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## **Democracy Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990 to 2014**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Even though over the past two decades virtually every country in Africa has held repeated multiparty elections, democratic development is progressing at an uneven pace across the continent. In some countries there seems to be a deepening commitment to democratic norms and practices, but in others, this commitment, both by political elites and the public, has proven shallow. Based on analysis of various definitions and measures of democracy it seems the adoption of democratic institutions in the 1990s initially led to a liberalization of the political realm; however, the gains of the previous decade were short-lived as substantive democracy—free, fair elections with protection of civil liberties—stagnated and in some cases degraded in the 2000s.

One potential area for further research is a reassessment or reordering of institutional priorities as a part of democratic transitions. Because the holding of elections alone is insufficient to produce long-term democratic gains, perhaps other institutions should be strengthened before elections are held. The judiciary needs to have the capacity and autonomy to resolve electoral disputes. The press needs to be adequately trained to responsibly report on elections. Domestic civil society must be able to successfully monitor elections. The electoral management body must have the independence to credibly organize and manage elections. Finally, the citizens must be aware of their civic rights to best exercise an effective vote. Without such companion requirements of democracy, elections are unlikely to improve the quality of democracy in Africa.

## CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION..... 3**

**DEFINING, DESCRIBING, AND MEASURING DEMOCRACY..... 3**

Background .....3

Criteria for Assessing Democracies.....6

**DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONING IN AFRICA, 1990s .....10**

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....12**

## Introduction

The widespread adoption of multiparty elections in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s was greeted with much enthusiasm by the international community. Many heralded this trend as the beginning of some great democratic experiment in Africa. This optimism was based in part on the belief that repeatedly holding multiparty elections would, over time, lead to improvements in democratic governance, specifically in terms of the protections of civil liberties and freedoms.

Even though virtually every country in Africa has now held repeated multiparty elections over the past two decades, democratic development is progressing at an uneven pace across the continent. In some countries there seems to be a deepening commitment to democratic norms and practices, but in others, this commitment, both by elites and the public, has proven shallow. Countries such as Ghana, Senegal, and Zambia have seen several peaceful transitions between political parties as a result of close and contentious elections. Countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have experienced sudden coups d'état of unpopular but constitutionally elected governments. Furthermore, in many cases elections do not seem to produce substantive change. Countries such as Cameroon, Chad, Gabon, and Angola routinely hold elections, but the opposition has no realistic chance of dislodging the incumbent party from power, and civil liberties in all three countries have either stagnated or regressed.

This paper identifies potential factors that may account for the range of democratic outcomes found in sub-Saharan Africa by (1) examining the different definitions of democracy, (2) determining the most common metrics that are used to assess democratic quality, and (3) identifying the factors or processes that led to the proliferation of multiparty systems in Africa. This project concludes with suggestions on how to better assess the process of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa and potential avenues for future research.

## Defining, Describing, and Measuring Democracy

### Background

For several reasons, democracy is touted as a preferred method of governance, especially compared with its authoritarian alternatives. Democracy is believed to be more conducive to economic and social development.<sup>1</sup> It is believed to be a more stable system of government in the long run compared with dictatorships, single-party systems, and the like, which are prone to civil strife and coups d'état.<sup>2</sup> From a foreign policy perspective, democracies are much less likely to engage in significant external conflict or war with each other, making the proliferation of democracy a likely precondition for global peace.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. Government has a long history of including democracy promotion as a fundamental tenet of its foreign policy. Beginning after World War II, the United States played an active role

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<sup>1</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic and Political Development," *American Political Science Review* 53 (1959), no. 1: 69–105; Ross E. Burkart and Michael S. Lewis-Black, "Comparative Democracy: the Economic Development Thesis," *American Political Science Review* 88(1995), 4: 903–910; Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950 to 1999* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Yi Feng, "Democracy, Political Stability and Economic Growth," *British Journal of Political Science* 27(1997), 3: 391–418; Przeworski, et al., *Democracy and Development*.

