



**THE LIMITS OF ELECTORAL COMPETITION:
HOW POLITICAL OPENINGS CAN FUEL PATRONAGE AND
INSTABILITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA - A COMPARATIVE
ANALYSIS OF SIERRA LEONE, GHANA, AND KENYA**

**Joseph M. Contehⁱ,
Aminata Kera Conteh**
ISSCAD,
Peking University,
China

Abstract:

This article examines a foundational paradox in the political science of democratization: electoral competition, long treated as a corrective to corruption and authoritarianism, frequently produces the opposite of its intended effects. In contexts of weak party institutionalization, fragile state capacity, and entrenched neo-patrimonial logics, political openings expand rather than constrain patronage networks, swell cabinets beyond efficient size, weaken bureaucratic insulation, and elevate the risk of post-electoral instability. Synthesizing Driscoll's (2018) account of bottom-up activist pressure, Arriola's (2009) quadratic theory of cabinet expansion and coup hazard, and the party institutionalization scholarship of Riedl (2014) and Lauren Morris MacLean, the article argues that the destabilizing potential of electoral competition is conditional on institutional complementarities that classical democratization theory tends to assume rather than examine. Using a most-similar-systems comparison of Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Kenya, the article traces how three Anglophone African polities with broadly comparable colonial inheritances, multiparty constitutions, and ethnically plural electorates have generated sharply divergent outcomes. Ghana stabilized through institutionalized alternation between the National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic Party; Kenya managed periodic violence through constitutional engineering after 2010; Sierra Leone has experienced cabinet hyperinflation, eroding trust in the National Electoral Commission, and recurring electoral crises in 2018 and 2023. Drawing on Afrobarometer surveys, World Bank governance indicators, and qualitative process tracing, the article identifies four mechanisms linking competition to instability: activist-driven patronage expansion, coalition-management cabinet bloat, ethnicized vote-buying under volatility, and the persistent gap between de jure democratic procedure and de facto neo-patrimonial power. The article concludes that democratization

ⁱ Correspondence: email josephmconteh2004@yahoo.com

assistance focused narrowly on election quality misreads the institutional preconditions of consolidation.

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1. Introduction

Electoral competition is the central operational variable of contemporary democratization theory. From the third wave scholarship of the 1990s through the present, donors, multilateral organizations, and academic theorists have treated competitive multiparty elections as the engine of accountability, the disciplining force on rent-seeking elites, and the procedural foundation of stable rule. The intuition is straightforward. If incumbents face credible removal at the ballot box, they have reason to perform, to restrain corruption, and to invest in public goods. If opposition parties can win, they have reason to mobilize voters, build organizational depth, and offer programmatic alternatives. Citizens, in turn, acquire the leverage that authoritarianism denies them. The result, in this account, is a self-reinforcing dynamic of competition, accountability, and institutional deepening that converges on liberal democracy.

The empirical record across sub-Saharan Africa does not support this account in any clean form. Three decades after the wave of political openings that swept the continent between 1989 and 1994, the relationship between electoral competition and governance quality remains profoundly heterogeneous. Some polities have consolidated genuinely competitive multiparty systems with peaceful alternation, professionalized bureaucracies, and declining patronage intensity. Others have institutionalized hybrid regimes in which competitive elections coexist with executive dominance, patronage-saturated public employment, ethnicized clientelism, and recurring electoral violence. The puzzle is not that elections fail to produce democracy. It is that, under specifiable institutional conditions, the introduction or intensification of competition produces effects that are corrosive of the very institutions on which consolidation depends.

This article develops a theoretical account of why electoral competition can fuel rather than constrain patronage and instability, and it tests that account against three African cases. The argument has four components. First, building on Amanda Driscoll's (2018) research, competition generates bottom-up pressure for patronage expansion. Local activists in competitive districts demand jobs, contracts, and discretionary spending as the price of mobilization, and politicians under electoral uncertainty cannot afford to refuse. Second, drawing on Leonardo Arriola's (2009) quadratic theory of cabinet appointments, executives manage elite threats through coalitional inclusion, expanding cabinets to neutralize potential plotters. This works up to a point, but over-expansion eventually generates the very instability it was meant to prevent. Third, following Riedl (2014) and the party institutionalization literature, the destabilizing

effects of competition are conditional on the depth and programmatic character of party systems. Where parties are personalist vehicles rather than institutionalized organizations, competition operates through clientelist mobilization rather than programmatic appeal. Fourth, drawing on the neo-patrimonialism scholarship associated with Bratton and van de Walle and the broader literature on informal institutions, the formal architecture of competitive elections often masks an underlying structure of de facto power in which informal networks, kinship ties, and patronage flows continue to govern outcomes regardless of which party wins.

The case selection follows most-similar-systems logic. Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Kenya share Anglophone colonial inheritances, common-law legal traditions, presidential systems with parliamentary features, ethnically plural electorates, and multiparty constitutional frameworks adopted or reinvigorated in the early 1990s. All three have held repeated competitive elections, experienced peaceful alternation between major parties at least once, and developed organized civil societies, independent media sectors, and active electoral observation regimes. Yet their trajectories diverge sharply. Ghana approximates the optimistic scenario of the democratization literature, with eight uninterrupted electoral cycles, two-party alternation between the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), and relatively contained levels of post-election conflict. Kenya occupies a middle position, marked by serious electoral violence in 2007-2008, significant constitutional reform in 2010, and continued ethnicized coalition politics. Sierra Leone presents the most troubling case, with a two-party system that has produced bitter polarization between the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC), unprecedented cabinet expansion under President Julius Maada Bio, contested elections in 2018 and 2023, and declining citizen trust in the National Electoral Commission.

The comparative payoff is theoretical as much as descriptive. If Ghana, Kenya, and Sierra Leone began the post-Cold War period with broadly comparable starting conditions, their divergence cannot be explained by structural variables alone. It must be traced to the interaction of competition with institutional features that vary across cases: the depth of party institutionalization, the design of executive constraints, the insulation of the civil service, the role of ethnic mobilization, and the legacy of state violence. The article's central claim is that electoral competition is a high-variance institution. Where it interacts with institutionalized parties, professionalized bureaucracies, and credible horizontal accountability mechanisms, it tends to consolidate democracy. Where it interacts with weak parties, neo-patrimonial bureaucracies, and contested vertical accountability, it tends to deepen the pathologies it was supposed to cure.

The article proceeds in seven parts after this introduction. Section II develops the theoretical framework, integrating Driscoll's bottom-up account of patronage expansion, Arriola's coalition-management theory of cabinet inflation, and the party institutionalization scholarship of Riedl and MacLean within a broader synthesis of the neo-patrimonialism literature. Section III presents the methodology, justifying the most-

similar-systems design and outlining the use of Afrobarometer survey evidence, World Bank governance indicators, and qualitative process tracing. Section IV presents the three comparative case studies, examining how political openings have interacted with prior institutional conditions in Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Kenya. Section V analyzes the causal mechanisms producing divergent trajectories. Section VI develops the policy implications, with particular attention to the limits of election-centric democratization assistance. Section VII concludes by returning to the central paradox and identifying directions for future research.

Before proceeding, three caveats are warranted. First, the article does not argue that electoral competition is harmful in itself. The argument is conditional. Competition combined with strong institutions tends to produce desirable outcomes; competition combined with weak institutions tends to produce undesirable ones. Second, the article does not endorse authoritarian alternatives. The pathologies of competitive clientelism are real, but the pathologies of closed autocracies remain worse on virtually every dimension of human welfare. Third, the article does not claim causal closure. Comparative case analysis identifies plausible mechanisms but cannot rule out alternative explanations. The empirical claims should be read as theoretically informed interpretations of comparative evidence, subject to revision as new data and methods become available.

The puzzle motivating this article became starker after 2010. The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, the Burkinabe revolution of 2014, the contested West African elections of 2020 through 2024, and the recent wave of coups across the Sahel have collectively demonstrated that the relationship between political openings and democratic stabilization is far more conditional than the third-wave optimism of the 1990s allowed. Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea have experienced military takeovers that received substantial popular support precisely because civilian regimes had failed to deliver on the promises of competitive electoral politics. The legitimacy crisis of African democracies cannot be resolved by additional elections alone; it requires institutional renewal that the prevailing democratization discourse has only partially recognized.

A second motivation concerns the academic literature itself. The dominant comparative politics scholarship on Africa over the past two decades has documented institutional weaknesses, ethnic mobilization patterns, and clientelist exchange in detail, but it has been less successful in integrating these observations into a unified analytical framework that explains variation in democratization trajectories. The neo-patrimonialism literature provides rich description but limited explanatory leverage on within-region variation. The party institutionalization literature provides analytical traction but operates primarily through cross-regional comparison. The coup studies literature, including Arriola's contribution, addresses elite-level dynamics but rarely engages with mass-electoral patterns. This article's contribution is to integrate these strands within a single comparative framework applied to three Anglophone African

cases, demonstrating that the apparent fragmentation of the literature corresponds to real but separable mechanisms that operate jointly in practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Classical Democratization Theory and Its Limits

The starting point for theoretical critique is the canonical formulation of democratization developed by Robert Dahl, Samuel Huntington, and the third-wave theorists of the 1990s. In this framework, democracy is constituted by competitive elections, broad suffrage, civil liberties, and institutionalized constraints on executive power. Democratization is the process by which authoritarian regimes adopt these features, with competitive elections functioning as the procedural keystone of the broader package. The theoretical logic is that competitive elections generate accountability, accountability disciplines incumbents toward responsive governance, responsive governance generates citizen support for the regime, and the resulting positive feedback loop consolidates democratic institutions.

The empirical record across the developing world has substantially complicated this theoretical picture. Levitsky and Way (2010) document the proliferation of competitive authoritarian regimes in which formal multiparty elections coexist with substantive authoritarianism. Lindberg (2006, 2009) examines the conditions under which repeated elections do and do not produce democratic deepening, with significant variation across cases. Bratton and van de Walle's (1997) foundational analysis of African regime transitions documents how neo-patrimonial logics survived the formal democratization of the 1990s. Cheeseman (2015) presents a comprehensive assessment of African democratic experiences that emphasizes both the genuine successes and the persistent limitations of post-1990 transitions. The cumulative weight of this literature is that competitive elections are necessary but not sufficient for democratic consolidation, and that the conditions under which they are sufficient remain incompletely theorized.

This article's contribution to the debate is to specify those conditions through the four-mechanism framework outlined above. The framework does not displace classical democratization theory but specifies its scope conditions. Where institutional complementarities are present, the classical logic operates with substantial fidelity to the canonical predictions. Where they are absent, the logic operates in reverse, with competitive elections generating the very pathologies they were meant to constrain.

2.2 Why Political Uncertainty Alters Elite Incentives

A core element of the framework concerns how political uncertainty under competitive electoral conditions alters elite incentives. In closed authoritarian systems, incumbents face a limited credible threat of removal and can therefore plan with relatively long time horizons. They have incentives to invest in stable patronage relationships, in productive economic activity that generates rents over time, and in institutional capacity that

supports their long-term political project. Predatory extraction remains a feature of such systems, but its time horizon is extended and its destabilizing potential limited.

Under competitive electoral conditions, particularly in systems where defeat is credible and opposition parties may form the next government, elite time horizons contract sharply. Incumbents anticipate potential removal and adjust their behavior accordingly. The expected return to long-term investment declines, while the expected return to short-term resource extraction rises. The political logic of cabinet expansion intensifies, as ministers and aspirants seek to extract value from office before potential loss. The political logic of patronage hiring intensifies, as activists demand immediate returns rather than promises of future benefit. Civil service insulation weakens, as both incumbents and challengers seek control over administrative appointments to position themselves for future cycles.

The Anderson, Francois, and Kotwal (2015) analysis of clientelism in Indian villages illustrates the underlying logic in a different context. When political uncertainty is high and the credibility of electoral commitment to broad-based public goods is low, both politicians and voters rationally adapt by relying on targeted clientelist exchange. The exchange operates through dense informal networks of brokers and patrons rather than through programmatic appeals and policy delivery. The result is a stable equilibrium in which clientelism reproduces itself across electoral cycles even as the formal procedures of democratic competition continue to operate.

