



Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations - A case study of Ghana

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Introduction

Ghana's steadily improving democracy is an exception to the democratic backsliding trend in Africa. Significantly, the role of political parties has been important in this progress. Ghana is a de facto two-party democracy: only the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) have won elections and formed governments that served their full term, and they are also the only two parties that have served as credible opposition parties.¹

A key Ghanaian democratic innovation has been the attempt to increase citizen participation through these parties. The two main parties have decentralized their organisational structures to involve citizens in deliberation at the grassroots level. This organisational capacity is rare in Africa where "political parties are organizationally weak, with little grassroots presence, and thus limited capacity to engage citizens, represent their views, or mobilize voters."² Thanks to the decentralised party structures of the NDC and the NPP, their grassroots presence has created a politically active and engaged electorate.

This is not a typical democratic innovation in the orthodox sense but meets wider definition of ideas for increasing citizen participation in democratic processes.³ It has pushed participation "from below".⁴ Decentralisation has generated enthusiasm for electoral politics in Ghanaians of every demographic, including the youth, resulting in electoral democracy becoming the "only game in town". Still, this Ghanaian democratic innovation has its drawbacks as it can fuel political patronage and crowd out alternative forms of civic activism and engagement, such as non-partisan and class-based forms of mobilisation and collective action.⁵

Grassroots Party Organisation and Active Civic Engagement in Ghana

The NDC and the NPP have, through their organisational structures,⁶ brought into being what Robert Dahl describes as the "establishment of highly developed grass-roots party organizations".⁶ The two parties have a strong organisational presence across all levels, from the national level through to the regional, constituency and grassroots levels; in Ghana's case the grassroots level of political parties are the branch/polling station units of their organisational structures.⁷ They have established executive committees across all of these levels, with various positions open for interested members to contest in party elections at party conferences, congresses, and meetings of either ordinary members or elected representatives, as specified by each parties' constitution.⁸

1 Minion K.C. Morrison, "Political Parties in Ghana through Four Republics: A path to Democratic Consolidation," *Comparative Politics* (2004): 421-442, doi:10.2307/4150169; Lindsay Whitfield, "Change for a better Ghana: Party competition, institutionalization and alternation in Ghana's 2008 elections," *African Affairs* 108, no. 433 (2009): 621-641, doi:10.1093/afraf/adx056; Anja Osei, "Political Parties in Ghana: Agents Of Democracy?," *Journal Of Contemporary African Studies* 31, no. 4 (2013): 543-563, doi:10.1080/02589001.2013.839227.

2 Matthias Krönke, Sarah J. Lockwood, and Robert Mattes, "Party footprints in Africa: Measuring local party presence across the continent," *Party Politics* 28, no. 2 (2022): 208-222, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211008352>.

3 Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar, "Introduction to The Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance: the field of democratic innovation," in *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*, eds. Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar, 1-10, (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

4 Lindsay Whitfield, "Change for a better Ghana"; George M. Bob-Milliar, "Political party activism in Ghana: factors influencing the decision of the politically active to join a political party," *Democratization* 19, no. 4 (2012): 668-689, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1666265>; George M. Bob-Milliar, "Place and party organizations: party activism inside party-branded sheds at the grassroots in northern Ghana," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7, no. 4 (2019): 474-493, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2018.1503091>; Osei, "Formal party organisation."

5 Staffan I. Lindberg, "It's Our Time to 'Chop': Do Elections in Africa Feed Neo-Patrimonialism rather than Counter-Act It?" *Democratization* 10, no. 2 (2003): 121-140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714000118>; Barry Driscoll, "Democratization, party systems, and the endogenous roots of Ghanaian clientelism," *Democratization* 27, no. 1 (2020): 119-136, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1666265>; Sarah Brierley and Noah L. Nathan, "The Connections of Party Brokers: Which Brokers Do Parties Select?" *The Journal of Politics* 83, no. 3 (2021): 884-901, <https://doi.org/10.1086/710783>; Ghana Center for Democratic Development, "Rising Cost of Politics in Ghana Attracting Illicit Funding from Organized Crime - CDD-Ghana/ASI Study," press release, February 2, 2022, <https://cddgh.org/rising-cost-of-politics-in-ghana-attracting-illicit-funding-from-organized-crime-cdd-ghana-asi-study/>.

6 Martin P. Wattenberg, "The decline of party mobilization," in *Parties without partisans: Political change in advanced industrial democracies*, eds. Dalton, J. Russell, and Martin P. Wattenberg, 64-76, (Oxford University Press 2000).

