



Trends in Voting Behaviour and Democratisation of Namibia (1990–2020)

Lars R. Schuler

Warsaw, Poland

Email: irschuler@proton.me,

Keywords: Africa, Namibia, democratisation, corruption, employment, voting behaviour, foreign aid distribution, election turnout.

Abstract

Voter behaviour is one of the diverse factors that impacts democratic trends, especially when it comes to the legitimacy and the defence of democratic institutions. Previous literature has looked at single cases in Africa and often applied traditional Western models to African democracies. This paper seeks to provide a holistic overview of how voter behaviour is shaped in Namibia. To this end, traditional literature will need to be contrasted with the limited Africa-specific literature to discover what is important when looking at voter behaviour in Africa. A case study of only Namibia will be necessary as the extant literature makes a deep dive into the details difficult. This will be overcome by an in-depth investigation into the traditional influences on voter behaviour and the less common insights of individual African countries. Finally, voter behaviour is influenced by many factors, some of which run contrary to common beliefs, as African voters show themselves as mature decision makers and drivers of democracy in their nations. This paper seeks to provide a foundation from which further research and critique regarding voter behaviour and democratisation in Namibia can be built. The resulting findings indicate that Namibia has factually improved in terms of battling corruption and extending the franchise to the broader population. The belief that ethnic lines are evidenced in voter behaviour is also refuted, while the critical voter is evidenced in Namibian elections.

Introduction

While Namibia's 2024 election was marred with mismanagement and accusations of voter suppression, it is, without a doubt, a great credit to Namibia that another election cycle has been completed without violence or widespread political intimidation. With another successful election behind us, it is prudent to look back over the years at the democratisation of Namibia, a country of only a few millions and ruled by one party since her independence.

In recent years, Africa has seen a resurgence of coups and democratic backsliding, the inception of this being global democracy's setback with COVID-19 and the restrictions that followed it. During this time, Namibia held a successful election and managed to see the birth of a new political party and a break with SWAPO

dominance. That begs the question – how has Namibia maintained, protected, and expanded democracy, and what are the challenges that may lie in the future?

It is no exaggeration that Namibia, alongside a handful of democracies in Africa, is a success story for the continent and something of which every citizen can be proud. Through the reality of the ruins of apartheid and colonisation, a nation has emerged that has built a democratic tradition and one of civil discourse. This has been possible only through the continuous and concerted effort of all Namibians.

Literature and Methods

It is only natural that the discussion should proceed with an analysis of democratic developments in Namibia,



then with an investigation into the reaction and opinions of the citizens, and finally with some of the factors that may have influenced democracy. Especially for the last point, we must acknowledge the demographic and economic reality of Namibia as a country clearly divided, and what these social cleavages mean for Namibia, as well as the opportunities that may be wrung from them. Regarding the opinions of the electorate, it is important to see how much they trust their government and its various institutions and guarantees. This can only be established by direct investigation, which, in a country as vast as Namibia, poses significant challenges to thoroughness as rural communities will often be underserved by surveys.

Regrettably, international political research on Namibian democracy is sparse; this is first and foremost a symptom of political science having underserved Africa in major ways, and more specifically, it speaks to Namibia's relative population and economic size. The resources that are at our disposal are data sets established by institutions such as the Afrobarometer and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). These comprehensive data sets allow for the creation of both broad and specific images of Namibia and, to a limited extent, of Africa and even the world beyond. In addition to the data provided by Freedomhouse, IDEA, and the Economist, it will be possible to create a full picture of the processes of democratisation, its challenges, and the perception of democratic growth in Namibia.

The paper will first analyse general theories of voter behaviour, followed by ones specific to Africa. From this, we will be able to see what impacts voter behaviour. These factors will be taken together and contrasted with the relevant and available data to see which of the identified factors are endemic to voter behaviour in Namibia.

Furthermore, research into voting behaviour is dominated by inferences that are based on large-N analysis rather than the construction of middle-range theories or theories beyond variable-centred theories. This is compounded by the fact that the theories and research devoted to voting behaviour have focused largely on the West (Lago 2019: 1-2). This means that while democracies exist around the world, most have been neglected by researchers. Furthermore, Lago (2019) suggests that recent research into other democracies has shown marked differences to previous studies. The questions posed by Lago are vital to understand the state of voting behaviour in Africa. The lack of empirical field studies makes anything beyond an observational analysis a challenge, but one that no researcher should shy away from. Understanding the theories and assumed motivators in voting behaviour is essential to create a thorough overview of the issues.