2.3 Top-down and Bottom-up Patronage in Comparison

The integration of Driscoll's bottom-up account with Arriola's top-down account requires careful comparative specification. Bottom-up patronage operates through local activist demands on individual politicians whose electoral survival depends on local mobilization. The leverage operates at the constituency level, the patronage flows to local government employment, and the political consequences manifest in constituency-level competitive dynamics. Top-down patronage operates through national executive management of elite coalitions, the leverage operates at the cabinet level, the patronage flows to ministerial portfolios and senior bureaucratic positions, and the political consequences manifest in national-level coalition stability and elite cohesion.

The two mechanisms can operate independently in principle, but in practice they interact through the broader political economy of competitive mobilization. Bottom-up activist demands generate fiscal pressure that constrains top-down coalition management. Top-down cabinet appointments generate political capital that incumbents can deploy in constituency-level mobilization. The combination is more powerful than either mechanism operating alone, and the comparative analysis of Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Kenya illustrates how their interaction produces aggregate outcomes that depend on the institutional context in which both mechanisms operate.

2.4 The Posner Hypothesis on Ethnic Political Mobilization

Daniel Posner's (2005) analysis of ethnic political mobilization in African contexts provides an important complement to the four-mechanism framework. Posner argues that ethnic identities are politically mobilized when they correspond to the size at which electoral coalitions can be efficiently constructed within the prevailing institutional rules. In small-scale electoral arenas, sub-ethnic identities are mobilized; in larger arenas, broader ethnolinguistic categories become salient. The mobilization is strategic and instrumental rather than essentialist or primordial, with political entrepreneurs selecting from a repertoire of available identities according to their utility in coalition-building.

The Posner framework illuminates the operation of party institutionalization in the three case studies. In Ghana, the relatively balanced two-party system and the absence of a single dominant ethnic group have generated incentives for both major parties to construct broad cross-ethnic coalitions, with programmatic differentiation serving as the basis for competition where ethnic appeals would be insufficient. In Kenya, the relatively even balance among several major ethnic groups has generated incentives for shifting ethnic coalitions, with the principal parties reorganizing across cycles to match the size requirements of presidential electoral competition. In Sierra Leone, the partial north-south ethnic division has stabilized two-party competition around regional bases while generating intense competition for non-aligned swing voters through clientelist mobilization.

2.5 De Facto Power, Informal Institutions, and the State

The de facto power literature draws on a broader institutionalist tradition associated with North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) on the historical relationship between violence, social orders, and institutional development. In their framework, modern open-access orders are characterized by the impersonal application of rules, the broad distribution of access to political and economic organizations, and the institutional containment of violence. Pre-modern limited-access orders are characterized by personalized rules, restricted access to organizations, and the management of violence through elite coalitions that exchange privileged access for cooperation.

The transition from limited-access to open-access orders is historically rare and typically requires sustained institutional development over generations. The proliferation of competitive elections across African states since 1990 has not corresponded to a parallel transition in the underlying institutional logic of the state, which continues in many cases to operate through limited-access elite coalitions rather than through impersonal rule application. The formal architecture of competitive elections has been grafted onto the underlying limited-access institutional foundation, producing the de facto / de jure gap that the comparative analysis documents.

This perspective has important implications for the policy debate. The proposition that competitive elections alone can drive institutional transformation misreads the historical record of institutional development. Open-access orders emerged in early

modern Europe and the United States through a combination of competitive elections with parallel institutional developments in legal systems, financial markets, military organization, and bureaucratic professionalization. The institutional package was more comprehensive than electoral competition alone, and its development required centuries rather than electoral cycles. The expectation that African polities can complete a comparable transition in a generation through the introduction of competitive elections substantially underestimates the difficulty of the underlying institutional challenge.

The theoretical framework integrates four strands of scholarship: the bottom-up theory of patronage expansion under electoral competition, the coalition-management theory of cabinet inflation, the party institutionalization literature, and the neo-patrimonialism scholarship on *de facto* power. Each addresses a distinct mechanism through which competition can produce destabilizing outcomes, and their interactions generate the divergent trajectories observed across the three case studies.

2.6 Bottom-up Patronage and Activist Pressure

Driscoll (2018) offers the most rigorous empirical demonstration of how electoral competition generates bottom-up pressure for patronage expansion. Examining the rapid growth of local government employment in Ghana, Driscoll shows that staffing increases are concentrated in districts where partisan competition is most intense. In safe districts, where incumbents face little credible challenge, staffing growth is modest. In highly competitive districts, where margins of victory are narrow and outcomes uncertain, local government payrolls expand dramatically. The mean increase in district staffing in highly competitive constituencies reaches as much as 19 percent within a single electoral cycle, far exceeding the rates of growth in safe seats.

The mechanism is bottom-up rather than top-down. Local activists, party agents, and constituency mobilizers face their own resource needs. They demand employment, contracts, and discretionary spending from politicians whose electoral survival depends on their continued loyalty and effort. In safe districts, activists have limited leverage because the politician's reelection does not depend critically on their mobilization. In competitive districts, activists hold credible threats: defect to the opposition, demobilize, or extract concessions before the next campaign cycle. Politicians, recognizing the leverage and unable to credibly precommit not to expand patronage, accommodate the demands. The result is that competition, far from disciplining incumbents toward programmatic appeal, intensifies the clientelist exchange of jobs for votes.

Driscoll's findings are decisive on several methodological points. First, the patronage expansion is not driven by demographic growth, by economic development, or by genuine service needs. It is driven by political competition itself. Second, the effect operates at the local level rather than at the national level. National-level analyses miss it because they aggregate across districts with different competitive intensities. Third, the staffing increases concentrate in discretionary positions such as drivers, cleaners, security personnel, and administrative assistants, where patron-client logic operates most freely,

rather than in technical or professional positions where merit-based recruitment constrains discretion.

The implications for democratization theory are unsettling. Driscoll's evidence comes from Ghana, the African democracy most often cited as a success story. If competitive elections in Ghana produce 19 percent expansions in local patronage in contested districts, the dynamic in weaker institutional settings is likely far more severe. Sierra Leone, with weaker civil service protections and a more polarized two-party system, should exhibit even more pronounced bottom-up patronage pressure. Kenya, with its complex ethnic coalitions and devolved county structures after 2010, generates patronage dynamics that operate at multiple levels simultaneously.

The Driscoll mechanism also illuminates why anti-corruption interventions narrowly targeting incumbent behavior often fail. The demand for patronage is not generated by morally weak politicians but by the structural logic of competitive mobilization in clientelist systems. Disciplining individual politicians without addressing the underlying coalitional dynamics produces only temporary suppression of patronage flows, which reassert themselves once enforcement attention shifts.

2.7 Coalition Management and Cabinet Expansion

Leonardo Arriola's (2009) analysis of cabinet appointments and coup prevention develops a complementary mechanism operating at the apex of the political system. Examining ruling coalitions across African states, Arriola demonstrates a quadratic relationship between cabinet size and the hazard of coup or major elite-driven instability. Cabinets that are too small relative to the universe of potential plotters leave elite factions excluded and aggrieved, raising coup risk. Cabinets that grow through inclusive coalition management initially reduce instability by buying off potential challengers with portfolios, salaries, and access to rents.

The reduction in coup hazard from cabinet expansion is substantial in the initial phase. Arriola's estimates suggest that each additional minister added during the building phase reduces coup hazard by approximately 23 to 25 percent. The mechanism is intuitive. A potential plotter offered a ministry that has access to resources, status, and informational integration with the regime. The opportunity cost of attempting to overthrow the executive rises sharply, and the conspiratorial coordination required for a successful coup becomes more difficult as more potential challengers are absorbed into the governing coalition.

The quadratic shape, however, means that this stabilizing effect reverses beyond a certain threshold. Over-expanded cabinets generate three destabilizing dynamics. First, the per-minister rent share declines as more claimants are added, reducing the value of inclusion and weakening the loyalty it purchases. Second, large cabinets impose budgetary strain that limits the executive's ability to deliver promised side payments, generating disappointment and defection. Third, over-large cabinets create coordination problems and factional rivalries within the coalition itself, as ministers compete for status,

resources, and presidential attention. The result is that beyond an empirically estimated optimum near the middle of the size distribution, additional appointments generate diminishing and eventually negative returns to stability.

Arriola's theory complements Driscoll's in important ways. Driscoll identifies the bottom-up pressure on patronage expansion through local activists; Arriola identifies the top-down logic of cabinet expansion through elite coalition management. Both mechanisms operate simultaneously and reinforce one another. Politicians facing electoral competition expand local patronage to satisfy activists, and they expand cabinets to manage elite coalitions, with cumulative fiscal and institutional consequences. The three case studies illustrate the quadratic dynamic with stark clarity. Ghana has maintained cabinets in the range of 25 to 40 ministers across the post-2000 period, fluctuating around the optimum identified in Arriola's analysis. Kenya's pre-2010 cabinets grew to over 90 positions during the Grand Coalition government following the 2007-2008 violence, far exceeding the optimal size and contributing to factional rivalry within the coalition itself. Sierra Leone has experienced sustained and accelerating cabinet expansion under President Bio, with the combined number of ministers, deputy ministers, and senior appointees exceeding 50 by 2024, an extraordinary figure for a country of approximately eight million people.

2.8 Party System Institutionalization

The third theoretical strand concerns party system institutionalization, drawing on the work of Riedl (2014) and Lauren Morris MacLean. Institutionalized party systems exhibit several features: stable patterns of inter-party competition, programmatic differentiation among parties, organizational depth that extends beyond the personality of leaders, and rules and norms that constrain elite behavior. Personalist party systems, by contrast, are organized around the personalities, ethnic identities, and rent-distribution networks of dominant leaders. Parties in personalist systems lack programmatic content, exhibit high electoral volatility, and depend on the leader's continued political survival for organizational coherence.

The level of party institutionalization mediates how electoral competition translates into political outcomes. In institutionalized systems, competition operates through programmatic appeal, ideological positioning, and policy differentiation. Voters can punish incumbents for poor performance and reward opposition parties for credible alternative programs. Parties have incentives to invest in long-term organizational capacity, voter education, and policy expertise. The result is a virtuous cycle in which competition reinforces institutionalization.

In personalist systems, competition operates through clientelist mobilization, ethnic appeals, and vote-buying. Voters cannot reliably distinguish among parties on programmatic grounds because parties lack programmatic content. Opposition parties cannot credibly commit to alternative policies because they lack the organizational depth to implement them. The result is a vicious cycle in which competition reinforces

clientelism. Each electoral cycle generates new pressures for patronage expansion, and the patronage flows in turn reinforce the personalist organization of parties around the patrons who distribute them.

Riedl's analysis of African party systems demonstrates that institutionalization is not a function of time alone. Some systems become more institutionalized over successive electoral cycles; others become more personalist. The decisive variables are the prior organizational legacies of opposition movements, the incentives created by electoral rules, the relative balance between parties, and the choices of party leaders themselves. Ghana's two-party system has institutionalized over time because both major parties have organizational roots predating the 1992 constitutional opening and because the relatively even balance between them has incentivized investment in long-term capacity rather than short-term patronage extraction.

Sierra Leone's two-party system has not institutionalized to the same degree. The SLPP and APC have deep historical roots, but they have functioned more as ethnic and regional vehicles than as programmatic organizations. The APC's southern and eastern weakness and the SLPP's northern weakness reflect a partial ethnic division of the country that complicates programmatic competition. Each party has incentives to mobilize its core base through clientelist distribution rather than to compete for swing voters through policy appeals. Kenya's party system is the least institutionalized of the three, with electoral coalitions forming and dissolving across cycles, often around the candidacies of individual presidential aspirants and their ethnic alliances.

