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Explaining case selection in African politics research

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ABSTRACT

It is common to test general claims about politics in Africa with evidence from a small number of countries. This note examines patterns in the countries of study in two Anglophone African politics journals over two decades. Countries with larger populations are studied more, while former French colonies are under-represented. There is no bias towards former-British colonies once one controls for population and former-French colonial status. These biases suggest that Anglophone research on African politics produces results not about African politics in general, but rather about politics in a narrow and novel subset of countries.

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Research in African politics often makes claims that are thought to apply across the sub-Saharan portion of the continent. These general claims are then often tested or defended using data from one country, or a small number of countries. This is not inherently a problem, but it does require us to be careful about the empirical bases upon which we generalise. The present paper shows that there are strong biases in the countries under study in two Anglophone African politics journals. The countries under study in these journals are more populous than average, and are much less likely to have been colonised by France. If these journals can be seen as representative of the wider Anglophone literature on African politics, then broad generalisations from this literature to Africa are on shaky ground.

Bias in case selection

The cases that we choose can determine the answers that we get (Geddes 1990), so case selection is critical to producing reliable inferences. Case selection should be theory driven and, if one wants to generalise to a larger population, then one should either draw a large number of cases randomly from the population, study the entire population, or select cases to ensure variation on key variables.[1]

In practice, researchers also pick cases for a variety of other reasons, such as ease of work, or an often-unstated sense that some country is particularly important. When these factors co-vary with other variables that are important to our theories, such as colonial origins or levels of wealth, then our empirical work will produce biased statements

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about the population as a whole. In simple terms, an accumulated bias in country selection across a body of African politics literature may produce a skewed picture of Africa.

In many cases, however, bias in case selection is less problematic than described above. For example, we may feel – and we may be justified in feeling – that more populous countries are inherently more important than smaller ones, and so are more deserving of study.[2] In other cases, we may be trying to explain a specific outcome in one country rather than the general effect of some cause (Goertz and Mahoney 2012). However, if we fail to study certain kinds of African countries, then we have no business claiming general knowledge of African politics. The issue is thus one of generalisation and the scope of our theories. While it is not possible to move from a study of total journal output to claims that any specific paper exhibited bias in its case selection, if at the journal level we see general trends towards certain kinds of countries being heavily studied, then we should exercise caution in generalising broadly from this literature. To put it differently, this paper asks 'if one were to read the past two decades of Anglophone scholarship on African politics, would one actually learn about how politics across Africa works?' While there seems to be a general sense that the English-language study of African politics privileges the study of certain countries, such as those that have English as an official language, there has been little rigorous work examining the determinants of case selection in African politics. This note provides what I believe is the first systematic study of the matter.

This note is most similar to Das et al. (2013), who studied the determinants of country selection across a large number of economics journals between 1985 and 2005. In their cross-national comparisons, they found that wealthier, more populous, and English-speaking countries were more likely to be studied. The findings in the present note are similar, suggesting that similar biases in case selection seem to exist across economics and political science.

Bias in case selection is likely driven by the incentive structures facing researchers. To motivate the following hypotheses, we can consider a simple model where researchers face incentives to publish many important articles quickly. In this situation, there are good reasons to focus on more substantively important countries, as it is likely easier to publish results from these countries in good journals, and articles on these countries are more likely to garner attention. Researchers also want to write articles on countries that are convenient, as this allows them to publish more articles in a set amount of time.

This simple model leads to a number of hypotheses. First, it is expected that researchers will study countries that are perceived to be more substantively important. In more concrete terms, it is expected that countries that are richer or more populous will be studied more. Second, researchers are also motivated to focus on countries where it is easier to do research. This paper studies articles in two English language journals and so I use a British coloniser dummy variable to give a strong signal as to the presence of English, and thus the ease of many forms of research, in the country. It is expected that countries that were colonised by the British will be studied more. Finally, the analyses also include a dummy variable measuring whether or not the country was colonised by the French. This comes from a series of anecdotal observations suggesting that English-speaking scholars may have more difficulty collecting information in a French-speaking country than in other countries such as Ethiopia or Angola. It is thus expected that countries that were colonised by the French will be studied less than other countries, all else being equal.

