketsane 2016, 167)—reveals an “emerging dynastic political culture” (Kasenally 2011, 168), which makes leadership change possible, but only within pre-defined circles or families.

The second issue concerns the dominance of the ethnic narrative in the discussion of African parties, and especially of party types. The concept of “ethnic parties” has received significant academic attention for at least three reasons. First, elite perceptions in many African countries support the ethnic narrative despite often-shaky empirical evidence. Second, rare but newsworthy events of ethnicized electoral violence, such as those that occurred in Kenya in 2007/08, confirm the relevance of ethnic parties in some political contexts. Third, ethnic alignment

has become the default category for apparently weak party organizations that do not fit the ideological or programmatic models.

To be sure, the notion of ethnic parties captures some element of reality and many treatments offer nuanced arguments about the relationship between identity and parties. Gunther and Diamond's (2003) influential typology of party types and species offers "ethnic parties" as one species that matches the African context. Since mono-ethnic parties are rare, they propose the "ethnic congress party," although this tends to become a residual category for African parties that are suspected to work in ethnicized contexts. Elischer (2013) has added further nuance to this typology by distinguishing "ethnic congress parties" from "ethnic catch-all parties," which transcend ethnic cleavages by calling for national unity—with the latter coming closer to the well-known model of "catch-all parties" than to an "ethnic party" in the proper sense. In systems characterized by ethnic catch-all parties, voter mobilization efforts may still appeal to ethnic representation but not as distinct from another ethnic group (ethnic party) or another ethnic alliance (ethnic congress party). Elischer thus acknowledges that ethnicity is often the single most important sociopolitical feature in African party politics, but not necessarily a divisive one.

Notably, Elischer also finds that two more party types are useful to describe party variance in Africa: personalist and programmatic. In turn, Basedau and Stroh (2012) find that ethnic appeals often fall behind clientelistic interests that affect all people within a politically relevant geographic area. Marcus and Ratsimbaharison (2005) implicitly support Elischer by preferring the catch-all model to describe Madagascan parties. All of this suggests that the strong ethnic narrative only captures one dimension of parties in Africa and that its dominance may suppress comparative research on programmatic parties—an issue explored below.

### **Prospects of programmatic political parties in Africa**

At independence, most African leaders tended to refer to leftist ideas. However, during the Cold War, the ideologies of political parties chiefly equaled the respective regime's political orientation, which was usually connected to international alliances, and sometimes fostered programmatic politics. In this vein, Dickovick (2008) argues that the socialist ideological orientation of political leaders in Benin, Ghana, and Mali helped attenuate the salience of ethnic politics and open up space for more programmatic contestation.

However, since the return to multiparty politics in the 1990s, a common assumption has been that one of the problems with contemporary African parties is their non-programmatic nature. It is of course the case that many parties turn to valence issues such as general democratization or well-being (Bleck and van de Walle 2013). At the same time, systematic comparisons of party manifestos are rare. We therefore do not have information about the manifestos' variable meanings to different groups of people and about the various ends they serve (Däubler 2012), including internal communication and discussions. The latter, for example, help party officials and candidates identify with the party organization. In one of the exceptional studies that exist, Elischer (2012) applied the largely Eurocentric Manifesto Research Group's (MRG) evaluation scheme to twenty-eight election manifestos in Ghana, Kenya, and Namibia. Although he confirms that only two parties out of his sample—Ghana's National Progressive Party (NPP) and Kenya's Democratic Party (DP)—can be considered programmatic parties, the evaluation scheme offers systematic insights regarding who engages more in programmatic positioning (generally, opposition parties) and what issues make it into the programmatic considerations of African parties. In turn, Stroh's (2014, 152–77) analysis of party platforms in Benin and Burkina Faso found significant differences both between and within each country in terms of the topics covered by the relevant parties and the degree of specificity. However, in line with Bleck and

van de Walle (2013), general statements about democratic and economic progress were found to be common across all manifestos and platforms. In turn, in countries with less competitive party systems and long-time ruling parties the main narrative of the opposition usually reads: It's time for a change; the president must go. But what happens if change indeed forces the president to go? When Burkina Faso's president, Blaise Compaoré, was ousted in 2014, the former ruling party collapsed, although not completely, and the main valence issue that had structured party competition—the authoritarian character of the Compaoré presidency—disappeared with the ex-president.

The discussion above suggests that four factors could reconfigure a party system in this situation: personalist interests; ethno-regional patterns; old cleavages; and ideological closeness. The general literature on African party systems would further suggest that programmatic positions are the least likely factor to take effect. However, the case of Burkina Faso demonstrates that the prospect of programmatic competition might be underestimated. While the more conventional factors played their own role, coalition politics after the December 2015 general elections are hard to explain without taking ideas into account. During the political transition, renegades of the old regime—mostly longstanding and high-ranking officials—created the *Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès* (MPP), which evolved into the largest party. Both the MPP and the former ruling party identify as social-democratic. The many overlaps between the MPP and the former regime could have precluded any collaboration with former opposition parties and sharp critics of the Compaoré government. The liberal *Union pour le Progrès et le Changement* (UPC) and the Sankarist, or leftist, *Union pour la Renaissance* (UNIR) were the most important opposition parties before the transition. Interestingly, UNIR formed a coalition with MPP despite the deep political antagonism that had separated the respective party politicians for many years. UNIR officials explain that programmatic proximity determined the decision to join MPP's government and also kept the liberal UPC at a distance from the MPP.<sup>3</sup>

