

**Bleck, Jamie and Van de Walle, Nicolas. 2019. *Electoral Politics in Africa Since 1990: Continuity in Change*. New York/Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. x + 331pp. ISBN 978-1-107-16208-2**

Electoral politics in Africa continue to be a topic of debate, particularly since the 1990s which brought about multiparty elections and transformed political systems. One area of such debates revolves around the nature and quality of democratic transformations, with concerns over the lack of free and fair elections. Other areas of debate concern party organisation, voter motivation, incumbency advantage, elite capture, and the nature of political campaigns. The underlying assumption has been that these factors have profound influence on the process and outcomes of competitive elections on the continent.

In *Electoral Politics in Africa Since 1990*, Jamie Bleck and Nicolas Van de Walle ask whether routinised multiparty elections across the continent since the 1990s have had a meaningful impact on political change and democratic consolidation. The book takes a comparative politics perspective to address several questions, most of which revolve around the nature of electoral competition, the evolution of political parties, institutionalisation of the party system, the quality of democracy, voter behaviour, and the shifts in electoral campaigns. Focusing on events that occurred between 1990 and 2015, the book argues that, despite the challenges facing Africa's competitive politics, elections have continued to take place. This is because of the presidential systems and incumbency advantage. In other words, little change has taken place since the 1990s.

The book is structured around six thematic areas: (1) the emerging patterns in electoral competition, (2) the quality of democratic changes, (3) variations in parties and party systems, (4) candidates and campaigns, (5) core issues in elections, and (6) voter behaviour/attitudes. The introduction explores the "puzzle" around the continuity in electoral politics, and the conclusion discusses the implications of such continuity for the everyday lives of Africans.

Whereas these issues have been dealt with in the past (see Lindberg 2006; Lynch and Crawford 2011; Salehyan and Linebarger 2015), this book represents, in my opinion, one of the most systematic attempts to address

electoral politics and political change in Africa. The book engages with a rich dataset of more than 500 national-level multiparty elections to show that the continuity of change characterising African elections is bound to diminish across time and space because of the “executive dominance and the liability of newness” (p. 29). Although the book claims a broader country coverage, much of the discussions presented centre on electoral systems in Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Uganda and Zambia. According to Bleck and Van de Walle, these countries arguably represent the variation in Africa’s political systems. They argue that, although the institutionalisation of multiparty elections across the continent has had little impact in terms of economic and political transformations, electoral continuity is likely to reshape the “rules of the game” in future electoral competitions. Whereas this observation is not entirely new (see Lynch and Crawford 2011), it demonstrates a cautious step back from studies on African elections that emphasise “big man politics” and ethnicity as core determinants of the process and outcomes of elections. The book also shows how the changing political terrains increasingly force contemporary politicians to pay attention to the core issues affecting citizens such as problems of governance (pp. 264–267), including issues of security and sovereignty (pp. 197–201; 277–279). However, corruption and clientelism practices remain the main obstacles to economic growth and democratic consolidation (pp. 136–139; 229–230).

In fact, Bleck and Van de Walle believe that democratic accountability and government responsiveness will determine the future of political regimes once legacy politics fades away. The authors attribute this looming paradigm shift to increased voter knowledge and engagement in political processes. However, the likelihood of this happening depends on the commitment of the current actors and institutions (pp. 279–280), which, in a sense, renders the previous argument paradoxical. Nonetheless, the authors convincingly discuss how the ongoing political trends align with distributive politics. The growing roles of the media and the business community in the balance of power are also captured (pp. 169–178; 208–217; 252–256). This is all too often neglected, yet the media and business community play central roles in Africa’s competitive elections. Admittedly, the scholarship on Africa’s electoral politics often highlights structural problems (e.g., historical grievances) and institutional hurdles (e.g., slow reforms), yet media transformations in the 1990s also influenced the shifts in party systems and election campaigns. In my opinion, the discussions that make this book compelling are found in chapters

4 (Political Parties and Electoral Competition), 5 (Candidates and Electoral Campaigns), and 6 (Analyzing Issues in Presidential Campaigns), which show how electoral competition has changed the nature of political parties, behaviour of candidates, and issues of interest. Chapter 2 (The Evolution of Electoral Competition, 1990-2015) provides important theoretical viewpoints that lay the terrain for discussions presented in the book.

Despite the merits of this book, there are areas of potential quibble. While it is undeniable that incumbency advantage and “elite capture” undermine the process and outcomes of elections on the continent, opportunistic political settlements (see Khan 2018) and “hybrid regimes” (see Lynch and Crawford 2011) increasingly become common in post-election pacts. It is unclear whether these developments are to be understood in the contexts of political brokerage and partnerships discussed on the pages 145-184. Moreover, while the book cautions against seeing ethnicity as an important aspect of voter behaviour (pp. 229–231), a growing body of literature shows that such politics of belonging have only taken different forms, such as temporal opportunism (see Lynch and Crawford 2011). In other words, ethnic agency still remains relevant in voter behaviour. Ironically, the book alludes to this plausibility by recognising the authority that certain “brokers” have in amassing co-ethnic votes (pp. 162–166; p. 244–246). This sits at odds with the claims of in-existent or weak ethnic agency in the formation of voter behaviour purported in the book.

Overall, *Electoral Politics in Africa Since 1990: Continuity in Change* provides solid and compelling empirical evidence on Africa’s electoral politics and what this means for democratic consolidation. The book is likely to appeal to a wider readership beyond African politics to include democratisation studies and governance.

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