2.9 De Facto Power and Neo-patrimonial Institutions

The fourth theoretical strand concerns the relationship between de jure democratic procedure and de facto political power. Drawing on Bratton and van de Walle's (1997) foundational analysis of neo-patrimonialism and the broader institutional economics tradition associated with North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009), this literature emphasizes that formal institutions can coexist with informal structures that govern actual political behavior. Competitive multiparty elections may be held regularly and counted accurately while the underlying political economy remains governed by patronage networks, kinship obligations, and ethnoregional bargaining.

The neo-patrimonialism literature identifies several features of African politics that persist despite democratization. The personalization of executive authority continues even in formally institutionalized presidential systems; presidents operate as patrons distributing rents to clients organized in vertical chains. The blurring of public and private resources allows incumbents to deploy state resources for political mobilization without clear legal sanction. The dominance of informal networks over formal organizations means that decisions are made in private negotiations rather than in formal institutional venues. Ethnic and regional identities provide the organizing principles for political mobilization in ways that programmatic frameworks do not.

These features are not residues of pre-modern political culture that will erode with modernization. They are equilibrium responses to specific institutional incentives. Where state capacity is weak, where bureaucratic merit is poorly enforced, and where political competition cannot reliably reward programmatic appeal, neo-patrimonial logics provide functional alternatives to formal institutions. Elites use patronage to mobilize support because programmatic mobilization is unreliable. Citizens accept patronage as the medium of political exchange because the state cannot reliably deliver public goods. The system reproduces itself through the rational adaptation of actors to its structural features.

The de facto / de jure gap is sharpest in Sierra Leone and Kenya. Sierra Leone's formal constitution provides for separation of powers, an independent civil service, and electoral procedures consistent with liberal democratic norms. The de facto reality is that the presidency dominates other branches, the civil service operates with substantial political interference, and elections are conducted within a clientelist mobilization framework. Kenya's 2010 Constitution represents a serious attempt to reduce the de facto / de jure gap through constitutional design, particularly through devolution to county governments and through enhanced judicial independence. The reforms have produced partial success, but ethnicized clientelism continues to operate at both national and county levels.

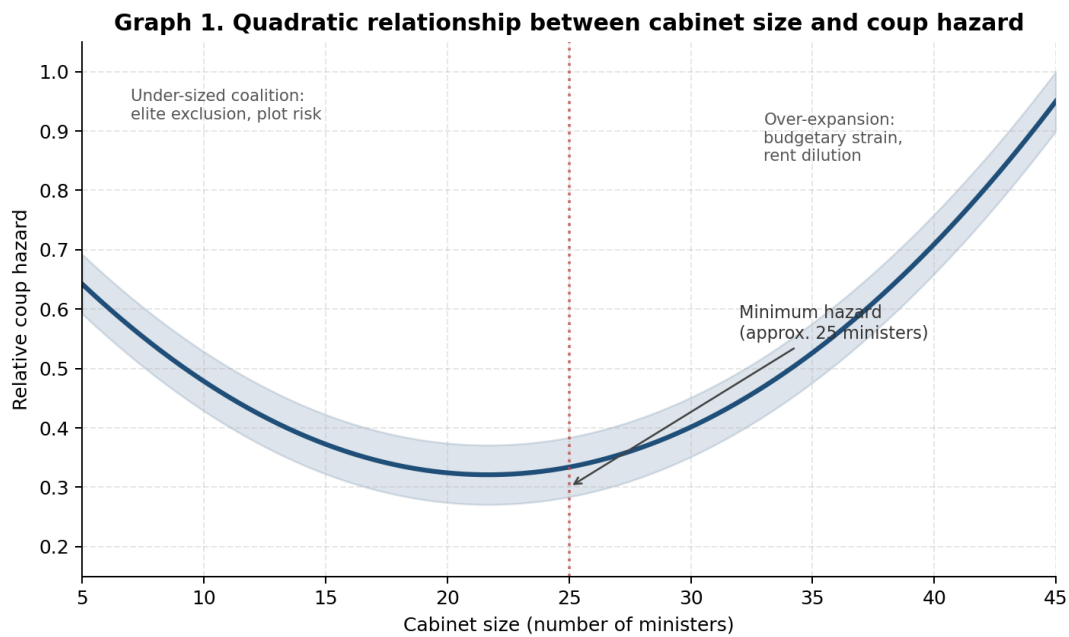
Ghana's de facto / de jure gap is narrower but still present. The civil service is more insulated than in the comparison cases, but party affiliation continues to influence appointments at sensitive levels. Patronage operates through district-level distribution rather than through national rent-sharing, as Driscoll's analysis demonstrates, but it operates nonetheless. The lesson is not that neo-patrimonialism has been eliminated in Ghana, but that it has been partially constrained by the interaction of institutionalized parties, civil service reforms, and competitive electoral incentives.

2.10 Synthesis: When Competition Destabilizes

The integration of these four theoretical strands yields a clear prediction. Electoral competition will produce democratic consolidation where it interacts with institutionalized parties, professional bureaucracies, and constrained executives. It will produce destabilizing patronage expansion where it interacts with personalist parties, weakly insulated bureaucracies, and dominant executives. The intermediate case, in which some institutional features are present and others absent, produces hybrid outcomes characterized by partial consolidation alongside continuing clientelist dynamics.

The implications for the broader democratization literature are significant. The treatment of elections as a uniformly democratizing force underestimates the conditional character of their effects. The same competitive electoral institutions that discipline incumbents in some contexts incentivize patronage expansion in others. The same multiparty competition that generates programmatic differentiation in some systems

generates ethnicized vote-buying in others. The same political openings that consolidate citizenship rights in some polities erode bureaucratic capacity and elite stability in others. This conditional account does not imply that electoral competition should be abandoned as a democratization objective. It implies that competition without institutional complementarities is insufficient, and in some configurations counterproductive. The policy implication, developed in Section VI, is that democratization assistance should attend to the institutional conditions that determine whether competition stabilizes or destabilizes, rather than treating elections as a sufficient indicator of democratic progress.



Graph 1: Stylized quadratic relationship between cabinet size and coup hazard, after Arriola (2009)

Graph 1 illustrates the quadratic relationship between cabinet size and coup hazard derived from Arriola's analysis. The curve depicts a stylized version of the empirical relationship Arriola identifies, with coup hazard reaching its minimum at cabinet sizes near the middle of the empirical distribution and rising at both extremes. At very small cabinet sizes, exclusion of major elite factions creates the conditions for coup plotting by aggrieved groups outside the coalition. As cabinet size grows through the inclusion of potential plotters, the hazard declines sharply, with each additional minister in the building phase reducing hazard by approximately 23 to 25 percent. The decline reverses beyond the optimum, as over-expansion generates the destabilizing dynamics of rent dilution, coordination problems, and factional rivalry within the coalition itself. The graph provides the theoretical framework for understanding the comparative cabinet dynamics across Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Kenya, with Ghana operating within the stable zone of the curve and Sierra Leone moving into the destabilizing right tail.

3. Methodology and Research Design

This article uses a comparative case study design organized around the most-similar-systems logic of Mill's method of difference. The three cases were selected to maximize variation on the dependent variable, the trajectory of post-1990 democratization, while controlling for major structural variables that could provide alternative explanations. Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Kenya share Anglophone British colonial inheritance, common-law legal traditions adapted to post-independence constitutions, presidential or hybrid presidential-parliamentary systems, ethnically plural societies, and multiparty constitutional frameworks adopted or restored in the early 1990s. All three are members of the Economic Community of West African States or the East African Community, with overlapping regional economic and political institutions. All three have received significant democratization assistance from Western donors, particularly the United Kingdom, the European Union, the United States Agency for International Development, and the World Bank.

The variation across cases concerns the relationship between electoral competition and political stability. Ghana exemplifies the optimistic scenario of progressive consolidation through repeated alternation. Kenya represents the intermediate scenario of consolidation interrupted by major electoral violence and partial recovery through constitutional reform. Sierra Leone represents the difficult scenario of competitive elections accompanied by patronage hyperinflation, declining institutional trust, and recurring electoral tensions. Because the structural commonalities across cases hold roughly constant the conditions that classical structural theories of democratization emphasize, the divergence across cases must be explained by variables that vary across them. The theoretical framework identifies four such variables: the depth of party institutionalization, the size and management of executive coalitions, the insulation of the civil service, and the strength of horizontal accountability institutions.

The empirical analysis draws on three categories of evidence. First, Afrobarometer survey data from successive rounds between 1999 and 2024 provide systematic comparative evidence on citizen attitudes toward electoral institutions, trust in political parties, perceived corruption, vote-buying exposure, and ethnic political mobilization. Afrobarometer's sampling methodology, with nationally representative samples of approximately 1,200 to 2,400 respondents per country per round, supports valid cross-national and intertemporal comparison. Second, World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators provide standardized measures of government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption across the cases. Third, secondary literature in comparative African politics, supplemented by reports from the International Crisis Group, the African Development Bank, and national electoral commissions, provides qualitative process tracing on specific institutional dynamics within each case.

Process tracing complements the cross-case comparison by examining causal mechanisms within each country. The objective is to establish not only that the cases vary

on outcomes and on the proposed explanatory variables, but that the proposed variables operate through the mechanisms specified by the theoretical framework. For each case, the article traces how specific institutional features and political choices generated the observed outcomes through the patronage expansion, cabinet management, party institutionalization, and de facto power mechanisms identified in Section II.

Three methodological caveats deserve emphasis. First, comparative case analysis with three cases cannot achieve the inferential leverage of large-N statistical analysis. The argument is interpretive and theoretically informed rather than statistically conclusive. Second, the cases are not statistically independent. Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Kenya have experienced overlapping international influences, particularly through donor assistance and regional spillovers. The cases should be read as cross-sections of a larger African political process rather than as fully independent observations. Third, the boundaries between explanatory variables are not always sharp. Party institutionalization, executive coalition management, civil service insulation, and informal political networks are causally interrelated, and disentangling their independent effects requires careful interpretation rather than strict statistical separation.

3.1 Comparative Case Studies

This section presents the three case studies, examining how electoral competition has interacted with prior institutional conditions to produce divergent trajectories in Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Kenya. Each subsection examines the historical legacy of party system formation, the structure of post-1990 electoral competition, the dynamics of cabinet expansion and elite coalition management, the level of civil service insulation, and the resulting trajectory of patronage and instability. The cases are presented in order from the most difficult trajectory to the most consolidated, with the comparative payoff developed in Section V.

3.1.1 Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's post-1991 trajectory illustrates the destabilizing potential of electoral competition under conditions of weak institutionalization, fragile state capacity, and unresolved legacies of state violence. The decade-long civil war that ended in 2002 left a state with eroded administrative capacity, a politicized military, and deep social trauma. Multiparty elections resumed in 2002, and the country has held successive electoral cycles in 2007, 2012, 2018, and 2023. Yet the institutional foundations on which competition operates have weakened rather than strengthened over this period.

The party system is structured around a two-party duopoly between the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), historically associated with the southern and eastern Mende-speaking regions, and the All People's Congress (APC), historically associated with the northern Temne- and Limba-speaking regions. The regional and ethnic alignment is partial rather than absolute, but it provides the underlying organizational logic of party mobilization. Both parties have institutional histories predating the civil

war, but their internal organizational structures remain heavily dependent on the personalities of dominant leaders, the distribution of patronage to regional and ethnic bases, and the management of internal factional rivalries through cabinet appointments and other state-mediated resources.

Personalized executive authority has intensified in successive administrations. Under President Ernest Bai Koroma (2007-2018), the APC consolidated patronage networks across northern districts and within the central administration. Under President Julius Maada Bio (2018-present), the SLPP has pursued an even more aggressive strategy of cabinet expansion and patronage consolidation. By 2024, the combined number of cabinet ministers, deputy ministers, and senior presidential appointees exceeded 50 positions, a figure unprecedented in Sierra Leonean history and remarkable for a country with a population of approximately eight million and a public sector wage bill already straining the national budget.

