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PARLIAMENTARY PRIMARIES IN GHANA'S  
NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC CONGRESS:  
EXPLAINING REFORMS TO CANDIDATE  
SELECTION AND THEIR IMPACT

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## **Parliamentary primaries in Ghana's National Democratic Congress: Explaining reforms to candidate selection and their impact**

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### **Abstract**

Candidate selection procedures play a crucial role in shaping parliaments and influence the quality of democracy. Yet our understanding of how and why political parties reform their candidate selection mechanisms over time is surprisingly limited – especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where a number of parties have begun to shift towards more inclusive procedures. To address this gap, we examine the experience of Ghana's National Democratic Congress, which reformed its selection procedures in 2015 allowing all party members to vote in primary elections for its parliamentary candidates. We identify four motivations that drove these reforms: making the party more democratic by expanding participation, reducing the cost of the primary process, building the organizational capacity of the party, and keeping up with the party's main competitor. Each motivation mattered more to some within the party than others; almost all ended up disappointed due to a substantial divergence between actual and intended effects that ultimately led to the reversion of the reforms in 2019. Our findings leave us better placed to understand both why political parties in sub-Saharan Africa's more democratic regimes have shifted towards more inclusive candidate selection mechanisms over time, and why the pace of that change has been slow and uneven.

Keywords: Democracy; Primary Election; Political Party; Candidate Selection; Reforms

### **Résumé**

Les procédures de sélection des candidats jouent un rôle crucial dans la formation des parlements et influencent la qualité de la démocratie. Pourtant, notre compréhension des réformes des mécanismes de sélection des candidats par les partis politiques et des raisons pour lesquelles ils le font au fil du temps est étonnamment limitée, en particulier en Afrique subsaharienne, où un certain nombre de partis ont commencé à s'orienter vers des procédures plus inclusives. Pour combler cette lacune, nous examinons l'expérience du Congrès national démocratique du Ghana, qui a réformé ses procédures de sélection en 2015, permettant à tous les membres du parti de voter lors des élections primaires pour ses candidats parlementaires. Nous identifions quatre motivations qui ont été le moteur ces réformes : rendre le parti plus démocratique en élargissant la participation, réduire le coût du processus primaire, renforcer la capacité organisationnelle du parti et se maintenir au niveau de son principal concurrent. Chacune de ces motivations était plus importante pour certains au sein du parti que pour d'autres ; presque tous ont fini par être déçus en raison d'un écart important entre les effets réels et les effets escomptés, ce qui a finalement conduit au retour des réformes en 2019. Nos conclusions nous permettent de mieux comprendre à la fois pourquoi les partis politiques des régimes plus démocratiques d'Afrique subsaharienne ont évolué au fil du temps vers des mécanismes de sélection des candidats plus inclusifs, et pourquoi le rythme de ce changement a été lent et inégal.

Mots-clés: Démocratie; élection primaire; parti politique; sélection des candidats; réformes



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## Introduction

In many African countries, the selection of parliamentary candidates by political parties is where the “real” electoral competition takes place. The reason for this varies between countries. It may be because a ruling party is dominant – as in Tanzania,<sup>1</sup> because voting is heavily influenced by ethnicity – as in Kenya,<sup>2</sup> or because parties have clear regional strongholds that render certain seats “safe” – as in Ghana.<sup>3</sup> In such countries, political parties become the gate-keepers to the political world, since voters can only select from the “menu” of candidates they offer-up.<sup>4</sup> Parties’ candidate selection procedures influence who has access to political power, and what they do with it; they shape the composition of legislatures and the nature of political debates. These effects have particular significance in sub-Saharan Africa, where the ideological divides that characterise inter-party competition elsewhere are often weak – or absent.<sup>5</sup> Candidate selection procedures can also create barriers to the participation of women in politics,<sup>6</sup> or allow parties to favour wealthy candidates over those who are better qualified but have fewer financial resources.<sup>7</sup> Both effects may, in turn, have a corrosive effect on the quality of democracy.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, political parties are increasingly making use of primary elections to select parliamentary candidates, particularly in the region’s more democratic

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<sup>1</sup> Melanie O’Gorman, “Why the CCM Won’t Lose: The Roots of Single-Party Dominance in Tanzania,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2012): 313–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2012.669566>.

<sup>2</sup> Nic Cheeseman and Miles Larmer, “Ethnopolitism in Africa: Opposition Mobilization in Diverse and Unequal Societies,” *Democratization* 22, no. 1 (2015): 22–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.809065>.

<sup>3</sup> Anja Osei, “Political Parties in Ghana: Agents of Democracy?,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 31, no. 4 (2013): 543–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2013.839227>.

<sup>4</sup> Gideon Rahat, “Candidate Selection: The Choice Before the Choice,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 1 (2007): 157–70, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.0014>.

<sup>5</sup> Sebastian Elischer, *Political Parties in Africa: Ethnicity and Party Formation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Vibeke Wang and Ragnhild Louise Muriaas, “Candidate Selection and Informal Soft Quotas for Women: Gender Imbalance in Political Recruitment in Zambia,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7, no. 2 (2019): 401–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1564056>.

<sup>7</sup> Dominika Koter, “Costly Electoral Campaigns and the Changing Composition and Quality of Parliament: Evidence from Benin,” *African Affairs* 116, no. 465 (2017): 573–96, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adx022>.



political regimes.<sup>8</sup> In 2001, for example, the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) adopted new regulations allowing all registered members to participate in the selection of its parliamentary candidates in a reform that became known as '*bulela ditswe*' (open to all).<sup>9</sup> In Nigeria, parties have been legally required to hold primaries since 2011,<sup>10</sup> though party elites have typically retained a substantial degree of influence over candidate selection. In most cases, Nigeria's primaries remain indirect, in the sense that the electorate is constituted by delegates (rather than all members). However, in the lead up to the 2019 election, the All Progressives Congress (APC), one of Nigeria's two major parties, piloted direct primaries (in which all registered members were able to vote) in 16 states.<sup>11</sup>

African scholars have analysed this trend in terms of its implications for intra-party democracy.<sup>12</sup> Yet despite their prior work, our understanding of why political parties in Africa might choose to reform their primary processes at a particular point in time, and the challenges that they confront in implementing those reforms, is curiously poor. This is due to two weaknesses in the existing literature on candidate selection mechanisms which we elaborate in more depth below. The first of these is an over-emphasis on the structural determinants of candidate selection mechanisms, something that makes it difficult to explain change over time. The second is a tendency to deduce the motivations of party leaders from the impact of candidate selection mechanisms in practice – an approach likely to lead to inaccurate conclusions given increasing evidence that candidate selection mechanisms often have unintended effects. These leaves us poorly placed to understand how and why the candidate selection mechanisms adopted by political parties across Africa are evolving.

The primary goal of this paper is to expand our knowledge of what motivates parties to reform candidate selection procedures, and the ways in which reforms can diverge from expectations, in the context of Africa's more democratic political systems. In order to do so, it presents a case study of Ghana's National Democratic Congress (NDC). Specifically, we examine the changes that the NDC made to its primary process in 2015 and 2019, prior to

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<sup>8</sup> This has occurred primarily in countries with single member district electoral systems, as primary elections are rarely used to draw up candidate lists in proportional representation systems.

