



Democracy, decentralization, and district proliferation: The case of Ghana



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ABSTRACT

In many developing countries, a rhetorical commitment to decentralization often superficially manifests through the creation of new or smaller administrative units at the sub-national level. In democracies in particular, this raises the question of whether sub-national unit proliferation is intended for winning popular support in elections or addressing the concerns of local citizens. This paper analyzes the motivations for district creation by focusing on Ghana, which is oft-considered one of Africa's more committed countries to decentralization. At the same time, successive governments repeatedly have divided the country into more districts in an espoused effort to more effectively bring services closer to citizens. With an in-depth focus on the most recent increase from 170 to 216 districts between 2008 and 2012, this paper employs national and district census, socioeconomic, and electoral data to examine which districts were split and why. Instead of representing a source of patronage to swing voters or a divide-and-rule strategy in opposition strongholds, the study finds that the incumbent party at the time, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), used re-districting as a tactic of malapportionment and predominantly targeted non-competitive districts where gaining an additional legislative seat in subsequent elections was more likely. Evidence suggests that this pattern is not specific to the NDC and that previous district splitting under the New Patriotic Party (NPP) also focused disproportionately on that party's safe seats. Overall, the paper emphasizes the need for according greater consideration to underlying institutional aspects, particularly electoral rules and executive-legislative relations, when analyzing the motivations for territorial reforms.

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Introduction

The administrative fragmentation of subnational territories is quite common in developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where executives rather than independent commissions typically have the authority to decide on boundaries (Prempeh, 2008). For instance, President Joseph Kabila increased the number of provinces in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 11 to 26 in 2015. In the same year, President Salva Kiir expanded the number of states in South Sudan from 10 to 28. In Zambia, almost 30 new districts were created between 2011 and 2016 under the government ruled by the Patriotic Front. More generally, Grossman and Lewis (2014) note that between 1990 and 2010, at least 25 African countries increased their number of subnational administrative units by at least 20 percent.

What motivates subnational proliferation and the choice of

which administrative units to fragment? To address this question, this paper focuses on the case of Ghana, which almost doubled its number of districts (from 110 to 216) between 2000 and 2012. Analyzing these dynamics in Ghana is relevant for a number of reasons. First, much of the existing scholarship on sub-national unit proliferation focuses on either one-party or competitive authoritarian cases, including Yoweri Museveni's 30-year rule in Uganda (Green, 2010; Grossman & Lewis, 2014) and Communist-controlled Vietnam (Malesky, 2009). Moreover, many have noted that administrative unit proliferation is common during periods of transition from authoritarian to multi-party systems when parties are in flux and uncertainty in electoral outcomes is high (e.g. Boone, 2003; Hassan, 2016). Incumbents in Cameroon, Kenya, and Zimbabwe have all used this tactic as multi-party elections were being introduced (Barkan, Densham, & Rushton, 2006; Fombad & Fonyam 2004; Hassan, 2016).

However, the Ghanaian case allows for examining whether and why this pattern persists in developing countries after multi-party

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transition and even democratic consolidation, and whether the reasons for district creation are the same as in non-democratic settings. Indeed, Ghana is widely lauded as one of Africa's most robust democracies. A genuinely competitive multi-party system has resulted in the alternation of political parties, classifying the country as one of only a handful on the continent to have achieved democratic consolidation according to [Huntington's \(1991\)](#) two-turnover test. In fact, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) peacefully has handed over power to the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in 2000 and again in 2016. Similarly, the NPP conceded to the NDC when it lost the presidency in the wake of the 2008 elections. The Ghanaian context therefore allows for probing whether the determinants of district creation identified elsewhere are just as relevant, or even more pronounced, within a vibrant and consolidated democracy.

Secondly, the theoretical benefits of fragmentation have played an important role in motivating a commitment to decentralization, which is identified as a policy priority by at least 25 African countries in their national development strategies ([Resnick, 2014a](#)). According to [Tiebout \(1956\)](#), a larger number of local governments can result in a more diverse range of tax and service delivery options, and citizens can then “vote with their feet” and locate in the community that offers the best tax-service bundle (see also [Musgrave, 1959](#); [Oates, 1972](#)). Based on a variety of political, fiscal, and civil service indicators, Ghana is considered one of Africa's most robust examples of decentralization ([Riedl & Dickovick, 2014](#)). As of 2009, the country has further institutionalized its constitutionally-enshrined commitment to decentralization by effectively devolving the functions of 11 different ministries to departments of the districts ([GoG, 2009](#)). Therefore, while district creation has coincided with substantive re-centralization in places such as Uganda ([Grossman & Lewis, 2014](#); [Lambright, 2014](#)), the same opposing trends are not evident in Ghana. Consequently, the country offers a useful setting for identifying whether and to what extent district proliferation is indeed motivated by concerns over improving local service delivery.