<sup>3</sup> John M. Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19 (1994), 2: 87–125; Paul R. Hensel, Gary Goertz, and Paul F. Diehl, "The Democratic Peace and Rivalries," *Journal of Politics* 62(2000), 4: 1173–88.

in encouraging integration and liberalization in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> During the Cold War, the United States sought out allies in its ideological stalemate with the USSR, which sometimes put its foreign policy at odds with its stated goal of pursuing democracy across the world. But in the 1980s under the Reagan administration, the United States began to actively support democratization programs in Latin America. Since the 1990s, the United States has established numerous programs to help support the growth of democracy in Africa. Presidents George Bush, Sr., Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush all actively promoted democratic reform in Africa as an essential part of their foreign policy strategies.<sup>5</sup> The first pillar of the Obama Administration's 2012 "US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa" is explicitly focused on strengthening democratic institutions in support of deepening democracy on the continent.<sup>6</sup>

Because promoting democracy can be shown to be such an essential part of US foreign policy, it is important to be absolutely clear about what is meant by the concept of democracy. Researchers and academics have been debating the definition of democracy for decades, and yet there is still little consensus on a precise definition.<sup>7</sup> Some use democracy as a catchall phrase to describe anything from the holding of elections to the broad protection of human rights, each of which addresses a part of what democracy could look like.

At its essence, democracy is rule by the people. It is a system of decision-making and governance that is territorially bound to a specific group of people who have assented to rule. Primary alternatives to democracy include (1) anarchy, in which there is no overarching authority that makes decisions on behalf of a group; (2) autocracy, in which a single person or entity makes decisions on behalf of a group; and (3) oligarchy, in which a small group of people makes decisions on behalf of a group. Anarchy, autocracy, and oligarchy do not require the members of the group (the governed) to assent to rule, whereas democracy requires it. Another key distinction between these various forms of governance is the number of individuals involved in the decision-making process. In theory, the range is from none (anarchy) to all (pure democracy). Monarchy is a specific subtype of autocracy in which leadership succession is hereditarily based. Theocracy is another subtype of autocracy in which leadership is based on religious strictures. The selection criterion for political leadership under an oligarchy is established by some formal criteria such as race, ethnicity, or economic class. Anocracy is the category that describes countries that combine characteristics of both autocracy and democracy.

Although democracy may seem like a simple concept, because there are actually several different ways in which democracy can be organized, it is a concept that lends itself to different levels of definitional specificity. In small groups or societies, democracy can be exercised through town meetings or other types of inclusive forums in which everyone is allowed to participate in the decisions that are made on behalf of the group. This type of democracy is

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<sup>4</sup> Mark P. Lagon, "Promoting Democracy: the Whys and Hows for the United States and the International Community," Expert Brief, Council on Foreign Relations, 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/democratization/promoting-democracy-whys-hows-united-states-international-community/p24090>, accessed December 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Adewale Banjo, "U.S. Development Diplomacy in Africa: from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 4(2010), 4: 140–49.

<sup>6</sup> "US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa," The White House, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/209377.pdf>, accessed December 2014.

<sup>7</sup> J. D. May, "Defining Democracy: a Bid for Coherence and Consensus," *Political Studies*, 1978; P. C. Schmitter and T. L. Karl, "What Democracy Is...and Is Not," *Journal of Democracy*, Summer 1991; P. R. Newberg and T. Carothers, 1996. "Aiding—and Defining Democracy," *World Policy Journal*, 1996; G. L. Munck, "What is Democracy? A Reconceptualization of the Quality of Democracy," *Democratization*, 2014.

referred to as direct democracy. The size and complexity of most modern societies, however, makes direct democracy virtually impossible to implement. An alternative to direct democracy is indirect democracy in which a smaller group of representatives is empowered with the authority to make decisions on behalf of the group at large. It is understood that these representatives are agents that speak on behalf of the known preferences of the larger group and make decisions with these preferences in mind.

There are myriad methods of selecting political representatives. Democracy requires a method of leadership selection in which virtually all citizens are able to participate and to exercise some form of control over said leaders. In contrast, autocracies generally rely on a very narrow subset of individuals to select leaders or, in the case of monarchies and theocracies, political leadership is preordained. The most common method of leadership selection in a democracy is some form of an election. An election can be as simple as a show of hands or as complicated as an electronic secret ballot. Elections can be conducted using various formulas that translate the preferences of the electorate into its representatives. Constituencies are drawn, either randomly or deliberately, and given a specific number of seats that represent that specific constituency.

Electoralism has now become the norm, meaning that most every country in the world holds some form of election as a means of selecting some contingent of its political leadership. Whereas prior to the 1990, elections were held intermittently in most African countries, now elections are almost universally adopted. Elections, although an essential component of democracy, are not the exclusive domain of democratic governments. Elections can be held by non-democracies. For example, in Swaziland—Africa's last hereditary monarchy and absolutely not a democracy—the executive position is handed down from generation to generation based on lineage. Elections are held to fill some legislative positions, but there are many barriers to entry and organization. Political parties are not allowed to form and the executive, King Mswati III, retains final decision-making authority.

