

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02111-2 - Multiethnic Coalitions in Africa: Business Financing of Opposition Election Campaigns

Leonardo R. Arriola

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

The Puzzle of Opposition Coordination

You cannot fight fairly against a candidate who is in power if you are divided, especially in Africa.

Blaise Compaoré, president of Burkina Faso, 2005¹

Democracy seems to break down all too easily in multiethnic societies. While electoral competition can generate democracy's most desirable attributes, this competitive mechanism is widely thought to fail wherever politicians and their parties become identified by ethnicity. Democracy obviously can collapse if the competition between ethnic parties degenerates into a violent confrontation over control of the state. But democracy usually disintegrates through subtler means. It begins when incumbents face too little competition rather than too much. Incumbents who confront an ethnically divided opposition effectively have insufficient competition. And if they do not fear losing elections, incumbents do not have much incentive to be responsive to their citizens, to craft better policy, or to respect institutional constraints. Electoral competition in multiethnic societies, to be meaningful, requires opposition coordination across ethnic cleavages.

The potential impact of opposition coordination is readily apparent in the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, where opposition politicians have routinely divided along ethnic lines when challenging incumbents through multiparty elections. In Gabon, President Omar Bongo, Africa's longest-serving ruler, died in 2009 after having defeated an ethnically fragmented opposition in three elections since the transition to multipartism in 1990. Because the personalized clientelistic networks used by Bongo to stay in power were disrupted by his death, the election held to replace the deceased president offered an unparalleled opportunity to bring about the country's first democratic alternation.

¹ Compaoré made the statement on the eve of the 2005 presidential election in Burkina Faso. He went on to win 80% of the vote against 12 opposition candidates. See Tanguy Berthemet, "Blaise Compaoré: 'La crise ivoirienne inquiète le Burkina,'" *Le Figaro*, 12 November 2005. Author's translation from the French version.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02111-2 - Multiethnic Coalitions in Africa: Business Financing of Opposition Election Campaigns

Leonardo R. Arriola

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Yet, his son and designated successor, Ali Bongo Ondimba, managed to keep the incumbent regime in power by winning 42% of the vote against an opposition that split its support between two rivals who each garnered a quarter of the vote.²

An ethnically divided opposition fumbled a similar opportunity in Zambia. The Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) became the dominant ruling party in that country after winning the 1991 election and each subsequent contest over the next twenty years. In the 2006 presidential election, President Levy Mwanawasa was reelected with 43% of the vote against two opposition candidates who divided the remaining votes between them. In the election called following Mwanawasa's sudden death in 2008, his designated successor, Rupiah Banda, kept the MMD in power with 40% of the vote against two challengers who split the opposition vote. That a divided opposition would enable the ruling party to retain the presidency was known in advance. They were the very same candidates who had competed two years earlier.³

A similar problem occurred in Kenya, where an opposition splintered by ethnicity permitted the country's long-ruling incumbent, President Daniel arap Moi, to hold onto power throughout the 1990s. As head of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), which had ruled the country since independence, Moi enjoyed considerable advantages in competing for office, but these were offset by a narrowing base of support. Nevertheless, in the 1992 presidential election, Moi won reelection with only 36% of the vote because his three principal rivals divided the country's largest ethnic groups among them. In the 1997 presidential election, Moi again won reelection with 40% of the vote against four opposition candidates who commanded blocs of their coethnics' votes.⁴ A repeat of this scenario was expected in the 2002 presidential election for which Moi had handpicked his successor.

But the Kenyan opposition did not divide along ethnic lines in the run up to the 2002 election. Mwai Kibaki, who had lost two previous bids for the presidency, unexpectedly managed to assemble a multiethnic electoral coalition that would go on to defeat the ruling party, bringing about the country's first democratic transfer of power and one of the few seen in Africa since the transition to multipartism began in the early 1990s. Kibaki, however, was an unlikely standard-bearer for the opposition. Derided by civil society activists as

² André Mba Obame, an ethnic Fang and a former minister in Bongo's regime, won 26% of the vote in the 2009 presidential election. Pierre Mamboundou, an ethnic Punu and long-time opponent of the regime, won 25%.