<sup>9</sup> Zein Kebonang and Wankie Rodrick Wankie, "Enhancing Intra-Party Democracy: The Case of the Botswana Democratic Party," *Journal of African Elections* 5, no. 2 (2006): 141–50.

<sup>10</sup> Section 87 of the *Electoral Act 2011* stipulated that "a political party seeking to nominate candidate for elections under this Act shall hold primaries for aspirants to all elective positions."

<sup>11</sup> International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute, "IRI/NDI Nigeria International Election Observation Mission Final Report" (Washington D.C.: IRI and NDI, 2019), [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/nigeria\\_election\\_report\\_updated.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/nigeria_election_report_updated.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Mpho Mlomo, "The Roles and Responsibilities of Members of Parliament in Facilitating Good Governance and Democracy," in *Botswana, Politics and Society*, ed. W. A. Edge and M. H. Lekorwe (Trenton: J.L. van Schaik, 1998); A. O. Omobowale, "Flawed Political Party Primaries In Nigeria's Fourth Republic: The Case Of The Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP)," *African Journal for the Psychological Study of Social Issues* 11, no. 1 (2008): 282–91; Marietu Tenuche, "The Albatross Called Primary Elections and Political Succession in Nigeria," *Canadian Social Science* 7, no. 4 (2011): 121–30, <https://doi.org/10.3968/j.css.1923669720110704.063>.



the 2016 and 2020 elections respectively. In short, in 2015 NDC leaders dramatically expanded the selectorate (that is, the body of people responsible for selecting candidates) by allowing all party members to vote in the parliamentary primaries. In 2019, this change was undone, with the NDC reverting to a more exclusive process, under which a small number of delegates and party officials (rather than all party members) were entitled to vote in primary elections. We investigate the motivations and impact of each of these decisions, asking several related questions. First, to what extent did the impact of the reforms made in 2015 match the party's intentions in making those reforms? Second, what explains any discrepancy between the two? Third – and finally – how did the NDC's experience of reform in 2015 and 2016 shape its decision to reverse the reforms prior to the next election?

We find that one of the main stated goals of the reform process – to democratize the party primaries by expanding member participation – was achieved in a numerical sense: the number of people who voted in the NDC's primaries increased substantially. However, this increase in participation was not matched by the achievement of the other two goals that had motivated the NDC's leaders to adopt the reforms. The reforms largely failed to reduce the overall cost of the primary process – the second goal – although there is some evidence that it did make vote-buying more difficult. Nor was the third goal, to build organizational capacity of the party, achieved. Failure on both these fronts was significant for the sustainability of the reforms, since these latter two goals played a more fundamental role in driving the reforms. In contrast, the expansion of participation – though often talked about – was more a convenient means of justifying the reforms to the public than a true cause of change. Senior NDC leaders were also motivated by a desire to keep up with – and preferably outpace – their main competitors, the New Patriotic Party (NPP). However, this was a longer-term driver of change rather than a more proximate trigger for the reforms adopted in 2015. We also show that the gap between the party's expectations and the outcome was not primarily due to the design of the reform, but rather the manner in which it was implemented: party leaders seriously underestimated the scale of the logistical challenge that a radical expansion of the primary selectorate entailed. This, together with a perception that the reforms contributed to the NDC's electoral defeat in 2016, led to the reversion of the reforms in 2019. Despite that, there appears to be a large degree of consensus within the NDC that a more inclusive primary process represents "the future of the party," providing it first builds a reliable mechanism for identifying its own members.

These findings deepen our understanding of how and why the candidate selection mechanisms employed by African political parties are changing over time. In particular, our analysis draws attention to the complexity of the motivations behind these reforms, which are rarely driven by a single goal, much less one that is shared equally by all actors within a party. Our findings also suggest that, despite the challenges encountered by the NDC, we are likely to see more political parties experiment with inclusive candidate selection mechanisms in sub-Saharan Africa. Many of the factors that motivated leaders within NDC – such as a desire to curtail the role of money and strengthen the party's organizational capacity –



are likely to be shared by the leaders of other parties in the region. Perversely, however, our case study also exposes the fact that poor organizational capacity, in particular a party's limited ability to identify its own members in a reliable manner, can act as a significant barrier to the introduction of inclusive candidate selection mechanisms long after the moment of democratic transition has passed. Such a lack of capacity – which might seem exceptional to those who study political parties in the Western world – is by no means unusual across sub-Saharan Africa. Together, our findings leave us better placed to understand both why political parties in sub-Saharan Africa's more democratic regimes have shifted towards more inclusive candidate selection mechanisms over time, and why the pace of that change has been slow and uneven.

Before presenting our case study, Section 1 provides an overview of prior research on candidate selection, and explains why existing research leaves us poorly placed to understand what motivates reforms to candidate selection procedures and the challenges of putting them into practice. Section 2 describes and justifies our research design, before we present and analyse our empirical material in Section 3. In the final section we reflect on the implications of our findings for future research, and for political parties seeking to make their candidate selection procedures more inclusive.

## **1 Understanding reforms and the challenges of implementation**

Candidate selection mechanisms, including primary elections, vary in many different ways. They can differ with regard to eligibility (who may be a candidate?), the inclusivity or exclusivity of the selectorate (who chooses the candidates?), the degree of geographic centralization (is the decision made at the national, regional or local level?), the selection method (is it by voting or appointment?) and the extent of institutionalisation (does the process consistently follow clearly specified rules?).<sup>13</sup> Prior research – much of it conducted in established Western democracies – identifies a wide range of factors that shape a party's choice of candidate selection mechanism.<sup>14</sup> These factors include variables internal to parties, such as their ideology and degree of organization, as well as external ones, such as anticipated electoral benefits, the degree of party competition, state or national laws, and contagion at both the domestic and international level.<sup>15</sup> Some warn that the determinants of candidate selection mechanisms may differ in sub-Saharan Africa, because there is relatively little ideological variation among political parties – a fact that drives party leaders to prioritize the

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<sup>13</sup> Merete Bech Seeberg, Michael Wahman, and Svend-Erik Skaaning, "Candidate Nomination, Intra-Party Democracy, and Election Violence in Africa," *Democratization* 25, no. 6 (2018): 959–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1420057>.

<sup>14</sup> For reviews see: Gideon Rahat and William P. Cross, "Political Parties and Candidate Selection," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-625>; Bonnie N. Field and Peter M. Siavelis, "Candidate Selection Procedures in Transitional Polities: A Research Note," *Party Politics* 14, no. 5 (2008): 620–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068808093393>.

<sup>15</sup> Field and Siavelis, "Candidate Selection Procedures in Transitional Polities."



attraction and retention of wealthy candidates, as well as the mobilization of grassroots activists.<sup>16</sup> Others, such as Bonnie Field and Peter Siavelis, argue that choices about candidate selection mechanisms are likely to be different in new or transitional democracies.<sup>17</sup> In such contexts, they suggest, four main factors push parties to adopt exclusive rather than inclusive candidate selection mechanisms. First, they argue, party leaders in transitional democracies face a much greater degree of political uncertainty – a product of the transition process itself. Second, leaders must work with party organizations that are weaker and less extensive, a state of affairs that is often the result of their repression (or outright illegality) prior to the transition. Third, in a transitional democracy, party leaders must contend with strategic complexity generated by the interaction of certain types of electoral systems<sup>18</sup> with fractionalized party systems. Fourth, and finally, party leaders in transitional democracies are subject to greater pressure to maintain elite alliances, since elite pacts are often critical for sustaining democratic transitions. Together, these constraints lead political parties to adopt exclusive candidate selection procedures, rather than inclusive ones, because they reduce uncertainty, are logistically less demanding, facilitate co-ordination among the political elite and make it easier to maintain elite alliances.