Translating citizen preferences and votes into elected seats adds another level of complexity to the definition of democracy. Plurality rules award elected seats to the highest vote-getter. Zambia and Malawi use plurality rules in their presidential elections. Majoritarian rules require that eventual victors receive at the least 50 percent of the vote plus one. Kenya, Nigeria, and Liberia use majoritarian rules for their presidential elections. Proportional representation apportions seats based on the percentage of votes that parties or politicians receive. South Africa and Benin adopted proportional representation for their legislative electoral systems. Mixed systems combine aspects of plurality, majoritarian, and proportional representation. Senegal and Lesotho both use mixed-member electoral systems. Countries may also use separate rules for executive and legislative elections. For example, Zimbabwe uses majoritarian electoral rules for its executive elections and simple plurality rules for legislative elections.

Once representatives are elected, they are organized into different governing components. Essential functions of a government include making laws, executing and enforcing laws, and adjudicating when disputes over rules arise. Most modern configurations of democracies include three primary branches with distributed responsibility for these functions. A legislature makes rules for the group. An executive ensures these rules are followed. A judiciary resolves disputes regarding these rules. Parliamentary systems fuse legislative and executive responsibilities and make them simultaneously accountable to each other. Botswana and South Africa are examples of parliamentary systems. Presidential systems, on the other hand, create separate mandates for executive and legislative responsibilities. Sierra Leone and Niger have



presidential systems. Semi-presidentialism, also referred to as hybrid regimes, combines aspects of presidentialism and parliamentarism. The Democratic Republic of Congo and Madagascar both employ semi-presidentialism. Any of these three types of systems can be democratic but they do not have to be.

Political parties may form before or after elections. Political parties are formal organizations that facilitate elections through such activities as mobilizing voters, coordinating local and national campaigns, and providing ideological branding on behalf of the candidates as a collective. Political parties also play a significant role in organizing a common policy agenda and passing legislation once members have obtained office. Party systems refer to the number of active political parties routinely participating in elections. The number of political parties varies among different democratic systems and has a close, but not perfect, relationship to the types of electoral rules in use. Two-party systems tend to form in conjunction with plurality or majoritarian electoral rules. Multiparty systems tend to form in conjunction with the varieties of proportional representation. There is no fixed number of political parties necessary to consider a country democratic.

In some countries, elections may be held but partisan organization and competition are highly restricted. Uganda during the 1990s held no-party elections. Several countries in Africa during the 1970s and 1980s, including Kenya, Tanzania, and Ghana, organized single-party elections in which only one party was legally allowed to nominate candidates for office. In the 1970s, Senegal briefly adopted a mandatory three-party system with strict ideological roles assigned to each political party. From a normative perspective, there are ongoing debates regarding the democratic quality of these forced-party systems as they impose formal restrictions on organization and electoral participation.

Although not an exhaustive examination of the different ways of organizing democratic governments, this review should make clear that there are myriad ways to configure democracy. Because of the ways these different political institutions can be combined, identifying democracy and differentiating it from other regime types can become complicated. This is especially true due to the overlap in political institutions and terminology between democratic and nondemocratic regimes. Presidents as well as nominally functional legislatures are found in democracies and nondemocracies alike. Elections are held in both democratic and autocratic systems. In addition, because some countries may be motivated to overemphasize the presence or quality of democracy for a domestic audience, an international audience, or both, relying on self-reported designations can prove unreliable. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, also known as North Korea, is an example of a nondemocratic country that has adopted the language of democracy for rhetorical reasons.

### **Criteria for Assessing Democracies**

So based on what criteria can democracies be identified and assessed? Some researchers utilize a minimal definition of democracy in their analyses. Such a definition focuses on whether a country has adopted only the most essential of democratic institutions: elections. The only caveat to this definition is that elections must be considered "open" in that most citizens are free to contest elections as an aspirant *and* most are free to participate as a voter. This *procedural* definition focuses only on the inclusivity of political institutions and the freeness of citizens to participate in leadership selection. This approach to identifying democracy does not account for the quality and conduct of elections and is silent on many other key aspects of democratic rule. Further, this approach does not factor in individual civil liberties such as the right to organize and assemble, freedom of speech, or freedom of the press. It stands to reason

that these types of guarantees serve to buttress the ability of citizens to effectively and actively participate in elections. The inclusion of such criteria creates a *substantive* definition of democracy, one in which the establishment of democratic institutions is not sufficient; the institutions must also work as designed. When analyzing data on democratic designations, it is imperative to be aware of which definition is being used.

