

Where Are Ghana's Swing Voters? A Look at the Voters Responsible for Alternating Power in One of Africa's Most Successful Democracies

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The massive wave of democratic transition literature had barely settled on African shores in the early 1990s before prominent scholars began to ponder questions of democratic consolidation (see Beetham, 1994; Sandbrook, 1996; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Joseph, 1998). Though there were disagreements over how much potential the fledgling democracies popping up all over the continent really had, even the most hopeful predictions acknowledged that there were lots of roadblocks in the way of Africa's new electoral regimes and making democracy 'the only game in town' (Linz & Stepan, 1996, 5).

Though it took two rounds and a dramatic late vote in the rural Tain constituency, the victory of John Evans Atta Mills and his National Democratic Congress (NDC) party in Ghana's 2008 elections created a rare atmosphere of excitement. Given the feebleness of Ghana's Second and Third Republics, each lasting less than 30 months, one could certainly not blame those Ghanaians who trekked to their polling stations on 3 November 1992 for being only cautiously optimistic. Yet, when Mills was sworn in on 7 January 2009, Ghana's Fourth Republic had in barely a decade and a half passed Huntington's much vaunted 'two turnover test'. Huntington (1991, 266–267) explains how he operationalises his popular consolidation benchmark:

... a democracy may be viewed as consolidated if the party or group that takes power in the initial election at the time of transition loses a subsequent election and turns over power to those election winners, and if those election winners then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election.

By a strict application of this standard, Mills' swearing in as President of the Fourth Republic made Ghana the first African democracy to enter the realm of the consolidated.¹

Ghana's status as a praised democratic 'outlier' makes the country's elections a popular subject for scholarly analysis. Many of these studies have used broad descriptions to focus on particular elections (see Jeffries & Thomas, 1993; Oquaye, 1995; Jeffries, 1998; Ayee, 2001, 2002; Gyimah-Boadi, 2001, 2009; Boafo-Arthur, 2006). They summarise key players and events for the historical record and their contemporaries, whose sights might have been directed elsewhere. Others look systematically at the state of Ghanaian electoral politics using election returns and demographic data (see Nugent, 1999, 2001; Fridy, 2007; Lindberg & Morrison, 2008). These studies highlight social and political characteristics that can be relied upon to mark Ghanaian elections for the foreseeable future. Pointing out these static traits is useful in that it makes it possible to compare Ghana's electorate with those of neighbouring countries and democracies elsewhere.²

This article charts a course somewhere between these electoral 'play-by-plays' and systematic examinations of the different stages of the state in Ghanaian electoral politics. It adopts the mission of the former and the methods of the latter. While there are certainly individuals who have voted for the same political party across the Fourth Republic's six election cycles, enough have changed their minds to generate two turnovers in government. Who are these swing voters that managed to hoist the situation in Ghana into conversations on democratic consolidation?³

Swing Voters: The Competing Hypotheses

By definition a 'swing voter' is a voter not beholden to a particular political party. Sometimes these voters are independents willing to listen to multiple appeals, but on some occasions they are party members who, under certain circumstances, are willing to vote across party lines. In their analysis of the differences between Ghana's 1996 and 2000 elections, Lindberg and Morrison (2005, 9) find that roughly four-fifths of their survey respondents voted consistently for the NDC, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), or another party in both these elections, leaving nearly a fifth of survey respondents in the category of active swing voters. A look at the election results of the first five presidential contests of Ghana's Fourth Republic suggests that this estimate of 20 per cent

swing voters is a good starting point. In first-round polls, NDC contestants have never garnered more than 57 per cent (in the 1996 vote), never less than 44 per cent (in the 2004 vote), and an average or median of 48 per cent in the 2008 vote. NPP contestants have never drawn more than 53 per cent of the vote (in 2004), never less than 29 per cent (in the 1992 vote), and an average or median of 48 per cent of the vote (in 2000).⁴

Inevitably people enter the ranks of the electorate when they reach voting age and exit when they perish, either through natural or unnatural causes. Throughout their voting years, from election to election, many people feel more or less attached to their preferred party in conjunction with, or regardless of, the sentiments of other swing voters (see Mayer, 2008). Shifting populations and multi-directionality make it impossible to accurately identify the exact number of swing voters in Ghana. What the aforementioned figures demonstrate, however, is that there are enough swing voters in Ghana to make the country's two-party dominant political system competitive and, to a large extent heretofore, unpredictable at the macro-level.