³ In the 2006 presidential election, Michael Sata, an ethnic Bemba and former member of the MMD, won 29%. Hakainde Hichilema, an ethnic Tonga and opposition party leader, won 25%. In the election to replace the deceased Mwanawasa in 2008, Sata won 38% of the vote. Hichilema won 20%.

⁴ The Kenyan opposition candidates who divided the 1992 vote were Kenneth Matiba, an ethnic Kikuyu, 26%; Mwai Kibaki, Kikuyu, 20%; and Oginga Odinga, Luo, 18%. The opposition candidates in 1997 were Mwai Kibaki, Kikuyu, 31%; Raila Odinga, Luo, 11%; Michael Wamalwa, Luhya, 8%; and Charity Ngilu, Kamba, 8%.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02111-2 - Multiethnic Coalitions in Africa: Business Financing of Opposition Election Campaigns

Leonardo R. Arriola

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Puzzle of Opposition Coordination*

3

a reluctant reformer and attacked by his political rivals as an ethnic chauvinist, he had neither the reputation nor the party required to mount a campaign that would attract votes from a cross section of the electorate. Indeed, since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in Kenya in 1991, no opposition politician had built a party organization that could challenge the ruling party on a national scale.

What Kibaki did have in 2002 was money. To overcome his electoral disadvantages, he pursued a pecuniary coalition-building strategy. His campaign advisors, a group of prominent businessmen and former parastatal directors, were able to raise funds among the Kenyan business community.⁵ That money was then used to secure public endorsements from politicians representing the country's major ethnic groups, beginning with local notables and moving up to national actors. Opposition politicians were, in effect, paid to leverage their own reputations in mobilizing their coethnics' votes on behalf of Kibaki. This pecuniary strategy ultimately enabled Kibaki to engineer the electoral coordination of Kenya's once-fragmented opposition.

Opposition politicians in African countries face the same electoral disadvantages as Kibaki wherever voters are ethnically mobilized and parties are organizationally weak. However, not all opposition politicians have been able to employ his seemingly simple pecuniary strategy for building electoral coalitions – the coalitions needed for meaningful democratic competition in multiethnic societies. What impedes the coordination of electoral opposition across ethnic cleavages? When are coalitions formed among politicians who might otherwise compete with each other for votes? Under what conditions can politicians agree to share power in societies divided by ethnicity?

This book engages such questions in the context of Africa's incomplete democratization. Although the formal elements of democracy – elections, parties, and legislatures – have been widely adopted in the region, these institutions have not brought about their desired effects in most countries. Two decades of experimentation with multiparty competition have not necessarily rendered governments more accountable, obliged their leaders to become more responsive to citizens, or induced their legislatures to more vigorously restrain the actions of executives. What underlies these deficiencies in African countries is the absence of an opposition that coordinates across ethnic cleavages. The competitive mechanism of democracy is ineffectual without it.

In the following pages, I introduce the problem of electoral coordination among ethnic-based opposition parties and why it matters for Africa's ongoing democratization. I then briefly review the relevant explanations found in the political science literature. To better account for the variation in opposition coalition formation across African countries, I provide an alternative explanation that focuses on the autonomy of business from state-controlled capital. I demonstrate in this book that opposition politicians are more likely to pursue

⁵ Author interviews, Nairobi, 21 July 2008; 29 July 2008; 5 August 2008; 6 August 2008; 15 August 2008.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02111-2 - Multiethnic Coalitions in Africa: Business Financing of Opposition Election Campaigns

Leonardo R. Arriola

Excerpt

[More information](#)

a pecuniary coalition-building strategy where the state's capacity to act as a gatekeeper for capital has been eroded by liberalizing financial reforms. Under such conditions, opposition politicians can tap the resources of business – the only viable source of campaign funding in poor countries – to amalgamate ethnically defined constituencies into national coalitions.

