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Abstract

Canvassing is an important way in which political parties around the world raise awareness and connect with voters. Despite this, the literature on parties in new democracies, and Africa in particular, has tended to overlook this form of activity, focusing instead on vote buying, mass rallies, and meetings. In this paper, we use public opinion survey data from Afrobarometer and the Comparative National Elections Project to show that overall rates of canvassing in Africa are similar to other new, as well as many established, democracies. The data also challenge several dominant views of party campaigns in the Africanist literature. First, African parties do not concentrate primarily on turning out their base, rather than reaching across the partisan divide. Indeed, the opposite is the case. African parties expend more energy contacting nonpartisan independents and cross-partisans, and thus make a potentially meaningful contribution to the supply of multiparty competition. Second, the vast majority of contacts occur without any clientelist exchanges of material goods between parties and individual voters. And third, while incumbent parties enjoy canvassing advantages over opposition parties in around one-third of the surveyed countries, opposition parties (viewed collectively) match the party in power in terms of the ground game in another third, and enjoy higher rates of contact in yet another third.

At the country level, we find that people are more likely to be contacted in societies with higher rates of grassroots party structures. While parties are more likely to canvass citizens who live in neighbourhoods with good roads, they also contact at higher rates in rural, less developed, and more violent and less secure neighbourhoods. Within these neighbourhoods, parties are likely to contact citizens who are more visible in terms of their participation in community-level politics. Finally, while parties contact people who are already more likely to vote, we show that contact increases the odds of voting even further, by around one-third.

Introduction

Political parties are said to provide solutions to a number of functional needs of democratic political systems. One important role is to advance the process of representation by aggregating individual preferences and interests and vertically linking citizens with their elected officials. This helps provide accountability by giving voters an effective choice between alternative sets of candidates, policies, and values in regular elections and enabling voters to reward or punish incumbent legislators and executive leaders.

One of the main methods that political parties have traditionally used to engage voters and motivate them to vote and, crucially, to vote for them is by contacting voters directly through activities such as face-to-face canvassing, local meetings, and large mass attendance rallies. While the growth of mass media has arguably led parties to de-emphasise "ground game" strategies and prioritise the use of radio and television advertising and news coverage (the "air game") to contact larger numbers of voters more efficiently, the importance of personal contacting has never disappeared. Indeed, in the United States, the ground game has assumed renewed importance, if only to track voter sentiment and ensure that supporters actually get to the polls on Election Day (Beck & Gunther, 2016).

Yet scholars of African politics have often claimed that African political parties perform few if any of these functions, or have at least questioned the quality with which they do so (see Krönke, Lockwood, & Mattes (2024) for a review of this literature). Scholars have questioned the ability of parties to engage voters, in particular. First, parties are generally thought to be organisationally weak (Randall & Svåsand, 2002). Second, to the extent that some parties do have real organisational capacity, it is seen as the result of governing parties' ability to exploit the advantages of incumbency, often via clientelism and patronage (Bleck & van de Walle, 2013; Koter, 2013). Third, because of the long-held assumption that Africans base their vote on ethnic, religious, or regional loyalties, party campaigns are assumed to fall along sectarian lines (Horowitz, 1985). And fourth, flowing from these prior assumptions, election campaigns are seen as exercises in mobilisation, often achieved by striking deals with local brokers to deliver blocs of votes through patronage, vote buying, or violent intimidation, rather than persuasion (Koter, 2016; Nathan, 2019a; Rauschenbach, 2015; Taden, Banini, & Kingsley, 2023).

However, most of these generalisations are based on studies of one or a small number of cases, usually conducted in countries with single-member districts (e.g. Kramon, 2020; Brierley & Kramon, 2020; Conroy-Krutz, 2016). Larger comparative studies rarely include more than a handful of cases from Africa (Basedau & Stroh, 2008) or from the Global South in general.[1] Thus, we actually know relatively little about the *frequency* with which Africa's political parties engage in this vital activity (Brierley & Kramon, 2020), *whom* parties approach, and whether it *matters*. But we need to understand these dynamics because the ways in which parties engage with voters has critical implications for new democracies. To take just one example, whether parties directly connect with co-partisans, cross-partisans, or independent nonpartisans shapes not only the quality of multiparty competition, but also the level of accountability pressures and future competition.

In this paper, we draw on data from 33 African countries surveyed in Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2021) as well as cross-continental public opinion data from the Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP) to put African efforts into a larger comparative context. The first part of the paper proceeds as follows. First, we provide evidence about party capacity in Africa by examining the overall frequency with which parties contact voters in election campaigns and how this compares to other world regions. Second, we shed light on party strategies by examining whether parties focus on mobilising co-partisans, persuading nonpartisans, or

[1] See Karp & Banducci, 2007; Karp, 2012; and Magalhães, Aldrich, & Gibson, 2018, who all rely on Comparative Study of Electoral Systems surveys that mostly focus on post-communist countries as new democracies.

converting cross-partisans, and we also provide evidence about the extent to which personal contacting includes the distribution of material incentives in the form of gifts. And third, we assess incumbency advantages by measuring the extent to which voters report being contacted by governing vs. opposition parties.

In the second section, we focus on the question of why some people are more likely to be contacted than others. We make use of macro data on factors such as national wealth, electoral systems, and communications infrastructure. We then examine the factors within countries that lead parties to contact some voters and not others. At the neighbourhood level, we collect data on factors such as physical infrastructure (e.g. roads) to measure how *accessible* communities are to party campaigns. And at the individual level, we measure factors such as citizens' levels of local political engagement to estimate their *visibility* to local party campaign managers.

We end, in the third section, by examining whether canvassing matters. Specifically, we examine whether those citizens who were canvassed by a political party during the campaign are more likely to turn out to vote, controlling for a variety of other factors.

To summarise our findings, across 33 countries we find that political parties contacted an average 24% of potential voters at least once during the most recent election campaign preceding Round 8 surveys between July 2019 and July 2021. Perhaps surprisingly, 7% were contacted by multiple parties. At the same time, we find tremendous variation within Africa, ranging from more than one-half of voters contacted in Botswana (55%) to fewer than one in 20 in Namibia (4%).

By exploring similar questions in CNEP post-election surveys, we also find that African political parties, on average, engage in canvassing at rates similar to the rest of the world.

The data also challenge several dominant views of political party campaigns in the Africanist literature.

First, African parties do not concentrate primarily on turning out their base, rather than reaching across the partisan divide. Indeed, the opposite is the case. Just 11% of all citizens were contacted by the party with which they identified; 10% were contacted by a different party, and a further 10% of nonpartisans were also contacted. Taken as a whole, African parties expend more energy contacting independents and non-co-partisan supporters, and thus meaningfully contribute to the supply of multiparty competition.