Despite prior research, our understanding of why political parties – both in Africa, and further afield – choose to reform their candidate selection procedures at specific points in time remains surprisingly poor, as does our knowledge about the challenges that parties confront in putting reforms into practice. This is for two reasons. The first reason is that much prior research on the determinants of candidate selection mechanisms emphasizes the role of structural factors, things like party ideology, the electoral system, the territorial and constitutional structure of the state, the degree of party competition and mass political culture.<sup>19</sup> These structural factors are undeniably important, but they offer little leverage in explaining the proximate causes of reform, save when that reform occurs at a moment of political rupture, such as a democratic transition. Very little work has focussed expressly on reforms that take place at other points in time. The work of Shlomit Barnea and Gideon Rahat provides one exception: they explain the adoption of reforms by reference to whether a party is in opposition or anticipates an electoral loss, and demonstration or contagion effects when other parties in a system have successfully introduced reforms.<sup>20</sup>

The second reason that our understanding of reforms, and their effects, remains limited is that existing work tends to deduce the intentions of party leaders from political outcomes – and vice-versa. If, for example, a selection mechanism appears to increase party

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<sup>16</sup> Nahomi Ichino and Noah L Nathan, "Primary Elections in New Democracies: The Evolution of Candidate Selection Methods in Ghana," in *Routledge Handbook of Primary Elections*, ed. Robert G. Boatright, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 369–83.

<sup>17</sup> Field and Siavelis, "Candidate Selection Procedures in Transitional Polities."

<sup>18</sup> Specifically, small magnitude proportional representation or majoritarian systems.

<sup>19</sup> See Table 1 in Field and Siavelis, "Candidate Selection Procedures in Transitional Polities."

<sup>20</sup> Shlomit Barnea and Gideon Rahat, "Reforming Candidate Selection Methods: A Three-Level Approach," *Party Politics* 13, no. 3 (2007): 375–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068807075942>.



cohesion, then party leaders are implicitly assumed to have chosen that mechanism in pursuit of this outcome.<sup>21</sup> Rarely have researchers actually asked party insiders what motivated their decisions, and only fairly recently has research explicitly questioned whether the results that party leaders expect candidate selection mechanisms to achieve are realised in practice. Yet divergence between intentions and outcomes appears to be a common problem. Prior work by Nahomi Ichino and Noah Nathan illustrates this: examining the candidate selection mechanisms employed by both of Ghana's major parties, they observe that party leaders' often 'adjusted the rules to address one set of problems only to inadvertently complicate another, creating a need to further adjust nomination procedures in the future.'<sup>22</sup>

It is particularly important to understand how shifts towards more inclusive candidate selection procedures become possible over time, the more proximate drivers of reform *and* the ways in which the impacts of reforms can diverge from a party's intentions in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Across the region, many African political parties – including those in Ghana – operate in political regimes that are quite stable and so can no longer be termed transitional.<sup>23</sup> This does not mean that those regimes are fully consolidated democracies, but rather that the "moment" of transition has passed. Thus, it seems likely that many of the factors that characterise a transitional regime, and which – according to Field and Siavelis<sup>24</sup> – are likely to preclude the adoption of more inclusive candidate selection mechanisms may have faded over time. For example, both political uncertainty and the pressure to maintain elite alliances (lest the transition to democracy unravel) are likely to have become less pressing as new 'rules of the game' have become established. This may have eroded the constraints that make the adoption of inclusive candidate selection less common in newer democracies, though it may not have erased them entirely. Other constraints may not fade at the same rate. In particular, many of the political parties (and political party systems) that operate within sub-Saharan Africa's more democratic regimes remain weakly institutionalized.<sup>25</sup> A significant proportion of African parties lack the organizational strength of their counterparts in other regions, including basic capabilities such as the ability to identify their own members. Alone, this may not always deter African political parties from adopting ambitious reforms to candidate selection mechanisms – but it may make

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<sup>21</sup> Shane Mac Giollaibhuí, "How Things Fall Apart: Candidate Selection and the Cohesion of Dominant Parties in South Africa and Namibia," *Party Politics* 19, no. 4 (2013): 577–600, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068811407599>.

<sup>22</sup> Ichino and Nathan, "Primary Elections in New Democracies."

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5–21.

<sup>24</sup> Field and Siavelis, "Candidate Selection Procedures in Transitional Polities."

<sup>25</sup> Matthias Basedau and Alexander Stroh, "Measuring Party Institutionalization in Developing Countries: A New Research Instrument Applied to 28 African Political Parties," Working Paper (German Institute of Global and Area Studies, February 1, 2008); Edalina Rodrigues Sanches, *Party Systems in Young Democracies: Varieties of Institutionalization in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).



divergence between a party's intention in adopting reforms and the impact they have in practice particularly likely in the African context. Might divergent rates of change among these different factors help to explain why political parties in sub-Saharan Africa appear to be moving towards more inclusive candidate selection mechanisms, but in a slow and uneven fashion? Our analysis suggests that they do.

## 2 Research design

Analysing the case of the NDC in Ghana offers a chance to address shortcomings in our understanding of why political parties reform their candidate selection mechanisms, and the challenges they encounter when they do so. Ghana is one of Africa's most stable emerging democracies. Since the re-introduction of multi-party democracy in 1992, there have been several alternations in power between the NDC and its main competitor, the NPP. These alternations have been both peaceful and regular, with power changing hands every eight years. This pattern evidences a two-party system that is both quite stable and relatively well institutionalized – characteristics that set Ghana apart from many other African countries. While both the NDC and the NPP have a nationwide presence – something mandated by Ghanaian party laws – and eschew appeals to an ethnic base, both have clear regional strongholds.<sup>26</sup> While the NPP draws most of its support from the Ashanti and Eastern Regions, the NDC typically wins the bulk of the vote in the Volta Region and the northern parts of the country. This, combined with a first-past-the-post electoral system, means that the NDC and NPP are the gate-keepers of Ghana's political world. Previous research has identified Ghana's political parties, and their primary processes, as one of the most important barriers to entry into politics, particularly for women.<sup>27</sup>

The NDC shares some important similarities with other political parties in the region, suggesting its experience has something to teach us more broadly. It was founded in 1992 by Jerry John Rawlings, a military leader who initially came to power via a coup before ruling as Ghana's elected President (1993-2001) after the return to multiparty politics. Like most parties associated with authoritarian pasts, the NDC has a particular interest in demonstrating its democratic credentials. It has also enjoyed success in several elections (1992, 1992, 2008 and 2012), growing beyond its founder to govern the country under Presidents John Atta Mills (January 2009 – July 2012) and John Dramani Mahama (July 2012 – January 2016).

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<sup>26</sup> Anja Osei, "Formal Party Organisation and Informal Relations in African Parties: Evidence from Ghana," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 54, no. 1 (2016): 37–66, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X15000981>.