Data

The dependent variable is the number of times that a country was the subject of an article, and it is drawn from a dataset introduced by Briggs and Weathers (2016). The dataset records information on all research articles published by *African Affairs* and *The Journal of Modern African Studies* between 1993 and 2013. In the dataset, articles are coded for whether or not their empirical analysis focuses on any specific countries. The coding in the dataset allows each article to focus on multiple countries, but as the number of study countries per article increases, the score given to each country declines proportionately. For example, when calculating the total number of articles that focus on Kenya, a single case study focusing only on Kenya would count for one, and an article in which Kenya was compared to some other country would count for 0.5.[3] The present paper asks why some African countries are studied more than others, and so it ignores articles that did not focus on African countries.[4] Articles focusing on Sudan and South Sudan were also dropped, because South Sudan separated from Sudan during the period under study and so these units were not stable over time. I then count the number of articles, including the fractional scores described above, that focus on each country per year. The two journals tend to focus on the same countries, and so rather than analyzing them separately, I simply take the annual sum of all articles per country.

For the initial analysis, I collapse the time dimension of the data by summing across all years. This produces a count of the number of articles written on each country between 1993 and 2013. Flattening the data set in this way reveals that most research focuses on a very small number of countries. This is demonstrated in Figure 1, which shows all countries that had more than ten articles written about them in the time period. The bars are coloured based on the country's former coloniser.[5] Figure 1 suggests that our research produces a skewed image of sub-Saharan Africa. Fewer than half of all countries

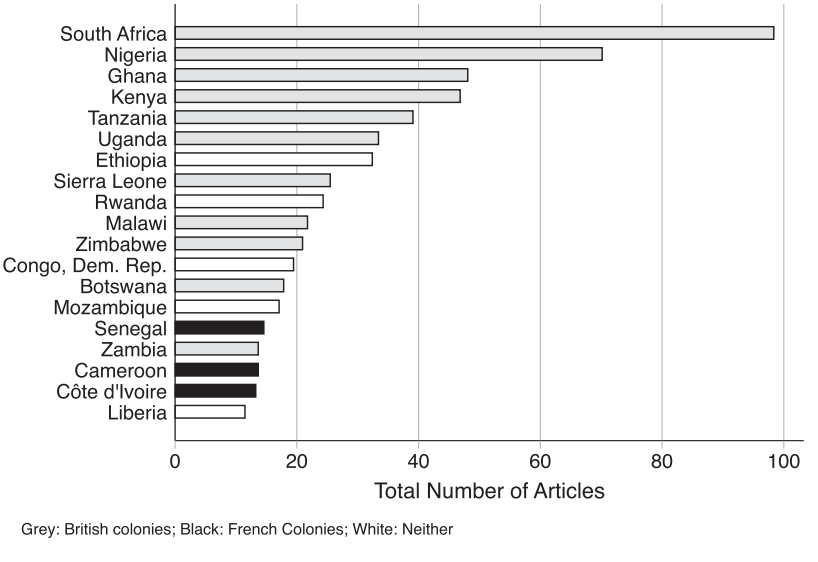

Figure 1. All countries with more than 10 articles between 1993 and 2013.

were written about more than ten times, and most of these countries were former British colonies.

To help visualise biases in country case selection across Sub-Saharan Africa, I created two maps of Africa. The first simply shows the countries in the sample, excluding a number of small islands.[6] The second is a cartogram, and it shows the same map after the area of each country has been scaled so that it is approximately proportionate to the total number of articles written on that country between 1993 and 2013.[7] Countries shaded light grey were British colonies, and countries in dark grey were French colonies. Both maps are shown in Figure 2, and they provide an approximation of how our literature represents Sub-Saharan Africa.

Figures 1 and 2 suggest that we over-represent countries that were colonised by Britain and under-represent countries that were colonised by France. This is supported by simple comparisons of means. On average, countries colonised by Britain had about 27 articles written about them over the period under study, while countries colonised by neither Britain nor France had about 11 articles written about them.[8] Each former French colony was the focus of only about 5 articles in this time period.[9] However, ex-British colonies also tend to be more populous and wealthier than other African countries, and so what looks like an ex-British bias could simply be the result of academics picking cases based on other variables, such as population or wealth. While this would also affect our ability to generalise to the continent, it would not be evidence of bias based on colonial origin. To more carefully examine the factors that drive case selection, I turn to regression analysis.