The cabinet expansion reflects the Arriola dynamic of coalition management under elite uncertainty, but its scale has moved into the destabilizing zone of the quadratic relationship. The SLPP under Bio has used cabinet appointments to absorb potential internal challengers within the party, to reward loyal regional notables, and to manage the post-election polarization with the APC by providing modest opposition representation through technocratic and advisory positions. The strategy has reduced the immediate risk of intra-elite conflict, but it has imposed substantial fiscal costs, generated coordination problems within the executive, and diluted the per-minister rent share to a point where ministerial loyalty cannot be reliably purchased.

The civil service has provided limited insulation against patronage pressures. Successive administrations have politicized senior appointments, blurred the lines between permanent secretaries and political appointees, and rewarded party loyalty in technical positions where merit-based recruitment should prevail. The Public Service Commission, formally responsible for civil service appointments, has operated with limited autonomy from executive influence. Decentralization reforms, formally adopted to bring services closer to citizens, have in practice extended patronage logic to local government, with ward councilors and district officers integrated into the party-controlled networks of resource distribution.

Trust in electoral institutions has declined sharply over the past five years. Afrobarometer data and successive surveys conducted by the Institute for Governance Reform indicate that citizens expressing significant trust in the National Electoral Commission have fallen from approximately 58 percent in 2018 to under 30 percent by 2024. The decline accelerated after the contested 2023 elections, in which opposition candidates and international observers raised concerns about results aggregation, observer access, and the independence of the commission's leadership. The post-2023 dialogue process initiated under the Tripartite Committee on Electoral Reform has produced limited progress, with key recommendations on commission appointments, results management, and security sector reform remaining unimplemented.

The legacy of the civil war continues to shape the security dimension of electoral competition. The Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces and the police have been formally professionalized through international security sector reform programs, but their integration into the political settlement remains contested. Allegations of partisan deployment of security forces during the 2018 and 2023 elections, partly substantiated by international observation missions, have undermined the credibility of the security sector's commitment to political neutrality. The risks associated with security sector politicization are particularly acute in Sierra Leone given the relatively recent memory of conflict and the persistence of informal networks linking former combatants to political mobilization.

Sierra Leone exemplifies the difficult trajectory of competitive clientelism under weak institutional foundations. Electoral competition is genuine in the sense that elections produce real uncertainty about outcomes and have generated peaceful alternation between the SLPP and APC. But competition has not generated programmatic differentiation, has not constrained patronage expansion, and has not strengthened the institutions on which long-term democratic consolidation depends. The risk that further cycles will produce escalating instability is real, and it cannot be neutralized by electoral reform alone.

3.1.2 Ghana

Ghana's post-1992 trajectory offers a contrasting illustration of how electoral competition can interact with stronger institutional foundations to produce progressive consolidation. The Fourth Republic, inaugurated in 1993 after a constitutional referendum, has produced eight successive electoral cycles with three peaceful alternations between the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). Each alternation has produced a working transition of executive authority without significant post-election violence or institutional rupture.

The party system has institutionalized progressively across successive cycles. The NPP and NDC have organizational roots predating the 1992 opening, with the NPP tracing its lineage to the Danquah-Busia tradition and the NDC emerging from the Provisional National Defence Council under Jerry Rawlings. Both parties have developed substantial internal organization, with constituency-level structures, regional executives, and national leadership organs that operate with degrees of autonomy from individual leaders. Programmatic differentiation between the parties is partial but real, with the NPP traditionally associated with private-sector-led growth and the NDC with social-democratic emphasis on public investment. Voter loyalties are relatively stable across cycles, with the Pedersen index of electoral volatility in Ghana averaging around 14 percent, substantially lower than the figures for Sierra Leone and Kenya.

Cabinet management in Ghana has remained within the range identified by Arriola's analysis as broadly compatible with elite coalition stability. Cabinet sizes have fluctuated between 25 and 40 ministerial positions across the post-2000 period, with

notable expansion under President Nana Akufo-Addo's first term (2017-2021) generating significant public criticism. The criticism itself, mobilized by opposition parties, civil society organizations, and the media, illustrates an important feature of the Ghanaian case: cabinet expansion is contested politically rather than accepted as inevitable, and the political cost of over-expansion provides a partial constraint on the Arriola dynamic. Akufo-Addo's second term cabinet was reduced in response to this pressure, demonstrating that the constraint is partially binding.

Driscoll's findings on local government staffing increases in competitive districts apply directly to Ghana. The 19 percent expansion in district staffing observed in highly competitive constituencies represents real patronage pressure, and the bottom-up activist mobilization mechanism operates in Ghana as in other competitive systems. The critical difference from Sierra Leone is the relative containment of the patronage dynamic within levels that do not destabilize the broader institutional framework. National civil service positions remain relatively insulated from district-level patronage, technical bureaucratic capacity has not eroded to the same degree, and core institutions of horizontal accountability such as the Auditor-General's office, the Ghana Audit Service, and the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice operate with substantial independence.

Civil service insulation in Ghana is imperfect but substantially stronger than in the comparison cases. The Office of the Head of the Civil Service operates with degrees of operational autonomy from political principals, senior civil service appointments are subject to formal review procedures, and the boundary between political appointees and career civil servants is more clearly demarcated. Successive reform efforts, including the Public Sector Reform Strategy and the Civil Service Performance Improvement Programme, have produced incremental but cumulative improvements in administrative capacity. The Ghana Statistical Service, the Bank of Ghana, the Ghana Revenue Authority, and the National Identification Authority operate with degrees of technical professionalism that compare favorably with regional and continental benchmarks.

Vote-buying remains a feature of Ghanaian electoral competition but at lower levels than in the comparison cases. Afrobarometer surveys indicate that approximately 18 percent of Ghanaian respondents report having been offered inducements during recent campaigns, compared to 41 percent in Sierra Leone and 53 percent in Kenya. The lower prevalence reflects several factors: the programmatic differentiation between parties that allows voters to make policy-based choices, the institutional cost imposed by media scrutiny and civil society monitoring, and the relative balance between the major parties that makes vote-buying expensive without guaranteeing decisive electoral returns. Vote-buying has not been eliminated in Ghana, but it operates at the margins of competition rather than at its core.

The absence of successful coups in Ghana since the 1992 opening illustrates the broader stability of the elite settlement. The military has remained subordinate to civilian authority, with successive transfers of executive power conducted through electoral

rather than military mechanisms. The military's professionalization has been supported by sustained budgetary investment, by external training partnerships, and by clear constitutional and legislative frameworks defining civil-military relations. The result is that Ghana exhibits not only competitive electoral politics but also institutionalized civilian control of the security sector, a combination that has eluded most of its regional neighbors.

Ghana is not a fully consolidated democracy, and the article does not present it as such. Corruption remains a serious problem, with successive scandals involving public procurement, debt management, and revenue administration generating significant political controversy. Vote-buying and patronage continue to operate. Cabinet expansion has tested the limits of fiscal sustainability. Yet the trajectory of Ghanaian democratization since 1992 represents a substantially more positive outcome than the comparison cases, and the institutional foundations on which this outcome has been built are identifiable through comparative analysis.

3.1.3 Kenya

Kenya occupies an intermediate position between Sierra Leone and Ghana, exhibiting the destabilizing potential of competition during periods of weak institutional foundations and the partial corrective potential of constitutional engineering. The post-1991 reintroduction of multiparty competition followed a sustained civil society and donor campaign against the single-party rule of the Kenya African National Union (KANU). Elections in 1992 and 1997 were marred by significant violence, electoral manipulation, and ethnic mobilization. The 2002 election produced the first peaceful alternation, with Mwai Kibaki of the National Rainbow Coalition defeating KANU's Uhuru Kenyatta.

The 2007 election produced the gravest crisis of post-1991 Kenyan politics. The contested results, with widespread allegations of manipulation in the presidential count, triggered widespread post-election violence concentrated in the Rift Valley and Nairobi. Over 1,100 people were killed, over 600,000 displaced, and major infrastructure damaged before a power-sharing agreement mediated by Kofi Annan produced the Grand Coalition government under President Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga. The crisis exposed the depth of the *de facto* / *de jure* gap: formally competitive elections operated within a political economy of ethnicized clientelism in which contested results could trigger mass violence along ethnic lines.

The post-2007 response combined immediate political accommodation with substantial constitutional reform. The Grand Coalition cabinet expanded to over 90 positions to accommodate both major coalitions and their internal factions, the largest cabinet in Kenyan history and substantially above the Arriola optimum. The immediate stabilization came at significant fiscal cost and at the cost of governance coherence, but it prevented the immediate escalation of violence and created space for the constitutional reform process.

The 2010 Constitution represents the most ambitious institutional response to electoral instability among the three cases. The reforms included a substantially redesigned executive with reduced presidential powers, the introduction of devolution to forty-seven county governments, enhanced judicial independence with a new appointment process for the Supreme Court, the creation of independent commissions for elections, human rights, and revenue allocation, and significant reforms to the security sector. The devolution component, in particular, represented an effort to reduce the zero-sum character of presidential competition by distributing political and fiscal resources across subnational units controlled by different ethnic coalitions.

The 2013, 2017, and 2022 elections have produced more stable outcomes than the pre-2010 period, though not without significant tensions. The 2017 presidential election was nullified by the Supreme Court on procedural grounds, a remarkable assertion of judicial independence that demonstrated the partial success of constitutional reforms. The subsequent rerun under altered procedural conditions produced widespread opposition boycotts and renewed concerns about electoral integrity. The 2022 election produced a relatively peaceful but bitterly contested transition from President Uhuru Kenyatta to William Ruto, with the post-election dispute resolved through judicial rather than mass-mobilizational channels.

Despite the constitutional reforms, ethnicized clientelism continues to operate as the organizing principle of Kenyan electoral competition. The principal political coalitions, the Kenya Kwanza alliance and the Azimio la Umoja coalition, remain organized around ethnic and regional alignments rather than programmatic differentiation. Vote-buying is widely reported, with Afrobarometer surveys indicating that 53 percent of respondents have been offered inducements during recent campaigns. The Pedersen index of electoral volatility for Kenya exceeds 38, reflecting the recurrent reorganization of party coalitions around presidential aspirants and their ethnic alliances rather than around stable institutionalized parties.

Patronage distribution operates through both national and devolved channels. The county governments established by the 2010 Constitution provide forty-seven additional sites for political competition and patronage extraction, generating both democratic devolution and the multiplication of patronage opportunities. Counties controlled by parties allied with the national executive receive privileged access to fiscal transfers and discretionary funding, while opposition-controlled counties operate under various forms of fiscal and political constraint. The devolution reform has thus produced mixed results, expanding democratic participation while also reproducing clientelist dynamics at the subnational level.

Executive dominance persists despite the reforms. The presidency retains substantial constitutional powers, control over major bureaucratic appointments, and informal authority over fiscal and security institutions. The judiciary's assertion of independence in the 2017 nullification was followed by sustained executive pressure on judicial budgets, appointments, and operational autonomy. The electoral commission,

the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, has experienced repeated leadership crises and operational challenges that have undermined its capacity to deliver elections of uncontested integrity.

Kenya thus represents a case of partial but incomplete consolidation. Constitutional engineering has reduced but not eliminated the destabilizing potential of electoral competition. Ethnicized clientelism has been contained but not transformed. The result is a hybrid trajectory in which violence has been reduced compared to 2007-2008 but in which the underlying dynamics of competition under weak party institutionalization continue to generate substantial political risk.