<sup>27</sup> Gretchen Bauer, "Ghana: Stalled Patterns of Women's Political Representation," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women's Political Rights*, ed. Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Netina Tan, Gender and Politics (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 607–25; Gretchen Bauer and Akosua K. Darkwah, "'Some Money Has to Be Going...' Discounted Filing Fees to Bring More Women into Parliament in Ghana," in *Gendered Electoral Financing: Money, Power and Representation in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Ragnhild L. Muriaas, Vibeke Wang, and Rainbow Murray, Gender and Comparative Politics (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 133–54.



The NDC has formally adopted an ideological position, identifying as a social democratic party and joining Socialist International, the worldwide organization of social democratic, socialist and labour parties. Yet, as in the case of most African parties, ideology forms a relatively minor part of its appeals to voters, which tend to be based on broader promises to deliver development and fight corruption, as well as appeals to group identity (which in Ghana manifests primarily on a regional, rather than an ethnic, basis).

All of this makes the NDC – and the changes it made to its parliamentary primaries between 2015 and 2019 – a particularly important case when it comes to expanding our understanding of what drives political parties to reform their candidate selection mechanisms, the challenges that parties confront in implementing reforms, and the impact that reforms have in practice. From a theoretical point of view, studying Ghana allows us to build on the work of Field and Siavelis on candidate selection in transitional polities.<sup>28</sup> The case of the NDC can shed light on how parties choose to reform their candidate selection procedures as the constraints initially imposed by democratic transition fade over time. The NDC's candidate selection mechanisms are also substantively significant, since political parties across Africa often view Ghana's parties as worthy of emulation. For example, in 2017, Kenya's opposition alliance, the National Super Alliance (NASA) planned to replicate the NPP's method of compiling a parallel vote tally, a tactic seen (by the NPP and, presumably, NASA) as having played a crucial role in preventing electoral manipulation in Ghana's 2016 election.<sup>29</sup> These plans were scuppered when the NPP experts, who formed part of a team of election observers from the Democratic Union of Africa, were denied entry on their arrival into Kenya. Nevertheless, this example shows that the NDC's motivations for reforming its candidate selection mechanisms, and its experience in implementing those reforms, have significance beyond Ghana's borders.

A qualitative case study is well-suited to addressing our central research questions. Though relying on a single case may limit our ability to generalize, it allows us to untangle complex causal relationships that play out over time.<sup>30</sup> Here we confront not only the (very high) likelihood that multiple factors contributed to the outcomes of interest, but also complexity in terms of timing: we need to be able to examine both underlying (long-term) causes, as well as more temporally proximate triggers of the decisions made by the NDC. As with many complex social processes, the connection between triggers and long-term causes is such that 'seemingly rival explanations may often be complementary.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "Candidate Selection Procedures in Transitional Polities."

<sup>29</sup> Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis, "Digital Dilemmas: The Unintended Consequences of Election Technology," *Democratization* 25, no. 8 (2018): 1397–1418, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1470165>.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 102.



We draw on a wide range of empirical evidence. We use Ghanaian (and to a lesser extent, international) media reports to document both the publicly stated reasons for the NDC's adoption of reforms in 2015 – and their abandonment in 2019 – as well as the party's public assessment of the impact of those reforms. To probe whether these public accounts align with narratives from within the party, we draw on 28 semi-structured interviews with key informants. The majority of these interviews were conducted in Ghana during the last four months of 2019 with different authors responsible for interviewing different categories of respondents depending on their personal expertise and networks.<sup>32</sup> Respondents included senior NDC officials (past and present) who were closely involved in the reforms, current NDC MPs as well as (unsuccessful) NDC parliamentary aspirants or candidates with first-person experience of the 2015 primaries, and leading political experts within Ghana. We also rely on some descriptive analysis of the constituency-level election results from 2016 to test the plausibility of the effects attributed to the reforms by those within the NDC.

### **3 The case of the National Democratic Congress in Ghana**

The mechanisms used by the NDC to select its parliamentary candidates have not been static over time. On the whole, the trend has been one of gradual democratization, decentralization and formalization of candidate selection procedures, with the NDC historically lagging slightly behind the NPP in terms of the inclusiveness of its selection procedures.<sup>33</sup> Since at least the 2004 election both the NDC and NPP have had fairly standard rules for candidate selection set out in their party constitutions.<sup>34</sup> By 2015, the NDC and the NPP had very similar mechanisms for selecting parliamentary candidates. In each constituency, electoral colleges of around 500 delegates, comprised of four (in the case of the NDC) or five (in the case of the NPP) party executives from each polling station – of which there might be about 90 in a constituency, as well as a small number of additional delegates (typically around 15) selected the parliamentary candidates for the relevant party.<sup>35</sup> For the 2015 primaries, however, the NDC opted to expand its primary selectorate significantly, opening up primary voting to all party members: thousands, rather than hundreds, of people were now able to participate in each constituency.

These changes made the NDC one of the most progressive parties in Africa as far as the inclusiveness of the selectorate for parliamentary primaries is concerned. Prior to the reforms on which we focus in this article, the NDC's candidate selection procedures for

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<sup>32</sup> A small number of interviews, conducted by G. Bauer between May 2016 and June 2018 and part of a different project, provide supplementary evidence.

<sup>33</sup> Cyril K Daddieh and George M Bob-Milliar, "In Search of 'Honorable' Membership: Parliamentary Primaries and Candidate Selection in Ghana," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47, no. 2 (2012): 204–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909611421905>.

<sup>34</sup> Daddieh and Bob-Milliar; Osei, "Political Parties in Ghana."

<sup>35</sup> Bauer and Darkwah, "Some Money Has to Be Going..."; Ichino and Nathan, "Primary Elections in New Democracies."



parliamentary elections reflected the median, or most-common, approach adopted by political parties in sub-Saharan Africa. Examining 64 parties from 25 countries in the region, Merete Seeberg and her co-authors found that roughly half of these parties (55%), including the NDC, involved party delegates in the selection of parliamentary candidates.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, 29% of the parties employed more exclusive approaches (party leaders only) while just 16% took the most inclusive approach (allowing ordinary party members and/or all voters to be involved in the choice of candidates). Consequently, the changes generated very positive media coverage for the NDC, with one reporter stating that the reforms were ‘a democratic first and a marked improvement in the system employed by its rival the New Patriotic Party.’<sup>37</sup>

Significantly, the NDC’s decision to expand the selectorate became very closely tied to the introduction of a new biometric party register. Plans for this were first mooted in the wake of the 2012 election, and in 2013 the NDC solicited bids for the construction of the new register and production of biometric membership cards for members. Balking at the cost of this – the bids received came in at more than 7 million euro – the NDC ultimately attempted to roll-out a “home grown” solution. Relying on data included in the national voter register, the NDC issued party members with new membership cards featuring a photo, but it did not itself collect biometric data, nor use biometric data (other than photos) to verify the identity of those included in the new register or check for multiple registrations. The two initiatives – the construction of a new party register and the expansion of the selectorate – became almost inseparable both in practice and in terms of how the reforms were discussed by NDC insiders. In media reports and in our interviews, party leaders, MPs and aspirants rarely talked about one without immediately mentioning the other, frequently presenting the two initiatives as part of a single package of reform. As they put it, the decision to allow all party members to vote in the 2015 primary elections was premised on the idea that members would be identified by the new register, while the expense of the register was justified (in part) on the basis that it would facilitate the expansion of the selectorate. As we discuss in more detail later, this conflation of the two initiatives had important ramifications for how the NDC evaluated the impact of its reforms in the wake of the 2016 election.

