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# Democracy in practice: diversity and complexity<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Debates on democracy in Africa have shifted over time from conversations that could broadly be characterized as optimistic versus pessimistic, to ones in which questions of complexity and difference have taken center stage. This chapter provides an overview of this shift and introduces some of the key themes that emerge from contributions to the volume; namely, the significance of elections, the role of institutions, diversity of actors, and relationship between democracy and citizens. The importance of elections lies in their potential to remove or weaken incumbents, and thus provide a peaceful means for determining political outcomes, but also in their tendency to be associated with significant malpractice and violence, and thus with the probability of strengthening incumbents. As unpredictable political processes that actors invest much time and energy in, elections can also tell us much about the level and nature of democracy and broader political realities. At the same time, the chapter draws attention to the importance of formal and informal institutions, and to the increasingly diverse range of actors that need to be considered in an analysis of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, and to how no single institution or actor has a clear-cut relationship with democracy. Attention then turns to the importance of ordinary people and their support for democracy; to the ways in which expectations and demands help to shape political outcomes; and to the ways in which citizenship can be used to exclude, but also to discipline. The implication is that divergence, difference, and contradictory trends in democratization are to be expected. It also means that, while the academic literature on democracy in Africa is vast and growing, it is still far from covering the full range of issues and dynamics that demand attention across the subcontinent.

Teaching a course on democracy in sub-Saharan Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, one could have easily introduced or framed the discussion with reference to optimistic versus pessimistic perspectives. Pessimists—whether drawing on the idea of democratic prerequisites (Decalo 1992) or apparent challenges on the ground (Kaplan 1994)—offered a dire forecast, even in the context of emergent pro-democracy movements and transitions to

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<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming in Gabrielle Lynch and Peter Von Doepp (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Democratization in Africa*. Abingdon: Routledge.

multiparty politics.<sup>2</sup> Optimists, on the other hand, adopted more of a “bias for hope,” and focused on the very real changes taking place and the possibilities that they presented (Chege 1994).

As an increasing number of countries came to hold regular multiparty elections during the 1990s and early 2000s, variations of this debate continued as attention turned from the prospects of transition to democratic regime types and trajectories. This conversation obtained increasing immediacy as it became clear that incumbents often sought to use elections as a means to legitimize their leadership and to quiet and divide opposition forces. These included authoritarian leaders—such as Daniel Arap Moi in Kenya—who, despite bowing to domestic and international pressure to introduce multiparty politics, had clearly not become committed democrats overnight (Bratton 1998). It also included many self-declared democrats—such as Frederick Chiluba in Zambia and Abdoulaye Wade in Senegal—who won elections (in 1991 and 2000, respectively) only to then manipulate “the mechanisms of democracy” to bolster their own positions (Huntington 1996, 8). Given these realities, scholars came to speak of “the end of the transition paradigm” (Carothers 2002) and emergence of new “hybrid regimes” (Levitsky and Way 2002) or of “democracy with adjectives” (Collier and Levitsky 1997).

This discussion of new and varied regime types went hand-in-hand with discussions of democratic trajectories. However, while some adopted broadly pessimistic or optimistic positions—by speaking, for example, of the rise of “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria 1997) or of “democratization by elections” (Lindberg 2006)—others emphasized divergence and complexity. In this vein, Diamond (2010, x) talked of “both democracy on the march and

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<sup>2</sup> For a useful review, see Lemarchand (1992) or Shaw and Adibe (1995).

democracy in retreat.” Lynch and Crawford (2011) reached the more cautiously optimistic conclusion that—while the story of democratization in Africa was mixed and more needed to be done to secure both civil and socioeconomic rights and citizens’ physical security—on the whole, democratic progress during the first twenty years of the “third wave” outweighed the setbacks.

Such discussions drew upon, and also fed into, several other key areas of debate. This included topics such as the demands and expectations of ordinary citizens (for example, see Karlström 1996; Schaffer 1998); the relationship between democratization and development (for example, see Harding and Stasavage 2013; Lewis 2010; Masaki and van de Walle 2014); and the role of culture, structure, informal and formal institutions, and individual agency (for example, see Ake 2000; Albaugh 2011; Barkan 2008; Chabal and Daloz 1999, Posner and Young 2007). As with discussions of regime types and trajectories, these debates shifted over time from conversations that could broadly be characterized as optimistic versus pessimistic, to ones in which questions of complexity and difference took center stage. The emergent perspective suggested that understanding democratic trajectories required looking more closely at histories, contexts, and interactive dynamics. Examples of this turn include Villalón and VonDoepp’s (2005, 11) collection on the fate of Africa’s democratic experiments, which emphasized the “multiple tendencies and diverse hybridities” operating in new democracies; or Cheeseman’s (2018, 373) call “to pay careful attention to the great variety of relationships that exist between the formal and informal realm” and to “the informal foundations of formal structures, and the ways in which the official rules of the game shape informal processes.”

