INTRODUCTION

Dictators, Democrats, and Government Performance for African Development

Book manuscript by

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As de-colonization neared its end in the 1950’s, a wave of optimism swept across Sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria, the jewel of Britain’s African colonies, citizens anxiously embraced the promise of political sovereignty. At his inauguration as governor-general in 1960, Nigeria’s great nationalist, Nnamdi Azikiwe, recited a poem by the African-American author Langston Hughes, called “Youth,” which begins, “We have tomorrow bright before us like a flame/Yesterday a night-gone thing a sun-down name.” Hughes sat in the audience with thousands of Nigerians, all welcoming a new dawn.¹ The incoming government promised massive investment in education and socio-economic development. Voters had peacefully exercised their rights at the polls, foreign investment was pouring in, and the economy was expanding.

When a new political generation gathered in the capital half a century later to commemorate that momentous day, militants detonated two bombs near President Goodluck Jonathan, killing a dozen people. Only minutes before, Jonathan had cautiously reflected on Nigeria’s previous five decades, declaring, “There is certainly much to celebrate: our freedom, our strength, our unity and our resilience.” One newspaper called the 2010 bombing “perhaps one of the most unfortunate incidents in the 50 years of Nigeria’s post-independence history.”² Another Nigerian commentary bluntly asked, “Has Nigeria achieved the greatness it was clamoring for at independence? Or is Nigeria a fool at fifty?”³

¹ “Zik Becomes His Excellency,” West Africa, 19 November 1960, p. 1299.
The answers offered in this book will disappoint the cynics and surprise the optimists. It is true that the United Nations counts Nigeria among the world’s most underdeveloped nations, where approximately 90 percent of the population lives on less than $2 per day and the average life expectancy is less than forty-eight years. Economic growth since the transition to democracy in 1999 masks significant governance failures, including increases in economic inequality and extreme poverty (United Nations Development Programme 2009). The country has little to show for the estimated US$300 billion it has earned from oil exports since the 1970s. When Transparency International, a global non-governmental organization that monitors corruption, ranked Nigeria just ahead of low achievers such as Zimbabwe and Mauritania in a 2010 report, an editorial in one of Nigeria’s leading newspapers lamented, “The fight against corruption has remained a problematic one, with sloganeering by successive governments and very little else to show for it.”

But President Jonathan’s reflections on the 50th anniversary of independence were not unfounded. After all, Nigeria survived one of Africa’s most brutal civil wars and five military coups. It emerged from this violence to become an important regional and global leader in peacekeeping and diplomacy. The youth literacy rate stands at 87 percent, up from 65 percent in 1985. In the early years after independence, only 5 percent of the nation’s children were enrolled in primary school; enrollment rates now reach 100 percent in some parts of the country. In contrast to the high inflation that crippled Nigeria’s booming oil economy in the 1970s and the subsequent borrowing that funneled export income into interest payments, consumers today face more predictable prices and the government has rid itself of almost all foreign debt.

Nigeria record seems to validate the claim that development comes through good public policy. Increased literacy and school enrollment owe much to policies instituted in the 1970s,

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when the federal government called education the “greatest investment that a nation can make for the development of its economic, political, sociological and human resources.” Federal budget deficits and inflation became less volatile after a reform-minded public finance team renegotiated or paid off the country’s debts in 2006. Nigeria’s many failings must be viewed alongside developmental successes that punctuate its post-colonial history.

The question that drives this book is: what factors affect the Nigerian government’s ability to formulate policies conducive to development? Polices are binding decisions about public resources, and good government performance means that policy outputs serve a greater common good over the long term. Comparative studies often blame ethnic diversity, foreign debt, authoritarianism, or an economy dependent on natural resource exploitation for policy failures in the developing world. Research on Africa very often adds colonial legacies to this list. Nigeria possesses many of the qualities associated with policy failure, including a string of dictatorships, high foreign debt, tremendous ethnic diversity, and a robust oil economy. While these characteristics are certainly relevant to understanding Nigeria, none of them fully explain variations in government performance.

Drawing on a historical study of Nigeria since independence, I argue that the structure of the policy-making process explains variation in government performance better than other variables. I use the concept of “veto players” to capture this underlying structure, identifying political actors operating in both formal and informal political settings with the leverage to block policy change and extract concessions. Using qualitative and quantitative data gathered during extensive field research, I then empirically link Nigeria’s veto players to patterns in government performance from 1960 to 2007. Focusing on policies which the development literature associates with long term economic development, I distinguish between national collective

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goods, non-excludable public policies that inherently benefit the country on the whole, and local collective goods that are more particularistic and might be targeted to specific communities or interests.

Even after taking into account intervening variables for dictatorship, debt, and oil revenue, I show that the number of veto players systematically explains Nigerian government performance in these two broad categories of public policy. But the number of veto players has differential effects, which leads to an important insight: conditions which impair the delivery of national collective goods also tend to improve the delivery of local collective goods. Nigeria, like many African countries, therefore faces what I refer to as a “Madisonian dilemma,” since it has to balance contradictory effects implicit in the structure of the policy process. Resolving this dilemma remains a perennial challenge due to cultural and demographic pressures to make the policy process representative. For example, Nigeria has arguably complicated matters by adopting some institutions to explicitly represent identities and others intended to transcend them.

The approach here differs from many single country studies, since it does not attempt to explain maldistribution or patronage other than what is reported in aggregate national-level figures. Similarly, it does not attempt to document the quality of governance or changes in the level of corruption. I instead focus on how the underlying structure of the policy process affects the government’s ability to deliver policy benefits consumed at different levels. Government performance in these terms refers to policy outputs directly linked to government decisions, such as hiring more instructors to teach in public schools. Following Baum and Lake (2003), it also includes more indirect policy outcomes. After all, even if the government is not a direct provider of the goods and services in question, it still regulates them and monitors performance. By
conceptually organizing regimes based on centers of power, my causal explanation transcends blunt distinctions between democracy and dictatorship, and contributes to emerging literatures on authoritarian institutions, political development, and ethnic politics. Veto player analysis therefore offers a new way of thinking about the causes of suboptimal government performance in Africa and beyond.

GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE IN THE LITERATURE

In order to situate this book’s central argument about veto player theory in a proper context, it is important to review four standard explanations for poor government performance in Africa. Each of these explanations faces limitations. I begin with a discussion of modernization theory, which argues that economic and social progress lead to democratization. This theory has experienced a revival over the last decade, although the persistence of illiberal regimes in a surprising number of countries across the developing world has kept the debate over modernization theory’s explanatory value alive. A second, common explanation attributes performance failures to the relative wealth of the state. Governments with little income have weak capacity due to few resources to enact good public policies, while governments with substantial revenue from natural resources perform poorly because citizens lack political leverage to hold government accountable. In this construction, Africa’s poor countries are doomed either way. A third explanation blames ethnic diversity for breeding parochialism and clientelism, outcomes that distort the distribution of resources and ultimately undermine long-term economic growth. Finally, there is the bad leadership explanation. Political commentators, casual observers, and scholars often attribute governance successes or failures to leaders’ personal qualities. There is reason to be skeptical of this formulation. As Tanzania’s first president, Julius Nyerere, said in 1968, “Leadership cannot replace democracy” (Nyerere 1973). This blunt assessment of
leadership as process still rings true, affirming the possibilities of comparative politics by emphasizing the need to understand the systemic factors that impact decision making by individuals. “For policies to be effective,” writes a leading Nigerian political scientist, “the process through which they are made and executed has to be rational, sequential and deliberative” (Jega 2007, 105).

**The Regime Type Explanation: Does Democracy Deliver?**

When European colonial powers withdrew from Africa in the 1950’s, many Africans hoped that independence would lead to political development and economic self-sufficiency. The developed world promised assistance to ease the transition from colonialism to independence, and the new nationalist governments enjoyed enormous popular support. Decolonization coincided with democratization. Nationalist movements in Kenya, Tanzania, and elsewhere were reborn as political parties, and citizens embraced new forms of political participation as the franchise quickly expanded. By the end of the 1960s though, a number of African countries, including in Nigeria and Ghana, had experienced violent coups and had fallen prey to a cycle of instability and corruption. Continuing violence sowed doubts about the possibility for true democracy. Events in the developing world, including the Cold War and ambiguous outcome of the Third Wave of democratization, further clouded the picture in Africa.

Support for illiberal politics in the name of stability and prosperity remains common in Africa. Rwanda middle class often rationalizes away President Paul Kagame’s poor human rights record, saying “it’s necessary to have a little repression here to keep the lid on” in order to obtain economic development (Kinzer 2007, 23-6). Similarly, President Yoweri Museveni in Uganda has tightened his grip on power between in Uganda by suppressing civil society and harassing opposition. As the country’s combined score for political and civil rights by the non-
governmental organization Freedom House dropped from eleven to nine (out of fourteen), the economy grew at a rate of 5.7 percent. This presents the question, does democracy deliver? Is the existence of a democratic government linked to positive performance outcomes?

Research on the linkages between regime type and government performance has its origins in modernization theory. Early cross-national studies noted a correlation between development and democracy—certain socioeconomic conditions led to particular political outcomes (Lipset 1959; Deutsch 1961). Modernization theorists argued that democratization occurs when an educated middle class develops an expectation of political influence and a willingness to exercise political moderation. Samuel Huntington led a group of scholars who took the argument one step further, arguing that building a middle class and achieving economic growth in the developing world would require limiting popular participation in the short term until political institutions consolidated. In his view, limits on democracy were a necessary and temporary sacrifice to achieve long-term economic growth and contain communism (Huntington 1968).

“Bureaucratic authoritarian” models of development from Latin American seemed to confirm the claim. Military regimes governed by unelected technocrats adopted politically unpopular but economically rational public policies conducive to growth (O’Donnell 1973; Collier 1979). Chile emerged as a favorite example, where the dictator Augusto Pinochet recruited American economists to liberalize the economy. Growth in East Asia also seemed to confirm democracy’s disadvantages, as governments maintained high growth rates through corporatism (Wade 1992) and “soft authoritarianism” (Johnson 1987, 136-164).

This reasoning had strong appeal in Africa. In 1979, reflecting on progress made under his military government, Olusegun Obasanjo defended dictatorship’s ability to promote growth
through sound public policies. He credited his outgoing government with a fourteen-fold increase in economic output, the establishment of free primary education, and reduced inflation.\textsuperscript{6} General Ibrahim Babangida, four years into his dictatorship in 1989, similarly praised the Nigerian military’s contribution to stability and progress. He claimed credit for rescuing the nation from the “serious economic crisis arising from the mismanagement of the political era.”\textsuperscript{7} Some scholars even acknowledge that, for all their flaws, these military regimes contributed positively to the country’s development (Iwayemi 1979, 47-72; Ohiorhenuan 1988, 141-162). One of Babangida’s civilian governors (who later went on to chair the political party still ruling today), praises the government of the late 1980s for its policies on rural development, economic liberalization, and infrastructure expansion. Drawing a comparison to U.S. President Barack Obama, he says, Babangida ran a “task oriented” cabinet full of experts.\textsuperscript{8}

Democratization since the 1990s has challenged modernization’s causal claims in both directions. First, affirming a famous critique by Rustow (1970), contemporary examples across Latin America and Africa suggest there are no socioeconomic preconditions for democracy (Wood 2000; Lindberg 2006). Democratic transitions can occur at any point in a country’s development, although democracy is more likely to survive the farther along a country is on the development continuum (Przeworski et al. 2000). Second, a thriving post-democratization literature explores the unexpected persistence of hybrid regimes nestled somewhere between dictatorship and democracy (Levitsky and Way 2010; Zinecker 2009). Breaking with modernization’s linear philosophy, which sees illiberal polities as moving inexorably toward democracy, this new research explores the possibility of authoritarian consolidation – not just

\textsuperscript{7}Address by General Imbrahim Babangida on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the Armed Forces Consultative Assembly (Government Monograph), 5 June 1989.
\textsuperscript{8}Interview with Okwesilieze Nwodo, March 8, 2010. Abuja.
stalled democratization (Brownlee 2007; Tripp 2010). The North African revolutions of 2011 notwithstanding, Freedom House classifies a third of the world’s 194 countries as only “partly free.” As if taking a cue from Aristotle, who explains in *The Politics* that tyrants extend their rule by giving the appearance of limited royal authority, these intermediate regimes mask oppression in a veneer of freedom. With great skill, a surprising number of governments thus manage to formally hold elections while suppressing competition and popular participation (Schedler 2006; Bunce and Wolchik 2010).