### **Motivations for the NDC reforms in 2015**

Our interviews with NDC party leaders, aspirants, candidates and sitting MPs (who won the 2016 elections), together with an analysis of media reports documenting public statements made by those actors, reveal four sets of reasons that motivated the opening up of the NDC

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<sup>36</sup> Seeberg, Wahman, and Skaaning, “Candidate Nomination, Intra-Party Democracy, and Election Violence in Africa.”

<sup>37</sup> GhanaWeb, “NDC Presidential, Parliamentary Primaries Slated for Nov. 7,” GhanaWeb, August 14, 2015, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/NDC-presidential-parliamentary-primaries-slated-for-Nov-7-375040>.



primaries in 2015. Untangling the relative importance of these is empirically challenging. Different types of actors within the party typically emphasized different reasons for the reforms, while certain reasons were accorded greater prominence in public narratives about the reforms and less in more private discussions. The reason that was typically first cited by those within the NDC – both in media reports and interviews – was a desire to democratize the candidate selection process, in the sense of bringing more party members into the process as primary voters, bolstering grass-roots participation in this crucial party activity. Yet a second reason tended to follow this, and was typically given much greater emphasis by those we interviewed – especially aspirants and MPs: a desire to reduce the role of money in the primary elections, often referred to as the monetization of politics. A third reason, building the party’s organizational capacity, was cited much less frequently in interviews. However, this factor was particularly important to senior leaders in the party who drove the reforms forward, suggesting that it played a central role. Finally, a fourth reason, only occasionally cited (and almost exclusively by senior party leaders) was a concern that the NDC needed to keep up with (and preferably outpace) reforms adopted by the rival NPP.

As Cyril Daddieh and George Bob-Milliar have observed, the NDC’s ‘revolutionary ideology and populist rhetoric predisposed it to a preference for bottom-up processes and for consensus building in its operations.’<sup>38</sup> This preference appears to have played a role in the decision to expand the primary selectorate in 2015. Almost all of those we interviewed about the 2015 reforms referred to a desire to democratize the candidate selection process, and for many this was the first reason they identified. While our respondents only rarely described the reforms explicitly as an attempt to strengthen internal democracy, most implied as much, frequently referencing a desire to increase the participation of party members in decision-making. For example, one relatively senior MP (first elected in 2012), stated that the primary motivation for the reforms was a desire ‘to get everybody involved in the decision’<sup>39</sup> while another explained that ‘it just made sense that they wanted more people involved.’<sup>40</sup> In 2015, party leaders had made similar statements to the media, sometimes linking this desire to increase participation to a need to select candidates who had genuine grass-roots support. Thus, party leaders expected that expanding participation in the primaries would generate electoral benefits down the track, making it harder for “big men” without genuine local support to gain nominations. For example, in 2015, the NDC’s Deputy General Secretary, Koku Anyidoho explained that delegates sometimes selected candidates who did not resonate with voters, driving down the NDC’s vote in parliamentary races compared to the presidential poll.<sup>41</sup> Other party leaders repeated these sentiments in interviews, with some explaining that broadening participation and making the primaries more inclusive would force candidates to become more familiar with the needs of their constituents.

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<sup>38</sup> “In Search of ‘Honorable’ Membership,” 211.

<sup>39</sup> NDC MP, interviewed by S. Dodsworth, 12 November 2019, Accra.

<sup>40</sup> NDC MP, interviewed by S. Dodsworth, 14 November 2019, Accra.

<sup>41</sup> GhanaWeb, “NDC Presidential, Parliamentary Primaries Slated for Nov. 7.”



This would, in their view, not only empower the grassroots members of the party but ensure NDC candidates were better positioned to win during the national election campaign.

While a desire to strengthen democracy by expanding participation was often the first response to questions about what drove the NDC to reform its primary process in 2015, it was typically not what respondents emphasized most strongly, nor even the reason that was most prominent in contemporaneous media reports. This suggests some degree of social desirability bias: respondents may have explained the reforms by reference to democracy and participation due to a perception that this was the “correct” response. In interviews – and media reports – a different motivation tended to be given greater emphasis, though it was one that also had serious implications for the quality of democracy: vote-buying. Specifically, a desire to eliminate the “cocoa season” described by Staffan Lindberg,<sup>42</sup> the costs of which many felt had escalated to a point that was unacceptable and unsustainable. In media interviews at the time the reforms were announced, party leaders asserted that by increasing the number of people who voted in the primary elections, the new system would make vote-buying impossible, unless one had – in the words of Anyidoho – ‘all the money in the Bank of Ghana.’<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in interviews, aspirants stressed the need to move away from a primary system in which they were expected to provide “envelopes” (money) and material goods to delegates. One sitting MP (first elected in 2012 and again in 2016) stated, ‘the system of delegates, getting delegates is prone to – how do you call it – the monetization of the process. The highest bidder wins.’<sup>44</sup> Aspirants explained the logic behind the reforms: with the new procedures expanding the selectorate, candidates could not possibly pay all voters in the way delegates had been paid in the past. One aspirant who (unsuccessfully) challenged an incumbent MP in the Upper West region said that in the past one could “buy” all of the executives (delegates) for GHC 500 each but that would not be possible when the voter register was expanded 10-fold. Many others made similar statements about the (anticipated) “impossibility” of buying victory when all party members were able to vote.

All of the senior NDC party leaders we interviewed indicated that reducing the role of money in the primaries as well as their overall cost was one of the main reasons for the 2015 reforms. Some emphasized that the practice of vote-buying not only made the primary elections expensive, but led to corruption and dishonesty. As a very senior NDC party official put it, the reforms were ‘the most radical way’ to ‘eliminate corruption in the [primary] elections.’<sup>45</sup> At the same time, senior NDC party leaders also spoke frequently of the third motivation, namely, building the party’s organizational capacity – something not raised by those who had actually competed in the primaries. According to senior NDC party officials, the reforms to the 2015 party primaries were also intended to build the

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<sup>42</sup> Staffan I. Lindberg, “‘It’s Our Time to “Chop”’: Do Elections in Africa Feed Neo-Patrimonialism Rather than Counter-Act It?,” *Democratization* 10, no. 2 (2003): 121.

<sup>43</sup> GhanaWeb, “NDC Presidential, Parliamentary Primaries Slated for Nov. 7.”

<sup>44</sup> NDC MP, interviewed by S. Dodsworth, 3 October 2019, Accra.

<sup>45</sup> Interviewed by S. Alidu and G.A. Bukari, 2 October 2019, Accra.



infrastructure of the party, creating an accurate and reliable database of party members while raising revenue, as members would need to pay their membership dues to obtain their new party card. While these kinds of motivations received less prominence in media coverage, they were emphasized by party leaders interviewed by the press. As early as 2013, the NDC's General Secretary called on party members to support the new party register and planned reforms to the primary process because they would help transform the party, ensuring it was active on continuous basis – not only during elections.<sup>46</sup> Later, in August 2015, he explained how the new party register made the impending expansion of the selectorate possible and would help to reduce disputes relating to candidate selection<sup>47</sup> since so many conflicts 'hover around who a real member is.'<sup>48</sup> He went on to highlight the importance of the new party register – which he presented as almost inseparable from the expansion of the selectorate – in terms of organizational capacity:

You cannot run an organization without knowing the number of members you have in that organization, so it is a basic requirement of any management situation that, if you are in charge of any organization, you have to know how big or how small the organization is to be able to monitor the growth or decline in membership of that organization.<sup>49</sup>

According to senior party leaders the twin reforms – expanded selectorate and new party register – would allow the party to make more accurate predictions about election outcomes (since changes in party membership would signal increases or decreases in support), identify where it should invest campaign resources, and increase its ability to generate revenue (since party members would be more motivated to pay their membership dues).

