

A Cross-National Comparison of Voter Turnout in 15 Sub-Saharan African States

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Abstract

The political fortunes of Sub-Saharan Africa changed dramatically in the past twenty-five years. Since the late 1980s, many countries have held regular multi-party elections. A cross-national examination of voter participation rates, a common starting point for work on democratization, is now possible. This paper represents a first look at the determinants of voter turnout in 15 African states that have witnessed some stability in national elections since 1988. Controlling for several standard explanations of voter turnout, a model is developed to test a colonial legacy thesis, which seeks to understand the influence the former colonizing power has had on contemporary political outcomes. In addition, the research examines the role played by ethnic fractionalization and religious diversity on electoral participation rates. The former is found to associate with less participation and the latter higher voter turnout. Moreover, the research uncovers, on average, voter turnout is higher in former French colonies.

Key Words: Voter Turnout; Africa; Democratization; Colonial Legacy; Ethnic Fractionalization; Religious Pluralism

Introduction

Africa is home to about one-seventh of the world's people and it contains a little over a quarter of the world's nation-states. Being the second largest continent in the world, Africa's great expanse gives rise to a rich and diverse terrain featured in countless movies and photographs. Increasingly, Africa has become a desired tourist destination for people from all over the globe. Unfortunately, governmental stability on much of the continent is incomplete. Nation-states often divide along ethnic lines, giving rise to political discord and social disharmony (Annett 2001; Lindberg and Morrison 2008; Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010). High natural resource endowments are not dispersed equitably and are often linked to civil conflict (Homer-Dixon 1994). Moreover, Africa's vast and varied terrain hides the fact there is a dearth of suitable farmland (Eswaran et al. 1996), which creates socio-economic and political challenges. Nevertheless, shifts to stable multi-party elections in many nation-states, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, may mark a permanent trend away from political strife toward a steady social and economic life for much of the continent (Wiseman 1993; Lindberg 2006).

This research studies recent elections in 15 Sub-Saharan African nation-states with a focus on voter participation rates. Scholars argue, quality elections with reasonably high voter turnout are central to the democratic experience and go a long way toward defining successful democratic transition (Mozaffar 2002, 86; Moehler 2009). Political theorist Robert Dahl (1989) argues, convincingly, that the core institution of modern liberal democracy is competitive and participatory elections. Although elections with high voter turnout are insufficient to define which countries are, and which are not, succeeding as democracies, scholarship suggests that competent elections unlike any other democratic institution must precede successful self-governance (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Lindberg 2006, 1). Moreover, many argue early



electoral experiences represent a critical juncture in the trajectory of a body politic (Rustow 1970; Kostadinova 2003; Kostadinova and Power 2007) and that once regularized, even the mere presence of democratic elections, helps to establish a self-reinforcing trend toward greater civil and political liberties (Lindberg 2006).¹

Hence, this inquiry into democratic development in Sub-Saharan Africa focuses on elections. While not an unqualified success (*see* Chabal 1998; Brown and Kaiser 2007; Cheru 2012), over the past 25 years, multi-party elections have become more common in many countries on the African continent. Taking advantage of the relative stability, this research initiates a cross-national comparison of voter turnout rates in an attempt to illuminate correlates in the manner others have used to examine variance in voter turnout rates in other parts of the world. Distinct from other voter turnout studies, however, this research scrutinizes the colonizing experience each of the countries endured as it relates to contemporary variance in participation rates. A colonial legacy thesis has been a common baseline for work on political development in Africa (Brown and Kaiser 2007; Englebert 2000; Mozaffar 2002).

In addition, we attempt to generalize, across nation-states and time, about the role of ethnic and religious fractionalization on voter turnout rates. Many suggest ethnic identity and conflict is a paramount explanation of electoral-political outcomes across Sub-Saharan Africa (Young 1976; Bates 1983; Horowitz 1985; Lindberg and Morrison 2008; Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010; and on ethnic identity and seat volatility *see* Ferree 2010). We add something new to this debate by also examining religious diversity, a consideration that has received much less attention. In particular, we seek to test whether ethnic homogeneity may reduce political tension and associate with higher voter turnout rates, while religious homogeneity or dominance by a single religion may cause individuals, in the aggregate, to de-emphasize the political process and associate with lower participation rates.