The seminal literature on non-Western democracies comes from Mozaffar et al (2003). In this paper, ethno-political cleavages are investigated. As Mozaffar et al. (p. 380) mention, electoral institutions have long been studied separately from the social cleavages. In this regard, we can see that investigation into multi-ethnic systems has focused largely on one of these facets, specifically on ethno-political cleavages and their strategic value. This creation of a reductionist view of voting behaviour can lead to skewed results. However, there has been some research conducted with this plurality in mind. Two results can be seen here: either

we can witness the creation of a two-party state or, if the voters are grouped in specific regions, multi-party states (Mozaffar et al. 2003: 380).

We arrive then at a discrete set of variables to be investigated and discussed: the general trend of Namibian democracy since independence, how and if ethnic divisions factor into voter choices, voter perceptions, outside influences, and how reality interacts with citizens' perceptions. By taking a holistic view, it will be possible to draw conclusions from this small set of data that may be used to understand the democratisation of Namibia and to make comparisons with other nations on the continent with different conditions.

But before a serious attempt can be made to understand democratisation and the impact of voter behaviour on it, the difficult topic of democratic consolidation must be addressed. Democratic consolidation has been defined in myriad ways (Schedler 1997: 3-5). In fact, there is a body of literature seeking to define this seemingly simple term, a term that is made up of the words 'democratic' and 'consolidation'. Each of these terms represents the possibility of extensive research, but will not be the focus of this investigation. When discussing the term 'democracy', two definitions emerge: Huntington's definition has been confined to elections that happen with regularity, freedom of choice, and honesty in their process, where the vast majority of adults are eligible to vote and parties compete for votes (Beetham 1994: 158). This is not the only definition; certainly Tilly's definition seems to suit the concept of democracy in Namibia: one where political relations are wide-reaching, equal, and safe, creating binding frameworks between the state and its citizens, including the rights for most adult citizens to express their will, safety from state violence, lack of negative discrimination, and the ability to appeal to authority by the average citizen (Cooper 2016: 2). Cooper indeed proves that Namibia has become more democratic since independence as the factors that had held it back have materially improved in the last decade (p. 8-9). Both Cooper (2016) and Beetham (1994) agree that democratisation is an ongoing process that never reaches its zenith without a subsequent fall.

'Consolidation', on the other hand, is defined by the dual propositions of beginning with a process, in this case the creation of a democracy, and seeking to strengthen democratic institutions within the country. This is often seen through the 'two-election' test, otherwise known as the 'transfer of power test' (Beetham 1994: 160). This would, until recently, preclude Botswana and South Africa from being rated as democracies, and exclude Namibia, disregarding the successful election challenges on the local and regional level. This is a concern as it is long held that long-ruling political parties deeply embed themselves within the state apparatus, making the transition that much more challenging should they fall at the electoral hurdle. It may then be better to consider the resilience of democratic institutions, independence of the branches of government, and how well arrayed they are to deal with crisis and avoid authoritarian regression (Schedler 1997: 6-10). Democratic consolidation can then be seen as the continuous process through which a democracy guards against its own end, requiring both institutional and participant actions to hold governments, politicians, and processes to account. Voters here play a pivotal

role by giving their trust to programmes and parties that seek to uphold and further the democratic aims and desires of the people.

Looking through the data and literature extant in Africa, we can see that the attribution to ethnic lines, while a dominant conception, is false. This is due to the fact that African elections, largely, do not fall into this model; in fact, it seems that minority groups can also hold a large degree of power in a democracy as performance is an important predictor of voting intention and re-election chances (Hoffman & Long 2013: 130-1).

When we discuss voting behaviour, there are certain behaviours that are seen as self-evident based on party affiliation, but still, unnatural voting behaviour is something we can observe around the world. It is vital, then, to understand how voting behaviour is conceptualised and how it occurs in reality. Theories assume that the working class prefer voting for leftist parties, whereas members of the middle class are assumed to vote for right-leaning parties (Achterberg & Houtman 2006: 75). This is meant to maintain or improve their economic situation. SWAPO has historically dominated Namibian politics, with other parties, until recently, winning seats on the local rather than national level. We can see, however, that larger concentrations of people have favoured outsider candidates who have their own agendas and aims in politics as they break with existing parties and form their own movements (ECN Namibia 2024).