Finally, senior party leaders sometimes mentioned a fourth motivation for the 2015 reforms: keeping up with – and preferably overtaking – the NPP. While the NPP continues to use a delegate-based system for its parliamentary primaries, it had expanded the selectorate for the selection of its presidential candidate prior to the 2012 election. In interviews, one expert informant as well as several party leaders explained that this made the NDC look as if it was lagging behind the NPP in terms of democracy. In media reports, senior party figures admitted that the NDC was emulating the NPP, with one Ghanaian newspaper describing the reforms in its headline as an order from former President Jerry John Rawlings 'to copy NPP.'<sup>50</sup> In an interview, one very senior NDC figure noted how the NDC's origins –

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<sup>46</sup> Jasmine Arku, "NDC Reforms Distinct from NPP — Asiedu Nketia," *Graphic Online*, October 9, 2013, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/ndc-reforms-distinct-from-npp-asiedu-nketia.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Under the delegate-based system, disputes often arose at the vetting stage, as formal rules state that aspirants are only eligible to contest if they have been a party member for a certain length of time..

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Gifty Arthur, "NDC Holds Presidential & Parliamentary Primaries On November 7," *The Herald*, August 14, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> quoted in Arthur.

<sup>50</sup> Daniel Nonor, "JJ Orders NDC to Copy NPP," *The Chronicle*, October 7, 2013, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201310072122.html>.



created out of Rawlings' PNDC – made the NDC appear less democratic than the NPP in the minds of some – and this was something the party had long sought to change:

When we got to 2002, NPP had emerged strongly and people were comparing how they were doing their things versus how we were doing ours... So, people began increasingly looking at our party as less democratic than NPP that had also begun selecting their candidates through open elections and so on. So, you cannot isolate yourself from an environment like this.<sup>51</sup>

Such statements suggest that both competition and a degree of contagion were underlying drivers of the reform, though factors that had a less immediate or proximate effect on the decision made in 2015.

### **The impact of the 2015 reforms: Intended vs unintended effects**

The reforms introduced by the NDC in 2015 had a variety of effects. Some of these aligned with the party's intentions. Most notably, expanding the selectorate to include all party members did increase participation in the candidate selection process. Where in the past, candidates had been selected by several hundred people, in 2015 the NDC's candidates were (for the most part) selected by thousands.<sup>52</sup> This roughly 10-fold expansion of participation represented a significant achievement: according to Ghana's Electoral Commission, more than 1.2 million people voted in the NDC's primary elections.<sup>53</sup> In comparison, around 140,000 people voted in the NPP primaries. Unfortunately for the NDC, this expansion of participation did not generate many of the benefits that party leaders had anticipated – and had a number of unanticipated negative effects.

There is some disagreement about whether the reforms achieved the goal of reducing the monetization of the primary process. In interviews, a number of aspirants and candidates in the primaries, as well as some sitting MPs, asserted that the reform had increased rather than decreased the financial (and time) cost of the primaries, something that they attributed directly to the expansion of participation. They complained that they had been expected to compensate not just a group of delegates but all voters – up to 10,000 in a single constituency. A common refrain was that it was as if candidates were financing a general election two times over. One incumbent NDC MP lamented:

You now [in 2015] have to bribe the 50,000. It's very expensive and time consuming ... Now the entire community was involved. In fact, you spend so much money, and then your energy. It was so difficult.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Interviewed by S. Alidu and G.A. Bukari, 2 October 2019, Accra.

<sup>52</sup> In a small number of constituencies, parliamentary candidates were unopposed in the primary election.

<sup>53</sup> Ebenezer Afanyi Dadzie, "95% of NDC Members Affirm Mahama's Candidature for 2016 Polls," Cit-iFM Online, November 22, 2015, <http://citifmonline.com/2015/11/95-of-ndc-members-affirm-mahas-candidature-for-2016-polls/>.

<sup>54</sup> Interviewed by S. Dodsworth. 3 October 2019, Accra.



Yet there were also some aspirants who suggested that, although the overall cost of running a primary campaign was increased by the need to engage with a larger number of people (pushing up costs for things like transportation and refreshments), direct vote-buying (in the sense of monetary payments explicitly being made in exchange for votes) did become more difficult. One (unsuccessful) aspirant who contested in the Volta region explained:

Whereas [with] 9 branch members you can always bribe them easily – it happened in 2012 where the night before our primaries people were distributing 500 Ghana cedis when some of us had only 50 Ghana cedis to give. So, in 2015 the good thing about it is that you couldn't bribe people on election day or a day before the election day, it was difficult.<sup>55</sup>

There were also some candidates who stated that the goal of reducing the monetization of the process was accomplished for certain people; the candidates who had good track-records in their communities and genuine grassroots support (among which they typically identified themselves). Such candidates could – according to these respondents – count on the votes of ordinary party members and so were liberated from the financial expectations of delegates.<sup>56</sup>

The most serious unintended consequences to flow from the reformed primary process in 2015 related to the new party register, with which the expansion of the selectorate had become so closely tied. Figures at the top of the NDC party structures identified 'the development of the database' as 'the biggest source of challenges.'<sup>57</sup> The construction of the new party register would have constituted a logistical challenge under any circumstances, but for the NDC this was exacerbated, in some constituencies, by the fact that those who were opposed to the expansion of the selectorate were responsible for building the new party register. Moreover, the fact that the new register would determine who could – and could not – vote in the primary elections meant that there was a clear incentive to manipulate it. According to one very senior NDC official, this resulted in 'many people finding ways of compromising the database,' aided by the fact that the party 'did not have the capacity to introduce the necessary checks and security features'<sup>58</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that problems with the register were cited by nearly all of our informants whether they were party leaders, aspirants, or candidates. Some stated that certain NDC members had been prevented from registering or had their names removed from the new register (causing them to be turned away on the day of the primaries), while others suggested that NPP

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<sup>55</sup> NDC parliamentary aspirant from 2015, interviewed by S. Alidu, October 2019, Accra.

<sup>56</sup> There may be a degree of social desirability at play in some responses, though we found that aspirants and MPs were typically quite open about the fact that they spent a lot of money on their campaigns. The role of money in Ghana's primary elections is very widely acknowledged and well documented: see Westminster Foundation for Democracy, "Cost of Politics in Ghana" (London: Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Interview with senior NDC party official, by S. Alidu and G.A. Bukari, 2 October 2019, Accra.

