‘CHANGE FOR A BETTER GHANA’: PARTY COMPETITION, INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND ALTERATION IN GHANA’S 2008 ELECTIONS

LINDSAY WHITFIELD

ABSTRACT
This article analyses the process and outcomes of Ghana’s 2008 elections, which saw the National Democratic Congress replace the New Patriotic Party and thus an alternation of ruling party for the second time since (re)democratization in the early 1990s. It argues that Ghana’s democratic political system survived the closeness and intensity of the 2008 elections because it has developed stabilizing characteristics: an independent Electoral Commission and transparent electoral processes, integration of the political elite alongside the creation of norms and institutions structuring elite behaviour, and the institutionalization of political parties. The closely competitive elections are the result of a two-party system where voters and political elites are mobilized around two political traditions. These political traditions provide ideological images, founding mythologies and political styles for the parties. Thus, Ghana is different from several African countries where parties split or form around leaders, who bring their popular support base with them. It is also different in that elections are not dominated by ethnic politicization, because the two main parties in Ghana have a strong political support base in most regions and party identification is based on cross-cutting social cleavages of which ethnicity forms only one part.

WITH THE FIFTH NATIONAL ELECTION since the return to democracy, Ghana increased its credentials as the shining democratic star on the African continent. Since presidential and parliamentary elections held in late 1992 and culminating in the inauguration of the Fourth Republic of Ghana in January 1993, national elections have been held every four years. The National Democratic Congress (NDC) won the 1992 and

Lindsay Whitfield (lkw@diis.dk) is a Project Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark. She wishes to thank Emmanuel Akwetey and Kwesi Jonah for useful discussions on the 2008 elections, and Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai for comments on earlier drafts of the article. She also thanks the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on an early draft, from which the final version has greatly benefited. This article is based on several periods of fieldwork, including one during the pre-election period.
1996 elections, but lost power in the 2000 elections to the New Patriotic Party (NPP), who secured another victory in the 2004 elections. The 2008 elections ushered in a second alternation of ruling party, with the NDC regaining the reins of power.

Ghana’s democratic success has been built on a rocky foundation, which makes it all the more interesting. The Third Republic of Ghana was overturned through a military coup in December 1981 led by J. J. Rawlings. Rawlings established the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), a quasi-military government. In the face of the 1992 elections, Rawlings and the PNDC political elite created the National Democratic Congress, using the political support base of the PNDC regime. The 1992 elections were extremely controversial. For this first election, the presidential and parliamentary elections were held on separate days, and protests from the New Patriotic Party that Rawlings had won the presidential election unfairly led the NPP to boycott the parliamentary elections. Since then, elections have been held simultaneously, and the quality of elections has increased significantly. Rawlings was elected President twice on the NDC ticket, but then stepped down as required by constitutional term limits.

In the 2000 elections, the NDC only barely lost power to the NPP. A second round of voting for the President was held after no presidential candidate secured more than 50 percent of the vote (as required by the 1992 constitution), and the NPP needed the support of smaller parties and Independents to fashion a majority in Parliament. The 2008 elections were a repeat of this close race, but actually even closer. There was no clear presidential winner after the first round of voting, and a run-off was held between the two leading candidates. In the end, John Atta Mills of the NDC won with 50.23 percent of the vote, while Nana Akufo-Addo of the incumbent NPP polled 49.77 percent. Mills became President by a margin of 40,586 votes out of nine million votes cast. The NDC also needed the support of smaller parties and Independent MPs to secure a majority in Parliament.

During the 2008 elections, the international news media judged Ghana in the context of the 2007 Kenyan elections, which unexpectedly erupted in violence and a stalemate; the 2008 electoral violence and stalemate in Zimbabwe; and the 2007 fraudulent elections in Nigeria. Ghana was on the line to either confirm or redeem this image of African democracy. But African countries are increasingly charting different political courses since (re)democratization began in the early 1990s.1 This article analyses the process and outcomes of Ghana’s 2008 elections, placing the analysis within Ghana’s political trajectory. It describes just how competitive the elections

were; explains why Ghanaian elections have always been fairly close, but why 2008 was even closer; and examines how the country’s democratic political system survived this extremely close race.

The article argues that elections in Ghana are competitive because of the *de facto* two-party system, in which both the NDC and NPP serve as credible opposition. The parties mobilize voters and political elites around two political traditions which emerged during decolonization and remain salient. These political traditions provide ideological images for the parties which cut across social cleavages such as ethnicity, region, urban/rural and social status. The two parties have established institutional networks in all regions of the country, although there are two regions which lean predominantly to one party or the other. While each party has strongholds, the outcomes of elections are determined by so-called swing regions, which contain a large number of floating voters who are not party loyalists and may switch their vote based on government performance. The intensity of the 2008 elections was the result of both parties increasing their percentages of the vote in almost all regions and the further decline of the smaller parties. Ghana’s democratic political system survived the close and tense 2008 elections because it has developed stabilizing characteristics over the past several decades: an independent Electoral Commission and transparent electoral processes, integration of the political elite alongside the creation of norms and institutions structuring their behaviour, and the institutionalization of parties.