Can manifesto research confirm this programmatic proximity? The MRG's standard evaluation scheme, which Elischer (2012) used to differentiate party programs on a left-to-right scale (Budge and McDonald 2006, 453), does not measure programmatic proximity between the MPP and UNIR party manifestos for the 2015 general election. Instead, the UNIR appears slightly "right" of center, the UPC slightly "left" of center, and only the MPP is clearly located on the political left. However, UNIR's result is strongly driven by the standard scheme's ignorance of the Marxist heritage of some parties and the relatively weak authority of the state in many African countries. A few context-sensitive modifications—such as including advocacy for lean government (MRG code 303) on the right and Marxist analyses (MRG code 415) on the left—dramatically shift the picture of programmatic proximity. UNIR moves to the left and is now very close to MPP. UPC appears as a center-left party at a large distance from the left-leaning coalition partners (see Figure 16.2 for the measurement results). These results suggest that carefully contextualized measures of party ideology can help us understand recent developments in African party politics and that the prospects for programmatic parties should not be neglected in future research.

## Conclusion

The existing research on political parties and party systems in Africa tends to draw on relatively easily available electoral data or to cover limited chronological periods and geographical areas. As a result, while issues of party-system fragmentation and instability have received fairly extensive coverage, African party organizations—particularly their programmatic statements—have attracted relatively limited attention, often for pragmatic reasons related to data access. However,

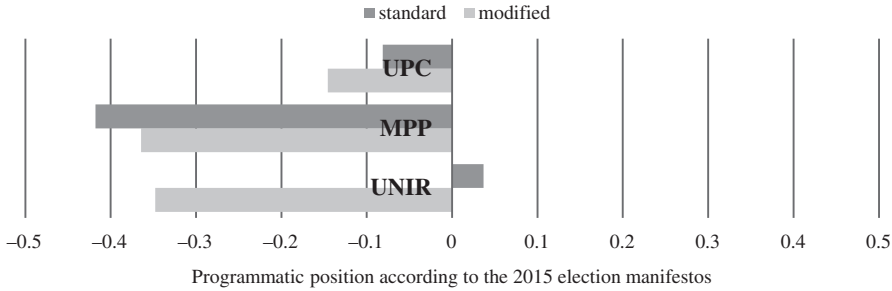


Figure 16.2 Major Burkinabè parties on the left-to-right scale

Note: Author's representation using own data from original research. Negative values signal a "left"-leaning programmatic position. The estimation follows the MRG's scheme, which subtracts the share of relevant left-leaning statements in a party manifesto from the share of right-leaning statements. The standard measures use the MRG's standard set of statements (Budge and McDonald 2006, 453), as also used by Elischer (2012). The modified measures include MRG codes 204, 302, 415, 416, 501, 503, 607, and 705 on the left, and codes 109, 110, 301, 303, 608, and 704 on the right—they discount codes 305 and 606 from the right.

since one-party dominance basically appears to be a problem of either authoritarian regime persistence or of very specific historical circumstances, matters of appropriate party-system flexibility, programmatic difference (or homogeneity), and party organization deserve much more attention when it comes to the contribution of specific party systems to democratization processes. The time has thus come to focus on differences in the African party landscape instead of continuing to search for African commonalities that often exoticize African experiences. For example, recent breakdowns of authoritarian one-party dominance in Burkina Faso and The Gambia invite research that reconsiders the basis of party competition beyond ethnic alignment.

We have limited knowledge about the dynamics of peaceful party competition at the local level and we lack detailed information about why parties increasingly invest in programmatic proposals. Further research is needed on the extent to which manifestos serve internal and external communication, and on the extent to which policy proposals mirror the political convictions of party leaders or address interested communities including the electorate and international party promoters. The range of party-system realities in African electoral democracies also calls for more research on whether party-system instability—which is conventionally seen as running counter to democratization and democratic consolidation—needs to be revisited as a matter of flexibility that facilitates democratic dynamics. Finally, and in sum, it is clear that we still need to better understand political parties' specific relevance for democracy and democratization.

## Notes

- 1 The number of relevant or effective parties in a system can differ significantly from, for instance, the number of parties represented in parliament as a consequence of the most frequently used counting rules (Sartori 1976; Laakso and Taagepera 1979).
- 2 President Soglo (1991–6) created the party *Renaissance du Bénin* (RB), which still represents Soglo family interests at time of publication. President Kérékou (1996–2006) kept his distance from individual parties, just as President Talon, elected in 2016. President Boni Yayi's (2006–16) presidential movement *Forces Cauris pour un Bénin Émergent* (FCBE) only formally became a political party in his second term (2013).
- 3 The author's conversations with UNIR officials, Ouagadougou, February 2016.

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