How urbanization can (fail to) change democracy in Africa

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Sub-Saharan Africa approaches a demographic tipping point: within the next decade, the region will become majority urban (Montgomery 2008, United Nations 2018). Many African countries have already passed this threshold, especially outside East Africa. Only forty years ago, just one quarter of Africans lived in cities. But in the 20 years between 1985 and 2005, Sub-Saharan Africa's cities added 300 million residents. Within the past 20 years, they have added 520 million more. In the next 20, urbanization will accelerate, with city populations growing by another 715 million (United Nations 2018). Bundled up into this urbanization process have been other important demographic changes, including the emergence of an increasingly large urban middle class and a redrawing of the continent's ethnic geography as rural-urban migration brings increasingly diverse populations into shared urban spaces.

This chapter considers the current and future political implications of these transformations: does urbanization fundamentally change the ways politicians wield power and citizens hold leaders accountable? Has it aided – and will it continue to aid – democratization? Concurrent with the continent's rapid urban growth, the last decade has witnessed an explosion of empirical research on Africa's urban politics (Collord et al. 2021, Hoelscher et al. 2023). Three broad categories of arguments have emerged, mapping to optimistic, pessimistic, and cautious outlooks about the prospects for urbanization to usher in meaningful political change. I identify each cluster of arguments and review their supporting evidence with the goal of providing future scholars of Africa's urban transition a set of distinct conceptual frames through which to makes sense of this dynamic

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set of studies.[1]

While there inherently are caveats to any broad-brush categorization of such a vast region, I argue that the recent literature presents more compelling evidence for the pessimistic and cautious accounts than the optimistic one. Looking retrospectively, recent urbanization does not appear to have ushered in major changes to the underlying nature of political competition and accountability in most cases. Thinking prospectively, the core conditions theorized to be working together to stall these changes seem likely to remain in place well into the future. And to the extent significantly new forms of politics *have* begun to emerge in the region's burgeoning cities, they appear to manifest most often as anti-system populism, a political force that can just as (or perhaps even more) easily seed authoritarian back-sliding as enhance democracy.

This view contrasts with the great optimism with which Africa's urbanization is sometimes described by scholars, policymakers, and journalists, especially in popular media. Accounts making excited predictions about coming political change rarely explicitly use the terminology of mid-20th century modernization theory (e.g., Lerner 1958, Lipset 1960, Deutsch 1961), but often implicitly share its central assumptions: that the demographic changes inherent in urbanization will break down old models of social interaction and political competition, forging new class-based and cross-ethnic solidarities around which a new (and better) politics emerges.

But these optimistic predictions have similar flaws to those with modernization theory itself (Migdal 1988). They are often teleological, assuming progression to a common destination (Cheeseman 2022), while discounting the steep transaction costs that can reinforce path dependent political equilibria even in the face of demographic change (Shefter 1977). In their predictions about ethnicity, they often also mistakenly assume that the intergroup contact produced by rural-urban migration will be an inherently positive force, rather than one that can cut both ways based on the nature of that contact (Allport 1954, Enos 2017) – including by potentially heightening and solidifying (new) ethnic cleavages (Epstein 1958, Wolpe 1974, Bates 1983, Vail 1989).

Much of Africa's recent urbanization has occurred alongside limited structural economic transformation (Fox 2012, Hoelscher et al. 2023), leaving broad majorities in the informal sector (Collord et al. 2021, Gottlieb 2024). Crucially, it has also primarily occurred amidst low state capacity (Nathan 2019, Gottlieb 2025). These two factors significantly constrain transitions to more programmatic, policy-based politics. They both limit citizens' ability to coordinate around coherent programmatic demands of their leaders (Gottlieb 2024) and constrain leaders' ability to credibly

[1]My primary focus in this review is on positivist, empirical research on African cities in political science – my home discipline – while mostly setting aside a separate critical literature rooted in urban theory, which I am not well-equipped to distill.

commit to addressing those demands (Nathan 2019).

The result can be a self-reinforcing "trap" in which prevailing forms of non-programmatic politics persist despite the demographic changes associated with urbanization (Nathan 2019, Gottlieb 2025). Moreover, as much urban political competition remains broadly clientelist, personalized, or discretionary (Paller 2019), rooted in competition over scarce state services, the incentives sustaining ethnic political mobilization can persist, or even further increase – not fade away (Bates 1983, Posner 2005, Nathan 2019).

The urban residents not well-served by this status quo, including those in the growing urban middle class, may find little viable outlet to address their political demands. The result could be withdrawal and disengagement (Nathan 2019). In increasingly common patterns of "enclaving" in African cities (Nielsen et al. 2021), many relatively wealthy residents effectively exit from the normal social contract with the state by privately providing services to themselves (Wilson 2024). These acts of "exit" (Hirschman 1970) only further disincentivize changes to the broader political equilibrium (Nathan 2019).