At the same time, class-related variables, such as wage dependence, unemployment risk, and income of the family, have little relation to unnatural voting behaviour, the impact instead coming from participation in cultural activities (Achterberg & Houtman 2006: 86). This means people more active in cultural events, their own and foreign, are more likely to vote leftist. Similarly, a higher education indicates more progressive tendencies in voting behaviour.

As Achterberg & Houtman (2006) conclude, the class approach considers mainly economic factors, which are contradicted by the increasing incidence of unnatural voting behaviour. However, this does not mean that class analysis is not usable, as it does lay out evidence and reasons for natural voting behaviour (p. 89).

Another view on voting behaviour concerns itself with the Nash equilibrium when trying to explain how voters behave and how they can be incentivised to vote in elections. The Nash equilibrium is a concept in game theory that can be adopted to investigate how voters would behave if they had only costly options to vote or to abstain (Feddersen 2004: 102). That is to say that factors such as adverse weather conditions, complicated registration systems, distance from polling stations, and even how long campaigns last, amongst others, all influence voters either to vote or to abstain (Feddersen 2004: 100). Palfrey & Rosenthal (1983), in Feddersen (2004: 102), concluded that high voter turnout occurs when a vote is a close race, when there are approximately equal numbers of supporters for each of the main candidates.

This is assuming that voters act rationally when deciding on whether to vote or not. A lot of literature has discounted the decline of voter participation as voters acting non-strategically. (Feddersen 2004: 99). However, the belief that voters would choose to vote strategically but not also decide whether to abstain

with the same presence of mind seems contradictory. In fact, it seems that the assumptions of what affects voter turnout are often false; rather, the likely impact of a voter's strategic choice on the election motivates voter turnout (Feddersen 2004: 99-100).

In Feddersen (2004: 104), it is demonstrated that uninformed voters, in an ideal environment, abstain in such numbers that independents do not play a pivotal role in elections. This abstention is expected to even out the difference between partisans. It is evident, then, that information availability heavily impacts voter turnout as well. It seems that voting behaviour is influenced heavily by the education of the electorate. In conclusion, voting behaviour is assumed to be influenced by the cost to vote, education, and partisanship of voters. Additionally, class and ethnicity ought to influence voting behaviour, although not in the classical conception, as voters vote not only on their class or ethnicity but also base their vote selection on performance.

One trend that has emerged heavily in Africa is the swing voter. Weghorst and Lindberg (2013: 717) discovered that 33 of Africa's countries have experienced three or more consecutive government changes, even if the governing party stays the same. Additionally, 33 per cent of these countries have changed the legislative or executive body without issue. This is a marked departure from traditional models for emerging democracies, where ethnic blocs are expected to vote cohesively (Weghorst & Lindberg 2013: 717). However, Barkan (2009) found that re-election for legislative seats in African elections is under 50 per cent (Weghorst & Lindberg 2013: 718). This means that, despite party affiliations, candidates cannot be secure in their positions, as a rival from within a dominant party can take over a seat, which runs counter to the popular conception of entrenched incumbents that seek to take over the political system.

Weghorst & Lindberg (2013: 720) demonstrate that there is limited evidence to suggest that partisanship is deeply involved with swing voters in Africa; the social cleavages presented by the ethnic makeup of young democracies in Africa also seem to be less determining of swing voters, although they do still play a role in voter behaviour. This means that partisanship might still play a limited role in the decisions voters make, in the same way that ethnicity is important, but would not act as a determinant of loyalty in African democracies. This could also lead to lower voter participation as the youth do not feel particularly invested in political partisanship (Resnick & Casale 2014: 1176).

Another issue that could impact voter behaviour is government performance. It can be assumed that voter behaviour is influenced by the performance of their legislative and executive bodies. In many cases in Africa, the voters who backed the losers of an election are less likely to rate trust in government and government performance highly, while those backing the government rate them higher in both metrics (Moehler 2009: 345). This has led, at least in Ghana, to a political landscape with two closely matched parties where one of the defining factors of electoral success is the perception of government performance in matters of policy and execution (Henning et al. 2018).

