MEGATRENDS Afrika

Lena Gutheil

The impact of urbanisation on political regimes in Africa: A literature review

Dr. Lena Gutheil
Research Associate with Megatrends Afrika and the German
Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)
lena.gutheil@idos-research.de

Content

Executive Summary

The discussion paper examines the **relationship between urbanisation and political regimes in Africa**. The paper starts with an exploration of differences between rural and urban populations and finds that **the urban population is on average younger, better educated and wealthier.** Even though urbanites are more critical of their governments, differences between urban and rural populations regarding the support of democracy are marginal.

Modernisation theorists assume that **heterogeneity and density in cities facilitate the pathway to enhanced democratic accountability** because a more middle-class, heterogeneous urban population will lead to more inter-ethnic contact, which is predicted to reduce clientelism and voting along ethnic lines. Density is expected to foster collective action that bridges ethnic and class divides.

The paper finds that these assumptions do not hold. **Urban heterogeneity is not a valid predictor for reducing the salience of ethnicity and clientelism.** Ethnic and socio-economic segregation persists in African cities and related notions of indigeneity have an important impact on clientelism and therewith access to goods and services. Ethnic identities matter for distributive politics as well as settlement patterns.

Modernisation theory's hypothesis that educated urban elites form civil society organisations, which in turn lead to more democratic accountability is also questionable. **The mere existence of civil society organisations does not necessarily lead to more accountability.** However, the salience of urban protests for the ongoing third wave of protests shows that **urban density contributes to contentious politics.** The current wave of protests is significantly shaped by the participation of the urban poor.

Even though urbanites are wealthier than their rural counterparts and have higher expectations regarding service delivery, **the growing middle class does not necessarily lead to more programmatic politics and accountability.** The middle class is more likely to turn to the private sector for their needs and to disengage from politics.

The growing urban electorate has also changed partisan politics on the continent. In line with a worldwide trend of rising populism, Africa is seeing an **increase of populist leaders who primarily address the urban poor.** Such populist mobilisation contributes to the **success of opposition parties in African cities.**

Hence, **urbanisation does not automatically lead to democratisation**, but structures the way citizens relate to the state through settlement patterns, growing pressure on public goods and services, and improved access to education and communication technology. While urban density facilitates collective accountability demands that often transcend ethnic and clientelist ties, the link between urbanisation and individual accountability relationships with the state is less straightforward. Political subjectivities are shaped by the experience of the limitations of the clientelist system paired with state neglect and unresponsiveness.

The reviewed evidence suggests that the force to reckon with is not the middle class, but rather the poor masses. It is not enough for governments to cater to the elites anymore, as the share of the urban poor becomes too large to ignore. Hence, inequality and class are under-researched variables that will – combined with ethnicity and clientelism – continue to structure how governments mobilise voters and distribute resources and how citizens relate to the state.

Introduction

Analysts agree that "Africa's future will be decided in its cities".[1] The African continent is currently urbanising at the fastest pace in the world. It is estimated that by 2040 the majority of Africans will live in cities.[2] Cities are not only loci of elite and government power, but are also places of contestation and popular protest. Hence, journalists and researchers have been optimistic, declaring that "Urban density will make it easier to mobilize popular support for or against policies, ideas, or regimes in democratic and nondemocratic countries alike, improving both the quality and the responsiveness of governance."[3] The narrative describing Africa's cities as "engines of economic growth"[4] or "engines of democracy"[5] is nothing new. Early anthropological studies of the 1950s examine the colonial foundations of many African cities and expose (often while simultaneously reproducing) the colonialist modernisation paradigm underpinning urbanisation.[6] Cities were not only supposed to bring "civilisation" in terms of infrastructure and as such foster economic growth, but also produce "modern" political subjects as understood by Western political thought.

Current debates are optimistic about the role to be played by Africa's youth, drawn to the cities, and eager to challenge incumbents who have been in power for as long as the youth can remember.[7] In countries such as Kenya, Zambia and Zimbabwe opposition leaders were indeed successful in challenging the ruling party's dominance. However, the recent military coups in Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali tell a different story, even if protests contributed to the diminishing legitimacy of prior regimes. The paper takes these opposed developments as a point of departure and aims to disentangle some of the impacts urbanisation has on political regimes[8] in Africa, which, to date, have not been fully understood in their complexity. The paper seeks to contribute to closing this gap by reviewing the literature on how the specific conditions in African cities impact the ways citizens relate to the state and vice versa. It thereby contributes to answering Cheeseman's recent call to "develop a deeper understanding and a more systematic empirical mapping of the civic consciousness that has emerged in urban spaces, and of the conditions that give rise to these variations".[9] To date, there is a lack of empirical understanding of how urban life in Africa shapes political subjectivities[10] that create a demand for democratic or autocratic rule, individually and collectively. The paper seeks to enhance our understanding of this relationship and derives important research caveats that deserve further research attention.

---

[1] Maihack, Henrik. 2019. "Africa's future will be decided in its cities." *IPG Journal*, 18. October 2019.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Anku, Amaka, and Tochi Eni-Kalu. 2019. "Africa's Slums Aren't Harbingers of Anarchy – They're Engines of Democracy. The Upside of Rapid Urbanization." *Foreign Affairs*, 16 December, 2019.
[4] UN-HABITAT. 2021. *Regional Representation for Africa. 2020-2023 Strategic Plan*. Nairobi: UN-HABITAT, p. 9.
[5] Anku and Tochi, 2019.
[6] See Balandier, George. 1955. *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires*. Paris: Armand Colin.
[7] Burke, Jason. 2018. "Young Africa: New Wave of Politicians Challenges Old Guard." *The Guardian*, 21 September 2018.
[8] I rely on Skaaning's seminal definition of a political regime as "an institutionalized set of fundamental formal and informal rules structuring the interaction in the political power center (horizontal relation) and its relation with the broader society (vertical relation)". Skaaning, Svend-Erik. 2006. "Political Regimes and Their Changes: A Conceptual Framework." *CDDRL Working Paper* 55, p. 13.
[9] Cheeseman, Nic. 2022. "(Mis)understanding Urban Africa: Toward a Research Agenda on the Political Impact of Urbanization." *African Studies Review*.
[10] Political subjectivity refers to the way people think and feel about their relationship to the state, their entitlements, rights and obligations as well as their sense of belonging to a political community, see Pikovskaia, Kristina. 2022. "Informal-Sector Organisations, Political Subjectivity, and Citizenship in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 48, no. 1: 23-41.

Overall, the paper argues that urbanisation does not automatically lead to democratisation, but rather structures the way citizens relate to the state through settlement patterns, growing pressure on public goods and services, and improved access to education and communication technology. The empirical evidence shows that urban areas do indeed give rise to specific political subjectivities that have an impact on distributive politics, electoral politics and collective action.

The paper's first section starts by describing how urbanites' socio-economic characteristics and attitudes differ from those of their rural counterparts. The section finds that the urban population is on average younger, better educated and wealthier. Surprisingly, despite urbanites' pronounced critical attitudes towards their governments and the authorities in general, differences regarding the support of democracy are marginal.

The fact that urbanites are better educated, wealthier and more critical of their government seems to be in line with modernisation theorists' idea that heterogeneity and density in cities facilitate the pathway to enhanced democratic accountability. Building on Weber and Marx, scholars such as Lipset, Lerner or Deutsch argued in the 1950s and 1960s that cities improve communication links between people and give rise to an educated class that leaves behind parochial identities.[11][12] This thinking is still influential in research[13] and is also at the heart of the hasty conclusions drawn about the potential democratising effects of African cities. The literature review thus builds on density and heterogeneity as the two major structural conditions for examining citizen–state relationships.

Section two examines the hypothesis positing that the heterogeneous population in cities would lead to more democratic demand, by lessening the attachment to particularistic identities. The section examines individuals' accountability relationship with the state by looking at the politics of redistribution and voting behaviour. It establishes in what way cities engender different forms of ethnic and class identities, showing that urban heterogeneity is not a valid predictor for reducing the salience of ethnicity and clientelism. Ethnic and socio-economic segregation persists in African cities, and related notions of indigeneity have an important impact on clientelism and therewith access to goods and services.

Subsequently, the third section examines how the density of cities facilitates collective action to demand accountability and discusses its impact on partisan politics and elections. It finds that the current wave of protests is significantly shaped by the participation of the urban poor and that the growing urban electorate has also changed partisan politics on the continent. Africa's cities are not only hubs for opposition parties, but also see an increased engagement of populist leaders.

The paper closes with concluding remarks and identifies research caveats.

[11] Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1959. "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy." *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1: 69-105; Lerner, Daniel. 1958. *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*. New York: Free Press; Deutsch, Karl W. 1961. "Social Mobilization and Political Development." *American Political Science Review* 55, no. 3: 493-514.

[12] The importance of urbanisation and industrialisation for crafting national identities also features later in theories of nationalism, as advanced by Anderson and Gellner: Gellner, Ernest. 2006. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell; Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

[13] To name just a few: Davis, James C. and J. Vernon Henderson. 2003. "Evidence on the political economy of the urbanization process." *Journal of Urban Economics* 53, no. 1: 98–125; Inglehart, Ronald, and Christian Welzel. 2010. "Changing Mass Priorities: The Link between Modernization and Democracy." *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 2: 551–67; Quigley, John M. 2009. "Urbanization, Agglomeration, and Economic Development. Commission on Growth and Development." *Working Paper* 19. World Bank, Washington, DC: 115.

Urbanites' characteristics

The question of how urbanisation impacts political subjectivities and regimes is based on the assumption that urbanites actually differ in their political behaviour and attitudes from their compatriots living in the countryside. This could be due to different socio-economic profiles or the different environment people find themselves in. For this reason, the section examines in a comparative manner urban and rural African's socio-economic characteristics and political attitudes.

Urbanites are on average younger and better educated than people living in rural areas. More than 60 percent of urban Africans are 15 years or younger.[14] The share of people who have completed secondary education or even university is more than twice as high in urban areas as in rural areas. This effect is also significant if one takes into account that young people who migrate to cities tend to be better educated than their rural peers. The education level of urban-born residents is still higher than the one of rural-born residents who migrate to the city. This can be explained by better access to education in urban areas, as well as the importance of education for the urban labour market.[15] In addition, the gender gap is smaller with regard to education in cities.

Hourly wages increase substantially with the size of a city's population. As figure 1 shows, in large cities hourly wages can be up to twice as high as in rural areas.