Importantly, we do not hold that higher voter turnout rates are analogous to greater democratic development. The research, in this regard, must be viewed as incomplete. Our more limited intention is to further cross-national discovery on the topic of voter turnout in African elections, while uncovering insights that others might use to study democratic development more directly. Ultimately, we will test the predictive power of the former colonizer, ethnic pluralism, religious pluralism, and several control variables that others have found affect voter turnout patterns around the world. Specifically, we control for population density, adult literacy, concurrent executive and legislative elections, founding elections, and the level of civil liberties and civil rights that characterizes each country in each election year as defined by the Freedom House organization.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. The first provides a brief overview of earlier works on democratic transition in Sub-Saharan Africa particularly as it relates to colonialism and ethnic and religious pluralism. The second develops and proposes hypotheses regarding voter turnout, based on previous scholarship. The third section presents the results of our empirical tests, which is followed by a summary section that attempts to explain the somewhat counterintuitive findings related to former French colonies. Where others have suggested former

¹ A lot of work is being done to define competent democracy by the Varieties of Democracy Project led by Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, and Staffan Lindberg (<http://kellogg.nd.edu/projects/vdem/> last accessed 8/27/2014). We cite Lindberg and various co-authors extensively throughout this paper because of their work both in the democratization literature, but also for work on elections in Africa.

British colonies, on average, ought to have greater democratic success, this research finds all else being equal, higher voter participation rates in former French colonies. We also uncover evidence that ethnic pluralism associates with lower voter turnout, while religious diversity prompts higher rates of voter participation.

Earlier Works on Sub-Saharan African Democracy

The study of democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa, although becoming more common, still has left significant theoretical and empirical holes. What has been learned, to date, often is applicable to individual nation-states (Firmin-Sellers 2000; Brown 2001; Schubert 2010; Hoffman and Long 2013). When scholars make cross-national comparisons (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Adejumo 2000; Brown and Kaiser 2002), by their own admission, the work has been largely exploratory. In an important deviation, Mozaffar (2002) studies 36 Sub-Saharan African nation-states and learns former British colonies and ethnic fragmentation associate positively with the autonomy of election management bodies or state-run bureaucracies used to organize and legitimize the electoral process. Another cross-national work examines a sample of countries and survey data to learn that as elections draw nearer ethnic identity becomes more salient (Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010). This research will use a similar approach to those just cited and seeks to establish a starting point for further inquiry into the relationship between a host of predictor variables and voter turnout rates.

Probably the facet of democratic development in Africa studied the most is the extent to which an uneven democratic experience is due to the dissimilar governing practices of each colonizing power. Most notably, Gilbert and Reynolds (2008) note the varied philosophies of the European colonizers have led to distinct government structures. The British model of colonial governance is known as 'indirect rule' for its greater reliance on local power structures (324). The French orientation, stated at its best, was one of fostering equality between Europeans and Africans but with Euro-centric standards and little actual socio-political or economic equality (320-21). The Portuguese and Belgian models were more closely aligned with the French; although often there was even fewer civil rights or liberties afforded indigenous populations (322-23).

Others note the British common law legal system is responsible for greater civic culture in the country's former colonies (Firmin-Sellers 2000; La Porta et al. 1999; Hayek 1960). These scholars note good governance and economic growth have been less robust, on average, in former French colonies. Under a British common law system, countries tend to have better property and investor protections, which can lead to a more diverse spread of capital and higher aggregate economic growth (Barro 1996). Accordingly, and broadening Firmin-Seller's sample, Bossuroy and Cogneau (2008) study inter- and intra-generational social mobility in Africa. Their study of five former colonies, which run the gamut of the democracy/authoritarian spectrum, finds native populations in former British colonies have better social mobility, after controlling for occupation and educational status.²

Important for this work, we note both Britain and France introduced multi-party elections prior to the independence movements that swept Africa in the 1960s. However, French colonies, on average, had a longer experience and a greater number of multiparty elections (Collier 1982).