Finally, district creation has been fraught with suspicion in Ghana. There is a strong belief that since these new districts are usually created in election years, they are specifically intended as a political stunt to provide the incumbent party with an advantage (see [Ayee, 2013](#); [Bening 2012](#); [Smith, 2011](#)). In fact, the 2012 district splits and the resultant constituencies they created were challenged in the Supreme Court by a civil society group known as the Concerned Citizens of Ghana, which consisted of the Trade Unions Congress, lawyers, and minority party parliamentarians ([Commonwealth 2012](#)). Thus, determining the motivations for, and impacts of, district proliferation has important policy implications in the specific Ghanaian context.

Even though there are previous studies on district proliferation in Ghana (e.g. [Ayee, 2013](#); [Bening 2012](#); [Mohammed 2015](#)), this paper is the first to combine Ghana's 2000 and 2010 national and district-level census data, 2012/2013 Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS), and presidential and parliamentary data to disentangle various hypotheses underlying district creation. Based on this data, I find that in addition to population size and population density, the ruling NDC disproportionately targeted non-competitive districts for splitting in 2012. In other words, the NDC focused on districts where it had obtained large vote shares over the next most competitive party in the previous elections. In doing so, the NDC had a higher future chance of winning extra members of parliament (MPs) in the new constituencies that had accompanied the creation of the new districts. This gamble paid off, with the NDC subsequently winning large majorities in the new districts in the December 2012 elections. At the same time, it has resulted in severe malapportionment, with voters in traditional NDC strongholds

having disproportionate representation in the National Assembly. This pattern, however, also appeared under the NPP, which disproportionately targeted non-competitive districts it had won in the 2004 elections for splitting in 2008. While the NPP lost its executive and legislative majority in 2008, it experienced higher vote margins in those districts that it had split than in those it had not.

What drives district proliferation?

The motivations for district proliferation span both economic and political rationales. Starting in the mid-1950s, scholars from both the fiscal federalism and polycentricity schools argued that a larger number of local governments overseeing smaller populations can facilitate information sharing about citizen preferences and in turn help to better target goods and services ([Oates, 1972](#)). [Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren \(1961\)](#) further claimed that more local government units creates competition among bureaucrats to provide the best services while consolidation of units into larger entities gives bureaucrats monopoly power to control and misuse resources. Indeed, some empirical work shows that local government fragmentation reduces corruption because there is greater transparency and accountability over spending at the local level (e.g. [Goel & Nelson, 2011](#)). Others claim that smaller local councils can produce services at lower per capita costs and demonstrate lower outlays of expenditures than more consolidated local systems (see [Boyne, 1998](#); [Dollery & Johnson, 2005](#)).¹ A corollary is that by being a smaller size, there is more monitoring activity, which results in greater efficiency of key services (see [Grosskopf, Shawna, Hayes, Taylor, and Weber, 2001](#); [Hayes, Razzolini, & Ross, 1998](#)).

In developing country contexts, however, progress on decentralization is sometimes solely equated with the number of sub-national governments rather than how well those new sub-units actually function. For instance, President Kiir of South Sudan claimed that “one purpose of the new states is to decentralize power, placing resources closer to the rural population while at the same time reducing the size of the national government” ([Butty, 2015](#)). Likewise, when the late president Sata announced the creation of additional districts in Zambia, he noted that his government was “determined to decentralize Government operations for the effective and efficient delivery of services to the masses” ([Lusaka Times 2012](#)).

On the political side, the rationale for district proliferation can be broadly categorized as enhancing incumbent power through three key channels. The first channel is using sub-unit proliferation to undermine the base of sub-national elites who may represent a threat, or outright opposition, to the ruling regime (see [Crook, 2003](#)). For instance, [Kraxberger \(2004\)](#) shows how the late Nigerian dictator, Sani Abacha, pursued a “divide and rule” strategy in order to weaken opposition in Yorubaland during the 1990s. Likewise, [Resnick \(2014b\)](#) discusses how the former Senegalese President, Abdoulaye Wade, used the tactic of subnational splitting, or *découpage*, in order to undermine the influence of mayors from opposition parties. More recently, the creation of four new provinces out of the DRC's resource rich Katanga province was widely viewed as an effort by President Joseph Kabila to reduce the resource and support base of the popular Moïse Katumbi, Katanga's governor at the time and a suspected opponent in the 2016 elections ([Soudan, 2015](#)).

The second channel is via patronage, with new sub-units viewed as equivalent to other types of locally targeted goods such as

¹ There are of course quite a number of economic counter arguments to fragmentation and in favor of consolidation (see [Fox & Gurley, 2006](#)).

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