Figure 1.2. Hourly wages in cities and rural areas, in 2010 USD
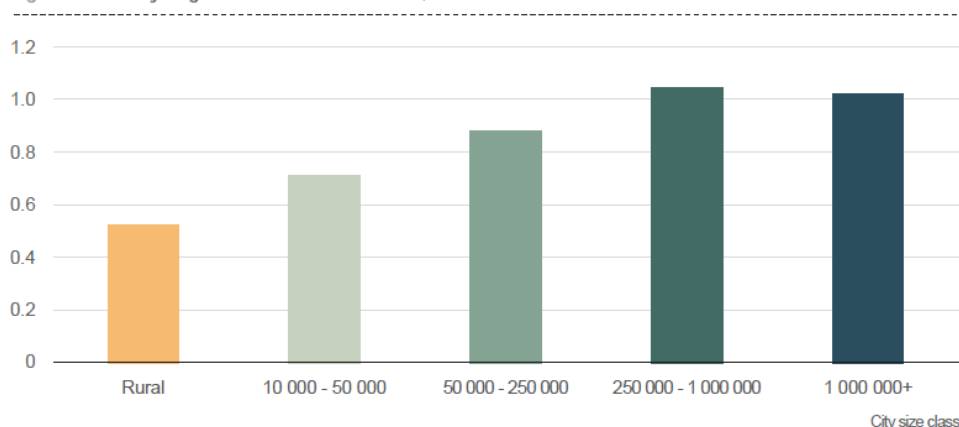
Note Average based on data for ETH, MLI, MWI, NGA, TZA and UGA from 2010-2019.
Source OECD/SWAC calculations based on World Bank LSMS (2008-2019ₚ) and OECD/SWAC (2018ₚ).

Figure 1: Hourly wages in cities and rural areas in Africa in USD 2010.

Higher wages are also reflected in consumption patterns and asset ownership. It is striking that 18 percent of adults living in cities with more than 1 million inhabitants own a car, as opposed to 3 percent in rural areas. Even more striking is the distribution of wealth (see figure 2). The share of the wealthiest quintile increases constantly with city size, starting with 4 percent in rural areas and increasing to 59 percent in the largest cities. Even though the variation between countries and even cities disappears in this depiction due to the

---

[14] African Policy Circle. 2020. "Addressing the Challenges of Urbanization in Africa." *A Summary of the 2019 African Policy Circle Discussions*. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Global Public Policy Institute.
[15] OECD, UN ECA, and AfDB. 2022. Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2022: The Power of Africa's Cities. Paris: OECD Publishing.

cross-country average, these figures are still indicative of larger trends setting rural areas from urban areas apart.

Cities in sub-Saharan Africa are amongst the most unequal worldwide. While South African cities top the list by displaying Gini coefficients above 60, other cities such as Kigali and Blanytre in Malawi reach Gini coefficients above 50. (Values of European cities and many Asian cities are normally below 40.) Another measure of inequality, the so-called Palma ratio, comes to a similar conclusion: Johannesburg, Lagos and Nairobi are listed as the most unequal cities in the world.[16] There is evidence that the high inequality could be detrimental to democratic development. Research based on Afrobarometer Data found that demand for democracy is lower amongst people who feel relatively worse off or well off than others. Thus, inequality seems to lessen the demand for democracy.[17]

Figure 1.4. Share of residents in rural and urban areas by wealth quintile
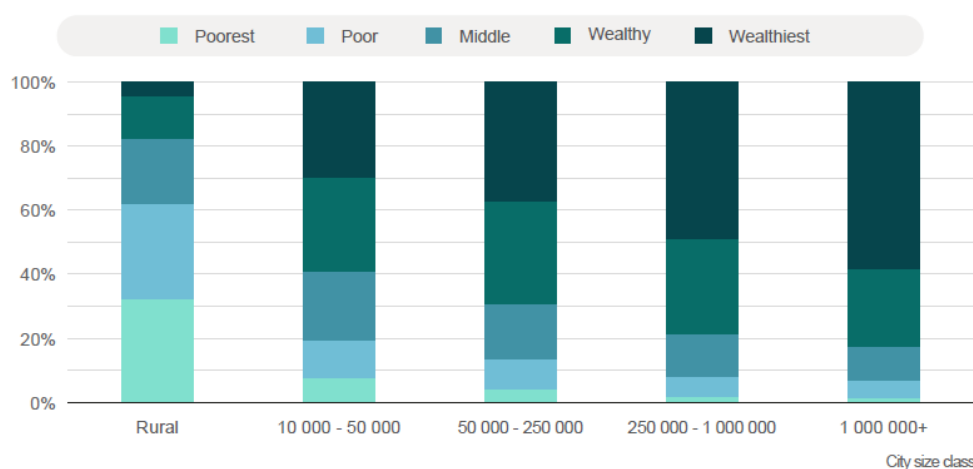
Note Based on data from various years between 2010-19 for AGO, BEN, BFA, BDI, CIV, CMR, COD, COM, GAB, GHA, GIN, KEN, LBR, LSO, MDG, MLI, MOZ, MWI, NAM, NGA, RWA, SEN, SLE, TCD, TGO, TZA, UGA, ZAF, ZMB, ZWE. Data on wealth quintiles are obtained from the DHS wealth index.

Source OECD/SWAC calculations based on ICF (1990-2019[t]) and OECD/SWAC (2018[p]).

Figure 2: Share of residents in rural and urban areas by wealth quintile.

The occupational structure between urban and rural areas differs quite substantially. While, in the countryside, up to 60 percent work in agriculture or fishing, the urban populace is working more often as hawkers, manual labourers, mid-level and upper-level professionals or in sales. According to OECD estimates, the share of skilled workers in cities is 2.5 times that of rural areas. Accordingly, urbanites are more than twice as often employed by the private sector and the government compared to their rural counterparts. In rural areas three quarters of the populace are self-employed as opposed to half in urban areas.[18]

Urbanites benefit from better access to public utilities, such as connection to the electricity grid and piped water on plot. In rural areas on average 20 percent of all households have access to electricity, whereas in small cities the share is more than 65 percent. While the difference between rural and urban areas is hence significant, the differences between cities of different sizes are less pronounced. The same is true for access to piped water on plot. Besides, ownership of bank accounts is two to three times higher in cities than in rural

---

[16] UCLG. 2022. "Pathways to Urban and Territorial Equality." Accessed November 24, 2022.

[17] Isbell, Thomas. 2022. "Only Game in Town? Inequality and Demand for Democracy in Africa - a Micro Perspective." *Afrobarometer Working Paper* 191.

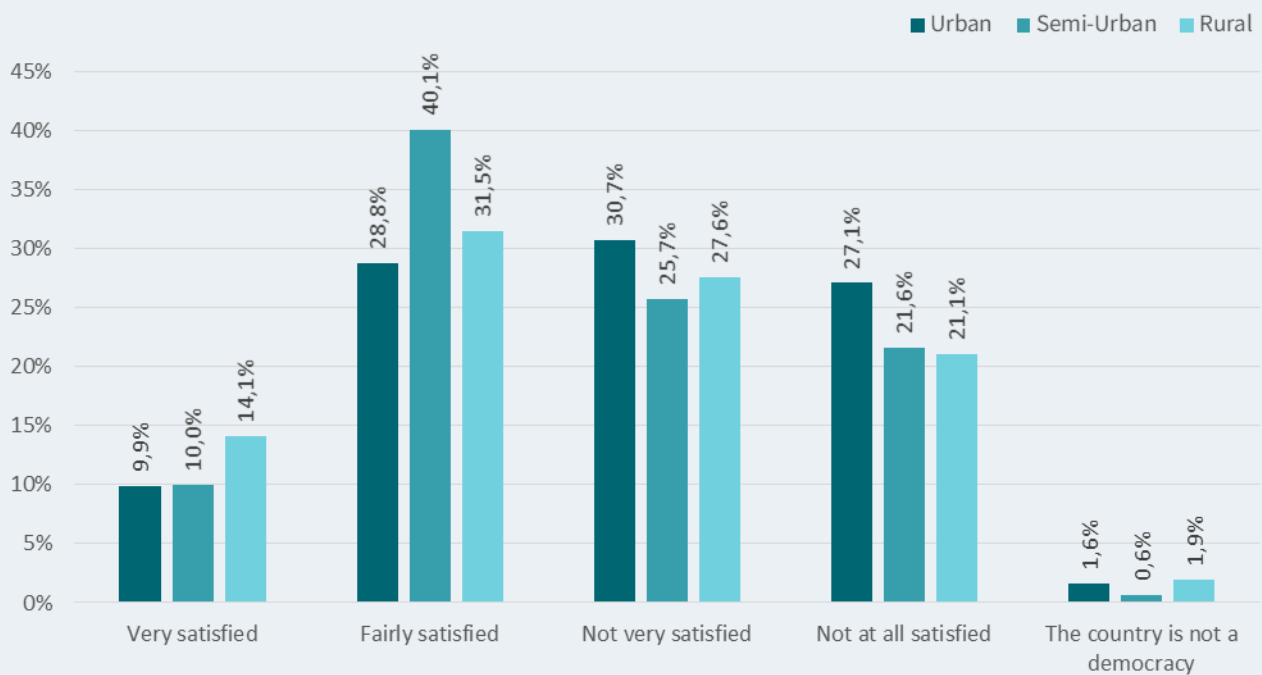[18] Afrobarometer Data, all countries, Round 8, 2019/2021, available at http://www.afrobarometer.org.