Analysis

The flat, cross-sectional data used in the previous section have the benefit of smoothing over year-to-year fluctuations in article counts per country, but they also prevent us from taking time into account. In order strike a better balance between smoothing noisy variables and considering the temporal dimension of the data, the analyses in this section

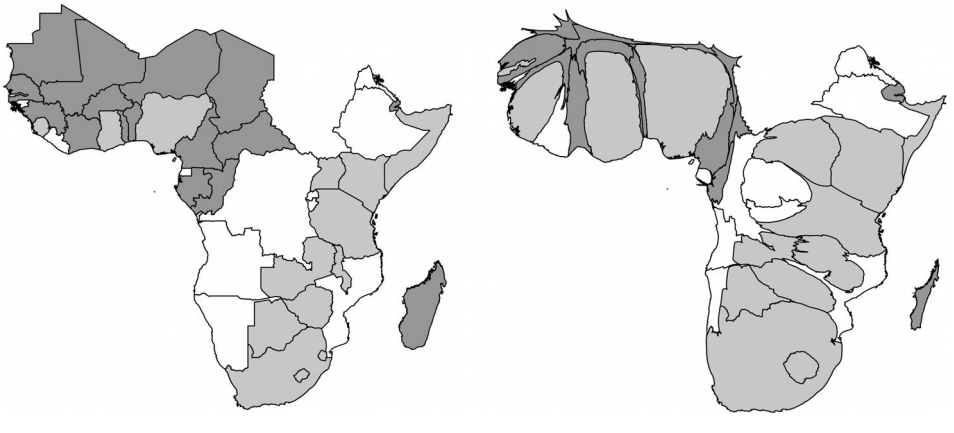

Figure 2. The map on the left shows all countries in the sample (excluding small islands). The cartogram on the right shows the same map after it has been distorted so that the area of a country is approximately proportionate to the number of articles written about it between 1993 and 2013. Light grey countries were British colonies and dark grey countries were French colonies.

group all observations into five, four-year time periods starting in 1993. This approach allows us to smooth the variables over time (within each period) while also retaining some of the time structure of the data.

The dependent variable is the total number of articles written on each country during each of the five periods, and the unit of analysis is the country-time period. The independent variables take the means of their values within each time period, and any years with missing values are disregarded when calculating these means. The control variables are GDP (in constant 2011 dollars, PPP), population, area (in sq. km), the country's Polity score, and a variable measuring the total number of major episodes of political violence in the country.[10] The key independent variables are dummies marking whether a country was formerly colonised by either the British or the French. Many of the variables, including the dependent variable, are skewed, and so they enter the analysis as the natural log of their value.[11] All models include time period fixed effects and cluster standard errors on countries. The results are shown in Table 1.

Across all models, population is a major factor driving the number of articles written on a country. For every 5% increase in a country's population, the number of articles per 4-year period increases by about 3%. Model 1 shows that after controlling for population, area, GDP, violence, and level of democracy, ex-British colonies are still written about more than twice as much as other countries.[12] However, this result is based on a comparison between ex-British colonies and all other countries in the sample. Model 2 adds a former-French colony dummy, which means that the comparison group for both the British and French dummies in model 2 is countries that were colonised by neither of these European powers. This addition substantively changes

Table 1. DV: ln(Number of Articles).

	1	2	3
ln(Population)	0.650***	0.621***	0.621***
	(0.167)	(0.133)	(0.134)
ln(Area)	−0.008	0.018	0.018
	(0.110)	(0.086)	(0.088)
ln(GDP)	0.084	0.089	0.089
	(0.140)	(0.111)	(0.113)
Polity	0.039	0.042*	0.042*
	(0.025)	(0.023)	(0.023)
ln(Violence)	0.119**	0.046	0.048
	(0.056)	(0.061)	(0.062)
UK	0.849***	0.259	0.261
	(0.263)	(0.275)	(0.278)
France		−0.923***	−0.981**
		(0.255)	(0.428)
$Time_2 \times France$			0.188
			(0.504)
$Time_3 \times France$			−0.030
			(0.469)
$Time_4 \times France$			0.175
			(0.407)
$Time_5 \times France$			−0.039
			(0.517)
Time Period Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	210	210	210
Countries	42	42	42
R-squared	0.54	0.59	0.59

Note: Country clustered robust standard errors in parentheses.
***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

the results. When compared to countries that were colonised by neither Britain nor France (and controlling for the other variables in the model), ex-British colonies are not written about much more than would be expected. On the other hand, there is strong bias against the French. For every 5 articles published on countries like Ethiopia, Liberia, or Mozambique, only 2 focus on a former French colony.[13] Thus, while ex-British colonies are studied much more than other countries, this seems to be due primarily to the fact that they were not colonised by France. The bias against former French colonies is more direct, as it cannot be explained away by any of the control variables.