Government performance then plays a role in the results issuing from an election. It is difficult to define the accuracy of the voters' grading of government

performance as they ‘view elections differently.’ (Moehler 2009: 345). To this extent, we can see that partisan affiliation impacts the perceived efficacy of government (Moehler 2009: 358). This difference in perception is an obstacle when discussing how government performance impacts partisan voters.

However, it is evident that a considerable number of voters in Africa vote critically, especially when considering swing voters, as they analyse their economic situation and are more likely not to vote for an incumbent if they perceive it as having worsened (Weghorst & Lindberg 2013: 726-7). Economic performance is seemingly an important factor when determining voter behaviour in Africa, with voters either becoming apathetic or hostile if their economic situation deteriorates (Hoffman & Long 2013; Moehler 2009; Resnick & Casale 2014; Weghorst & Lindberg 2013). Economic performance has a large impact on voter behaviour, as a change in their quality of life may influence a voter’s choice.

Afrobarometer (2021) casts voter decisions in an interesting light. In fact, while SWAPO only had a reported 55 per cent of the vote by survey participants, Ovambo, Caprivians, Kavangoans, Lozi, Subia, and Tswanan respondents voted above this number by a minimum of two percentage points, demonstrating a greater investment in the ruling party. At the same time, the Ovambo respondents would not vote for another party, with less than three per cent of respondents being willing to elect the PDM, the next biggest party. This is not wholly unexpected as voters ‘who say that their lives are intrinsically tied to other members of their social group’ seem to vote more in line with their community (Harder & Krosnick 2008: 536). So, while voters seem to be relatively shrewd, we can see partisanship, in the case of ethnicity, can be a swaying factor.

As the impact of ethnically-influenced voters can still be the point on which victory hinges, it is important to investigate the allocation of aid in Africa. This is not an allocation by the external donors but rather the pattern of spending aid within a nation. Here, it is vital to note that Africa receives large amounts of financial aid from abroad to improve the material and intellectual qualities of the continent. It is uncommon for donors to delineate areas where the aid should be spent (Anaxagorou et al. 2020: 1-2). This is especially so in the case of Chinese aid, where it has been found that governments allocate funds to incumbent voting areas as World Bank aid is more difficult to redistribute politically (Anaxagorou et al. 2020: 2). This may create an environment where it is economically beneficial to vote for the ruling party as that will result in higher amounts of aid being allocated to improve local material conditions. Anaxagorou et al. (2020) discovered that Chinese aid is likely to be given to core areas that consistently elect the government rather than to swing voter areas, while regions with high opposition support receive less allocation of Chinese aid (p. 12). World Bank aid was found to be less manipulated as it is more strictly controlled (Anaxagorou et al. 2020: 20). Voter behaviour is therefore impacted by the unregulated aid that is given by China, while not impacted by the aid from more regulated donors.

Results and Discussion

When looking at the results of the literature and the data sets mentioned, we can discover a myriad of facts. And while these bear deeper investigation in future research and as Namibia continues to develop, they are nonetheless vital to plan for the potentially bright future of Namibia.

Namibia is, famously, ethnically diverse, with the Ovambo making up 50.4 per cent of the population as the largest ethnic group. This is followed by a drastic drop, the Herero and the Damara each make up 5.9 per cent of the population, followed by Kavangos at 4.99 per cent, Caprivians at four per cent, Namas at 3.1 per cent, those of mixed ancestry at 2.1 per cent, Europeans at 1.8 per cent, while Basters account for 1.5 per cent (Namibia Statistics Agency 2024). Ethnic differences play a role in voter behaviour in Africa. This can happen within the family unit through socialisation (Resnick & Casale 2014: 1176) or through the expectation that the youth and others vote similarly to notable figures and leaders within their community (Kuenzi & Lambricht 2011: 771).

In nations as rural as African ones, this creates more ethnic voting blocs. We can see some correlation with ethnic voting groups but not absolute correlation, especially in the case of Ghana, which is similar to Namibia regarding ethnic diversity (Hoffman & Long 2013: 143). This means that rural areas are susceptible to local leaders influencing the voters around them (Kuenzi & Lambricht 2011: 771). It seems that ethnicity does play a part in African elections, but is not the main determinant of voting behaviour. Indeed, looking at Namibia, we find a wide range of opinions and parties elected to the local level rather than the national. Different regions and constituencies have had successful opposition parties win elections, with ordinary Namibians voting critically and with younger generations not bound by traditional partisanship.