The NDC won this time around as the result of several factors which led to a decline in support for the NPP in swing regions, the most important of which was probably the deteriorating macro-economic situation. In many ways a comparison of the 2008 US and Ghanaian elections seems more relevant than one between Ghana and Kenya. Elections in the US and Ghana are two-party contests, and a pattern of parties alternating every eight years is emerging in Ghana. After Barack Obama won the US presidency on 4 November 2008, the NDC added the word ‘Change’ to its original campaign slogan ‘For a Better Ghana’. Arguably, the fall of the Republicans in the US and the defeat of the NPP in Ghana were both due to economic problems. People’s personal economic situation had worsened, and Ghanaians voted for a change.

*Just how close were the 2008 national elections?*

In order to analyse and appreciate the competitiveness of Ghanaian elections, it is first necessary to review the 2008 elections. The presidential race was open, as it had been in the 2000 election where neither presidential candidate was the sitting President. President John Kufuor had to step down after two terms in office. The NPP’s presidential candidate, Akufo-Addo,
was a former Foreign Minister under President Kufuor, and the NDC’s candidate Atta Mills had been Vice-President of the NDC government from 1997 to 2000. Both the NPP and NDC had had two terms in office, so the electorate had a basis for comparing their performance.

Ghanaians went to the polls on 7 December 2008. The Electoral Commission announced the results three days after the polls closed, but by then most observers knew the general outcome because results declared at polling stations had been aggregated independently by several media houses. Both the parliamentary and presidential elections were extremely close, but interestingly their results pointed in opposite directions. For the presidency, Akufo-Addo showed a slight lead with 49.1 percent of the vote, while Mills polled 47.9 percent. The remaining valid votes went to the smaller parties’ candidates.2

In the parliamentary race, the NDC took the lead. With the results for 228 seats out of 230 declared, the NDC took 114, while the NPP had 107. Two small parties took 3 seats, and Independent candidates won 4 seats.3 The immediate impression was a split Parliament, since neither of the two main parties won a clear parliamentary majority of 116 seats. However, with two seats still undeclared, the NDC secured the support of enough of the Independent and smaller-party Members of Parliament to produce 117 seats in its majority caucus. The standing orders of Parliament require that Independent and smaller-party MPs align with the majority or minority caucus in order for Parliament to transact business. One of the Independent and both of the People’s National Convention (PNC) MPs aligned with the NDC.4 The remaining three Independent MPs and the sole MP from the Convention People’s Party (CPP) aligned with the minority caucus. The CPP Member of Parliament, however, argues that she will vote independently but was forced to align owing to the rules of Parliament, which she is trying to change.5

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2. These results were based on 229 of the 230 electoral constituencies, owing to an extraordinary event which invalidated the results in one constituency.
3. Winners for the Akwatia and Asutifi South constituency elections were not declared owing to irregularities on voting day. The cases have been brought to court, and outcomes of the elections depend on court decisions. In Akwatia, ballot boxes at some polling stations were stolen in a coordinated ‘robbery’. In Asutifi South, the result of the race was heavily disputed by the NPP and taken to court.
4. ‘Parliamentary caucuses defined for the transaction of business in House’, Ghana News Agency (GNA), 27 January 2009, posted on Ghana Web <http://www.ghanaweb.com> (9 July 2009). The Independent MPs were previously members of the NDC or NPP but chose to stand independently because they did not win their party’s primary (or even make it into the primary contest).
The presidential run-off was held on 28 December. This second round of voting was even closer than the first, but with the NDC candidate in the lead this time. With the results of 229 out of 230 electoral constituencies declared, Mills won 50.13 percent of the vote and Akufo-Addo 49.87 percent. Mills led by about 23,000 votes. Logistical problems caused a delay in voting in Tain constituency (Brong Ahafo Region). It was numerically possible given the number of registered voters in Tain that Akufo-Addo could still win, forcing the Electoral Commission to hold a presidential run-off in Tain on 2 January. However, the NDC and its presidential candidate Mills had all but won the elections. Mills led Akufo-Addo by a comfortable margin in the first round of voting in Tain and the NDC parliamentary candidate had won there.