In terms of the impact of democracy on policy performance, a robust literature on governance and growth generally concludes that democracies perform better than autocracies. But there are important layers of nuance. For example, dictators may invest in productive economic policies when they do not fear for their future. Relative political stability and institutional longevity extend the time horizon with which rulers judge the political benefits (or costs) of public policies. To borrow Mancur Olson’s famous analogy, these regimes may behave as “stationary” rather than “roving” bandits and are thus able to promote long-term growth by enforcing contracts (Olson 2000), protecting property rights (Clague et al. 1997), and investing in social policies such as education and health care (Glaeser et al. 2004). Theoretical models also claim that oligarchs may adopt policies to enhance productivity because they can efficiently overcome organizational obstacles and face potentially greater potential returns on investments (Gorodinichenko and Grygorenko 2008). Countless articles document the link between natural resources and corruption, but dictators with revenue streams from natural resources also face less political uncertainty, and this can create incentives to pursue productive policies (Boix 2003).

Democracy’s defenders continue to argue that political freedom and competition deliver clear benefits through several mechanisms. Democracy resolves the problem of short-term, self-
interested thinking by politicians by creating an institutional incentive for leaders to supply the type of good governance that voters demand. This arrangement is meant to bind the short-term interests of politicians to the long-term economic and political development of the nation (North and Weingast 1989). Democracy also addresses the succession problem that plagues all autocrats from Mubarak to Mugabe. An institutionalized, recurring method of leadership selection eliminates a certain degree of uncertainty about the future (Brownlee 2002; Hirschman 1970). Finally, democracy’s defenders argue that by creating a credible threat of replacement, democracy incentivizes politicians to provide public goods and resist “temptations for politically opportunistic behavior that is economically damaging” (Alence 2004). Even poor democracies face electoral pressures to provide services such as education that benefit society as a whole (Brown and Hunter 1999; Halperin et al. 2010).

Extensive cross-national research concludes that citizens of democratic countries live longer, happier, and healthier lives (Halperin et al. 2010; Przeworski et al. 2000). Precisely how democracy leads to these outcomes remains a subject of considerable debate. Democracy may directly alter governmental spending priorities. Studies from newly democratized Latin American countries report shifts from government consumption to social welfare (Ames 1987; Looney and Frederiksen 1987), as well as increases in the absolute amount of resources devoted to social services (Brown and Hunter 2004). Research from Africa shows that democracy leads to increased spending on education (Stasavage 2005a) and access to education (Stasavage 2005b). On a global level, the evidence is more mixed: democratic and authoritarian regimes typically fund social services (such as pension and welfare) at comparable levels (Mulligan et al. 2004).
However, democracy’s most important effects on policy performance may actually be indirect. A broad range of studies refute modernization theory’s claims about the developmental advantages of dictatorship, but they also fail to find a specific causal link between democracy and economic growth (Feng 2003; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2001; Mainwaring and Perez-Linan 2003; Norris 2008). A recent meta-analysis of the democracy-development link reviewing 483 sets of statistical results from 84 studies concludes that democracy’s direct impact on government performance is indeterminate and that its primary benefits are indirect (Doucouliagos and Ulubasoglu 2008). This is reinforced by studies showing that democracies are more likely to promote human capital formation by investing in health care and education. The effects of such policies are indirect in that the benefits become clear over time, as the labor force becomes healthier, better educated, and more productive (Schultz 1999; Baldacci et al. 2008).

But the direct and indirect benefits of democracy are both predicated on the existence of viable political competition. This caveat possibly explains the ambiguous effects of African experiments with democracy in the 1990s (Olivier de Sardan 1999; van de Walle 2001). Without competition, party turnover, and a broader political environment of freedom and transparency, governments lack the accountability. This has complicated assessments of African democracy because democratic institutions seem to coexist with corruption, inflation, and economic mismanagement. Notwithstanding the significant economic development in a number of African countries, Lewis (2008) for example points to the problematic phenomenon in Africa today of “growth without prosperity.” Governance decisions generate wealth and improve macroeconomic performance, but the poor are ignored and disempowered.

A disadvantage of focusing on regime type (democracy versus dictatorship) is that it glosses over important variations among democracies and dictatorships, both in terms of how
they govern and in terms of how they perform. For every Zimbabwe or Cameroon, where authoritarianism has led to economic catastrophe, there is a Uganda or Rwanda, where illiberal regimes have created laudable development. For every Ghana, where democracy has contributed to economic gains, there is a Benin, where democracy reigns but the population remains destitute. Perhaps the most comprehensive multi-country study of African development to date concludes that regime type was less important to explaining growth than over-regulation, war, short-sighted policy making, or distribution of resources along ethno-regional lines. Combining cross-national analyses with country case studies, the authors argue that countries can overcome unfavorable structural conditions such as landlocked geography or exploitative colonial pasts by adopting growth-enhancing policies (Ndulu et al. 2008). In addition, bracketing the question of whether countries are democratizing or not allows us to focus on other factors and types of institutional which affect the policy making environment.

**State Wealth: Poor States, Poor Performance?**

Another common set of explanations for government performance focus on levels of government income. In one version, scholars argue that governments with little income have less capacity and fewer resources to direct toward good public policies (Przeworski et al. 2000). Countries are developmentally poor because the state is poor and spending largely depends on revenue (Please 1967). Moreover, revenue fluctuations from global commodity price changes adversely impact African public policy spending (Ekpo 1996). Exposure to exogenous economic conditions is a perennial issue for Africa’s largely undiversified economies (Ake 1996). Another version of the economic argument blames surplus rather than scarcity for government performance failures. In particular, governments that receive a great deal of income from natural resources tend to perform poorly. Resource-rich countries have low levels of taxation, and this deprives citizens
of a powerful source of leverage they can use to hold government accountable (Jensen and Wantchekon 2004; Ulfelder 2007). In the long run, this so-called resource curse weakens state capacity as public officials see politics primarily as a redistributive game (Karl 1997; Robinson et al. 2006).

Together, these two sides of the economic coin suggest that African countries are at risk when the state is too rich or too poor. Africa’s economies are susceptible to exogenous shocks, and natural resource revenue has fueled violence, corruption, and clientelism. Mineral-rich countries like Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are mired in corruption and patronage, while revenue-poor countries such as Benin and Togo cannot afford to make the human capital investments necessary for economic growth. These challenges remain prevalent today, and they lie at the center of “poor state, poor performance” explanations.

Subsequent chapters will examine the political circumstances that contribute to the economic problems facing African governments. Recent oil discoveries in several African countries point to an urgent need to rethink the resource curse hypothesis since extraction will have begun after democratic transitions (unlike dictatorships which benefitted from oil discoveries in the 1970s). Ghana for example expects to earn $400 million from its first year of oil production in 2011, boosting economic growth from an already respectable 5 percent to nearly 12 percent. Since countries which have a record of human capital investment appear to be better equipped to absorb such income and technology shocks (Kurtz and Brooks 2011), Ghana’s democracy just might manage to turn the curse into a blessing.