Especially in Namibia, this is evident where we see that, before 2019, 80 per cent of the electorate voted for the ruling SWAPO party, with this falling in 2019 and beyond with a loss of absolute majority (ECN Namibia 2024). Since voters act with a rational self-interest, it is clear that Namibians are looking for a change either for economic or social reasons. It is here that we will see the true character of SWAPO in their bid to remain the dominant party.

However, it is important to note that the youth is historically less engaged in politics than the older generation, much as is the trend around the world, especially as the older generations hold a closer affiliation to the parties that helped usher in multi-party democracy, or in Namibia’s case majority rule, in their country while youth unemployment disengages young voters in Africa (Resnick & Casale 2014: 1178-9). There is then the problem of apathy or of the unwillingness of youth to participate in the democratic process due to the retention of power in the hands of established politicians. While the non-affiliation of younger voters in Africa certainly plays a role in their voting behaviour, it is difficult to attribute their voting behaviour to any single cause.

Furthermore, the fundamental driver of voters is material well-being; in this, we must be aware of the role of pressures such as the spending of foreign aid. If we consider that a government spends an increased

amount on its strongholds, we would expect to see resilience of government support in the areas that are ethnically similar and have voted overwhelmingly for the governing party. And yet we can see that, at the regional level, SWAPO has lost popularity between 2014 and 2019 (ECN Namibia 2024). This coincides with the first major loss of popularity for SWAPO. It also demonstrates that Namibians may see the improvement in material conditions as insufficient.

Still, both the Omaheke and Kavango regions saw a rallying in government support during that term, despite a general downturn (ECN Namibia 2024). We cannot then draw a distinct link between voter loyalty in Namibia and either ethnic or aid-incentivised cleavages. This is further called into question as, despite 65 per cent of the Ovambo electorate remaining loyal to SWAPO (Afrobarometer Data 2021) SWAPO has allowed for ethnically representative cabinets (Cooper 2016: 7). It is, however, rational that those seeing the benefit of a ruling party would elect to keep them in power, especially for voters that see shared interests and solidarity with community as emblematic of the party that they feel represents their bloc (Ishiyama 2012: 764). This allows for rational voter behaviour within a nation, as incumbent strongholds are not found in every region, although certain regions do show long-term propensity toward one party. This means neglected regions will fall away faster if not sufficiently courted between elections, either by material improvements or by a more positive view of the government.

And Namibia faces the dual struggle of unemployment and corruption. Here, the media play a vital role both in keeping the public informed and politicians under pressure to perform in an environment that has largely been forgiving in Namibia. Here, the public has great trust in the institution of a free press. All the while, government forces have acted to restrict or hinder this same freedom (Mpako & Ndoma 2024).

Indeed, Namibians rely on the media to report on the foibles and failures of the government. They are inevitably influenced by this reporting in their perception of corruption. This can be tracked in Afrobarometer, with 80 per cent of Namibians believing in some degree of corruption in the parliament. Fifty-five per cent believe this is limited to only a minority, while 23 per cent believe that most members of parliament are corrupt (Afrobarometer Data 2021). We can also see this reflected in the Corruption Perceptions Index, where the terms of President Pohamba were seen as being more tolerant of corruption than the later terms of President Nujoma. However, major sources disagree on how the incidence of corruption has changed as the perception thereof can often be overstated, especially when fewer than one in 50 interviewees reports participating in or witnessing corruption (Cooper 2016: 4). This could be higher considering the fear of reprisal for reporting corruption, where 67 per cent of Namibians believe they will be met with negative consequences for doing so (Afrobarometer Data 2021).

Namibia has seen a steady decrease in voter participation from the heady heights of 97 per cent in 1989 to 60.38 per cent in 2019 (Coppedge et al. 2025). This shows the disengagement of voters from politics, often the young and disadvantaged, and an increased reliance on the old guard, who are more likely to exhibit partisan behaviour (Feddersen 2004: 104; Resnick &

Casale 2014: 1176). Namibian democracy is likely to stagnate unless the youth are highly motivated and involved in the politics of the nation. This is especially so as only 20 per cent of interviewees between 18 and 25 reported voting, while those older than 56 reached near ubiquity in voting, with above 90 per cent participation (Afrobarometer Data 2021).