Second, the vast majority of contacts occur without any clientelist exchanges. There is evidence that parties sometimes use material incentives such as food, gifts, or money when they approach voters during their canvassing efforts. However, just 21% of those who were contacted received a gift (excluding those who also attended a rally or worked for a party). Thus, most of the time, parties contact potential voters without also providing material incentives.

And third, we find that the extent of the incumbency advantage, at least in terms of organisational capacity to canvass voters, is modest at best, and varies substantially across Africa. While incumbent parties enjoy canvassing advantages over opposition parties in around one-third of the surveyed countries, opposition parties – at least in the aggregate – match the party in power in terms of the ground game in another third, and indeed collectively have higher rates of contact in yet another third.

At the country level, we find that people are more likely to be contacted in societies where parties have more extensive grassroots party structures. At the neighbourhood level, parties do not necessarily shy away from campaigning in less accessible areas. While parties are more likely to canvass citizens who live in neighbourhoods with good roads, they also contact at higher rates in rural, less developed, and more violent and less secure neighbourhoods. Within these neighbourhoods, parties are likely to contact citizens who are more visible because they are active in terms of local politics.

Finally, we find that canvassing matters. While parties contact people who are already more interested in and engaged in politics (and by extension, more likely to vote), we find that contact increases the odds of voting even further, by around one-third. In other words, politically engaged citizens who are contacted during an election campaign are more likely to vote than engaged citizens who are not contacted. The implication is clear: Unless parties develop ways to extend their canvassing operations to contact less-visible citizens, the gaps in electoral participation are likely to widen further.

Through these findings, we make several contributions to the literature on political parties and election campaigns in Africa. First, we build on other recent studies that challenge the presumed weakness of political parties in Africa (Basedau & Stroh, 2008; Krönke et al., 2022; Lockwood, Krönke, & Mattes, 2022; Paget, 2022; Wahman, 2017) and the Global South (Auerbach, 2019; Thachil, 2016), as well as the supposed focus on mobilisation over persuasion (e.g. similar to Horowitz, 2016).

Second, while the literature on the determinants of canvassing is well-developed in the American context, far less work has been done elsewhere (Nyman, 2017; Brierley & Kramon, 2020). We therefore provide new insights into whether the same macro-level factors matter in established and new democracies. We also present important new micro-level evidence about the importance of accessibility and visibility of citizens to parties. This builds on recent studies that highlight how neighbourhood-level variation affects electoral politics (e.g. Auerbach & Thachil, 2018, 2020; Brierley & Nathan, 2021; Nathan, 2019b) and is particularly important in contexts where parties have less access to high-quality information about their voters through detailed and up-to-date voter registers or survey data.

And finally, our findings suggest important considerations in light of the likely profound impacts of ongoing technological shifts in how parties learn about voter affiliations and preferences and how they contact them. Scholars and voter-education advocates would do well to help develop information-technology applications that enable parties to contact those people who are ordinarily less visible and combat the polarising effect of micro-targeted voting appeals.

How extensive is election canvassing in Africa?

For most of this analysis, we rely on data from Afrobarometer (2023) Round 8. These public opinion survey data were collected across 33 countries between July 2019 and July 2021. (While Round 8 was carried out in 34 countries, the question on canvassing was not asked in Eswatini.)

In Round 8, for the first time, Afrobarometer asked respondents whether they were canvassed in the last election and by whom:

- *Thinking about the last national election in [20XX], did any representative of a political party contact you during the campaign?* (Yes; No; Refused to answer; Don't know)
- *If someone from a political party contacted you, which party were they from?* (Interviewer recorded the party that contacted the respondent, multiple mentions possible)

On average, one-quarter (24%) of all respondents said they had been contacted by a representative of at least one political party. By way of comparison, 35% said they had attended a campaign rally in the most recent election campaign (and 16% did both). Thus, the personal-contact dimension of electoral canvassing is a reasonably frequent activity in Africa. That continental average, however, masks an extremely large degree of cross-national variation. About one-half or more of all voters were personally contacted by a political party during the most recent election campaigns in Botswana (55%), Sierra Leone (52%), and Uganda (49%). But parties contacted far fewer citizens in Tanzania (12%), Ethiopia (7%), and Namibia (4%) (Figure 1).

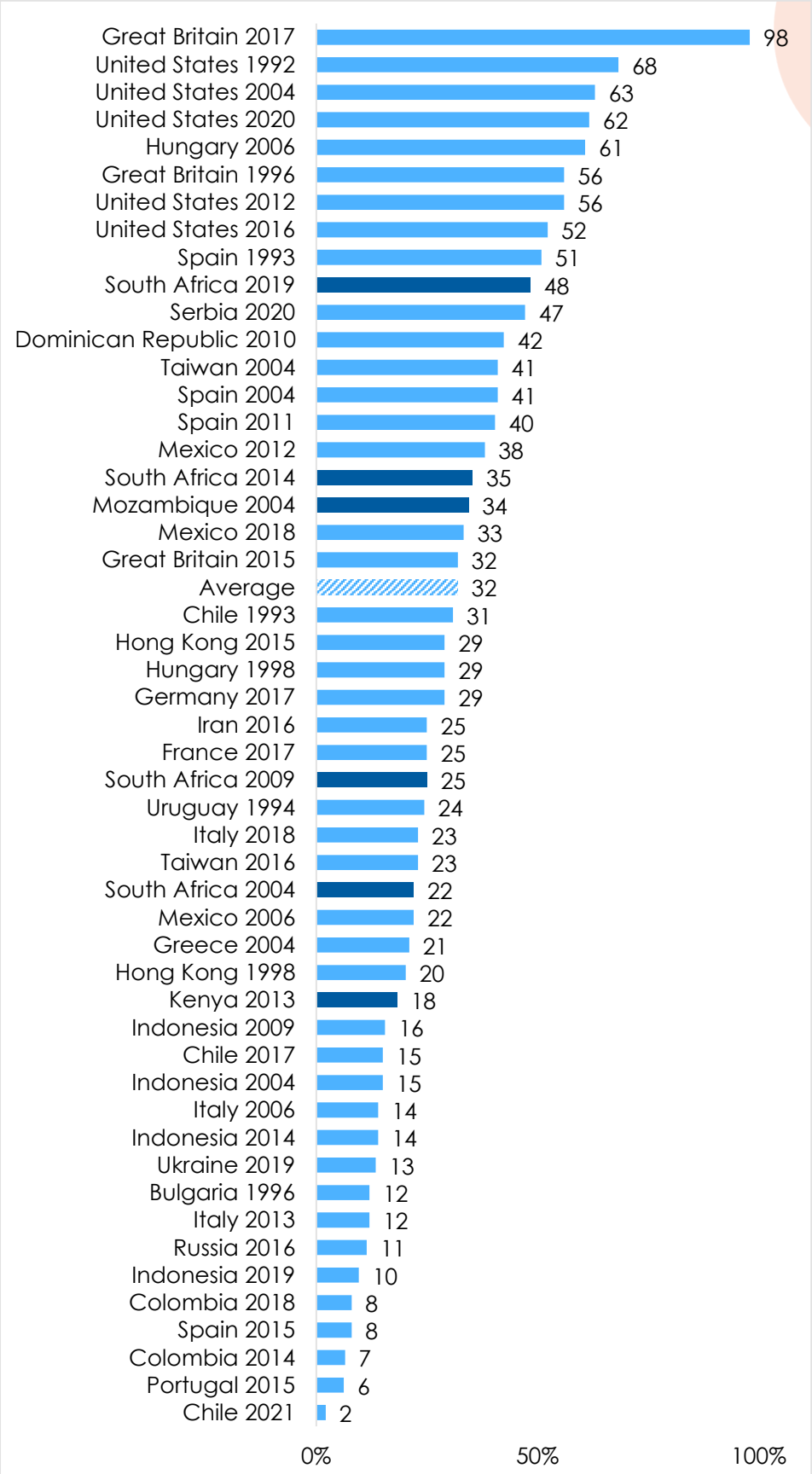
Figure 1: Political party canvassing rates (%) | 33 countries | 2019/2021