Nigeria offers an especially useful case study in this regard, since Nigeria has fallen into both categories at various points in its history—it has suffered from both too little and too much income. Since oil exports took off in 1970, the country has earned an estimated US$300 billion

dollars in oil revenue. In considering the effects of a sudden influx of dollars, most studies have focused on how Nigeria’s oil booms undermined governance by enabling corruption and creating economic distortions (Ikein et al. 2008; Ahmad Khan 1994). There’s little reason to question this relationship, but it is important to acknowledge that increased revenues impact other aspects of performance as well. For example, the initial rise of oil revenues into Nigeria in the early 1970s also prompted huge investments in education and infrastructure (Odetola 1982; Onyejekwe 1981).

The problem for Nigeria really came when subsequent governments encountered reduced oil revenues (Asiodu 2000, 7-10). Faced with the daunting task of collecting taxes in a poor country with weak property rights and political instability, governments instead cut social spending and, like many African countries, borrowed liberally from abroad. Across the continent, African debts to foreign creditors accumulated at an astonishing pace during the 1970s and 80s. In the early 1980s, Africa’s foreign debt to export ratio increased more than fivefold. By the end of the 1990s, the average African country was spending 15 percent of all export earnings paying off debts (DeLancey 2001, 117). These loans had helped stabilize recalcitrant dictators, but the long-term costs were passed on to fragile new democratic governments during the Third Wave of democratization. When Nigeria transitioned to democracy in 1999, it had more debt in absolute dollars than any other country in Africa, 15 percent of the continent’s total. For 17 years, creditors provided generous loans to a succession of Nigerian dictators, oblivious to the damage it was doing to political reformers (Chevillard 2001).

Africa’s debts affected government performance by diverting scarce revenue into loan repayments rather than human capital and infrastructure investments (Tordoff 2002), which undermined economic growth (Pattillo et al. 2004; Mohamed 2005). Without the debt burden,
some models predict that growth in thirty-five African countries would have been as much as 50 percent higher (Fosu 1999). But like the relationship between development and democracy, the relationship between debt and government performance is complex. With regard to growth, the amount of debt is clearly significant, since modest loans invested productively tend to actually stimulate growth (Ayadi and Ayadi 2008; Moore and Thomas 2010). In terms of diverting money from the social sector, there is some evidence that anticipated future debt rather than the actual payments may be to blame for adverse effects on government policy (Fosu 2007). Debt thus influences policy priorities, but it offers only a partial explanation for performance. We can better understanding how revenue and spending impact policy performance by including an era when neither oil nor debt significantly shaped Nigeria’s policy planning environment. My findings suggest that the structure of the policy making had a more systematic impact on government performance than these two other factors.

**Ethnicity Explanations: Primordialism and Parochialism**

A third account blames social heterogeneity for poor policy performance and a broad range of other outcomes summarized in an influential literature review by Chandra (2009). At the far end of the spectrum, ethnicity is seen as the root of civil war—and the conflicts in Yugoslavia and Rwanda would seem to bear this out. Scholars in this tradition argue that people reflexively turn to primordial identities in moments of uncertainty or tension and allow these emotional attachments to spur violence. Even when ethnic identity does not lead to war, some scholars see diversity as a threat to political stability and democratic consolidation; this operates on assumptions about the willingness of incumbent elites to permanently exclude some groups. Finally, several studies link diversity to poor government performance across different types of public policies.
At the most basic level, social heterogeneity is seen as a possible impediment to collective action. Compelling empirical research shows that ethnic fractionalization contributes to low growth, low school enrollment, and federal budget deficits (Easterly and Levine 1997, 1203-50). Coordinating interests across socially diverse constituencies is simply more difficult due to mistrust or memories of marginalization among ethnic groups. And even if they do not harbor hard feelings that inspire retaliation, it can still be difficult to communicate across constituencies with different cultural values. Corruption increases and the quality of policy making declines for similar reasons (Alesina et al. 2003, 155-94). Tests in 130 countries using the broad concept of “social diversity,” which incorporates multiple expressions of ethnicity, arrive at similar conclusions about economic performance (Okediji 2011).

Recent groundbreaking micro-level research complements these large-N studies by offering an explanation for how diversity can undermine public policy. “Ethnically homogeneous communities have an advantage in providing public goods because ethnic groups possess both norms and networks that facilitate the sanctioning of community members who fail to contribute to collective endeavors” (Habyarimana et al. 2007, 722). Other scholars link ethnicity to distributional distortions. Without other meaningful political cleavages based on ideology or class, ethnicity breeds the kind of mistrust conducive patronage. This argument is especially compelling with regard to Africa because colonial authorities purposefully exacerbated ethnic tensions among ethnic groups in order to divide and conquer. Both the direct and indirect forms of colonial rule favored some groups over others in order to maximize imperial efficiency and minimize costs (Mamdani 1996).

Nigeria’s governance failures could therefore be rooted in its diversity. After all, the north is largely Muslim, the south is largely Christian, and hundreds of languages (5 percent of
the world’s total) are spoken in Nigeria’s 400-square-mile territory. This hyper-diversity could conceivably create countless possibilities for primordialism and parochialism. The British famously adopted a sympathetic view towards the Hausa and Fulani in the north, which undermined national integration and generated lasting resentments. This tension climaxed with a brutal civil war from 1967 to 1970 which killed more than a million people. Simply put, scholars writing in this tradition argue, quite reasonably, that politicians will serve their own ethno-regional communities at the expense of others. This ethnic patrimonialism depends on access to the so-called “national cake,” the figurative and literal resource wealth controlled by the center. Nnoli for example blames ethnicity for Nigeria’s failure to allocate these resources, for intra-group bourgeois competition, and for religious conflict (Nnoli 1995). A core problem in governing ethnically diverse countries is limiting politicians’ ability or incentive to serve their own ethno-religious communities at the expense of others. This has been described as a problem of “prebendalism” (Joseph 1991), the sense of entitlement that a subset of Nigerians have to the revenues of the state when members of their ethnic or kinship circle are in office.

Nigerians discuss this diversity through the discourse of the “national question.” For ordinary citizens, this involves reconciling your identity as a citizen of the modern state with your ethnic and cultural affinities (Amuwo, Agbaje and others 2000; Suberu 2001). Successive governments experimented with various solutions since the 1950s, including building strong regional governments, imposing ethnic quotas on the bureaucracy and the military, and arranging power sharing agreements among the various ethnic groups.