This implies that voters must be mobilised to understand that they make the difference to the outcome of any election. Employment status, however, seems to play a negative role: youth unemployment generally leads to voter apathy in that cadre (Resnick & Casale 2014: 1178-9). This is confirmed by Afrobarometer (2019), where the highest disengagement from politics stems from those unemployed, whether or not they are seeking work; they are the least engaged in politics even when corruption is effectively combated. But wide-scale corruption will galvanise this same cadre to engage in elections.

The economic factor cannot be understated: a deteriorating economy influences the populace at worst to be hostile toward incumbents of office, and at best apathetic toward a political process that they believe does not serve their interests (Hoffman & Long 2013; Moehler 2009; Resnick & Casale 2014; Weghorst & Lindberg 2013). In fact, while Namibians broadly enjoy the freedoms and rights granted by the constitution, there have been instances of the police exceeding their authority (Mpako & Ndoma 2024), resulting in a complaint being lodged with the International Criminal Court (Freedomhouse 2020). A harsh reaction to protests by those underserved by the system endangers the active participation of citizens between elections. This may also spill over into the electoral sphere. And while over 60 per cent of Namibians did not fear, feel, or see political violence or intimidation during the 2019 election, over 33 per cent of Namibians reported some level of violence or intimidation (Afrobarometer Data 2021). Political intimidation mars the ability of Namibians to participate in political society, something that is a baseline requirement for a democracy. However, 79.7 per cent of voters agreed that they were able freely to cast their ballot, since witnessing political intimidation does not necessarily affect one's own ability to cast one's vote (Afrobarometer Data 2021). We can see that Namibian democracy remains resilient despite factors that have disengaged cadres of voters and sought to bar others from exercising their rights without fear.

Young voters show the highest electoral abstention rates, which is a trend across the world that is exacerbated by unemployment; as not only employment status but political knowledge are the greatest influences for youthful voters' engagement (Resnick & Casale 2014: 1176). It is then unsurprising when 40 per cent of Namibians never discuss politics, and this statistic reaches heights of 44 per cent in the youngest surveyed cadre (Afrobarometer Data 2021). Namibians are also largely partisan, with 55 per cent feeling close to a particular party and with 66 per cent of SWAPO voters feeling affiliated to the party (Afrobarometer Data 2021), which is a statistic that is also reflected with age, as older voters are more partisan than younger voters.

Trust of institutions and governments is also mediated by party affiliation, where winners are likely to trust the government and rate them higher, whilst losers are more critical and rate them lower (Moehler 2009: 345).

Addressing the question of the undermining of government legitimacy by losers of an election, African democracies make conscious efforts to increase the feeling of electoral legitimacy with the voters of opposition parties (p. 363). In fact, it is the losers of an election that hold the government to account concerning the preservation of democratic institutions (p. 346-7). A good result for Namibia is that 80 per cent of citizens trust the electoral commission to make accurate and true assessments of election outcomes ([Afrobarometer Data 2021](#)). Legitimacy of the government is then viewed not only through the lens of party affiliation, but also through the general trajectory of the country, as citizens who rate their satisfaction with political and economic outcomes higher are more likely to support an incumbent government ([Moehler 2009: 358](#)).

Until 2020, it seemed that unless there was an incentive to vote, it was more likely to see voters abstain during elections. We have seen a downturn, culminating in the 2019 election. Following COVID-19, any trend remains to be studied or proven. The 2029 election will be vital when discussing the political activation and engagement of Namibians. If voters acted in a vacuum, we could attempt to draw predictions for future contests; this would be futile at this juncture, as Namibians are adjusting to the reality after 2020 with the formation of the IPC and the potential disturbance this can create.