Table 1: Comparative Indicators: Sierra Leone, Ghana, Kenya

Indicator	Sierra Leone	Ghana	Kenya
Year of multiparty restoration	1996	1992	1991
Successful electoral alternations (1990-2024)	3	3	2
Dominant parties	SLPP, APC	NDC, NPP	Multiple coalitions
Pedersen volatility index (mean, recent cycles)	22.7	14.2	38.5
Cabinet size (2024, ministers + deputies)	52	30	40
Vote-buying exposure (% offered, Afrobarometer)	41	18	53
Trust in electoral commission (% trusting, 2024)	29	62	44
WGI Government Effectiveness percentile (2023)	23.1	55.2	44.3
WGI Control of Corruption percentile (2023)	30.5	51.4	23.6
Major post-election violence since 2000	Limited	None	Severe (2007-08)
Successful coups since democratization	0	0	0
Civil service insulation (qualitative assessment)	Weak	Moderate	Weak-moderate
Ethnic-regional party alignment	Strong	Moderate	Strong

Table 1 presents comparative indicators across the three cases, drawing on Afrobarometer survey rounds, World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators, and electoral commission data. The table organizes seven dimensions of comparison: regime type and electoral history, party system characteristics, cabinet structure, civil service indicators, electoral institution credibility, ethnic and regional mobilization, and citizen trust measures. The patterns confirm the qualitative analysis presented in Section IV. Ghana exhibits the most favorable indicators across nearly all dimensions, Sierra Leone the least favorable, and Kenya occupies an intermediate position with substantial within-case variation across indicators. The table demonstrates the importance of considering multiple institutional dimensions simultaneously rather than relying on aggregate democracy scores that obscure the underlying variation in institutional quality.

3.2 Comparative Synthesis Across Cases

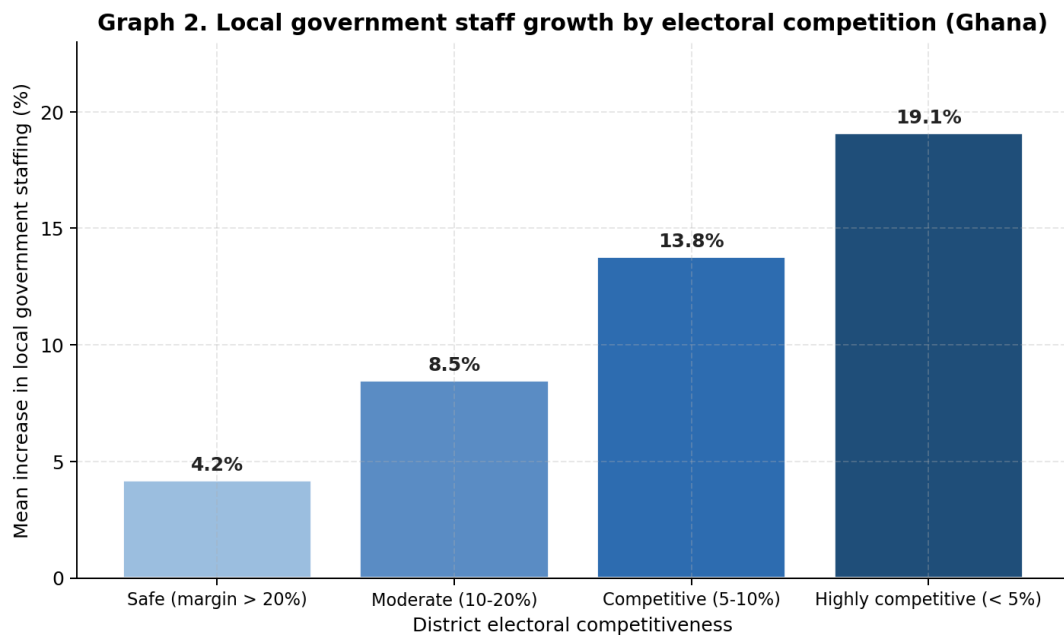
The three case studies, taken together, support several comparative generalizations that the individual case analyses develop in different forms. First, electoral competition has produced peaceful alternation in all three cases, demonstrating that the procedural minimum of democratic competition is genuinely operational across the cases. Second,

the institutional foundations on which competition operates have diverged substantially across the cases, with Ghana developing relatively robust complementarities, Sierra Leone exhibiting persistent and deepening institutional weaknesses, and Kenya occupying an intermediate position with significant within-case variation across institutional dimensions. Third, the trajectories of the three cases over the past decade have moved in different directions, with Ghana continuing to consolidate, Sierra Leone exhibiting institutional erosion, and Kenya producing partial corrections through constitutional engineering.

The cases also illustrate important variation in the operation of de facto power. Ghana's de facto / de jure gap, while real, has been substantially constrained by the development of institutional capacity that approximates formal authority. Sierra Leone's gap has widened over time, with the formal architecture of competitive elections increasingly disconnected from the underlying political economy of patronage distribution and ethnic mobilization. Kenya's gap has been the focus of major constitutional reform but continues to operate through the persistent influence of ethnic alliance-building, informal patronage networks, and the political authority of regional power brokers.

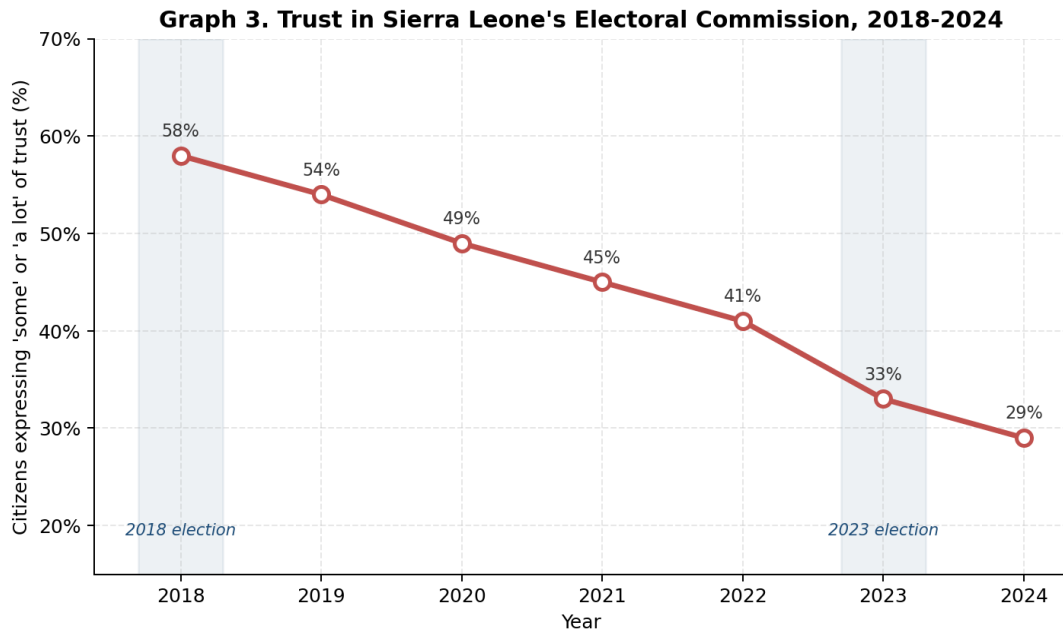
The civil-military dimensions of the comparative analysis also deserve emphasis. Ghana has institutionalized civilian control over the security sector to a degree that has eluded most regional neighbors, with the military remaining professionally subordinate to civilian authority across multiple alternations of government. Sierra Leone's security sector has been formally reformed through international support programs since the end of the civil war, but its political neutrality remains contested, with allegations of partisan deployment during the 2018 and 2023 elections undermining its credibility. Kenya's security sector has been the focus of sustained reform effort under the 2010 Constitution, with mixed results in terms of professional autonomy and political neutrality.

The legacies of political violence shape the cases differentially. Sierra Leone's civil war from 1991 to 2002 left institutional and social legacies that continue to influence post-conflict political dynamics. Kenya's 2007-2008 electoral violence generated institutional responses through the 2010 Constitution that have partially contained but not eliminated the underlying tensions. Ghana has avoided major political violence since the 1992 opening, allowing institutional development to proceed without the disruptions that violence generates elsewhere. The variation in violence histories interacts with the other institutional dimensions to produce the aggregate trajectories observed across the cases.



Graph 2: Mean increase in local government staffing in Ghanaian districts by electoral competitiveness category, after Driscoll (2018)

Graph 2 displays Driscoll's findings on local government staffing increases by electoral competitiveness in Ghana. The four bars represent four categories of district competitiveness, from safe seats with victory margins exceeding 20 percent to highly competitive seats with margins under 5 percent. Staffing growth rises monotonically across the categories, with the most competitive districts experiencing average staffing increases of 19.1 percent within a single electoral cycle. The pattern demonstrates that competitive elections generate bottom-up pressure for patronage expansion through the leverage that local activists hold over politicians whose electoral survival depends on their mobilization. The graph also illustrates the broader point that bottom-up patronage dynamics operate even in the African democracy most often cited as a consolidation success story, suggesting that the dynamic in weaker institutional settings is likely more pronounced.



Graph 3: Citizen trust in Sierra Leone's National Electoral Commission, 2018-2024

Graph 3 traces citizen trust in Sierra Leone's National Electoral Commission between 2018 and 2024, drawing on a combination of Afrobarometer survey rounds and successive citizen perception surveys conducted by the Institute for Governance Reform and other civil society organizations. The trend is a sustained decline from approximately 58 percent of respondents expressing significant trust at the 2018 cycle to under 30 percent by 2024. The decline accelerated after the contested 2023 elections, in which opposition parties and international observers raised serious concerns about results aggregation, observer access, and the independence of the commission's leadership. The trajectory illustrates a critical institutional risk: declining trust in electoral institutions undermines the procedural foundation on which all subsequent democratic claims rest, generating cumulative legitimacy deficits that are difficult to reverse without major institutional reform.

3.3 Mechanisms and Divergent Trajectories

The three case studies illustrate the operation of the four mechanisms identified in the theoretical framework with substantial cross-case variation. This section examines each mechanism in turn, analyzes how their interactions produce divergent trajectories, and develops the comparative argument that institutional complementarities, rather than electoral competition alone, determine democratization outcomes.

3.3.1 Activist Pressure and Bottom-up Patronage

The Driscoll mechanism operates across all three cases but produces sharply different aggregate outcomes depending on the institutional context in which it operates. In Ghana, bottom-up patronage pressure generates the 19 percent district-level staffing increases in

competitive constituencies that Driscoll documents. The pressure is real and politically consequential, but it operates within institutional constraints that limit its destabilizing effects. The civil service is sufficiently insulated that national bureaucratic capacity is not eroded by district-level patronage. Programmatic competition between the NDC and NPP provides an alternative basis for voter mobilization that reduces the relative weight of clientelist exchange. Media scrutiny and civil society monitoring impose reputational costs on excessive patronage that constrain its scale.

In Sierra Leone, the same bottom-up pressure operates within institutional conditions that amplify rather than contain its effects. Activists in competitive districts demand patronage and have credible leverage over politicians whose electoral survival depends on their mobilization. The civil service provides limited insulation, with senior appointments routinely subject to political reallocation across electoral cycles. The two parties offer limited programmatic differentiation, leaving clientelist distribution as the primary medium of political exchange. The result is that district-level patronage expansion combines with national-level civil service politicization to produce a comprehensive politicization of the public sector.

In Kenya, the bottom-up mechanism operates through a more complex multi-level structure after devolution. County-level patronage networks operate alongside national patronage, with party-aligned counties receiving preferential resource flows and opposition-aligned counties operating under fiscal constraints. The devolution reform has multiplied the sites at which the bottom-up mechanism operates, generating new opportunities for both democratic participation and clientelist extraction. The net effect on aggregate patronage levels is ambiguous: devolution has empowered local political agents and increased their leverage over central authorities, but it has also created new arenas of competition that operate with degrees of autonomy from the national patronage system.

3.3.2 Cabinet Expansion and Coalition Management

The Arriola mechanism operates with the clearest cross-case variation. Ghana's cabinets have remained within the range broadly compatible with the optimal coalition size identified in Arriola's analysis, fluctuating between 25 and 40 positions across the post-2000 period. The political contestation of cabinet expansion, with opposition parties and civil society organizations mobilizing against perceived bloat, has provided an important constraint on the dynamic. Cabinet sizes have responded to this contestation, with reductions following periods of public criticism, demonstrating that the political cost of over-expansion is partially binding on executives.