In the American context, where the phenomenon of swing voters has been most exhaustively explored, each election since Richard Nixon's 1968 victory has been portrayed, both in academic and journalistic analysis, as a race for 'the vote of the 47-year old Dayton housewife' or one of her many variants (see Scammon & Wattenberg, 1971). With tools like the National Election Survey, exit polling and countless media-sponsored surveys, which exactly these American swing voters are has become a matter of finding a catch-phrase to encapsulate various integral characteristics of their different identities. News organisations have turned to the pastime of giving these voters witty names like 'soccer moms', 'NASCAR dads', and 'Joe six-packs' (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008), while scholars have turned to questions of whether, in fact, it is swing voters that decide elections (ideologically, moderates reside at the centre of the electorate; see Lindbeck & Weibull, 1987), or whether turn-out among the core, partisan supporters of the contestants (more towards the 'fringes' of the electoral pool) is more important (Cox & McCubbins, 1986). Though their models are proprietary or trademarked and held quite 'close to the chest', political parties themselves have turned the identification of core and swing voters into a sophisticated, not to mention expensive, model complete with house-by-house analysis of where campaign resources should be directed to efficiently bring the most potential pro-voters to the polls and keep the most potential con-voters at home on election day.

Researchers doing work on swing voters in Ghana, or any of the African democracies for that matter, are a few years behind their American counterparts. Hypotheses about Ghanaian swing voters exist, but systematic and rigorous tests of these hypotheses are few and far between. Using election and census data, this article tests three of the most widely held assumptions about the nature of voters responsible for alternating power in Ghana:

- *Hypothesis 1* contends that it is ethnic blocs (particularly those in non-Asante Akan areas in the Central, Western, and Brong-Ahafo regions) that act as electoral free-agents moving from one party to the other in hopes of gaining a more substantial voice in government, and a subsequently larger share in the regional division of national resources. To explain the NPP's first presidential victory in the 2000 election in Ghana, Nugent (2001, 6) argues that the party 'ensured that [the] Ashanti and Brong-Ahafo renewed their loyalties and brought other Akan voters from the Central, Eastern, and Western regions into the fold'.
- *Hypothesis 2* looks not at ethnicity as the explanatory factor, but instead at ideological factors. Those holding this position argue that ideologies emanating from independence-era debates between Kwame Nkrumah and J B Danquah still resonate with the Ghanaian public, and as parties make their appeals for votes the electorate responds along well-worn socio-economic lines (Morrison, 2004).
- *Hypothesis 3* eschews social cleavages as its explanatory variable and instead looks at issues of retrospective voting. The logic goes that areas where political elites have catered to the demands of the masses will be politically content, whereas areas that feel neglected will be more apt to change their electoral preference. In Ghana, Lindberg and Morrison (2008, 121) found that 'a majority of citizens ... reason and behave as relatively mature democratic voters by consciously evaluating the past performance or the promised policy program[me]s of candidates and parties'.