But what of the role of SWAPO? Ruling single-handedly has given SWAPO the opportunity to implement whatever programmes they will, even if so inclined, to appoint partisan judges to the courts and stuff the ballot boxes. And, yet, their support in dropped to 65 per cent ([ECN Namibia 2024](#)) and to 56.3 per cent in the 2019 parliamentary and presidential election ([The Namibian 2019](#)). This change toppled SWAPO's long-held two-thirds majority and challenged, for the first time since independence, the order most Namibians had come to accept. Despite this, the electronic voting machines used in this election were later declared unconstitutional, although the result was upheld (Ndeunyema 2020). With these recent challenges, it is clear, as SWAPO has celebrated her 30 years of majority rule, that the party must transform, as it has already done to a limited extent. But now the transformation is likely to be from a dominant party to a conventional political actor, as they once transformed from freedom fighters to a dominant party. As President Geingob said, 'There is always a loser and a winner [...] so I'm glad that out of this competition, which was tough, I emerged as a victor. It is not a joke. It is a heavy responsibility on my shoulders, but I was there already, so I will just continue' ([The Namibian 2019](#)).

Conclusion

Certainly, Namibia is one of the leading democracies in Africa. This has been achieved through the stability brought by SWAPO and the expansion of access to education and economic opportunities. Still, no democracy has been truly tested before a transfer of power between parties. It is certain then that the elections beyond 2024 will demonstrate this security as SWAPO loses its firm grip on power to new parties such as the IPC and AR. While there has been evidence of a crackdown on some democratic rights ([Mpako & Ndoma 2024: 1](#)),

Namibians have rallied in the past and proven to be shrewd political operators.

Democratisation in Namibia has faced many challenges, not least of which the perception of corruption, which has pushed many unemployed youths from political engagement. This has seen marked improvement, as the youth of Namibia found their voice in 2019, and corruption has been decreasing in the three decades of independence. Despite this, youth unemployment has remained a perennial issue for voter participation as disaffected youths remain largely on the sidelines. It is unsurprising that party affiliation is lower the younger the age groups one surveys.

This lack of party affiliation has allowed for the growth of successful opposition bids in local and regional elections, which poses the question to SWAPO as to how they will respond if they lose their majority. At the same time, voters who backed opposition parties have been shown to be ever more critical of SWAPO's efficacy and legitimacy; a phenomenon not helped when the Supreme Court follows the letter of the law to prevent recounts or verify election results independently.

Political education, too, is lacking in Namibia. If the youth and established voters were more open to discussions of political programmes and parties, we could expect to see more engagement across the board. Improvement in the material conditions of Namibians is also largely wanting, which fails to mobilise potential voters despite the inflow of aid from both closely regulated and less regulated donors. This, coupled with the limited extent of violence and intimidation, presents a problem for Namibian democratisation as it may tarnish the legitimacy of any party that gains from these means while driving more voters away from the ballot.

There is still much to be investigated when it comes to Namibia and democracy. The systems of electoral security, the distribution of power to and independence of bodies within the state, and the power of traditional leaders, to name but a few. It is undeniable that these will be investigated as Namibia becomes more closely scrutinised. In this case, we can expect to see successes and shortcomings brought to light. These efforts can be aided by academics, workers, and politicians to preserve democracy and improve equality.

The role of the media, judiciary, and civil society is more important than ever as Namibia enters a world after 2019. A party that has held power for over 30 years is always difficult to dislodge, as they make up the apparatus of state, from political to functional. But with the guarantees of a strong democracy and a desire for growth and prosperity for all members of society, it is only a matter of time before a serious challenge will be mounted. And as Namibian politics continues to change and develop, it is important to remain mindful of the issues facing the country. How will Namibia overcome an ethnically and economically stratified society? What cleavages will new political actors seek to highlight in future campaigns? Maybe most critically, what will SWAPO do when faced with the reality of losing their ability to govern alone, and with which party or parties will they seek to align?

