

Workshop Program Point Sud 2021

**Party Branding in Africa – Political Images, Narratives,
and Voting Decisions**

10-13 October 2021

University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon

Conveners

Dr. Anja Osei, University of Konstanz, Germany

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Abstract

Electoral politics in Africa raise cross-cutting issues on the nature of power, the repertoire of socio-cultural imagination, and narratives of nationhood, stateness and political history. Since interest in African political parties has seen its revival at the end of the 1990s, researchers have emphasized aspects like informality, political clientelism, weak party organizations, and weak programmatic appeals (Erdmann 2004). In fact, most African parties cannot be mapped on the left-right continuum of political ideologies. As a result, the classical tools of party research are only of limited analytical value (ibid). Despite their alleged “weakness”, however, many parties are quite successful in elections and seem to be well entrenched in their social environment. We think that a debate on flexible, yet concise and context-sensitive research tools is necessary to move the field beyond a mere description of what African parties are not in comparison to their Western counterparts.

We propose the idea of “party branding” as an analytical lens. In consumer economics, a brand is “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one marketer’s product as distinct from those of other marketers” (Pride and Ferrel 2016). Although the introduction of marketing concepts into party research is controversial (Smith 2009), the concept can be heuristically applied to new democracies with fluid party systems (Lupu 2016).

Brands give voters an orientation idea about the type of citizen that is represented by this party (Lupu 2016: 19). In Ghana, for example, the two main parties refer to longstanding political traditions that are coupled with ethno-regional strongholds, key programmatic positions, references to historic leaders, as well as references to a specific cultural heritage expressed in party symbols (Osei 2012; Bob-Milliar 2012). Therefore, Party branding also shapes electoral prospects. In the 1990s large numbers of new political parties emerged in Africa, many of them with relatively similar campaign strategies and general promises for a better future (see Bob-Milliar 2019). Many of them vanished over time, but others have become institutionalized. Against this background we argue that party strategies and voters’ behavior are contingent on each other. Parties need to take the preferences of the electorate into account to build successful campaigns, and voters choose from the menu of existing political options.

Our conference has the following main objectives:

- introduce the introduce the concept of “party branding” as a new conceptual lens,
- explore party strategies and voters’ behavior as complimentary perspectives,
- include views from different disciplines like political science, geography, economics, history, and anthropology,
- compare case studies from different regimes types and different regions.

The conference will lay the foundation for a further theorization, which can later be tested and refined in empirical studies.