THE PROBLEM OF OPPOSITION COORDINATION IN AFRICA

Political parties in Africa have struggled to coordinate across ethnic cleavages since they were first mobilized to agitate for independence after the Second World War. The dynamic between a hegemonic ruling party and a fragmented opposition began to take hold before formal independence was even achieved (Kilson 1963; Schachter 1961; Wallerstein 1961). The parties that won control of territorial legislatures in the elections leading up to independence were soon able to dispatch rival parties organized on an ethnic or regional basis. In pre-independence Ghana, Apter (1964a, 279) observed that a fragmented opposition enabled the Convention People's Party (CPP) to become politically ascendant, which meant that "local parties could be annihilated by the CPP one by one."⁶ Just a year after most West African countries achieved independence, Wallerstein (1961) was already asking, "What Happened to the Opposition?" He found that opposition parties were represented in parliament in only two of the twelve countries surveyed.⁷

Apter argued during Africa's post-independence decade that opposition politicians would gradually learn to coordinate through repeated elections and thereby generate the competition required for democracy (Apter 1964b, 467–470).⁸ But Zolberg (1966) showed instead that incumbents could use their resources to coopt or eliminate their disordered rivals, and do so with minimal violence. The disappearance of a legal opposition by the mid-1960s was among the first signs that Africa's political development would be hindered by the absence of organizations that could effectively coordinate political actors and resources on a national scale (Bienen 1967).

Persistent opposition coordination failure became a feature of politics even in African countries that approximated peaceful multiparty competition. In Botswana, where multiparty elections have been regularly held since 1966,

⁶ Apter noted that the opposition attempted to build a united front against the CPP on at least two occasions, though they failed each time. In 1952, the Ghana Congress Party (GCP) was designed to be a broad-based party that would merge the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) and the National Democratic Party (NDP), but J.B. Danquah ultimately refused to dissolve his UGCC. In 1954, the Volta Charter was negotiated as a common platform for parliamentary elections, but it was never signed by the participating parties.

⁷ Wallerstein found that dominant ruling parties had become established in Ghana, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo, and that no legal opposition party existed in Côte d'Ivoire, Dahomey, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Upper Volta. Opposition parties had parliamentary representation only in Ghana and Nigeria.

⁸ The actual purpose of Apter's 1962 paper was to convince independence-era leaders that multiparty competition was essential for democracy.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02111-2 - Multiethnic Coalitions in Africa: Business Financing of Opposition Election Campaigns

Leonardo R. Arriola

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Puzzle of Opposition Coordination*

5

the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has consistently held at least a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, which elects the country's president.⁹ Much of the BDP's dominance is linked to the opposition's own persistent fragmentation. The cost of coordination failure has been plain in repeated elections, but the main opposition parties have insisted on fielding competing candidates in most constituencies (Molomo and Molefe 2005; Molutsi 2004). In the 2004 elections, for example, the BDP won 77% of parliamentary seats partly because opposition parties split the anti-incumbent vote. The opposition parties won only 13 seats among the 57 contested. Had they coordinated their candidates, the combined opposition would have picked up 12 additional seats, thus denying the BDP its two-thirds majority for the first time (Sebudubedu and Osei-Hwedie 2010).

When multiparty politics were finally reintroduced across the continent in the early 1990s, the opposition in most countries emerged as fragmented as it had been in the early 1960s. African party systems repeated the pattern from forty years earlier: the incumbent's ruling party overawed a weak and fragmented opposition (Bogaards 2004; Mozaffar and Scarritt 2005; Olukoshi 1998; Rakner and Svasand 2002; Rakner and van de Walle 2009; van de Walle 2003). Incumbents, of course, achieve this dominance by using fraud and coercion to reduce the uncertainty associated with holding elections. They actively work to dismiss their opponents as "drunkards, embezzlers and lunatics," as President Robert Mugabe said of his opponents during Zimbabwe's 1990 election,¹⁰ or as "amateurs and opportunists," as President Paul Biya said of his rivals on the eve of Cameroon's 1992 election.¹¹ However, a recurrent theme in case studies of African party systems is the failure of opposition politicians themselves to coordinate at the ballot box in countries that vary in constitutional arrangements as well as social conditions (Crook 1997; Joireman 1997; Konings 2004; Marty 2002). And incumbents whose governments neither promote the public good nor respect citizen preferences are able to retain power, in part, because they do not confront a coordinated electoral opposition that presents a viable alternative to the political status quo.