But much as predicted in Huntington's (1968) famous early revision to modernization theory, political outcomes can also become much more volatile when the state is consistently incapable of meeting citizens' demands amidst rapid socio-economic change that produces new preferences and expectations. Discontent with the prevailing political equilibrium in urban Africa has also begun to find a release valve in the form of support for new, anti-system populists (Resnick 2014, Hoeslcher et al. 2023, Gottlieb 2025). While a few populist movements on the continent have pursued democratic openings (Paget 2024), others bring threats of democratic erosion (Hinfelaar et al. 2023, Sishuwa 2024) or scapegoat minority groups (Currier and Cruz 2020, van der Westhuizen 2023), painting a far more cautionary picture of urban Africa's potential future political trajectory.

1 The case for optimism

For nearly two decades, commentators in Western media and policy circles have been describing Africa's rapid urban transition as a harbinger of major political change. And in a sharp deviation from the gloomy outlook of media narratives a decade earlier – exemplified by Kaplan's (1994) (in)famous dystopian rendering of urban disorder and overpopulation in "The Coming Anarchy" – the narrative of the last few decades has shifted in a far more positive direction, centered on the optimistic prediction that urbanization, and its associated socio-economic changes, will help usher in decidedly more democratic and accountable politics.

In the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, we have heard that Africa's urbanization will "improve governance across the continent" and "[increase] political pressure for accountability" (Anku and Eni-

Kalu 2019). Over a decade ago, readers of the *New York Times* op-ed page learned of the "cosmopolitan trend" diminishing the importance of ethnicity in urban Africa (Brooks 2014). *Reuters* described the emerging urban middle class as "enlightened voters" and "drivers of democracy," "more likely to vote according to policies and issues rather than automatic or traditional allegiances to any party or ethnic group" (Fletcher 2013). Prominent policy analysts at the African Development Bank suggested these urban voters will "use their greater economic clout to demand more accountability and transparency from their governments" (Ncube 2015, 3), while World Bank officials have written of a looming "end of ethnicity" (Severino and Ray 2011).

At the heart of these popular narratives are three core theoretical claims, summarized in the model in Figure 1. First is a *preferences* argument: urban residents make inherently different demands of their government than rural dwellers. For example, Anku and Eni-Kalu (2019) write that "urban voters tend to care more about structural economic and governance issues than their rural counterparts, who are typically more concerned with basic social welfare needs." In the terminology of Nathan (2019), this is a claim that urban preferences are more "universalistic" than "particularistic." The central implication of the preferences argument is that addressing more universalistic demands will require politicians to shift towards more policy-based, programmatic appeals for support, focused on the delivery of broader public goods, rather than persist with a narrower, exclusivist politics of clientelism and ethnic favoritism often associated with low-quality governance.[2]

Second, these pieces often advance a *mobilization* argument: due to their physical proximity and social networks, urban dwellers inherently face a less severe collective action problem than rural dwellers, enabling enhanced political participation through which they are better able to express opposition to their governments. Again using Anku and Eni-Kalu (2019) as an example, they also write that "Urban density will make it easier to mobilize popular support for or against policies, ideas, or regimes in democratic and nondemocratic countries alike, improving both the quality and the responsiveness of governance."

Third is a *socialization* argument: due to rural-urban migration, greater social mixing occurs in cities than rural areas, allowing ethnicity to decline in salience and, in turn, ethnic competition and conflict to become less central to politics (e.g., Severino and Ray 2011, Brooks 2014). This

[2]In keeping with the substantial recent evolution of the literature on clientelism (Hicken and Nathan 2020), I define clientelism throughout this review *broadly* as the bundle of non-programmatic linkages, occurring throughout the electoral cycle, through which politicians selectively and narrowly target or withhold patronage to induce or reward political support; this extends far beyond campaign season "vote buying," and does not assume a fully monitored and enforced *quid pro quo*, which is in fact empirically quite rare (both across Africa and everywhere else).

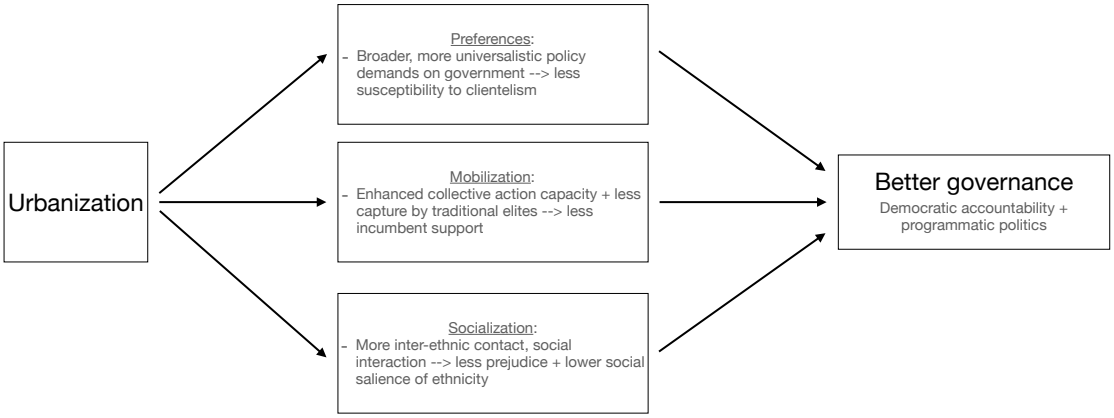

Figure 1: *Model 1: the optimistic case*. The implicit causal argument(s) of the optimists.

socialization argument shares much of its logic with the social psychology literature on intergroup contact (Allport 1954, Pettigrew 1998), predicting that as different types of people come into increasing social interaction, they will develop less exclusionary attitudes and prejudices.