I argue that the standard view of ethnicity overestimates the likelihood that diversity will undermine government performance (Fish and Brooks 2004; Collier 2003). As noted, even in ethnically divided societies, a government’s performance record significantly shapes citizens’
voting preferences (Gibson and Long 2009; Bratton and Kimenyi 2008). Patronage politics remain common, but voters increasingly seem to weigh those benefits against other objectives, including more programmatic national policies (Wantchekon 2003). The political salience of ethnicity is conditional on a range of factors. Ethnicity must be actively politicized through particular historical processes or identifiable institutions such as electoral systems (Posner 2005). But ethnicity is no more likely to be activated than other types of identity, even though it is relatively more visible. It simply does not have the sort of unique causal status often ascribed to it in the literature (Chandra 2009).

By focusing on a single country over time, the research design of this book, as described in Chapters 2 and 3, provides a dependable way to measure the impact of ethnic diversity on government performance because the outcomes vary but the number of ethnic groups in Nigeria does not. Ethnic salience in Nigeria fluctuates depending on changes in the political and social incentives for self-identification. Surveys shortly after the 1999 democratic transition showed Nigerians having stronger ethnic self-identification than almost any other Africans (Afrobarometer 2002). Since then, ethnic and religious self-identification has varied locally over time (Lewis 2007). Clearly, ethnic heterogeneity alone cannot explain the vicissitudes of government performance. I argue that Nigeria’s political differences between north and south remain the most important and that institutional consolidation depends upon balancing or transcending these regional cleavages. This was dramatically illustrated in 2010, when a president from the north, Umaru Yar’Adua, died in office and a succession battle erupted because vice president Goodluck Jonathan came from the south. Jonathan eventually became president, and I claim in the book’s conclusion that his re-election the following year constitutes a historic turning point because it suggests that Nigerians are joining other African voters who
increasingly value policy performance over ethnicity when evaluating politicians (Bratton et al. 2011; Ferree 2011).

**Leadership**

The last explanation for government performance commonly invoked by scholars, officials, and casual observers is the quality of leadership. Ideas about the centrality of a leader’s personal characteristics arose during the anti-colonial struggles that featured towering personalities such as Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, Léopold Sédar Senghor in Senegal, and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana. Patrick Chabal refers to “failure of leadership” as the standard explanation for Africa’s post-colonial disappointments (Chabal 2009, 118), and it emerged again following Africa’s re-democratization in the 1990s. “The effective study of leadership is enjoying a period of resurgence across the globe,” wrote Joseph Ayee in an assessment of Ghana’s leadership since the 1993 transition to democracy. Leadership entails formulating a vision for the future, developing a rational strategy for realizing that vision, and enlisting the support of political actors who can help. Politics is based on a “leader-follower” relationship that is purposeful, interactive, and capable of causation (Ayee 2007, 166). Kwame Boafo-Arthur, drawing on the work of former British prime minister, Tony Blair, the World Bank, and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development, argues that there is a recent convergence of views about the importance of good leadership in mobilizing economic resources, limiting political failures, and adopting good policies (Boafo-Arthur 2007). “Leadership, in other words, is an essential element in the process of nation-building,” concludes one diagnosis of post-colonialism. “The history of nation-states and civilizations have clear [sic] shown that well-focused, transparent, and visionary leaders have played strategic roles…above all, changing the destiny of their countries” (Abubakar 2004, 154).
In this view, good governance requires leaders like Plato’s philosopher-king, possessed of noble virtue. When Chukwuma Nzeogu began discretely planning Nigeria’s first coup in late 1965, he and his co-conspirators blamed selfish politicians and weak leadership for “moving the nation steadily but surely into self-destruction.” They dreamed that military discipline would lead the country into social revolution, or at least unify a nation that democracy had divided (Obasanjo 2004, 82). There is a long history in Africa of idolizing, indeed fetishizing, the “strong and enlightened visionaries at the helm” in Asia’s fast-developing nations (Tsikata 2007, 82). Praise for selfless personal character routinely leads to romanticizing of Asia’s soft authoritarianism. Kwaku Tsikata writes that what distinguishes the Asian success stories from many African cases is “strong and enlightened visionaries at the helm” who provided the sort of “developmental leadership” (Tsikata 2007, 82). Ayee also attributes Africa’s stalled development to a lack of “transformational” leadership of the kind that benefitted the Asian dragons (Ayee 2007, 165). Along the same lines, Nigeria’s former dictator Yakubu Gowon says, “I wish we had the fortune of Singapore’s or Malaysia’s leadership. . . . When one got to know them and see how they were doing things, that was what we wanted to achieve.”

10 A senior Nigerian senator comments, “When you have a very energetic and visionary president, things change. And Nigeria has not been blessed with one so far. If you look at Asian countries, there comes a time when a president comes and changes everything.” Speaking in 2010, during the most dramatic constitutional leadership crisis since the 1999 transition, he said “Nigeria has a bright future, provided that we are lucky to have the right leadership. Just like in America or any other country, you see that the fortunes of those countries change when they have good leadership.”

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11 Interview with Senator Abiola Ajimobi, Ibadan, March 15, 2010.
Scholars blame Nigeria’s flawed leaders for a variety of developmental problems, including widespread corruption (Balogun 2009; Aluko 2009). One of Nigeria’s leading political scientists and the current chair of the electoral commission, Attahiru Jega, links the country’s “crisis of leadership” to ethnic tensions and “political brinkmanship.” Transparency, accountability, and good governance all originate in “the mind-set of the leaders,” he says, while “democracy-inclined” civil society strives to exercise political control (Jega 2007). “There is a near consensus that almost all of Nigeria’s problems are traceable to poor leadership,” says another scholar. “In no sphere of life is this debacle being more universally felt than the economy. . . . Policy uncertainty, executive arbitrariness, unsustainable expansionary spending and wastage are the defining characteristics of what could pass for monetary and fiscal policies” (Tukur 2004, 244). Joseph’s classic work on the short-lived Second Republic argues that democracy collapsed due to bad leadership rather than any inherent institutional flaws (Joseph 1987, 129). An analyst of the current Fourth Republic writes, “Most politicians, statesmen and business leaders have not been practicing the politics of virtue.” Nigeria’s leaders therefore need to display loyalty, respect, fairness, compassion, and self-discipline. This “hero in history” model builds from counterfactuals, arguing that issues and events would have been different without the influence and power of individual leaders possessed of strong character (Dike 2003).