This shift to look at complexity and interactive dynamics has built upon and further fostered a burgeoning literature that examines how various actors and institutions actually work. For

example, scholars have come to look at how political parties have evolved, function, and campaign (see, for example, Cheeseman and Hinfelaar 2010; Elischer 2013; LeBas 2011; also Beardsworth; Kramon; Stroh, this volume); at key democratic institutions—such as legislatures, judiciaries, and electoral management bodies (Opalo; Ellet; Gazibo, this volume); and at the complexity of ethnic and patronage politics (Koter; Gallego and Wantchekon, this volume). Others have taken a less organizational or institutional approach and looked, for example, at voting behavior (Weghorst and Lindberg 2013; Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010; Long, this volume); new political movements (Resnick 2013, and in this volume); the status of key political and social rights (VonDoepp and Young 2013, 2016; Grossman 2015; Kang 2015; Kuukuwa and Epprecht, this volume); and relationship between democracy and development (Lewis, this volume). At the same time, more attention is given to how the different elements of democracy—such as judicial institutions, elections, and press freedoms—have varying levels of significance across the continent and how these different elements may not always operate in harmony with each other (Cheeseman 2018).

This shift has also been fueled by growth in, and increased attention to, scholarship from the continent, which (among many other strengths) tends to provide richly textured analysis<sup>3</sup> and avoid a tendency, sometimes characteristic of scholarship from the “West,” to draw continental wide conclusions from a handful of country case studies. This has gone hand-in-hand with increased attention to different voices—from a range of scholars in different disciplines and places to the insights provided by blogs, activists, artists, musicians, and survey data (for example, Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2005; Nyairo and Ogude 2005; Omanga 2019).

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<sup>3</sup> For a few examples from Kenya, see Chweya (2002); Murunga and Nasong’o (2007); Mutua (2008); Njogu and Wekesa (2015).

For this burgeoning literature from the African continent and beyond that takes agency, institutions (both formal and informal), complexity, diversity, context, and different perspectives seriously, the question of “how democracies are faring (and why)” is less central than it was to most scholars of African democracy in the 1990s and early 2000s. This is not to suggest that such concerns have disappeared. On the contrary, much of this work is interested in the operation and status of key institutions, support mechanisms, and processes precisely because of their presumed connections to democratic progress, survival, or backsliding (see, for example, Cheeseman and Klaas 2018). However, it is rarely now the main research question, and for some is of only passing concern. Instead, the common theme is that to study democracy in Africa (as elsewhere) one must approach the topic with an understanding that the reality is complex and belies broad evaluative summary statements, and that one must analyze what is actually happening rather than rest on tired assumptions.

The field of scholarship on African democracy has thus grown tremendously and continues to expand in new and exciting ways. Indeed, taking stock of the array of scholarship reflected in the pages of this volume, it is striking how wide and rich the conversation about democracy in Africa has become. In this respect, the effort to teach a course on democracy should be different from the late 1990s. Rather than begin with pessimism versus optimism, and then proceed with a consideration of regime types and trajectories, the scholar approaching this field confronts a diverse set of conversations on a range of topics that speak to a complicated reality. The scholar, especially if based outside of the continent, should also be much more aware of the need to engage with analysis—both scholarly and otherwise—from the African continent itself. This is a good thing. It indicates that scholars are addressing a broader array of concerns in comparative politics and ensures that African experiences are part of a much wider set of conversations about developments and solutions. It has also undermined the idea

of African exceptionalism and suggests that democracy is functioning well enough in places that the scholarly community can not only explore, but can have rich discussions about issues ranging from legislative development to campaign strategies to municipal budgets. To be sure, the scholarly community is also discussing challenges facing democracies such as electoral manipulation, violence, and corruption—yet these themes no longer dominate the discourse to the same extent.