Table 1 describes several different measures of democracy commonly used in research, each with its own merits and drawbacks. Some measures use the procedural definition of democracy (Polity IV, Przeworski et al.) whereas some measures incorporate substantive aspects of democracy (Freedom House, Boix et al.) Some measures capture worldwide data from as far back as the 1800s (Polity IV, Boix et al., Przeworski et al.) whereas some confine their data collection to more recent times or regions (Freedom House, Mo Ibrahim Index). Some measures are binary, merely indicating either the presence or absence of democracy (Boix et al., Przeworski et al.). Some measures assign cumulative scores based on various defined criteria (Mo Ibrahim ranges from 0 to 100; Freedom House ranges from 1 to 7; Polity IV ranges from -10 to 10). Measures such as these present themselves as ordinal-level data such that we can measure and use to compare different countries or different time periods; however, there is debate about the appropriateness of using data in such a way.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1: Sampling of Common Measures of Democracy**

Measure	Definition Used	Countries Included	Years Covered	Operationalization
Boix et al.*	Substantive	Global	1800–2007	1 = democracy, 0 = autocracy
Freedom House	Substantive	Global	1974 to present	Ranges from 1 to 7; 1 = free, 7 = not free
Ibrahim Index of African Governance	Substantive	Africa	2000 to present	Ranges from 100 to 0; 100 = best performing, 0 = worst performing
Polity IV	Procedural	Global	1800 to present	Ranges from 10 to -10; 10 = pure democracy, -10 = pure autocracy
Przeworski et al.	Procedural	Global	1950 to 1990	1 = democracy, 0 = autocracy

\* Charles Boix, Michael Miller, and Sebastian Rosato, “A Complete Data Set of Political Regimes, 1800–2007,” *Comparative Political Studies* 46(2013), 12: 1523–54.

Hogstrom (2013) evaluates two of the most frequently used measures of democracy, Freedom House and Polity IV.<sup>9</sup> Both are global time-series datasets, making them popular in quantitative analysis of democracy trends and patterns. Data for Polity IV is collected from 1800 to present

<sup>8</sup> See Gerardo L. Munck and Jay Verkuilen, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: Evaluating Alternative Indices,” *Comparative Political Studies* 35(2002), 5: 5–34 for a more detailed debate.

<sup>9</sup> John Hogstrom, “Does the Choice of Democracy Measure Matter? Comparisons between the Two Leading Democracy Indices, Freedom House and Polity IV,” *Government and Opposition* 48(2013), 2: 201–21.

day for all countries in the world. Freedom House data has been collected since 1974. Polity IV measures come from the presence of specific procedures for electoral contestation: the competitiveness of political participation, constraints on executive power, and the openness of executive recruitment. Freedom House measures are based on country expert surveys of protections for both civil liberties and political rights. Hogstrom finds that the two measures are correlated (but not perfectly so) and that the differences between the two measures can have a significant effect on research findings. The substantive measure of democracy, Freedom House, sets a much as higher standard for consideration of democracy than does Polity IV, which measures the procedural definition of democracy. Hogstrom concludes that the measure of democracy that is used has a direct impact on the nature of research findings, with different measures sometimes producing conflicting results. Thus, in any analysis it is necessary to be explicit about the definition and how it is used and how democracy is measured.

For the purpose of this report, I examine both the minimalist (procedural) and maximalist (substantive) measures of democracy. Comparing trends in procedural democracy and substantive democracy presents a picture of progress and retreat across sub-Saharan Africa. Based on data from Polity IV, in 1991 there were approximately 7 democracies in Africa; by 2012 there were 16, more than double the number 20 years before (See Table 2). The increase in the number of democracies was accompanied by an associated decrease in autocracies, from 16 in 1990 to 3 in 2012.<sup>10</sup> According to the data, the vast majority of countries in Africa, however, were characterized as anocracies, or hybrid regimes that occupy the space between democracy and autocracy. The number of anocracies increased as well, from 17 in 1991 to 24 in 2012. From this measure, it would seem that democracy has spread rapidly across sub-Saharan Africa and that this improvement has come at the cost of autocratic rule. The most significant gains appear to have taken place between 2000 and 2012, where many countries transitioned from anocracy to democracy.

