

The Legislative Agenda in 13 African Countries: A Comprehensive Database

Abstract. While African legislatures have been receiving increasing academic attention in recent years, efforts to expand our understanding of these institutional bodies have been hampered by a dearth of reliable quantitative data regarding their activity and output. To rectify this issue, we have collected and issue-classified data on the legislative agenda in 13 sub-Saharan African countries. We leverage this new dataset to explore how democratic development affects the legislative agenda. We show that legislatures in more democratic countries have a larger, broader, and more dynamic agenda, and we propose an extensive future research agenda for legislative politics in Africa.

Keywords: Legislative agenda; Political agenda setting; Democratic development; Election quality; Africa

Traditionally, legislatures in Africa have been considered weak institutions with marginal influence on politics (Prempeh 2008; Thomas and Sissokho 2005). However, an ongoing wave of research is producing important new insights concerning the value of these institutions (e.g., Ofosu 2019; Opalo 2020) and the balance of power within the legislature (e.g., Collord 2016; Demarest 2021; Opalo 2019). Yet as systematic data collection across African legislatures over time is highly demanding, there is currently no time-series dataset on the output of the legislatures in the region. This lack of data impedes our capacity to answer even simple descriptive questions like: (a) How many bills or laws are discussed on the floor? (b) What kinds of issues attract the attention of legislators? (c) Are there differences across regimes?

In a period of rapid change in the levels of parliamentary institutionalization, this remains a critical blind spot. The legislative agenda (i.e., the policy topics debated in parliament) is at the core of representative democracy. Multiple topics, including crime, unemployment, corruption, and poverty, call for the attention of the representatives in the legislature; far more topics than any legislature can possibly attend to (Baumgartner and Jones 2005). Hence, few topics make it onto the legislative agenda and are debated on the parliament floor. The legislative agenda, typically measured through the bills and laws in parliament, is at the end of a longer political decision-making process and marks the ultimate allocation of the political agenda: Which topics become the subject of serious political attention and possible policy change?

This study introduces a new dataset on the legislative agenda in 13 African countries over time. We collected and issue categorized bills and laws in 13 legislatures for which we could find accessible data, in many cases since the early 2000s. This allows us to immediately discover the topics on the legislative agenda in a particular country in a particular year. This will be a major benefit for future research on African legislatures. To set

the stage for an acceleration in legislative research in Africa, we match this data with a host of relevant variables in the V.-Dem. Project (Coppedge et al. 2021) and the Afrobarometer (www.afrobarometer.org). Since we use the well-established codebook developed by the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al. 2019) to categorize the 13 legislative agendas, these data can be easily merged with existing and very extensive data sources on legislative agendas in mainly Western countries (available at www.comparativeagendas.net) as well as the proliferating research agenda on legislatures in Latin America (e.g., Alemàn 2006; Crisp and Schibber 2014; Morgenstern and Nacif 2002). Hence, we not only enrich the general research agenda on legislatures and legislative agendas on a global scale and expand the scope of variation dramatically, we also provide a comparative case to learn about African legislatures.

To showcase the value of these data and illustrate how they might be used, we provide an initial analysis of the relationship between democratic development within and across African countries and the shape of the legislative agenda. We use the V-Dem data to measure democratic development and employ well-established measures from the policy agenda literature to distinguish between the size, width, and stability of the legislative agendas (Chaqués-Bonafont et al. 2020). In accordance with our expectations, our empirical analysis shows that the legislative agendas of our 13 African countries differ significantly depending on the level of democratic development. We show that the legislative agenda is larger—and more diverse—in more democratic countries. In addition, when the level of democracy is higher, the agenda is more dynamic over time, with different issues emerging. In the conclusion, we discuss how this new dataset can be used to address important but hitherto overlooked questions regarding African legislative politics.

African Legislatures

A recent wave of research focuses on the inner workings (i.e., the political organization) of legislatures in Africa and beyond and their effect on policy outcomes (e.g., Collord 2016; Gandhi et al. 2020; Opalo 2020; Williamson and Magaloni 2020). These studies indicate how the diverse ways in which these legislatures function are tailored to their specific political realities (Gandhi et al. 2020) and that, granted the authority, various elites attempt to influence the final policy product using the institutional tools at their disposal (Williamson and Magaloni 2020). In environments where electoral contests are more competitive, the executive is often less capable of exerting this degree of control, despite their survival in office depending on it.

Several sub-Saharan countries displayed this lack of total control in presidential bids to extend or abolish executive term limits; usually, the executive is successful in such attempts. When they do fail, however, it is often due to resistance in parliament (Cassani 2020). Critically, such resistance takes place within the ranks of both opposition and government party MPs. Zambia in 2001 offers a case in point, where the parliament refused to remove the term limit clause included in the constitution despite the president's party being a dominant force in the assembly (McKie 2019).

Even in countries where the executive managed to extend its tenure, MPs may remain hard to control. In Uganda, where the National Resistance Movement has maintained an uninterrupted grasp on power since its creation in 1986, Museveni must often exert considerable effort and make concessions to bring unruly MPs in line. Because of this dynamic, MPs occasionally band together and manage to force policy change. In 2012, for example, opposition and ruling party MPs successfully pushed for substantial health service spending (Collord 2016).

This happens more frequently in countries such as Kenya, where electoral competition is fierce. As the uncertainty regarding the results of electoral contests increased over time and the legislature became more institutionalized, control over the agenda was gradually wrested away from the executive. This is reflected in how the ratio of legal noticesⁱ to bills passed decreased from about 35/1 to 5/1 between 1992 and 2013 (Opalo 2020).

The discussion above lends credence to a wave of scholarship holding that formal institutions in Africa, and specifically parliaments, can play a much more integral and dynamic role in legislating than previously thought (e.g., Adida et al. 2020; Brierley 2012; Opalo 2012). Prominent scholars of African politics call for a change of momentum in research on African legislatures. As Opalo (2020: 1355) writes, “the logics of institutional politics in Africa largely conform to standard predictions developed by scholars who study similar topics in other parts of the world. This is a call for more data collection and rigorous studies of institutional politics in Africa” (see also Bleck and Van de Walle 2019).

Nonetheless, existing research on African policymaking focuses almost exclusively on a single policy within a single country. This research approach is valuable but ill-suited to investigate the increasing (yet varying) institutionalization of legislatures across the continent (Opalo 2019). Moreover, in these studies, the legislature is rarely considered an actor of consequence. Research focuses instead on the legislative influence of international donors and NGOs (Kalu 2004; Makuwira 2018) and traditional institutions, such as local assemblies led by chiefs or kings (Brenya and Asare 2011). Also, civil society groups can influence policy outputs in some of the region’s more democratic countries (Carroll and Carroll 2004; Kpessa 2011; Mohammed 2013).

When formal state institutions are studied, the focus tends to be on exploring how informal, clientelist relations inform policy outcomes and implementation. According to this

branch of the literature, the policy issues included in the agenda depend on the interests of the actors supporting the ruling coalition (Kjær 2015; Whitfield et al. 2015). At the same time, increasing electoral competition often calls for a widening of the ruler's base. Such developments may lead to policy interventions by the executive in favor of particular groups (Goodfellow and Titeca 2012). Conversely, elite divisions may allow mass-based groups to lobby MPs to introduce additional issues on the agenda (Collord 2021).