² The British may also have been better at unwinding their hold on their colonies, transitioning power from colonial administrators to a new society, in a more functional and timely manner than the French.

Lindberg (2006) has studied elections in nearly all Sub-Saharan African countries since 1989 and one of his most important theses is that even when elections are merely '*de jure*' they 'have allowed for equality of political participation and free competition' (8). Lindberg emphasizes the important role played by successive election cycles as a legitimizing force and an important barometer of the quality of the democratic process. Beginning in 1946, all former French colonies elected representatives to assemblies in both France and local councils. Our suspicion is that these regular-competitive elections might prompt greater legitimacy for the contemporary electoral process in former French colonies.

Lindberg (2006) also notes, political parties tend to be ethnically based across much of Sub-Saharan Africa and that this presents several potential problems for the functioning of an electoral system (*see also* Easterly and Levine 1997; Posner 2004; Posner 2005). Importantly, ethnic fractionalization has been negatively correlated with the quality of governance, as well as economic growth (Blais 2000; Fornos et al. 2004; Burkhart and Lewis-Beck 1994). Today, political parties in many African nation-states continue to form along ethnic lines and incumbent politicians have an easy time making the case that a win by an opponent may incite ethno-political violence (Bates 1994, 21). This, in turn, can have the effect of dampening voter enthusiasm, especially among moderates or non-group members.

Mozaffar, Scarritt and Galaich (2003), for their part, show that ethnicity and electoral rules interact in ways to create variance in the quality and manageability of multi-party elections. In particular, they note the high interest in concurrent elections, which tends to increase the number of coalitions, reduce the number of political parties, and mitigate the potential for deadlock caused by ethno-political fragmentation.³ Moreover, Bratton and van de Walle (1997) note the round of democratization that began in the early 1990s opened with less ethnic fractionalization than had previously been witnessed (251-252; *see also* Mamdani 1996). Lindberg (2006) attests to this and notes the hyper-regional characteristic of parties has waned (78-80; *see also* Reilly 2000-01).

Religion, and the effect of religious diversity on electoral processes and outcomes in Africa, has not received nearly the level of attention that ethnic pluralism has. Unlike ethnic pluralism, religious diversity may encourage participation. As noted, ethnic pluralism has been associated with the development of competing political parties that may advocate for election violence and/or boycotts, both formal and informal. This obviously can decrease aggregate voter turnout. However, when religious diversity prevents a single religion from dominating the socio-political life of a community, there may be greater voter participation. Previous researchers find that religious *homogeneity* can prompt a scenario where people are more loyal to religious traditions than they are political associations and, consequently, less concerned with the political process (Fish 2002).⁴ Religious pluralism and a more secular political process, one that puts a

³ Ordeshook and Shvetsova (1994) for their part find that electoral institutions and social cleavages are both important, and that though district magnitude helps to define the number of parties involved in an election, this effect is conditioned by ethnic group concentrations (385-86).

⁴ Although work on religious pluralism in Africa is scarce, much has been written about the possible links between organized religion and authoritarianism (Kakar 1996; Kalyvas 1996), primarily concerning Islam and Catholicism (*see also* Kalyvas, 2000 on the relevance of religious parties). The conclusion is, generally, that the more dominant a single religion is the weaker are democratic institutions (Blais 2000; Fornos et al. 2004). Importantly, Fish (2002) has shown that predominantly Islamic or Catholic countries had poorer

premium on participation sans religion, might then associate with greater voter turnout, on average.⁵

