

## Patterns of Political Issues in Sub Saharan African Elections: A Typology of Issue-Engagement

Nicolas Van de Walle<sup>1</sup> and Jaimie Bleck<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cornell University, Department of Government, Ithaca, NY, USA

[jb462@cornell.edu](mailto:jb462@cornell.edu)

Existing political science literature tells us surprisingly little about political issues in emerging African democracies. We note that many issues could potentially mobilize Africa voters, yet the region's political parties fail to engage most of these issues in a substantive way. This paper draws on a theory of "non-mobilization" to predict and test patterns of issue-engagement across Africa. We argue the establishment of "issue ownership" by parties in the region is constrained by the common elite backgrounds of party candidates, the newness of electoral systems, and undefined constituencies, other than cultural ones such as ethnicity. Based on hypotheses developed in an initial study of Francophone West Africa, we analyze local newspapers in six countries, Mozambique, Senegal, Ghana, Zambia, Kenya and Nigeria, to code the frequency and character of issue engagement in order to test our hypotheses. We argue that most often parties will focus their efforts on proving competence around three key *valence* issues, economic development, democracy, and sovereignty, drawn from a common vocabulary of democratic politics. As parties have a greater chance to build reputations through repeated electoral competition and turnovers of power, they will be more likely to begin to claim specific policy space around a valence issue. We explain why a second group of *unclaimed issues*, including issues related to family, religion, and traditional authority, the government's role in the economy, and immigration, are much less likely to be appropriated by parties. In sum, the paper offers both a typology of political issues in African elections, as well as an explanation for the ways in which these issues are elided or debated.