As interest in legislatures across the world is growing and it is becoming clear that they can be significant policy actors, the influence of these institutions on the content and composition of the legislative agenda remains understudied. To advance this research agenda, we introduce a new dataset covering the legislative agenda across time in 13 largely Anglophone African countries. Before introducing the dataset, we briefly touch on the legislative agenda as a concept.

The Legislative Agenda

Our understanding of the legislative agenda builds on the idea that it consists of a hierarchy of issues in which only a handful among the multitude of issues receive serious political attention (e.g., Dearing and Rogers 1996; McCombs 2004). Amidst a million problems in society, this implies that only some issues make it to the agenda while the rest are excluded (Baumgartner and Jones 2005). Over the years, prominent issues such as racial discrimination, poverty, and inequality, or—more recently—climate change, took a long time to get on the legislative agenda in advanced democracies.

Previous research indicates that the “under attention” to certain issues is partly due to the cognitive architecture of the human mind—so-called “bounded rationality” (Jones 1999)—and partly due to the organization of politics (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Baumgartner and

Jones 2005). On the floor of parliament, parliamentarians can only debate one issue at a time; a (one-chamber) assembly does not allow for parallel debates. Hence, an inevitable byproduct of political organization is that the information flow is inherently limited (Baumgartner and Jones 2005; Jones 1999). Such bottlenecks of parliamentary attention are an inescapable feature of the decision-making process in all parliaments (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Yet it is not a constant, and the question then becomes whether the organization incentivizes decision-makers; for instance, through political competition and electoral accountability, to cultivate a larger, broader, and constantly updating legislative agenda (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Our dataset allows us to explore such questions further in the context of African legislatures.

A New Dataset on Legislative Agendas over Time in 13 African Countries

As our primary contribution, we have collected the first large-scale, cross-country dataset on all bills and laws from African legislatures available online. Our data covers 13 largely Anglophone countries: Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. This is a very diverse set of countries in terms of socioeconomic, institutional, and historical factors. Consequently, this dataset could be leveraged to study a wealth of empirical research questions about African legislatures and policy agendas in general.

In terms of case selection, language barriers limited us to the Anglophone countries in the region. The final set was further limited by the availability of accessible and reliable data sources. The number of years covered differs between countries subject to variation in online availability. While the dataset covers more than 20 years for Malawi, Namibia, and Zambia, it only covers 3 years for Cameroon. Table 1 provides an overview.

Table 1. Overview of the data on African parliamentary agendas.

	Annual obs. (#)		Period	
	Bills	Laws		
Cameroon		✓	2016	2019
Ghana		✓	1993	2017
Kenya	✓		2014	2019
Malawi		✓	1994	2018
Mauritius		✓	2008	2019
Namibia		✓	1990	2019
Nigeria	✓		2008	2019
Sierra Leone		✓	1995	2019
South Africa		✓	2007	2019
Tanzania		✓	2002	2019
Uganda	✓		2005	2019
Zambia		✓	1997	2019
Zimbabwe	✓		2005	2019

Measuring the legislative agenda is no easy task, as it involves tapping into which topics currently draw the attention of the parliamentary representatives. Which issues are subjects of legislation? Agenda scholars often refer to this as the political agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Bevan and Greene 2018; Cayton 2021; Green-Pedersen 2007). We rely on the common standards in previous agenda research (op. cit.) and measure the legislative agenda through bills and laws. Laws are the ultimate product of parliament and therefore a core indicator of the legislative agenda, and bills are a close second. Bills might fall in parliament, but tabling a bill requires extensive investment compared to, for example, calling a hearing or merely asking the minister a question.

In terms of information processing in the political system, the legislative agenda is at the back end of the policymaking process, and some effort is required of politicians to table bills and form majorities to pass laws. This means that we apply a central but conservative

measure in the sense that the legislative agenda may not respond as much to changes in the input to the system as, say, speeches or parliamentary activities, such as questions to the minister (Baumgartner et al. 2009).

To gather the data from the African legislatures, we visited the homepage of each national assembly and web-scraped the content of bills and laws or used research assistants to download each bill or law manually. By applying the widely acknowledged issue content codebook from the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al. 2019; CAP) to categorize the bills and laws, we ensure consistency across the African legislatures and over time. The CAP issue-coding scheme identifies the substance of a bill or law on the legislative agenda. Using this scheme, each item on the legislative agenda has been coded into one of 21 major categories. Examples of major categories include crime, immigration, education, and health, which correspond closely to the organization of politics into committees and ministries. The topic codes are found in Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials.

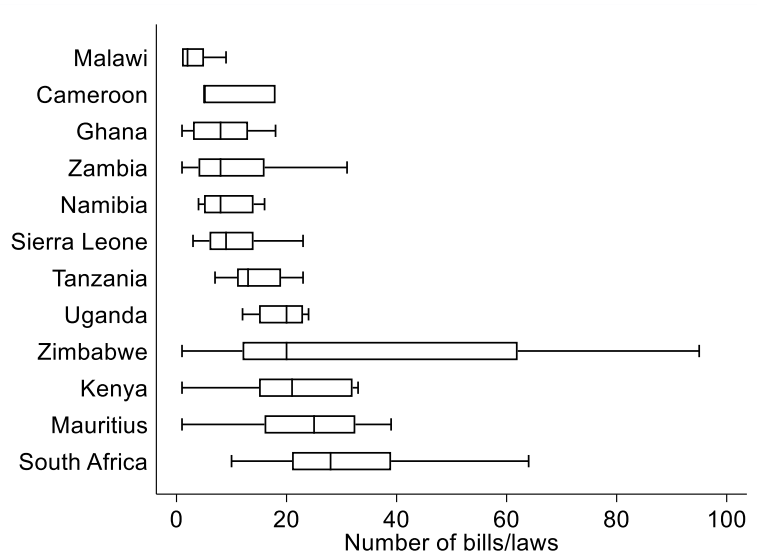
To categorize each bill and law in the African legislatures, we used a neural network approach. Neural networks are shown to be highly effective in various text analysis tasks (Popov 2018, and text classification is no exception (Mirończuk and Protasiewicz 2018). While the use of neural networks in political science is a recent development, it allows the development of enormous datasets in areas of study that are underdeveloped due to a lack of data. In one recent application, for example, Wahman et al. (2021) followed this approach to code more than 110,000 speeches from the Malawian parliament.

Following the procedure discussed in Wahman et al. (2021), we employed transfer learning on BERT (Devlin 2018), a pre-trained neural network made available by Google. We used hand-coded bills from Nigeria to re-train the network for the specific task of interest and then validated it using hand-coded laws from Ghana and bills from Zimbabwe. After

seven epochs of training on 90% of the Nigerian data, the network could code the remaining 10% of the data with an F1 score of 88.4%. It then coded the (up to this point unseen) data from Ghana and Zimbabwe with F1 scores of 84.2% and 80%, respectively. These scores are remarkable given the number of categories and the results of previous efforts in the automatic coding of similar items.ⁱⁱ We then used the trained network to code the remaining data.

To give a sense of the data, we plot the number of bills/laws for each of our 13 countries across time in Figure 1. The horizontal box shows the interquartile range (25th to 75th percentiles) for each country, the vertical line in each box shows the median (50th percentile), and the whiskers indicate the minimum and maximum values. In Figure 2, we break this plot down by issue, and we graph the number of bills/laws per country over time for some of the policy areas that are generally high on the legislative agenda. The plot in Figure 1 shows considerable variation in the number of bills/laws per year across countries. Zimbabwe, Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa rank highest in terms of bills/laws per year, while Malawi, Cameroon, Ghana, and Zambia are at the bottom. These averages cover substantial temporal variation within each country. South Africa, for instance, has a median of slightly less than 30 bills/laws per year, but 50% of the observations regarding South Africa are in the interval from slightly more than 20 bills/laws per year to almost 40 bills/laws per year.