Capturing the cultural mood on the question of national stewardship, one of Nigeria’s most famous authors, Chinua Achebe, writes, “The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a problem of leadership.” Studies of African governance frequently refer to this quote from The Trouble with Nigeria (Achebe 1983, 1). For example, an introductory chapter to the 2010 edition of Democratization in Africa says it “sums up the opinion of many contemporary Africans about the underlying cause of their perennial national crises of bad governance and
underdevelopment” (Prempeh 2010, 22). Achebe, however, puts this conclusion in important contexts. First, he says, “It is totally false to suggest, as we are apt to do, that Nigerians are fundamentally different from any other people in the world” (Achebe 1983). This is important because it responds to claims of African exceptionalism. Political science spent much of the last decade revisiting debates over area studies, methodology, and positivism with surprising contentiousness.12 Second, Achebe probes his compatriots to think about deeper explanations and alternatives, writing, “Nigerians are corrupt because the system under which they live today makes corruption easy and profitable…They will cease to be corrupt when corruption is made difficult and inconvenient” (Achebe 1983, 38). In this new formulation, enlightened citizens are more important than enlightened leaders. When some of Nigeria’s reformers argued in the late 1990s that their best hope lay in the hands of the brutal dictator, Sani Abacha, a dissident colonel offered a stringent critique: “To continue to predicate the future of this country on the existence of one man, I think will be very dangerous. What happens when the man is gone?”13

A new generation of political thinkers now links the quality of leaders to the political processes that chooses them. Suggesting that Achebe’s oft-used quotation represented post-colonial hero worship and Weberian ideas of charismatic authority, Osaghae says that democratization taught Africans one thing: “The best form of leadership was that restrained by institutional checks” (Osaghae 2010, 420). Liberian President and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Ellen Sirleaf Johnson similarly concludes, “Good leadership is only partly about the individual people in leadership positions. Much more important is how these leaders are chosen and how they are held accountable by citizens” (Radelet 2010, 5).

12 See for example the symposium, “Perestroika in Political Science: Past, Present, and Future,” PS: Political Science and Politics 43, 4 (October 2010), 725 – 754.
Clearly, leadership matters for something. Coming to power in 1994 after 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela’s willingness to protect the rights and property of South Africa’s white minority was a monumental act of forgiveness which also helped preserve the country’s engines of growth. And as Seymour Martin Lipset reminds us of George Washington, nothing exemplifies “self-sacrificing heroism” like the former general’s willingness to gracefully return to private life after the Revolutionary War and then do so again after serving two terms as president. England’s stunned King George commented that this made Washington “the greatest character of the age” (Lipset 1998, 24). James Madison himself asked, during the Virginia Convention, “Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks—no form of government can render us secure.”

But the danger of embracing leadership is that it ignores institutions, social forces, and other types of post-colonial African agency. By resigning history to randomness, it falsely separates a leader’s decisions from the social reality and political systems in which they are made. Like structural determinism, the leadership explanation asks citizens to accept governance failures as the result of forces beyond their control. African nationalists in fact discarded colonial constitutions with surprising swiftness following independence. And while many post-colonial policies had failed by the 70s, evidence increasingly demonstrates that excessive voluntarism is too stochastic to account for empirical patterns of government performance in the decades since then. African agency operates within a finite universe of opportunity constraints, Africans are not locked fatalistically into path dependency in which neither politicians nor citizens have control over their destiny (Alence 2004; Ndulu et al. 2008). James Madison, whose ideas inspire the theoretical argument of this book, understood the dangers of relying on political

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will and placing hope in individual leaders. “A nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato,” he writes in “Federalist Number 49.” An enduring, hard reality, he writes elsewhere in the Federalist Papers, is that “enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm.” Governance always entails confrontations among hostile factions, and “it is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust to these clashing interests, and render them subservient to the public good.”

AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION

Madison argues that the causes of factions, which include above all the unequal distribution of property, cannot be removed. Therefore, “controlling the effects” of factions is among the principal tasks of government. “Each department should have a will of its own,” he explains in the Federalist Papers, famously arguing that “ambition must be made to counter ambition.”

Starting in the 1990s, political scientists have used this central insight as the basis for developing veto player theory. Yet Madison’s foundational legacy is largely taken for granted and the literature rarely mentions him. In one sense, this is unsurprising because veto player theory is intended to operate in a comparative framework and overt references to Madison could be misinterpreted as narrowing its scope to just the American experience. In a broader sense though, veto player theory and even comparative politics more generally, have unpaid debts to Madison (Samuels and Shugart 2010).

George Tsebelis makes the contemporary case for veto players as a comparative tool, arguing that conventional categories such as presidential/parliamentary, unicameral/bicameral, or majoritarian/proportional often defy clear demarcation. For example, despite innumerable national differences, this theory allows meaningful comparisons between political executives in

15 Federalist No. 10.
16 Federalist No. 51.
Peru and France who, without formal institutional authority, often exercise effective vetoes over policy. Policy making is therefore better understood in terms of a continuum reflecting the number and type of divided interests. These veto players are thus “individual or collective actors whose agreement is required for a change of the status quo” (Tsebelis 1995).

His work has spawned dozens of studies over the last fifteen years that have tested or extend this framework in various ways. With a few notable exceptions,17 virtually all of this research has focused on developed countries. “It may be that there is much less faith in institutional approaches among those who do not work on developing countries,” explains a recent literature review on veto players, which is unfortunate in light of the theory’s “proven use” (Hallerberg 2010, 35). While veto player theory has formed the basis of a highly integrated niche literature on the developed world, it has been less convenient to apply in regions where key concepts are difficult to measure and quantify. Despite an appreciation for the idea that veto players are more than numbers on a chart, that they represent some underlying social contract concerning the distribution of political authority, operationalizing this idea remains a challenge.

Most veto player studies are also limited by their focus on explaining policy stability rather than change (Konig et al. 2010; Gelbach and Malesky 2010). This focus is unnecessarily narrow, since some literature does link veto players to other types of outcomes. If veto players can extract policy concessions, then their impact should be seen in their ability to demand targetable policy outputs that function as side payments to political allies – in addition to their ability to block policy change (Cox and McCubbins 2001; Lyne 2008). Indeed, one study looking at institutional actors in seventy-eight countries found that as the number of “veto points” increases, governments embark on more costly “white elephant” projects that benefit narrow constituencies (Henisz and Zelner 2006). Research on African power-sharing agreements

17 See for example Cheesman and Tendi (2010) and MacIntyre (2001).
suggests that veto players may also impact the likelihood of renewed political violence (Cheeseman and Tendi 2010). The literature explores how veto players limit opportunities for selfish behavior, but typically through the lens of policy stability. Scholars try to gauge the extent of veto players’ “commitment” or “resoluteness” when it comes to maintaining the status quo (Haggard and McCubbins 2001). Accountability is framed as a safeguard against impetuous policy shifts driven by a small number of cohesive political actors.