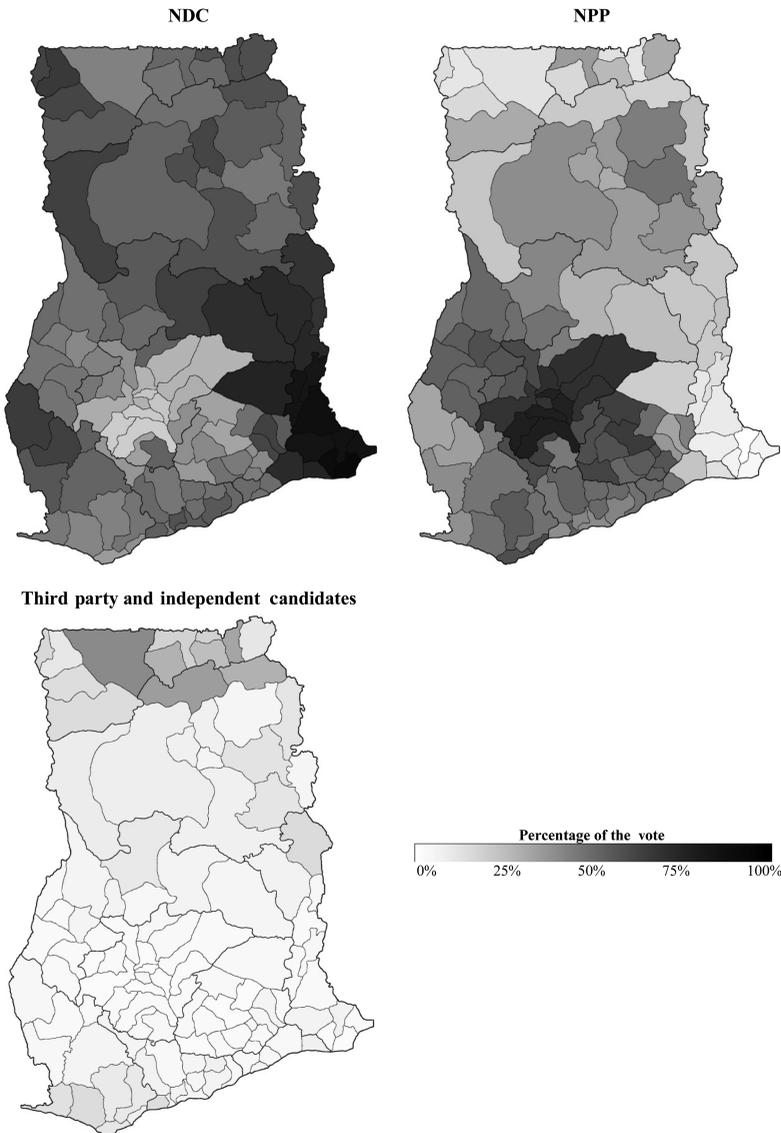
A Case Study of Ghanaian Elections

There are certain givens in Ghanaian elections. The NDC will dominate in the Volta Region and the NPP in the Ashanti Region. Ghana's remaining eight regions have tendencies that are less extreme. Though these proclivities are well-documented elsewhere (Fridy, 2007), Figure 1 graphically summarises the established voting patterns in Ghana's Fourth Republic elections.

By looking at the median (average) votes for the NDC, NPP and non-major party candidates in first-round presidential elections, one gets a fairly good idea of what the electoral status quo in Ghanaian politics looks like, but one cannot begin to explain how the NDC gained outright victories in 1992 and 1996 and a run-off victory in 2008, whereas the NPP gained an outright victory in 2004 and a run-off victory in 2000.

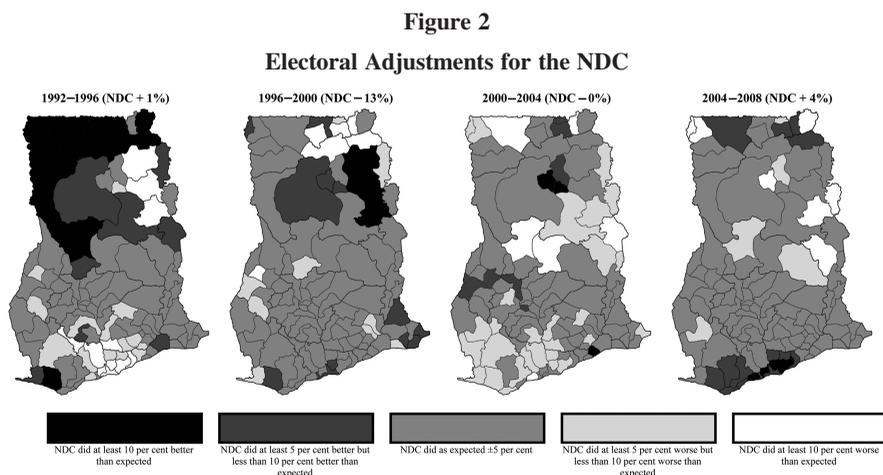
To begin this exploration, one needs to look at what changes from election to election instead of what remains more or less static. Figure 2 (for the NDC) and Figure 3 (for the NPP) graphically illustrate these changes across Ghana's 110 districts.⁵