Respondents were asked: *Thinking about the last national election in [20XX], did any representative of a political party contact you during the campaign? Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 surveys.*

We can gain some purchase toward a cross-continental perspective by turning to data from the Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP). Asking a similar question in 51 post-election surveys conducted in 26 countries across five continents since 1992, including Kenya, Mozambique, and South Africa, these surveys find that an average of 32% of citizens report having been contacted during the previous election campaign (Figure 2). This proportion remains constant regardless of whether the African cases are included or excluded.

The numbers reported in Figure 2 sum all responses to a series of questions in the CNEP questionnaire about a range of contact types, including a personal visit, post, telephone, SMS, and e-mail. But given the wording of the Afrobarometer question, we assume that most if not all contacts reported to Afrobarometer interviewers were face to face. Triangulating the Afrobarometer and CNEP results provides support for this assumption. Iin the 2021 Afrobarometer survey in South Africa, 19% report being contacted during the 2019 election campaign. In the 2019 CNEP post-election survey in that country, 49% report being contacted, but the proportion citing a face-to-face contact was exactly the same as the Afrobarometer result: 19%. And if we look only at face-to-face contacts, the average rate across the CNEP surveys is 17%, just slightly lower than the Afrobarometer average of 24%.

Figure 2: Canvassing rates across the world



Source: CNEP. Note: Dark-blue bars indicate African countries.

Is campaign canvassing in Africa just an exercise in mobilisation and vote buying?

As mentioned in the introduction, many scholars assume that election campaigns in Africa are mainly exercises in herding loyal supporters to the polls or buying citizens' votes through material exchanges. However, recent empirical research suggests that there are important limits to the effectiveness of these strategies for campaign participation (Jöst, Krönke, Lockwood, & Lust, 2023) and vote choice (Kao, Lust, & Rakner, 2022).

After asking respondents whether they had been contacted, Afrobarometer fieldworkers asked people for the identities of the party or parties that had contacted them. The results suggest that it is true that African parties are more likely to contact partisans (e.g. those who say they "feel close to" a specific party) than nonpartisans (35% vs. 16%). But the more important part of this question concerns whether parties contact *their own* partisans (co-partisans) more frequently than those who identify with other political parties. To answer this question, we compare the name of the party by which they were contacted with the name of the party with which they said they identified.

We categorise a contact as an attempt at ***mobilisation*** when a political party canvasses someone who already identifies with that party. We classify a contact as an exercise in ***persuasion*** when it canvasses someone who does not identify with any party. And we label a contact as part of a strategy of ***conversion*** when a party contacts someone who identifies with some other political party.

Overall, we find that while 24% of all respondents across all countries were contacted at least once by a party, just 11% can be classified as "mobilisation" attempts where parties canvassed their own co-partisans. Similar levels of canvassing were recorded as "persuasion" contacts (10%) with nonpartisans and "conversion" contacts (10%) with cross-partisans. (This sums to more than the 24% who report any contact because many people report being contacted by more than one party.)

In Table 1 we display the balance of mobilising vs. persuading and converting contacts across 33 African countries. Again, we find considerable cross-national variation. The substantial number of countries in which we predominantly observe persuasion is perhaps surprising given the current assumptions of the literature. We can observe four broad patterns:

- *Mobilising* contacts are most frequent in six countries (by at least a 4-percentage-point difference), including Mali, Guinea, and Nigeria.
- *Persuasion* contacts are prevalent in eight countries, including Cabo Verde and Mauritius.
- *Conversion* contacts are most frequent in four countries (Botswana, Zambia, Senegal, and Niger)
- No specific strategy is prevalent in 15 countries, including Sierra Leone, Uganda, Benin, Ghana, and Gabon.

There are at least two possible interpretations of these results. On one hand, assuming that African parties have accurate information about the partisan leanings of a particular neighbourhood or specific households before they enter, the fact that they expend a great deal of resources talking to nonpartisans and cross-partisans suggests that they believe that voting preferences are fluid and that they are genuinely interested in the possibilities of persuasion and conversion. On the other hand, if African parties do not possess accurate information about the partisan affiliation of the person who opens the door (Brierley & Nathan, 2021), visits with nonpartisans and cross-partisans may be "accidental contacts."

