

Throw the Rascals Out! Elections, Accountability, and Government
Performance in East Africa:
Reflections on a presentation by Dr. Gina Lambright

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A political pundit once claimed that all politics are local. Since the third wave of democratization was launched in the 1970s around the world, democracy has become the most popular form of governance and the central topic of political research. As Latin America, Africa, and Asia made a democratic transition from harsh authoritarianism, examining a democratic institution like a free and multi-party election has become an important criterion of assessing the country's democratic quality. It is precisely this area of research whereby George Washington University professor Gina Lambright ambitiously embarked on, particularly by focusing on local-level elections in two of Africa's most democratically consolidated countries: Uganda, and Kenya.

Astonishingly, Dr. Lambright's research on village elections in both Uganda and Kenya reveals that elections do matter and that they are perhaps at the heart of deepening political participation for the masses. Her systematic recounting of voting turnouts for both Uganda and Kenya's local elections since they have democratized reveals a curious, if not contradictory, pattern. Many political scientists widely claim that in newly established democracies and advanced democracies, a deep sense of political alienation prevails among the voters and that voting turnouts in these countries are on a decline. Dr. Lambright's research refutes this widely held belief by asserting that election turnouts in Uganda and Kenya remained consistently high, even after the founding elections that marked a democratic transition from authoritarianism.

Dr. Lambright further argued that these local elections do serve many functions for newly established democracies. Not only are the elections a way of political participation for the masses by empowering the people to throw the rascals out, but the elections do accelerate democratic accountability and transparency. Simply constitutionalizing local level elections with universal suffrage guarantees political rights and civil freedoms for the population. Simply put, elections in and of themselves have normative values, especially for the otherwise powerless. Of course, some elections may entail corruption and rigging of elections by incumbents to stay in power; however, given the increasing visibility of vibrant civil society, many of these politicians have difficulty manipulating election results and often get voted out of the office, peacefully. The remarkable achievement that democracy has on these societies is that democratic, peaceful ways become the norms of throwing the incompetent politicians out of the office, and not armed struggle, fraught with violence.

The most illuminating part of Dr. Lambright's presentation, however, is the link between democracy and development. Both Uganda and Kenya are developing countries that have institutionalized a series of harsh economic stabilization programs over the years. Some political scientists and policy makers argue that democracy cannot be implemented simultaneously with market-oriented economic development. Others even go further by claiming that "soft" authoritarianism, like those existed in South Korea and Taiwan, is more conducive to fostering development and that democracy is only possible after obtaining sustainable development. Given the political instability and particularly devastating social impacts that capitalistic development often imposes on the poor, democracy that emphasizes plurality and openness may legitimize the views of various extreme groups that oppose capitalist-led economic development at all costs. In this aspect, Dr. Lambright's research emphatically provides unambiguous evidence of Uganda and Kenya that democracy and development can be implemented simultaneously and that they can even flourish.

The road to democracy is ridden with difficulties but will be even more difficult if a level of economic development is low. However, this is precisely why such a democratic institution as a fair and free election as Dr. Lambright emphasized, is so critical, as the election becomes the only legitimate, peaceful channel, tolerating the open discussion of the problems that a country faces, whether economic or social. Today, democracy in both Uganda and Kenya, especially measured by the standards of their local elections, are indeed in good shape.