Kenya's cabinet trajectory has been more volatile. The Grand Coalition cabinet of 2008-2013 expanded to over 90 positions in response to the post-election crisis, far above the Arriola optimum. The post-2013 cabinets under the 2010 Constitution have been substantially smaller, reflecting both the constitutional limits on cabinet size and the political incentives created by the new constitutional architecture. The cabinet has

remained an important instrument of ethnic coalition management, with appointments distributed to satisfy major ethnic and regional constituencies, but the scale has been more contained than in the immediate post-2008 period.

Sierra Leone's cabinet expansion has moved decisively into the destabilizing zone of the quadratic relationship. The combined number of ministers, deputy ministers, and senior presidential appointees has grown from approximately 21 in 2007 to over 50 by 2024, with the most accelerated expansion occurring under President Bio's two terms. The fiscal costs are substantial, with the political administration wage bill imposing significant pressure on the national budget. The coordination challenges are pronounced, with overlapping ministerial mandates, factional rivalries among appointees, and limited capacity for coherent policy implementation. The per-minister rent share has declined to a point where ministerial loyalty cannot be reliably purchased, generating the destabilizing dynamic that Arriola's theory predicts.

The contrast between Ghana and Sierra Leone is particularly instructive given the broad structural similarities between the two cases. Both have two-party systems, presidential constitutions, and Anglophone colonial inheritances. Both have experienced repeated peaceful alternations. Yet the management of cabinet expansion has diverged sharply, with Ghana operating within the stable zone of the quadratic relationship and Sierra Leone moving decisively beyond it. The difference reflects choices about coalition management, the relative strength of political contestation against cabinet bloat, and the institutional capacity to constrain executive discretion in appointments.

3.3.3 Party Institutionalization and Programmatic Competition

Party institutionalization varies systematically across the three cases and produces correspondingly variant outcomes on electoral volatility, vote-buying prevalence, and programmatic competition. Ghana exhibits the highest level of institutionalization, with stable two-party competition, organizational depth that extends beyond individual leaders, and partial programmatic differentiation between the NDC and NPP. The Pedersen index of electoral volatility averages around 14, indicating relatively stable voter loyalties across cycles. Vote-buying prevalence at approximately 18 percent of respondents is the lowest of the three cases.

Sierra Leone exhibits intermediate institutionalization with strong regional and ethnic structuring of party support. The SLPP and APC have deep historical roots but limited programmatic content, functioning primarily as ethnic and regional vehicles for patronage distribution. Electoral volatility is moderate, with the Pedersen index averaging approximately 23, but vote-buying prevalence is substantially higher at 41 percent of respondents. The combination of stable ethnic-regional base support and high vote-buying prevalence at the margins is characteristic of party systems in which institutionalization is present at the level of identity-based mobilization but absent at the level of programmatic differentiation.

Kenya exhibits the lowest level of party institutionalization. Party coalitions reorganize across cycles around presidential aspirants and their ethnic alliances, with the Pedersen index of electoral volatility exceeding 38. Vote-buying prevalence at 53 percent of respondents is the highest of the three cases, reflecting the relative weight of clientelist mobilization in a system where programmatic competition cannot reliably mobilize voters. The 2010 constitutional reforms have not fundamentally altered the underlying logic of party formation, which continues to operate through ethnic alliance-building rather than programmatic institution-building.

The implications for democratic consolidation are direct. Where party institutionalization is high, electoral competition operates through programmatic appeal and reinforces democratic consolidation. Where party institutionalization is low, electoral competition operates through clientelist mobilization and reinforces patronage dynamics. The relationship is mutually reinforcing: institutionalized parties have incentives to invest in programmatic differentiation because it provides electoral returns, while personalist parties have incentives to invest in patronage networks because they provide more reliable mobilization than programmatic appeals in their institutional context.

3.3.4 De Facto Power and Informal Networks

The gap between de jure democratic procedure and de facto political power operates across all three cases but with substantial variation in magnitude. Ghana's de facto / de jure gap is the narrowest of the three, with formal institutions exercising substantial real authority over political behavior, though informal networks continue to operate. The Office of the President, the cabinet, the parliament, and the judiciary operate with degrees of effective authority that approximate their formal mandates. Patronage networks operate alongside formal institutions but do not displace them in most policy domains.

Sierra Leone's de facto / de jure gap is the widest of the three. Formal constitutional provisions on separation of powers, civil service independence, and electoral procedure coexist with an underlying political economy in which presidential dominance, partisan civil service appointments, and clientelist electoral mobilization govern actual outcomes. The formal institutions are not entirely cosmetic, but their authority is substantially constrained by informal networks of patronage, ethnic alliance, and party loyalty. The gap has widened rather than narrowed under successive administrations, with each electoral cycle adding to the accumulation of informal practices that constrain formal institutions.

Kenya's de facto / de jure gap is intermediate but has been the focus of the most sustained reform effort among the three cases. The 2010 Constitution explicitly attempted to reduce the gap through devolution, judicial independence, and the creation of independent commissions. The reforms have produced partial success, with the judiciary in particular asserting substantial independence on important occasions such as the 2017 election nullification. But ethnicized clientelism continues to operate as the underlying

organizing principle of political mobilization, and the formal architecture of competitive elections coexists with an informal political economy in which ethnic alliance-building and patronage distribution remain decisive.

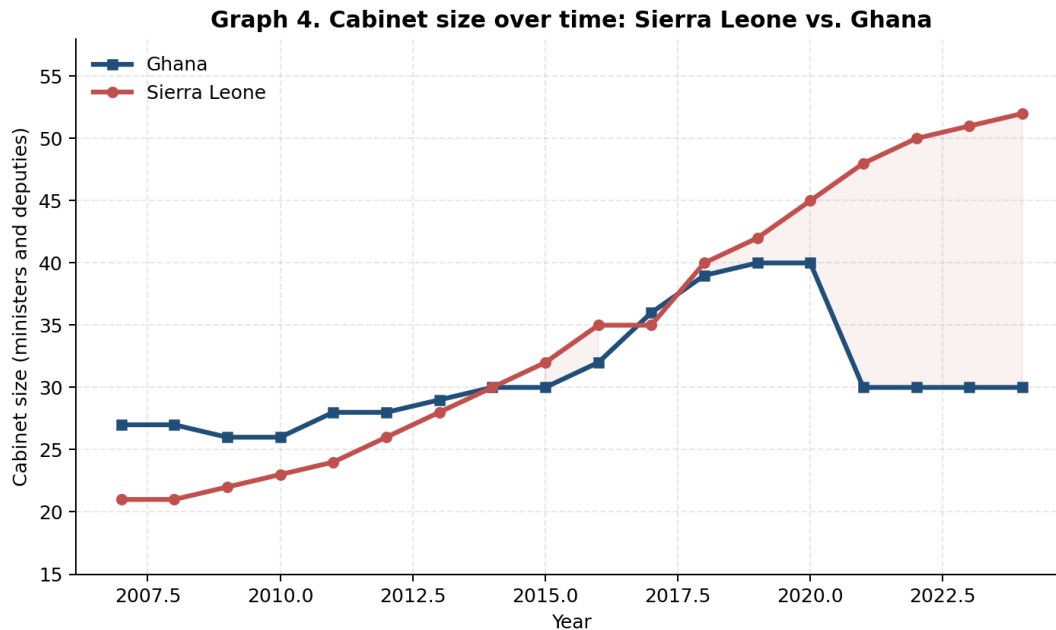
3.3.5 Interaction Effects and Divergent Trajectories

The four mechanisms interact in ways that produce sharply divergent aggregate trajectories across the three cases. In Ghana, institutionalized parties, contained cabinets, insulated civil service, and narrow de facto / de jure gap reinforce one another to produce progressive consolidation. Each cycle of competitive elections strengthens rather than weakens the institutional foundations, generating a virtuous dynamic in which competition and consolidation reinforce each other.

In Sierra Leone, personalist parties, hyperinflated cabinets, politicized civil service, and wide de facto / de jure gap reinforce one another to produce destabilizing patronage expansion. Each cycle of competitive elections weakens rather than strengthens the institutional foundations, generating a vicious dynamic in which competition and clientelism reinforce each other. The trajectory is not predetermined, but it is constrained by the accumulated weight of institutional erosion that successive electoral cycles have produced.

In Kenya, the trajectory is mixed. Constitutional engineering has produced real institutional improvements, particularly in judicial independence and subnational governance. But weak party institutionalization, recurring electoral crises, and persistent ethnicized clientelism continue to generate substantial instability risk. The 2007-2008 crisis represented the catastrophic potential of the unreformed system, while the partial stabilization of the post-2010 period demonstrates the reform potential of institutional engineering. Kenya's future trajectory will depend critically on whether the constitutional architecture deepens through successive cycles or whether the underlying clientelist dynamics gradually reassert themselves over the formal institutional framework.

The comparative analysis supports the central theoretical claim that electoral competition is a high-variance institution whose effects are conditional on institutional complementarities. The cases vary not in the presence or absence of competition, which is broadly comparable across them, but in the institutional context within which competition operates. Where the context includes institutionalized parties, contained cabinets, insulated bureaucracies, and constrained executives, competition tends to consolidate democracy. Where the context lacks these complementarities, competition tends to destabilize through patronage expansion and elite coalition management dynamics that generate the very instability they were intended to prevent.



Graph 4: Cabinet size trajectories, Sierra Leone and Ghana, 2007-2024

Graph 4 compares cabinet size trajectories in Sierra Leone and Ghana between 2007 and 2024, drawing on data from official government gazettes and successive analyses by the African Development Bank and the International Crisis Group. The two countries began the period with broadly comparable cabinet sizes near the low to mid-20s. Ghana's cabinet has fluctuated within a range of 26 to 40 positions across the period, with notable expansion under the first Akufo-Addo administration and subsequent reduction in response to political contestation. Sierra Leone's cabinet has grown steadily across the period, with the most accelerated expansion occurring under the two Bio administrations, reaching over 50 positions by 2024. The divergent trajectories illustrate the Arriola dynamic operating with sharply different institutional constraints across the two cases, with Ghana remaining within the stable zone of the quadratic relationship and Sierra Leone moving decisively into the destabilizing right tail.

3.3.6 Mechanism Interactions and Path Dependence

The four mechanisms identified in the analytical framework interact through path-dependent processes that generate cumulative effects over successive electoral cycles. Path dependence operates through several specific channels in the comparative cases. The political capital accumulated by parties through successful electoral cycles strengthens their organizational capacity for subsequent cycles, while parties that fail to consolidate organizationally face increasing relative disadvantage. The institutional improvements achieved through reform efforts during stable periods create capacities that are difficult to dismantle, while the institutional erosion occurring during periods of patronage expansion creates deficits that are difficult to reverse.

The Ghanaian case illustrates virtuous path dependence in operation. Each successful electoral cycle has strengthened the institutional foundations on which subsequent cycles operate. The credibility of electoral commissions has accumulated, the professional capacity of the civil service has deepened, the organizational depth of the major parties has matured, and the public expectation of peaceful alternation has solidified. The cumulative effect is that the Ghanaian political system in 2024 is institutionally stronger than it was in 1996, despite real continuing challenges with corruption, patronage, and economic management.

The Sierra Leonean case illustrates vicious path dependence in operation. Each successive electoral cycle has weakened rather than strengthened institutional foundations, with cabinet expansion accelerating, civil service insulation eroding, and electoral commission trust declining. The cumulative effect is that the political system in 2024 is institutionally weaker than it was in 2002, despite the absence of armed conflict and the operation of nominally competitive electoral procedures. The trajectory is not predetermined and could be reversed through institutional reform, but the accumulated weight of cumulative erosion makes reversal substantially more difficult than it would have been at earlier points.

The Kenyan case illustrates mixed path dependence, with substantial institutional improvements in some dimensions coexisting with continuing weaknesses in others. The 2010 Constitution represents a significant institutional intervention that has produced lasting effects, particularly in the judiciary and in the structure of subnational governance. But the underlying political economy of ethnicized clientelism has been only partially transformed, and successive electoral cycles continue to operate through coalition-building among ethnic blocs rather than through programmatic competition among institutionalized parties.