Table 1: Canvassing rates (%) | by type of contact | 33 countries | 2019/2021

	Mobilising contacts (with co-partisans)	Persuasion contacts (with nonpartisans)	Conversion contacts (with cross-partisans)
Mali	**19**	6	8
Guinea	**17**	6	5
Nigeria	**15**	7	7
Togo	**14**	9	4
Kenya	**13**	9	5
Liberia	**11**	7	5
Cabo Verde	**13**	**25**	**13**
Mauritius	8	**17**	**12**
Malawi	8	**12**	8
Morocco	6	**12**	2
South Africa	5	**11**	6
Sudan	4	**12**	5
Tunisia	2	9	2
Ethiopia	1	**12**	6
Botswana	**24**	**16**	**29**
Zambia	8	9	**14**
Senegal	2	**13**	**22**
Niger	1	7	**18**
Sierra Leone	**37**	9	**37**
Uganda	**30**	7	**25**
Benin	**15**	**13**	8
Ghana	**14**	9	**11**
Gabon	**14**	**16**	4
Zimbabwe	**10**	3	9
Mozambique	**10**	9	5
Lesotho	9	**11**	**10**
Cameroon	9	7	6
Côte d'Ivoire	9	7	7
Tanzania	8	3	4
Burkina Faso	7	5	2
Angola	7	**10**	7
Gambia	7	4	7
Namibia	3	1	4
Average	11	10	10

Numbers are row percentages. Numbers in bold indicate national contact rates above 10%.
Source: Afrobarometer

It is also possible that these campaign contacts are characterised predominantly by the provision of handouts or gifts to voters, rather than the exchange of information between party representatives and citizens. Indeed, the distribution of election campaign handouts has received a great deal of attention in the literature (Lindberg, 2003; Bratton, 2008; Kramon, 2018; Vicente, 2014). Yet handouts have rarely been measured in connection with canvassing.

To test this possibility, we first look to the results of a separate 2012 election survey in Ghana carried out by Sarah Brierley and Eric Kramon (2020), which found that the then-ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) distributed material handouts to 13% of respondents, while the opposition New Patriotic Party handed out gifts to 8%. Importantly, the share of citizens who received handouts was far lower than the 30% of respondents who were

canvassed by parties.[2] Moreover, using panel data on Zambian citizens, Krönke (2023) finds that party activists spend significantly more campaign time exchanging information with citizens than providing material goods.

We can also turn to a separate question on handouts from Afrobarometer Round 8 to analyse this issue across our sample countries. Respondents were asked:

> *"During the last national election in 20XX, how often, if ever, did a candidate or someone from a political party offer you something, like food, a gift, or money, in return for your vote?"*

Overall, one out of five respondents (19%) said that a party representative had offered them a gift at least once during the previous national election campaign (including 9% who said this happened more than once). Other than simply being approached at the polling place on Election Day, there are three mechanisms by which such an offer might be made: (1) when parties come to people's homes to canvass; (2) when citizens attend a party campaign rally; or (3) when citizens work for a candidate or party.

While 19% of all respondents reported being offered a gift, the figure is considerably higher among those who worked for a campaign (34%), attended a rally (28%), or were canvassed by a party representative (31%). However, many people who are canvassed also attend a rally or work for a candidate, making it hard to isolate on which occasion the handout was offered. Thus, to obtain a cleaner estimate of the extent to which canvassing comprises vote buying, we examine those respondents who were canvassed but exclude those who also worked for a campaign or attended a rally. Here we find that only 21% of respondents who were canvassed but did not attend a rally or work for a candidate were offered a gift. Thus, eight out of 10 of these contacts took place *without* any exchange of gifts (see Table 2). Moreover, we should not automatically infer that where gifts were offered, these consisted only of nefarious ploys such as cash handouts; they could also include a free ride to the polling place or clothing, such as a T-shirt or a hat, that ultimately serves the purpose of the party by generating free advertising.

Table 2: Citizens were offered gifts (%) | by type of party engagement | 33 countries | 2019/2021

Offered gift	All voters	Worked for campaign	Attended rally	Canvassed	Canvassed but no campaign work/no rally
No	81	66	72	69	79
Yes	19	34	28	31	21
N	39,601	39,600	39,600	39,600	24,302

Figures are column percentages. Source: Afrobarometer

Is there an "incumbency advantage" in African campaign canvassing?

Another bit of common wisdom about political party organisations and their ability to conduct large-scale election campaigns is that governing parties enjoy substantial advantages over opposition parties. Because of weak or non-existent separation of state and partisan interests, so the argument goes, governing parties take advantage of their control of the state and use a wide range of official resources for campaign purposes,

[2] Responses from a country-specific question fielded in Round 5 of Afrobarometer in Ghana reveal that citizens perceive party activists to spend far more time advocating for their party's policies and plans (22%) than providing handouts to citizens (7%) (Afrobarometer, 2012; Brierley & Kramon, 2020). Respondents were asked: "In your opinion, which three main activities would you say grassroots political party activists (or foot soldiers) primarily engage themselves in during election campaigns and elections?"

including personnel, computers, communications technology, buildings, vehicles, and state-run news media (Basedau & Stroh, 2008; Southall, 2016).

To test this hypothesis, we disaggregate reported contacts depending on whether the contacting party was a governing or opposition party (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of the parties we define as governing parties). In apparent contrast to the common wisdom, across the full 33-country sample, 14% of all respondents report contact by a governing party, while 15% report contact by an opposition party (this sums to more than the 24% who reported any contact because many people reported being contacted by more than one party).

But the picture becomes more complex once we examine the ratio of governing-opposition party contacts within each country (Table 3).

Table 3: Canvassing rates (%) | by ruling vs. opposition parties | 33 countries | 2019/2021

	Contacted by governing party	Contacted by opposition party/ies	Incumbent advantage (percentage points)
Uganda	**41**	**21**	+20
Gabon	**23**	9	+14
Senegal	**27**	14	+13
Togo	19	6	+13
Mozambique	17	4	+13
Cameroon	14	7	+7
Tanzania	11	4	+7
Angola	11	5	+6
Guinea	16	11	+5
Zambia	15	10	+5
Niger	14	10	+4
Zimbabwe	11	7	+4
Ethiopia	5	1	+4
Kenya	14	11	+3
Namibia	2	1	+1
Morocco	10	9	+1
South Africa	11	10	+1
Mauritius	17	17	0
Nigeria	14	14	0
Gambia	7	7	0
Cabo Verde	**33**	**35**	-2
Lesotho	13	17	-4
Ghana	12	17	-5
Sierra Leone	**41**	**47**	-6
Benin	16	**22**	-6
Malawi	5	12	-7
Tunisia	<1	9	-9
Liberia	7	16	-9
Sudan	2	13	-11
Botswana	18	**52**	-24
Côte d'Ivoire	4	**35**	-29
Mali	0	**36**	-36
Average	14	15	-1

Figures are row percentages. Figures in bold indicate national contact rates above 20%.
Source: Afrobarometer

Conforming to typical expectations, governing parties enjoy substantial relative advantages in Uganda, Gabon, Senegal, Togo, and Mozambique. At the same time, there is virtually no difference in government vs. opposition canvassing (in the aggregate) in seven countries (Namibia, Morocco, South Africa, Mauritius, Nigeria, the Gambia, and Cabo Verde). And in sharp contrast to expectations, opposition parties (again, collectively) enjoy canvassing advantages in 11 countries, including a substantial edge in Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali.