Research Design and Hypotheses

The study uses a Generalized Least Squares (GLS) regression model to explain voter turnout in uninterrupted multi-party elections in 15 African countries. The elections took place between 1988 and 2012. When constructing the sample, several factors were considered. First, only Sub-Saharan African nation-states are included. The sample excludes the states of North Africa due to the region's distinct social and political history (Lindberg 2006, 9). Island nations were also excluded due to their unique characteristics, not the least of which is small population. Explicitly, any nation-state with a population below one million persons was not considered, bolstering a most similar case design intended to hold some socio-economic and cultural considerations constant. Next, we only use first round elections. Second round elections and referenda are excluded, again, for the purpose of analyzing as best as possible comparable cases. Last, starting the clock in 1988 coincides loosely with the latest wave of democratization in the region (Huntington 1991). The final sample can be seen in Table 1 and includes 92 elections; the following footnote elaborates more on case selection.⁶

(Table 1 goes about here. See appendix)

Dependent Variable: *Voter turnout* is modeled as the percentage of the voting age population (VAP) that casts a vote in a given election year. The average value for each of the 15 countries included is provided in Table 1. Most specifically, total votes are divided by the VAP (the over-18 population in each country). We use VAP instead of registered voters because the data are cleaner. Registration rolls in many African nation-states are poorly tracked or maintained (Geys 2006, 639). Data on voting age population were retrieved from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), as it has the most comprehensive database for VAP. Data on total votes cast were drawn from the online *African Elections Database* (AED),

democratic experiences but were not more violent and did not experience lower levels of interpersonal trust. In his study, he controls for a wide range of factors including ethnic pluralism and a British colonial heritage.

⁵Varshney (2007) claims that 'religion' is a particular kind of 'ethnicity' (277), but we hold that the phenomena are distinct. We offer as evidence the countervailing theoretical expectations cited above.

⁶Initially, only countries which maintained successful, *de jure* democratic elections since the late 1980s were in the sample. This consideration caused all former Belgium colonies to be dropped from the analysis. We relax the coding rule and include two successive and contemporary elections from Burundi and three post-genocide elections from Rwanda to test the hypothesis that voter turnout will be lower in Belgium colonies. Bratton and van de Walle (1997, 120-21) are particularly cognizant of the many issues surrounding selecting a suitable sample of country-elections to study. We include elections from some cases they label 'blocked transitions.' We fully appreciate their concerns and recognized this preliminary test of voter turnout may be compromised by any of a number of factors related to money politics, incomplete data, and fraud. Yet, we hold there is value in initiating the discovery process nonetheless. In the end, when the elections took place in countries with flawed transitions we include elections only if there was some minimal level of competition, defined as the losing political parties receiving at least 30 percent of the votes cast.

and compared to data in *Psephos* (2013) and *Elections in Africa* (1999) for accuracy. We found IDEA's data for total votes cast to be less reliable.⁷

Colonial Power. The first explanatory variable is the former colonizer in each of the 15 African nation-states. The countries included were colonized by *Britain, France, Belgium, and Portugal* and consequently four dummy variables are employed, one representing each colonizer. Given the theoretical and empirical range of institutional bonuses former British colonies gained upon independence, it is hypothesized that voter turnout should be higher in those countries than elsewhere, *ceteris paribus*. British colonies are the excluded group in the regression analysis, providing the baseline for the statistical test. The expectation is that the tests will produce negative regression coefficients suggesting that, on average, voter turnout will be lower in any of the other countries than in former British colonies. In addition, we expect former Belgian and Portuguese colonies will produce the lowest voter turnout rates, given their more limited efforts to involve indigenous populations in the legal and bureaucratic order during colonial times. Portugal, scholars argue, had been particularly repressive (Gilbert and Reynolds 2008, 320-23).

Key Considerations: Ethnic and Religious Pluralism: Given the well-established ties between ethnicity and party politics across Africa, *Ethnic Pluralism* is included as a key predictor of variation in voter turnout rates across the countries studied. Our expectation is that greater ethnic diversity, on average, will lead to lower voter turnout. The causal argument is concern over the tendency for ethnic-based political parties to sponsor election boycotts and electoral violence. The latter is believed to deter people from showing themselves at polling stations, lest they be caught up in violent acts. Data for ethnic pluralism are retrieved from the last 25 annual editions of the *CIA World Factbook*. Specifically, we subtract from 100 the percentage of the population from the largest reported ethnic group. For instance, if the largest ethnic group comprises 32 percent of a country's population, the variable's value is '68.' Scored as such, a larger value implies that the largest ethnic group is a smaller percentage of the total population, and greater ethnic pluralism prevails. The mean ethnic pluralism value for all cases is 34.9 percent with a standard deviation of over 30 percent.