The NPP panicked. It did not expect to lose the reins of power so soon after its accession in 2001. Leaders of the NPP filed a motion with the Accra Fast Track High Court on 1 January 2009 to stop the Electoral Commission from declaring the final results until its claims that the NDC had committed electoral malpractices in the Volta Region during the run-off election were investigated; when that failed, the party sought an injunction on the Tain election. Many public figures were outraged and urged the NPP leaders to yield to the authority of the Commission and follow the legal process for redressing such claims. Perhaps most importantly, President Kufuor released a press statement encouraging everyone to accept the results declared by the Commission and indicated his willingness to meet the constitutional requirement of handing over power on 7 January 2009.

The NPP withdrew its legal suits from the Court, but pulled out of the Tain special election citing security concerns which would undermine the transparency of the elections. When the Commission announced the final results of the presidential election on 3 January and the victory of Mills, Akufo-Addo acknowledged the declaration and conceded defeat the same day. Table 1 displays results from both rounds of the presidential election disaggregated by region.

6. The constitution mandates that a run-off be held within three weeks of the national elections and no later than 31 December.
8. Author’s observations from first and second round voting data.
10. Protests were voiced through newspapers and local radio stations.
Table 1. Presidential results for NPP and NDC in the 2000, 2004 and 2008 elections (% of vote)*

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<th>Region</th>
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<th>National Democratic Congress (NDC)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Nana Akufo-Addo John Kufuor</td>
<td>John Atta Mills</td>
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<td>Western</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>48.11 47.55</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>45.59 46.03</td>
<td>51.99 59.95 52.52</td>
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<td>37.67 37.72</td>
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<td>Upper East</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>34.40 35.25</td>
<td>31.66 42.83 21.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>National total</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>49.77 49.13</td>
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Notes: *The 2008 first round results are from 229 out of 230 constituencies. **The number of constituencies was increased from 200 to 230 before the 2004 elections.

Why Ghanaian elections in the Fourth Republic are so competitive

Elections have increased in competitiveness since 1992. Table 1 indicates how close the presidential races were in the 2000 and 2004 elections. On the parliamentary side, 39 seats during the 2004 elections were won by a margin of less than 5 percent of the vote.12 The explanation for Ghana’s competitive elections is found in its de facto two-party system and thus the existence of a credible opposition at each election. The existence of its two-party system, in turn, is explained by the two political traditions that emerged during decolonization in the 1950s, and by the significant degree of party institutionalization (which is partly a consequence of the political traditions). These political traditions to a large extent provide the two main parties with founding mythologies (more so for the NPP), ideological images, and distinct political styles, around which elites gravitate and voters are mobilized. These two factors – political traditions and party institutionalization – give rise to competitive voting patterns, where some regions in Ghana are seen as strongholds for one of the parties but most are seen as swing regions where the two parties compete fairly evenly for votes, and which determine the outcome of elections.

A credible opposition must exist in order for elections to be competitive, a situation that does not exist in several African countries. Having held power previously helps a party to consolidate its popular support base, credibility of its ability to govern, and party financing, and thus its ability to be a viable opposition. The NDC gained its popular support base, credibility, and financing as it emerged out of the political elite of the PNDC regime that ruled from 1982 to 1992, which oversaw the country’s economic recovery and then transition to democratic rule. On the other hand, the NPP was a credible threat in the 1992 and 1996 elections even though it had not held power since the Progress Party government of 1969–72 led by K. A. Busia. The New Patriotic Party is the current manifestation of a political tradition which the Progress Party represented in the 1969 elections.

However, the real origins of Ghana’s credible opposition, and its two-party system, lie in the political traditions that developed during decolonization in the 1950s: the Danquah/Busia tradition versus the Nkrumahist tradition. Since the first elections in Ghana’s history, parties have formed around these two traditions. The situation of the Fourth Republic is somewhat different, but I argue that the consolidation of the two-party system since the 1992 elections resulted from a new party, the National Democratic Congress, effectively occupying the Nkrumahist tradition and thus displacing the old Nkrumahist parties.

J. B. Danquah established the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) in 1947 to advocate for independence from British colonial rule. Famously,
Kwame Nkrumah broke away from the UGCC and founded the Convention People’s Party (CPP) in 1949. The UGCC was the party of the new educated political elite comprised of lawyers, intellectuals, and old merchant families; its aim was to ensure that they replaced the British in governing, instead of the established neo-traditional elite who had dominated political positions under colonial rule until that point. The neo-traditional and educated elites overlapped through familial ties and shared much in common, but in the political sphere they came into conflict in a struggle for political power. The British effectively divided the two indigenous elite groups and played them off against each other, keeping them from forming an alliance. However, Nkrumah’s founding of a rival and more radical nationalist party, supported by trade unionists and a spectrum of non-elites, forced the educated and neo-traditional elite into an alliance.