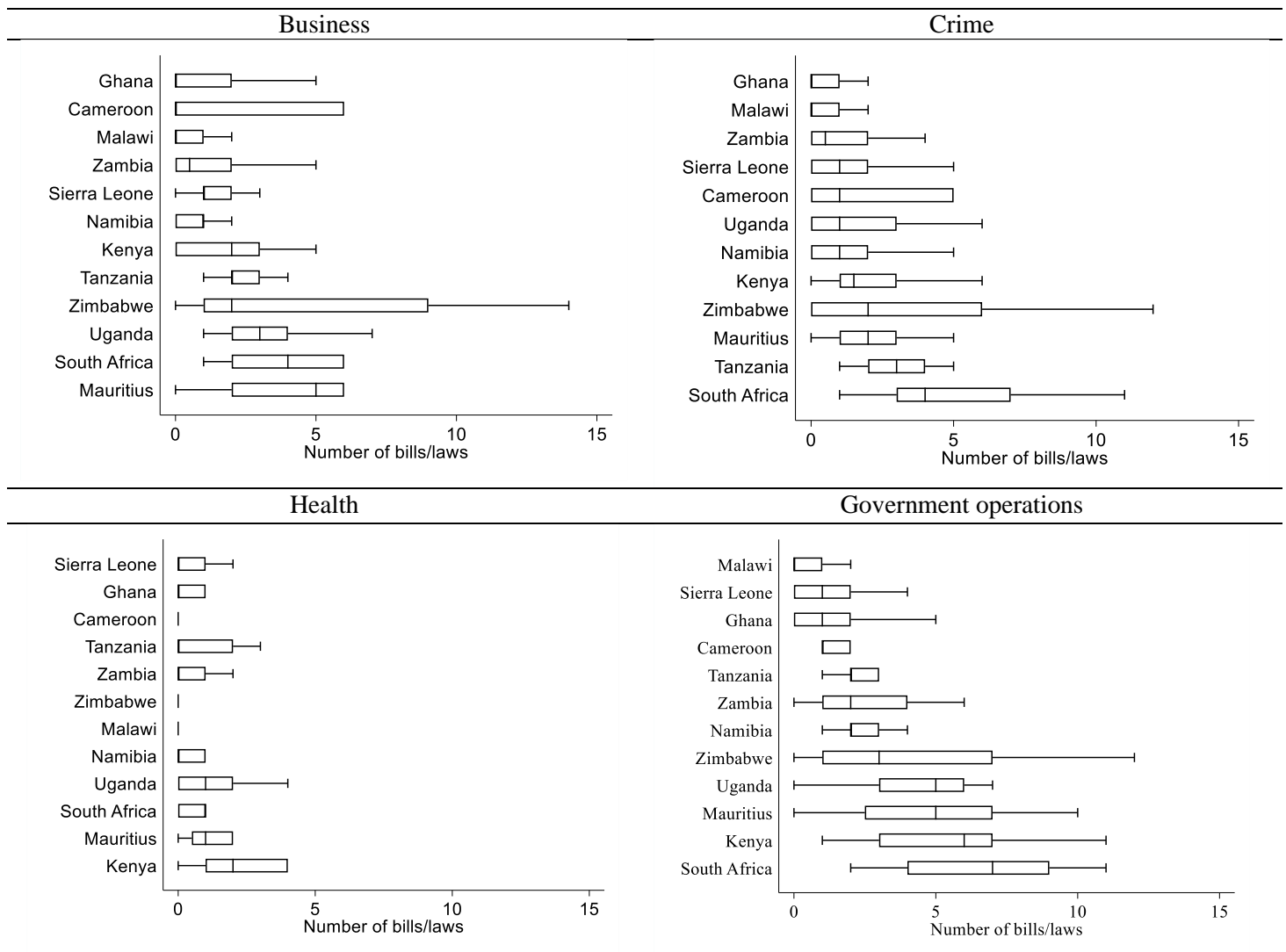
Figure 1. Boxplot of the number of bills/laws per year across 13 African Countries, 1980–2019



Note: We exclude Nigeria for presentation purposes, as it has markedly more bills per year than the rest (mean: 201, st.d.: 148).

A critical feature of our dataset is that each bill/law is categorized according to its issue area, which allows us to examine variation across issue areas. Some issues receive very little legislative attention, but no issues are completely neglected. On average across countries, the top-10 includes basic issues for a developing country, such as transportation/infrastructure, economic issues, such as the economy, business, agriculture, and the labor market, in addition to crime and core welfare issues such as education and health. Figure 2 plots the number of bills/laws for a subset of issues in our dataset. On business, crime, health, and government operations, there are on average only a few bills/laws per year for most of the countries. And yet in Tanzania, for instance, it is not uncommon to have three to four bills/laws on crime per year. In contrast, bills/laws on health are rare in Tanzania but far more regular in Kenya. Bills on government operations, which include bills related to the postal service, intergovernmental relations (the national–local cooperation), public employees, the bureaucracy, and the tax administration, as well as property management, procurement, and contractors (i.e., state-building), are particularly common in Mauritius, Kenya, and South Africa.

Figure 2. The development over time in the average number of bills/laws to a selection of issues across 13 sub-Saharan countries, 2000–2019.



Note: We exclude Nigeria for presentation purposes, as it has substantially more bills/laws on average per year across issues than any of the other countries.

Measuring the Legislative Agenda

To bolster the utility of the new dataset, we conceptualize the legislative agendas through three central concepts that have been much used in the analysis of Western countries.

Legislative agendas vary in size (Bækgaard et al. 2018; Mortensen and Seeberg 2016), diversity (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015; Boydstun et al. 2014; Green-Pedersen 2007; Jennings et al. 2011), and stability (Bevan and Greene 2018; Mortensen et al. 2011).ⁱⁱⁱ

Importantly, these concepts of the legislative agenda are independent dimensions; for

example, an agenda may be narrow and contain only a few issues (low diversity), but each issue comes up repeatedly (large size) and persistently (high stability). Alternatively, an agenda may contain multiple issues (high diversity) that are discussed only briefly (small size) and momentarily (low stability), because new issues keep replacing issues that are already on the agenda.

The first and most straightforward measure is the sheer size of the agenda as the number of bills or laws initiated per year (Green-Pedersen 2007; Mortensen and Seeberg, 2016). If a large number of bills and laws pass through parliament, this implies great legislative productivity and turnover in the legislature. A large legislative agenda carries a large number of issues (width) and/or handles a diversity of aspects related to each issue (depth). A small legislative agenda signals either gridlock, where legislators abstain from introducing new bills/laws in the anticipation that it will not pass, or negative agenda-setting, where legislatures intentionally keep certain issues off the legislative agenda. On average, the legislative agenda carries 25.9 bills and laws per year across the legislatures in our sample. Figure 1 provides an overview of this part of the agenda.

