

# THE POLITICS OF ELECTORAL REFORM IN FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICA

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My dissertation examines the origins of and changes in electoral system in Francophone West Africa: Senegal, Mali, and Niger. It addresses the following question: why are alternative electoral rules considered and implemented in certain countries at certain times and, once they have been established, how are they altered or replaced with new ones? Changes in the rules governing the entire electoral process are very common in Africa and underpin the politics of electoral reforms, yet little attention is paid to them. The growing literature on electoral reform emphasizes changes in electoral systems—namely the set of rules that structure the way in which thousands or millions of citizens' votes are counted and translated into a relatively small number of parliamentary seats. Part of the reason for this relative neglect is that electoral governance (such as electoral administration, election regulatory bodies and norms, and dispute resolution mechanisms) is an issue largely taken for granted—especially in established liberal democracies where electoral processes are, in general, procedurally fair and technically sound. The same cannot be said of the majority of African countries where, once an alternative electoral system is chosen, attention shifts toward gradual reform of the broad institutional framework consisting of the procedures and structures that govern and regulate the entire electoral process.

The key to my argument is that in most African countries what determines who wins and who loses an election, or how one wins or loses, is not only a function of the electoral system. It is an interactive combination of the effects of the electoral system in conjunction with the other rules of the electoral game. Subsequently, the debate on the reform of the electoral system is not separable from the debate on the administration or governance of the entire electoral process.



This project builds on some five years spent following the dynamics of electoral reform in sub-Saharan Africa. It first emerged as part of my participation in the Trans-Saharan Elections Project (TSEP) from 2011 to 2013. Moreover, I was able to travel to Senegal, Mali and Niger during summer 2013 for my pre-dissertation research thanks to a grant from the Center for African Studies and from Minerva Research Initiative. The initial purpose of this summer research was to collect empirical data on elections and electoral systems in order to write a well-informed dissertation proposal. In 2014, I carried out a one-year field research during several trips to Mali, Niger, and Senegal.

The findings of the dissertation suggest that electoral rules can be chosen or changed for various reasons. The existence of electoral threat (i.e. the high perception of losing the next election under current electoral rules) is partly and not exclusively what drives political actors to choose or change electoral institutions. For the most part, electoral reforms in francophone West Africa have occurred as a result of a choice made by the incumbent regime to secure political tenure in the

face of mounting extra-institutional threat. Such a threat emerges when the overall performance of the political system fails to meet some standards of electoral inclusiveness and when opposition groups, unable to influence any change through formal channels, mobilize masses and use extra-institutional pressure to threaten the survival of the ruling regime. My findings also suggest that electoral reform occurs as a result of an imposition or a negotiation (in which case they can be chosen by a consensus or via compromise). In times of normal politics, incumbent politicians are likely to change the rule of the game when electoral threat is high and extra-institutional threat low. However, in times of extraordinary politics—especially during periods of democratic transition when extra-institutional threat is high—politicians are likely to negotiate over electoral reform to secure their tenure.

Mamadou Bodian recently completed his doctorate in political science. His research was funded by the Minerva Research Initiative.