This volume is an effort to illuminate this field of study. Chapters offer overviews of the key scholarship on particular topics, including the latest research, and provide insights and suggestions for those interested in further inquiry. Our hope is that the specific chapters allow the reader to engage with the scholarly conversations on important issues and that the volume as a whole provides an appreciation of the richness and diversity of this field. With this in mind, the chapters include attention to broad cross-continental patterns, for example with respect to public opinion or political violence (see chapters by Mattes; or Bekoe and Burchard), as well as to the role and experience of difference actors—from key institutions to religion, youth groups, and party activists (for example, see chapters by Opalo; Ellett; Harkness; Gazibo; Gyampo; Kramon; Patterson; Kendhammer; Gyampo; Tettey; Mueller; and Resnick). They also draw on the experiences of a variety of cases. This includes countries that have been the focus of a considerable amount of research over the years, such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya, but also others such as Burkina Faso, Benin, and the Central African Republic, that are too often ignored or downplayed.

Rather than try to summarize—and thus unintentionally simplify—these conversations and insights from the volume, this introduction offers an overview of some particularly important and interesting themes that emerge, with sections on the significance of elections, the role of

formal and informal institutions, the diversity of actors, and the relationship between democracy and citizenship. The overarching lesson is that we need to pay even more attention to how things actually work in practice and why, as well as guard against lazy assumptions or overgeneralizations, if we are to fully capture and understand continuities and change, and similarities and differences, across an increasingly diverse subcontinent.

### **The significance of elections**

The role of elections has been at the heart of much academic inquiry about democracy and democratization. This is unsurprising for those who adopt a minimalist understanding of democracy as regular free and fair elections (Schumpeter 1942), but it likewise holds for those who view elections not just as a means to install democratic governments, but also “as a necessary prerequisite for broader democratic consolidation” (Bratton 1998, 52). In the African context, this perspective gained support most centrally from Lindberg’s research (2006). According to his initial thesis, regular multiparty elections are not only a constitutive part of democracy, but serve to promote democracy through their “positive effects on the spread and deepening of civil liberties in the society” (Lindberg 2006, 3). This idea of “democratization-by-elections” stimulated much debate as critics pointed to the ways in which manipulated elections could strengthen autocrats, fuel violence, and create crises (as occurred, for example, in Zimbabwe in 2008). Overall trends in Freedom House ratings of civil and political liberties—an initially positive upward trend in which had provided a basis for Lindberg’s optimistic conclusions in the early 2000s—also began to see a reversal from 2006 (Lynch and Crawford 2011, 280).

In the face of such complex realities, Lindberg has revised his original position to explicitly recognize how election quality conditions “the democratising power of elections” such that “electoral practices are often reproduced over time” allowing for both “democratisation-by-elections” and “stabilisation by autocracy” (van Ham and Lindberg 2018, 229–34). This latter possibility complements a broader literature, which outlines how incumbents in authoritarian or hybrid regimes tend to use elections as a means to divide the political opposition and bolster their national and international legitimacy, while simultaneously drawing upon a “menu of manipulation” (Schedler 2002) to ensure their victory (Cheeseman and Klaas 2018). As a result, elections can augment the probability of authoritarian incumbent’s survival, while also opening up the possibility for the removal or weakening of incumbents (Schedler 2009, 292).

Elections therefore matter because they help to strengthen autocrats in certain contexts, and bring about regime change in others. However, elections also matter for a number of other reasons. They help to construct—or question—a state separate from society (Willis, Lynch, and Cheeseman 2017); as such, they can provide a peaceful means for determining political outcomes, but also be associated with significant malpractice and violence. At the same time, as unpredictable political processes that various actors—from aspirants and activists to diplomats, religious leaders, and voters—invest much time and energy in, elections can tell us much about the level and nature of democracy and provide an informative window onto broader political trends and realities.

