

## Counting parties and identifying dominant party systems in Africa

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**Abstract.** By most definitions, the third wave of democratisation has given rise to dominant parties and dominant party systems in Africa. The effective number of parties, the most widely used method to count parties, does not adequately capture this fact. An analysis of 59 election results in 18 sub-Saharan African countries shows that classifications of party systems on the basis of the effective number of parties are problematic and often flawed. Some of these problems are well known, but the African evidence brings them out with unusual clarity and force. It is found that Sartori's counting rules, party system typology and definition of a dominant party are still the most helpful analytical tools to arrive at an accurate classification of party systems and their dynamics in general, and of dominant party systems in particular.

### Introduction

Multi-party elections do not lead automatically to multi-party systems. In sub-Saharan Africa, the spread of multi-party politics in the 1990s has given rise to dominant parties. A majority of African states has enjoyed multi-party elections, but no change in government (Bratton & van de Walle 1997; Baker 1998; Herbst 2001; Cowen & Laakso 2002). In some countries where a change in government did take place, the former opposition is by now well entrenched in power. This has led to the prediction of an 'enduring relevance of the model of single-party dominance' (O'Brien 1999: 335). By the end of the 1990s, observers were expressing concern about the prospect of 'de facto one-party regimes' in Africa (Good 1997; Giliomee & Simkins 1999a). This situation bears an uncanny resemblance to the situation after independence (Schachter 1961).

The aim of this contribution is to evaluate how the general literature on counting parties and types of party system can help with the identification of dominant parties and party systems in Africa. It does not concern itself with either the sources of one-party dominance or its consequences. The leading question will be: Which definition of dominance, typology of party systems and method of counting parties are most helpful for an accurate identification of dominant parties and party systems in Africa?

The argument proceeds in two steps. First, the article provides a brief review of definitions of dominant parties and party systems. The most promising definitions of party dominance and party system typologies are then applied to a data set of 18 African countries with a total of 59 elections. These are all sub-Saharan African countries that have held three or more consecutive multi-party elections up until the end of 2002. It will be demonstrated that at least half of these countries has or had a dominant party and party system by most definitions. The second part approaches the same issue from a different angle, looking at the number of parties and how to count them. After a brief review of the different methods for counting parties, the various measures are applied to the African data. It will be shown that the most widely used method – the effective number of parties – frequently fails to capture party dominance. The article then goes on to demonstrate that attempts to make inferences about the type of party system on the basis of indexes of party number are seriously flawed and fail to detect many of Africa's dominant party systems. The conclusion is that Sartori's counting rules, party system typology and his definition of a dominant party are still indispensable to arrive at an accurate classification of party systems and their dynamics in general, and of dominant party systems in particular.

The advantages of Sartori's framework of analysis are fivefold. First, Sartori's counting rules are not strictly based on relative size, but on the number of relevant actors in electoral competition and government formation. Second, Sartori's analysis employs a conception of dominance absent in continuous measures of party number. Third, the distinction between dominant and dominant authoritarian party systems encourages an identification of the nature of dominance. Fourth, dominant party systems are embedded in a typology of party systems. In fact, there are two typologies: one for structured party systems and one specifically designed for Africa's fluid politics and unstructured party systems. Finally, and decisively, Sartori's counting rules, his definition of a dominant (authoritarian) party system, and typology of party systems provide a unified and coherent framework of analysis that is sensitive to context and time. By contrast, the quantitative counting rules dominating the literature have no intrinsic relationship to party systems, making any attempt to go from one to the other extremely hazardous.

## **Dominant parties**

Definitions of party dominance can usefully be distinguished by means of four criteria: the threshold for dominance; the inclusion or exclusion of opposition features; in presidential systems of government: the presence or absence of

divided government; and the time-span taken into account. The simplest definition of party dominance relies only on vote or seat share; it is not interested in the make-up of the opposition, does not take into account presidential systems of government and is limited to a single legislature. The most complex definition includes all four dimensions.

Table 1 provides an overview of the main definitions of party dominance. The definitions by Van de Walle and Butler (1999) and Coleman (1960) apply to party systems in sub-Saharan Africa, while the definitions by Blondel (1968), Ware (1996) and Pempel (1990a) apply to established democracies. Sartori's definition applies to both. Although the criteria are identical, Sartori uses the term 'predominant party' in the context of a structured party system and 'dominant party' for an unstructured party system. Ware further distinguishes between a 'party system with one large party and several smaller' ones (simply labelled 'dominant' in Table 1) and a 'predominant party system'.

