

BOOK REVIEW

Political Leadership in Africa: Leaders and Development South of the Sahara

By Giovanni Carbone and Alessandro Pellegata. Cambridge University Press, 2020. 386p., €38.95

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The study of African politics, with its emphasis on presidential power, stresses the role of top leaders. However, there has not yet been a systematic evaluation of leadership and leadership transitions on key governance outcomes. Existing work explores regime transitions or individual leaders' attributes, but rarely combines the circumstances of a leader's rise to power and their policy outputs. This leaves many important questions unanswered. For instance: in the context of an increasing institutionalization of multi-party elections, should we expect elected executives to govern differently than non-elected peers? Should we anticipate shifts in development policy from the leaders of military juntas that have taken power in the last 10 years?

Political Leadership in Africa: Leaders and Development South of the Sahara, by Giovanni Carbone and Alessandro Pellegata, fills this important void by examining leadership transitions in Africa since 1960 and their relation to policy outcomes. Drawing on insights from across comparative literatures, the authors theorize leadership transitions as an opportunity for policy change, particularly early on in leaders' time in office. The book argues that political institutions create incentives for individual leader's implementation of development-oriented policy (or not) and who the beneficiaries of those policies are. Therefore, it is critical to examine the conditions under which different leaders assume power. Carbone and Pellegata anticipate that pro-development policies, and, subsequently, development to be associated with leaders elected in the multiparty context: 'elected leaders will produce development outcomes that are comparatively better than those produced by non-elected leaders' (42). This is driven by leaders' motivation for political survival in a competitive environment – they need to prove their ability to deliver development and good governance to win electoral support. By contrast, non-elected leaders will be more attentive to targeted distribution in order to thwart potential challenges by members of their own coalition (45).

The book draws on an outstanding original dataset, *Africa Leadership Change*, which records all top political leadership transitions in sub-Saharan Africa since each country's independence (starting in 1960) through 2018. It documents how and when each president, prime minister, or king enters and exits office, their time in office, and the country's political arrangement while they are in power. The authors' detailed coding allows them to examine the relationship between different types of transitions, leader duration, and a series of outcome variables: GDP growth, GDP per capita growth, change in primary and secondary school enrollment, change in health spending, change in life expectancy at birth, change in under 5 mortality, change in state capacity (using Hanson and Sigman, 2021), change in political corruption, and change in executive corruption (using the Varieties of Democracy Dataset). First, they code whether or not a transition takes place and whether it is electoral or non-electoral. The latter category is

further disaggregated into peaceful, non-electoral transitions (a president's death or resignation) and violent or irregular transitions such as coups, guerilla takeovers, and foreign intervention. They code multiparty electoral transitions as contexts where two or more parties legally compete in elections: *electoral succession* takes place when candidate from incumbent party wins an open-seat election or a candidate from a new party wins without the incumbent party running. *Electoral alternation* is when a winner defeats the incumbent or the incumbent's party. They further assess whether the multiparty context was democratic (Polity2 score of 6 or higher) or not.

The authors run regressions using country-year as the unit of analysis. This allows them to test hypotheses about a leader's duration in power, the democratizing power of elections (Lindberg, 2006), and whether leaders who were selected through elections and in democratic contexts actually generate greater growth, service provision, state capacity, and less corruption.

The authors' analysis suggests that elections generate more responsive and better performing leaders. The authors find that elected leaders (whether operating in a democratic context or not) are associated with higher growth rates (206), state capacity (238), and service provision compared to autocratic peers (224). Those leaders elected in a 'democratic context' do even better on a subset of health and education outcomes (224) as well as state capacity measures in the long term (238). Interestingly, those candidates that win with lower margins of victory as well as new successor candidates or elected opposition leaders do better on state capacity performance than elected incumbents or non-elected leaders (238).

They also find that the more elections a country has held, the better elected officials do on growth (206), a range of health and educational outcomes (224), and state capacity (238).

By contrast, length of tenure in office is negatively correlated with GDP growth (199); when leader in office more than 15 years, it is associated with poorer performance on state capacity (237) and when leaders surpass 20 years in office, it is associated with negative performance on corruption (250). The book is pessimistic about junta leaders' performance on growth, development, capacity, and corruption. Coup leaders are associated with weaker economic performance, school enrollment, health spending, life expectancy, higher child mortality, and corruption (148).

The book also offers a huge descriptive contribution. These new data enable us to view interesting longitudinal trends. For instance, all fifteen instances of an opposition leader defeating an unelected leader at the polls took place between 1991 and 2006 (72). The book also demonstrates the tremendous variation in the number of top rulers in each country since independence. Benin and Comoros are the countries with the most leadership changes (eighteen between 1960–2018), while Cameroon, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, eSwatini, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, and South Sudan had one or less. The book also offers a lot of specific case information about dynamics related to incumbents' retention of power and leadership transitions within individual countries.

The book enables us to visualize and explore comparative data on leadership transitions in new ways and the database, when merged with other sources, will allow scholars to evaluate the impact of leadership transitions on a multitude of other outcomes such as electoral strategies or governance style. This book will likely fuel many research agendas for new generations of scholars interested dynamics around leadership transitions.

References

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