Although contemporary articulators of the optimistic outlook rarely make this connection explicit, they are essentially regurgitating central tenets of classical modernization theory, once the dominant theoretical lens through which many social scientists viewed the developing world. In line with the three arguments above, proponents of modernization theory have long associated urbanization with a transition into modernity and suggested that rising standards of living in urban areas contribute to the development of post-materialist political preferences (Inglehart 1997), the activation of higher levels of political participation (Lerner 1958, Huntington 1968), and the displacement of primordial kin-based ethnic allegiances in favor of new class- and interest-based identities (Lerner 1958, Lipset 1960, Deutsch 1961).

Though the broader modernization approach is now often seen as discredited, recent literature suggests these three arguments are not without some empirical merit. Nathan (2019) uses survey data from Ghana to show that at least middle class (if not all) urban residents do have more universalistic policy preferences than other types of voters. Given the heavy concentration of the middle class in cities, urban voters overall then appear less likely than rural voters to make particularistic demands on the state that could be satisfied through clientelist politics.

The mobilization argument is consistent with the long-standing observation that urban protest is a more pressing threat than rural protest to many African regimes (Bates 1981), a claim Dorward (2024) has helped validate with data showing mass protest is more common in African cities

than rural areas.[3] A rich series of recent studies places urban protest movements at the forefront of specific episodes of political change on the continent (e.g., Branch and Mampilly 2015, Collord et al. 2021, LeBas and Young 2023, Hassan 2024), similar to broader case study literatures from across the social sciences that regularly focus on cities as the central stage for new social movements (Holston 1999).

Relatedly, the mobilization argument is consistent with observations that the relative absence – in at least some African cities – of powerful traditional elites, often viewed as clientelistically capturing political life in many parts of rural Africa, frees urban dwellers to better mobilize against their governments. For example, Koter (2013) ties the weakness of Islamic marabouts in urban Senegal to higher levels of pro-opposition voting. More broadly, Harding (2020) uses Afrobarometer surveys to demonstrate that urban voters across the continent are, on average, more supportive of opposition parties than rural voters, consistent with a case study literature focused on how opposition movements have become particularly strong in some African cities (e.g., Resnick 2012).

Finally, the socialization argument appears consistent with survey evidence that urban respondents are relatively more likely than rural respondents to prioritize national over ethnic identities (Green 2012, Robinson 2014). Kramon et al. (2022) leverage rich panel data from Kenya to suggest micro-foundations for these patterns, offering causal evidence that rural-urban migration can lead individuals to deemphasize social identification with ethnic groups. Berge et al. (2020) use lab-in-the-field experiments to demonstrate that urban Kenyans have remarkably few ethnic biases in their decision-making, including compared to rural residents. Such findings are in line with the indisputable sociological reality that more inter-group social contact is indeed occurring in cities compared to most rural areas, which tend to be comparatively less diverse. This is reflected, for example, in higher rates of inter-ethnic marriage in cities (Posner 2025), creating a growing minority of the urban population with dual or ambiguous ethnic heritage not accounted for in classic theories of ethnic politics (Dulani et al. 2020).

2 The case for pessimism

Yet, despite all this evidence, the broad political transformation that modernization-style accounts predict has still not materialized across most African cities. The individual pieces of evidence in favor of the optimistic arguments cannot be arranged into a coherent broader mosaic depicting widespread political change because there are many even bigger pieces of evidence pointing in the

[3]By contrast, however, Dorward (2024) shows that violent conflict is instead much more common in rural areas.