Intertwined with the question of whether and how elections affect regime consolidation, are the issues of electoral integrity and stability. With respect to electoral integrity, most now appreciate the need to look beyond the processes of voting, counting, and tallying, to the

entire electoral cycle. As the work of Cheeseman and Klaas (2018, 26) reveals, the “menu of manipulation” now involves a wide array of tactics and a more “sophisticated and sinister” use of existing strategies that incumbents in particular can use to rig elections. These include the more strategic uses of violence to cow journalists and opponents, the employment of social media to misinform citizens, and misuse of new electoral technology. In addition to the fact that such tactics are frequently deployed in the service of consolidating authoritarian incumbents, they also deserve consideration in light of the potential relationship between electoral malfeasance and violence. Concerns about electoral integrity have certainly cascaded into violent episodes, especially in the aftermath of contests. More generally, however, and as Bekoe and Burchard explain in their chapter, violence can be used by a diversity of actors during an electoral cycle to achieve different ends—with preelection violence often used to intimidate or disenfranchise, and postelection violence often used to reject official results or punish particular groups of people.

Yet manipulation and violence are not the only factors that determine the outcome, quality, and impact of elections. Indeed, even where incumbents (or ruling party candidates) draw from a “menu of manipulation,” they also invest significant amounts of time and energy in building coalitions and undertaking political campaigns (Conroy-Krutz and Logan 2012; Lynch 2014). The strategies adopted by opposition politicians also matter. As Bunce and Wolchik (2010, 47) have shown in Eastern Europe, if one wants to explain cases of electoral continuity and change one not only needs to look at “whether regimes [are] ready to depart” but also at “whether the opposition [is] ready to defeat them.” This includes the degree of opposition coordination, which as Beardsworth reminds us in her contribution, “is one of the most important predictors of electoral turnover in competitive authoritarian regimes.”

The strategies of incumbents and opponents also matter because, as various contributions to this volume make clear (see especially Koter; and Long), politicians cannot simply rely on ethnic, regional, or religious blocs for support, nor can they simply “buy votes” (as detailed in chapters by Burbidge and Philp; Kramon; and Wantchekon and Gallego). Instead, if politicians are to mobilize the level of support that they need to win (or to not too obviously rig) an election, they must consider policy preferences, popular issues, and people’s expectations of assistance and fears of marginalization, as they seek to persuade people to vote for them and against “others” (see also Lynch 2011). At the same time, campaign dynamics are often more complicated than they may at first appear. For example, what might appear as “vote buying” often reflects a more complex strategy whereby candidates seek to establish connections with targeted voters and communities and “make their campaign promises more credible” (as argued in Kramon’s chapter). Similarly, patronage may take various forms over the course of an electoral cycle, and thus require the involvement of different kinds of structures, party workers, and brokers, and have different socioeconomic and political impacts (see Gallego and Wantchekon’s chapter). The implication is that to explore African elections and understand their outcomes and what they reveal about the level and nature of democratic politics, we must look at multiple issues. These include—but are not necessarily limited to—the types of manipulation deployed; the use and chronology of violence; party structures; campaigns (including the use of music and performance); and the role of opinion leaders.

Stepping back from the more “micro” issues of campaign strategies and voter choices, the outcome of elections can also reflect more macro-level or contextual factors. As Cheeseman argues in his contribution, the removal of incumbents from power in “founding elections” was most likely in contexts “where economic decline had been particularly severe, civil

society...[was] united and powerful, and international actors were willing to push for change.” Cheeseman uses these factors to explain different trajectories over time, but also recognizes how “pathways are not set in stone and remain subject to disruption by new economic conditions, international contexts, and changes in leadership.” As a result, his chapter adds to a literature on historical institutionalism, but also provides more general insights as to the range of factors that might encourage “democratisation-by-elections” or “stabilisation by autocracy” (van Ham and Lindberg 2018). In turn, Obi’s contribution focuses on one of these factors and discusses how struggles over natural resource wealth “framed as a winner-takes-all game tend to undermine...free and fair elections.”

While studies of elections are sometimes focused squarely on presidential elections, this volume also points to the importance of lower-level elections for both their direct and indirect effects on democratization. This includes the ways that competitive races allow for legislative accountability and a stronger opposition (Opalo), but also for how parliamentary campaign strategies can also rely on patronage (Gallego and Wantchekon) and violence and mobilization against “the other” (Bekoe and Burchard). Indeed, as Hassan reminds us, the devolution of power to sub-national units can simply lead to a localization of corruption and exacerbation of ethnic tensions and conflicts.