Second, we measure the topical diversity of the policy agenda for each country in each year by calculating the entropy score commonly used in agenda setting studies (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Jennings et al. 2011). Two legislatures might have the same number of issues on the agenda, but while the first one might spend most of its time on only a few such issues, attention is more evenly distributed in the second. We follow the recommendations of Boydston et al. (2014) and use Shannon's H , which is calculated by multiplying the proportion of the agenda that each item receives by the natural log of that proportion and then taking the negative sum of those products: $-\sum_{i=1}^n (p(x_i)) \cdot \ln p(x_i)$, where x_i represents an item, $p(x_i)$ is the proportion of the total attention the item receives, and $\ln(x_i)$ is the natural

log of the proportion of attention the item receives. The entropy score increases as the spread of attention across all items becomes more equal (Boydston et al. 2014).

Across the legislative agendas in Africa, the entropy score varies from 0.02 to 3.6 with a mean of 0.3 (see Table 2). Overall, this indicates a rather narrow legislative agenda (Boydston et al. 2014). The top part of Figure 3 offers a glimpse of the diversity of the legislative agenda in the 13 African countries. Subject to considerable temporal variation within each country, the legislative agendas are overall more diverse in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa compared to Malawi, Cameroon, Zambia, and Ghana at the other end of the figure.

Third, we measure the dynamic of the agenda as the overlap in the content of the legislative agenda the current year versus the previous year (Mortensen et al. 2011). The relative issue content of a legislative agenda is calculated by dividing for each year and each set of laws/bills the number of laws/bills devoted to an issue i by the total number of laws/bills in the legislature in that year. These numbers (for $i=1$ to n) are then combined into a single measure of agenda stability across successive legislative agendas in a country. The measure is standardized to range between 0 and 100, and subtracting the measure from 100 converts it into a measure of stability rather than instability. The measure can be expressed as

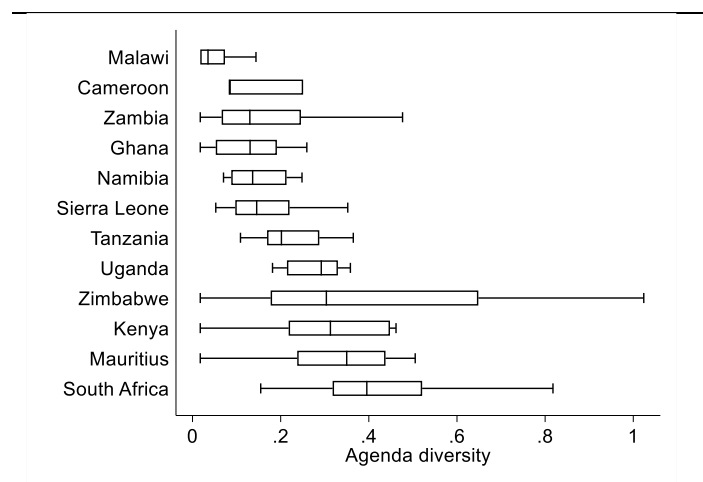
$$AS_t = 100 - \left(\sum_{i=1}^n |LA_t - LA_{t-1}| \right) / 2$$

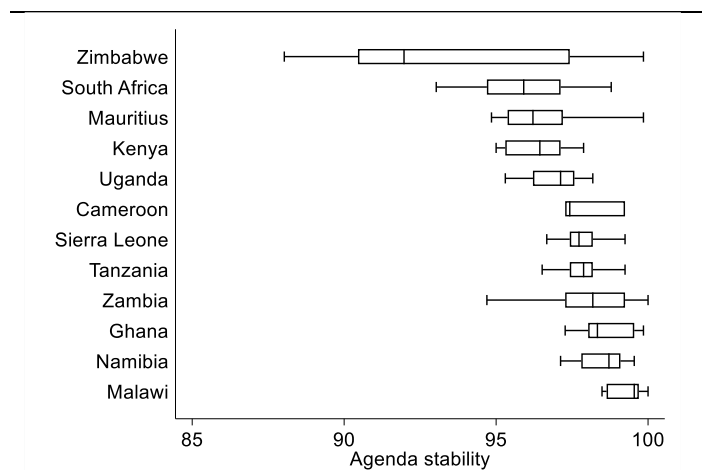
where LA_t and LA_{t-1} are the percentages of the total legislative agenda devoted to a particular issue i at time t and time $t-1$, and the absolute differences between them are summed over all n of the potential issues on the agendas (Mortensen et al. 2011: 981). A score of, say, 70 for a given year would indicate a 70% overlap between that year's legislative agenda and the previous year's agenda. The agenda stability varies from 54.7 to 100 in our 13 African

legislatures with a mean of 96.4 (see Table 2). Overall, this indicates a high level of stability in the legislative agenda (Mortensen et al. 2011).

The bottom part of Figure 3 gives a firsthand impression of the stability in the legislative agenda in the sample. Although there is generally a high level of stability, there is large variation between countries. Zimbabwe stands out with a considerably lower level of stability (in the early 1990s) followed by South Africa, Mauritius, and Kenya. In the other end of the spectrum, Zambia, Ghana, Namibia, and Malawi have rather high levels of stability (almost 100) with few signs of temporal change in the content of the legislative agenda.

Figure 3. Boxplot of the diversity and volatility in the legislative agenda per year across 13 African countries, 1980–2019





Note: We exclude Nigeria for presentation purposes, as it has markedly more bills per year than the rest (mean: 201, st.d.: 148).

Additional Variables in the Dataset

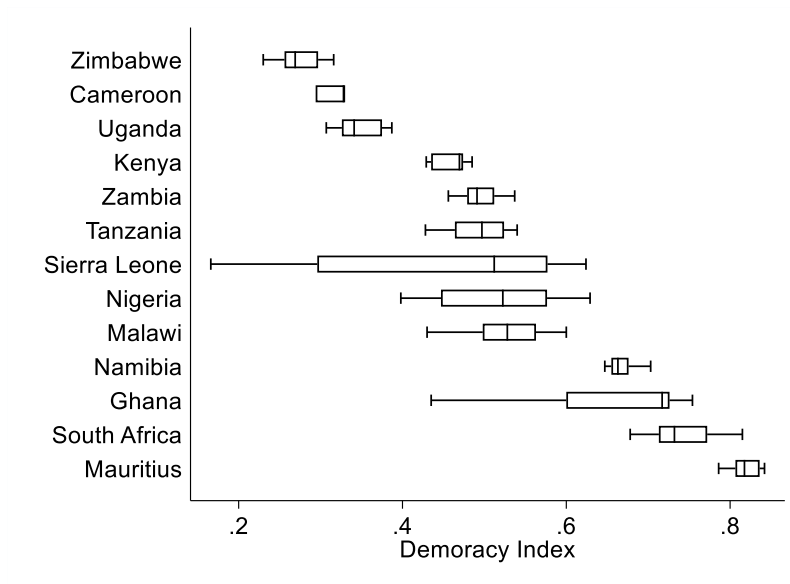
In addition to these measures of the agenda, the dataset includes a large selection of additional variables which are relevant to the study of legislatures. In this section, we provide an overview of these variables (see Table 2 for a detailed list) and more insights regarding several of the variables (Table 3 and Figure 3). We believe that they will be of great value for scholars using our new dataset on legislative agenda in African countries.

First, we include an indicator specifying the type of legislative data that we analyze (this dummy takes the value 0 for bills, 1 for laws/acts). We have data on laws in nine countries and data on bills in four countries (see Table 1). In addition, we create a measure for the overall saliency of the bills/laws in the legislature per year. This is possible with our unique issue classification of the bills/laws in our dataset, which allows us to match the issue content of each bill/law with public saliency measures from the Afrobarometer dataset across issues in each legislature in each year. Thus, our variable counts how many bills/laws have passed in the legislature on the five topics considered as the “most important problems” by Afrobarometer respondents. This public saliency measure also proxies which bills might be more controversial in the legislature.