Figure 3: Satisfaction with democracy. Source: Afrobarometer. [19]

areas. Urbanites are also more likely to own a title to their house: in rural areas the share is less than 20 percent, in cities it is around 50 percent.[20]

The superior quality of service delivery in cities is also mirrored in urbanites' attitudes. Afrobarometer data shows that urbanites have higher expectations concerning service delivery and are also much more critical of the performance of their presidents and governments. Urbanites are better informed, as they access news and the internet more often and are altogether less satisfied with their democracies (see figure 3).[21] An Afrobarometer working paper from 2010 shows that support for incumbents is higher in rural areas across Africa and argues that this is due to political incentives to favour the rural majority's interests.[22] This mirrors the fact that opposition parties are more successful in cities.[23]

Urbanites also show lower trust in their local councillors and the police, the army and the courts. Overall urbanites agree less with the statement "most people can be trusted". This could be linked to the perceived sense of insecurity. Urbanites feel more often unsafe walking in their neighbourhood and have experienced violent events more often than their rural peers.[24]

In addition, urbanites are more critical in appraising the fairness and freeness of elections. At the same time, when asked about their attitudes towards democracy, differences are rather small, if not insignificant, in most categories. If asked whether "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government" there is even slightly more approval in rural areas (see figure 4).[25]

[19]   Afrobarometer Data, all countries, Round 8, 2019/2021, available at http://www.afrobarometer.org.
[20] OECD, UN ECA, and AfDB. 2022.
[21] Afrobarometer Data, all countries, Round 8, 2019/2021, available at http://www.afrobarometer.org.
[22] Harding, Robin. 2010. "Urban-Rural Differences in Support for Incumbents across Africa." *Afrobarometer Working Paper Series*.
[23] Resnick, Danielle. 2012. "Opposition Parties and the Urban Poor in African Democracies." *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 11: 1351-78.
[24] Afrobarometer Data, all countries, Round 8, 2019/2021, available at http://www.afrobarometer.org.
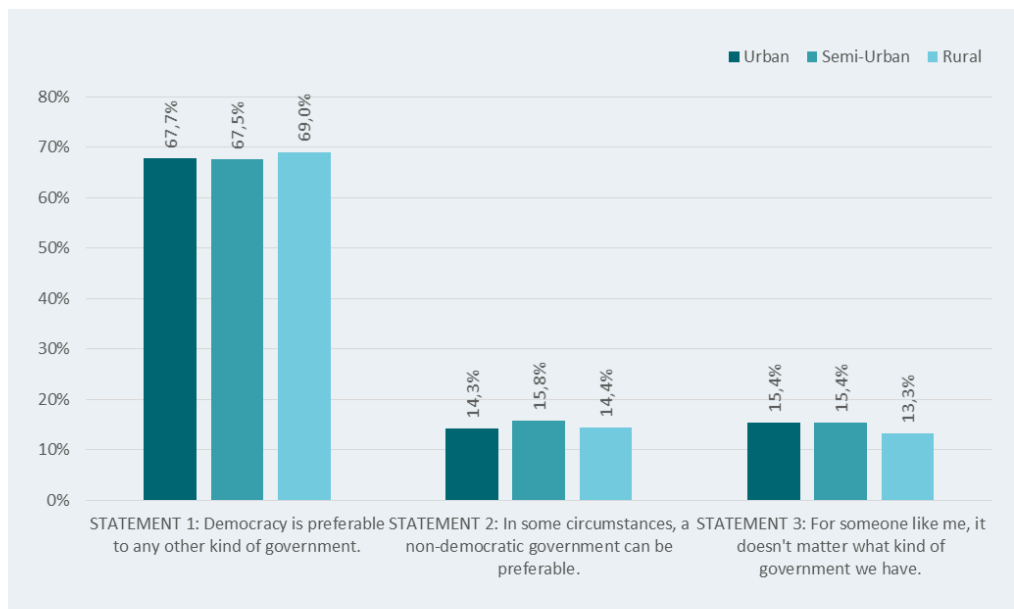[25] Ibid.

Figure 4: Support for democracy. Source: Afrobarometer. [26]

One of the questions where a clear difference is observable concerns the approval for one-party rule: the share of urbanites who chose "strongly disapprove" is five percentage points higher than of those who live in the countryside in the latest round of data collection (R8 2019/2021.)[27]

Another discernible difference pertains to political participation. Urban voters were less likely to have voted in the most recent national elections (62% of urban vs 72% of rural people voted). People in rural areas are also 8 percent more likely to attend a campaign rally, and significantly more likely to attend community meetings. However, participation in demonstrations and protest marches is slightly higher in urban areas and among those who did not have the chance to participate in such an event, more urbanites declare their willingness to do so.[28]

In summary, the urban population is on average younger, better educated and wealthier. They work in more skilled jobs and more often in the formal economy. Urbanites also have better access to services and are more critical of their governments. They tend to be less in favour of incumbents. However, differences regarding the support for democracy are marginal. Despite these striking differences, it is important to note that the distinction between the categories "rural" and "urban" is less straightforward than is often assumed. Due to the manifold social and economic relations connecting people, ideas and goods, rural and urban can rather be thought of as interrelated. The distinction becomes even more complicated if the rapid growth of peri-urban areas, metropolitan corridors and secondary cities is taken into account.[29] The more salient question is whether the identified characteristics matter for citizens' political subjectivities. The fact that urbanites are more educated, wealthier and more critical substantiates at first sight modernisation theorists' hypotheses. However, the following sections establish that there are other factors on top of socio-economic characteristics that significantly shape the ways urbanites relate to the state.

[26] Afrobarometer Data, all countries, Round 8, 2019/2021, available at http://www.afrobarometer.org.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Cheeseman, Nic. 2022, p. 83.

Understanding heterogeneity: ethnic and class identities

Identification and ethnic segregation

One of the core arguments underpinning the hypothesis that urbanisation fosters democratisation is that cities bring together a heterogeneous crowd of people, which undermines attachments to particularistic identities. This argument was put forward, for instance, by modernisation theorists such as Lipset, who argued as early as 1959 that contact between different groups in cities leads to more tolerance and paves the way for democratisation.[30] This is based on the assumption that national identification would lead to more programmatic politics and less clientelism. Early anthropological studies of the Rhodesian Copperbelt argued in a similar manner that urbanisation creates new identities that at least partially replace ethnic identities.[31] However, there were also other voices claiming the opposite: namely that the encounter of different ethnic groups in cities can lead to conflicts and even violence.[32]

A study by Green suggests that urbanisation indeed contributes to ethnic homogenisation in countries that show low urbanisation rates.[33] Another study using Afrobarometer data from 2005 finds that educated and formally employed urbanites are much more likely to identify with their national identity than those without formal education living in a rural area.[34] However, if looked at only in terms of the differences between urban and rural citizens without taking into account their education or employment, the result is much less conclusive. The latest Afrobarometer data finds that citizens' sense of belonging only differs slightly between urban and rural areas (see figure 5). Urbanites are only 3 percent more likely to state that they exclusively identify with the national identity and 2 percent more likely to state that they identify more with their national than their ethnic identity than their rural counterparts. In fact, the majority in rural and urban areas identifies with both. Green's finding that Africans who own a TV or radio set (who are over-represented in urban areas) identify less with ethnic identities could be a hint towards the mediating factor of education.[35]

[30] Lipset. 1959.

[31] Gluckman, Max. 1960. "Tribalism in modem British Central Africa." *Cahiers d'Études africaines Année* 1, no. 1: 55-70.

[32] As argued for instance in Mumford, Lewis. 2011 [1937]. "What Is a City? Architectural Record." In *The City Reader*, edited by Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, 59-62. New York: Routledge.

[33] Green, Elliot. 2011. "Endogenous Ethnicity." Political Science and Political Economy Working Paper 3, Department of Government, London School of Economics.

[34] Robinson, Amanda Lea. 2014. "National versus Ethnic Identification in Africa: Modernization, Colonial Legacy, and the Origins of Territorial Nationalism." *World Politics* 66, no. 4: 709-46.

[35] Green, Elliot. 2013. "Explaining African ethnic diversity." *International Political Science Review*, 34, no. 3: 235–53.

Figure 5: Identification with ethnic or national identity. Source: Afrobarometer.[36]
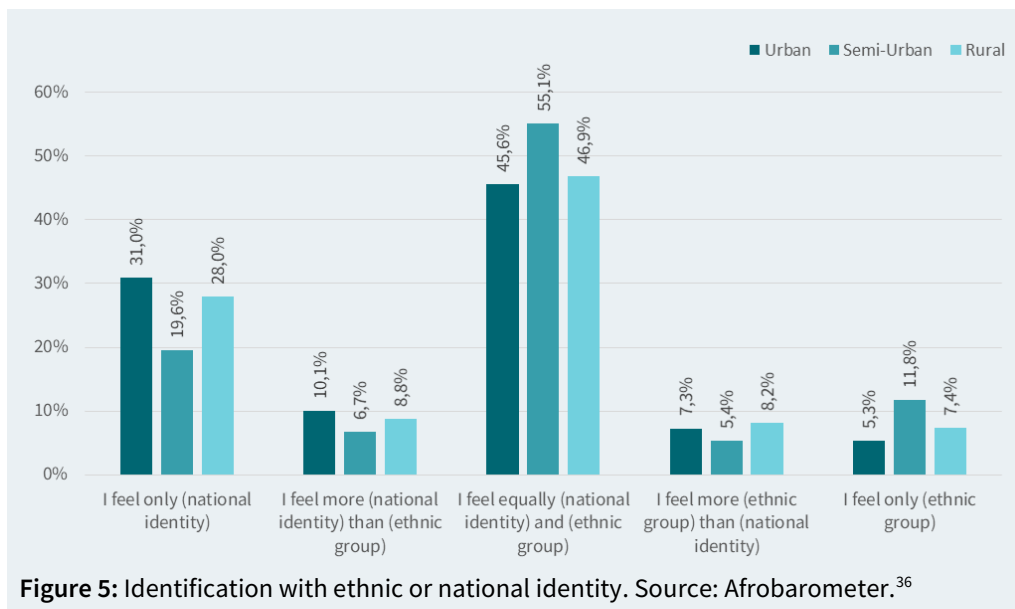
An argument against urbanites' identification with the nation is provided by contemporary studies from South Africa, Ghana and Kenya suggesting that ethnic segregation remains pervasive in African cities, as new migrants settle into similar neighbourhoods as their co-ethnics.[37] A study on Nairobi describes the colonial origins of racial and ethnic residential segregation and shows how this segregation manifests itself today in terms of income differences and differences in land prices.[38] Similarly, Coquéry-Vidrovitch traces the colonial continuities with regard to what she calls racial and social zoning and concludes that:

> in most African metropoles, a typical residential partitioning has evolved […] Markets, long the points of contact between different classes, do not have this function anymore, as the higher and middle classes embrace the Western supermarkets and shopping habits.[39]

Case studies on South African cities equally show that while racial segregation persists, this segregation is strongly related to income inequalities.[40] At the same time, socio-economic segregation seems to have decreased slightly between 2001 and 2011.[41] While spatial segregation does not necessarily translate into an identification with one's own group, it runs counter to the assumption that cities always facilitate co-habitation.

[36] Afrobarometer Data, all countries, Round 8, 2019/2021, available at http://www.afrobarometer.org

[37] Resnick, Danielle. 2019. "Urban Politics." In *Routledge Handbook of Democratization in Africa*, edited by Gabrielle Lynch and Peter VonDoepp, 404-16. London: Routledge.

[38] K'Akumu, O. A. and Washington Olima. 2007. "The Dynamics and Implications of Residential Segregation in Nairobi." *Habitat International* 31, no. 1: 87-99.