To be sure, the increase in procedural democratic practices across the continent is impressive. But again, this measure does not capture democratic quality or substantive gains in democracy in Africa. It only reflects the number of countries that have transitioned to multiparty elections with minimal formal restrictions on participation. This definition may be inappropriate given the patterns and nature of electoral competition in Africa. Electoral fraud is a common occurrence and more than 50 percent of elections in Africa can be characterized by harassment, intimidation, or some other form of electoral malfeasance.<sup>11</sup> In many cases, the government is directly responsible for sponsoring violence against potential voters, through attempts to mobilize supporters and disenfranchise the opposition.<sup>12</sup> Problematic elections have been held repeatedly in Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, in which thousands have lost their lives due to violence before and after the elections. In other countries, elections may be superficially peaceful, but significant fraud and vote rigging are believed to have taken place.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Sub-Saharan Africa: Regimes by Type, 1946-2012," Systemic Peace, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/ssafrica2.htm>, accessed December 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Scott Straus and Charlie Taylor, "Democratization and Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2008," in *Voting in Fear: Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Dorina Bekoe (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2012), 15-38

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Collier and Pedro C. Vicente, "Violence, Bribery, and Fraud: The Political Economy of Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Public Choice* 153(2012), 1-2: 117-47.

**Table 2: Polity Scores, Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990 to 2012**

	1990	2000	2012
Democracy	17.5%	19.5%	37.2%
Anocracy	42.5%	70.7%	55.8%
Autocracy	40%	9.7%	6.9%

Freedom House scores are an example of a substantive measure of democracy. They are calculated based on subjective assessments in several areas related to the protection of political rights and civil liberties. The score reflects expert survey responses regarding a country's electoral process; political pluralism and participation; functioning of government; freedom of expression, association, and organization; rule of law; and individual rights. Based on these scores, Freedom House, a nonprofit organization, assesses the overall level of freedom of a country and rates it as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free. Table 3 displays the distribution of countries in Africa based on these criteria. The most significant gains in political freedoms and civil liberties in Africa took place from 1990 to 2000, where the percentage of "Free" countries more than doubled and the percentage of "Not Free" countries was virtually halved. From 2000 to 2014, however, it seems as though democracy stagnated and may have even declined a bit as the percentage of countries ranked "Not Free" increased from 33 percent in 2000 to 41 percent in 2014.

**Table 3: Freedom House Scores, Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990 to 2014**

	1990	2000	2014
Free	8%	19%	20%
Partly Free	32%	48%	39%
Not Free	60%	33%	41%

Another measure that attempts to capture substantive democratic gains in Africa is the Ibrahim Index of African Governance. Since 2000, the Mo Ibrahim foundation has been releasing yearly reports broadly assessing governance trends across the continent. Fortuitously, this is the time period in which the two previous measures of democracy seem to disagree the most, allowing us to further probe the reason for the divergence.

The Mo Ibrahim Foundation collects data on over 100 different measures and then combines the scores on these measures into 4 indicators of governance: safety and rule of law; human development; sustainable economic opportunity; and participation and human rights. The index assigns scores that range from 0 (worst) to 100 (best). All four indicators are then combined into a single measure representing a country's governance score. In 2000, the continental average was 46.6. For 2012, the continental average was 51.6; for 2013, the continental average was 51.5. According to their 2014 report, there was no difference in the overall governance measure from the previous year. Among the various components, however, there were some changes. The biggest gains were in human development (+10.2), and there was a slight decline in safety and rule of law (-1.1). There is also a wide gulf between the top and bottom. Table 4 shows the rankings and scores for the top-10, middle-10, and bottom-10 performing countries for 2014.