Several chapters also alert and remind us to guard against the assumption that elections necessarily enhance the overall quality of democracy. Indeed, recalling the theme of complexity that informs our discussion, while competitive and credible elections are an essential part of democracy, they can also be compatible with—and actually help to encourage—less democratic tendencies. This includes the role of elections in helping to legitimize authoritarian leaders, fuel violence (Bekoe and Burchard), and cultivate a culture

of campaign handouts that can encourage corruption (Burbidge and Philp) and an inefficient distribution of state resources (Gallego and Wantchekon). It also includes the ways in which competitive elections might encourage populist politics that work against gender equality (Johnson and Phillips) and the rights of sexual minorities (Kuukuwa and Epprecht). Similarly, the high turnover rates of MPs witnessed in many elections can help to promote accountability, but can also undermine “the accumulation of institutional memory, investment in specialized committee systems, and the ability [of legislatures] to politically balance presidents” (Opalo).

Critically, the same holds for the relationship between elections, democracy, economic growth, and development, which, as Lewis shows in his chapter, may have less to do with nominal regime type than with the “quality of state institutions, the commitments of leadership, and the nature of political coalitions with producer groups.” In short, the relationship between regular multiparty elections, equality, and poverty reduction is shown to be even weaker than that between electoral regimes and macroeconomic stabilization.

Such complex realities are important for understanding elections and democratization, but also for understanding what elections reveal about the broader political economy and culture, and the relative power, role of, and relationships between various informal and formal institutions and actors. For example, much can be understood about a country’s judiciary by looking at how they oversee election petitions, or about state security services by looking at how they police protests or demonstrations. This, in turn, highlights the importance of institutions for democracy.

## **The role of institutions**

Scholars have increasingly come to recognize the importance of both formal and informal institutions in African politics, and how formal institutions help to shape informal institutions and vice versa (Cheeseman 2018). A number of our chapters offer reviews of the research on particular institutions. This includes institutions that have attracted significant attention over the years—such as legislatures (Opalo), judiciaries (Ellett), militaries (Harkness), and devolved government (Hassan)—as well as others—such as term limits (Dulani), electoral management bodies (Gazibo), and municipal governments (Resnick)—which have received far less attention.

Several of these chapters affirm important insights about the rising significance of formal institutions and their potentially positive effects on democratization processes. Term limits, as Dulani details, are not only increasingly common on the African continent, but they continue to expand and enjoy widespread popular support despite attempts to reverse or undermine them. Moreover, they have positive effects on democracy, contributing especially to executive turnover, which in turn can contribute to the deepening of democracy in a variety of ways (Cheeseman 2010). In a similar fashion, Signe suggests that horizontal accountability mechanisms have enhanced democratic regimes via their role in constraining executive power.

However, certain chapters also reveal how an investigation of institutions can reveal potentially surprising and even counter-intuitive findings about their relationships with democracy. For example, one might assume that proper institutional design, such as the putting in place of legal provisions to ensure the autonomy and authority of key institutions,

would contribute to their ability to help promote accountability and deepen democracy. Yet, several chapters indicate that the performance of key institutions may be more historically and contextually rooted than is often assumed. In this way, Ellett illuminates how historical legacies substantially shape the character and behavior of courts in the contemporary era. Thus, despite the constitutional empowerment of courts in the 1990s, they must still overcome their legacies as subservient institutions deployed in the service of autocratic executives. This helps to explain the varied pattern whereby judicial institutions can be harnessed in efforts to preserve and enhance executive dominance, but also to promote democratic outcomes. In a related argument, Opalo's chapter on legislatures reveals their varied ability to serve as checks on executives and how this is in large part shaped by the historical evolution of these bodies during the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Similarly, one of the key insights from Gazibo's chapter on electoral management bodies is that institutional design is but one factor alongside a host of others connected to the domestic and international context that affects the performance of these bodies and, ultimately, the integrity and success of elections. This again reminds us of the complexity that confronts the investigation of important aspects of democratization processes.

At the same time, several chapters detail how formal institutions that are often believed to help promote democracy can undermine the same. In this vein, Hassan details how devolution—which is sometimes cast as a means to undermine a divisive “winner-takes-all politics”—can go hand-in-hand with powerful presidents, or even enable the re-centralization of power, as well as potentially further heighten inter-communal tensions and conflicts. Moreover, while much of the established literature on democracy presumes that stable, institutionalized party systems are a benefit to democracies, Stroh's chapter ably

demonstrates how this may not be true in all African contexts, and how some emerging democracies may be better served by party systems characterized by some level of “reliable flexibility.” Mehler’s chapter, in turn, outlines the potentially detrimental impacts of power-sharing—an institutional design that is often used to try and promote conflict in post-conflict settings. The story is complicated still further by the complex ways in which these institutions interact with broader contexts—with judicial institutions, for example, sometimes showing greater independence in more authoritarian societies (see Ellett, this volume).