Are there any important differences in government vs. opposition strategies (Table 4)? More than half of all contacts initiated by governing parties were aimed at opposition identifiers (25%) or nonpartisans (36%). Almost one in five opposition-initiated contacts were with governing party identifiers (17%), and one-third were with independents (35%). Furthermore, a majority (54%) of the opposition party identifiers contacted by an opposition party were contacted by a *different* opposition party. This poses a strong challenge to the dominant view that parties in Africa rarely cross partisan lines. It also suggests that opposition parties do canvass at much higher rates than previously expected. This is encouraging for the development of multiparty politics and the growth of elections as a contest of ideas rather than an assertion of partisan, ethnic, racial, or religious identities.

Table 4: All party contacts (%) | by partisanship | 33 countries | 2019/2021

	Overall	Governing party contacts	Opposition party contacts
Governing party identifiers	27	39	17
Nonpartisans	36	36	35
Opposition party identifiers	37	25	48
N	9,502	5,334	5,666

Figures are column percentages. Source: Afrobarometer

Whom do parties contact?

Thus far we have found that while there is wide variation across countries, African parties frequently contact substantial numbers of voters during election campaigns. Moreover, canvassing is not simply an exercise in mobilisation or vote buying. And governing parties do not necessarily enjoy a large advantage over opposition parties, taken as a whole. Thus, canvassing seems to be an important part of African elections as an exercise in democracy.

In this section, we analyse prominent macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors that make parties more likely to contact voters in some countries than others and, within countries, to contact some potential voters and not others. We briefly describe the hypothesised relationships of these factors as well as the measures we employ to operationalise them.

National- or collective-level factors

Based on the comparative literature, we expect that parties are more likely to canvass voters in countries with higher levels of societal and organisational capacity. At its broadest, political parties in wealthier countries might be expected to have access to the resources that enable them to canvass larger shares of the population. We test this using *GDP per capita* (five-year average prior to survey fieldwork). We also hypothesise that parties are more likely to canvass voters where they can contact larger proportions of voters efficiently (with the least effort). If larger shares of the population live in *urban* areas, it might be easier for parties to contact citizens in person. We test this using the share of the total population

that lives in urban areas (World Bank Group, 2024). Similarly, in countries with more extensive and higher-*quality road networks*, party workers would have an easier time travelling to different communities, and thus we would expect to find higher levels of canvassing. To estimate this, we employ aggregated Afrobarometer data on the quality of enumeration area roads.

Another important element of societal capacity is the extent of mass communications infrastructure. But in this case, we expect to find a depressing effect on canvassing. Where parties can rely on other means to engage voters, they might be less likely to engage in canvassing. Thus, we capture the potential for a campaign "air game" by using Afrobarometer data on average *news consumption* via radio (the most common mass medium across Africa) at the country level.

Moreover, all else being equal, we expect political parties to face fewer obstacles to campaigning in *freer* societies. We measure the level of democracy by taking the five-year average of a country's Freedom House (2025) score prior to fieldwork (0=not free, 6=free).

It is also possible that canvassing will be shaped by a series of political factors. We might expect different canvassing rates depending on the electoral system type. *Single-member districts* (SMD) should create incentives for local legislative candidates to take responsibility for organising campaigns, and thus result in higher levels of canvassing. To test this hypothesis, we employ two measures, both drawing on the V-Dem data set (Coppedge et al., 2022; Pemstein et al., 2022). First, we create a dummy variable to capture the difference between countries with SMD systems and all others (SMD system=1, 0 otherwise). Second, we use the *average district magnitude* of each country.

For the same reason, we also expect that *parliamentary systems* will have higher levels of canvassing. In these contexts, local candidates have greater personal incentives to fund and organise campaigns. In contrast, where there is a nationally elected presidential candidate on the ballot in each constituency, local legislative candidates might be more willing to sit back and let their presidential candidate take responsibility for turning out voters. We might also expect to see higher rates of overall canvassing in political systems with higher rates of electoral competition across a wider range of parties. To test this hypothesis, we employ the widely used *effective number of electoral parties* measure.

Irrespective of the levels of national wealth, political parties might be able to develop and sustain significant levels of organisational capacity at the grass-roots level. Organising face-to-face canvassing initiatives requires political parties to develop a substantial local presence, which is both time-consuming and costly. This presence can vary, ranging from official branch offices to party-branded sheds (Bob-Milliar, 2019), or it could be more informal, with local brokers organising local activities. To measure this, we use the *Party Presence Index* (PPI) developed by Krönke, Lockwood, and Mattes (2022). We use Afrobarometer Round 7 data. This has the double advantage of introducing a time lag as well as avoiding endogeneity because we rely on separate sets of Afrobarometer respondents.

From this wide array of potential explanatory macro-level variables, only three exhibit a statistically significant relationship with national-level rates of contacting (Table 5). National wealth, low district magnitude, and more extensive levels of local party organisation have higher rates of canvassing. These three factors account for 31.2% of the national-level variation in canvassing.

Table 5: National-level covariates of party contacts | OLS regression

	Unstandardised coefficient	Standardised coefficient	Significance
Constant	.025		.750
GDP per capita	.000	.420	.020
Average district magnitude	-.003	-.385	.026
Party Presence Index	.415	.473	.008
R^2	.		.312
Countries			30

Note: Eswatini excluded due to missing dependent variable. Angola, Liberia, and Sudan excluded due to missing independent variables.

Neighbourhood-level factors

What explains why political parties contact some citizens and not others *within* each country (Table 6)? As noted earlier, most scholars of African politics see political parties in Africa as organisationally weak, with few of the resources that parties enjoy in more developed societies, such as direct mail, phone banks for large numbers of systematic telephonic contacts, or localised data from targeted survey research to guide canvassing operations. These weaknesses are exacerbated by the exigencies of African geography and level of development, with relatively large and often remote rural populations, large urban informal housing areas, and relatively underdeveloped transportation networks. In some countries, some villages or neighbourhoods are also plagued by criminal or partisan violence, perpetrated by figures who then act as local gatekeepers, advantaging some parties and creating "no-go" areas for others (Wahman, 2023). Thus, one important factor that helps discriminate between the canvassed and non-canvassed is simply that some citizens may be more "reachable" than others.