Religious Pluralism is measured in the same manner as ethnic pluralism. Data, again, are obtained from the annual editions of the *CIA World Factbook*. Scores for religious pluralism range from six percent in Senegal in 2007 and 2012 to 76.2 percent for Mozambique in 2012. Senegal is about 94 percent Sunni Muslim and correspondingly the country is the most religiously homogeneous of the nation-states studied. In Mozambique the largest religious group is Catholic, but this group comprises less than 25 percent of the country's population. The average value for all cases is 39.7 percent.

⁷ We contacted IDEA concerning four issues we uncovered with their data. Two were simple copy-paste errors. The other two were transcription errors: the last digit was missing. Finally, their data include an inconsistency in coding Total Votes for multi-round elections. Sometimes, first round numbers are used, while other times it is second round numbers. Because of these problems, we turned to alternative sources relying most heavily on the *African Elections Database* (AED), as it appears to be the most comprehensive source of voter turnout data. IDEA and AED values are identical or nearly identical for many elections, but when they were not, we turned to *Elections in Africa* and *Psephos* as a means of triangulating on the 'correct' value. AED tended to match these other sources more often than IDEA.

Demographic Controls: As attested to in studies of other parts of the world, education tends to be positively correlated with voter turnout (Geys 2006, 653). *Literacy*, as a percentage of the total population is used here, as elsewhere (Schraufnagel and Sqouraki 2005), as a proxy for a better education system. Data were gathered from the *CIA World Factbook*. Literacy scores range from 10 percent (Senegal in 1988) to over 85 percent in Kenya during the 2000s. Across all cases there is a mean value of about 52 percent.

Population Density is used as a proxy for access to voting stations. Given the scattered, rural nature of many parts of Africa, it is expected that higher population densities make voting easier by reducing the distance necessary to travel to polling stations. The variable is measured as the number of people per square kilometer. Data were retrieved from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Density varies widely across Sub-Saharan Africa, with Gabon in the middle single digits (3.8 persons per square kilometer in 1993) and Burundi and Rwanda at the extreme high end with about 300 to 400 persons per square kilometer over the last decade.

Classic Controls: Three additional variables were included in the analysis as they are common control considerations in voter turnout studies. The first, *Concurrent Elections*, is a well-established and important control variable in the voter mobilization literature. Cox and Munger (1989) suggest that when the chief executive and the legislature are elected at the same time there is increased media attention and greater sums spent on campaigning and voter mobilization efforts (see also Geys 2006, 652). Moreover, others note, because voting is typically a fixed cost, 'an added election on the ballot spreads the cost of voting' (Carter 1984, 201n). A dummy variable is generated, scored '1' for concurrent elections, and the expectation is that the test will uncover a positive association with voter turnout. Data were obtained from the *African Elections Database* (2013).

Seminal Elections is another common control variable in analysis of cross-national variance in voter turnout. Previous work on turnout in Latin America and Eastern Europe has found much higher rates in seminal elections (Kostadinova and Power 2007). Specifically, we score an election as 'seminal' if it is the first competitive election following regime change. In many of these cases, individuals were granted the ability to choose between candidates from different political parties for the first time in a generation (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, 207). The ability to have a democratic voice, along with the novelty of the enterprise is likely to increase the rate of voter involvement relative to other elections. Elections are scored '1' when it is the first to occur after regime change or a switch from single-party to multi-party elections. Data were gathered from the *African Elections Database* (2013).