As can be seen in Table 1, the threshold for dominance ranges from a mere plurality of votes and seats to 70 per cent of the seats, with several positions in between. The two authors using the highest thresholds both applied their research to Africa. Although no reason is given, one may surmise that this is related to the nature of African political parties, which are 'plagued by weak organisations, low levels of institutionalisation, and weak links to society' (Van de Walle & Butler 1999: 15). In the case of weak party discipline and a high likelihood of defections, presumably a party's majority needs to be substantial to be effective. However, the argument also works the other way around, as weak parties make it easier for the ruling party to win over opposition deputies. There is ample evidence to attest to the success of this strategy, obviating the need for a substantial party majority. There thus seems no reason to limit the qualification of dominance to a small category of supermajorities.

More pertinent is the distinction between plurality and majority dominance. Pempel and Ware recognize dominant parties with less than half of the seats in parliament, whereas Blondel identifies dominance with less than half of the votes. By contrast, the predominant party system types of Ware and Sartori require an absolute majority.<sup>1</sup> In the case of an absolute majority, the make-up of the opposition loses much of its relevance. One more condition needs to be satisfied. With a presidential form of government, the dominant party must control both parliament and the presidency. Existing definitions of dominance were developed for parliamentary forms of government, but in Africa most countries have a strong presidency. Divided government signals the absence of dominance. In what follows, we will speak of a dominant party (system) when one party has won a parliamentary majority plus the presidential elections, where present, in three consecutive multi-party elections.

Table 1. Definitions of dominant parties

Author(s)	Coleman	Van de Walle & Butler	Ware predominant	Sartori (pre-)dominant	Ware dominant	Blondel	Pempel
Threshold of dominance	70% (seats)	60% (seats)	50% (seats)	50% (seats)	45–50% (seats)	40–50% (votes)	Plurality (votes & seats)
Opposition	Dispersed	–	Divided	–		Double the vote share of the runner up	
President	–	–	–	No divided government*	Several smaller parties	Multiple opposition helpful	Inferior bargaining position
Duration	Analysis limited to single election	Analysis limited to single election	Permanent	Three consecutive elections	Dominant party should win 'usually'	Analysis over twenty-year period	'Substantial period'

\* This feature is my own addition.

## **Dominant party systems**

In Sartori's (1976: 44) famous definition, a dominant party effectively determines 'the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition', thereby creating a dominant party system. After having settled on a definition of dominant parties, we now need a typology of party systems in order to proceed.

Van de Walle and Butler (1999) break down African party systems into two types: 'one party-dominant systems', in which the largest party has more than 60 per cent of the legislative seats, and 'fragmented party systems', in which the largest party has less than half of the legislative seats. This typology raises two immediate difficulties. First, where does one place those countries in which one party occupies between 50 and 60 per cent of the seats? Second, the category of fragmented party systems is very diverse. In the cases cited, the seat share of the largest party ranges from less than 20 per cent to nearly 50 per cent. Only the first case could be called fragmented. In effect, the breakdown made by Van de Walle and Butler is not between dominant and fragmented party systems, but between dominance and no dominance. Even this distinction is imperfect as it ignores majorities with less than 60 per cent of the seats.

Coleman's (1960) typology likewise suffers from a lack of discriminatory power. Of the 14 territories with a 'one-party-dominant system', eight have single-party legislatures, suggesting that these may be non-democratic political systems without the plurality of parties necessary to speak of a party system. A total of 12 of the 16 territories with a 'competitive party system' (the other main category) have majority parties. Some of these have more than 70 per cent of the seats, but not the fragmented opposition that Coleman deemed necessary to qualify as a one-party dominant system.

Pempel is only interested in the dominant party as such, whereas Blondel and Ware develop elaborate typologies of party systems. There are problems involved in the transposition of party system typologies developed for established (Western) democracies to Africa (Erdmann 1999). Reynolds (1999: 71) adapts Blondel's classification of party systems for Southern Africa. In addition to Blondel's 'multi-party system with a dominant party', defined by Reynolds as more than three parties in parliament, Reynolds distinguishes a 'dominant one-party system'. However, while the label is the same, the content is not. The dominance of the ruling party in Reynold's 'multi-party system with a dominant party' far exceeds the 40 to 50 per cent of the vote Blondel thought typical for established Western democracies and by consequence the opposition is much weaker. The distinction between a multi-party system with a dominant party and a dominant one-party system is based on the absolute number of parties in parliament, with Reynolds drawing the line at four

parties. This yardstick does not take into account the strength of the opposition and sees fragmentation of the opposition as a sign of a viable multi-party system instead of as contributing to the ruling party's dominance, as most other analysts do.