To understand these dynamics, we develop a measure of *neighbourhood accessibility* that tests three potential indicators of the physical location of different sets of citizens within a country that may make them easier or harder to contact. It includes whether a respondent lives in an urban or rural enumeration area (EA), the quality of roads in and leading to the EA,[3] and whether the respondents' household is connected to the kinds of services provided by local state infrastructure.[4] We also test the effect of *neighbourhood vulnerability*, which includes the Afrobarometer Lived Poverty Index and whether respondents say they fear crime and violence in their neighbourhood, fear political violence in their neighbourhood, and fear campaign violence and intimidation, which we expect to result in lower rates of contact.[5]

[3] This index consists of Afrobarometer fieldworker observations about whether the previous five kilometres of road was paved and in good condition and whether the road at the survey start point was paved.

[4] This index measures whether the respondent's household has access to electricity, water, and sewerage on the property.

[5] This index measures whether respondents feared crime in their home or felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood during the previous 12 months

Table 6: Predicting party contacts (all respondents) | 30 countries | 2019/2021

	Country		National		Demographic*		Neighbourhood		Individual		Combined	
Intercept	**-1.224**	**.000**	**-2.345**	**.001**	**-3.395**	**.001**	**-4.114**	**.000**	**-4.295**	**.000**	**-4.434**	**.000**
National-level factors												
National wealth			**1.000**	**.002**	**1.000**	**.026**	**1.000**	**.019**	**1.000**	**.006**	**1.000**	**.005**
Average district magnitude			**.979**	**.001**	**.979**	**.001**	**.978**	**.001**	**.977**	**.000**	**.976**	**.001**
Grassroots party presence			**8.744**	**.001**	**9.934**	**.011**	**8.815**	**.012**	2.896	.296	2.856	.287
Neighbourhood accessibility												
EA urban							**.754**	**.001**			1.008	.908
EA good roads							**1.125**	**.010**			**1.237**	**.000**
HH services							**.806**	**.010**			.963	.670
Neighbourhood vulnerability												
Lived poverty							**1.402**	**.017**			1.272	.165
Fear of crime							**1.067**	**.003**			**1.066**	**.013**
Fear of political violence							**1.288**	**.001**			**1.192**	**.000**
Fear of electoral violence							1.069	.396			1.052	.466
Visibility												
Partisan									**1.929**	**.000**	**1.950**	**.000**
Community activist									**1.999**	**.000**	**1.928**	**.000**
Contacted local politicians									**3.939**	**.000**	**3.900**	**.000**
Contacted MPs									1.017	.881	.999	.9990
Contacted traditional leaders									**1.429**	**.002**	**1.302**	**.000**
Attended rally									**3.443**	**.000**	**3.422**	**.000**
Country fixed effects	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Controls*	No		No		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Classification rate	75.6		75.6		76.7		76.8		80.1		80.1	
Classification rate/contacts	14.6		14.6		20.8		21.9		41.1		41.3	
Countries	30		30		30		30		30		30	
Weighted respondents	35,178		35,178		35,092		34,997		35,041		34,946	

*Source: Afrobarometer. Note: Logistic regression. Cells list odds ratios (intercept displays the logistic regression coefficient). Angola, Liberia, and Sudan excluded due to missing independent variables. *Controls: Age, gender, education, traditional news media use, social media use, political discussion)*

Individual-level factors

Once parties select a given neighbourhood for canvassing, what determines which doors they knock on? Some citizens may be less likely to be canvassed simply because they are less visible to political party campaigns. If local campaigners lack good data on citizens' partisan identities or voting preferences, they may just contact those citizens who are already known to local candidates, party officials, or party brokers because they are politically active. Thus, our *citizen visibility* model tests several aspects of citizens' political participation, including whether they are active in community politics[6] or contact local councillors and party officials, members of Parliament (MPs), or traditional leaders. We also examine the effect of whether citizens identify with any political party or attended a campaign event. Not only will these citizens be more visible simply because their activism brings them into contact with party officials and local notables, but their names and addresses may also be more likely to appear on voter rolls or on councillors' or party officials' lists of visitors.

To ensure that we are estimating the effects of neighbourhood vulnerability and accessibility or individual visibility, and not underlying covariates, we also include a battery of control variables to capture respondents' demographic profiles (age, gender, formal education), as well as their exposure to news (through traditional or social media) and their proclivity to discuss politics with others.

We then estimate a series of multilevel binary logistic regressions. The dependent variable is the individual report of whether they were contacted by a party in the preceding national election campaign. To start, a null model that includes only the national citizenship of the citizen correctly predicts 15% of the observed contacts. The second model adds the three statistically significant national-level predictors (national wealth, average district magnitude, and grassroots party presence) (see Table 5). While this does not increase the rate of successful prediction, all three variables are statistically significant predictors of individual-level contacts. The third model then adds the individual-level demographic measures discussed above, which increases the prediction rate to 21%. Older and male respondents, who make more frequent use of traditional (but not social) news media, are more likely to be contacted, while those who frequently discuss politics with friends and neighbours are much more likely to be contacted (not shown).

This provides a baseline against which we now evaluate the impact of the vulnerability, accessibility, and visibility models. In terms of neighbourhood accessibility, the three variables included in this model are all statistically significant. But we encounter some apparently contradictory findings. In line with our expectations, those respondents who live in areas with good road networks are more likely to have been contacted. But against expectations, urban respondents and those who live in fully serviced households were less likely to have been canvassed.

The results provided by indicators of neighbourhood vulnerability are also unexpected. Parties are more likely to contact people who live in poorer areas, marked by high(er) levels of crime and violence. However, they are no more (nor less) likely to canvass in areas marked by election-related fear. Taken together, these two sets of indicators suggest that as long as African political parties can access a particular area (via good roads), they seem to go out of their way to visit rural, less developed, and more vulnerable neighbourhoods.

The addition of these measures of accessibility and vulnerability has roughly the same overall predictive power as the simpler demographic model (22%). However, our ability to discriminate between canvassed and non-canvassed citizens doubles (from 22% to 41%) when we add the indicators of *citizen visibility*. With the notable exception of contacting an MP, each of these indicators is associated with increased odds of being canvassed. Those

[6] This is measured through a construct that combines respondent answers as to whether they attended community meetings or joined with others to raise an issue over the previous year.

respondents who identified with a political party, or attended a campaign rally, were especially more likely to be canvassed. And those who had contacted local councillors, party officials, and/or traditional leaders were also more likely to be contacted. More importantly, the impact of these indicators remains even when we include all items in a combined model. Thus, engagement in local political networks matters a great deal, while engagement with national officials (MPs) does not. Furthermore, while contacting traditional leaders increases the likelihood that citizens are canvassed, participation in local civic networks matters far more.