The final variable included in the model is a measure for the democratic character of the country in the year the election was held. We measure this using *Freedom House's* 'Political Rights' and 'Civil Liberty' scores, indicators that appear in other works of a similar genre (Fornos et al. 2004, 921; Burkhart and Lewis-Beck 1994; Helliwell 1994). Freedom House scores on each of the two dimensions range from 1 (mostly free) to 7 (least free), resulting in a scale that ranges from '2' to '14' when the indices are combined. The Freedom House score is intended to control for varying degrees of democratic penetration in countries at the time the election was held. The lowest score, indicating greater freedom, occurs in Ghana in both the 2008 and 2012 election cycles (a combined score of 3). Cameroon, with a total score of either 11 or 12 throughout the

study period, represents the other extreme. Others note that the degree of democracy, in general, is positively correlated with voter turnout (Blais 2000; Fornos et al. 2004; Schraufnagel and Sgouraki 2005, 48). Given the way the scale is operationalized, higher scores (less freedom) are expected to associate with a lower level of voter turnout.⁸ Put differently, the regression results are expected to produce a negative coefficient.

Results

Results of the regression analysis can be found in Table 2 (see appendix). Contrary to base expectations, former French colonies are witnessing greater voter turnout levels than former British colonies. Given the model configuration, with former British colonies establishing the baseline, we learn there has been about 13 percent greater voter turnout in French colonies, on average, all else being equal. One possible explanation is the longer history and greater number of state-managed elections in former French colonies prior to independence. Alternatively, the sample may be picking up the character of the regimes just prior to independence. Bratton and van de Walle note (1997) those countries which liberalized the most (perhaps prompting greater voter turnout) at the beginning of the latest wave of democratization were civilian-ruled single-party regimes, many of which were former French colonies (188). Given the surprising nature of this finding further study is justified. In the summary we will elaborate in more detail the two competing theoretical explanations just offered.

(Table 2 goes about here. See appendix)

Considering the other two colonizers in the analysis it can be noted both former Belgian colonies (Burundi and Rwanda) have witnessed lower voter turnout than the former French colonies after controlling for other factors, but also substantially lower voter turnout than former British colonies. The single former Portuguese colony (Mozambique) had lower voter turnout than the former French colonies; however, there is no statistical difference between voter turnout levels in Mozambique and former British colonies, all else being equal. Results regarding the former Belgian colonies (Burundi and Rwanda) are not surprising given recent history, which has included coups and in the case of Rwanda, genocidal civil war. The relative short or truncated democratic experience does not seem to have been sufficient to have legitimized the electoral process in a manner that would encourage widespread participation.

Both tests of ethnic and religious pluralism return statistically significant coefficients in the direction hypothesized; although the value of the coefficient for ethnic pluralism is double the size of the value for religious pluralism. Because these two variables are measured in the same manner it is possible to make this comparison. Substantively, the coefficient representing the effect of ethnic pluralism suggests that as the largest ethnic group grows in size by five percent (say from 70 to 75 percent) voter turnout will increase by about 1.5 percent ($.30 \times 5$), all else being equal. Considering religious pluralism, as the largest religious group shrinks in size (say from 65 to 60 percent)—indicating greater pluralism—there will be a corresponding increase in

⁸ A variable commonly used in cross-national tests of voter turnout is compulsory or mandatory voting. However, Gabon is the only country in our dataset with mandatory voting, and in Gabon the law is not enforced (IDEA). The lack of variation on this otherwise important consideration causes us to not include the variable in this analysis.

voter turnout of about .75 percent (.15 x 5), on average. Given the range of the religious pluralism variable is about 70 percent, the full range of the religious pluralism consideration is associated with about a 10.5 percent increase in voter turnout (70 x .15).

Results for literacy conform well to expectations, as does the population density consideration. The latter is strongly correlated with voter turnout ($r = .43$; $p < .001$) and in the multivariate testing it proves to be the variable most strongly linked, statistically, to voter turnout. Given much of Sub-Saharan Africa is rural; this finding has important policy implications. As noted above, it is assumed that population density is capturing something about the accessibility of polling stations. Hence, if increasing voter participation rates is a priority, one can imagine a concerted effort to make polling stations more geographically convenient might lead to higher turnout rates.