7 National Democratic Congress (NDC), "Constitution," accessed February 12, 2022, <https://ndcgh.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/NDC-Constitution-mini.pdf>; New Patriotic Party, "Constitution," accessed February 09, 2022, <https://newpatrioticparty.org/constitution/>.

8 NPP, "New Patriotic Party discusses upcoming internal elections," press release, January 28, 2022, <https://newpatrioticparty.org/press-conference-addressed-by-the-npp-general-secretary-john-boadu-on-the-partys-upcoming-internal-elections/>.

Reflecting internal democracy within the NDC and the NPP, inclusiveness and diversity measures have been integrated into their organisational structures in order to address structural barriers to broad-based internal participatory democracy, barriers such as gender, ethnic and age hierarchies. For example, gender parity is promoted by carving out special positions for women: women organisers and deputy women organisers. These women-only positions are created across all levels of the parties' organisational structures. Similarly, the inclusion of the youth is promoted by designating special positions which are contested and occupied specifically by the youth.

Aiming to become more inclusive, both major parties identified the Zongos – squalid suburbs of Ghanaian cities, usually inhabited by Muslims, migrants, and people from northern Ghana – as a constituency of interest. As such the two parties have both created party wings that aim to mobilise new members from within Zongo's. The NPP created the NASARA wing and NASARA Coordinators to achieve this goal. The NASARA Coordinators are also made members of the national and regional executive committees.⁹ The NDC created the Zongo Caucus to fulfil a similar role to NASARA.

Furthermore, the two parties have devised internal democratic processes which are oriented towards promoting grassroots democracy. They have given local members more say in selecting leadership candidates. The internal democratic process of primary elections has ignited intense competition within the NDC and the NPP, a development that has promoted party activism across all levels of the organisational structures of these parties. Driven by the competitive nature of primary elections, the political elites of both parties are compelled to campaign at the grassroots level, going to remote villages across the country to canvass for votes.

The crucial point is that these internal processes have gone hand in hand with efforts to strengthen civic engagement and participation. There has been a surge of interest and participation in politics at the grassroots level, as well as an increase in the amount of party activism and the number of party activists.¹⁰ This is evidenced by our focus group discussions with grassroots members of the two parties. Most participants expressed strong loyalty to their parties, linking this to their enthusiasm for and participation in party activities, such as party meetings, rallies, elections for executive positions, electoral campaigning, and getting the vote out for

their parties in national elections. Most Ghanaians are active in party politics and frame national discourse on development issues through a partisan lens. This was also seen amongst our participants, with one noting that “political party activism has become the only tool for self-expression because when you speak as a social activist, your views are seen as either being sponsored by the government or opposition”.¹¹ Party activism is not limited to election years, as one participant said, “we always held meetings upon meetings just to keep our members intact and also get more people to join the party”.¹²

This means that much citizen participation and deliberation in Ghana is carried out through forums within the parties, not separate from them. The strength and importance of party-level activism in Ghana is demonstrated by the broad range of civic groups engaged in grassroots party activism. One regional party executive told us, “when you get to the communities, they have various meeting groups or fun clubs that meet on a regular basis”.¹³ The clearest example of these “meeting groups” is the proliferation of “party sheds” across Ghana. These are painted in party colours or hoist the flag of a political party. These party sheds, as George Bob-Milliar demonstrates, are places where grassroots party members, especially the youth, meet to engage in civic activities and debates.¹⁴ Some of the civic activities that take place in these sheds include discussions on important political issues that either concern the country or community. They have been the route for large numbers of citizens to participate in agenda setting at the local level.

A recent example of the link between the grassroots organisational structure of parties, civic activism in Ghana and rising demands for accountability can be seen in the internal elections of the NPP that took place in early 2022. The NPP organized elections for executive positions across all of its organisational levels, starting with the elections for polling station executives. The competitive and participatory dynamics described above were reported vividly in mass media coverage. Enthusiastic participation in the polling station elections was demonstrated by the high number of grassroots members who tried to buy application forms to run for these positions. Additionally, the internal elections also showcased a high level of involvement from grassroots communities in different forms of protest against leading party figures.

9 Fobih, “Dynamics of political parties”, 33.

10 Bob-Milliar, “Political party activism in Ghana,” 668-89; Bob-Milliar, “Place and party organizations,” Isaac Owusu Nsiah, “Who said we are politically inactive?": A reappraisal of the youth and political party activism in Ghana 2004–2012 (A Case of the Kumasi Metropolis),” *Journal of Asian and African studies* 54, no. 1 (2019): 118-135, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909618791210>.