As a measure of democratic development, we include the “Electoral democracy index” (“v2x_polyarchy”) from the V-Dem Project (Coppedge et al. 2021), which has become standard in the literature (Coppedge et al. 2016; Teorell et al. 2019).^{iv} This measure is an index ranging from 0 to 1, where 1 is the highest level of democracy. The index is based on country expert scores covering three dimensions: freedom of expression, freedom of association, and election quality overall. The index also covers the degree of broad suffrage.

Figure 4 provides an overview of the variation in the level of democracy across our 13 African legislatures and over time. It demonstrates how there is considerable variation across countries from Zimbabwe and Cameroon at the bottom and Ghana, South Africa, and Mauritius at the top. The within-country temporal variation (illustrated by the interquartile range for each country in Figure 4) is also noteworthy, particularly in Sierra Leone and Ghana with wide boxes. Together, the data in our dataset cover most of the 0–1 interval. Democratic development, however, takes time and it might be a non-linear process. It is possible that, instead, we observe periods of autocratic institutionalization and democratic backsliding (Meng 2020). Therefore, looking at a span of one or two decades probably underestimates the true effect of these long-term processes, e.g., on the legislative agenda.

Figure 4. Variation in the Democracy Index across 13 sub-Saharan countries.



Note: The boxplot reports the median (the vertical line in the box), the interquartile range (the box), and the 95% interval (whisker).

We also include several institutional variables to account for the strength of the legislature and for legislative–executive relations. This includes the extent to which the legislature constrains the executive, legislative oversight, legislative staff and committees, opposition party autonomy, government seat share in the legislature, and whether the legislature controls its own resources. We also measure if members of the legislatures are allowed to introduce bills to parliament. All of these measures come from the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al. 2021). As additional proxies for the strength and type of the legislature, we include the number of ministries (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020), the size of the parliament, and the legislative setup (presidential, mixed, or parliamentary, as well as unicameral vs bicameral; Coppedge et al. 2021). We also include indicators for election years and the type of electoral system in the lower chamber (proportional, mixed, or majoritarian). Finally, we include a list of frequently used socioeconomic variables, including population size, annual GDP growth, and life expectancy.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of measures of the legislative agendas and possible explanatory variables in 13 sub-Saharan countries.

	Mean (st.d.)	Min-Max	Source label	Source
Legislative agenda				
Source: Law or bill	Law	0 (bill), 1 (law)		Own coding
Size	25.9 (57.7)	1–537		Own coding
Diversity	0.3 (0.5)	0.02–3.61		Own coding
Stability	96.4 (5.7)	54.7–100		Own coding
Democratic development				
	0.53 (0.14)	0–1	v2x_polyarchy	V-Dem
Free and fair elections	0.72 (0.27)	0–1	free_elec	V-Dem
Freedom of expression	0.87 (0.14)	0–1	free_expr	V-Dem
Freedom of association	0.84 (0.11)	0–1	free_assoc	V-Dem
Executive constraints				
Judicial constraints on executive index	0.69 (0.19)	0.09–0.90	v2x_jucon	V-Dem
Legislative constraints on executive index	0.73 (0.16)	0.27–.95	v2xlg_legcon	V-Dem
Opposition party autonomy	1.28 (0.62)	-1.1–2.4	v2psoppaut	V-Dem
Executive oversight	1.10 (0.83)	-1.3–2.3	v2lgotovst	V-Dem
Legislature can introduce bills	0.36 (0.48)	0–1	v2lgintblo	V-Dem
Government seat share	0.5 (0.16)	0.1–0.7	v2paseatshare	V-Dem
Legislature resources				
Legislature controls resources	-0.2 (1.07)	-1.6–1.7	v2lgfunds	V-Dem
Lower chamber committees	1.07 (0.72)	-0.3–2.6	v2lgcomslo	V-Dem
Lower chamber staff	-0.61 (1.15)	1.9–2.3	v2lgstafflo	V-Dem
Number of cabinet ministers	24.51 (5.92)	0–47	wgov_min	Nyrup & Bramwell (2020)
Contentious legislation				
Public saliency of issue	4.6 (11.6)	0–101	prob_legis	Afrobarometer
Institutions				
Seat in lower chamber	191.6 (105.3)	62–400	v2elloseat	V-Dem
Political system:		0–2	v2eltype	V-Dem
Presidential	0.18 (0.4)			
Mixed	0.77 (0.4)			
Parliamentarian	0.04 (0.2)			
Unicameral or bicameral	1.3 (0.5)	0–2	v2lgbicam	V-Dem
Election years	0.2 (0.4)	0–1		V-Dem
Electoral system in lower chamber:		0–2	v2elparlel	V-Dem
Proportional	0.73 (0.4)			
Mixed	0.24 (0.4)			
Majoritarian	0.02 (0.2)			
Social characteristics				
Population	2.84×10^7 (4.06×10^7)	1.2×10^6 – 2.01×10^8	wdi_pop	World Bank
GDP growth	4.58 (4.57)	-20.6–26.4	wdi_gdpgr	World Bank

Life expectancy	56 (8)	37–75	wdi_lifexp	World Bank
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Note: In the dataset, a majoritarian electoral system is most prevalent, a mix of presidentialism and parliamentarianism is most prevalent, and the legislative agenda is typically based on laws more than bills. All of the 13 legislatures are in effect unicameral (see also Table 3). Source of V-Dem data: Coppedge et al. 2021.

Table 3 shows how most of the 13 African countries in our period of analysis have a mixed system, are unicameral, with a majoritarian electoral system. There are exceptions, including the parliamentarian political systems in Mauritius and South Africa, and the proportional electoral systems in Namibia and South Africa. Changes to these institutions are rare but do occur. Sierra Leone switched from a proportional to a majoritarian electoral system in 2001, and Cameroon, Ghana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have all altered their respective political systems (presidential vs parliamentary).

Table 3. Political institutions in 13 African countries

	Presidential vs parliamentary	Unicameral vs bicameral	Proportional vs. majoritarian electoral system
Cameroon	Parliamentarian (< 2018), Pres. (> 2017)	Unicameral	Mixed
Ghana	Mixed (< 2000), Pres. (> 1999)	Unicameral	Majoritarian
Kenya	Mixed	Unicameral	Majoritarian
Malawi	Mixed	Unicameral	Majoritarian
Mauritius	Parliamentarian	Unicameral	Majoritarian
Namibia	Mixed	Unicameral	Proportional
Nigeria	Mixed	Unicameral	Majoritarian
Sierra Leone	Mixed	Unicameral	Proportional (< 2002), Majoritarian (> 2001)
South Africa	Parliamentarian	Unicameral	Proportional
Tanzania	Mixed	Unicameral	Majoritarian
Uganda	Mixed	Unicameral	Majoritarian