**Table 4: 2014 IAG Overall Scores**

Top 10	Middle 10	Bottom 10
Mauritius (81.7)	Mali (49.5)	Libya (42.1)
Cape Verde (76.6)	Niger (49.4)	Angola (40.9)
Botswana (76.2)	Comoros (49.3)	Equatorial Guinea (38.4)
South Africa (73.3)	Liberia (49.3)	Zimbabwe (38.0)
Seychelles (73.2)	Ethiopia (48.5)	DRC (34.1)
Namibia (70.3)	Madagascar (48.2)	Guinea-Bissau (33.2)
Ghana (68.2)	Cameroon (47.6)	Chad (32.3)
Tunisia (66.0)	Djibouti (46.8)	Eritrea (29.8)
Senegal (64.3)	Togo (46.4)	Central Africa Republic (24.8)
Lesotho (62.3)	Nigeria (45.8)	Somalia (8.6)

The top-10 countries are the most stable, and they have been routinely ranked relatively highly since 2000. The bottom 10, on the other hand, have seen significant volatility. Southern African countries perform the best, and Central African countries are many of the worst performing countries on the continent. The top-five improvers since 2000 are Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Angola, and Togo. In four of these countries, a significant war or conflict ended in the 2000s. The average improvement score was 4.8 points. The five countries that have seen the largest decreases in terms of governance since 2000 are Madagascar, Central African Republic, Eritrea, Libya, and Mauritania. Four of these countries have experienced at least one coup d'état since 2000. The patterns of improvement and decline since 2000 reflect the devastating effects of conflict and instability. In addition, according to the disaggregated data, the biggest gains across the continent have been in human development (specifically health outcomes); more modest gains have occurred in safety and rule of law. The largest areas of stagnation and retreat have been in the areas of political participation and human rights protection.

It seems that the number of democracies across sub-Saharan Africa has significantly increased since 1991, with major gains taking place in the 2000s. This perspective, however, provides an incomplete picture of the growth and development of democracy. According to substantive measures, democracy spread across Africa in the 1990s but has stagnated since 2000. In some ways, this makes sense. Adopting democratic procedures—namely elections—is much easier and less threatening to political elites than genuinely liberalizing the political sphere. Furthermore, elections are but one of the many structural features necessary for a country to be considered fully democratic. Citizens must have access to information about government policy, legislation, and deliberative processes to adequately evaluate performance. They must also be able to use other democratic means of contacting elected officials and making their preferences known. Ensuring that there are protections in place for individual civil liberties, and that these protections are respected, helps to strengthen democracy.

### **Democratic Transitioning in Africa, 1990s**

This finding—that the number of procedural democracies in Africa has dramatically increased since the 1990s while substantive democracy is either stagnating or declining—is in tension with much of the research that has found a democratizing effect of elections in Africa. In 1990s and

2000s, several researchers staunchly argued in favor of the holding of elections, regardless of quality.<sup>14</sup> Some contended that even imperfect elections would over time produce substantive democratic gains as voters became more sophisticated and learned how to work within the system to hold their elected officials accountable. Unfortunately, this seems to have been an overly optimistic assessment of the function of elections. Examining the democratic transition process in Africa may provide some clues about why many countries have embraced democracy in name only. Based on a careful review of the literature, I was able to identify the major patterns associated with democratic transitions in sub-Saharan Africa over the past two decades.

Africa is unique in several respects, especially pertaining to the continent's experience with democracy. The continent was late to independence—decolonization took place mostly in the 1960s—and compared with other regions, Africa has been a late adopter of democracy. Before 1990, only a handful of countries held multiparty elections: Botswana, Mauritius, Senegal, and The Gambia all held relatively free elections for extended periods of time. The Gambia, however, fell to a coup in the mid 1990s, and freedoms have absolutely eroded under the autocratic presidency of Yahya Jammeh. Once adopted in the 1990s, however, multiparty elections rapidly spread across the continent. Many attribute the spread of democratic procedures in Africa to a combination of internal and external pressures. The end of the Cold War changed donor priorities, and countries dependent on aid found themselves bound by new conditions for assistance.<sup>15</sup> Protests and demonstrations by civil society organizations, disgruntled students, and labor organizations also contributed to the decision to transition away from autocratic rule.

Benin was one of the first to transition back to multiparty elections in 1990. Between 1989 and 1997, approximately 75% of African countries had adopted multiparty elections. Adejumobi identifies four primary patterns leading to democratization and change in the 1990s: civil society demands change and elites concede; civil society demands change but is co-opted by elites; the state “decided” on its own to transition to multiparty elections; or a significant social conflict preceded the transition.<sup>16</sup> In each of the four cases, except when civil society is able to exert itself and force the state to concede, the transition to democracy resulted in superficial reforms. Many of the political elites who decided to adopt democracy did so tactically to avoid full reform programs.<sup>17</sup> As a result, many countries experienced an incomplete democratic transition. That is, the political institutions exist on paper, but in practice they lack capacity, and in many cases they are degrading quickly.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, these transitions largely left executive powers largely intact.<sup>19</sup> Today, most African countries experience some form of hyperpresidentialism, in which

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<sup>14</sup> Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy and Elections in Africa* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Staffan I. Lindberg, “The Surprising Significance of African Elections,” *Journal of Democracy* 17 (January 2006): 139–51; Staffan I. Lindberg, ed., *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Staffan I. Lindberg, “Democratization by Elections? A Mixed Record,” *Journal of Democracy* 20(2009) (3): 86–92.