Figure 1
The Electoral Status Quo



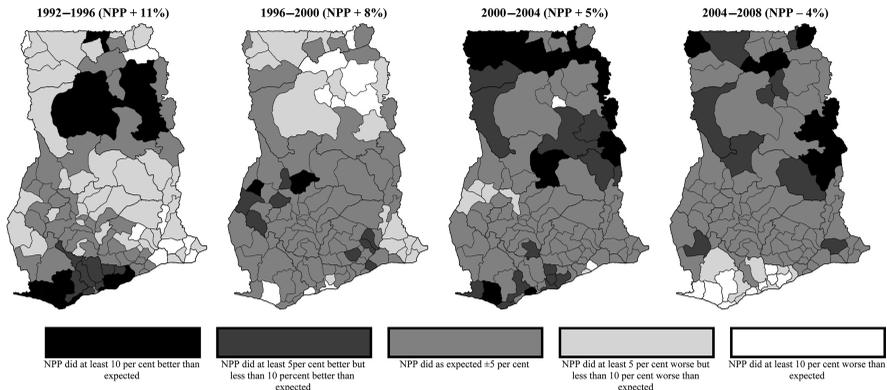
Note: Median presidential votes across the Fourth Republic's first five elections (1992–2008).

These figures use the previous election as a base and assume that when a presidential candidate loses or gains a percentage of the vote nationally in relation to the previous election, he will lose or gain the same percentage of the vote in each district. One can use a single district to illustrate this assumption. Professor Atta Mills won 39 per cent of the vote in Jomoro District in 2004, which is 5 per cent less than his national average of 44 per cent. Therefore, the 2004–2008 map depicted in Figure 2 anticipated (on the basis of probability) that when Mills garnered 48 per cent of the vote in the first round of national polling in 2008, he should have won 48 per cent minus 5 per cent (or 43 per cent) of the vote in Jomoro in 2008. Jomoro District, like most districts in Ghana across elections for the Fourth Republic, came fairly close to meeting this expected outcome. In 2008, electors from Jomoro gave the NDC candidate for the presidency, 41 per cent of their vote in the first round; several districts, however, did not meet this expectation. They voted either substantially more, or substantially less, for a candidate than predicted by the aforementioned formula. A cursory understanding of Ghanaian political history helps explain a number of these exceptions to the national rule.



Notes: Variance from the national norm between presidential elections (1992–1996, 1996–2000, 2000–2004 and 2004–2008). This percentage used to colour-code districts was calculated using data from first-round presidential contests and the following formula: (NDC per cent nationally first election *minus* NDC per cent district first election) *minus* (NDC per cent nationally second election *minus* NDC per cent district second election); the prediction is that all districts will change similarly from election to election.

Figure 3
Electoral Adjustments for the NPP



Notes: Variance from the national norm between presidential elections (1992–1996, 1996–2000, 2000–2004 and 2004–2008). This percentage used to colour-code districts was calculated using data from first-round presidential contests and the following formula: (NPP per cent nationally first election *minus* NPP per cent district first election) *minus* (NPP per cent nationally second election *minus* NPP per cent district second election); the prediction is that all districts will change similarly from election to election.

One can see, for instance, the cleavage between Abudu and Andani ‘gates’ of the Dagbon chieftaincy group becoming more and less polarised because of local conflict — the Dagbani royal family has two ‘gates’ (in fact, rival factions) and the Yaa Naa, chief of the Dagbon, has rotated between the two ‘gates’ since the mid-1800s because of a succession dispute). The northern districts of the Volta Region can be seen pulling away politically from their southern, more Ewe-speaking neighbours. The Western and Central regions appear to be moving away from the NDC and towards the NPP over the first several elections of the Fourth Republic, only to make an about-face between 2004 and 2008.