It is also important to note that the strong effect of national rates of grassroots party organisational presence disappears once we take individual patterns of political visibility into account. Yet this is in fact what local party organisations do: They organise, arrange, or coordinate election campaigns, engage with local community organisations and meetings, and facilitate contacts between citizens and local incumbents and party officials. Thus, we would expect that a respondent's engagement with a political party has a stronger relationship with our outcome variable than the Party Presence Index – a macro-level measure of party presence of all parties in the country.[7]

Do parties contact different types of people when they attempt to mobilise, persuade, or convert?

Beyond the important question of which citizens political parties contact, we also investigate the factors that might determine whether parties contact their own supporters or other citizens. This may have important implications for democratic responsiveness and accountability and the development of a competitive electoral marketplace of ideas. Therefore, we return to our three-fold classification of contact – mobilising, persuading, and converting – and rerun the models previously discussed, with two exceptions. First, we remove the measure of partisan identification, since we use this variable to construct the new dependent variables. Second, we restrict the analysis to only those respondents who were canvassed.

The results of the three logistic regression models reveal important differences in the profiles of type of contact (Table 7). Reflecting the usual image of African party politics conveyed by the literature, party identifiers are more likely to be contacted by their own party if they are in frequent contact with local party officials, councillors, and traditional leaders or attend election rallies (mobilisation). Perhaps in contrast to this image, poor respondents who live in accessible areas serviced by good roads are less likely to be contacted. Unaffiliated, nonpartisan respondents are more likely to be contacted (persuasion) if they live in a country with lower levels of grassroots party presence or live in urban or poor areas. Nonpartisans/ independents are also more likely to be contacted if they are less embedded in local community politics. Finally, party identifiers are much more likely to be contacted by a different political party (conversion) if they live in countries with more extensive local party presence, and slightly more likely in countries with lower levels of average district magnitude. Within countries, identifiers who live in rural and less violent communities and who are in frequent contact with local officials are also more likely to be the subject of conversion attempts. In short, when political parties attempt to mobilise their base, they prioritise those who have previously contacted local politicians or attended a rally and are thus known to local party officials. When parties attempt to appeal to potential new followers, however, these results indicate that they look to voters who are less active in established local political networks, and thus less visible.

[7] Because Afrobarometer aims to conduct fieldwork outside of campaign periods, the elapsed time between an election and fieldwork varies substantially, which may affect citizens' ability to recollect campaign engagement. To test for this, we also ran alternate versions of the models in Table 5 and Table 6 that included a measure of the number of months since the last election. In both cases, the effect was not statistically significant.

Table 7: Predicting mobilisation, persuasion, and conversion attempts (contacted respondents only) | 30 countries | 2019/2021

	Mobilisation contacts		Persuasion contacts		Conversion contacts	
Intercept						
Macro-level factors						
National wealth	1.000	NS	**1.000**	**.000**	1.000	NS
Average district magnitude	1.003	NS	.992	NS	**.989**	**.008**
Grassroots party presence	4.250	NS	**.129**	**.010**	**10.154**	**.008**
Neighbourhood accessibility						
EA urban	.964	NS	**1.282**	**.000**	**.832**	**.049**
EA good roads	**.883**	**.054**	.985	NS	1.120	NS
HH services	.798	NS	1.156	NS	.990	NS
Neighbourhood accessibility						
Index of lived poverty	**.574**	**.000**	**1.516**	**.004**	1.033	NS
Fear of crime	.984	NS	1.024	NS	1.003	NS
Fear of political violence	1.055	NS	1.004	NS	**.875**	**.012**
Fear of electoral violence	.814	NS	1.017	NS	1.067	NS
Visibility						
Community activist	**1.191**	**.053**	**.774**	**.000**	1.001	NS
Contacted local politicians	**2.024**	**.000**	**.462**	**.000**	**1.592**	**.048**
Contacted MPs	.885	NS	1.183	NS	**.811**	**.037**
Contacted traditional leaders	**1.167**	**.029**	**.838**	**.000**	1.146	NS
Attended rally	**1.171**	**.000**	**.575**	**.000**	1.076	NS
Country fixed effects	YES		YES		YES	
Classification rate	67.5		71.9		73.2	
Classification rate/contacts	62.7		41.5		40.1	
Countries	30		30		30	
Weighted respondents	8,776		8,776		8,776	

Source: Afrobarometer. Note: Logistic regression. Cells list odds ratios (intercept displays the logistic regression coefficient). Angola, Liberia, and Sudan excluded due to missing independent variables.

Does canvassing matter?

So far, our analyses have focused on whom parties contact during the election campaign. But we also want to know whether canvasing works, that is, are those citizens who are canvassed more likely to turn out to vote? To investigate this, we now use canvassing contact as an independent variable along with the other independent variables included in the models in Table 6 and Table 7. The dependent variable is now whether the respondent reports having voted in the previous election. And to ensure that we have identified the impact of being canvassed separately from other related campaign activities, we add the measures of attending election rallies and receiving gifts as predictors.

The results show that of the three campaign activities tested, rally attendance has the strongest relationship with voter turnout. But taking this and a wide range of other variables that are strongly predictive of turnout (e.g. gender, rural/urban status, poverty, education, news media use, political discussion) into account, respondents who are canvassed by parties are also much more likely to report having voted in the previous election (with the marginal predicted probability increasing from .60 among those not contacted to .82

among those contacted). Just as importantly, we find that, all else being equal, those who receive a gift are no more (nor less) likely to vote.

To recall, parties in Africa are more likely to contact voters who are older, male, and live in rural areas, who make more frequent use of news media, frequently discuss politics with friends and neighbours, identify with parties, contact local officials, and attend local community meetings. In other words, parties contact those people who are already more likely to vote. Yet the very act of contacting some people with this demographic profile is associated with even higher probability of voting relative to those not contacted (Table 8). In other words, politically engaged citizens who are contacted during an election campaign are more likely to vote than engaged citizens who are not contacted. The implication is clear: Unless parties develop ways to extend their canvassing operations to contact less visible citizens, the gaps in electoral participation are likely to widen further.

Table 8: Canvassing contact and voting in previous election: Marginal probabilities

	Multivariate model		Marginal probability of voting	
	Exp(b)	Significance	No	Yes
Contacted by any party	1.468	.000	.63	.81
Attended rally	2.252	.000	.60	.82
Received gift	1.067	NS	--	--
Dependent variable: Vote in previous election Independent variables: Variables listed in Table 6, plus receiving a gift, attending a rally, and contact. N=35,178				

In Table 9, we rerun the analysis but now use our measure of the type of contact. We find that the impact of contacting is strongest when parties contact their own supporters but also occurs when parties contact cross-partisans. However, contacting nonpartisans is not associated with increased likelihood of voting.