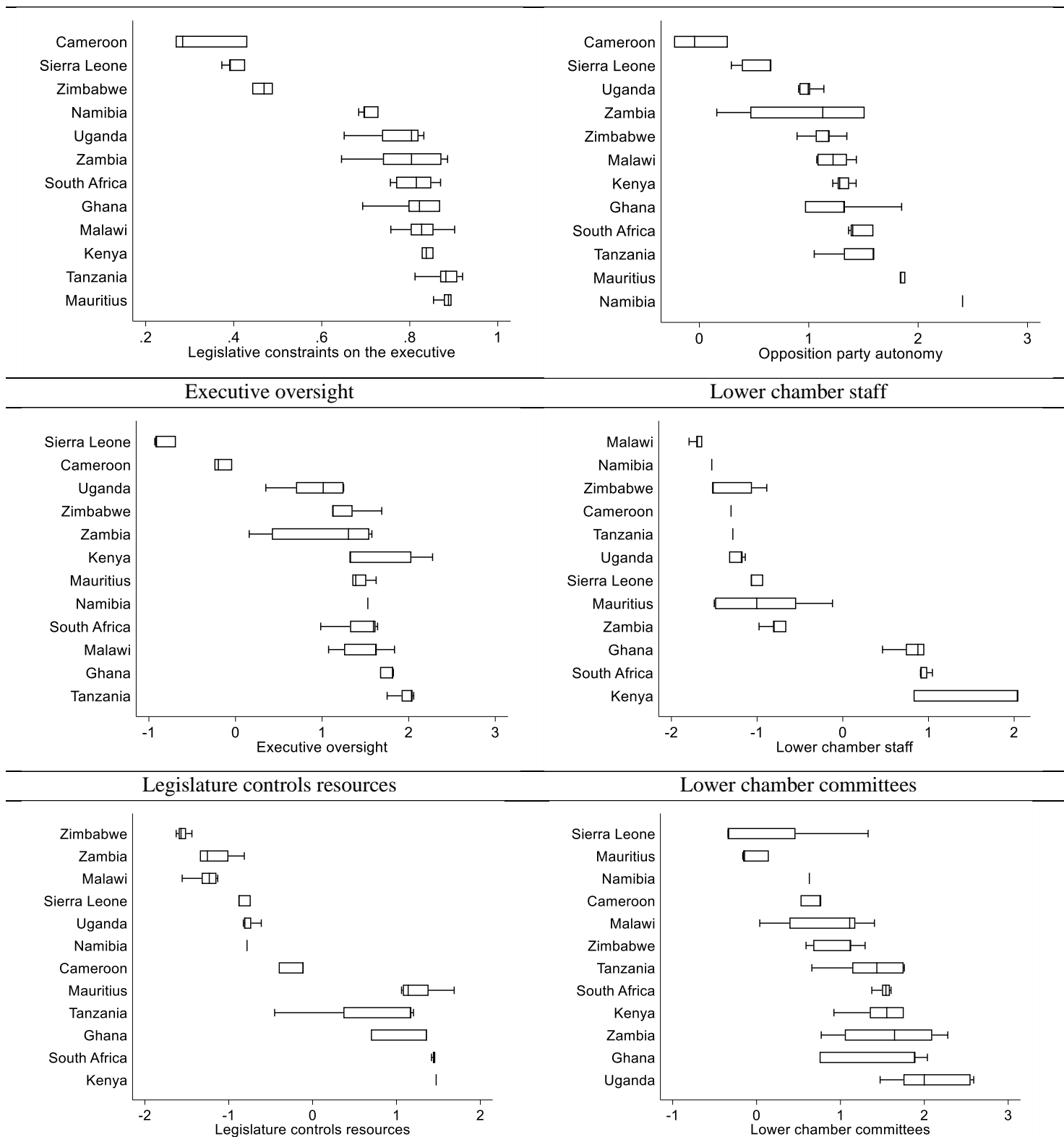
Zambia	Mixed (< 2008), Pres. (2008–2010), Mixed (> 2010)	Unicameral	Majoritarian
Zimbabwe	Parliamentarian (< 2018), Mixed (> 2017)	Unicameral	Majoritarian (< 2018), Mixed (> 2017)

Note: “Mixed” is a combination of Parl. and Pres. In (parts of) our period of analysis, Cameroon, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Namibia had bicameralism, but the second chamber approved the legislation from the first chamber (see “v2lgbicam” and “v2lglegpup_ord” in V-Dem.). Sierra Leone had no chamber 1995, 1997–2001. Source: Coppedge et al. 2021

As displayed in Figure 3, the sample harbors considerable institutional variation when it comes to the strength of the legislature and its legislative authority vis-à-vis the executive. Most countries have relatively high levels of legislative constraints on the executive (see the upper-left corner of Figure 3). Yet constraints are limited in Cameroon, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe. They also display modest opposition party autonomy (upper-right), modest executive oversight (middle-left) and a limited legislative committee system (lower-left), unlike most other countries, which have substantially more opposition party autonomy and executive oversight. Legislative staff (middle-right) and legislative control of resources (lower-right) are modest in most of the countries except Ghana, South Africa, and Kenya. This variation in the legislative institutions is crucial because it dampens concerns that the dataset covers a very specific type of African country.

Figure 5. The cross-country, cross-time variation in a selection of institutional variables across 13 sub-Saharan countries, 2000–2019.

Executive constrains (legislative)	Opposition party autonomy
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Note: We exclude Nigeria for presentation purposes, as it has markedly more bills per year than the rest. Source: Coppedge et al. 2021.

Application: Democratic Development and the Legislative Agenda

The legislative agenda is at the core of representative democracy. For democracy to work, representatives must be responsive to the voters and held accountable by them. In a democratic environment, representatives are expected to be aware of voters' priorities and to shape the legislative agenda accordingly. And yet to date, our understanding of how democratic development affects the legislative agenda is limited. We leverage the considerable variation in democratic development exhibited between countries in our dataset to explore this issue empirically.

Democratic development includes freedom of expression, freedom of association, and election quality (Møller and Skaaning 2013). These qualities facilitate accountability linkages between voters and representatives, enhance the flow of information between them, and inform the legislative agenda. Freedom of association ensures that civil society can organize around issues of public concern. Freedom of expression allows them to publicly voice their concerns (Przeworski et al. 2000: 16–18). Free and fair elections facilitate competition and ensure that voters can vote sincerely and that the aggregated results reveal the true distribution of their preferences (Møller and Skaaning 2013).

Increased levels of accountability incentivize elected representatives to be more active in their attempts to respond to citizen concerns and improve citizen welfare in order to be reelected (Fiorina 1981; Powell 2004). Case studies of African legislatures indicate that this accountability effect holds in the region, even if additional conditions must be met. Voters reward good program performance, albeit only when the information is made relevant to them and is understood to be widely disseminated. If these conditions are not met, MPs are penalized instead (Adida et al. 2020).

This accountability linkage opens up pathways towards expanding the legislative agenda and making it more dynamic. First, the freedoms of association and expression allow

mass-based groups (e.g., unions, farmers' associations) to organize and apply pressure to legislators and, possibly, to introduce new items to the legislative agenda (e.g., Carroll and Carroll 2004; Collord 2021; Kpessa 2011; Mohammed 2013). Research on political agenda-setting shows bottom-up mobilization sets the size, diversity, and dynamic of the legislative agenda. When the democratic institutions allow, civil society, policy stakeholders, and politicians will try to draw attention to issues and propel them onto the legislative agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014; Kingdon 1995). One example is the opposition to the death penalty that spread like a wildfire in the US in the 1990s and 2000s (Baumgartner et al. 2008). However, while many countries in the African region have demonstrated a willingness to consult with civil society groups regarding policy issues of interest to their members, there is no institutionalized avenue in most cases for direct citizen participation in the legislative process.