Two of the three classic control variables are statistically significant. Only the Freedom House consideration of democratic rights and liberties does not link, statistically, to voter turnout in the testing. It can be noted that a simple bivariate relationship is also not statistically significant ($r = .06$; $p < .60$). This finding could be the result of corruption, in the form of vote buying or the over-reporting of voting, in more authoritarian settings (APSA Workshop 2008; Nichter 2008). If voting irregularities are occurring in more authoritarian settings we would expect higher Freedom House scores (less openness) to comport with higher turnout values. Using this sample of elections, concurrent elections, which tend to increase voter awareness and interest, are associated with about 11 percent increase in voter turnout. Seminal elections, which may also associate with higher voter interest, are linked to an increase in voter turnout of about 10 percent, all else being equal.

Summary

This research tests a model of voter turnout, across a sample of Sub-Saharan African nation-states. This type of query only became possible following a significant turn toward consistent multi-party elections since the late 1980s and early 1990s (*see* Lancaster 1991-92). The relative normalcy of electoral processes has allowed this initial testing of factors theoretically linked to variance in voter turnout levels in Africa. Specifically, the research has been able to follow the line of work which has used a colonial legacy thesis to study democratic transitions in Africa, while controlling for ethnic and religious pluralism and other considerations that matter for voter turnout in other parts of the world. A primary contribution has been the finding that French colonies, after controlling for population density and other considerations, are associated with higher electoral participation rates than former British colonies.

Given the unexpected result regarding former French colonies additional scrutiny of the colonial legacy thesis seems warranted. There are two alternative theoretical arguments that can be found in existing literature that might help to elucidate the finding. First, it may be the case the longer duration and greater number of state-managed multi-party elections in former French colonies, prior to independence, is responsible for the finding. Lindberg (2006) has noted former French colonies' had seven multi-party elections prior to independence and that these experiences may have 'locked in' a kind of institutional memory that leads to contemporary acceptance of elections as a legitimate means of citizen control (112). Put differently, it may be that even when elections are not likely to have a substantive effect on the lives of people participating in them, their mere presence creates in these same people an appreciation for the process. If this is true, it causes one to wonder what other facets of democratic development might also be affected by *de*

jure electoral experiences.⁹ Complimenting this explanation is the unique way each set of former European colonies achieved independence. Former French colonies voted themselves independent via plebiscite (Gilbert and Reynolds 2008). This experience alone might be shaping subsequent citizen judgment of electoral legitimacy.

We must also consider the contentions of Bratton and van de Walle (1997) who suggest the type of regime change can influence subsequent democratic outcomes. They note during the most recent switches from single-party to multi-party elections in Africa it was the subset of moderately exclusionary authoritarian regimes which liberalized the most. Countries that had broader multi-party experiences liberalized less, and military authoritarian regimes democratized more in law than in fact. Put differently, the middle range of countries, civilian single-party regimes, witnessed the greatest liberalization and made the largest leaps toward democratization. When protests grew in the 1980s, the next step for many of the middle-range regimes, if they hoped to remain in power, was more legitimate multi-party elections (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, 187-88). Importantly, for our purposes there is a match between many of the former French colonies in our sample and those nation-states that Bratton and van de Walle characterize as civilian single-party systems.

It is also important for us to reiterate our supporting findings regarding ethnic fractionalization. Early researchers on this topic likely are not surprised by our finding that lower voter turnout occurs under conditions of greater ethnic diversity. Others note, fractionalization associates with more ethnic based political parties and more difficult elections. Electoral violence under conditions of ethnic diversity is often the norm. This study is suggesting that perhaps moderates, people less enamored by politics, and others with justifiable fears related to electoral violence are less likely to show themselves at polling stations when ethno-political rivalry is salient. If corroborated this finding suggests the need for political parties that cut across ethnic cleavages. It has long been argued that the factional basis of political parties, whether based on ethnicity, class, religion, or geography has important implications for democratic development (La Palombara and Weiner 1966; on Nigeria see Jinadu 1985).