Beyond simply graphically illustrating fleeting events in Ghana’s political history, this exercise also provides a relatively good idea (at the district level) what portions of the electorate remains relatively static and what portions are moving away from particular political parties. Across the first five first-round presidential elections in Ghana’s Fourth Republic, approximately 85 per cent of the votes cast were relatively easy to predict and more or less evenly divided between the two dominant political parties.

This leaves a ‘floating vote’ of around 15 per cent. A few voters inevitably go to the usually ill-fated third party or independent candidates that seem so important on the pages of daily newspapers before the elections, and so impotent on those same pages post-election. About a third of this uncommitted vote, a couple of percentage points per party, seems to be a function of some national *zeitgeist* where on average all districts are nudged in the same direction, towards either the NDC or NPP, by roughly the same amount. A lot of the variance from election to election, approximately two-thirds, however, does not follow a national pattern. This roughly 10 percentage points per district is no insignificant number.

It is these latter unexplained portions of the vote that the regression tables depicted in Tables 1–6 shed light upon.⁶

The embedded research question is: why do some districts lean much more towards, or away from, one of the two main political parties from election to election than what others do? These tables answer this question using the aforementioned ethnic hypothesis, ideological hypothesis, and retrospective voting hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1 contains the most straightforward abstraction. Ghana’s 2000 census asked respondents for their ethnic identity; the number of self-identified Akan-speakers in each district is, therefore, known (Ghana Statistical Service, 2002). If the non-Asante amongst this group, and to a lesser extent non-Akyem, those living primarily in Ghana’s Central, Western, and Brong-Ahafo regions, move as an electoral bloc, one would expect significant positive movement towards a particular political party to translate into national success.⁷

Table 1
Predicting Swing Voters: NDC (1996–2000)^a

	Coefficient (SE)
Constant	.074*** (.026)
Akan	-.046** (.020)
Rural	-.034 (.028)
Independent	-.148*** (.045)

^aA dependent variable is variance from the national norm (see Figures 2 and 3) between presidential elections. Independent variables are percentage of Akan-speakers in a district, percentage of rural dwellers, and the percentage of the vote obtained by non-major party parliamentary candidates as compared to the last election.

Significance: ** $p < 0.05$.

Significance: *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2
Predicting Swing Voters: NPP (1996–2000)^a

	Coefficient (SE)
Constant	-.026 (.024)
Akan	.060*** (.019)
Rural	.003 (.026)
Independent	-.123*** (.042)

^aA dependent variable is variance from the national norm (see Figures 2 and 3) between presidential elections. Independent variables are percentage of Akan-speakers in a district, percentage of rural dwellers, and the percentage of the vote obtained by non-major party parliamentary candidates as compared to the last election.

Significance: *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3
Predicting Swing Voters: NDC (2000–2004)^a

	Coefficient (SE)
Constant	.105*** (.022)
Akan	-.051*** (.016)
Rural	-.127*** (.026)
Independent	-.113*** (.041)

^aA dependent variable is variance from the national norm (see Figures 2 and 3) between presidential elections. Independent variables are percentage of Akan-speakers in a district, percentage of rural dwellers, and the percentage of the vote obtained by non-major party parliamentary candidates as compared to the last election.

Significance: *** $p < 0.01$.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 require a bit more elaborately constructed independent variables. Commenting on Ghana's dominant political ideologies, Pinkney (1988, 48) notes that 'in the vague sense of folk memories of the early nationalist movement, [ideology] appears to have been important in welding the party together as a vote-winning and activist winning machine'. At the aggregate level, it is very difficult to validly abstract this concept from ideology, because the nature of these 'folk memories' is nuanced, multi-faceted, and not necessarily dependent on the understanding of complicated economic and political

Table 4
Predicting Swing Voters: NPP (2000–2004)^a

	Coefficient (SE)
Constant	-.100*** (.023)
Akan	-.017 (.017)
Rural	.156*** (.026)
Independent	.232*** (.042)

^aA dependent variable is variance from the national norm (see Figures 2 and 3) between presidential elections. Independent variables are percentage of Akan-speakers in a district, percentage of rural dwellers, and the percentage of the vote obtained by non-major party parliamentary candidates as compared to the last election.