<sup>15</sup> Thad Dunning, “Conditioning the Effects of Aid: Cold War Politics, Donor Credibility, and Democracy in Africa,” *International Organization* 58(2004), 409–23.

<sup>16</sup> Said Adejumobi, “Elections in Africa: a Fading Shadow of Democracy?” *International Political Science Review* 21(2000): 59–73.

<sup>17</sup> Victor O. Adetula, “Measuring Democracy and Good Governance in Africa: a Critique of Assumptions and Methods,” in *Africa in Focus: Governance in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Kwandiwe Kondlo and Chinenyengozi Ejiogu (Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Gabrielle Lynch and Gordon Crawford, “Democratization in Africa 1990–2010: An Assessment,” *Democratization* 18(2011), 2: 275–310.

<sup>19</sup> Oda Van Cranenburgh, “‘Big Men’ Rule: Presidential Power, Regime Type and Democracy in 30 African Countries,” *Democratization* 15(2008), no. 5: 952–73.

the powers of the executive dwarf those of other political institutions.<sup>20</sup> Many presidents have extensive appointment powers over other branches of the government and the unique right of legislative initiation. In these instances, legislatures function as a rubber stamp that allows executives to push through their agenda. Other political institutions necessary for the proper functioning of balanced democracy are also compromised. Political parties tend to be relatively weak and often treated as merely vehicles for individual politicians to access power.<sup>21</sup> Judiciaries in Africa receive scant attention and are arguably the least developed democratic political institution in many countries.

As a result of some of these incomplete democratic transitions, the military continues to play an active role, intervening in politics when it deems necessary.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, many of these military interventions, or coups d'état, are meant to curtail the powers of an overly aggressive or power-hungry executive. Some are referring to them as “democratic coups” or a “democratic reset.” In Burkina Faso in 2014 and in Niger in 2010, the military intervened after popular protests broke out when each country’s president attempted to circumvent the constitution to stay in power longer than allowed. Despite the seeming reluctance of elites to provide substantive democracy to the citizenry, there remains a sizable public demand for it across the continent.<sup>23</sup> Seventy-two percent of Africans surveyed between 2010 and 2012 stated that they preferred democracy to other forms of government; 84 percent of those surveyed preferred elections to other methods; and 59 percent stated that they wanted their country to be “completely democratic” in the future.<sup>24</sup> When it comes to the quality of democracy in their own countries, however, only 19 percent said their country could be considered a full democracy; 36 percent said their country was a democracy with minor problems; and 40 percent said their country was a democracy with major problems or not a democracy at all.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Much as the above analysis demonstrates, Lynch and Crawford also find confirmation of early democratic gains due to repeated elections from 1990 to 2003, but according to them, a tapering off seems to have occurred around 2004.<sup>25</sup> There are several possible explanations for this finding but nothing definitive yet. Future research should delve deeper into the reasons for this pattern of early gains and then democratic backsliding. Do elections without meaningful institutional reform produce ephemeral gains in terms of democratic governance?

The mere holding of elections may be the most visible but also least reliable indicator of democracy due to the extreme variance in quality of elections. Using violence as but one indicator of electoral quality or integrity, elections in sub-Saharan Africa have not demonstrated much improvement since the 1990s. Table 4 reports the percentage of elections held in sub-Saharan Africa based on the level of election violence that took place either directly before or

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<sup>20</sup> Oda Van Cranenburg, “Democracy Promotion in Africa: the Institutional Context,” *Democratization* 18(2013), no. 2: 443–61; Lynch and Crawford, *Democratization in Africa 1990–2010*.”

<sup>21</sup> Lynch and Crawford, *Democratization in Africa 1990–2010*.”