Second, when accountability levels are high, a true opposition (of a critical mass) may enter parliament and—subject to parliamentary rules and institutions—provide an alternative vehicle for propelling issues onto the legislative agenda (Chan and Zhao 2016: 141; Or 2019: 929; Wegmann 2022). Research on political agenda-setting shows that the opposition is often the crucial initiator of pushing new and more issues on the agenda (Schattschneider 1965; Seeberg 2013; van de Wardt et al. 2015). Democratic development expands the room of maneuver for the opposition. In the African context, incumbents tend to campaign based on a valence issue platform, while tentative evidence suggests that opposition parties are more likely to campaign based on issue positions (Bleck and van de Walle 2013). When opposition parties win more seats in the legislature, there is therefore a higher probability that they will push the incumbent out of their comfort zone by bringing additional issues for discussion to the floor and expanding the agenda. In Zambia, for example, the opposition Patriotic Front

managed to carry the 2011 elections after forcing the issues of bad mining conditions and high taxation on the agenda (Opalo 2012).

These positive qualities are diminished if the electoral field is tilted in favor of the incumbent, as is common in many African states. The introduction of multiparty elections, executive dominance, and a reliance on clientelistic linkages led to the establishment of weak party systems around a dominant party (van de Walle 2003). Legislatures tend to be weaker in such contexts, which enables the executive to dominate the legislative process. In Senegal, following the approval of the 2001 constitution, President Wade dissolved the assembly and, following new elections, his coalition controlled 89 of 120 seats. Of the 120 MPs, 104 were first-time legislators (Thomas and Sissokho 2005). Such episodes erode the ability of parliament to conduct its legislative role in a meaningful way and limits its ability to control the agenda.

Under conditions of lower accountability, it might also be convenient for the elite to keep the flow of information limited in order to hide inconvenient problems from the public (Baumgartner et al., 2017: 2; Chan and Zhao 2016: 138). Consequently, policy on several important topics might be decided through executive action and completely bypass the parliament (Opalo 2020). This limits the number of items to be discussed in the legislature and, therefore, the scope of the legislative agenda—both in terms of bills introduced and laws enacted.

Nonetheless, these dynamics are not permanent. When faced with strong, well institutionalized authoritarian government parties, opposition parties are also forced to institutionalize to be competitive (Riedl 2014). This leads to a more balanced and institutionalized party system, which favors legislative strengthening. In Kenya, in periods when the legislature was more independent, the volume of subsidiary legislation fell

considerably. Before the multiparty era, the legislature was dominated by the executive, and President Moi controlled the rule-making process. However, the introduction of multiparty elections rebalanced the relationship in favor of the legislature, which started to gain control of the political agenda (Opalo 2020).

As these examples highlight, the lack of accountability and the domination of politics by powerful executives under conditions of weak democratic development affect the legislative agenda. To sum up our argument, poor democratic development reduces the levels of accountability and the flow of information. This insulates the agenda from pressures by mass-based groups and from the influence of an independent opposition, and hence, leads to a short, narrow, and closed (i.e., stable) agenda (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Green-Pedersen 2007).^v Such agendas contain fewer issues, a narrower array of issues, and a focus on the same few issues (high stability) that are preferred by the ruling elite.

Research Design

We operationalize the three dimensions of the legislative agenda, the dependent variables in our application, based on the size of the agenda, the calculated entropy score, and our measure of stability in our new dataset. We expect higher levels of democratic development to be associated with higher numbers of bills/laws per year, higher entropy scores, and, finally, lower levels of stability. To measure democratic development, our independent variable, we rely on the “Electoral democracy index” (“v2x_polyarchy”).^{vi}

The main models also include several controls. We control for the type of legislative data that we analyze (bills/laws), which is important because not all bills become laws. This might make the legislative agenda larger for bills than for laws. A central concern for the analysis is that it is not the level of democracy per se that influences the legislative agenda

but modernization more generally, and economic development in particular. Hence, we control for economic development through the annual GDP growth rate. We also control for population size and include indicators of more general modernization, such as life expectancy. Moreover, the institutional variables presented in Table 2 also constitute important control variables. In the Appendix (Table A8), we present additional models showing that we can control for groups of variables measuring executive constraints, the resources of the legislature, contentious legislation, and institutional setup without changing the results.^{vii}

The unit of analysis is an observation of X (democratic development) and Y (legislative agenda) in a country in a given year. The analysis includes three dependent variables: (1) the number of bills/laws per year in a country, (2) the diversity score for a given year in a country, and (3) the level stability in a given country in a given year calculated as a change in the issue content of the agenda in the previous year. Since all of the variables are continuous, we rely on standard OLS cross-section, cross-time regression.

Inspired by previous research studying the legislative agenda (Mortensen and Seeberg 2016), we specify what has become known as a hybrid model (Allison 2009; Bell and Jones 2015; Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008). This model distinguishes between-country effects of the independent variable, democratic development, on the legislative agenda from within-country developments. This is appropriate due to the nature of our data. Institutions such as those associated with democratic development (or reversal) are relatively slow moving. We are therefore primarily interested in between effects (time-invariant differences between countries), which would be washed away in a standard fixed effects model. Formally, a hybrid model is expressed as follows: $Y_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1(X_{ij} - X_{mean,j}) + \beta_2 X_{mean,j} + u_i + e_i$, for each year (i) and each country (j), where β_2 is the between effect; that is, the mean of the democratic development variable over time for each country repeated in each year. It

indicates the general level of democratic development. The within effect, β_i , is estimated by demeaning (i.e., isolating the deviation of each observation from the mean; or mean centering) the democratic development variable for each country in each year.^{viii}

Results

The main results are reported in Table 4. We examine the association between democratic development and the size of the legislative agenda (Model 1), the diversity of the legislative agenda (Model 2), and the stability of the legislative agenda (Model 3). As discussed, we focus on the between effects of democratic development (the mean), because it is a slow-moving indicator that mainly varies between countries. The estimation in Table 4 is based on data on both bills and laws in our 13 African countries.^{ix}

In line with our preliminary expectations, we find that more democratic development is associated with a larger, more diverse and more dynamic legislative agenda in the African parliaments. All coefficients are statistically significant at the 95% confidence intervals. These effects hold up even when including the rather long list of institutional and socio-economic control variables listed in Table 2 (see Appendix, Table A8). The indicative effect sizes are considerable. Moving one standard deviation of democratic development (μ 0.53, σ 0.14), the legislative agenda size increases on average by about 41 laws/bills, which corresponds to 72% of a standard deviation change in agenda size. The agenda diversity increases 0.36 units, which corresponds to 75% of a standard deviation change. The agenda stability decreases 3.15 units, which corresponds to 23% of a standard deviation change. This suggests that the key change in the legislative agenda during democratic development is that the agenda becomes larger (size), wider (diversity), and more dynamic (stability). Thus, the agenda takes on more issues (diversity), addresses each issue more (size), and the year-to-year overlap in the issues on the agenda decreases (stability).

