

Neopatrimonialism and Democracy



Official Election Certification Ceremony in Liberia, UN Photo/Albert González Farran

KEY FINDINGS

- African regimes are not significantly more or less neopatrimonial than regimes in other parts of the developing world and they vary on the different dimensions of neopatrimonialism.
- Neopatrimonialism does not necessarily impede the advancement or survival of democracy.
- The effects of neopatrimonialism on democracy vary depending on the existing regime type.

Neopatrimonialism is a form of rule commonly associated with ineffective governance in Africa. According to Bratton and van de Walle (1997), it combines clientelism, strong presidents, and the use of state resources for political legitimization. V-Dem Working Paper #56 by Rachel Sigman and Staffan Lindberg uses empirical tools to assess the levels of neopatrimonialism in African political regimes and the extent to which neopatrimonialism poses an obstacle to democratic development (WP56).¹ This policy brief introduces the key findings of this study and discusses several policy implications.

Overview

What impact does neopatrimonialism have on the survival of democracy and democratic development? On the one hand, neopatrimonialism is predominantly perceived negatively in scholarship on African politics and development (e.g., Van der Walle, 2003; Opalo, 2012; Shatzberg, 2001). This perspective suggests that the key characteristics of neopatrimonialism – strong presidential rule supported by patronage-based distribution of power combined with weak institutional limitations – have little in common with the features of democratic regimes. On the other hand, there is some evidence that advancements in certain facets of democratization, such as electoral competition, civil rights, political freedoms, and public goods distribution, may flourish even in neopatrimonial contexts (e.g., Lindberg, 2006; Edgell et al., 2017; Stasavage, 2005).

Measuring Neopatrimonialism

WP56 defines neopatrimonialism as a three-dimensional concept that includes clientelism, strong presidents (presidentialism) and the use

of public resources for private or political benefit (regime corruption). Using this conceptual outline, the authors of the paper construct an index of neopatrimonial rule and assess to what extent political regimes in Africa qualify as neopatrimonial. The measure shows that sub-Saharan Africa, as a whole, appears to be less “exceptionally neopatrimonial” than the literature on African politics suggests. The degree of neopatrimonialism also varies vastly within the continent. There is a clear visible difference between countries scoring lowest (Cape Verde, South Africa and Botswana) and highest (Chad and Eritrea) on the Neopatrimonialism index. The dimensions of neopatrimonialism are also configured variously. For instance, clientelistic regimes tend to also score high on corruption, although there are some exceptions such as Burkina Faso, Zambia and Senegal, where moderate levels of political patronage are combined with high corruption. Furthermore, less presidentialistic regimes vary considerably in the extent to which their politics are clientelistic and plagued by corruption (WP56: 14).

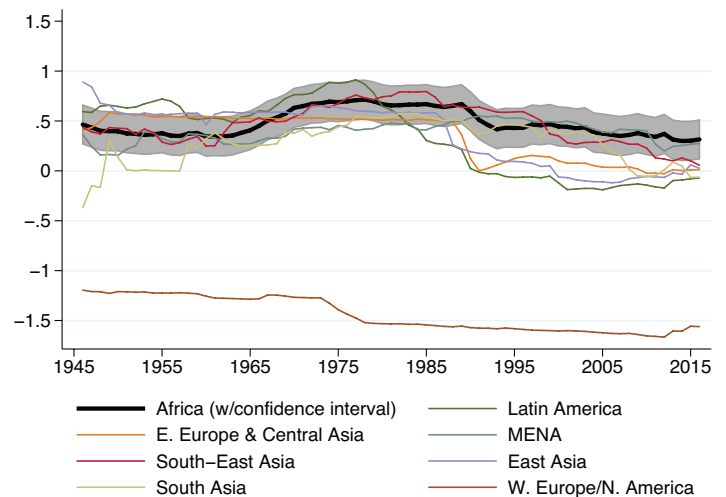
Neopatrimonial Democracy?

To examine the relationship between neopatrimonialism and democracy, Sigman and Lindberg first look at average levels of neopatrimonialism across different regime types in Africa. Using the Regimes of the World measure (RoW) (Lührmann et al., 2018), the paper shows how levels of neopatrimonialism vary across four regime categories: closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, and liberal democracy. Closed autocracies tend to score highest on the neopatrimonial index, whereas liberal democracies tend to have the lowest scores. Authoritarian regimes tend to be more clientelist than democratic ones. Strong presidential power may be associated with autocracy and noticeable constraints for democracy in Africa.

1. This paper is forthcoming as a chapter in the Routledge Handbook of Democratization in Africa, edited by Gabrielle Lynch and Peter VonDoepf.

How might neopatrimonialism act as an impediment to democracy in Africa? In WP56, Sigman and Lindberg first assess the effects of neopatrimonialism on democratic survival and advancement using regression analysis. They find that corruption does not, in general, significantly affect prospects for democratization. Neither clientelism nor regime corruption dampen the probability of democratic survival. Second, they examine whether neopatrimonialism constrains the development of democratic regimes. The estimated effect of neopatrimonialism on democracy depends on the existing regime type. In democratic regimes, as levels of presidentialism increase, the effects of neopatrimonialism on democracy become more negative. In autocratic regimes, as levels of presidentialism increase, the effects of neopatrimonialism on democracy become gradually more positive, and thus, autocratic regimes that are more neopatrimonial are likely less stable than autocratic regimes based on more legal-rational principles (WP56: 20-21).

FIGURE 1. GLOBAL TRENDS IN NEOPATRIMONIALISM. NOTE: HIGH VALUES INDICATE HIGH LEVELS OF NEOPATRIMONIALISM (WP 56: 9).



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Given variations in neopatrimonialism across African countries, policy makers and practitioners should not assume that all institutions function in a neopatrimonial way. It is necessary to develop a nuanced understanding of when, where and how neopatrimonialism manifests itself within a country.
- Democracy can survive and advance, even in the presence of high levels of clientelism, corruption and strong presidents.
- Anti-corruption programs may not always directly help to promote democracy and vice-versa.

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V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 17 staff, and a project team across the world with 6 Principal Investigators, 14 Project Managers, 30 Regional Managers, 170 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and 3,000 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest ever social science research-oriented data collection programs.



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