[39] Coquéry-Vidrovitch, Cathérine. 2012. "Racial and Social Zoning in African Cities from Colonization to Postindependence." In *Beyond Empire and Nation. The Decolonization of African and Asian Societies, 1930s-1970s*, edited by Els Bogaerts and Remco Raben, 267-86. Leiden: KITLV Press.

[40] van Rooyen, Jacobus Marthinus. 2022. "Persistent Segregation: Spatial Patterns and Dynamics of Residential Segregation in Cape Town." PhD diss., University of London; Strauss, Margot. 2019. "A Historical Exposition of Spatial Injustice and Segregated Urban Settlement in South Africa." *Fundamina* 25, no. 2: 135-68.

[41] van Ham, Maarten, Tiit Tammaru, Ruta Ubareviciene, and Heleen Janssen. 2021. *Urban Socio-Economic Segregation and Income Inequality. A Global Perspective.* Cham: Springer.

> **Statistical evidence on the link between urbanisation, economic growth and regime change**
>
> The assumption that economic growth leads to democratisation is at the heart of modernisation theory. While this much-discussed assumption has been widely dismissed or at least presented in a more nuanced way,[42] urbanisation is often presented as one facet of economic growth that can aid democratisation. Lipset stated as early as in 1960 that: "All the various aspects of economic development – industrialization, urbanization, wealth and education – are so closely interrelated as to form one major factor which has the political correlate of democracy."[43] The link between urbanisation and economic growth has been the subject of intense research. Economists argue that the density of cities lowers transportation costs and also fosters economic specialisation.[44] A literature review on the issue by Glaeser and Steinberg concludes that "agglomeration economies are important drivers of productivity" and generally lead to higher wages as well as higher prices for land.[45] However, the authors also find that this correlation is dependent on the time period studied and therefore contend that overall urbanisation might aid country-level growth, but that this effect is not an automatism. Studies that take into account different regions of the world find that the link between urbanisation and economic growth is more prevalent in wealthier countries. Accordingly, several studies suggest that urbanisation is not linked at all to economic growth in developing countries.[46] This missing linked is explained, for instance, by the fact that urbanisation is not necessarily accompanied by industrialisation in developing countries[47] or by a lack of infrastructure[48] or adequate governance[49] that is needed for cities to benefit from agglomeration economies. Thus, urbanisation in Africa has also led to less poverty reduction than in other regions.[50]

[42] Acemoglu, Daron, Simon Johnson, James A. Robinson, and Pierre Yared. 2009. "Reevaluating the Modernization Hypothesis." *Journal of Monetary Economics* 56 (8): 1043-58.

[43] Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1960. *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

[44] Krugman, Paul. 1991. "Increasing Returns and Economic Geography." *Journal of Political Economy* 99 (3): 460-482.

[45] Glaeser, Edward L., and Bryce Millett Steinberg. 2017. "Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?" *Regional Studies* 51 (1): 58-68.

[46] Barrios, Salvador, Luisito Bertinelli, and Eric Strobl. 2006. "Climate Change and Rural-Urban Migration: The Case of sub-Saharan Africa." *Journal of Urban Economics* 60 (3): 357-71; Behrens, Kristian, and Alain Pholo Bala. 2013. "Do Rent-Seeking and Interregional Transfers Contribute to Urban Primacy in Sub-Saharan Africa?" *Papers in Regional Science* 92 (1): 163-96; Gollin, Douglas, Remi Jedwab, and Dietrich Vollrath. 2016. "Urbanization With and Without Industrialization." *Journal of Economic Growth* 21: 35-70.

[47] Bloom, David E., David Canning, and Günther Fink. 2008. "Urbanization and the Wealth of Nations." *Science* 319 (5864): 772-75.

[48] Castells-Quintana, David. 2017. "Malthus Living in a Slum: Urban Concentration, Infrastructure and Economic Growth." *Journal of Urban Economics* 98: 158-73.

[49] Frick, Susanne A., and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose. 2018. "Big or Small Cities? On City Size and Economic Growth." *Growth and Change* 49 (1): 4-32.

[50] Ravallion, Martin, and Shaohua Chen. 2017. "Welfare-Consistent Global Poverty Measures." *Policy Research Working Paper* 8170.

Ethnicity, indigeneity and clientelism

The previous section suggests that it is worthwhile taking a closer look at the ethnic and socio-economic composition of contemporary African urban neighbourhoods and their linkage with politics. The neighbourhood as a locus of analysis has not received sufficient research attention so far. Jeffrey Paller's work is exceptional in this regard in that his study on urban Accra focuses exclusively on the neighbourhood level, arguing that "the underlying informal norms of settlement continue to structure the practice of politics at the neighbourhood level".[51] He identifies different types of settlements which he calls indigenous, stranger and squatter. His overall argument is that it is through claims to indigeneity that land tenure regimes are maintained, as indigenous groups are custodians of land. The non-indigenous groups, termed migrants by Paller, have accessed land initially through traditional authorities and have established patron–client relationships to further their interests. As they de facto own land, they are regarded as legitimate dwellers. In contrast, squatter settlements lack the legitimacy of migrant/stranger communities because they do not buy land directly from traditional authorities or family elders. In addition, they are regarded as illegitimate by the state. Thus, depending on the type of settlement, communities establish relationships with different opinion leaders (brokers) that structure their access to state resources (see table). Communities in squatter settlements rely on political parties and other non-state actors, as they cannot make legitimate claims on traditional authorities or indigenous family elders. The struggle for political power is therefore at the same time a struggle for legitimacy and belonging. Paller's work aptly illustrates how urbanisation processes facilitate clientelism and the politics of belonging despite progressing liberalisation and growing middle classes in Ghana.

Figure 6: Settlement type and matching opinion leaders according to Paller 2012[52]

Settlement type	Opinion leaders
Indigenous	Chiefs, family elders, religious leaders, landowners
Stranger	Teachers, religious leaders, landlords, early settlers, civic leaders
Squatter	Slumlords, scrap dealers, political party brokers, NGO leaders, youth leaders

The importance of indigeneity is also reflected in wider ideas about citizenship. Dorman describes how President Mugabe repeatedly emphasised that his core voters were "sons of the soil", unlike many urban voters who lack this connection to the earth.[53] She further contends that "The idea that citizenship is rooted in the soil speaks to nationalist discourses, but also reflects the urban/rural divisions embedded in colonial states, where explicit attempts were made to exclude unemployed Africans, and women, from cities."[54] In such a way, norms of citizenship and belonging shape perceptions of who is entitled to public goods and who is undeserving. Thus, inhabitants of informal settlements face in many instances multiple discrimination as they are neither "sons of the soil" nor deserving citizens who contribute to the formal economy.

---

[51] Paller, Jeffrey. 2012. Democracy in Ghana: Everyday Politics in Urban Africa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Dorman, Sara Rich. 2016. "'We Have Not Made Anybody Homeless': Regulation and Control of Urban Life in Zimbabwe." *Citizenship Studies* 20 (1): 84–98.
[54] Ibid.

Paller's findings on the importance of clientelist relationships in cities runs counter to the conventional wisdom that citizens living in the countryside are more susceptible to clientelism because of the tight web of social relations in rural areas. This argument has, for instance, been advanced by Koter, who explains the high success rate of incumbents in elections in rural areas by the prevalence of clientelism. According to her, rural voters can be mobilised more easily in blocs than can urban voters. [55] Paller's work shows that clientelist relationships work differently in different neighbourhoods and engender different forms of distributive politics. Nathan goes as far as stating that clientelism at the individual level is more pronounced in urban informal settlements than in rural areas.[56]

A study by Obala and Mattingly on four neighbourhoods in Nairobi corroborates Paller's finding on clientelism and ethnicity, arguing that ethnicity is used as an important resource in conflicts over land. Interestingly, the authors show that for the poorest segment, ethnicity mattered less, pointing towards the entanglements between ethnic and class identities:

> In all four study areas, those who were poorest were consistent losers in land conflicts […]
> Ethnicity seemed to have little part in their defeat, but corruption disadvantaged them significantly. Nevertheless, exclusion of the poorest was able to heighten belief in an ethnic bias in plot ownership that contributed to tensions between ethnicities.[57]

Evidence from Malawi suggests that provision of public goods is less in ethnically diverse areas, as politicians tend to provide public goods to co-ethnics in ethnically segregated areas to yield a maximum voter return.[58] An experimental study on Uganda looks at public goods provision in a Kampala neighbourhood and comes to a similar conclusion. The authors explain favouritism for one's own ethnic group by norms of reciprocity: cooperating with co-ethnics is not only morally desirable, but it is also safer, as non-compliance is sanctioned.[59] Another experimental study looks at market interactions in Lagos, Nigeria and finds that in one-off interactions ethnicity does not matter. The authors explain this as due to one-off encounters not carrying the fear of sanctioning. In these types of interactions, discrimination does not occur along ethnic lines, but rather along class lines.[60] Thus, it is important to understand that clientelist relations cannot be reduced to singular transactions, but are part of an ongoing relationship with rights and responsibilities.

Overall, Paller finds that multi-ethnic coalitions are mostly emerging in stranger neighbourhoods, as migrants are dependent on their patronage relationships with indigenous groups to secure property rights and access to public services. Coalitions with other ethnic groups can help to intensify pressure on the state. In contrast, social organising is mostly along ethnic lines in indigenous and squatter settlements. While the indigenous want to preserve their privileges, squatters rely mostly on ethnic ties connecting them to their rural place of origin, as a form of insurance due to their insecure status.[61]

[55] Koter, Dominika. 2013. "Urban and Rural Voting Patterns in Senegal: The Spatial Aspects of Incumbency, c. 1978–2012." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, no. 4: 653-79.

[56] Nathan, Noah L. 2019. Electoral Politics and Africa's Urban Transition: Class and Ethnicity in Ghana. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[57] Obala, Luke M., and Michael Mattingly. 2014. "Ethnicity, Corruption and Violence in Urban Land Conflict in Kenya." *Urban Studies* 51, no. 13: 2735-51.

[58] Ejdemyr, Simon, Eric Kramon, and Amanda Lea Robinson. 2017. "Segregation, Ethnic Favoritism, and the Strategic Targeting of Local Public Goods." *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 9: 1111-43.

[59] Habyarimana, James, Macartan Humphreys, Daniel N. Posner, and Jeremy M. Weinstein. *Coethnicity: Diversity and the Dilemmas of Collective Action.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

[60] Grossman, Shelby, and Dan Honig. 2017. "Evidence from Lagos on Discrimination across Ethnic and Class Identities in Informal Trade." *World Development* 96: 520-28.

