


Book Review

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Keith Weghorst, *Activist Origins of Political Ambition: Opposition Candidacy in Africa's Electoral Authoritarian Regimes*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, 2022; xvii + 381 pp.; ISBN: 978 1 316 51992 9, £90 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Sarah Lockwood , University of Cambridge, UK

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Why do rational individuals stand as candidates for opposition parties in electoral authoritarian regimes, where the chances of winning are slim and the costs of running high? In *Activist Origins of Political Ambition: Opposition Candidacy in Africa's Electoral Authoritarian Regimes*, Keith Weghorst tackles this intriguing question head on, arguing that, far from being rare and irrational occurrences, the decisions of opposition candidates to run in such regimes are both frequent and entirely explicable.

Anchoring his argument in a detailed case study of Tanzania, Weghorst convincingly shows that opposition candidates in electoral authoritarian regimes are motivated by different goals and perceptions of risk than their ruling party counterparts, and that these differences are both rooted in, and shaped by, earlier life experiences. Specifically, he finds that previous experience with activism and civil society organizations is associated with a higher likelihood of standing as an opposition candidate, while a history of career partisanship is more common for candidates associated with the ruling party. He argues that this is because civil society activism leads individuals to see value in candidacy even when they might not win the election, to have a higher tolerance for risk and repression, and to value ideological expression over and above material gain. All qualities that support opposition candidacy. Career partisanship, in contrast, involves deep commitment over a long period of time to the structures of a party, which is not only more feasible for members of the ruling party (where party structures are larger and able to operate more freely), but is also typically a requirement to be allowed to stand as a ruling party candidate in the first place.

Weghorst's book is well-written and compelling, rooted in a deep understanding of the Tanzanian context. The argument is underpinned by a variety of rich data, including some novel measurement approaches (most notably the use of *methali* or local proverbs to measure risk appetite), which have the potential to revolutionize our research in the region. By challenging dominant explanations of candidacy decisions and party behavior on the continent, moreover, Weghorst contributes to an important area of emerging scholarship, tackling head on the problematic claims that legislators in Africa are unanimously motivated by personal gain, and that parties in the region rarely hold genuine policy positions.

As compelling as the overall argument is, however, the book somewhat frustratingly leaves unanswered the question of what propels individuals into these early life experiences in the first place. That is, if the decision to stand for the opposition versus the ruling party in Tanzania is affected by previous involvement in civil society or party activity, what underpins the decision of individuals to choose one of these two paths? Suggestions are made at times - such as in discussions of the life history of one of the central figures (January Makamba), whose father's involvement in Tanzania's ruling party is described as leading almost inevitably to January's engagement with the party in childhood - but overall, surprisingly little attention is played to this question. In some ways this might seem a relatively minor point - the book argues that engagement in these earlier experiences affects the decision to run for candidacy later, and the argument and data here are relatively convincing. But it does raise an important question around causality. At present, the book suggests that the underlying causal direction runs almost exclusively in one direction, from engagement in civic activism/career partisanship towards the decision to stand as a candidate. And throughout the book the argument is made that career partisanship and civic activism experiences have "consequences" for decisions about candidacy later in life (p. 240), with these early experiences taking place "before candidacy is even considered" (p. 54). This may be true, but without knowing why individuals decide to get involved in activism or career partisanship in the first place, it is hard to evaluate whether the causality is really quite as uni-directional as claimed. If the benefits of prior involvement in civic activism for

opposition parties are as big and widely understood as indicated, for example, it is possible that individuals hoping to stand for opposition parties make decisions to engage in civil society activism only *after* deciding they would like to get involved in opposition politics. That is, the decision to stand for candidacy at some point down the line actually *predates* the individual's involvement in civil society. Similarly, if, as is discussed on page 54, more than fifteen years of party activism are typically required before being eligible to stand as a ruling party candidate, then career partisanship seems an entirely logical path for someone to take with the express goal of eventually standing as a candidate for the ruling party. I do not know that this is the

case, of course, but without a fuller discussion of these earlier decisions it is hard not to wonder at times just how strong the claimed causal relationship really is.

Overall, however, this is a fascinating and insightful work, which contributes in important ways to our understanding of Tanzania, candidacy, opposition parties and electoral authoritarian regimes. Weghorst's deep contextual knowledge, rich data, and novel argument make it a compelling read, and one well worth engaging with. Highly recommended.

ORCID iD

Sarah Lockwood  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3578-6053>