Critically, this picture of complexity and the calling into question of the presumed status and roles of various institutions also extends to informal institutions. Thus, while the presumed neopatrimonial character of African politics is often used to explain the continent’s hybrid regimes, Sigman and Lindberg show how, “for much of the period since independence, African [regimes] have not been significantly more or less neopatrimonial than regimes in other parts of the world.” Just as importantly, they show that neopatrimonialism may not be a major hindrance to democratization and democratic survival. Its effects, instead, are “likely contingent on a host of other regime factors.” Similarly, Burbidge and Philp suggest that the behavior of public officials, and especially the distributive practices in which they engage, are best understood with reference to their connections to multiple normative networks operating in African societies. This calls up the importance of a range of other informal institutions, from moral codes to taboos.

Collectively, these insights show how the relationship between these institutions and democracy is far from clear-cut, and how many of the common presumptions that have characterized the study of African politics are misguided or overly simplistic. Moreover, they highlight how much more attention still needs to be given to local realities, the informal

institutions that operate within those contexts, the relationship (in practice) between formal and informal institutions, and to the role and experience of various groups of people.

### **Diverse actors**

Regarding people, contributions point to the complex role played by an increasingly diverse array of actors in African democracies. For example, although much of the literature dealing with national level contestation has focused on political elites and, more specifically, presidential aspirants, chapters in this volume point to the importance of other political actors—from local politicians (Beardsworth; Resnick), political workers (Kramon), brokers (Gallego and Wantchekon), and bloggers (Tettey); to military officers (Harkness), judges (Ellet), donors (Evans and van de Walle), civil society (VonDoepp), and students (Gyampo). For example, Beardsworth's discussion of opposition coalition building looks not only at the experiences and expectations of prominent politicians, but also at the ways in which the vested interests and political aspirations of local-level politicians can help to make or break national-level coalitions. From another angle, Resnick shows how mayors have become important political players not just at the local level, for example in service delivery for urban residents, but also due to their engagement in, and impact on, national politics.

Militaries have also (re)emerged as important actors. With the advent of multiparty politics and the attendant decline of the coup as a form of political change, these actors seemingly receded from the center stage of African political life. Yet, as Harkness reminds us in her chapter, Africa's militaries remain highly important players in democratic contexts, for

example, by making demands on policy and even claiming some level of autonomy vis-à-vis efforts to address security concerns.

In turn, while significant attention has been given to the role of the international community in democratization—from the relative significance of domestic and international pressures for reform (Bratton and van de Walle 1997) and tendency for the international community and observers to pull their punches and to accept substandard elections and prioritize stability and development (Brown 2011)—the chapter by Evans and van de Walle helps to further nuance this debate and bring it up-to-date. More specifically, they show how, while targeted democracy support initiatives can help to promote democracy, generic development assistance tends to strengthen incumbents. Their analysis also points to the importance of donor interests and influence. While Africa’s substantial aid dependence in the early 1990s facilitated Western political leverage, “the resumption of growth and the concomitant decline of debt, increased competition with other non-African states, most notably China, and the struggle against global terrorism, have all conspired to lower Western leverage and have lessened Western governments’ commitment to democratic reform.” Moreover, while the interests and influence of donors is critical, contributions also point to the importance of other international actors—from the role of multinational companies involved in natural resource exploitation (Obi), to international non-governmental organizations (VonDoepp).

Turning attention to African societies, an increasing and diverse collection of groups and actors have emerged to make claims on public life. Part of this reflects the expansion of spaces and opportunities for engagement created by political liberalization. Yet it also reflects economic changes, demographic developments, and globalization. For example, the transformation of Africa’s economies over the last twenty years has facilitated the rise of a

more independent middle class. As detailed by Mueller (2018), individuals from this section of society were often in the leadership of the protest movements that shook Africa starting in 2010. Moreover, Africa's "youth bulge" has shaped the character of politics, as young people are variously incorporated into political networks and organizations and have also taken advantage of the spaces created by political liberalization to carve out their own independent roles. As Gyampo shows in his chapter, student connections to political parties have enriched democratic engagement in many respects, while the incorporation of marginalized youth into political networks of powerful political actors has sometimes facilitated their becoming agents of violence and instability. Changes in the media climate are also significant in this regard. On the one hand, popular activism and engagement have been facilitated by increased access to mobile phones and Internet connections. On the other hand, new players such as citizen journalists and bloggers have emerged to shape politics. As Tettey points out in his chapter, such developments can sometimes serve to generate accountability, but they may also have pernicious effects on civic life.