[61] Paller, Jeffrey. 2012.

Hence, the presented evidence suggests that urban heterogeneity is not a valid predictor for reducing the salience of ethnicity and clientelism. Ethnic and socio-economic segregation persists in African cities and related notions of indigeneity have an important impact on clientelism and therewith access to goods and services. Although ethnic and class identities matter for distributive politics, citizen–state relationships are most significantly mediated through settlement patterns.

The rising middle class

In line with modernisation theorists, Tilly argued that due to better education and wealth levels urbanites were more critical and informed and that the rise of such middle classes would lead to more demand for accountability.[62] In European industrialisation, the rising middle class played a crucial role in establishing liberal democracies.[63] The argument that the rising middle class in Africa (just as the youth) is a harbinger of democratisation is still popular, especially in the media and policy circles.[64] Estimates of the middle class in sub-Saharan Africa range from 197 million to 523 people, revealing that the concept itself is subject to debate.[65] However, what is certain is that urban middle-class voters are primarily found in cities and that they comprise a significant share of the electorate, which is likely to increase further. It is assumed that middle-class urbanites are less susceptible to clientelism and ethnic voting and would therefore demand more programmatic politics and state accountability.[66] However, newer studies are more nuanced in their approach. Handley is sceptical about the politically and economically transformative impact of the rising African middle class. She argues that African middle class orientation is not necessarily towards the state, but rather towards the private sector for the provision of goods and services.[67] Another study points towards local governments' attempts to co-opt urban middle-class voters in Luanda and Nairobi by providing affordable housing.[68] Melber also cautions about the political salience of the middle class. He contends that "It is indeed the top decile (if not the top five per cent or an even smaller fraction) among the haves that mainly executes control over societies and to a large extent decides on the course of social engineering."[69] In a similar manner, a study on middle-class Kenyans suggests that middle-class voters find themselves isolated as they neither have the financial resources of the upper class nor the popular power of the lower classes to influence politics. This feeling of disempowerment contributed to their decision to stick with ethnic voting, despite their dissatisfaction with ethnic politics.[70]

[62] Tilly, Charles. 1992. Coercion, Capital, and European States, A.D. 990 – 1992. Cambridge: Blackwell.

[63] Furness, Mark, Imme Scholz, and Alejandro Guarin. 2012. "Das Wachstum der neuen Mittelschichten in Entwicklungsländern – wiederholt sich die Geschichte des Westens?" *Analysen und Stellungnahmen* 16/2012.

[64] As described in Nathan, Noah L. 2019.

[65] Haroon Bhorat, Mumbi E. Kimani, James Lappeman & Paul Egan. 2021. "Characterisation, Definition, and Measurement Issues of the Middle Class in sub-Saharan Africa", *Development Southern Africa.*

[66] For instance, Birdsall, N. 2015. "Does the Rise of the Middle Class Lock in Good Government in the Developing World?" *European Journal of Development Research* 27, no. 2: 217–29 and Koter, Dominika. 2013. "Urban and Rural Voting Patterns in Senegal: The Spatial Aspects of Incumbency, c. 1978–2012." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 51 (4): 653-79.

[67] Handley, Antoinette. 2015. "Varieties of Capitalists? The Middle-Class, Private Sector and Economic Outcomes in Africa." *Journal of International Development* 27, no. 5: 609-27.

[68] Pitcher, M. Anne. 2017. "Varieties of Residential Capitalism in Africa: Urban Housing Provision in Luanda and Nairobi." *African Affairs* 116, no. 464: 365–90.

[69] Melber, Henning. 2017. "The African Middle Class(es) – In the Middle of What?" *Review of African Political Economy* 44, no. 151: 142-54.

[70] Burbidge, Dominic. 2014. "'Can Someone Get Me Outta this Middle Class Zone?!' Pressures on Middle Class Kikuyu in Kenya's 2013 election." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 52, no. 2: 205-25.

Nathan's study on electoral politics and class in Accra points again to the importance of shifting the analysis to the neighbourhood level.[71] He finds that while there are a lot of middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods in which clientelism and ethnic voting are virtually absent, there are others that display exactly the opposite pattern. According to his analysis, it is the degree of ethnic segregation that determines these different outcomes and not the class background. Ethnically homogenous neighbourhoods are easy targets for politicians to distribute private or club goods and create an expectation of favouritism. The result is that citizens will keep voting along ethnic lines despite their middle-class status. In contrast, more diverse neighbourhoods do not receive these favours and therefore do not have an incentive to vote along ethnic lines. In a similar manner as Paller, Nathan shows the importance of neighbourhood composition for distributive politics. This phenomenon leads to a situation in which municipal elections can be captured by (minority) groups that are easy to mobilise. The resulting patronage type of politics leaves the calls for more programmatic politics by middle-class voters unmet. The disillusionment of those middle-class voters is likely leading to their abstention from voting at all, as they do not feel represented by anyone. In turn, those voters rather address the private sector to meet their needs. Nathan sees the biggest potential for reform with the supply side – that is, the local government.

Even though urbanites are wealthier than their rural counterparts and have higher expectations with regards to service delivery (see section I), these expectations do not necessarily lead to more programmatic politics and accountability.

---

[71] Nathan, Noah L. 2019.

Understanding density: collective action

Cities are known to facilitate collective action.[72] Cities improve communication links between people and lower organisational and transport costs due to density.[73] The presence of elites and educated leaders who can lead mobilisation is also vital for organising collective action events.[74] Collective action can take many forms. The literature mainly distinguishes between more institutionalised civil society organisations and looser organisational forms such as social movements or even ephemeral protest events. While the employed tactics vary, social movements are more likely to organise protests, whereas civil society organisations generally use more institutionalised channels for lobbying and advocacy.

Civil society organisations

Since the 1990s, the number of civil society organisations (CSOs) has dramatically increased in Africa.[75] While there is no reliable data on the location of CSOs across Africa, there is reason to assume that urban areas, and capital cities in particular, attract a large number of CSOs. This is not only due to the fact that (donor-funded) CSOs have a bias towards hiring educated elites, but also because of logistical reasons.[76] Not only domestic, but also international CSOs often have their headquarters or country office in capital cities, which provide better accessibility, infrastructures and contacts to CSO networks. While this type of organisation often assumes coordinating functions for operations across the country or region, many of them are also involved in campaigning at the national level. Organisations that specialise in lobbying and advocacy at the national level are also to be found in urban centres where access to political target groups is easier. Despite ongoing advocacy efforts, there is also a burgeoning literature that questions the political salience of CSOs in the global South, of which the majority is relying on donor funding.[77] Instead of assuming political functions such as advocacy, acting as watchdogs or representing the interests of marginalised groups, many organisations are focusing instead on implementing foreign-funded donor projects and are active in service delivery. Hence, CSOs are criticised for lacking constituents and grassroots representation, which comes at the expense of their democratic functions.[78] At the same time, these organisations act as important coalition partners for grassroots organisations and social movements due to their linkages to the international level as well as to political decision makers.

---

[72] Collective action does not only include protests, but also other forms of social organising, for instance in unions. See Collord, Michaela, Tom Goodfellow, and Lewis Abedi Asante. 2021. "Uneven Development, Politics and Governance in Urban Africa: An Analytical Literature Review." *African Cities Research Consortium Working Paper* 2.
[73] Glaeser, Edward L., and Bryce Millett Steinberg. 2017.
[74] Wallace, Jeremy. 2014. Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution, and Regime Survival in China. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[75] Lewis, David. 2004. The Management of Non-governmental Development Organizations: An Introduction. London: Routledge.
[76] Kamstra, Jelmer, and Lau Schulpen. 2015. "Worlds Apart But Much Alike: Donor Funding and the Homogenization of NGOs in Ghana and Indonesia." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 50: 331–57.
[77] For an overview of the debate see Banks, Nicola, David Hulme, and Michael Edwards. 2015. "NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort?" *World Development* 66: 707-18.
[78] Banks, Nicola, David Hulme, and Michael Edwards. 2015.

Apart from donor-funded civil society organisations, trade unions and informal sector associations are also primarily active in urban areas. While trade union membership is not well documented for the continent, the few existing sources point to the fact that membership of formal workers is quantitatively significant. However, due to the neoliberal restructuring of labour relations, unions have suffered membership losses in the last decades. In addition, many countries do not enforce existing legislation allowing workers to unionise, which impedes effective union activities in the private sector.[79] Union membership in the formal sector is therefore skewed towards public sector officials. While most unions focus primarily on labour rights and not on political questions, the recent protests in Sudan and Burkina Faso were significantly shaped by union activists. Besides, there is a vibrant associational life of informal workers that is particularly significant in urban areas. These associations include, for instance, market vendors' associations, hawkers' and squatters' associations, transport workers' associations, informal enterprise associations and urban agricultural cooperatives (to a lesser extent also producer cooperatives).[80] Some of these informal associations are integrated into joint union federations alongside the formal sector. A non-representative survey among poor households in Lagos in 2014 found that more than 80 percent of the survey households were part of a trade group or cooperative.[81] It is estimated that the organised minibus taxi associations and motorcycle taxi (*boda boda*) associations in Kampala have a membership of 70,000, mirroring the significance of informal sector associations.[82] These associations use collective action that goes beyond clientelist relations to engage with often predatory states, sometimes successfully. For instance, market trader associations in Lagos actively work against government interference and predatory politicians[83] or bus drivers in Dar es Salaam use strikes and union organising to fight back against state transport regulation and poor labour conditions.[84]

While density thus clearly facilitates collective action, it is uncertain whether these engagements lead to more participation and accountability. In some instances, organisations have managed to circumvent clientelist interactions and have succeeded in gaining long-lasting influence.[85] Other case studies find that these interactions are rather short-lived and revolve around single issues[86], while others report how collective action was co-opted by the authorities.[87] A study on informal enterprise organisations in Nigeria concludes that "The social and often legal marginality of the groups involved, and the increasing fragmentation of cluster networks and associations, has continued to undermine their ability to influence political decision-making, whether through patrimonial or more formal channels."[88] Hence, not only the different channels for accessing the authorities matter, but also the social capital and political leverage of organisations.