Bibliography

- ACHTERBERG, P., HOUTMAN, D. 2006. Why do so many people vote 'unnaturally'? A cultural explanation for voting behaviour. *European Journal of Political Research*, 45(1):75–92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2005.00291.x>.
- AFROBAROMETER DATA. 2021. *Afrobarometer (R8 2019/2021)*. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/>.
- ANAXAGOROU, C., EFTHYVOULOU, G., SARANTIDES, V. 2020. Electoral motives and the subnational allocation of foreign aid in sub-Saharan Africa. *European Economic Review*, 127, 103430. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2020.103430>.
- BEETHAM, D. 1994. Conditions for democratic consolidation. *Review of African Political Economy*, 21(60). <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056249408704053>.
- COOPER, I. 2016, October. *Whither Namibia? Democratisation in a dominant party system*. <https://democracyinafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Whither-Namibia.pdf>.
- COPPEDGE, M., GERRING, J., et. al. 2025. 'V-Dem Dataset v15' *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project* [Dataset]. <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds25>.
- ECN NAMIBIA. 2024, May 12. *Election 2024*. <https://www.elections.na/NationalAssembly.aspx>.
- FEDDERSEN, T.J. 2004. Rational choice theory and the paradox of not voting. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 18(1):99–112. <https://doi.org/10.1257/089533004773563458>.
- FREEDOMHOUSE. 2020. *Namibia: Freedom in the World 2020 Country Report | Freedom House*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/namibia/freedom-world/2020>.
- HARDER, J., KROSNICK, J.A. 2008. Why do people vote? A psychological analysis of the causes of voter turnout. *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(3), 525–549. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.00576.x>.
- HENNING, C.H.C.A., DIAZ, D., LENDEWIG, A. 2018. Voter behavior and government performance: Empirical application in Ghana. In *Working Papers of Agricultural Policy* (Nos. WP2018-04; Working Papers of Agricultural Policy). University of Kiel, Department of Agricultural Economics, Chair of Agricultural Policy. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/zbw/cauapw/wp201804.html>.
- HOFFMAN, B.D., LONG, J.D. 2013. Parties, ethnicity, and voting in African elections. *Comparative Politics*, 45(2):127–146. <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041513804634235>.
- ISHIYAMA, J. 2012. Explaining ethnic bloc voting in Africa. *Democratization*, 19(4), Article 4.
- KUENZI, M., LAMBRIGHT, G.M.S. (2011). Who votes in Africa? An examination of electoral participation in 10 African countries. *Party Politics*, 17(6):767–799. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068810376779>.
- LAGO, I. 2019. A research agenda in elections and voting behavior in a global and changing world. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2019.00001>.
- MOEHLER, D.C. 2009. Critical citizens and submissive subjects: election losers and winners in Africa. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(2):345–366. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000513>.
- MOZAFFAR, S., SCARRITT, J.R., GALAICH, G. 2003. Electoral institutions, ethnopolitical cleavages, and party systems in Africa's emerging democracies. *American Political Science Review*, 97(3):12.
- MPAKO, A., NDOMA, S. 2024, November 19. *AD902: Namibians head for elections with confidence in the freedom of their press*. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad902-namibians-head-for-elections-with-confidence-in-the-freedom-of-their-press/>.
- NAMIBIA STATISTICS AGENCY. 2024. *Namibia 2023 population and housing census report*. <https://nsa.org.na/census/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2023-Population-and-Housing-Census-Main-Report-28-Oct-2024.pdf>.
- NDEUNYEMA, N. 2020. *Vote, but you cannot verify: the Namibian supreme court's presidential election decision | OHRH*. <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/vote-but-you-cannot-verify-the-namibian-supreme-courts-presidential-election-decision/>.
- RESNICK, D., CASALE, D. 2014. Young populations in young democracies: Generational voting behaviour in sub-Saharan Africa. *Democratization*, 21(6):1172–1194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.793673>.
- SCHEDLER, A. 1997. *Concepts of Democratic Consolidation*. <https://bibliotecavirtual.clacso.org.ar/libros/lasa97/schedler.pdf>.
- THE NAMIBIAN 2019, February 12. *Reduced victory ... Swapo, Geingob drop votes*. *The Namibian*. <https://www.namibian.com.na/reduced-victory-swapo-geingob-drop-votes/>.
- WEGHORST, K.R., LINDBERG, S.I. 2013. What drives the swing voter in Africa? *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(3):717–734. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12022>.

About the Author

Lars Schuler holds a graduate degree from the University of Warsaw and has a keen interest in the politics of Africa in general and Namibia specifically. He has worked as an intern at the United Nations in Windhoek and worked as a political consultant for the presidential bid of Ally Angula in the 2024 election. Apart from political science, Lars has experience in financial crime prevention and liaising with government institutions. His research interests focus heavily on democratisation, non-traditional influences on power, and electoral security. He is currently preparing to pursue a PhD at his Alma Mater.