Unexpectedly, the British colonial government turned their support from this alliance of emergent and established elites toward Nkrumah’s CPP, inviting Nkrumah to form a government after his party won only a handful of municipal elections in 1951. After the 1954 elections, which the CPP also won, a new political organization emerged based in the Ashanti Region called the National Liberation Movement (NLM). This Movement combined the UGCC, the Ashanti Youth Association, wealthy cocoa farmers, traders and traditional authorities in the Ashanti Region. It was largely an Ashanti nationalist movement and a cocoa-growers’ protest movement, but some smaller groups in the northern and eastern parts of the country also aligned with it against the CPP. This Movement forced the British to hold a third and final election in 1956 prior to independence, which the CPP still won.

These events have significantly shaped not only the trajectory of elite formation in Ghana, but also its party structures. Nkrumah was overthrown in 1966 by the military, and the country experienced oscillations of military and civilian rule. When elections were held in 1969 and 1979, the main

13. The term neo-traditional elite refers to chiefs who acquired a Western education, a new way of life, new economic interests and new administrative functions under colonial rule. See Martin Kilson, ‘Emergent elites of Black Africa’ in Peter Duignan and L. H. Gann (eds), Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970), pp. 351–98. In Ghana, the neo-traditional elite were educated members of traditional royal families in southern Ghana with new economic interests, especially cocoa production, and new administrative functions under colonial rule.


parties contending the elections were reincarnations of the CPP and the UGCC/NLM. Until the Fourth Republic, parties were forbidden to use the names of parties thrown out of government, but the link to the first parties was made clear. The Progress Party (PP) led by K. A. Busia won the 1969 elections, marking the first time that the UGCC/NLM elite came to power. The People’s National Convention (PNC) party and its presidential candidate Hilla Limann won the 1979 elections, marking the return of the CPP.

Both the NDC and NPP embody the ideological ideas and political styles of these political traditions established during decolonization, the Nkrumahist and Danquah/Busia traditions respectively. The Nkrumahist tradition is perceived in Ghanaian popular imagination as ethnically and socially inclusive, broad-based, populist and left-wing. The Danquah/Busia tradition is perceived as elitist, ethnically exclusive (predominantly Ashanti and Akyem sub-groups of the Akan), liberal-democratic and right-wing.17

While the NPP’s institutional network dates back to the UGCC and NLM in the 1950s, the NDC institutional network emerged only in the early 1990s. The NDC was formed around Rawlings, who led a ‘people’s revolution’ in December 1981 which overthrew the Limann government and established an authoritarian-bureaucratic government with members from the military and from outside the established political elite. Through the establishment of ‘revolutionary’ groups and through local government reforms in 1988–9, Rawlings built a political support base that very closely resembled the political machine of Nkrumah’s CPP. On the eve of the 1992 elections, Rawlings converted this support base and the senior personalities of his regime into the National Democratic Congress.18 Thus, the NDC does not draw its founding mythology from the Nkrumahist tradition but rather from the 1981 ‘revolution’. Nonetheless, the rhetoric and actions of Rawlings as a non-elite figure (when he took power), championing the cause of ‘the people’, allowed him to usurp the Nkrumahist tradition away from the old Nkrumahist parties. Although the NDC does not refer to Nkrumah’s legacy and doctrine in its founding mythology and everyday speech, it uses a similar brand of populist rhetoric and claims, as Nkrumah’s CPP did, to represent the ordinary person and to be the party of the masses. For the 1992 elections, the NDC allied with the remnant of the CPP, but from 1996 onwards the NDC stood alone, and the smaller parties tracing their heritage back to the Nkrumahist tradition polled very little of the vote. Thus, the NDC replaced the CPP as the party of the people and the alternative to the Danquah/Busia tradition, effectively embodying the Nkrumahist tradition

17. Svanikier, ‘Political elite circulation in Ghana’.
even if its party history and institutional networks do not link back to the 1950s.

The 2008 elections confirm the NDC capture of the Nkrumahist tradition and the further consolidation of a two-party system. In previous elections, the PNC polled significant amounts of votes in the three northern regions, because former President Limann of the PNC was from the north and thus the PNC somewhat claimed to represent the interests of the north. However, it has steadily lost ground, as Table 2 shows. The 2008 elections were expected to show a resurgence of the CPP, since its presidential candidate was a popular minister in the NPP government, but the reverse happened. The CPP presidential candidate polled only 1.34 percent of the vote and the PNC candidate polled 0.87 percent. The PNC took two parliamentary seats in the upper northern regions, and the CPP’s sole parliamentary seat was won by Samia Nkrumah, the daughter of Kwame Nkrumah, in his hometown. The PNC and CPP are the largest of the smaller parties that contested the 2008 elections. None of the remaining four presidential candidates polled over 0.5 percent of the vote. Two candidates came from new parties formed by breakaway factions of the NDC and NPP, but they were not even on the radar in the elections. Breakaway factions cannot compete because they cannot reproduce the institutional networks and loyalties of the NDC and NPP. In this sense, Ghana is different from several African countries where parties split or form around leaders, who bring their popular support base with them.