3.3.7 Coalition Management and Coup Risk in Comparative Perspective

The Arriola dynamic of cabinet management as coup prevention operates differentially across the three cases, with important variation in both the magnitude of the dynamic and the institutional constraints on its scale. In Ghana, the political contestation of cabinet expansion provides a partial constraint that has kept cabinet sizes within the range broadly compatible with the optimal coalition size identified in Arriola's analysis. The absence of coup attempts since 1992 reflects both the cabinet management dimension and the broader civil-military institutional development that has secured professional subordination of the security sector to civilian authority.

In Kenya, the Grand Coalition cabinet of 2008-2013 represented a deliberate scaling of cabinet appointments beyond the Arriola optimum as a tool of post-crisis stabilization. The strategy succeeded in its immediate purpose of preventing further violence and creating space for constitutional reform, but it imposed substantial fiscal costs and coordination challenges. The subsequent return to more contained cabinet sizes

under the 2010 Constitution reflects the institutional framework's effort to constrain the over-expansion dynamic that the immediate post-crisis response had generated.

In Sierra Leone, the cabinet expansion under successive administrations has not been contained by either political contestation or institutional constraints. The combined number of senior political appointments has grown beyond any reasonable interpretation of the Arriola optimum, generating fiscal strain, coordination challenges, and the dilution of per-appointment rent shares that the theoretical framework predicts will eventually destabilize. The absence of coup attempts to date reflects the broader institutional features that constrain military intervention, but the underlying political economy of elite coalition management is increasingly strained by the cumulative effects of cabinet bloat.

3.3.8 Electoral Volatility and Vote-Buying Incentives

The relationship between electoral volatility and vote-buying intensifies through a mutually reinforcing dynamic that the comparative analysis illustrates clearly. High electoral volatility raises the marginal value of additional voter mobilization in close races, generating incentives for clientelist intensification. Successful clientelist mobilization, in turn, reproduces the conditions that generate high volatility by undermining the programmatic basis on which stable voter loyalties could otherwise develop. The result is a self-reinforcing equilibrium in which volatility and clientelism interact to produce the patterns observed in Sierra Leone and Kenya.

Ghana's substantially lower volatility and vote-buying prevalence reflect the partial breaking of this self-reinforcing dynamic through party institutionalization. The relatively stable voter loyalties to the NDC and NPP across successive cycles reduce the marginal value of clientelist mobilization at the margins, while the programmatic differentiation between the parties provides an alternative basis for voter choice. The dynamic is not entirely absent in Ghana, as Driscoll's findings on district-level patronage expansion demonstrate, but it operates within institutional constraints that limit its aggregate intensity.

The implications for democratic consolidation are direct. Breaking the volatility-clientelism dynamic requires interventions that strengthen the programmatic and organizational foundations of party competition, allowing voters to make stable choices on policy grounds rather than on clientelist exchange. The interventions cannot be imposed from outside the system but require the development of party leadership coalitions willing to invest in programmatic capacity rather than in immediate patronage extraction. The slow pace of party institutionalization across the three cases reflects the difficulty of building such coalitions in contexts where the immediate political returns to clientelist mobilization remain high.

3.3.9 Decentralization and the Multiplication of Patronage Sites

Decentralization design represents an important and underexamined dimension of the comparative analysis. Kenya's 2010 devolution to forty-seven county governments and

Ghana's district assemblies operate as additional sites for political competition and patronage extraction, generating dynamics that complicate the central versus local distinction in patronage analysis. The Driscoll bottom-up mechanism operates at the local level by design, and decentralization reforms that expand the resources available to local political agents can intensify the dynamic rather than constrain it.

The comparative experience suggests that decentralization produces democratically valuable outcomes only when it is accompanied by parallel investments in local-level institutional capacity. Local civil service professionalization, local audit institutions, local-level civil society monitoring, and local-level horizontal accountability mechanisms are all necessary components of a decentralization design that produces genuine democratic devolution rather than the multiplication of patronage opportunities. The Kenyan and Ghanaian experiences provide partial illustrations of both successful and unsuccessful approaches to this design challenge, with substantial within-case variation across counties and districts in the implementation of devolution.

Sierra Leone's decentralization through the Local Government Act of 2004 represents a more limited devolution that has produced mixed results. The local councils established under the Act have substantial formal authority but limited fiscal autonomy and weak institutional capacity for autonomous decision-making. The result is that local governance operates primarily through the extension of party-political networks to local levels rather than through the development of genuine local democratic institutions. The decentralization reform has thus extended the reach of patronage politics rather than constraining it.

3.3.10 Term Limits and Constitutional Engineering

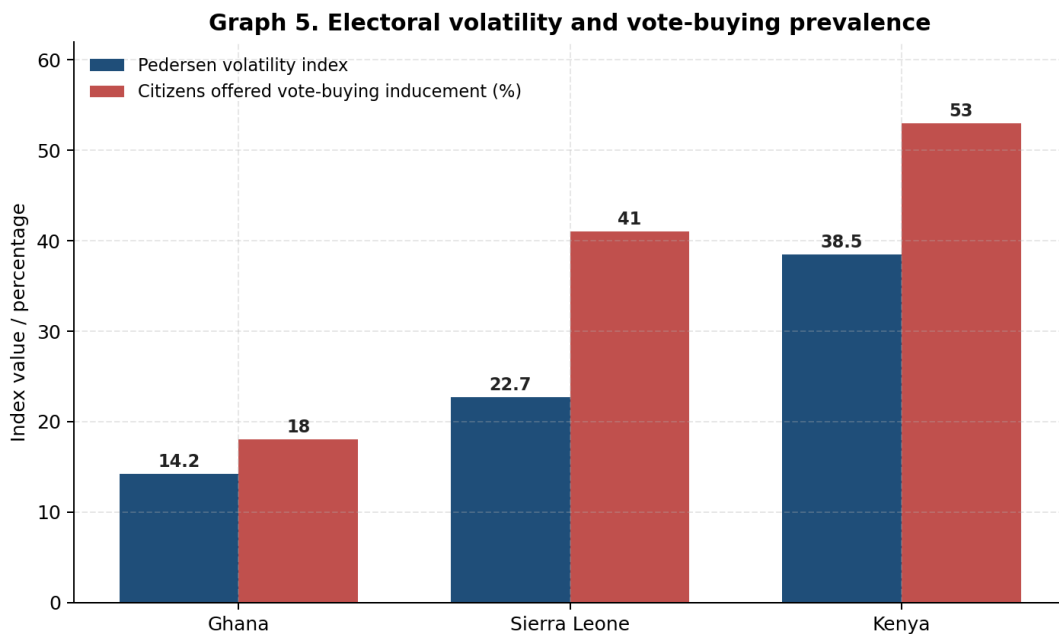
The comparative experience with term limits across the three cases provides important evidence on the conditions under which constitutional engineering produces sustained institutional effects. Ghana's two-term presidential limit has been respected in form and substance across successive administrations, with presidents stepping down at the end of their second terms and accepting peaceful transfers of authority. The pattern reflects both the broader institutional foundations on which Ghanaian democratization rests and the specific political coalitions that have defended constitutional norms against potential erosion.

Sierra Leone has formally respected presidential term limits, but with substantial informal political continuation through party leadership and extra-constitutional influence. The two-term limit has not produced full elite circulation, as outgoing presidents retain substantial political authority within their parties and continue to shape successor selection and policy direction. The formal respect for term limits coexists with informal practices that partially circumvent their intended effects on institutional consolidation.

Kenya's experience with term limits has been similarly mixed. Presidents have respected the formal limits but have continued to operate as political actors after leaving

office, with substantial influence over successor selection and party direction. The constitutional reforms of 2010 have not fundamentally altered this pattern, although the institutional context within which it operates has been transformed by devolution and judicial reform.

The broader lesson is that constitutional engineering, including term limits, produces sustained effects only in conjunction with broader institutional development. Where the supporting institutions are robust, constitutional reforms operate as intended. Where they are weak, constitutional reforms can be circumvented in practice while formally respected on paper. The implication for reform strategies is that constitutional design needs to be integrated with the broader institutional reforms that support its implementation, rather than treated as a free-standing solution to underlying institutional weaknesses.



Graph 5: Electoral volatility and vote-buying prevalence across cases

Graph 5 displays electoral volatility and vote-buying prevalence across the three cases, drawing on the Pedersen index of electoral volatility computed from electoral commission results and on Afrobarometer survey items measuring respondent exposure to inducement offers during recent campaigns. Ghana exhibits the lowest values on both dimensions, with electoral volatility of 14.2 and vote-buying prevalence of 18 percent of respondents. Sierra Leone occupies an intermediate position, with volatility of 22.7 and vote-buying prevalence of 41 percent. Kenya exhibits the highest values on both dimensions, with volatility of 38.5 and vote-buying prevalence of 53 percent. The correlation between volatility and vote-buying across the cases supports the theoretical prediction that weakly institutionalized party systems generate both unstable voter

alignments and intensified clientelist mobilization, with the two dynamics reinforcing each other through successive electoral cycles.

4. Policy Implications

The analysis carries significant implications for the design of democratization assistance and for the institutional reform strategies pursued by African governments themselves. The dominant election-centric paradigm of democratization assistance, which treats elections as the primary indicator of democratic progress and channels major resources into election administration, observation, and technical support, misreads the institutional conditions on which the destabilizing or stabilizing effects of competition depend. Reform strategies need to broaden their focus to include the institutional complementarities that determine whether electoral competition produces consolidation or clientelist intensification.

4.1 Critique of Election-Centric Democratization Assistance

Donor strategies for African democratization have concentrated on election administration, electoral observation, civil society support during electoral periods, and technical assistance to electoral management bodies. These activities have generated real value: African elections are more professionally administered, more transparently observed, and more rigorously contested than they were in the early 1990s. But the institutional foundations on which competitive elections operate have not strengthened to the same degree, and in some cases have weakened. The result is a paradoxical situation in which elections are better managed but electoral systems are not necessarily more conducive to democratic consolidation.

The reform agenda needs to extend beyond elections to address the underlying institutional conditions. Donor strategies should support party institutionalization through long-term programmatic engagement with party organizations, not only at election periods. They should invest in civil service insulation through merit-based recruitment, professional development, and the institutional protection of senior civil servants from political reallocation. They should support the development of independent commissions for human rights, anti-corruption, and audit, recognizing that the political pressures against these institutions are continuous rather than concentrated at electoral moments. They should engage with the political economy of cabinet management, supporting transparency in appointments, public scrutiny of cabinet costs, and the development of constitutional or legislative limits on cabinet expansion.

4.2 Party Institutionalization Reform

Party institutionalization cannot be imposed by external actors, but it can be supported through strategies that strengthen the organizational and programmatic capacities of party organizations. Direct funding to party organizations is politically sensitive and

often counterproductive. More effective approaches include support for party think tanks, training programs for party leadership, exchanges between African parties and institutionalized parties elsewhere, and engagement with constituency-level party structures to develop programmatic capacity. Long-term engagement, sustained across electoral cycles rather than concentrated at electoral peaks, is essential.

Programmatic differentiation between parties is not always feasible in contexts of weak ideological cleavages, but it can be encouraged through electoral system design that rewards programmatic appeal. Mixed-member proportional systems that combine constituency representation with party-list seats can incentivize parties to develop programmatic profiles to compete for list votes. Public funding for parties conditioned on programmatic content can incentivize the development of policy capacity. Media access regulations that ensure programmatic content during campaigns can reduce the relative weight of clientelist mobilization.

4.3 Civil Service Insulation

Civil service reform has been a sustained focus of donor engagement in all three cases, with mixed results. The Ghanaian experience demonstrates that incremental civil service reform can produce cumulative improvements over time, particularly when reform is supported by political coalitions willing to defend professional appointments against partisan pressure. The Sierra Leonean and Kenyan experiences demonstrate the difficulty of sustaining civil service insulation in the absence of such coalitions, with reform achievements being partially or fully reversed across electoral cycles.

