

ABSTRACT

ELITES AND ELECTIONS IN AFRICA

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This paper reviews two decades of democratisation in sub-Saharan Africa and the impact of elites on the process. In Africa's large political landscape several salient features are highlighted. These include: the political diversity of the region, elections versus democracy, presidentialism, ethnicity, and patronage. The role of elites in African democratisation concerns the exercise of power along these different axes. Such power may be corrective (through force or manipulation), persuasive (through legitimation or signification), or interpersonal (through patronage). Relatively small in number, elites have invariably developed within (or in close proximity to) the state and therefore have played a critical role in political developments. The focus of the paper is on the outcomes (as opposed to the processes) of elections in Africa. These can be viewed positively – as the democratising potential of elections – negatively – as a smoke screen for continued neo-patrimonialism – or neutrally within a wider political context of formal and informal political institutions. The exercise of elite power has parallel outcomes, positively as a driving force for political and economic change or negatively as the exercise of coercion and other forms of domination for predatory ends. The paper concludes by examining a) the shifting balance of power between political elites in African democratisation and b) the relations of elites to counteracting groups that exert pressure or protest in the political process.