[79] McQuinn, Mark. 2017. "Strengths and Weaknesses of African Trade Unions in the Neoliberal Period with a Sierra Leone Case Study." *Africana Studia* 28: 111-29.
[80] Collord, Michaela, Tom Goodfellow, and Lewis Abedi Asante. 2021.
[81] Lawanson, Taibat, and Leke Oduwaye. 2014. "Socio-economic Adaptation Strategies of the Urban Poor in the Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria." *African Review of Economics and Finance* 6, no. 1: 139-60.
[82] Spooner, Dave, and John Mark Mwanika. 2017. "Trade Unions in Transformation. Transforming Transport Unions through Mass Organisation of Informal Workers in Uganda." Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Study.
[83] Grossman, Shelby (2020). "The Politics of Order in Informal Markets: Evidence from Lagos." *World Politics* 72, no. 1: 47–79.
[84] Rizzo, Matteo. 2017. *Taken for a Ride: Grounding Neoliberalism, Precarious Labour and Public Transport in an African Metropolis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[85] Rizzo, Matteo. 2017. See also Mitlin, Diana. 2018. "Beyond Contention: Urban Social Movements and their Multiple Approaches to Secure Transformation." *Environment and Urbanization* 30, no. 2: 557–74.
[86] Goodfellow, Tom, and Kristof Titeca. 2012. "Presidential Intervention and the Changing 'Politics of Survival' in Kampala's Informal Economy." *Cities* 29, no. 4: 264–70.
[87] Chirisa, Innocent, Elmond Bandauko, and Nyasha Takawira Mutsindikwa.2015. "Distributive Politics at Play in Harare, Zimbabwe: Case for Housing Cooperatives." *Bandung: Journal of the Global South* 2: 1–13
[88] Meagher, Kate. 2011. "Informal Economies and Urban Governance in Nigeria: Popular Empowerment or Political Exclusion?" *African Studies Review* 54, no. 2: 47-72.

Modernisation theory's hypothesis that educated urban elites form worker organisations that lead to more democratic accountability cannot be confirmed. The mere existence of civil society organisations does not necessarily lead to more accountability. The presented evidence indicates that formal CSOs are less involved in contentious politics than informal sector organisations (and social movements as the next section shows). These findings mirror research by Branch and Mampilly, who dismiss the argument that depicts "the professional, globalized middle class as leading Africa's transition towards deepened democracy".[89]

Popular protest

Cities are known for being places of popular protest. Studies have shown that there is a clear correlation between the size of urban centres and the occurrence of protests in Africa.[90] The sheer mass of people increases anonymity and makes participation in protests less risky for the individual protester. At the same time, only a small percentage of the overall inhabitants of a city is required to get together to create a critical mass.[91] Uprisings in large and, in particular, capital cities tend to be more effective because of the proximity of protests to elites and decision makers.[92] For instance, Ben Ali was only defeated in Tunisia when the protests reached the capital Tunis.[93]

Data from the Armed Conflict and Event Data Project suggests that protests and riots are increasing in Africa; researchers call this the third wave of protests. Previous protest waves were recorded in the 1950s and 1960s, when African nations were fighting for independence, and in the 1970s, when the oil crisis triggered economic hardship which made people take to the streets to demonstrate against austerity policies. The protests targeted both economic grievances and political repression and thus contributed to the political liberalisation reforms of the 1990s.[94]

The current protest wave started in the 2000s against a backdrop of rapid urbanisation and improved digital means of communication (see figure 7).[95] According to Mueller, the current protests have three distinct characteristics as compared to previous waves: "communication technology is more advanced; opposition to incumbent regimes is more vociferous; and the poor are more involved."[96] Social media users are said to be more critical of regimes and the anonymity of the internet facilitates protests in authoritarian settings. Even though movements that start online do not always lead to effective mobilisation offline, online mobilisation played an important role in the majority of the latest protest movements, such as

[89] Branch, Adam, and Zachariah Mampilly. 2015. *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change.* London: Zed Books.

[90] Bahgat, Karim, Halvard Buhaug, and Henrik Urdal. 2018. *Urban Social Disorder: An Update*. Oslo: PRIO Paper; Urdal, Henrik, and Kristian Hoelscher. 2012. "Explaining Urban Social Disorder and Violence: An Empirical Study of Event Data from Asian and sub-Saharan African cities." *International Interactions* 38, no. 4: 512–28; Dorward, Nick, and Sean Fox. 2022. "Population Pressure, Political Institutions, and Protests: A Multilevel Analysis of Protest Events in African Cities." *Political Geography* 99, no. 102762.

[91] Wallace, Jeremy. 2014.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Glaeser, Edward L., and Bryce Millett Steinberg. 2017.

[94] Branch, Adam, and Zachariah Mampilly. 2015. *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change*. London: Zed Books; Mueller, Lisa. 2019. "Popular Protest and Accountability." In *Routledge Handbook of Democratization in Africa*, edited by Gabrielle Lynch and Peter VonDoepp, 392-03. London: Routledge.

[95] Sanches, Edalina Rodrigues. 2022. "Introduction: Zooming in on Protest and Change in Africa." In *Popular Protest, Political Opportunities, and Change in Africa*, edited by Edalina Rodrigues Sanches, 1-18. London: Routledge.

[96] Mueller, Lisa. 2019. "Popular Protest and Accountability." In *Routledge Handbook of Democratization in Africa*, edited by Gabrielle Lynch and Peter Von Doepp, 395. London: Routledge

Figure 7: Protests and riots between 2000 and 2022 across Africa. Source: ACLED.[97]
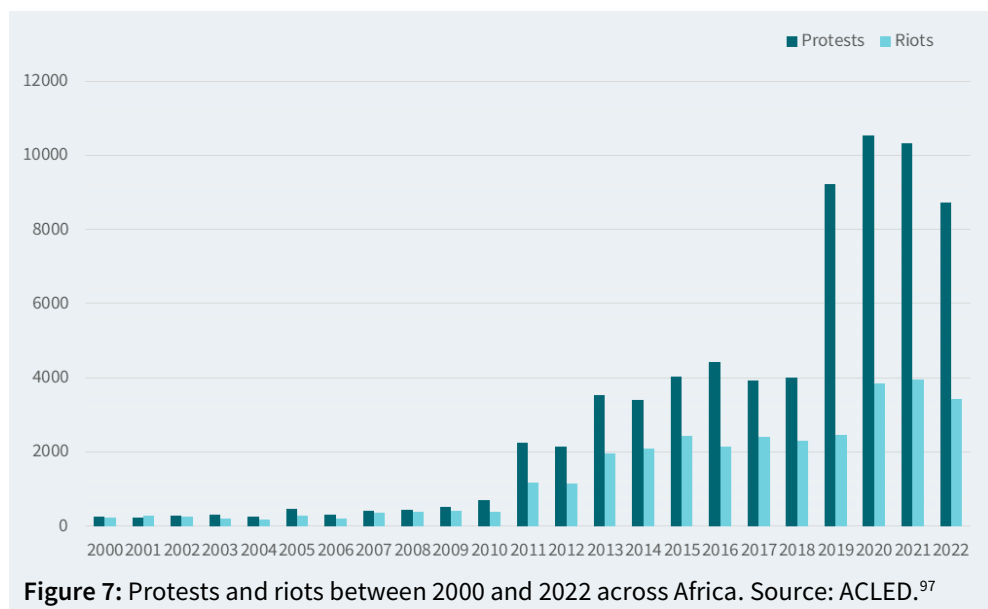
#EndSARS or #RhodesMustFall.[98] While, according to Mueller, protest organisers are predominantly middle class, they use their resources to mobilise the poor around popular grievances over service delivery and jobs.[99] Thus, recent protests tend to be more socio-economically diverse and young people play a prominent role.[100]

Branch and Mampilly also point towards the importance of the urban poor or "underclass" in the third wave protests. At the heart of the participation of the urban poor in protests is their "relation to state power, a relation defined by an alternation between neglect and direct violence, between extra-legality and illegality."[101] According to Branch and Mampilly, protests that are predominantly shaped by the urban poor might not conform to civil society norms of popular protests. Instead, protests might be leaderless, spontaneous, without a clear agenda and sometimes violent. While protests that involve organised civil society act within the realm of negotiating citizen–state relationships, the protests described by Branch and Mampilly can be characterised as an attempt to subvert state power in its entirety.[102] Their argument mirrors the findings of section I, which describes the low levels of trust, the critical attitude towards democratic institutions and the low sense of security that urbanites exhibit. These findings point to an overall disenchantment with democratic politics that is reflected in lower participation in elections and a higher likelihood of joining protests.

Overall, no clear picture emerges of the motives for protests. Although "food riots" once more played a major role in the protests around the 2007 financial crisis, these cannot easily be separated from political demands. The Arab Spring of 2011 is the most popular example, but movements such as *Y'en a marre* in Senegal in 2011 and *Le Balai Citoyen* in Burkina Faso in 2014 also revolved around socio-economic grievances as well as amendments to

[97] ACLED. 2022. "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)." Accessed 30 November 2022 https://acleddata.com/.
[98] Ruijgrok, Kris. 2017. "From the Web to the Streets: Internet and Protests under Authoritarian Regimes." Democratization 24, no. 3: 498–520; Bosch, Tanja. (2017) "Twitter Activism and Youth in South Africa: The Case of #RhodesMustFall." Information Communication and Society 20, no. 2: 221–32.
[99] Mueller, Lisa. 2018. *Political Protest in Contemporary Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[100] Honwana, Alcinda M. 2012. The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa. Virginia: Kumarian Press.
[101] Branch, Adam, and Zachariah Mampilly. 2015. *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change.* London: Zed Books, p. 20.
[102] Ibid.

presidential terms.[103] An analysis of the Burkina Faso protests reveals how the fuel and food crisis in 2007 to 2008 brought together a multitude of actors, such as trade unions, student groups, human rights and other organisations that enabled mass mobilisation.[104] Apart from socio-economic grievances, researchers argue that activists mobilise particularly successfully around constitutional issues, building on the legacy of the pro-democracy movements of the 1990s.[105] Another feature of the new protest wave is the mobilisation around women's and LGBT rights[106] and the role played by popular musicians. In North Africa, hip-hop has long been a form of political and social contestation, but musicians also played an important role in the recent protests in Senegal and Burkina Faso mentioned above. Another prominent example is Bobi Wine in Uganda who challenged president Museveni in the 2021 elections and formed his own political party.[107]