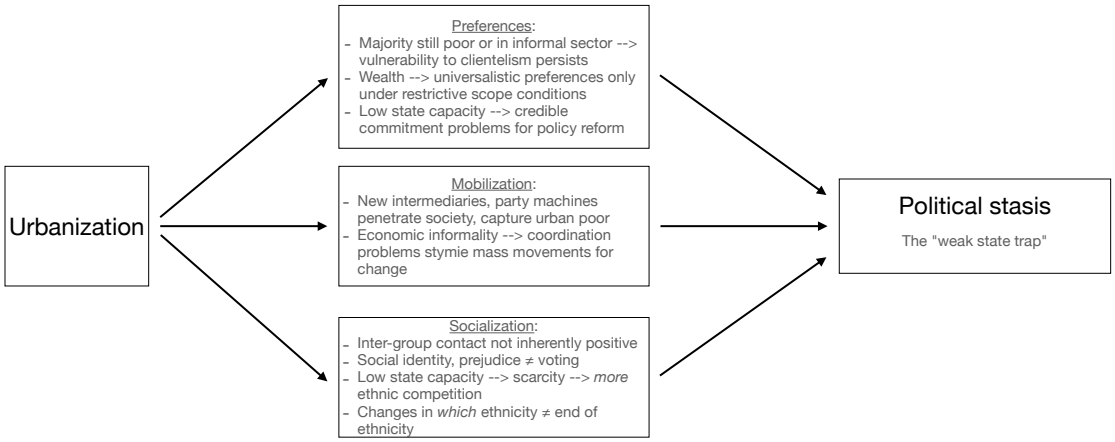

Figure 2: *Model 2: the pessimistic case*. The implicit causal argument(s) of the pessimists.

other direction – sometimes even within the same studies cited above. This alternative evidence collectively provides stronger support for a more pessimistic set of arguments about urbanization's (lack of) effects on improved governance, visualized in Figure 2.

For the *preferences* channel, the pessimistic accounts observe that even if the middle class is growing, and might make universalistic demands, the large majority of urban residents remain poor and vulnerable to economic shocks, with particularistic preferences that still manifest in susceptibility to clientelist relationships with politicians that substitute for incapable (or non-existent) formal welfare states (Nathan 2019).[4] Empirical evidence *abounds* that forms of clientelism remain vibrant across many African slums and other low-income urban neighborhoods (e.g., Nathan 2019, Paller 2019, Collord et al. 2021, Agbiboga 2022, Agbalajobi et al. 2025). This is not to suggest that forms of personalized, bottom-up, grassroots accountability between residents and local politicians cannot co-exist with clientelism in these neighborhoods – Paller (2019) shows compellingly that they can – but they are not occurring in the context of a broader transition to more programmatic politics in response to urbanites' universalistic policy preferences.[5]

Moreover, Nathan's (2019) finding that the urban middle class has more universalistic preferences has two key scope conditions that only apply in a subset of African cities. First, it requires

[4]Much of the discussion here focuses on Africa's democratic and/or competitive authoritarian regimes, as the underlying logic of the optimists' preferences argument already does not apply to closed authoritarian regimes where voter preferences are already largely orthogonal to policy outcomes anyway.

[5]Indeed, the literature on clientelism elsewhere already shows that clientelism and forms of grassroots accountability are not inherently incompatible to begin with (e.g., Auyero 2001).

the middle class to not be primarily dependent on state employment or resources for their economic position (Rosenfeld 2021). Where the private sector is relatively less vibrant than in urban Ghana, politicians have leverage to ensnare even relatively wealthy urbanites in patronage relationships, such as in Croese and Pitcher's (2019) example of how Angola uses state housing to wed urban middle class recipients to the regime. Second, where the urban formal sector remains small – the empirical reality in many African cities (Collord et al. 2021) – most residents, even those with middle class incomes, will remain in the informal sector, where their economic interests can depend on *ad hoc*, personalized interactions with the state that create additional points of leverage for patronage-based politics (Gottlieb 2024, 2025).[6]

Most crucially, even where both conditions apply, African urbanization is primarily occurring in contexts of limited state capacity in which politicians face significant supply-side constraints to credibly committing to whatever universalistic policy reforms urban voters may demand. In such cases, unable to convince voters that they will implement their policy promises, urban politicians' dominant strategy may be to double-down on their existing comparative advantage in responding to the particularistic preferences of the urban poor, leaving policy-oriented middle class voters with few credible political options that could realistically address their demands (Nathan 2019).

Nathan (2019) suggests this dynamic is especially likely in cities where poor and middle class populations are not well geographically segregated across subnational political (e.g., electoral or administrative) boundaries to which political power is significantly decentralized.[7] Where the urban middle class is clearly segregated into its own districts *and* local politicians at the district level have real policy-making power, there are incentives to specialize in addressing these voters' new universalistic preferences (should they exist). But these conditions are uncommon in most African cities, where limits to urban planning have often left poor and middle class populations spatially proximate within the same administrative units (Gugler and Flanagan 1978, Deuskar 2022) and local governments retain little policy-making independence (Grossman and Lewis 2014). When local urban politicians can still win on the support of the poor alone and lack the authority to change major policy outcomes on their own, high transaction costs to abandoning already-effective particularistic strategies targeting the poor in favor of cultivating new support among the urban middle class bind, preventing credible attempts to address universalistic preferences (Nathan 2019).

[6]Together, these two scope conditions echo a parallel debate on the historical urban US, in which authors such as Wolfinger (1972) observed that some middle class voters' private economic interests could still lead them into being active clients of urban party machines, in stark contrast to famous modernization-style claims that middle class voters had cultural values inherently inimical to machine politics (Banfield and Wilson 1963).

[7]This logic echoes similar theoretical claims by Luna (2014) and Holland (2017) for Latin American cities.