<sup>58</sup> Interviewed by S. Alidu and G.A. Bukari, 2 October 2019, Accra.



members might have “infiltrated” the register in order to help elect weaker NDC candidates (benefiting the NPP in the national election). Media reports document similar allegations, most notably in Atebubu-Amantin Constituency in the Brong-Ahafo Region, where NDC party members set fire to a copy of the new register in the wake of allegations that it had been manipulated by aspirants.<sup>59</sup>

Although the true extent of any manipulation of the new party register is difficult (perhaps impossible) to verify, from the vantage point of party leaders, the expanded register engendered significant acrimony and division within the NDC. While many ordinary party members were able to vote in the 2015 primaries, it is clear that (at least) a small minority were disenfranchised by the new register – their names were omitted either due to poor implementation, or deliberate manipulation. In the wake of the NDC’s election loss in 2016, the reformed primary process and new party register quickly became targets of blame. Senior NDC figures made allegations – both in media reports, and in our interviews – that the reforms had caused disunity and disillusionment, suppressing turnout among the NDC’s supporters, splitting its parliamentary vote in constituencies where dissatisfied aspirants had run as independents, and leading many NDC supporters to vote “skirt and blouse” (voting for the NDC in the presidential race, but for the NPP’s parliamentary candidate). These allegations were purportedly borne out by the findings of the “Kwesi Botchwey Report,” the 455-page document produced by a committee (led by former Finance Minister Professor Kwesi Botchwey) that the NDC had tasked with investigating the causes of its defeat in 2016.<sup>60</sup>

However, close analysis of constituency level election data strongly suggests the negative impact of the reforms on the NDC’s electoral fortunes have been overestimated by many within the NDC. Although gaps between the NDC’s presidential and parliamentary votes show that a significant number of people did vote “skirt and blouse” in some constituencies, there are very few constituencies in which this ultimately led the NDC to lose the parliamentary seat, and even fewer where this can plausibly be attributed to the expansion of the primary selectorate and new party register. Specifically, there were 17 constituencies where the NDC’s presidential vote outstripped its parliamentary vote by a number exceeding the NPP’s (parliamentary) victory margin.<sup>61</sup> For many of these, there is little evidence of controversy relating to the primaries in contemporaneous media reports. In others, there are reports of disputes within the NDC triggered by the primary process – some of which led to court cases or failed aspirants standing as independents. However, many of these

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<sup>59</sup> Daniel Yao Dayee, “NDC Burns Bloated Register At Atebubu,” *Daily Guide Ghana*, October 24, 2015, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/651305/ndc-burns-bloated-register-at-atebubu.html>.

<sup>60</sup> The report has not been publicly released, though some media outlets claimed to have seen leaked versions of it.

<sup>61</sup> Authors’ calculations based on number of ballots cast in 2012 and 2016, using data from Election Passport (available at <http://www.electionpassport.com>). These constituencies were Atebubu-Amantin, Dormaa West, Tain, Ekumfi, Dade Kotopon, Bunkpurugu, Kpandai, Salaga South, Savelugu, Tempene, Zebilla, Lawra, Nandom, Sissala East, Krachi East, Jomoro, and Sefwi Akontombra.



disputes centred on the vetting process rather than the new register, having been triggered by disagreements about the eligibility of aspirants to compete. In only four constituencies – Atebubu-Amatin, Dade Kotopon, Jomoro and Lawra – do media reports provide fairly clear evidence of disputes centred on attempts to manipulate the new party register. Moreover, in one of these constituencies – Jomoro – the real drain on the NDC’s parliamentary vote was Samia Yaaba Nkrumah, the candidate for the Convention People’s Party, who had served as the MP for Jomoro from 2008 to 2012 and is daughter of Ghana’s first President, Kwame Nkrumah.

Similarly, voter turnout was down by almost 10% (compared to 2012) in the Volta Region<sup>62</sup> – the NDC’s most important stronghold, where lower turnout clearly benefited the NPP in the presidential race. This drop in voter turnout had less impact on the parliamentary results. While it almost certainly contributed to the NDC’s shock loss in Krachi East, where the NPP’s candidate won with a margin of roughly 50 votes, the NDC won all the other parliamentary seats in the Volta region. Party leaders, aspirants and MPs frequently attributed the drop in voter turnout to disillusionment and resentment generated by the manipulation of the party register during the primaries, but at best, dissatisfaction with the changes made to the primary process in 2015 explain this only partially. The largest drops in turnout tended to coincide with disputes centred on the NDC’s vetting process, as was the case in Ketu South. Moreover, the drop in turnout was not uniform: in the Brong Ahafo Region (which is generally considered a swing region) there had been reports of NDC members being disenfranchised in the primaries, but voter turnout was essentially unchanged compared to 2012.

Previous research has also highlighted a variety of factors – quite independent of the primary reforms – that led to the NDC to lose the 2016 election. These include general disillusionment with eight years of NDC rule, combined with the expectation – now quite firmly entrenched in the minds of many Ghanaian voters – that political power changes hands every eight years.<sup>63</sup> Poor economic performance and a strong campaign by the NPP also cost the NDC.<sup>64</sup> In the eyes of many voters, the NDC’s mismanagement of the country was amply demonstrated by frequent and increasingly long-lasting rolling blackouts in the period from 2012 to 2016. These blackouts became known as “dumsor” (roughly translated as “off and on” in Twi) and inflicted significant economic damage: one report calculated that

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<sup>62</sup> Authors’ calculations using data from Election Passport (available at <http://www.electionpassport.com>).

<sup>63</sup> Ransford Edward Van Gyampo, Emmanuel Graham, and Eric Yobo, “Ghana’s 2016 General Election: Accounting of the Monumental Defeat of the National Democratic Congress (NDC),” *Journal of African Elections* 16, no. 1 (2017): 24–45, <https://doi.org/10.20940/JAE/2017/v16i1a2>.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph R. A. Ayee, “Ghana’s Elections of 7 December 2016: A Post-Mortem,” *South African Journal of International Affairs* 24, no. 3 (2017): 311–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2017.1378124>; Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis, “Ghana: The Ebbing Power of Incumbency,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 2 (2017): 92–104.



dumsor cost Ghana's economy almost \$1 billion in 2014 alone.<sup>65</sup> Together, these factors meant that the NDC faced an uphill battle in the 2016 election.

Although the negative electoral impacts of the 2015 reforms were overestimated by many within the NDC, it is clear that they did generate considerable suspicion and disunity within the party. This was not due to the formal design of the reforms, but rather the manner in which they were implemented. Regardless, the (mis)perception that the changes to the primary process had played a role in the NDC's defeat, ultimately led to a reversal of the reforms for the 2019 primaries.

### **The decision to abandon the 2015 reforms**

In 2017, the NDC's National Executive Council (NEC) voted unanimously to scrap the biometric party register because it lacked credibility and to "manually" construct another new party register.<sup>66</sup> Later, in 2019, the NEC announced that the NDC would put the selection of parliamentary candidates for the 2020 election back in the hands of delegates – albeit a slightly higher number of them than in the past: the electoral colleges for each constituency would comprise nine delegates from each polling station (rather than four, as in 2012) and the number of additional constituency-level delegates would increase. The party also introduced several new rules designed to avoid internal disputes relating to the primaries and minimise the impact of those that did occur. For example, aspirants in the 2019 primaries in Volta region were required to sign declarations stating that they would respect the results, abstain from taking court action and refrain from running as an independent candidate should their primary campaign be unsuccessful.<sup>67</sup>

To a person, all of the NDC party leaders interviewed for our study seemed to express some regret at the reversion to the delegate system and to indicate that the expanded selectorate is 'the future of the party.'<sup>68</sup> Indeed, in their views, the original reasons for seeking the reform still prevail. Moreover, they all seemed in agreement that the problems were not with the overall goal of democratizing the party primary process – by both expanding participation and reducing monetization – but with the implementation of the reform. At heart, the problem was that the party leadership had not fully appreciated the enormity of both the technical and political task that it was taking on. Several of the NDC MPs we interviewed expressed regret that the party had decided to return to the previous primary process, indicating a personal preference for the more inclusive process used in 2015. That more

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<sup>65</sup> Charles Ackah, "Electricity Insecurity and Its Impact on Micro and Small Businesses in Ghana," ISSER Report (University of Ghana, Legon: Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research, 2015).