Table 4. The influence of democratic development on the legislative agenda in Africa

	Legislative agenda		
	(1) Size	(2) Diversity	(3) Stability
Democratic development			
Between (mean)	294.26** (138.85)	2.53** (1.11)	-21.74** (10.80)
Within (dev.)	117.99 (128.98)	0.56 (0.83)	-6.09 (7.89)
Bill (0) or law (1)	-90.13** (36.53)	-0.79*** (0.29)	7.93*** (2.90)
Population (log)	12.27* (7.43)	0.11* (0.06)	-0.84 (0.57)
GDP growth	-0.98 (0.99)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.11 (0.10)
Life expectancy	-4.67* (2.39)	-0.04* (0.02)	0.35* (0.19)
Constant	43.53 (112.35)	0.19 (0.89)	93.33*** (8.29)
Observations	193	193	192
Year FE	+	+	+

Note: Includes year dummies. Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

To give a better sense of the effects, we present simulations based on our models. In a country such as Nigeria, where democratic quality improved from a V-Dem-score of 0.40 to 0.63 from 2009 to 2016, based on our estimates, the legislative agenda is predicted to change from 70 to 153 bills, from 0.78 to 1.28 on the entropy score, and from 92.21 to 86.88 on the stability score. In contrast, in a country such as Zimbabwe, with a V-Dem-score of 0.27 in 2012, we expect 29 bills on the legislative agenda, an entropy score of 0.39, and a stability score of 95.38. At the opposite end, in a country such as South Africa, with a V-Dem-score of 0.78 in 2012, we predict 82 laws on the legislative agenda, an entropy score of 0.81, and a stability score of 92.90. These examples underline the remarkable changes to the agenda size and diversity, and a more modest change in stability.

In addition to the between effect on which we have focused, it is notable how the within effect points in the same direction despite the limited variation on this part of the democracy

variable. It may take much longer time series to see statistically significant effects here. The lack of within effect is obviously a concern for strict causal claims, but it is also an artifact of our type of data focusing on slow-moving institutions.^x

Discussion

The legislative agenda is the centerpiece of the policymaking process in representative democracy. Issues must reach the legislative agenda and the parliament floor to become legislation and bring policy change. This article has introduced a new dataset in which we have issue-classified bills and laws on the legislative agenda in 13 African countries over time. This dataset addresses a glaring lack of data on a critical topic and therefore provides an important opportunity to advance the research agenda on African legislatures.

It is vital to understand how the legislative agenda is formed in the African context, perhaps especially regarding the design of political institutions such as elections and civil liberties. If the legitimacy of the political system hinges on the ability and willingness of decision-makers to tackle emerging issues, then it is essential to understand the barriers to establishing an accountability linkage between voters and legislators. Starting down this path, we explore how democratic development relates to the legislative agenda. We find that a higher level of democratic development is associated with a legislative agenda that carries more issues, covers a more diverse array of issues, and is more dynamic.

Nonetheless, a wealth of questions remains unaddressed. The degree to which such changes correspond with changes in citizen's priorities and demands is still unclear. The legislative agenda consists of real issues and real concerns (Baumgartner and Jones 2005), and might therefore change more in more democratic states if accompanied by citizen pressure for change on policy issues. If the legislative agenda is responsive to mass public

concerns, this is stronger evidence that African legislatures are institutions of significance. Future research should investigate this interplay, for example by relying on our data on the legislative agenda and Afrobarometer data. We also see a promising avenue of research into the downstream effects of a broader legislative agenda in African parliaments. It might even be possible that a broader legislative agenda triggers a virtuous circle in which citizens become more attentive to politics and elect more responsive politicians.

A parallel and potentially wider research agenda addresses the substantive representation in the legislature of issue priorities of different constituencies. A major quality of our dataset is how it allows the analysis of legislative politics on the policy issue level. Different voter constituencies have different demands. Issue-level analysis facilitates the exploration of which constituencies are catered to at a specific time. A non-exhaustive list of divides to explore include urban vs rural, men vs women, and ethnic majorities vs minorities. The structure of the dataset also allows the study of issue-level responsiveness and how fast the government reacts to emergencies. For instance, our dataset makes it possible to investigate the extent to which a failed harvest and farmer despair generate attention to agriculture on the legislative agenda and whether this depends on how crowded the legislative agenda already is (Jennings et al. 2011).

The countries included in our new dataset vary considerably in terms of institutional arrangements. To enable the study of such arrangements in relationship to the legislative agenda, we include a wide assortment of relevant variables from esteemed international datasets. These data allow researchers to get even closer to the inner workings of legislative politics in Africa through systematic, cross-country analysis. Thus, we could address research questions like how does the electoral system affect politicians' incentives to respond to voter input and put issues on the agenda? Moreover, does the African legislative agenda depend on

the number of parties in parliament? The relative size of these parties? Or the time at which they have been present in parliament?

Furthermore, systematic, high-quality data on the legislative agenda allows us to document sweeping changes in which issues occupy the political elite. From studies of Western democracies, we know that such changes at the elite level can dramatically rearrange coalitions in parliament and society, reorganize cleavage structures, and realign voter–politician relations (Green-Pedersen 2019). By extension, the composition of the legislature is also likely to affect the legislative agenda. If old, privileged men dominate the legislature, the legislative agenda is probably different from a legislature with a stronger presence of younger, female representatives.

These are but a few of the questions that could be studied with the use of the new dataset within the realm of African politics. However, our dataset also facilitates the comparative study of African legislatures and legislatures from other world regions for which similar data are available (Alemàn 2006; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Chan and Zhao 2016; Crisp and Schibber 2014; Morgenstern and Nacif 2002; Mortensen et al. 2011; Or 2019). For scholars of political agenda setting in Africa and beyond, this new dataset could be a valuable new resource. This is the first systematic, large-scale cross-country, cross-issue study over an extended period outside Western democracies that demonstrates the scientific gains of covering more terrain. Including Africa brings variation on variables that, by comparison, hardly vary in Western democracies (e.g., election quality) and can therefore generate fundamental insights into how the basic political organization affects the legislative agenda.

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ⁱ Legal Notices are rules issued by the executive, which are published in the Kenya Gazette and have the force of law.

ⁱⁱ For example, Burscher et al. (2015) train a different kind of classifier to code Dutch parliamentary questions using the same CAP coding scheme, and they reach an F1 score of 68%.

ⁱⁱⁱ Scholars also use the "kurtosis" score to describe the shape of the distribution of changes to the issue content of the agenda (Baumgartner et al., 2009). We report this score in the appendix (Table A7) to our analysis.

^{iv} For robustness, we also test an index ("v2x_libdem") that combines the rule of law ("v2x_liberal") and our main measure "v2x_polyarchy" in the Appendix, Table A9.

^v Baumgartner et al. (2009) use "friction" to describe a limited flow of information and refer to "high kurtosis" to describe a shorter and narrower agenda.

^{vi} In the Appendix (Section II), we provide additional analyses of each component of the index of democratic development in order to come closer to which part of the democratic development is more important.

^{vii} Because of the relatively short time series of this study, we avoid a lagged dependent variable in order to avoid biased and inconsistent estimates of the explanatory variables and to avoid losing multiple observations in our somewhat limited dataset. As noted by Wawro (2002, p. 29), the bias of including a lagged dependent variable is of order $1/T$. Yet including a lagged dependent variable does not change our results substantively (Appendix, Tables A6).

^{viii} We can largely reproduce our results in a standard random effects model in which the between effect and within effect are collapsed into one variable (Appendix, Tables A3–A4). As anticipated from a hybrid logic, however, results are weaker (although substantively unchanged) in a fixed effects model that eliminates the between effects (Appendix, Table A5).

^{ix} In the Appendix, we provide additional analyses of bills and laws separately. Tables A1–A2 illustrate how democratic development (between-effect) is systematically associated with a larger and more diverse legislative agenda when only looking at laws. For the very small dataset on bills only (42 observations), we only see a systematic within effect; the between effect is not statistically significant.

^x This within-effect also applies to the much reduced sample of bills in Table A1 in the Appendix, which covers only 42 country-year observations.