Next, undercutting a core premise for optimists' claims about enhanced urban *mobilization* against incumbent governments, Harding (2020) significantly qualifies his finding that urban survey respondents in Africa are on average more supportive of opposition parties by observing that this actually becomes less true the larger a country's overall urban population share grows: as urbanization progresses, incumbent governments in fact draw increasingly *more* urban support. Adapting the logic of Stasavage (2005), Harding (2020) attributes this to increased incentives for governments to cater to urban, rather than rural, demands for state spending as urban voters become more pivotal.

But there may be additional explanations for this pattern. Contrary to Koter's (2013) claims that urban voters in electoral regimes are more free to oppose incumbents because of the relatively limited control of traditional intermediaries (e.g., chiefs) in many cities, the increasing pivotality of urban votes creates strong competitive incentives for other types of intermediaries to emerge instead. Whether in the form of machine-style party organizations (Brierley and Nathan 2021) or criminal gangs and mafias (LeBas 2013, Agbiboa 2022), new clientelist intermediaries can exploit residents' poverty and fill the void left behind by traditional elites. Similar to urban areas elsewhere in the developing world (e.g., Auyero 2001, Auerbach 2020), the result is that Africa's urban votes can be still highly-intermediated – even captured – in ways that can enable well-resourced incumbents to undermine opposition mobilization.

Gottlieb (2024, 2025) also counters the optimists' mobilization arguments by claiming that conditions in the urban informal sector economy can undercut the otherwise seemingly-inherent collective action advantages of urban population density. She observes that the complex, hyper-variegated, and often competing private economic interests of informal sector actors in urban Senegal produce policy coordination problems that impede the formation of coherent constituencies for political change and can enable incumbents' urban divide and rule strategies.

Finally, a wide series of findings are inconsistent with the optimists' *socialization* narrative. First, increased inter-ethnic contact in more diverse settings like cities does not inherently reduce prejudice or inter-group competition. When ethnic groups become more proximate, but remain spatially segregated from each other – such that they regularly see each other and compete for local resources, but do not truly interact as peers – inter-group contact can instead lead to heightened tension, as Kasara (2013) shows for Kenya and both de Kadt and Sands (2021) and Bollen (2025) show for urban South Africa.[8] With ethnic discrimination in land or housing markets, and ethnic

[8]That contact cuts both ways, in part conditional on segregation, has been a tenet of contact theory from its inception (Allport 1954), but this nuance has been missed by many studies referencing the framework. See Enos (2017).

clustering in rural-urban migration patterns, many African cities – while far more diverse overall than rural areas – still feature ethnic segregation at a neighborhood level, enabling more divisive forms of contact.

Second, optimistic socialization accounts focused on prejudice reduction, a lack of general ethnocentric attitudes, or a lack of social identification with ethnicity in surveys may be centered on the wrong set of intermediate outcomes if one's goal is to explain the prevalence of ethnic-based political competition. Drawing on famous experiments in Kampala, Habyarimana et al. (2007, 2009) suggest that inter-group prejudice is not the mechanism for failures of local ethnic cooperation to begin with. Similarly, one's social identification with an ethnic group is often not the underlying reason for ethnic voting anyway (Posner 2005, Ferree 2006). In urban Ghana, for example, responses to similar survey items about social identification as in Green (2012) and Robinson (2014) are uncorrelated with whether respondents actually vote along ethnic lines (Nathan 2019). Instead, consistent with the fundamental insight that ethnicity is situational, voters can decry the role of ethnicity in some aspects of their lives and still cluster their votes by ethnicity for other reasons (Burbidge 2014). This is especially likely when the persistence of ethnic-based forms of patronage create instrumental incentives to expect better performance from ethnically-aligned politicians (Posner 2005) or if ethnicity continues to shape how voters process political information (Adida et al. 2017).

Third, and closely related, a large literature, going back decades to the late colonial and early independence eras, has long observed that bringing diverse populations together in growing cities in contexts where state capacity is limited and state resources are highly prized, but scarce, can result in heightened, not lessened, ethnic competition (Epstein 1958, Bates 1983, Posner 2005). Seeking a foothold in the urban economy, many urban dwellers invest in ethnic-based ties to rural home regions as key forms of social insurance (Vail 1989, Gugler 2002). Ethnicity also provides a useful form of social organization for coordinating urban residents to advocate for state resources (Epstein 1958, Wolpe 1974, Bates 1983). Historically, contrary to the central premise of modernization accounts tying ethnic politics to "traditional" rural life, it was educated, "modern" urban dwellers in many African countries who first acted as "ethnic missionaries" and helped export ethnic consciousness from the cities back to rural areas (Bates 1983).