While the two political traditions have been instrumental to party institutionalization and the consolidation of a two-party system, the NDC and NPP are not sharply differentiated along ideological lines. There is a gap between the ideological images constructed by the parties and the actual policies pursued by those parties when in government. The NDC calls itself the Social Democratic party, and the NPP sees itself as right of centre. However, the policies pronounced and pursued by the NPP and NDC governments since the 1990s have not been that different.\(^\text{19}\)

Rather, the ideological images and founding mythologies provide poles around which political elites gravitate. Which pole political elites (or aspirants) choose largely depends on historical affinities, family heritage, and political style. Former President Kufuor and Nana Akufo-Addo trace their family heritage and personal relationships back to the original founders of the party. Kufuor cites Busia as his intellectual mentor, and Akufo-Addo’s father was the ceremonial president of Prime Minister Busia’s government. The lineage of the Danquah/Busia tradition can be traced back to the collaboration and familial connections between the neo-traditional and educated

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<th>National Democratic Congress</th>
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Notes: *The number of electoral constituencies was increased from 200 to 230 beginning with the 2004 elections. The results of two parliamentary races in the 2008 elections had not been determined at the time of writing, so the chart reflects the results of 228 out 230 seats, as explained in the article text.

elites mentioned earlier. The NDC, on the other hand, is more linked to the tradition of the ‘educated commoner’ associated with Nkrumah’s party – where people not born into elite families rise up the social ladder through education and become politicized and/or aspire to elite status. Lastly, political elites of the NPP and NDC are differentiated by political style. Elites attached to the NDC talk about the plight of the masses, and deplore conspicuous consumption and what they see as the elitist attitude and style of the NPP.

As well as shaping the political affiliation of elites and aspirants, the political traditions are also important for mobilizing supporters during elections, with much of the electorate voting on the basis of party loyalty. Voters are characterized as core voters, who vote out of party loyalty, and floating voters, who choose between the NDC and NPP based on past performance of the party in government. Floating voters switch from one party to another and effectively decide the fate of the election. Staffan Lindberg and Minion Morrison estimate that core voters comprise 82 percent of the electorate, with floating voters at 18 percent, based on their survey conducted in 2003. However, Ephson notes that estimates of swing voters range from 20 to 40 percent. Some regions are considered strongholds for one of the two main parties, because they contain a large number of core voters and there is not much competition, as illustrated in Table 1. The strongholds for the NPP are the Ashanti and Eastern regions – home to the Ashanti and Akyem (sub-groups of the Akan ethnic group) who are linked to cocoa production and to the National Liberation Movement of the 1950s mentioned earlier. The Volta Region, where Ewe is the dominant ethnic group, has been a stronghold of the NDC because Rawlings, founder of the party, is Ewe and comes from that region. However, the loyalty of the Volta Region electorate to the NDC is not based exclusively on ethnicity. John Atta Mills, the NDC presidential candidate for 2000, 2004, and 2008, is Fanti, a sub-group of the Akan, coming from the Central Region. What might have begun as an ethnic affinity has developed into a party loyalty based on other factors.

Past analyses of Ghanaian elections considered the three northern regions (Northern, Upper West, and Upper East) to be NDC strongholds. Although the northern regions are still securely in the pocket of the NDC, the NPP has increased its competitiveness there, as Table 3 shows. After the 2000 elections, Paul Nugent noted that disillusioned voters in the southern part of the country were able to switch their votes from NDC to NPP, but that ‘this was more of a psychological leap for people in the north and east who

Table 3. Results of presidential elections in the three northern regions: 1992, 1996, 2000 (first round), 2004, 2008 (first round) (% of the vote)

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were more likely to stay at home’. This tendency resulted in a broad ethno-regional voting pattern. However, the increasing ability of northerners to make this leap has weakened this pattern. Why this has occurred cannot be explained without further empirical research.