Madison, however, recognizing the risks of making policy too difficult to change and argued for a strong, but bicameral, legislature. The division of the legislature was intended as a form of horizontal monitoring—separate and sovereign authorities to create checks and balances within and across government. Though he was no populist, Madison at the same time feared that inadequate control of delegated authority would disenfranchise the poor majority or enable the executive to spend recklessly. He appreciated the importance of accountability with a vertical dimension as well. In contemporary veto players literature, these ideas are represented in the form of strong unions, independent judiciaries, or influential militaries who shape policy choice (Tsebelis 2002; Andrews and Montinola 2004). In this book I bring such actors close to the heart of veto player theory. An analysis rooted in these foundational principles advances the study of Africa, where nationalists won their freedom in the 1960s, where social movements were surprisingly effective building capacity for vertical accountability in the 1980s, and where restraining executive authority stands out as perhaps the central problem of institutional consolidation today (Barkan 2009; Diamond and Plattner 2010). I build upon veto player theory by integrating the social bases of authority into the analysis of elite behavior. I find that the number of veto players does not only impact policy stability, the usual focus of veto player studies, it also has differential effects on local and nationally-oriented public policy outputs.
Since most veto player studies also focus on developed democracies, this book also aims to contribute to emerging comparative scholarship about authoritarianism. This research, which now complements democratization as a significant field of inquiry, strives to disaggregate authoritarian regimes in order to understand how they govern. By examining alternative bases of accountability, policy control, and civic participation, this “analytic authoritarian” literature has exposed how seemingly different regimes face surprisingly similar pressures to represent societal interests. For example, twenty-nine years into his tenure as president of the Ivory Coast, Félix Houphouët-Boigny asserted, “There is no number two, three or four...In Côte d’Ivoire there is only a number one: that’s me and I don’t share my decisions” (Meredith 2006, 379). In my view, the analytic authoritarian literature questions this excessive bravado. It explores how political institutions such as legislatures or mass political parties can and do constrain dictators (Wright 2008; Brownlee 2007; Frantz and Ezrow 2011). Autocrats govern through a variety of collective decision-making mechanisms, challenging the myth of the “solitary autocrat” (Gandhi 2008). Repression has its limits. Autocrats face real “audience costs,” the political risks of coercion compared to cooptation (Weeks 2008). Burkina Faso’s dictator, for example, has survived several waves of mass protests since coming to power in 1987 by employing strategies of conciliation rather than coercion.¹⁸ Unlike much of the democratization literature, which uses a wide array of ideal types to analyze illiberal regimes, veto player theory supports a comparative analysis by conceptualizing political authority on a continuum.

There is a pressing need to understand authoritarianism better because two decades after the “Third Wave” of democratization reached Africa’s shores, democracies across the continent are in a precarious condition and illiberal politics retain a significant allure. The Economist Intelligence Unit declared in 2010 that “Democracy is in retreat. The dominant pattern in all

regions over the past two years has been backsliding on previously attained progress” In Sub-Saharan Africa, democratization “is grinding to a halt and in some cases is being reversed” (Economist Intelligence Unit 2010, 2). Freedom House reported similarly discouraging findings in 2011 when it announced that freedom on a global level had declined for the fifth consecutive year.

Surveys carried out by Afrobarometer show that, since the project began in 1999, demand for democracy has increased across Africa and majorities reject alternatives to democracy (understood as one-man rule, one-party rule, or military rule). Still, fewer than half (47 percent) of respondents in 2008 indicated a demand for democracy, with significant variation across countries. More alarmingly, among the twenty most politically liberal countries in Africa, nowhere do a majority of respondents see democracy as consolidated—and in several cases a majority describe a consolidation of autocracy (Bratton and Mattes 2009). Citizens also express strong doubts about the quality of democracy. Vertical accountability and government responsiveness are low, indicating a deficiency in “extending the link between citizens and government beyond regular elections and formal constitutional protections to the day-to-day realm of policy-making and implementation” (Logan and Mattes 2010, 11). And even in countries where citizens clearly do prefer democracy (such as Nigeria), impatience with its ability to deliver on desired policies creates a restlessness which coup plotters have historically exploited.

Evidence suggests that Nigerians still clearly prefer democracy, but their commitment to the democratic process is weak. According to Afrobarometer surveys, there has been decline in “patience with democracy” since 2000, due to the government’s performance record. In 2005, nearly 40 percent of Nigerians said that they would “consider other political options” if
democratic performance does not improve (Afrobarometer 2006). Even before the corrupt elections of 2007, polls revealed growing cynicism about democracy. And after the elections, less than one-third of those interviewed were either “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way democracy works in Nigeria. Nigeria’s youthful population, roughly half of whom had never lived under a democracy at the time of the transition, expressed frustration. One retired military colonel who had risked his life to move the democratic transition forward in Nigeria complained in 2004, “This democracy that we have made so many sacrifices to bring about and invested so much hope in, has not delivered the expected dividends….This system has not promoted good governance.”

For his generation, such sentiments evoke memories of the period before the 1983 coup, a surprisingly popular regime change that ushered in sixteen dark years of dictatorship. Olusegun Obasanjo, who stepped aside in 1979 to allow a democratic transition, perhaps best expressed the nation’s enigmatic attitude toward democracy. Commenting after a 1985 coup that ordinary citizens are more concerned with the substance of government than its form, he said “[Nigerians] are interested in the ability to deliver, the ability to perform, rather than the means by which the government is brought about.”

The Structure of the Book

During the 1990s, a new dictator sent Obasanjo to prison, where the retired general changed his mind about democracy. After he was released, Obasanjo ran for office and became the first democratically elected president following the 1999 transition. During his eight years in office, he clashed continually with the National Assembly which tried to impeach him numerous times, oversaw two flawed elections, and witnessed the rise of Islamic law in the north and new violent rebellions in the south. He also increased social spending, oversaw economic reforms, paid off

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the country’s foreign debts, and restored Nigeria’s international reputation. What does this decidedly mixed record teach us about the factors that determine government performance? This book digs beneath the standard political and cultural formulations to understand the underlying dynamics that guide policy making.