In this context, any changes in ethnicity amidst urbanization may be less about ethnicity fading away than changes to the specific ethnic identities that get politically activated (Posner 2005). Super-ordinate ethnic identities that enable the construction of larger urban coalitions may become more important than narrower identities tied to specific rural places. This has been observed, for example, in Wolpe's (1974) early work on "super identities" in urban Nigeria or, more recently,

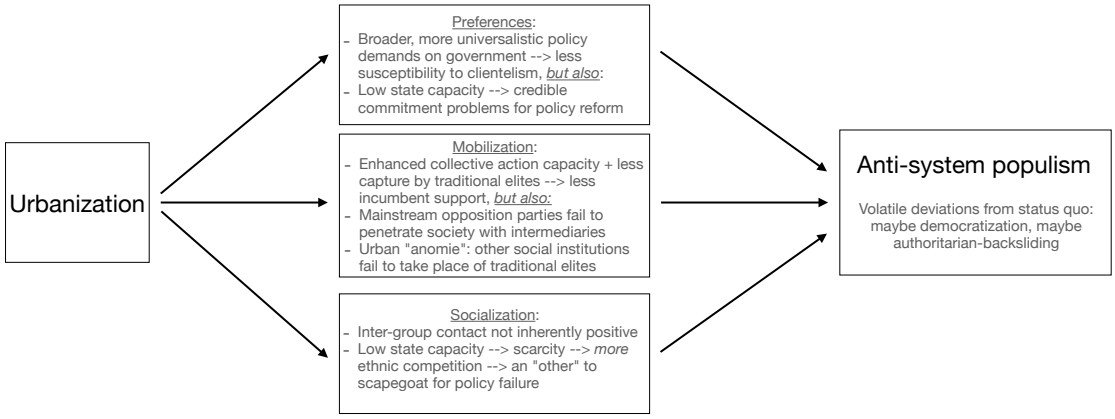

Figure 3: *Model 3: the cautious case*. The implicit causal argument(s) predicting populism.

in Green's (2023) finding that urbanization induces shifts in the types of ethnic identities to which African survey respondents subscribe, rather than a shift away from ethnicity altogether.

Ultimately, aggregating these strands of more pessimistic theories about preferences, mobilization, and socialization, the main prediction in Figure 2 becomes one of relative political stasis amidst demographic change. Nathan (2019) and Gottlieb (2025) both use the metaphor of a "trap" to highlight the self-reinforcing equilibria of clientelist, non-programmatic, often ethnic-based politics they expect to prevail in urban areas even as urbanization continues apace. The core inputs on this trap are fundamental structural conditions in the urban political economy: limits to state capacity, which incentivize clientelism, reduce the credibility of programmatic campaign promises, and produce scarcity in access to state resources; and the lack of a corresponding economic transformation alongside urbanization that moves most of the urban population out of the informal sector.

3 The case for caution

Although more inchoate than the first two literatures, a nascent third body of studies suggests another more volatile path for the political effects of urbanization: the rise of anti-system populists. This final cluster of arguments, which amalgamates elements of the first two, is visualized in Figure 3. It stands out as a case for caution, rather than optimism or pessimism, as populist politics can be harnessed in either more or less democratic directions (Bugaric 2019), especially depending on the prevailing status quo from which populists seek to radically depart.

For the *preferences* mechanism, consider a situation in which urban preferences for government action do change and become more universalistic, per the logic of the optimistic model (Figure 1),

but state capacity constraints render politicians' promises to ever realistically address those preferences non-credible, per the logic of the pessimistic model (Figure 2). This generates a growing mass of urban residents deeply disillusioned with the political status quo, but whose on-going support also cannot be reliably captured through clientelist politics. How do these citizens respond?

One possibility is disengagement: Nathan (2019) observes middle class voters with universalistic policy preferences in urban Ghana differentially withdrawing from political participation, reinforcing the "trap" equilibrium by allowing politicians to continue winning office while ignoring these voters' policy preferences and focusing instead on those with more particularistic demands. Instead of working through the formal political system, the urban middle and upper classes in many African cities appear to be systematically exiting the standard social and fiscal contract with the state and turning to private provision in its place (Grant 2009, Bodea and LeBas 2016, Nielsen et al. 2021, Wilson 2024): "enclaving" themselves in private (increasingly, gated) neighborhoods, privately providing basic services and security, skirting tax obligations,[9] and primarily engaging state officials on an individualized basis through private network ties in non-official channels (Agbalajobi et al. 2025), not by coordinating to make coherent policy demands.

However, a second possibility is that these urban residents eventually become so dissatisfied with the persistent policy failures of the status quo that the lid blows off the trap. Consistent with "supply-side" explanations for the rise of populism in the West, which root support for anti-system politics in the sustained failure of existing parties and state institutions to address voter demands (Berman 2021), the trap dynamics in Figure 2 could also seed support for new political actors that deploy populist rhetoric to position themselves in opposition to the status quo political equilibrium (Collord et al. 2021, Hoelscher et al. 2023, Gottlieb 2025).