The Central, Western and Brong Ahafo regions were considered swing regions because contests between the NPP and NDC have been close there, and because these regions determined who won in past elections. It was the NDC’s poor performance in the Central and Western regions that cost it the 2004 election. Similarly, the party’s dramatic turnaround in the Central and Greater Accra regions in 2008 forced the NPP to a run-off and ultimately won Atta Mills the presidency. There were also very close races in the Western and Brong Ahafo regions in 2008, with NDC catching up but NPP still in the lead. The NPP was considered to be dominant in urban areas and took Greater Accra in 2000 and 2004. However, Greater Accra became a swing region in the 2008 election and probably cost the NPP the election, given that it is a region with one of the highest number of voters. Why these regions swung towards the NDC in the 2008 elections is discussed below. In sum, the presidential outcome in 2008 was determined by the Central, Western and Greater Accra regions.

The NPP and NDC have steadily picked up votes in regions where they trail. Electoral races have become more competitive in the northern regions, and extremely competitive in the swing regions. This progression is illustrated by Kevin Fridy, who created maps showing the percentage of votes that the NPP and NDC received in each district in the 2004 elections, ranging from white (0 percent of the vote) through gradations of grey towards black (100 percent of the vote). These maps show movement towards the middle shades of grey for all areas except Ashanti and the southern part of the Volta Region. Looking at the results of the 2008 elections, this pattern still holds and has intensified somewhat. The contest between the NDC and NPP was even narrower in the 2008 elections because party competition increased in most regions, with each party increasing its percentage of the vote recorded in the previous election.

Why the NPP lost and the NDC won

Several factors led to a general decline in support for the NPP during Kufuor’s second term in office. However, the final blow was increasing

macro-economic problems, as it had been for the NDC in the 2000 elections. These factors possibly explain why the NPP lost ground to the NDC across the swing regions.

There were tensions within the NPP which boiled over into the public domain and which undermined its credibility and threatened its cohesion. First, the NPP presidential primary turned into a scramble to succeed Kufuor and a lavish spending spree by the top candidates which caused unease and speculation within the public. Seventeen high-ranking NPP officials contested the presidential primary. Many of the candidates were ministers and had to resign. With many ministers relinquishing their positions at the same time, people frequently criticized the party leaders as thinking only of themselves and neglecting their duties as government officials. Second, the presidential primary widened what was a growing rift between two factions within the party grouped around Kufuor and Akufo-Addo.25

This rift within the NPP bubbled to the surface several times during the electoral campaign, but internal problems of the party cannot account for its electoral failure. A more important factor is probably that the NPP became too complacent in office and was dogged by accusations of corruption. This is illustrated by former ministers and deputy ministers losing their parliamentary seats in the 2008 election. Most important were the issues at stake in the swing regions. The NPP’s poor performance in the Central Region is attributed to the government’s inaction on key issues facing the region (which is along the coast west of Accra) where many people rely on fishing for their livelihood. Public discussion prior to the elections highlighted the fact that pair trawling in Ghana waters by foreign vessels as well as the cost and access to pre-mix fuel used for fishing boats was hurting people’s incomes.26 The NDC succeeded in politicizing these issues, illustrated by the fact that during the presidential run-off the NPP government tried a little too late to do something about them.

The NPP also lost a lot of votes in the urban areas of the Greater Accra Region. After two terms in government, it had not fulfilled the promises it made to urban dwellers back in 2000. The cost of living was rising while employment opportunities and incomes remained stagnant. In late 2006 and again in late 2007, the country faced a series of power supply problems which resulted in severe rationing of the power supply. The NPP government made several new investments in energy, but it was too early for voters to see the benefits of those actions. In late 2007 and early 2008, there was a water supply shortage which resulted in increased rationing of water and

25. On these two factions, see Ivor Agyeman-Duah, Between Faith and History: A biography of J. A. Kufuor (Ayebia Clark Publishing, Banbury, 2006).
26. Pair trawling is a fishing activity carried out by two boats, where the mouth of the net is kept open by the lateral pull of the individual vessels.
highlighted the chronic problem of water supply facing the cities, especially Accra.

Furthermore, fuel price increases were frequent, and utility prices continued to rise. These were necessary cost adjustments that the state had to make, in order not to undermine its own financial stability, but which put heavy burdens on people with little or no extra income to spare. The dramatic increases in fuel price and its knock-on effects on utility, transport, and food prices, combined with rising imported food prices, seriously threatened to cost the NPP the elections. In May 2008, the Kufuor government removed import duties on staples, granted farmers subsidies for fertilizer, and cut taxes on fuel. However, this strategy for dealing with the global trends was a short-term approach which focused on consumption rather than production and job creation, and was fiscally unsustainable.

The country’s macro-economic indicators began to deteriorate, and the NDC pointed to the large fiscal deficit of 2007, which only increased in 2008. The poor fiscal performance of the NPP government towards the end of Kufuor’s second term took away one of the key pillars of the NPP campaign in the 2004 elections: its record of fiscal prudence. In addition to failing to solve urban problems and maintain prudent fiscal management, the NPP was perceived as countenancing an increased level of corruption.