The first chapter uses veto player theory to develop an alternative explanation for government performance. I detail the criteria for identifying and enumerating veto players. In my formulation, political actors possess veto authority when they possess motives to challenge the status quo, the organizational means to internally coordinate preferences, and they demonstrably block policy in one major area such as federal budgets or constitutional reform. I argue that the conditions which increase policy stability and credibility also make it more difficult for political actors to coordinate their interests. This should impact policies with non-excludable benefits at the national level since it is more difficult for veto players to agree that their interests are better served by these broad, collective policies. The number of veto players should also theoretically impact the overall levels of more particularistic goods since each actor can use its leverage to demand excludable benefits. Throughout the book I describe these two distinct policy outcomes as national collective goods and local collective goods, respectively.

In Chapter 2, I count the number of veto players in each Nigerian regime between independence in 1960 and the end of President Olusegun Obasanjo’s second term in 2007. Anecdotes from interviews with primary sources vividly illustrate why regimes with more veto players face bargaining problems. I explain how veto authority develops, sometimes from the top down and sometimes from the ground up. I pay special attention to policy actors who have gained power since Nigeria’s 1999 transition, the country’s longest experience with democracy since independence. I argue that violent agitation for Islamic law in the north and militant
demands for control over oil resources in the south stem from efforts to maintain a federal bargain between two distinct geopolitical regions. This analysis roots macro-level political leverage in geography, culture, and history, and it explores the endogenous factors that shape institutions.

In Chapter 3, I define government performance, specify different methods of measuring performance, and perform two sets of statistical tests. Building on the theory of public goods and relevant critiques, I elaborate on the distinctions between local and national collective goods. With respect to collective goods distributed on a national level, it is costly to exclude some citizens from enjoying their benefits. I operationalize these variables with original empirical data on budgetary policy, inflation, education, and judicial resolution of property rights cases. With respect to collective goods distributed on a local level, it theoretically is possible to target delivery and exclude some constituencies. I operationalize these variables with original data on capital and recurrent spending and electricity provision. I draw upon speeches and government documents to show that these performance indicators all reflect government policy priorities.

I then formulate twin hypotheses: A “coordination hypothesis” predicts that regimes with additional veto players will face bargaining problems that impede the delivery of national-level collective goods. A “logroll hypothesis” predicts that additional veto players will correspond with greater overall levels of local collective goods. Statistical tests with original data show that additional veto players do increase coordination problems, but they also foster policy stability and accountability. In a practical sense, having more veto players makes it more difficult to enact policies at a national level because it is difficult for veto players to agree on broad, collective policies. Regimes with the most veto players have larger budget deficits, higher inflation rates, higher student/teacher ratios, and less efficient judicial resolution of property rights cases. But
having more veto players actually lowers the overall delivery level of local collective goods. Tests show that these regimes are more likely to restrain capital and recurrent spending. This is because each player has the leverage to demand favors but faces greater scrutiny from political counterparts. I attribute these performance outcomes to the improved monitoring generated by additional veto players. All of these results remain robust after including controls for the conventional explanations for government performance. The evidence indicates that Nigeria faces a “Madisonian dilemma,” where the conditions that foster accountability simultaneously contribute to coordination problems.

To probe the comparative potential of the model beyond Nigeria, Chapter 4 investigates the individual, collective, and institutional factors guiding the policy process in two other African cases, Ghana and Zimbabwe. Rather than attempting to code veto players or establish causal relationships, the chapter builds on “post-paradigmatic” research approaches (Lichbach and Zukerman 2009). By focusing on discovery, explanation, and evidence, ontology and understanding trump the parochialism that sometimes traps political science in paradigms. Within discovery lies possible “core difficulties” that present barriers to the accumulation of knowledge. Within explanation lies causality in a “middle range” which avoids universalistic theoretical ambitions but still aims to account for a range of phenomena. And finally, within evidence resides “stylized facts” which deepen understanding of established causal relationships such as those I identify in Chapter 3. Where variables serve as evidence, here research looks to prevent them from becoming “reified social facts” which overextend their applications beyond the environment which gives them meaning. In this way, context and structure enrich theory development and empirical testing. Tools such as case studies and narratives thus serve a variety of roles within this broader post-foundational approach to political research (Lichbach 2009).
The narratives in Chapter 4 identify “analytical equivalents” and historical junctures when the policy process expanded or contracted. The study of Ghana focuses on a period of institutional consolidation in the 1980s when the country showed signs of breaking with post-independence patterns of impetuous economic policy making. The Zimbabwe narrative traces the path to the 2008 power-sharing agreement and identifies the sources of political reconfigurations in economic liberalization, coalitions for institutional reform, and new electoral challenges. By the time the country arrived at this critical historical juncture, elites had destroyed the institutions capable of arbitrating among different political factions, and the regime was beholden to a variety of independent-minded allies.

The final chapter, “Madison’s Model Unbound,” explains how this study adds to our understanding of informal institutions, federalism, and authoritarian governance. Even during regimes that formally limited states’ power, subnational actors sometimes constructed authority from the ground up. Conversely, sometimes institutions designed to counterbalance interests fail to exercise this power. I also identify factors that potentially limit the model’s generalizability. For example, Nigeria differs from many countries in its minimal dependence on foreign aid and its relatively unusual political equilibrium between the northern and southern regions at the heart of its federal system. New actors such as militant movements demanding “resource control” in the oil-rich Niger Delta and Islamic movements such as Boko Haram in the north are straining the historical bargain at the core of Nigeria’s nationhood, which will be 100 years old in 2014.

There are positive signs that Nigeria’s political system is becoming more broadly accessible and that its institutions are creating incentives for political organizing that cut across this highly sensitive regional cleavage. When a succession crisis ensued following the death of President Umaru Yar’Adua, a northerner, in 2010, the presidency unexpectedly shifted to a
southerner, Vice President Goodluck Jonathan. The resolution to the crisis demonstrated a commitment to constitutional terms of separate sovereignty, public authority grounded in distinct branches of government, and protecting national interests that cut across regional concerns. Similarly, southerners rose to defend presidential term limits in 2006, even though a southern politician stood to gain most immediately from constitutional modifications that would have allowed him to stay in office. Madison claimed, “The safety and happiness of society are the objects at which all political institutions aim, and to which all such institutions must be sacrificed.” Nigerians strengthened their political institutions by defending them, and politicians and civil society activists continue to fortify them in ways that demonstrate creativity and hope.