The formation of coalitions that aggregate blocs of votes, either as catch-all parties or multiparty alliances, should be a natural strategy for opposition politicians seeking national office in multiethnic societies; otherwise, if too many compete, they enable the incumbent to remain in the office by dividing the opposition vote. Yet, the opposition politicians who challenge incumbents across Africa appear incapable of building national parties, cultivating broad-based constituencies, or forging the electoral alliances necessary to pool their

⁹ The National Assembly is elected through first-past-the-post single member constituencies. Candidates are required to attest at registration that, if elected, they would vote for their party's presidential candidate.

¹⁰ Quoted in Sylvester (1990, 388).

¹¹ Quoted in Derald Everhart, "Cameroon President Facing Opposition Challenge in Capital," *Associated Press*, 11 October 1992.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02111-2 - Multiethnic Coalitions in Africa: Business Financing of Opposition Election Campaigns

Leonardo R. Arriola

Excerpt

[More information](#)

votes. Their fragmentation is all the more noteworthy because the same set of opposition politicians often faces off with the same incumbent over multiple election cycles. These politicians repeatedly fail to coalesce despite having regular interactions that enable them to communicate their political preferences and to demonstrate their relative strength based on vote shares from prior elections. Even when the regime in power has transgressed against them and their constituents, opposition politicians have had a difficult time selecting a single candidate around whom a national electoral coalition might be mobilized.

Although an intuitive strategy for counterbalancing the advantages enjoyed by an entrenched incumbent, the coordination of opposition across ethnic cleavages is difficult to bring about because it involves considerable uncertainty for individual politicians. Opposition politicians may have a common goal of unseating the incumbent, but they do not necessarily have identical preferences over which candidate should do so. As Przeworski (1991, 67) reminds us, “the struggle for democracy always takes place on two fronts: against the authoritarian regime for democracy and against one’s allies for the best place under democracy.” To be sure, the costs associated with political change are often distributed more equally than the rewards. The gains that could be realized through opposition coordination are unlikely to be shared equally, though each member of a coalition would have to shoulder some of the cost for bringing it about. The coalition candidate for the presidency or the premiership undoubtedly takes the largest prize in an election, while other coalition partners share the remaining spoils and usually on an unequal basis. It is in this respect that coalition bargaining often breaks down among the opposition. Every politician understands that power-sharing promises made before an election are cheap talk. A politician may receive either no compensation or less than what was promised even after having rallied votes for a coalition’s candidate. This frustrated politician would have no means of enforcing those promises once the winner is installed in office.

The difficulty of forming opposition coalitions in African countries is clearly observed when the region is placed in a comparative context. Presidential elections are particularly useful for gauging the presence of a coordinated opposition, since any challenger could become a focal candidate for anti-incumbent forces seeking an alternation in power. Figure 1.1 shows that this potential is usually not realized in African presidential elections. Between 1985 and 2005, 45% of all presidential elections held around the world resulted in alternation, meaning that an incumbent or a ruling party’s designated candidate was obliged to hand power over to an opposition candidate. But African elections have resulted in such an outcome only 26% of the time, a rate far lower than in comparable regions where presidential systems are commonplace and the democratization process remains ongoing. In Latin America, 66% of elections led to turnover, as they have 50% of the time in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Electoral coordination among opposition politicians could have significantly increased the relatively low rate of alternation shown for African elections in