To see if the bias against former French colonies is changing over time, I exploit the temporal groupings in the data. More precisely, I interact the time period dummies (included in every model to create the fixed effects) with the French dummy. This creates a test that will show if the coefficient for the French dummy variable changes significantly between the first time period and any later time period. The results are shown in model 3. Not a single interaction term is significant, and the coefficients are not evenly similarly signed. This tells us that the publication bias against French colonies is not changing over time.

In sum, while countries that were colonised by the British are over-represented in unconditional comparisons, these countries are also wealthier and more populous (and their main coloniser was not France), and once these factors are taken into account, ex-British colonies are not studied much more than countries that were either never colonised, or were colonised by countries like Portugal or Belgium. From a case selection point of view, this form of bias may be troubling, as it is hard to defend generalising from populous countries to small ones. However, and somewhat surprisingly given that these are English language journals based in the UK, there is little evidence of colonial origin bias towards ex-British countries. On the other hand, former French colonies are sharply under-represented in these journals. This effect cannot purely be caused by a lack of the English language, as many of the countries in the comparison group are not bastions of English (e.g. Ethiopia, the DRC, or Mozambique).

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed twenty years of African politics research and shown the extent to which our work clusters heavily on a small number of more populous and English-speaking countries. However, it also showed that when ex-British countries are compared with countries that were colonised by neither the British nor the French, then any Anglo bias can be explained away with standard variables like a country's population. The bias against former French colonies is both more robust and persistent over time.

As shown in the cartogram in Figure 2, our research from the last two decades does not in fact speak to African politics, unless we believe that we can create knowledge about all of Africa while predominantly studying countries like South Africa, Nigeria, or Ghana. This problem of generalising from specific, and often atypical, countries to the continent as a whole is a larger problem for researchers based at institutions outside of Africa, as they are more likely to generalise to the continent than are researchers based at institutions in Africa (Briggs and Weathers 2016).

If our literature does not provide a good representation of Africa as a whole, then we should both reduce the scope of our generalisations and make stronger attempts to diversify the countries that we study. The results of this paper suggest that former French colonies are especially neglected in Anglophone journals. It should be stressed that this does not appear to simply be a matter of a lack of English, as countries that were colonised by France are studied much less than not only ex-British colonies, but also countries that were colonised by neither.

In very practical terms, addressing this anti-Francophone bias may require more intensive language training or longer field work opportunities in graduate school. Both would require additional resources and seem unlikely at present. On a more feasible note, we should be clearer with ourselves about what we study and to what we can generalise. To be quite specific, we should shy away from thinking that most of our (English language) research produces knowledge that applies to French Africa, as the vast majority of this research does not in fact draw on evidence from these countries.

Notes

1. For a discussion on case studies and case selection, see King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), Brady and Collier (2010), and George and Bennett (2005).
2. Veenendaal and Corbett (2015) argue that there can be large theoretical payoffs to studying small states.
3. For more information on the coding of the dataset, see the original paper by Briggs and Weathers (2016).
4. Some articles were purely theoretical and others focused on, for example, American or French policies towards Africa.
5. For countries that were originally colonised by Germany, I chose the European country that held control after World War I.
6. The islands dropped from the map are Cape Verde, Comoros, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, and Mauritius. The map also excludes the South African Prince Edward Islands.
7. The scaling was done using ScapeToad, which deforms the map using the Gaster/Newmann diffusion algorithm (Gastner and Newman 2004).
8. In a *t*-test with unequal variances, the difference is statistically significant ($p = 0.035$).
9. In a *t*-test with unequal variances, the difference between former French colonies and countries that were neither British nor French colonies is significant at $p < 0.1$.
10. Population, GDP, and area all come from the World Bank's World Development Indicators. Polity scores and the variable measuring major episodes of political violence come from the Center For Systemic Peace (2014). Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, the Seychelles, and Sao Tome and Principe lack data on either the violence or Polity scores (or both) and so are dropped from the main analysis. The results of the analyses are similar if the aforementioned independent variables are dropped and these countries are included.
11. If a variable had zeros, then it was logged after 0.1 was added.
12. To see the percentage change in a log-level regression: $(e^{0.849} - 1) \times 100 \approx 130$. Ex-British colonies are written about 130% more than would otherwise be expected.
13. The figure is derived as before: $(e^{-0.923} - 1) \times 100 \approx -60$. Ex-French colonies are written about 60% less than would otherwise be expected.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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