The NPP government made one move before the presidential run-off which has been singled out by Ghanaian political commentators as sealing its defeat. After the results of the first round of voting, Mills promised that his first action, if elected President, would be to reduce the price of fuel. The NPP quickly did so a few days later, when the officially independent National Petroleum Authority announced a 17 percent reduction in the price of petrol effective 12 December. In fairness, it should be noted that the Authority had reduced prices the previous month; however transport fares (where people feel the reduction) had not changed because the reduction was too small for private transport owners to change their fares. In its next review, the Authority cut prices further, expecting transport owners to make the adjustment. However, the move backfired politically for the NPP. The


29. ‘Petrol price slashed 17%’, Isaac Yeboah, 11 December 2008, <http://www.ghanaweb.com> (5 January 2009). Fuel prices are supposed to be regulated independently by the National Petroleum Authority, but this has not worked in practice, since fuel prices are so political. See Whitfield and Jones, ‘Ghana: breaking out of aid dependence’.
opposition politicized it, saying the government could have reduced fuel prices earlier but failed to do so.

In this context, the opposition party did not have to do too much to win, but what made Atta Mills electable this time around still needs to be explained. In the past, Mills was seen as too close to former President Rawlings. Although Mills may have been imposed by Rawlings as the party’s candidate for the 2000 and 2004 elections, this time Mills was a strategic choice, and may not have even been Rawlings’s first choice. The party thought that Mills would be the easiest person to market, in a context where the NPP had to put up a new face. And it is clear that Mills’s choice of running mate, John Mahama, was not favoured by those in the Rawlings camp. This time around, Rawlings and his charismatic wife were increasingly sidelined from decision making within the party, and Mills made it clear that he was not a Rawlings puppet.

Why Ghana’s democratic system survived the 2008 elections

The NDC’s margin of victory in the 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections was extremely small, and the electoral process, which lasted a month and involved three separate votes, was characterized by an extremely high level of tension in the country. In the light of recent events in sub-Saharan Africa where elections break down into stalemate or violence, one might ask how Ghana’s political institutions could survive such close and tense presidential and parliamentary elections. Looking at Ghana’s own troubled political history of oscillating military and civilian rule, one might ask how the stability of the Fourth Republic came about. The following argument highlights some characteristics of the political system that seem to be the most important in explaining Ghana’s unprecedented stability and which are absent in many African countries.

The first characteristic is the strength of the electoral process. The independence and professionalism of the Electoral Commission, as well as the general transparency and security of the voting process, are crucial to maintaining the peace and instilling trust in the Commission’s declaration. Since the 1992 elections, significant improvements have been made to the electoral process, making it increasingly transparent and well-organized, with minimal accounts of electoral malpractices. New electoral constituencies were created before the 2004 elections to address inadequacies in constituency demarcation. There is a recurrent problem with a high level of

30. For more detail on the improvements, see for example Aubynn, ‘Behind the transparent ballot box’.
ghost names on the voter register, which opens up possibilities for elec-
toral fraud by double voting. The Commission has made several attempts
to clean the register, but the problem returns because the register is not
computerized and the system of registration is inefficient. In order to coun-
teract this problem, voter identification cards with pictures were issued
by the Commission, which makes it hard to vote fraudulently. Official
aid agencies have supported the electoral process with significant financial
contributions.

Representatives of political parties are involved at every step of the voting
process on election day, and this has helped to increase transparency and
instil trust within political parties in the process. On election day, each
political party has an agent at every polling station who is certified by the
Commission. These party agents observe the whole voting process, drawing
attention to any irregularities. They also stand next to the returning officer
who supervises the counting of votes at the polling station (where the public
can also observe) and must agree on whether ballots are valid or marked
improperly. Once the total count for the polling station is recorded, the
party agents must sign that they agree. The ballots are never counted again.
The official count goes to the constituency headquarters where it is logged
on a sheet with all polling station results, then it goes to the Commission’s
regional office where parties also have agents, and then faxed to the ‘strong
room’ at the Commission’s headquarters in Accra. All participating political
parties have representatives in the strong room to scrutinize the results
coming in and sign off on them before they are sent to the Chairman of the
Commission for endorsement and then faxed to the press centre. It is this
laborious process which explains why it takes the Commission several days
to declare the results.