While it is clear that urban density is an important factor in the current protest wave, the question at hand is whether (urban) protests are politically effective or even lead to regime change. The mere existence of protests is not necessarily a valid indicator for the democratic ambitions of citizens. Studies found that protestors do not necessarily support democracy more than non-protesters. Reasons for joining protests are diverse, and protesters can also be supporters of autocratic rulers.[108] A statistical analysis including 435 non-democratic regimes in over 100 countries shows that larger cities and higher levels of urban concentration negatively affect regime survival[109]. However, this finding seems to be only valid for non-democratic regimes; studies including democratic regimes did not find this effect.[110] One possible explanation would be that citizens find other ways than protest to express their grievances in democratic regimes. But even if protests do not lead to regime change they can contribute or lead to coups, elite splits or foreign intervention, as happened in Libya.[111] Historically, there are a numerous protests that had significant outcomes. Apart from the independence movements, there were also a number of urban protests due to food price escalations in the 1970s in Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria and Liberia which toppled regimes.[112] More recently, the Arab Spring eventually contributed to the defeat of Ben Ali (Tunisia), Mubarak (Egypt), al-Bashir (Sudan) and Bouteflika (Algeria). However, the ensuing democratic reforms have still not materialised. Protests against the extension of presidential term limits were successful in a few countries, namely Niger, Senegal and Burkina Faso, but less so in other places, including Cameroon, Burundi or Guinea.[113] It should be noted as well that in numerous examples of protests, regimes used brute force and arbitrary arrests to suppress protest activities. The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria are one prominent example, but also recent protests in N'Djamena and Moundou in Chad.[114] Even if protests are not

[103] Wienkoop, Nina-Kathrin, and Louisa Prause. 2017. "Who is Responsible for Corruption? Framing Strategies of Social Movements in West Africa Mobilizing against Presidential Term Amendments." *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 10, no. 3: 850-73; Sanches, Edalina Rodrigues. 2022.
[104] Engels, Bettina. 2015. "Different Means of Protest, Same Causes: Popular Struggles in Burkina Faso." *Review of African Political Economy* 42, no. 143: 92–106.
[105] Rakner, Lise. 2021. "Don't Touch My Constitution! Civil Society Resistance to Democratic Backsliding in Africa's Pluralist Regimes." *Global Policy* 12: 95-105.; Yarwood, Janette. 2016. "The Struggle over Term Limits in Africa: The Power of Protest." *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3: 51–60.
[106] Currier, Ashley, and Joelle M. Cruz. 2014. "Civil Society and Sexual Struggles in Africa." In *The Handbook of Civil Society in Africa*, edited by Ebenezer Obadare, 337-360. New York: Springer.
[107] Sanches, Edalina Rodrigues. 2022.
[108] Mueller, Lisa. 2018; Beissinger, Mark. 2013. "The Semblance of Democratic Revolution: Coalitions in Ukraine's Orange Revolution." *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 3: 20 – 48.
[109] Wallace, Jeremy. 2014.
[110] Glaeser, Edward L., and Bryce Millett Steinberg. 2017.
[111] Wallace, Jeremy. 2014.
[112] Sanches, Edalina Rodrigues. 2022.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Maclean, Ruth, and Mahamat Adamou. "Security Forces Open Fire on Protesters in Chad, Killing at Least 50." *The New York Times,* October 21, 2022.

successful in enforcing their claims, they can incite further community engagement and activism, creating solidarity and feelings of empowerment. Giugni and Grasso found that protests not only lead to enhanced community activism, but also positively influence voter turn-out and party membership. Social movements can thus contribute to a more democratic culture.[115] Sanches distinguishes between "the material (laws, policies, institutions) and non-material (social-capital, perceptions, visions) buildings of democracy and good governance" that can result from protests.[116] Branch and Mampilly point towards new forms of political consciousness and political imagination that can derive from protests.[117]

Partisan politics and elections

The growing urban electorate has also changed partisan politics on the continent. In line with a worldwide trend of rising populism, Africa is seeing an increase of populist leaders that primarily address the urban poor.[118] Resnick describes how "Populism involves personalistic leaders forging direct ties with diverse and unorganized constituencies, often through sociocultural performances that may involve vulgar language, dramatic acts, and a celebration of anti-intellectualism".[119] Hence, populism relies on a discourse that juxtaposes a corrupt elite with the ordinary (pure) people. Populist leaders have been able to mobilise voters in both national level and municipal elections. Examples of presidents whose campaigns relied on populist mobilisation include William Ruto (Kenya), the late Michael Sata (Zambia) or Jacob Zuma (South Africa).

Nairobi's former governor Mike Sonko poses a famous example of a populist leader who specifically addressed the urban youth with his flamboyant outfits and pompous lifestyle.[120] Being a former criminal and prisoner, he presented himself as "one of us" who knows the realities in Nairobi's informal settlements (despite the massive wealth he had acquired). He became known when he successfully appealed to President Kenyatta to stop demolitions in an informal settlement called Balozi in Nairobi.[121] As informal settlements accommodate the majority of the urban poor, they are a much politicised subject used in political campaigning. While in the example above politicians refrained from slum clearings to maintain or gain voter support[122], informal settlements can also be used to collectively criminalise and punish the urban poor for political reasons. For instance, the Zimbabwean "Operation Murambatsvina" (clear the filth) in 2005, during which more than 90,000 shacks were demolished and 20,000 informal vendors arrested, were attributed to the success of the opposition in these areas. Urban opposition voters were supposed to be intimidated and driven back to the rural areas.[123] The density of urban informal settlements is hence an important political factor.

[115] Giugni, Marco, and Maria T. Grasso. 2016. "The Biographical Impact of Participation in Social Movement Activities: Beyond Highly Committed New Left Activism." In *The Consequences of Social Movements*, edited by Lorenzo Bosi, Marco Giugni, and Katrin Uba: 85–105. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[116] Sanches, Edalina Rodrigues. 2022. "Introduction: Zooming in on Protest and Change in Africa." In *Popular Protest, Political Opportunities, and Change in Africa*, edited by Edalina Rodrigues Sanches, 14. London: Routledge.

[117] Branch, Adam, and Zachariah Mampilly. 2015. p. 7.

[118] Resnick, Danielle. 2012.

[119] Resnick, Danielle. 2019. "Urban Politics." In *Routledge Handbook of Democratization in Africa*, edited by Gabrielle Lynch and Peter VonDoepp, 408. London: Routledge.

[120] Mutahi, Basillioh. "Kenya's Mike Sonko: The rise and fall of Nairobi's ex-governor." BBC, 28 March 2021.

[121] Mutahi, Basillioh. 2021.

[122] This is not a singular instance, see e.g. Gillespie, Tom. 2017. "From Quiet to Bold Encroachment: Contesting Dispossession in Accra's Informal Sector." *Urban Geography* 38, no. 7: 974–92.

[123] Potts, Deborah. 2006. "'Restoring Order?' Operation Murambatsvina and the Urban Crisis in Zimbabwe." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, no. 2: 273-91.

Resnick points to the fact that even though populist politics relies much on personalistic linkages (a charismatic leader representing the people) and clientelism, there is also an element of programmatic politics involved:

> *Parties that employ populist strategies therefore offer a package of policies oriented around providing goods, services, and recognition to those who have been excluded from the economic and political status quo.[124]*

This reflects the large share of urban poor who have higher expectations towards service delivery than their rural counterparts. Mike Sonko, for instance, promised to provide services for all citizens, when he became governor in 2017.[125] In a similar vein, William Ruto's "bottom up" economic campaign contained programmatic appeals.[126] Resnick's study of Zambia's "Patriotic Front" shows that the populist strategy of mobilising voters by resorting to programmatic appeals was more successful than other mobilisation strategies relying on vote buying or ethno-lingustic appeals.[127] This is an interesting finding giving more nuance to the question of whether the salience of ethnicity and clientelism is reducing in urban areas. As Resnick's study relies only on voter mobilisation, the question remains unanswered as to what extent voter mobilisation is embedded in or detached from everyday forms of clientelism. Opalo provides a compelling account of the different cross-ethnic alliance-building strategies in different regions during the 2022 Kenyan elections, pointing again to the importance of including sub-national level data into analyses. Even though Opalo finds weakening attachments to ethnic groups, he contends that Odinga's outstanding performance among non-co-ethnic voters does not necessarily mean that ethnicity does not play a role in Kenyan politics anymore. He concludes that the success of programmatic politics will "depend on whether elite pacts result in strong inter-generational non-ethnic parties that offer opportunities for upward mobility regardless of ethnicity".[128]

Populist mobilisation contributes to the success of opposition parties on the continent. As opposition parties typically have fewer resources for campaigning than the ruling party, they focus on urban areas, which are more densely populated.[129] There are a number of examples of cities that are currently governed by mayors of opposition parties, such as the Democratic Alliance in Cape Town and three metropolitan areas in Gauteng,[130] the Democratic Movement of Mozambique in Beira and the All People's Congress in Freetown. The success of opposition parties in local elections did not in some instances, such as in Nigeria and Zambia, presage success in national elections. Surprisingly, there are only few examples of mayors who eventually became president.[131]

Partisan politics are particularly influential when mayors are elected and not appointed, as the performance of mayors is evaluated as a proxy for party and national elections.[132] However, mandates for mayors differ greatly across the continent and also reflect colonial rule to a certain extent. In Francophone countries, such as Benin and Senegal, mayors are in office for four to five years, can be re-elected and have wide-ranging powers. In Anglophone countries, mayors tend more often to have ceremonial functions and less decision-making

[124] Resnick, Danielle. 2012. "Opposition Parties and the Urban Poor in African Democracies." *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 11: 1358.
[125] Mutahi, Basillioh. 2021.
[126] Opalo, Ken O. 2022. "Hustlers versus Dynasties? The Elusive Quest for Issue-based Politics in Kenya." *OSF Preprints*, September 11, 2022.
[127] Resnick, Danielle. 2012.
[128] Opalo, Ken O. 2022.
[129] Harding, Robin. 2010.
[130] Winning, Alexander, and Wendell Roelf. "In a Blow to ANC, Opposition DA Mayors Elected in Major S.African cities." *Reuters*, 23 November 2021.
[131] Resnick, Danielle. 2019.
[132] Ibid.

authority. Re-election might not always be allowed and in a number of countries decision-making powers are rather with town clerks or appointed chief executive officers.[133] A different dynamic emerges in countries that use systems in which local governments are indirectly elected, for instance via councils. In Kenya, municipalities and towns are governed by boards which are appointed by the county government. This means that the link between citizens and their governments is less proximate. If elections pass through councils it is usually the party that wins the majority of seats that determines who assumes the post of the mayor. In such a scenario, mayors are much more bound to party lines than in direct elections. Rwanda poses an exception to this rule, as despite the indirect election system at the local level, partisan affiliation is forbidden.[134]

Where mayors are elected, this facilitates the ability of national politics to affect local decision-making. If cities are ruled by opposition parties and are reliant on coordination with other tiers of government that are ruled by the incumbent regime ("vertically divided authority"), there is a lack of incentive for cooperation.[135] In these instances, incumbent regimes have used a number of tactics to curb the opposition's influence. One of these strategies is to delay or withhold intergovernmental transfers. This happened in Lagos, when the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) came in power. As the state government lacked the resources to implement reforms, they decided to increase its tax revenue collection, which unexpectedly contributed to their success.[136] Due to Nigeria's federalist system, the state of Lagos had the power to raise taxes (in many francophone countries local governments do not have these powers). Generally, local governments prefer intergovernmental transfers, as they do not want to charge their voters with unpopular taxes. It also allows local governments to blame the central government for poor service delivery.[137] Situations in which authority is vertically divided thus provides certain incentives for local governments to gain more independence from central governments by relying on taxation.