Table 9: Type of canvassing contact and voting in previous election: Marginal probabilities

	Multivariate model		Marginal probability of voting	
	Exp(b)	Significance	No	Yes
Partisan contacted by own party	1.947	.000	.65	.87
Partisan contacted by another party	1.190	NS	--	--
Nonpartisan contacted by any party	1.155	.023	.67	.72
Attended rally	2.359	.000	.60	.82
Received gift	1.092	NS	--	--
Dependent variable: Vote in previous election Independent variables: Variables listed in Table 6, minus partisan identification, plus receiving a gift, attending a rally, mobilisation contact, persuasion contact, and conversion contact. N=35,178				

Conclusion

We have used public opinion survey data from Afrobarometer and the Comparative National Elections Project to probe the extent, frequency, nature, determinants, and consequences of electoral canvassing. Challenging the dominant view of African party politics, we find that overall rates of campaign canvassing in Africa are broadly similar to

those in other world regions. Moreover, opposition parties are almost equally active (collectively) as governing parties in election canvassing. Perhaps as surprising, we also find that while both governing and opposition parties often contact co-partisans, they also expend considerable resources to contact cross-partisans and non-aligned voters.

On the potentially more negative side, the mean level of face-to-face canvassing hides a great deal of cross-national variation: Very few respondents report election campaign contacts in many countries, especially in Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Namibia. Also, across Africa, parties exhibit clear biases in whom they contact. As the literature might expect, we find a clear partisan bias toward contacting party identifiers more frequently than independents. But more importantly, we find a clear and consistent bias in favour of canvassing those who are already more active in local politics and election campaigns than other citizens, and to a lesser degree, those who are easiest to access because they live in areas with better road networks that enable easier access by bus, car, or motorcycle.

Finally, among those citizens who are contacted, we find clear differences depending on the nature of the contact. Attempts to mobilise co-partisans concentrate on voters who are already known because of their engagement with the electoral process and local community politics. Contacts with cross-partisan and nonpartisan citizens, in contrast, appear to focus on poorer but more educated citizens who are less active in the political process, thus demonstrating how party attempts to grow their electorate can contribute to an expansion of political participation.

Finally, we show that contacting works. Those who are contacted are about one-third more likely to vote than those who are not contacted. But because parties contact those who are already more likely to vote because of their visibility, the gap in rates of voting between more and less active citizens widens further. Thus, scholars, voter-education advocates, and international organisations involved in party assistance and electoral administration need to develop ways to enable parties to use both new technologies and old strategies to engage and mobilise voters who are ordinarily harder to reach and less visible.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Survey timing, type of election, and ruling party coding | 2019/2021

Country	Fieldwork dates	Election referred to by contact question	Pres.	Parl.	Party of president during campaign for that election
Angola	27 Nov 2019 - 4 Jan 2020	26 Aug 17		x	People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA)
Benin*	22 Nov - 7 Dec 2020	28 Apr 19		x	Bloc Republicain
Botswana	25 July - 10 Aug 2019	24 Oct 14		x	Botswana Democratic Party
Burkina Faso	15 Dec - 30 Dec 2019	29 Nov 15		g	NONE (Post Uprising Party)
Cabo Verde	8 Dec - 22 Dec 2019	2 Oct 16	x		Movement for Democracy (MPD)
Cameroon	17 Feb - 9 Mar 2021	9 Feb 20		x	Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (RDPC)
Côte d'Ivoire	1 Nov - 7 Dec 2019	18 Dec 15		x	Rally of the Republicans (RDR)
Ethiopia	26 Dec 2019 - 10 Feb 2020	24 May 15		g	ERPDF
Gabon	7 Feb - 23 Feb 2020	6-27 Oct 18		x	Gabonese Democratic Bloc
Gambia**	1 Feb - 23 Feb 2021	6 Apr 17			United Democratic Party
Ghana	16 Sep - 3 Oct 2019	7 Dec 16		g	National Democratic Congress (NDC)
Guinea	20 Nov - 15 Dec 2019	11 Oct 15	x		Rally of the Guinean People (RPG)
Kenya	28 Aug - 1 Oct 2019	26 Oct17	x		Jubilee Party
Lesotho	23 Feb - 9 Mar 2020	3 Jun 17		X	NONE (Broad parliamentary coalition)
Liberia	19 Oct - 25 Nov 2020	26 Dec 17			Unity Party (UP)
Malawi	18 Nov - 2 Dec 2019	21 May 19		g	Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)
Mali	16 Mar - 3 April 2020	***			Rally for Mali [??]
Mauritius	6 Nov - 30 Nov 2020	7 Nov 19		g	Militant Socialist Movement
Morocco	8 Feb - 25 Feb 2021	7 Oct 16		g	Justice and Development Party
Mozambique	31 May - 19 July 2021	15 Oct19		g	Liberation Front of Mozambique (Frelimo)
Namibia	5 Aug - 22 Aug 2019	28 Nov 14		g	SWAPO Party
Niger	29 Oct - 13 Nov 2020	21 Feb 16		g	Nigerien Party for Democratic Socialism (PNDS)
Nigeria	20 Jan - 13 Feb 2020	23 Feb 19		g	All Progressives Congress (APC)
Senegal	12 Dec 2020 - 9 Jan 2021	24 Feb 19	x		Alliance for the Republic-Yakaar
Sierra Leone	9 Mar - 31 Mar 2020	7 Mar 18 and 31 Mar 18		g	All People's Congress (APC)
South Africa	2 May - 10 June 2021	8 May 19		g	African National Congress (ANC)
Sudan	11 Feb - 26 April 2021				No civilian government

Country	Fieldwork dates	Election referred to by contact question	Pres.	Parl.	Party of president during campaign for that election
Tanzania	23 Feb - 25 March 2021	28 Oct 20		g	Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM)
Togo	23 Dec 2020 - 4 Jan 2021	22 Feb 20	x		Union for the Republic (UNIR)
Tunisia	24 Feb - 18 Mar 2020	6 Oct 19		x	Nidaa Tounes
Uganda	30 Sep - 31 Oct 2019	18 Feb 16		g	National Resistance Movement (NRM)
Zambia	28 Nov - 30 Dec 2020	11 Aug 16		g	Patriotic Front (PF)
Zimbabwe	17 April - 1 May 2021	30 Jul 18		g	Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)

Note: g = General election
** Benin: We use the party allied with President Patrice Talon, who is independent.*
*** Gambia: Adama Barrow won the presidential election backed by a wide coalition in 2016. We use the majority party in Parliament based on 2017 elections.*
**** Mali: Presidential election 29 July 2018 OR both 29 March and 19 April 2020*

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