11 FGD Participant, Tolon Female youth, February 14, 2022.

12 FGD participant, Sagnarigu Constituency February 21, 2022.

13 Interview with NDC regional executive, February 16, 2022.

14 Bob-Milliar, “Place and party organizations,” 16.

Assessing the Ghanaian Democratic Innovation

A key implication of the Ghanaian democratic innovation concerns “the party government model of democracy, in which political parties provide a linkage between citizens, government, and policy outputs”, a linkage through which political parties serve as “the key in ensuring representative democracy really represents and is really democratic”.¹⁵ The huge organisational capacity of the NDC and NPP, especially their organisational presence “on the ground” act as a driving force behind Ghana’s active civic culture and democratic consolidation.

Credit should be given to the NDC and the NPP for providing Ghana’s democracy with this quality, a feature produced by the decentralised organisational structures discussed above. Over the last three decades (between 1992 and 2022), Ghana has held eight sets of four-yearly competitive presidential and parliamentary elections, keenly contested by the candidates of the NDC and the NPP. Three of these elections have led to the peaceful handover of power from the incumbent party to the opposition; namely, the 2000, 2008 and 2016 elections. All three were strongly contested, relatively free and fair, with the opposition winning despite all the advantages of incumbency enjoyed by the party in government.

Participative forums inside the parties has helped underpin this strong democratic performance of the two main political parties. They have helped generate interest and enthusiasm in politics amongst ordinary Ghanaians. The grassroots organisational structures of the NDC and the NPP have created high levels of participation in party politics, leading to high levels of voter turnout in presidential and parliamentary elections. This is illustrated by recent voter turnout figures: 85% in 2004, 73% in 2008, 80% in 2012, 69% in 2016 and 79% in 2020.¹⁶ In the background, Ghana has seen a consistent upsurge in interest in party politics. This interest in democracy is reflective of broader African trends, where demand for and participation in democracy is comparatively high to other regions.¹⁷

¹⁵ Russell J. Dalton, David M. Farrell, and Ian McAllister, “Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize democracy,” in *Parties without partisans: Political change in advanced industrial democracies*, eds. Dalton J. Russell, and Martin P. Wattenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ “Voter Turnout by Election Type,” International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/111/40>.

¹⁷ Gjimah-Boadi, Logan, and Sanny, “Africans’ Durable Demand for Democracy.”

Conclusion

The democratic innovation studied in this paper may not accord with citizen assemblies and the like, but it is connected to a successful consolidation of representative democracy in Ghana. Although located in mainstream politics, the Ghanaian democratic innovation is important for three reasons.

Firstly, it illustrates a rare case of the institutionalisation of political parties and a party system in Africa. This is a political development critical to the establishment of representative government in new electoral democracies. Unlike the advanced Western industrialised democracies where political parties and party systems had been institutionalised for a century or more before beginning the practise of electoral democracy,¹⁸ political parties are relatively new in Africa and are faced with various challenges to their institutionalisation. Secondly, the innovation illustrates the importance of specificity of context – political, cultural, economic, and historical – in the shaping of a political phenomenon as a democratic practice;¹⁹ in this case, the dynamics of democratic innovation across time and space. Thirdly, and intricately connected to the specificity of context, democratic innovation in Ghana is shaped by the specific historical conjuncture of democratization and its social structures.

The field of democratic innovation is still emerging, and its subject matter is yet to be clearly defined.²⁰ The Ghanaian case is associated with the body of work that looks beyond deliberative and participatory forms of democratic innovation such as mini-publics, citizens' juries, participatory budgeting, and in-person and online deliberative polling. Influential scholars of the field, like Albert W. Dzura and Carolyn M. Hendriks, have begun to point to new directions for democratic innovation within conventional politics and representative governance; namely, atypical forms of democratic innovation which hold the promise to reinvent democracy, and thereby cure its malaise.

The Ghanaian case illustrates this potential and opens new avenues of research into how representative democracy may be reinvented with innovative institutions and processes that promote the participation of ordinary citizens in conventional democratic politics. The enthusiasm for party politics and the spirit of civic engagement the Ghanaian innovation has created within Ghana has the potential of holding the political class accountable "from below", and in so doing, "making democracy work", in Robert Putnam's phrase.

¹⁸ Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister. *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage*.

¹⁹ Sidney Verba and Gabriel Almond, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 1975); Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁰ Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar, "Defining and Typologising Democratic Innovations," in *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*, eds. Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar, 11-31, (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

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About the project:

'Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations' is a research project supported by Robert Bosch Stiftung, which explores emerging innovations in democratic participation around the world and offering an overview of the lessons learned throughout the application of these innovations. The project highlights policy implications and gives a set of recommendations for European policymakers and practitioners working on the EU's internal democratic renewal. The project brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to exchange best practices in democratic political innovations.