Interestingly, we find that increased religious diversity may lead to higher voter turnout. This is not to suggest that political parties should be based on religious affiliations. Instead, our suspicions, based on previous research (Fish 2002), are that when a single religion dominates a country that citizen loyalty is to their religion and not the political process. It is reasonable to assume there is some critical level or cut point that might cause a country's citizens, in the aggregate, to tip toward an apolitical posture that decreases the salience and value of elections. Indeed, when we test a dummy variable scored one when religious pluralism was lower than .20, suggesting the dominant religion has over 80 percent of the population as members, voter turnout is over 10 percent lower, on average, a finding that is stronger than what we obtained when preserving the full range of the religious pluralism variable.

Finally, the suite of control variables incorporated into the model delivered results as expected. Only, the combined Freedom House score proved less substantial than one would expect. A more authoritarian political posture is not statistically linked to less voter turnout. The effect of fewer civil liberties and civil rights might be dampened by vote buying and election

⁹ Anderson and Dodd (2005) in their work on democratic transition in Nicaragua suggest there is something akin to 'democratic learning' that takes place in the earliest stages of democratic development that can translate into thoughtful and meaningful electoral outcomes.

rigging in more authoritarian settings (APSA Workshop 2008; Nichter 2008). The importance of our finding related to the control variables population density, literacy, concurrent elections, and seminal elections should not be overlooked. What these findings suggest is that for all intents and purposes, voter turnout in this sample of African elections, on some level, is as predictable as it is in other parts of the world. Using the same control variables that others find important in desperate cultural and geographic contexts we find statistically significant relationships. In particular, our finding regarding population density is not only consistent with previous literature (Schraufnagel and Sgouraki 2005) but also points to a possible policy solution for raising voter turnout levels: more geographically convenient polling stations.

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Appendix

Table 1.

Countries and Years Included in the Analysis: Including Former Colonizer and Average Turnout Value

Country	Colonizer	Years Included	Avg. Turnout of VAP
Benin	France	1991, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2011	70%
Botswana	Britain	1989, 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009	48%
Burkina Faso	France	1991, 1992, 1997, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2012	35%
Burundi	Belgium	2005, 2010	65%
Cameroon	France	1988, 1992, 1997, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2011	49%
Gabon	France	1993, 1995, 1998, 2005, 2009, 2011	43%
Gambia	Britain	1996, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2012	48%
Ghana	Britain	1992 (2), 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012	66%
Kenya	Britain	1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2013	48%
Malawi	Britain	1993, 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009	75%
Mozambique	Portugal	1994, 1999, 2004, 2009	51%
Rwanda	Belgium	2003, 2008, 2010	92%
Senegal	France	1988, 1993 (2), 1998, 2000, 2001, 2007 (2), 2012 (2)	36%
Tanzania	Britain	1995, 2000, 2005, 2010	52%
Togo	France	1992, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010	80%

Table 2.

Turnout of Voting Age Population in 15 Select African Nation-States: Multi-Party Elections, 1988-2013

Generalized Least Squares Regression for Cross-Sectional Time-Series Data

Colonial Power (Britain omitted):	Exp. Sign	Coefficient (robust s.e.)
France	-	13.01 (4.02)***
Belgium	-	-55.76(11.25)***
Portugal	-	-6.71 (8.17)
<i>Key Considerations:</i>		
Ethnic Pluralism	-	-.30(.06) ***
Religious Pluralism	+	.15 (.08) *
<i>Demographic Controls:</i>		
Population Density	+	.28 (.05) ***
% Population Literate	+	.22 (.09) **
<i>Classic Controls:</i>		
Concurrent Election	+	11.31 (5.22) *
Seminal Election	+	9.80 (4.22)*
Freedom House (combined)	-	-.97 (.74)
Constant		27.14 (6.97) ***
Wald Chi ²		6915.32 ***
R ² (overall)		.55
n		92

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; † $p < .10$ (one-tailed tests)

Note: Standard errors clustered around 15 country values.



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