Significance: *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 5
Predicting Swing Voters: NDC (2004–2008)^a

	Coefficient (SE)
Constant	-.031 (.020)
Akan	.076*** (.014)
Rural	-.032 (.023)
Independent	.140*** (.050)

^aA dependent variable is variance from the national norm (see Figures 2 and 3) between presidential elections. Independent variables are percentage of Akan-speakers in a district, percentage of rural dwellers, and the percentage of the vote obtained by non-major party parliamentary candidates as compared to the last election.

Significance: *** $p < 0.01$.

philosophies. The rural–urban cleavage is one the characteristics that has regularly been utilised to understand ideological struggles in Ghana and elsewhere, and has embedded in it quite a few identity markers (such as class, educational level, industry type, and access to national media) that often go hand-in-hand with ideology (Varshney, 1998; Nugent, 1999). Therefore, if *Hypothesis 2* is to be supported the percentage of rural dwellers in a district will be a good predictor of districts that vote substantially different from the national norm. Ruling parties in Ghana have been vulnerable to internal divisions as an

Table 6
Predicting Swing Voters: NPP (2004–2008)^a

	Coefficient (SE)
Constant	.046** (.020)
Akan	-.120*** (.015)
Rural	.041* (.024)
Independent	-.122** (.051)

^aA dependent variable is variance from the national norm (see Figures 2 and 3) between presidential elections. Independent variables are percentage of Akan-speakers in a district, percentage of rural dwellers, and the percentage of the vote obtained by non-major party parliamentary candidates as compared to the last election.

Significance: * $p < 0.1$.

Significance: ** $p < 0.05$.

Significance: *** $p < 0.01$.

expression of dissent. Regarding the NPP in 2008, Gyimah-Boadi (2009, 139) notes that 'the governing party had to overcome issues related to its internal democracy, reflected not only in its highly acrimonious presidential and parliamentary primaries but also in constituency-level disputes over candidate selection that drove some candidates to go independent'. Similar issues plagued the NDC when they held the reins of power. Given this proclivity, this article uses the growth or shrinkage in support for independent and third-party parliamentary candidates as a proxy for (dis)satisfaction with the ruling party. If the theory stands, there is a massive movement towards the non-dominant party MP hopefuls, and a simultaneous movement away from the dominant party candidate on the presidential ticket that will be interpreted as a sign of dissatisfaction with the incumbent party's performance in office.

With these three independent variables operationalised, they can be utilised to predict the electoral variance of a district from the national norm for Ghana's two major political parties. Put to this task, the ideological proxy proves particularly ineffective. The relationship between a district's percentage of rural dwellers and the distance above or below that district's expected vote is not significant at all in two of the three electoral dyads (1996–2000 and 2004–2008). The one dyad for which dwelling in a rural area does have significance (2000–2004) happens to be the only dyad of the three that did not see a change in government.

The relationship between electoral change and the presence of an abnormal number of relatively successful independent and/or third-party parliamentary candidates is more ambiguous. From 1996 to 2000, one sees the presence of more successful independent/

third-party parliamentary candidates than expected having a decidedly negative impact on the percentage of the vote garnered by presidential candidates of both major parties. In 2004 and 2008, when compared to the elections immediately prior, the winning party (the NPP and the NDC, respectively) had a positive relationship with quite a number of independent and third-party parliamentary candidates, while this relationship was negative for the losing party (the NDC in 2004 and the NPP in 2008, respectively). While the result from the 2004 to 2008 dyad is as the hypothesis predicts, the result from the 2000 to 2004 dyad is counter-intuitive. If the NDC were being punished at the polls for their time in office, one would expect this punishment to have been meted out in 2000, not in 2004 after they had been in opposition for four years.