Along these lines, some scholars identify disaffected urban populations as key support bases for nascent populist movements in some African countries (Resnick 2014, Cheeseman and Larmer 2015). Urban-based policy dissatisfaction has clearly been at the heart of prominent anti-system protest movements in recent years, such as Nigeria's widespread 2020 "End SARS" protests, Senegal's 2021 and 2023 protests in support of populist opposition candidate Ousmane Sonko (Gottlieb 2025), and Kenya's 2024 and 2025 anti-tax riots, each of which appear to have drawn on the types of upwardly mobile, educated young constituencies that Nathan (2019) suggests are

[9]Wilson (2024), however, compellingly demonstrates that the degree of middle class tax exit in Lagos is conditioned by the built environment: the specific type of housing in which middle class residents live. Some gated communities create new intermediaries in the form of estate managers who are legible to tax authorities and facilitate tax compliance, even as wealthy residents otherwise withdraw from the broader social contract with the state for basic services.

relatively most likely to hold universalistic preferences not well-addressed by current politics.

Features of the *mobilization* mechanism can help make these more explosive reactions more common. In Figure 2, one key argument for why urban populations often may not successfully mobilize against incumbents to the degree Figure 1 predicts is that party machines and other forms of clientelist intermediaries penetrate urban society, creating clientelist "problem solving" networks that maintain residents' dependency on the status quo. This should be most likely in stable party systems, where parties have the time horizons needed to invest in developing deep roots in the urban electorate. But party system institutionalization varies widely across Africa (Riedl 2014). In a highly institutionalized system like Ghana's, Nathan (2019) argues that the tentacles of the two major parties throughout Ghanaian society create high barriers of entry that crowd out political outsiders seeking to tap into persistent policy dissatisfaction. Indeed, recent examples of would-be anti-system agitators – such as the New Patriotic Party's dissident MP Kennedy Agyapong and the 2024 third party candidate Nana Kwame Bediako – floundered in the face of entrenched party institutions despite seeming to tap into very genuine voter discontent.[10]

But in more unstable party systems, what are often ephemeral, elite-oriented parties may have far less ability to sustain clientelist ties with voters through standing armies of intermediaries and brokers (Kramon 2017), leaving large swaths of the urban electorate – including much of the urban poor – potentially less integrated into the problem solving networks of mainstream parties. This can lower barriers to entry for outside candidates. For example, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that Sonko's populist appeal took off in urban Senegal in the immediate aftermath of the collapse what had previously been a fairly well-institutionalized party system (Resnick 2013, Riedl 2014). Major theories of populist politics outside Africa similarly ground the emergence of anti-system candidates in the failure of social integration by mainstream parties (Gidron and Hall 2020, Berman 2021). This echoes back to classic modernization-style claims that urbanization, by eroding traditional forms of social organization, can be an anonymizing and atomizing social process, producing "anomie" that leaves residents politically up-for-grabs (Wirth 1938).

Relatedly, the same *socialization* arguments in Figure 2 that urbanization can enhance ethnic competition in contexts of resource scarcity suggest the possibility, highlighted in Figure 3, that

[10] Agyapong's Trump-esque presidential campaign fell short in the 2023 NPP presidential primaries, overwhelmed by the resource advantages and clientelist muscle the party's sitting Vice President used to sustain control over the rank-and-file of the machine organization. Despite initially generating substantial media coverage, and seeming to pique the interest of the same kinds of young, middle class voters leading urban protests in other African cases, Bediako's third party campaign soon devolved into a national punchline and predictably floundered to just 0.75% in the general election, unable to ever credibly contest against the strongly-institutionalized NDC and NPP machines.

both new anti-system populists seeking to tap into urban discontent and the mainstream incumbents seeking to repel them turn to ethnocentric rhetoric, scapegoating the failures of the status quo trap on disfavored out-groups (Berman 2021). These "ethno-populist" appeals are an increasingly common feature of urban politics in many African cities (Cheeseman and Larmer 2015, Hoelscher et al. 2023), perhaps most prominently in nativist anti-immigrant mobilization in urban South Africa (van der Westhuizen 2023, Bollen 2025). Where this occurs, optimists' prediction of an end to ethnicity from socialization and inter-group contact is nowhere in sight.

The arguments in Figure 3 thus share with Figure 1 the expectation that urbanization could produce political change, but do not assume these changes will move towards more democratic governance and accountability. Where the status quo is already autocratic, populist anti-system rhetoric has been used by African opposition movements in service of demands for democratization, such as in Tanzania and Zimbabwe (Paget 2024). These movements cannot be assumed to succeed, however. In the early 1990s, international pressure on African regimes to democratize in the face of such urban protest movements was far more pronounced, such as in classic examples of "Third Wave" democratizations in Benin or Zambia (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, Riedl 2014). But contemporary populist "insurgent" urban social movements for expanded democratic rights (e.g., Holston 1999) appear to often struggle in the face of at times severe repression from status quo forces that has become less costly in today's more authoritarian-friendly international climate, such as witnessed (as of this writing) in the case of Kenya's on-going anti-tax protests.