The growth and diversification of faith communities in Africa is also a manifestation of this. The dramatic spread of neo-Pentecostal teachings and imagery in Africa since the early 1990s has entailed not only an increase in the sheer numbers of individuals joining these faith communities, but also their public presence, economic power, and political significance. As Patterson details in her contribution, they now represent a potent political force that is shaping public discourse and policies. In turn, while Islam has not witnessed a similar numerical growth in adherents or cultural visibility, it has witnessed what Kendhammer described as "fragmentation and informalization." One outcome of this is a diversification and empowerment of new religious groups. In this context, established Islamic authorities and groups remain important players in public life, but so too are "new participants,

ideologies, and identities” that engage in electoral politics and policy advocacy through democratic processes.

Finally, the return to multiparty politics has also witnessed a dramatic growth in the number of civil society organizations (Brass et al. 2018, 136). Moreover, while civil society engagement may at times appear supportive of the consolidation, and even deepening, of democratic regimes, VonDoepp raises concerns about the ambiguous record of civil society groups in this regard. He also highlights how much more attention has been given to organizations than to citizens and their manifold social connections, and how more attention to the latter can likely reveal important insights about how Africans think and talk about politics, as well as how they engage the public sphere. The proliferation of media outlets that has accompanied political liberalization, and the opportunities these present for citizens to articulate themselves (see Tettey, this volume), makes this consideration all the more pressing.

### **Democracy and “the people”**

The issue of how citizens connect and relate to democratic systems of government remains centrally important, especially in light of their envisioned role in such regimes. One key issue concerns whether these regimes enjoy popular support, and whether and how citizens’ attitudes and expectations shape the course of political life. As we learn from Mattes’ chapter, the picture here is complicated. Africans as a whole are supportive of democratic systems of government and the mechanisms of horizontal and vertical accountability that accompany them. At the same time, there is wide variety between countries with respect to

this support, and across most of the continent citizens see democracy as “undersupplied.” This takes on special significance in light of Mattes’ finding that countries with larger proportions of dissatisfied democrats are more likely to witness democratic backsliding.

However, attitudes capture only one dimension of citizen engagement with democratic politics; behavior represents another. Voting is of course the central political act of democratic citizens. Beyond this, citizen engagement with democratic systems is apparent through a range of activities—from protest to their involvement with parties, civil society groups, and the media. Important questions arise here. Protests were central to the democratic transitions that took place in the early 1990s (Bratton and van de Walle 1997), and became a central feature of African politics from 2010 forward, sometimes appearing to arise to challenge efforts by incumbents to entrench their authority and tamper with constitutions. Yet, it is not entirely clear whether such activity represented the defense of democracy by “the people” or developed and gained momentum in the context of other factors—issues that are addressed by Mueller in her chapter.

As previous sections have highlighted, attention also needs to be given to the tangible connections between citizens and political institutions, players and processes, and to the ways in which people’s expectations, demands, and actions help to shape and constrain the behavior of various actors and thus—together with politicians and other “elite” actors—help to co-produce political outcomes. As Kramon’s work on electoral clientelism has shown, popular expectations of assistance encourages the distribution of campaign handouts as aspirants seek to “demonstrate that they are a *redistributive type* ... [and] are *electorally viable*” (2017, 11; emphasis in original). The implication is that one can only ever fully understand political campaigns, patronage politics, and corruption when we look at both elite

strategies and the expectations and demands of ordinary citizens, and at how these play out in local contexts (Burbidge and Philp; Kramon, this volume). Similarly, Gyampo's contribution highlights how, to understand the political effects of Africa's burgeoning youth populations, we need to consider how they relate to political actors and organizations.