Taxation not only helps African cities to increase much-needed own-source revenue[138], but can also be used as an instrument to increase citizen–state accountability. Studies found that if citizens view paying taxes as their responsibility in the "fiscal social contract"[139] and the state's responsibility to deliver in return, this can contribute to state legitimacy and enhanced responsiveness.[140] This mirrors the experience of the ACN in Lagos mentioned above. Generally, urbanites are on average five percent more likely to state that their government has the right to collect taxes (one explanation for this could be the higher education level in cities). [141] However, Afrobarometer's latest survey round reveals that the perceived legitimacy of taxation has declined by 10 percentage points over the past decade in Africa.[142] This is related to citizens' impression of how the money is spent: only half of all

[133] Ibid.
[134] Resnick, Danielle. 2020. "The Politics of Urban Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Regional & Federal Studies* 31, no. 1: 139-61.
[135] Garman, Christopher, Stephan Haggard, and Eliza J. Willis. 2001. "Fiscal Decentralisation: A political theory with Latin American cases." *World Politics* 53, no. 2: 205–36.
[136] Bodea, Cristina, and Adrienne LeBas. 2016. "The Origins of Voluntary Compliance: Attitudes toward Taxation in Urban Nigeria." *British Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 1: 215-38.
[137] Resnick, Danielle. 2014. "Urban Governance and Service Delivery in African Cities: The Role of Politics and Policies." *Development Policy Review* 32, no. 1: 3-17.
[138] Haas, Astrid. forthcoming. "African Cities: Unlocking Financing for Urbanisation." *Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief*.
[139] Moore, Mick. 2004. "Revenues, State Formation, and the Quality of Governance in Developing Countries." *International Political Science Review* 25: 297-319.
[140] Moore, Mick. 2004; D'Arcy, Michelle. 2011. "Why do Citizens Assent to Pay Tax? Legitimacy, Taxation and the African State." Afrobarometer Working Paper 126.
[141] Isbell, Thomas. 2022. "Footing the Bill? Less Legitimacy, More Avoidance Mark African Views on Taxation." Afrobarometer Policy Paper 78.
[142] Ibid.

respondents state that the government is using taxes for the well-being of citizens. Therefore, in order to create a virtuous circle, governments need to visibly improve their performance in service delivery. Afrobarometer also found that those who are satisfied with their government's performance are more willing to pay higher taxes in return for improved service delivery.[143]

However, there is also a certain trade-off between accountability and intergovernmental collaboration. This can be further exemplified by Rwandan politics. As mayors sign performance contracts with the president to ensure that city politics is in line with national development plans, there is better coordination between the central and local governments. However, this does not allow for the flexibility to put forward locally tailored political projects that might enhance local accountability.[144]

Other subversion strategies to harm opposition rule in the case of vertically divided authority would be to reduce the size of the mayor's territorial mandate or to replace elected municipal bodies by institutions that are appointed by the federal level. [145] This recentralisation happened, for instance, in Kampala in 2010 when the Kampala Capital City Act was passed that instituted the Kampala Capital City Authority. This central government agency is now in charge of most of the city's affairs, taking away power from a popular elected council and mayor.[146] While this decision was widely criticised for its political repercussions, particularly the weakening of democratic accountability, the centralisation process also opened up a window of opportunity for much-needed reforms. Due to the backing of the KCCA by the president, successful administrative reforms were implemented that enabled the city to massively increase its own-source revenues.[147]

In other countries, such as Botswana, additional councillors can be appointed by the Minister of Local Government. These additional councillors have the same authority as the elected ones and are appointed if districts have special development needs.[148] Thus, recentralisation is often justified by the poor competence of the elected local government. For instance, in Senegal the central government removed Dakar's responsibility for trash collection and froze transfers as soon as local officials had developed a new and more efficient system. The resulting pollution due to workers' strikes was used by the central government to justify its decision on the basis of capacity.[149] While the primary reason for recentralisation is not always clearly discernible, these practices have important implications for the relationship between citizens and the state; if local governments are no longer elected, citizens cannot voice their discontent by voting for someone else. The cited examples show that service delivery is highly politicised. Central governments are careful to further decentralise decision-making powers, especially if these services have a high visibility and/or high potential for attracting donor funding.[150]

[143] Ibid.
[144] Resnick, Danielle. 2020.
[145] Resnick, Danielle. 2020.
[146] Muwanga, Nansozi K., Paul I. Mukwaya, and Tom Goodfellow. 2020. "Carrot, Stick and Statute: Elite Strategies and Contested Dominance in Kampala." EDIS Working Paper 146: 1-38.
[147] Haas, Astrid Rosemary Ndagano. 2022. "Decentralisation, Revenue and the Capital City." *Unpublished Manuscript.*
[148] Kathyola, Janet, and Oluwatoyin Job. 2011. Decentralisation in Commonwealth Africa: Experiences from Botswana, Cameroon, Ghana, Mozambique, and Tanzania. London: Commonwealth Secretariat.
[149] Resnick, Danielle. 2019.
[150] Resnick, Danielle. 2014.

Conclusions and further research

The relationship between urbanisation and political regimes is indeed much more complex than is assumed by modernisation theorists' thinking. Taking the European sequence as a point of departure in which urbanisation was accompanied by industrialisation and job creation and led to the formation of a working class and unionisation, which created a demand for democratic rule, is of little analytic value for understanding current urbanisation processes in Africa.[151] Urbanisation does not automatically lead to democratisation, but it structures the way citizens relate to the state, through settlement patterns, growing pressure on public goods and services, and improved access to education and communication technology. Citizens demand accountability both in their individual relationships with the state (through accessing government representatives or brokers and through voting), but also collectively (through protests and social organising). Yet, demands for more programmatic politics and accountability are often undermined by the state's effort to co-opt individuals and organisations. While urban density facilitates collective accountability demands that often transcend ethnic and clientelist ties, the link between urbanisation and individual accountability relationships with the state is more complex.

Ethnic voting and clientelism prevail in informal settlements and also in many other urban neighbourhoods primarily depending on the degree of ethnic segregation. Demands for more programmatic politics by middle class voters remain largely unheard. However, the rise of populism can be interpreted as one response to service delivery demands placed by urban voters. Even though urbanites support taxation more than their rural counterparts, the "fiscal social contract" between citizens and the state is losing legitimacy. Indirect voting systems that are in place in some African cities, as well as efforts to recentralise institutions to curb oppositional influence, further weaken accountability relationships between citizens and the state. Hence, the empirical evidence suggests that political subjectivities are shaped by an experience of the limitations of a clientelist system paired with state neglect and unresponsiveness, which depoliticises middle-class urbanites, who turn to the private sector, and politicises the urban poor, who take to the streets. At the same time, clientelism is at the heart of everyday struggles for survival.

Thus, the paper does not share the frequently held view that the middle class will demand more programmatic politics. The evidence suggests that the force to reckon with is rather the poor masses. It is not enough for governments to cater to the elites anymore, as the urban poor becomes too large a share of the population to ignore. Hence, I would argue that inequality and class are under-researched variables that will continue to determine how governments mobilise voters and distribute resources. This does not mean in turn that the salience of ethnicity and clientelism is declining. The recent Kenyan election shows that populist and programmatic appeals coincide with clientelism and the building of ethnic alliances.[152] More research is needed to understand how the different appeals and distributive strategies coexist and what outcomes they produce. Research on electoral mobilisation needs to take into account the ongoing everyday clientelist relations in which electoral mobilisation is embedded. In addition, research on the politicisation of ethnic identities is

[151] Maihack, Henrik. 2019. "Die neue Macht der Städte. Wie Afrikas wachsende Städte die Politik auf den Kopf stellen und über die Zukunft des Kontinents entscheiden." *IPG Journal Afrika*, 10 October 2019.
[152] Opalo, Ken O. 2022.

often class-blind. Taking into account the growing inequalities in cities by looking at the effects of residential segregation as well as of the lessening of inter-class contacts could be a promising research avenue.

A recurring theme in this paper has been the politics of service delivery and redistribution. Grappling with the processes underlying service delivery is key to understanding contemporary citizen–state relations and needs to be dealt with in a more systematic manner. Also the "fiscal contract" between citizens and the state is a much under-researched topic. The literature on clientelism from the citizen's point of view is currently largely disconnected from the literature that deals with how government actors use service delivery as a political tool. There is also a lack of engagement with brokers such as chiefs, religious leaders or party officials who act as intermediaries between citizens and the state. Density could make monitoring more difficult on behalf of the broker and urbanites might have more options to choose different avenues to access state resources.[153] The extent to which these brokering relationships significantly differ between rural and urban areas has not, however, been systematically studied.

In addition, the evidence on neighbourhood-level interactions in cities is still scarce. The studies reviewed in this paper suggest that studying settlement patterns and intra-urban variation is key to understanding clientelism, distributive politics and electoral mobilisation. An interesting caveat in this regard is the relationship between municipal and national   politics. While most studies of populism have been conducted at the national level, it would be interesting to analyse to what extent particular outcomes of municipal elections impact on national level elections and vice versa. More research can also be conducted on how the success of opposition parties in major African cities influences national level politics.

Overall, more comparative research is needed on different neighbourhoods and ultimately on different cities and countries. This will help to further theorise the empirical observations made in different case studies. Comparative research should also cover different city sizes, peri-urban areas and rural areas in order to flesh out the interlinkages and distinctions between rural and urban political subjectivities. This would also further the debate on whether it is more accurate to speak of a continual flow of people between urban and rural areas as opposed to urbanisation.

---

[153] Post, Alison E. "Cities and Politics in the Developing World." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 115-33.

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
**German Institute for
International and Security Affairs**

IDOS | German Institute of Development and Sustainability

IfW KIEL INSTITUTE FOR THE WORLD ECONOMY