

The political geography of voting: Opposition and the city in Africa

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Explanations for voting behaviour have so far largely focused on ethnicity or clientelism. This paper will argue that the urban-rural divide in voting is one of the issues that deserve more attention.

It is well known that urban movements were the backbones of democracy movements in the early 1990s. An example is the Senegalese PDS which commanded a large urban support in 2001. Over time, however, the tide turned and the party lost favour in the cities. A similar development can also be seen with regard to the Zambian MMD and, to a lesser extent, to the NPP in Ghana.

The paper begins with an empirical investigation using the Afrobarometer data (Round 4). By using logistic regression analysis, the extent of the urban-rural divide in voting will be measured and tested against some other variables relevant to voting behaviour. Although voting patterns differ markedly across the 20 countries, there is a clear trend that opposition parties tend to have their vote base in the cities, whereas ruling parties are stronger in the countryside. The second part of the paper will put these findings into perspective. By drawing on qualitative field research on political parties in Ghana and Senegal it will be argued that parties adapt their mobilisation strategies to the available levels of social and communication infrastructure. While the city as a social space is comfortable to opposition activities, political mobilisation in the countryside relies to a greater extent on (clientelistic) relationships with intermediaries.