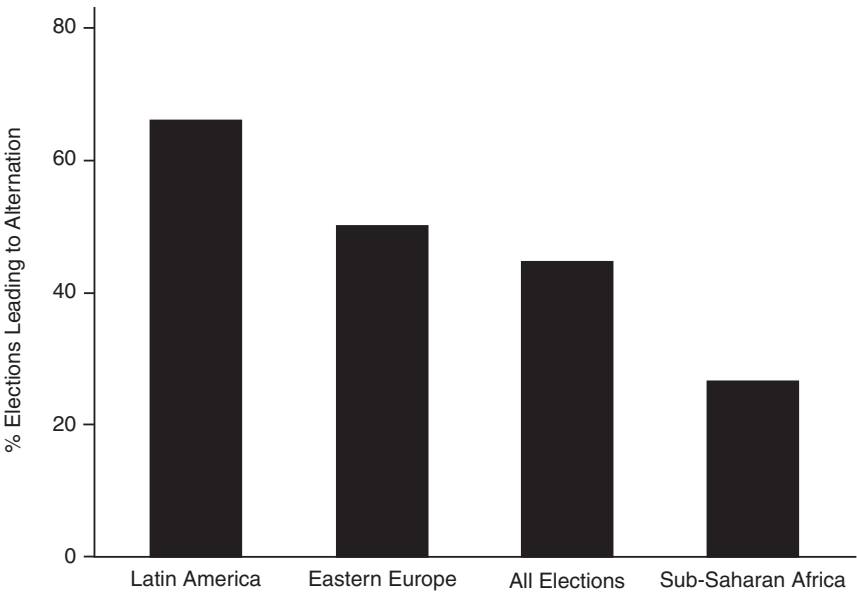


FIGURE 1.1. Alternation in presidential elections across regions, 1985–2005. Note: The sample includes 278 presidential elections held between 1985 and 2005. Of these elections, 106 were held in Sub-Saharan Africa, 85 in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 48 in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.
Source: Author’s data set.

Figure 1.1. The outcome might have been different in an estimated 40% of 74 presidential elections that were contested by the opposition but won by the incumbent between 1985 and 2005. If the top three opposition challengers had formed an electoral coalition or arranged for the strategic withdrawal of candidacies, their combined vote share would have been greater than the incumbent’s own in nine of those elections.¹² Their combined vote share would have brought them within ten percentage points of the incumbent’s in another twenty-two elections. And this would be no small feat in a region where incumbents win reelection with a margin of victory that averages more than 40%.¹³ Opposition coordination might have led to alternation in some of these twenty-two elections if a more competitive race encouraged greater voter turnout or vote switching in favor of an opposition coalition that presented itself as a viable alternative government.

But wherever opposition politicians have managed to overcome their divisions, the impact of their coordination has been tangible. Bratton and van de

¹² For countries with runoff systems, the vote shares are from the first round.
¹³ The incumbent margin of victory – the difference between the first- and second-place candidates – appears to be unusually high in Africa when compared across regions. The average margin of victory for reelected presidents or their designated successors is 34.5% around the world. That margin falls to 19.8% in Latin America and 9.6% in OECD countries.

Walle (1997) find that the transition from a one-party to a multiparty system was less prolonged in countries with a relatively cohesive opposition: of the sixteen countries with a cohesive opposition, fifteen held founding elections. Howard and Roessler (2006) further show that opposition coalitions can result in liberalizing electoral outcomes in competitive authoritarian regimes. The problem, however, is that there is no explanation for how those coalitions emerge in the first place.