Of the three hypotheses considered here, only the one suggesting that the Akan are the generators of regime change is supported in the regression analysis presented in Tables 1–6. Districts with high percentages of Akan-speakers moved disproportionately away from the NDC between 1996 and 2000 and towards the NPP. This movement seems to have continued over the period between 2000 and 2004, and then suddenly reversed course between 2004 and 2008. In other words, when the NPP's electoral fortunes were on the rise, Akan-speaking areas moved more towards the NPP than other areas in Ghana. Conversely, when the NDC's electoral fortunes were on the rise, it experienced similarly incommensurate movement of Akan-speaking districts towards its presidential candidate. Combined with the data depicted in Figures 2 and 3, one can make an even bolder prediction. In these two series of maps, districts in the Ashanti Region of Ghana are remarkably consistent in their voting patterns; movement was coming from the non-Asante Akan areas of Ghana. Given these patterns, the movement of Akan-speaking areas detected in the multiple regressions would likely be amplified had one been able to dissect Asante Akan-speakers out of the larger category.

Conclusion

Ghanaian elections have been well-studied, but this article fills a scholarly lacuna. After each Fourth Republic election, scholars provided the germane journals with summaries of the campaigns and explanations for why one party won and the other lost. Others picked up on trends that carried over from election to election and explained the state of Ghanaian electoral politics. However, heretofore none have focused systematically on the generators of electoral change across the Fourth Republic's now five elections.

The findings presented here suggest that movement in non-Asante Akan areas is the key to such an analysis. This is not to say that ephemeral phenomena like economic downturns, revelations of high-profile corruption, or communal violence cannot impact an election. They certainly do, and likely have to one degree or another. Each

election brings with it a certain amount of movement which, though not uniform across districts, has a clear national tendency. What the evidence presented here seems to say, however, is that the non-Asante Akan regions of Ghana (especially the Central, Western, and Brong-Ahafo) have been much better predictors of electoral success or failure than proxies utilised here for ideology or retrospective voting.

One message that is clear from this analysis is that journalists and scholars interested in divining the outcome of Ghanaian elections would be well-advised to take a trip to Cape Coast or Tarkwa or Wenchi. And political parties, too, should think more strategically about the importance of these regions for their electoral fortunes. This finding also points to a potential explanation for the longevity and relative success of Ghana's democratic experiment. Districts heavily populated by speakers of Fante, Abron, Nzema, and all the other non-Asante Akan languages share some linguistic, cultural and climatic similarities with Twi-speaking voters populating the NPP's electoral core (Kropp Dakubu, 1988). Citizens of these districts, not unlike many of those constituting the core of the NDC support base, also have their fair share of historical pre-colonial and colonial-era rivalries with the Asante Empire (Wilks, 1975). As somewhat uncomfortable allies to either the NPP or NDC base, these non-Asante Akan-speakers provide a strong disincentive for politicians on either side of the aisle for making narrow sectional campaign appeals, or governing in a way that could be perceived by voters in the important non-Asante Akan districts as parochial or 'tribalistic'.

Notes

- ¹ Huntington's standard shows a clear bias towards presidential systems with strong political parties. This makes it difficult for countries like Mauritius (with its parliamentary democracy) and Benin (whose last two presidents have run without political parties) to pass the two turnover test. Other democracies which might enter the consolidation conversation if alternative criteria are used, especially those in southern Africa, have such dominant single parties that passing Huntington's test seems out of reach for the foreseeable future.
- ² Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) edited book is just one example of a text that demonstrates this path.
- ³ Lindberg and Morrison's (2005) article look at swing voters but do so only for the period between the two elections of 1996 and 2000. The present article seeks to explore trends that inform all of Ghana's past national elections and use this analysis to generate hypotheses about future elections.
- ⁴ Only first-round presidential contests are used in the analysis because they are the national races that generate a larger number of cases than second-round presidential contests (which have only occurred twice in the Fourth Republic) and constituency races are often decided based on localised political pressures quite distinct from the national pattern.
- ⁵ For consistency's sake, districts used here are the same as those used in the 2000 census.

- ⁶ The tables do not consider 1992. Though the election would provide one more data point for analysis, founding elections are often exceptional (see Bratton, 1998) and the debate surrounding the legitimacy of the election makes it problematic (see Jeffries & Thomas, 1993; Oquaye, 1995).
- ⁷ For more on the difficulties associated with defining the 'Akan', see Kiyaga-Mulindwa's (1980) article. Because Ghana's 2000 census does not separate the various ethnic groups out of the larger Akan language category, this hypothesis cannot be tested here with any more precision.

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