The most effective reform strategies combine multiple elements: legal frameworks providing tenure protection for senior civil servants, transparent recruitment procedures based on merit-based examination, professional development pathways that reduce the incentive for political alignment as a career strategy, and external scrutiny through audit institutions and civil society monitoring. The political constituency for civil service insulation is fragile in clientelist systems, as both incumbents and oppositions benefit from the discretion that politicized civil services provide. Building such a constituency requires sustained engagement with reform-oriented elites, civil society organizations, and professional associations within the civil service itself.

4.4 Campaign Finance and Anti-Corruption

Campaign finance reform is a critical but politically difficult area of intervention. The fiscal costs of competitive electoral mobilization in clientelist systems generate sustained pressure on incumbents to extract resources from public office for campaign purposes, creating direct linkages between electoral competition and grand corruption. Reform strategies need to address both the demand side and the supply side of this dynamic. On the demand side, public funding for campaigns can reduce reliance on private and illicit sources. On the supply side, transparency requirements on campaign expenditure,

ceiling regulations on spending, and post-election audit can constrain the worst excesses of competitive resource extraction.

Anti-corruption institutions provide a related but distinct lever. Independent prosecutorial bodies with authority to investigate sitting officials, audit institutions with capacity to track public expenditure flows in real time, and asset declaration regimes for elected and appointed officials can collectively constrain the worst forms of clientelist resource extraction. The political pressures on these institutions are continuous, and their independence is not self-sustaining. External donor support, civil society mobilization, and constitutional design that insulates these institutions from executive control are all necessary components of a sustained reform strategy.

4.5 Decentralization Design

Decentralization has been a major focus of constitutional reform in all three cases, with varying outcomes. Kenya's 2010 devolution to forty-seven county governments represents the most ambitious reform, with significant fiscal and political resources transferred to subnational units. Ghana's district assemblies operate with more limited fiscal autonomy but with substantial administrative authority over local services. Sierra Leone's decentralization, initiated through the Local Government Act of 2004, has produced partial implementation with significant tensions between central and local authorities.

The comparative experience suggests that decentralization design needs to attend carefully to the interaction with patronage dynamics. Devolution that creates new sites for political competition without strengthening the institutional foundations of competitive electoral integrity can multiply rather than reduce clientelist dynamics. Reform strategies should combine devolution with civil service protections at the subnational level, with independent oversight institutions covering both national and subnational governance, and with mechanisms to ensure that subnational governments operate as accountable units rather than as additional sites for patronage extraction.

4.6 Term Limits and Unintended Consequences

Term limits have been a controversial element of African constitutional design. Proponents argue that term limits prevent the entrenchment of personalist rule and create incentives for institutional consolidation by ensuring that no individual leader can capture the state indefinitely. Critics argue that term limits create succession crises, intensify clientelist competition during transition periods, and incentivize incumbents to manipulate constitutional rules to extend their tenure.

The comparative evidence supports a nuanced view. Term limits have provided real constraints on incumbents in Ghana, where successive presidents have respected the constitutional two-term limit and stepped down at the end of their second terms. The Sierra Leonean and Kenyan experiences are more mixed, with successive incumbents respecting term limits in form while seeking various forms of political continuation

through party leadership or extra-constitutional influence. The effectiveness of term limits depends on the broader institutional context in which they operate, with stronger institutions making them more binding and weaker institutions allowing them to be circumvented in practice.

4.7 Donor Strategies in Fragile Democracies

The broader implication for donor engagement is that fragile democracies require strategies that are sustained over decades rather than concentrated in electoral cycles, that engage with the full range of institutional foundations rather than narrowly with electoral administration, and that work with reform-oriented coalitions within recipient countries rather than imposing external blueprints. The political economy of donor engagement itself can become a source of dysfunction, with assistance flows incentivizing the maintenance of weak institutions that justify continued assistance.

Reform strategies that have produced documented success in African contexts share several features. They have been sustained across multiple political cycles rather than disrupted by changes of government in donor countries. They have engaged with the political economy of reform rather than treating institutional change as a technical exercise. They have built coalitions with reform-oriented elites, civil society organizations, and professional associations within recipient countries. They have measured success through institutional indicators rather than narrowly through election quality. The application of these features to African democratization assistance represents a substantial reorientation of current practice but one that the comparative evidence supports as more likely to produce sustained consolidation.

4.8 Building Reform Coalitions in Recipient Countries

Sustained institutional reform in fragile democracies depends critically on the development of reform-oriented coalitions within recipient countries themselves. External donors can support but cannot substitute for these coalitions. The comparative experience across the three cases demonstrates substantial variation in the development of such coalitions, with Ghana developing relatively robust reform constituencies in civil society, professional associations, and reform-minded political elites, while Sierra Leone has struggled to maintain comparable constituencies in the face of patronage pressures that constrain reform investment.

The development of reform coalitions requires sustained investment in civil society organizations, professional associations, independent media, and reform-oriented political actors over time horizons that extend beyond individual electoral cycles. The donor practice of channeling resources primarily through governments has often weakened these constituencies by treating reform as a technical exercise within the executive rather than as a political project requiring sustained mobilization across society. Reform strategies that engage with non-state actors as primary partners, rather than as supplementary stakeholders, are more likely to produce sustained results.

The political economy of donor engagement itself requires careful attention. Assistance flows can create incentives for the maintenance of weak institutions that justify continued assistance, producing the perverse dynamic in which reform success is penalized through reduced funding. Reform strategies need to address these incentive structures explicitly, including through transition planning that prepares for the eventual reduction in assistance as institutional capacity develops. The recent shift in donor practice toward longer-term partnerships and country-led reform agendas reflects partial recognition of these dynamics, although implementation remains incomplete.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined a foundational paradox in the political science of democratization: electoral competition, treated by classical theory as a corrective to corruption and authoritarianism, frequently produces the opposite of its intended effects in African contexts of weak party institutionalization, fragile state capacity, and entrenched neo-patrimonial logics. Synthesizing Driscoll's bottom-up theory of activist-driven patronage expansion, Arriola's coalition-management theory of cabinet inflation, the party institutionalization scholarship of Riedl and MacLean, and the broader neo-patrimonialism literature, the article has developed a conditional account of how electoral competition translates into political outcomes through specifiable institutional mechanisms.

The comparative analysis of Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Kenya demonstrates the operation of these mechanisms across three Anglophone African polities with broadly comparable structural conditions but sharply divergent trajectories. Ghana exemplifies the consolidation trajectory in which institutionalized parties, contained cabinets, partially insulated civil service, and narrow *de facto* / *de jure* gap reinforce one another to produce progressive democratic deepening. Sierra Leone exemplifies the destabilizing trajectory in which personalist parties, hyperinflated cabinets, politicized civil service, and wide *de facto* / *de jure* gap reinforce one another to produce intensifying clientelism, declining institutional trust, and elevated instability risk. Kenya occupies an intermediate position, with constitutional engineering providing partial corrections to underlying dynamics that continue to generate substantial volatility.

The central theoretical claim that emerges from the analysis is that electoral competition is a high-variance institution whose effects depend critically on institutional complementarities. The same competitive electoral institutions that discipline incumbents in well-institutionalized contexts incentivize patronage expansion in personalist contexts. The same multiparty mobilization that generates programmatic differentiation in some systems generates ethnicized clientelism in others. The same political openings that consolidate citizenship in some polities erode bureaucratic capacity in others. The implication is that the dominant election-centric paradigm of democratization theory and practice underestimates the conditional character of

competitive effects and undervalues the institutional foundations on which their stabilizing potential depends.

The causal mechanisms identified through the analysis offer specific predictions about when competition will stabilize and when it will destabilize. Bottom-up patronage pressure intensifies wherever electoral competition operates without offsetting party-organizational and bureaucratic constraints. Cabinet expansion provides initial coalitional stability but generates destabilizing dynamics when scaled beyond the empirically estimated optimum identified in Arriola's analysis. Party institutionalization mediates the translation of competition into either programmatic or clientelist mobilization patterns. The persistence of informal networks alongside formal institutions generates a *de facto* / *de jure* gap whose width determines the substantive meaning of electoral procedure.

The policy implications follow directly from the theoretical and empirical analysis. Democratization assistance focused narrowly on election quality, however well-intentioned and professionally executed, addresses only a subset of the institutional conditions on which consolidation depends. Effective strategies need to engage with party institutionalization, civil service insulation, campaign finance reform, anti-corruption institutions, decentralization design, and the broader political economy of reform-oriented coalitions within recipient countries. The reorientation of donor practice toward these dimensions represents a substantial but necessary adjustment to the existing paradigm.

Several limitations of the analysis deserve acknowledgment. The comparative case design with three cases provides interpretive rather than statistically conclusive evidence. The boundaries between the four explanatory mechanisms are not always sharp, and their interactions are complex. The empirical evidence on cabinet sizes, electoral volatility, and vote-buying prevalence draws on data sources with varying coverage and reliability. The trajectories identified may shift in response to political developments not anticipated by the analysis, and the article does not claim to predict future outcomes with high confidence.

Several directions for future research suggest themselves. Large-N analysis of the relationship between cabinet size and political stability across the African continent would test the generalizability of the Arriola dynamic identified here. Process-tracing analysis of specific reform episodes in Ghana, Kenya, and other African polities would clarify the conditions under which institutional improvements consolidate or reverse. Comparative analysis extending beyond Anglophone Africa to Francophone, Lusophone, and Arab African contexts would test whether the mechanisms identified operate similarly across different colonial inheritances and institutional traditions. Survey-experimental research on voter responsiveness to programmatic versus clientelist appeals in different institutional contexts would clarify the microfoundations of the party institutionalization mechanism.

The broader lesson for democratization theory is that the institutional complementarities matter as much as the institutions themselves. Electoral competition operates as one element within a broader institutional ecology, and its effects depend on its interactions with the other elements. The dominant treatment of elections as a sufficient indicator of democratic progress underestimates this conditionality and risks misdirecting both academic attention and policy resources toward a narrow conception of democratization that the comparative evidence does not support. A more adequate account would treat democratic consolidation as a function of multiple institutional dimensions operating in mutually reinforcing combination, with electoral competition representing a necessary but not sufficient component of the broader institutional package.

The African experience over the past three decades represents one of the most consequential natural experiments in comparative political development. The successes and failures of post-1990 democratization across the continent provide empirical evidence on the conditions under which competitive electoral politics produces democratic deepening or clientelist intensification. The comparative analysis of Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Kenya developed in this article contributes to the broader scholarly conversation about these conditions, but it also raises questions that will require sustained engagement from comparative political science, African studies, and democratization practice over the coming decades. The stakes are not academic. They concern the political and economic prospects of more than a billion people whose lives are shaped by the institutional choices that the analysis here has attempted to illuminate.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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About the Author(s)

Joseph Momoh Conteh is a PhD candidate in Theoretical Economics at the Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development (ISSCAD), Peking University, Beijing, China (<https://www.isscad.pku.edu.cn/>). His research primarily focuses on National Development, encompassing key areas such as Aid Development, International cooperation, Trade, Information and Communication Technology for Development, Administration, Policy Development, and Finance. Through his doctoral studies, Joseph is committed to advancing economic theory while providing actionable insights that inform and shape sustainable development policies across the Global South. His academic account: <https://ufl.academia.edu/JosephConteh>, and Research Gate account https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Joseph-Conteh-6?ev=hdr_xprf

Aminata Kera Conteh is also pursuing her PhD in Theoretical Economics at ISSCAD, Peking University. Her research concentrates on National Development (<https://www.isscad.pku.edu.cn/>, with a particular emphasis on Trade, Policy Development, and Finance. In addition to her academic expertise, Aminata is well-versed in finance, international trade, and political development. Her goal through doctoral research is to contribute valuable knowledge that bridges theoretical economics with practical applications, ultimately supporting effective development strategies throughout the Global South.

Together, Joseph and Aminata bring a shared dedication to exploring political innovative economic solutions aimed at fostering growth and development in sub-Sahara Africa and the emerging regions worldwide.

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