But more importantly, populist appeals are perhaps more often used instead to provide cover for democratic backsliding, not to advance democratization, such as later occurred in Zambia in the 2010s under the Patriotic Front (Hinfelaar et al. 2023, Sishuwa 2024). Populist mobilization in cities is also used to paper over human rights violations against scapegoated minorities or to generate popular support for military takeovers, as witnessed during surges of apparent mass urban support for recent military coups in several Sahelian countries. For example, Burkina Faso's successive 2022 coups came amidst prominent scenes of populist urban mobilization in favor of the collapse of the country's nascent democracy, not protests calling for its reinstatement. That popular mobilization turned against democracy should not have been surprising in a context where dissatisfaction with the policy performance of the status quo political equilibrium had already manifested in dramatic double-digit declines in popular support for democracy on Afrobarometer surveys (Chin et al. 2024).

Populist appeals can also co-exist alongside and be layered on top of clientelism (Collord et al. 2021), and may not even imply the end of old forms of urban politics. A fitting example comes from recent developments in Ghana. Amidst broad middle class disillusionment with the prevail-

ing two-party system, there have been some populist-themed urban protests demanding improved government performance and accountability, such as the 2014 "Occupy Ghana" and 2021 "Fix the Country" movements. But consistent with Nathan's (2019) broader account of withdrawal, while these movements generated international press, they remained small on the ground, never remotely approaching mass appeal that could metastasize into broader political change.

By contrast, the cause that has attracted far more significant urban middle class political interest in this same period has also been infused with populist rhetoric, but in a regressive direction: widespread support among Evangelical Christians – church communities that in many ways have become the new dominant form of social organization for the urban middle class (McCauley 2013) – for aggressively anti-LGBT policies. This scapegoating of Ghana's small, politically-powerless LGBT community has been spearheaded by strategic efforts by the two mainstream parties to outbid each other in layering populist rhetoric on top of their on-going clientelist appeals, with the transparent goal of using social wedge issues to retain support among at least some of the voters disassociated from machine politics while still avoiding the high transaction costs of making deeper changes to the status quo political equilibrium (as in Figure 2).

4 Thinking ahead

Political scientists are notoriously bad at predicting the future. It is not our main enterprise. Yet given that Africa's urbanization will dramatically increase in the coming decades, the temptation to think through the future implications of these three sets of arguments is hard to resist. Several predictions seem easy. Most importantly, core theoretical building blocks underlying the trap argument in Figure 2 seem unlikely to change anytime soon. Low state capacity is not indefinitely fixed – capacity is endogenous to politics and a real variable that states can invest in changing (Suryanarayan 2024) – but rapid, broad increases in state capacity to the degree needed to break the incentives in Figure 2 remain quite rare (Fukuyama 2004, Berwick and Christia 2018). Similarly, despite on-going efforts in many African states at economic formalization (often via digitization), it is deeply implausible that urban Africa's large informal sector will disappear anytime soon.

Yet, per the logic of Figure 3, this also does not mean political change should be assumed away. Instead, if we do get urban political change we should expect it is likely to be volatile change, in the form of protests and other contentious outpourings as the dam of urban discontent created by the trap dynamics in Figure 2 suddenly breaks. And worryingly, we should recognize that these floods of heightened political activity could be channeled in potentially quite non-democratic directions by populist elites. Ultimately, what seems most clear from the current literature is that the teleology of the optimistic account in Figure 1 is unlikely to be a useful lens through which to study Africa's

continuing urban transition: path dependent transaction costs exist and change does not only move towards one destination.

It is also tempting to try to predict the future trajectory of research on African urbanization. Our current ability to predict the future of urban politics seems limited by the narrow scope through which most studies of urban politics view urban life. Virtually all of the studies cited above ignore one of the most salient elements of the urban experience: what African cities actually look like. Cities are not just population density. They are physical things – buildings, streets, neighborhoods – with designs. And the lived urban experience – and in turn the urban political experience – can be a causal outcome of those designs.

With most urban growth unplanned (Fox and Goodfellow 2016, Deuskar 2022, Nathan 2025), the *built environments* of informal neighborhoods and housing structures that have emerged to host many hundreds of millions of new urban residents play important, but often overlooked, roles in grassroots politics and mobilization (Nathan 2024, Bollen and Nathan 2025). At the same time, the designs and spatial organization of new planned housing developments – exemplified by the continent's proliferating gated urban neighborhoods – define the terms of how wealthier urban residents negotiate their engagement with and potential exit from the state (Wilson 2024). At the heart of existing accounts of both clientelism (e.g., Auyero 2001) and populism (e.g. Gidron and Hall 2020) are claims about the formation (or lack thereof) of social network ties that can be direct functions of how urban dwellers are arranged in physical space (Nathan 2024, Bollen and Nathan 2025).

My own efforts to further explore urbanization in Africa are now shifting in this direction, "bringing the city (back) in" – to paraphrase Skocpol (1985) – by attempting to leverage a proliferation of exciting new data sources and empirical tools, including from the explosion in capacity of remote sensing technologies and network data methods, to grapple more explicitly with how the design of the urban built environment conditions the political dynamics explored throughout this chapter. I encourage readers to join me in this effort, though I recognize this is likely just one of many new directions research on the politics of Africa's urban transition will soon head.

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