The objective of this book is to explain how opposition politicians are able to forge multiethnic electoral coalitions in some African countries but not others. Opposition coalitions typically attract scholarly or journalistic attention when they lead to an alternation in power, as in Senegal in 2000 or Kenya in 2002. However, as illustrated in Figure 1.2, opposition politicians in several African countries have managed to overcome their fissiparous tendencies to coordinate in the run-up to executive elections, though they do not always win. Multiethnic opposition coalitions are defined in this book as those in which a coalition endorses a single candidate for executive office, represents more than one ethnic group or region, and forms prior to the election in a plurality system or prior to the first round in a runoff system. I find that such electoral coordination has occurred in a number of African countries: 32 opposition coalitions have been formed in the 85 contested executive elections held between 1990 and 2005. These opposition coalitions account for over half of the executive turnover – 15 of 27 cases – seen in region during the same time period.¹⁴

Figure 1.2 further shows that the frequency of opposition coordination varies considerably across African countries. Opposition politicians in some countries are regularly able to overcome the uncertainty associated with making power-sharing promises before elections. Multiethnic opposition coalitions were formed for at least two elections in the countries shaded in dark gray, an opposition coalition formed for one election in the countries shaded in light gray, and no such coalition formed in countries marked with diagonal lines. The fact that Figure 1.2 suggests no obvious pattern in terms of colonial legacy or authoritarian background underscores our lack of knowledge concerning the institutionalization of electoral opposition or party systems in African countries where democracy has yet to be consolidated. The existing literature offers no convincing explanation for why electoral opposition becomes institutionalized more slowly in some countries than others or for whether the erratic nature of opposition in some countries will stabilize over time.

¹⁴ All elections examined in this book are listed in Appendix D. I coded the multiethnic opposition coalitions that formed during ninety-nine executive elections held between 1990 and 2005. The fourteen elections boycotted by the opposition are excluded from the analysis. Parliamentary races from Botswana, Ethiopia, Mauritius, and South Africa are included in the sample. I reason that their inclusion is justified because each party's candidate for president (Botswana and South Africa) or prime minister (Ethiopia and Mauritius) is known before the election. Moreover, the powers of the prime ministers in these countries are as expansive as those of their counterparts in presidential systems. Cox (2005, 80) notes that the incentive to form broad national parties can be as strong in parliamentary systems as in presidential ones "to the extent that parliamentary elections revolve around the prospective prime ministers."