<sup>66</sup> GhanaWeb, "NDC Biometric Register Not Credible – Portuphy," GhanaWeb, October 19, 2017, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/NDC-biometric-register-not-credible-Portuphy-592118>.

<sup>67</sup> Ghanaian Times, "Volta NDC to Vet 63 Aspirants for Parliamentary Primary ... Rawlings Aide Joins Race," Ghanaian Times, July 23, 2019, <http://www.ghanaiantimes.com.gh/volta-ndc-to-vet-63-aspirants-for-parliamentary-primary-rawlings-aide-joins-race/>.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with senior NDC party official, by S. Alidu and G.A. Bukari, 2 October 2019, Accra.



inclusive process was, they felt, safer and more reliable, since the risk of being “outbid” for the votes of the delegates was reduced – providing you had demonstrated your value to the community. Notably, while some women MPs indicated that the reversion to the delegate system had little impact on them personally, a small number felt it had made their campaigns for re-selection significantly harder because it increased the risk they would be outspent by rival candidates.

Such statements, together with the fact that the number of female candidates selected by the NDC in 2019 dropped to 27, compared to 40 female candidates fielded in 2016, suggests that the reversion of the primary reforms may have had a gendered impact. This possibility is something that we have been unable to fully explore in this paper and which warrants further attention in the future. Our evidence suggests that the more inclusive primary process employed in 2015 did not necessarily reduce the cost of primary elections on the whole, but there are signs that it did sometimes render voter-buying less effective in some circumstances because it allowed aspirants – particularly female aspirants – with good track-records in their communities to make greater use of this non-financial political capital. This is an effect that has previously been suggested, but not directly tested by prior research.<sup>69</sup>

#### **4 Implications and conclusion**

Ultimately, our evidence shows a substantial divergence between what the NDC hoped to achieve through its reforms to parliamentary candidate selection in 2015, and the actual effects of those reforms. The party did succeed in expanding participation in the primary process. However, this did not deliver the electoral benefits that NDC leaders had anticipated, in part because the construction of the new party register – a necessary step in the implementation of the reforms – was poorly managed, triggering internal disputes and distrust. The reforms also had no immediate success in reducing the monetization of candidate selection. In fact, many aspirants found that the costs of contesting the primaries increased. Yet, in certain cases, the expansion of the selectorate did reduce the efficacy of vote-buying, allowing some aspirants to better leverage other sources of political capital. Had the reforms been retained, this might have shifted the behaviour of aspirants, reducing the role of money over the long term. The NDC was also unable to realise anticipated gains in terms of the party’s infrastructure and organizational capacity. The biggest gain anticipated here was a comprehensive and reliable register of party members, but the new register constructed in 2015 was flawed and ultimately abandoned. It is also clear that the process of implementing the reforms did trigger disputes, disunity and distrust within the NDC, though our evidence suggests that the electoral cost of this has tended to be overstated by

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<sup>69</sup> Nahomi Ichino and Noah L Nathan, “Democratizing the Party: The Effects of Primary Election Reforms in Ghana,” Working Paper, 2016, <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/seminarpapers/pspe21032017.pdf>.



NDC insiders. It is highly likely that divisions and disputes *did* contribute to the NDC's poor electoral performance in 2016 in certain constituencies, but only a small portion of those disputes can be credibly laid at the door of the reforms to the primary process.

As noted earlier, Field and Siavelis<sup>70</sup> identify several constraints that deter political parties in transitional democracies from adopting inclusive candidate selection mechanisms. In such contexts, they argue, high political uncertainty, weak and limited party organizations, strategic complexity, and pressure to maintain elite alliances encourage party leaders to adopt more exclusive procedures. This article helps to fill in the next part of that story. As the example of the NDC shows, the constraints that Field and Siavelis identify fade but do not disappear entirely over time. If a country – like Ghana – successfully moves past the period of transition and begins the slower, more gradual (but still contingent) process of democratic consolidation, political parties are likely to see the democratization of their internal procedures as something they ought to do. This may be felt especially strongly in the case of the successors to former single or military parties – such as the NDC – that are likely to be particularly keen to distance themselves from their past. Moreover, as constraints like political uncertainty, strategic complexity and pressure to maintain elite alliances (so as to sustain a democratic transition) reduce, the adoption of inclusive candidate selection procedures may become more possible. Yet these shifts in the structural determinants of candidate selection mechanism do not – on their own – cause specific reforms. More proximate causes, such as those that motivated the decision of the NDC, must trigger a concrete decision to reform. When parties do decide to implement reforms, however, they are rarely entirely free of the constraints of the past. Thus, weak party organization may still act as a significant barrier to the introduction of inclusive selection mechanisms, even as it forms part of the motivation for adopting them. This helps to explain why we are seeing an increasing number of political parties in sub-Saharan Africa's more democratic countries experimenting with more inclusive candidate selection mechanisms, as the NDC has done in Ghana and the APC in Nigeria. It also explains why this shift towards inclusive mechanisms is slow, uneven, and sometimes subject to reversal.

Our findings clearly show the importance of studying the process of reform as a dynamic, contentious and highly contingent process. Explaining why political parties employ certain mechanisms to select candidates requires us to understand more than just the effects that a given procedure has once it is put in place: we must also understand the effects of the changes that must be made to move from one system to another. This is not just a question of institutional design, but of practical implementation. Examining the practical challenges of reforming primaries is valuable not only to academics, but also to political parties seeking to make their own candidate selection procedures more inclusive. Our case study suggests, for example, that the sequencing of reforms is very important. Any party considering a shift from a primary process based on delegates, to one in which all party

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<sup>70</sup> "Candidate Selection Procedures in Transitional Polities."



members can participate, would be well advised to invest in building a credible register of its members first. Notably, this does seem to be the lesson that the NPP has drawn from the NDC's experience. In an interview, one senior NPP leader stated that their party agreed with the general principle of expanding participation in the primary process, but observed that in light of what happened to the NDC, changes would need to be made slowly: the involvement of *all* party members in the selection of parliamentary candidates was thus a long term goal. Detailing some of the difficulties that the NDC encountered in implementing its more inclusive system – and noting the NDC's own assessment that this had contributed to their electoral loss – he nevertheless stated:

I think maybe in the near future we all have to think through that process again where every card bearing member of the party is given the opportunity to vote... ultimately that is where we may all have to go when we are having primaries.<sup>71</sup>

This statement reveals that the negative experience of the NDC has not doomed the prospects for a more inclusive candidate selection process to one day be introduced by the NPP – and perhaps by other parties across Africa that look to Ghana for examples. Yet, the mechanisms used to select parliamentary candidates have a critical influence on who has access to political power. Attempts to change these mechanisms will inevitably create winners and losers, no matter how well-informed they are by past experience. Reforms to candidate selection mechanisms will therefore remain a serious practical and political challenge for political parties everywhere.

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with senior NPP official, by S. Alidu, 15 November 2019, Accra.



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