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Michael Bratton, “Formal Versus Informal Institutions in Africa,” *Journal of Democracy* 18(2007), no. 3: 96–110; Stephanie Burchard, “The Resilient Voter: An Exploration of the Effects of Post-Election Violence in Kenyas Internally Displaced Persons Camps,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, forthcoming.

<sup>24</sup> Afrobarometer Round 5 data analysis; data available at <http://www.afrobarometer.org>; accessed December 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Lynch and Crawford, *Democratization in Africa 1990–2010*.”

directly after an election. Of the 100 elections held between 1990 and 1999, 24 percent experienced either violent repression or large-scale violence. From 2010 through 2013, approximately 21.5 percent of the 51 elections held have experienced similar levels of electoral violence.

**Table 4: Election Violence in Africa, 1990–2013**

	1990s	2000s	2010–2013
Violent Repression or Large Scale Violence	24%	18%	21.5%
Violent Harassment	37%	39.5%	37%
No Violence	39%	42.5%	41%
<i>n</i>	100%	134%	51%

Electoral violence has numerous causes but often takes place in an environment in which aspirants perceive the electoral process to be compromised. For instance, many electoral management bodies are closely aligned with executives and lack institutional autonomy. Irregularities in demarcation of boundaries, voter-registration processes, and vote tallying have been noted in several countries, including Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria. Judiciaries often lack the autonomy and capacity to fairly handle electoral disputes. In addition, in countries where the media is heavily controlled and censored, it may be difficult to access different points of view.

The belief in the democratizing effect of elections has led many in the international and policymaking communities to encourage fragile or conflict-prone countries to hold elections under very difficult conditions, sometimes at a very high cost in both real terms (the 2006 election in the Democratic Republic of Congo cost the international community an estimated \$500 million) and in human life (the 2007 Kenyan elections resulted in more than 1,300 fatalities). Unfortunately, elections do not seem to be resulting in democratic gains in Africa. And in many cases, violent or heavily manipulated elections are actually part of the problem, as contestation over political office turns violent and leads to a restriction of the political space. Close or highly competitive elections may lead to further restrictions on competition.

In Zimbabwe, the 2008 election—the closest in the country’s history—resulted in significant post-election violence after the ruling party was unwilling to accept defeat. Many believe that the opposition won the election, but the ruling party orchestrated an unnecessary second round of elections in an attempt to reverse its political fortunes. The opposition declared itself the winner and boycotted the second round of elections. The negotiations that took place as a result of the violence and electoral impasse resulted in a government of national unity that brought together both the ruling party and the opposition in a temporary power-sharing arrangement. The subsequent elections held in 2013 were much more peaceful and produced a resounding victory for the ruling party. Many have suggested that instead of allowing voters to decide the outcome of the election through the vote, the ruling party, in charge of the electoral commission, rigged the registration process to prevent more than 1 million opposition supporters from participating. Although the 2013 elections were much more peaceful, they were no more democratic than the 2008 exercise.



Elections are not always held under fair or democratic processes, and when electoral quality is severely compromised, elections may undermine democratic progress. Elections can reinforce autocratic rule or they can reinforce democratic rule.<sup>26</sup> They can also produce a sort of stable “electoral authoritarianism,” as may be the case in Zimbabwe. But elections, and more specifically electoral quality, may provide an internal metric by which citizens are beginning to assess the quality of their own democracies.<sup>27</sup> And some researchers are now explicitly including the quality and conduct of elections to differentiate democracies from autocracies.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the whole of the electoral process and the quality and conduct of elections may be providing us with new insight as to the quality of a country’s democracy.

One potential area for further research is a reassessment or reordering of institutional priorities as a part of democratic transitions. Because the holding of elections alone is insufficient to produce long-term democratic gains, perhaps other institutions should be strengthened before elections are held. The judiciary needs to have the capacity and autonomy to resolve electoral disputes. The press needs to be adequately trained to responsibly report on elections. Domestic civil society must be able to successfully monitor elections. The electoral management body must have the independence to credibly organize and manage elections. Finally, the citizens must be aware of their civic rights to best exercise an effective vote. Without such companion requirements of democracy, elections are unlikely to improve the quality of democracy in Africa.

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<sup>26</sup> Matthijs Bogaards, “Reexamining African Elections,” *Journal of Democracy* 24(2013), 4: 151–60.

<sup>27</sup> Bratton, “Formal Versus Informal Institutions in Africa.”

<sup>28</sup> D. Donno, “Elections and Democratization in Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57(July 2013), issue 3: 703–16.

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