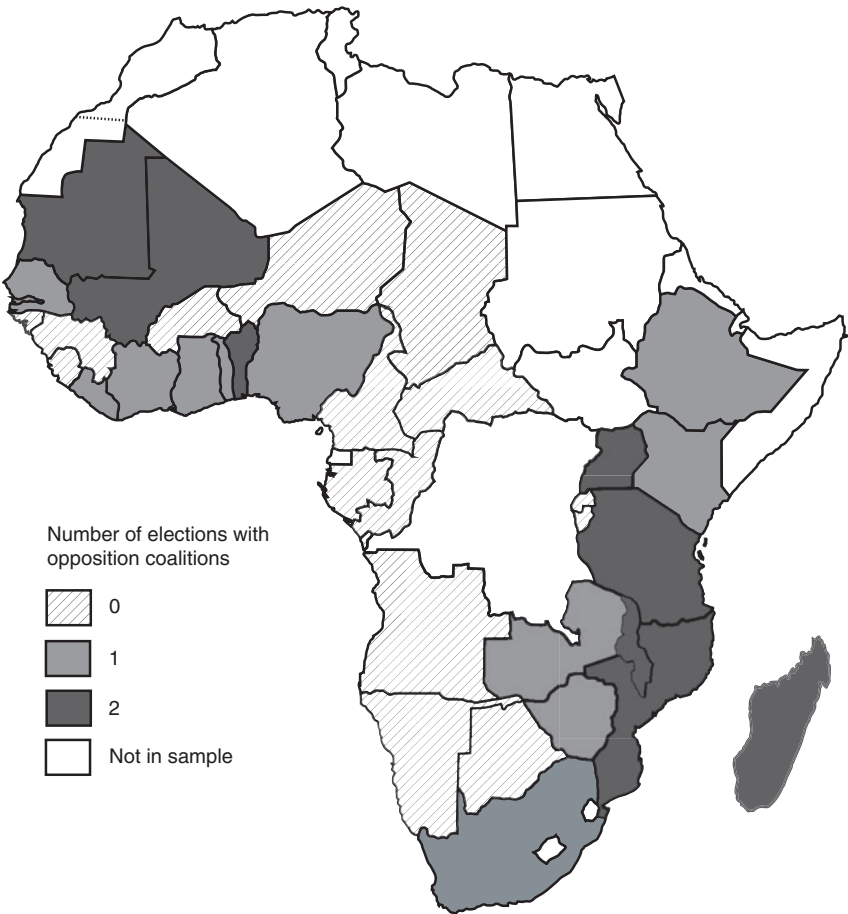


FIGURE 1.2. Cross-national variation in opposition coalition formation, 1990–2005. Note: There were nearly three multiparty elections held per African country, on average, between 1990 and 2005. Information on specific elections in each country is listed in Appendix D. Source: Original Africa map designed by Daniel Dalet (<http://d-maps.com>).

EXISTING EXPLANATIONS FOR OPPOSITION COORDINATION

The apparent difficulty that opposition politicians face in forming multiethnic coalitions could be easily attributed to the imperfect democratization of African countries. Despite the political liberalization that swept across the region in the early 1990s, executive authority remains highly personalized and unconstrained in most countries. African incumbents tend to rule through hybrid regimes that combine democratic and authoritarian traits. And they have the means with which to manipulate elections to extend tenure (Bratton and Posner 1999; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Schedler 2006).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02111-2 - Multiethnic Coalitions in Africa: Business Financing of Opposition Election Campaigns

Leonardo R. Arriola

Excerpt

[More information](#)

These incumbents can predetermine an election's outcome by influencing the vote count, by using violence to repress their opponents, or even by tailoring the composition of their opposition. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, President Henri Konan Bédié neutralized his chief rival in the 1995 presidential election by having his candidacy barred on allegations that he was not an Ivorian citizen. In Zambia, President Frederick Chiluba employed the same tactic to disqualify his main rival, who also happened to be his predecessor, from running against him in the 1996 presidential election.

Focusing on incumbent chicanery, however, provides limited insight into the conditions under which opposition politicians might become credible challengers. How can we explain the variation in opposition coordination across countries or within countries over time when nearly every incumbent in the region takes measures to prevent such an occurrence? It remains to be shown how opposition politicians manage to forge cross-cleavage alliances under less than ideal conditions. I review here the most plausible hypotheses based on scholarship that has examined the effects of ethnic mobilization, patronage politics, electoral institutions, and economic interests. Each explanation highlights an important structural factor that impinges directly on the choices made by politicians over their electoral strategies, that is, whether to coalesce or to fragment in their pursuit of elected office.

Ethnic Mobilization

The fragmentation of opposition parties could be directly attributed to the ethnic divisions found in most African countries. Scholars have long argued that democracy is conflict-prone and unstable where ethnic identity becomes the primary basis for political organization (Horowitz 1985; Lijphart 1969, 1977; Rabushka and Shepsle 1972; Snyder 2000). Ethnic-based politicking is thought to stimulate the escalation of communal demands, encouraging politicians who compete for the control of ethnic constituencies to engage in outbidding (Horowitz 1985; Rabushka and Shepsle 1972). With their immediate rivals being other coethnics, politicians can seek to gain electoral advantage by advocating increasingly extreme positions. This intragroup competition makes bargaining across cleavages problematic, since politicians may seek to protect their flanks by driving a hard bargain with their counterparts from other groups. Once locked into polarized positions, politicians are unable to strike the delicate balance between maintaining the support of their own coethnics and making concessions to politicians from other ethnic groups (Berman et al. 2004; Ottaway 1999).

These theoretical expectations seem to be borne out by the African record. Empirical studies of electoral mobilization in the region show that partisan support largely reflects ethno-regional identity (Ferree 2004; Norris and Mattes 2003; Posner 2005; Wantchekon 2003). Opposition parties are at a particular disadvantage in this regard because they tend to be based on ethnically defined constituencies that do not approximate an electoral plurality. This can be seen in the ethnic fractionalization scores for political parties. These scores can serve