Several incidents in the 2008 elections did test the independence and
strength of the Electoral Commission during the vote tallying, but the Com-
mission emerged from the electoral process looking strong. The NDC
claimed malpractices were committed by the NPP in some constituencies
in Ashanti Region because voter turnout statistics were abnormally high,
and the NPP accused the NDC of intimidation and violence against NPP
supporters and polling agents in the Volta Region. The Commission’s chair-
man asked both parties to bring evidence immediately, to be considered
before the Tain vote. When the Commission announced the final results on
3 January, it also stated that the NDC failed to submit enough documenta-
tion to uphold its accusations and that the materials submitted by the NPP
did not point to electoral malfeasance but rather bordered on criminality.
Accordingly, the Commission did not find any evidence to invalidate the

32. For example, see Smith, ‘Consolidating democracy?’.
33. For more on these incidents, see Gyimah-Boadi, ‘Another step forward for Ghana’.
results, stating later that electoral offences should be prosecuted, but that it was the duty of the police to make arrests and the courts to try criminal cases. It is clear that both parties committed some electoral malfeasance during the elections, but largely in their respective strongholds.

The electoral process in Ghana is not perfect, and the highly competitive 2008 elections exposed its weaknesses, but in general, the procedures are followed, and the process is transparent. However, the emergence of a strong Electoral Commission and the discipline of the political elite to follow the procedures (albeit stretching them as much as they can) also have to be explained. The answer lies in the foundation of norms and institutions, slowly built since 1992, that structures the behaviour of the political elite.

I have argued elsewhere that competition between different factions of the post-independence political elite for control over the state led to military coups and repeated regime changes. The extreme disunity within Ghana’s political elite resulted from the historical context of elite production described earlier, which was exacerbated by drawing in sections of the military. Since the inauguration of the Fourth Republic, the political elite has become more unified. This move from elite fragmentation to integration was not marked by a single event but was a gradual process that turned into a virtuous circle. One significant event which helped to start the virtuous circle was the creation of the Inter-Party Advisory Committee in 1994 by the Electoral Commission in an attempt to create trust among the political parties following the controversial 1992 elections. This Committee was instrumental during the 1990s in providing a forum where disagreements, suspicions, and fears were addressed. It succeeded in persuading political parties to play according to the rules of the democratic game and to build trust in the system and among themselves. Furthermore, Rawlings set a precedent by stepping down after he reached the constitutional limit of two terms as President and by not attempting to change the constitution. The peaceful change of ruling party in 2001 showed that it can be done, and that parties can lose power through the ballot box.

Thus, decisions made by party leaders in previous elections are important to understanding the actions of party leaders during the 2008 election. The actions of political leaders are important, but they are structured within

35. This was also the case during the 2000 elections; see Smith, ‘Consolidating democracy?’.
norms and institutions, which are themselves moulded over time. In addition to the functions that the Inter-Party Advisory Committee has come to play, the fact that parties are institutionalized is also important. Leaders and candidates of the two parties are chosen through internal party processes which are becoming increasingly democratic.\(^{38}\) Parties have developed a core supporter base which extends throughout the country and which is not dependent on the leader. There is a founding mythology and ideological image around which parties are organized. Therefore, in the Fourth Republic, power is not consolidated in individuals but rather through the idea of the party and the party machinery. I would argue that parties were not really institutionalized before the Fourth Republic; although the two political traditions survived Nkrumah’s authoritarianism and bouts of military rule, parties only emerged for short periods of time before being disbanded again.

Ghana’s experience holds out the possibility that parties in Africa do not have to be based on ideology to be institutionalized. However, they may need a founding mythology based on issues which cut across region and ethnicity. These provide poles around which political elites gravitate. The absence of ethnic politicization in Ghana is due to the consolidation of a two-party system where both parties have a strong political support base in almost all regions and party identification based on cross-cutting cleavages of which ethnicity is only one.\(^{39}\)

Ghana’s competitive elections are leading to more accountability and responsiveness of political leaders, but they have also produced a dilemma for its political leaders. On one hand, the prospect of elections pressures politicians to deliver immediate benefits. On the other, political leaders need to deliver sustainable benefits like employment and increased income through a kind of economic growth that benefits people and buffers the economy from external shocks, and this requires long-term thinking and strategies which may not have immediate effects. This is the quandary that Ghanaian politicians face. When Mills became head of government in January 2009, all the macro-economic indicators were pointing in the wrong direction. The country had a huge budget deficit (causing inflation to rise) and an increasing trade deficit (causing the currency to lose value). President Mills

\(^{38}\) When the NDC lost the 2000 elections, its party members demanded reform of internal party procedures to make them more democratic. The same seems to be happening with the NPP after its defeat. But there are still democratic deficiencies in both parties’ internal functioning.

and his new administration have to take tough economic measures in order
to stop the macro-economic slide, but measures that will not undermine
the need for investments in economic development, and all this within an
environment of immense popular expectations. If the new NDC govern-
ment fails to deliver, in four years time there could be another alternation
in ruling party.