Finally, as we raise the question of how citizens relate to democracy, we need to consider the status and lived socioeconomic, cultural, and political experiences of people vis-à-vis the political system. As Dorman effectively demonstrates, part of this involves questions about the legal standing of groups of individuals, and how that standing has been the target of manipulation in the context of democratic competition. But it extends beyond this, since, as Dorman shows, citizenship also involves normative expectations of what constitutes a "good citizen." These can involve behavioral expectations and ascriptive dimensions. Those who fail to approximate such standards can face exclusion, marginalization, and denial of rights associated with democratic citizenship. Consider, for instance, the experience of non-heterosexual persons (Kuukuwa and Epprecht, this volume) or the challenges encountered by women who are perceived to have violated gender norms in their pursuit for political office (Johnson and Phillips, this volume). Consideration of citizen experiences also extends to the economic sphere and the particular question of whether democracy brings economic growth and greater human security and equality (Lewis, this volume).

### **Conclusion: democratic realities**

By drawing on the contributions to this volume, this introductory chapter has highlighted the diversity of institutions and actors that need to be considered to fully understand democracy

in Africa. It also reveals how no single institution or actor has a clear-cut relationship with democratization—either positive or negative—and how roles are instead shaped by a complex mix of history and expectations; individual and collective agency; generational, demographic, ethnic and religious identities and relations; formal and informal institutions; and developments at the local, national, regional, and global level.

Appreciating such complexity is critical as it helps us to better understand different trajectories, both within and between countries, and surprising developments—from the eruption of violence in some areas or neighborhoods and not in others, to democratic erosion in Zambia, the fall of Zimbabwe’s President Mugabe, and a period of significant reform in Ethiopia. It also helps to ensure that studies of democracy make new contributions to knowledge on specific topics, such as political campaigning, while also helping to develop a more nuanced understanding of African history, politics, and society in a broader sense. It is also critical as it has important implications for initiatives to support democracy. For example, if cash handouts are not simply a means to “buy votes” but rather a display of capacity and generosity, then civic education campaigns that call upon citizens not to “sell their vote” will have limited impact. Similarly, if the workings of formal institutions are shaped by histories, key actors, and informal institutions, then efforts at “institutional design” need to move away from a tendency to suggest a “one-size-fits-all” response to look at local realities and different possible scenarios and trajectories.

Moreover, even while the volume covers a diverse range of issues, many remain under- or unexplored. Some of this may reflect the way in which the experience of particular countries—such as Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria—have been especially influential in shaping debates in and about the continent. However, it also reflects how certain issues lie somewhat

outside the boundaries of conventional political science research or may be challenging to investigate with the predominant tools and methods employed by the discipline. This includes the more performative aspects of democracy, such as the kind of state and regime that elections help to perform and construct (Willis, Lynch, and Cheeseman 2017), or the importance of public performance in mobilizing support and constructing a sense of “us” and “them” (Nyairo 2015). It also includes the broader structural and cultural contexts informing democratic experiences, such as the role of global, regional, and local capitalism (Wiegatz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018), the impact of music and art (Nyairo and Ogude 2005), and the nature of discourses of underdevelopment and insecurity (Abrahamsen 2000). Beyond this, the importance of certain actors, institutions, and developments demand greater attention. Notable in this regard is the role of the police (Ruteere 2011) and election observation groups (Hyde 2017), the impact of various democracy promotion activities, such as civic education programs and peace messaging (Lynch, Willis, and Cheeseman 2019), and the evolving strategies through which politicians—particularly incumbents, but also opposition politicians—seek to manipulate multiparty elections (Cheeseman and Klaas 2018).

In turn, future research would benefit from looking beyond the usual cases and voices and at the insights provided by political analysis more broadly speaking (including voices from the arts, music, and literature), at how different actors and institutions interact, and at how attitudes, expectations, and behaviors are actually produced and evolve in different contexts. This includes further analysis of people’s experiences of democracy and associated processes and institutions—most notably, the experiences of different socioeconomic classes and of a diverse range of actors such as political activists, financiers, public relations teams, the police, artists, and international companies. It also requires greater investment in and attention to analysis from the continent. This would help enrich all analysis, but also tackle

the deep-rooted structural inequalities in the production of knowledge and associated biases that follow in terms of what is researched, how, and with what conclusions.

The implication from the scope of both what is—and is not—included in this volume in terms of topics, countries, and voices is that divergence, difference, and contradictory trends are to be expected. It also means that, while the academic literature on democracy in Africa is vast and growing, it is still far from covering the full range of issues and dynamics that demand attention across the subcontinent.

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