The most comprehensive typology of party systems is still offered by Sartori. Of special interest is his separate typology of African party systems. Sartori distinguishes between structured (strong) and unstructured (feeble) party systems. A good indicator of a structured party system is the presence of genuine mass parties. By all accounts, mass parties are conspicuous by their absence in Africa. Most African parties are based on personalist and clientelist ties leaving even dominant parties prone to internal fractionalisation (Van Cranenburgh 1996; Bratton & van de Walle 1997). Only a handful of African party systems can be considered 'institutionalised' (Kuenzi & Lambright 2001).

Sartori distinguishes four types of multi-party system for Africa's 'fluid' polities: dominant authoritarian, dominant, non-dominant and pulverised (Sartori 1976: 260, Table 30). The non-dominant party system is described as a situation of 'relatively few parties that actually counterweight one another' (Sartori 1976: 258) and the pulverised party system speaks for itself. The dominant party system is simply described as the 'fluid' equivalent of the 'pre-dominant' party found in the 'formed' polities of the Western world (Sartori 1976: 261). This would suggest an absolute majority over at least three consecutive elections. Of special interest is the dominant *authoritarian* party system, in which one-party dominance is maintained by extra-democratic means. The authoritarian dominant party does not allow for competition on an equal basis and alternation in power is only a theoretical possibility.

We are dealing here with 'plebiscitary elections against token opposition' (Joseph 1998: 6) and 'pseudo-democracies': regimes 'that have multiple parties and many other constitutional features of electoral democracy but that lack at least one key requirement – an arena of contestation sufficiently fair that the ruling party can be turned out of power' (Diamond 1999: 15). The distinction between dominant and dominant authoritarian party systems can be operationalised by recourse to the Freedom House (various years) scores for political and civil liberties. Since we are interested in the conditions of political competition, the appropriate distinction is between free countries, electoral democracies in partially free countries ('el dem' in Table 2), and partially free and unfree countries that are not an electoral democracy. In the last case, a dominant party system has to be classified as dominant *authoritarian*. As can be seen in Table 2, an alternative breakdown between free countries, on the one hand, and partially free and unfree countries, on the other, would change few classifications.

In sum, Sartori's typology of African party systems has several advantages. First, the typology is specifically designed for the African situation. Second, Sartori (1976: 255) reminds us that in the context of unstructured party systems with 'quasi-parties' diffuse constellations are to be expected. For that reason, the categories are explicitly meant to be 'provisional', true to the nature of fluid politics (Sartori 1976: 246–248). Third, unlike their African alternatives, Sartori's categories are comprehensive and exhaustive. Fourth, the distinction between dominant and dominant authoritarian party systems encourages the identification of the nature of dominance and a distinction between different kinds of one-party dominance.

### **Dominant parties and party systems in Africa**

Table 2 presents an overview of 59 parliamentary election results and a characterisation of the party system for all 18 sub-Saharan African countries that held at least three consecutive legislative multi-party elections up until the end of 2002, allowing for more precise observations of the emerging patterns of electoral competition and government formation. As Coleman (1960: 294) already noted, 'one can make valid judgements regarding the character of a party system only on the basis of an analysis of the structure and interaction of political parties within that order over a reasonable period of time'. For the few older democracies on the continent, four elections were included.

To simplify representation and facilitate comparison, the party system typologies of Blondel and Ware have been reduced to three categories. For Blondel (1968), a distinction is made between cases that qualify as a multi-party system with a dominant party ('dom' for dominant), cases where the dominance of the leading party exceeds Blondel's ceiling of 50 per cent of the votes ('too dom' for 'too dominant' to fit into the category of 'multi-party system with a dominant party') and cases with no dominant party ('not dom'). For Ware (1996), the distinction is between his categories of 'one large party with several smaller ones' ('dom') and 'predominant parties' ('predom'), those parties that have an absolute majority but no permanent monopoly on government power ('too dom'), and cases without dominance. Classifications for Walle and Butler (1999) and for Sartori (1976) simply follow the types provided by these authors: fragmented ('fragmen') versus dominant ('dom') party system and the breakdown between pulverised ('pulver'), non-dominant ('non dom'), dominant ('dom') and dominant authoritarian ('dom auth'), respectively. Majority parties with less than 60 per cent of the seats cannot be classified under Walle and Butler's (1999) scheme ('no class').

Table 2. Emerging party systems in Africa

Country	Election year	Vote share winner	Seat share winner	Seat share runner-up	Freedom House score	Blondel	Ware	Van de Walle & Butler	Sartori
Benin	1991	19.0	19.0	14	free	not dom	not dom	fragnen	pulver
	1995	<b>15.0</b>	<b>25.0</b>	<b>23</b>	free	not dom	not dom	fragnen	pulver
	1999	23.0	32.0	12	free	not dom	not dom	fragnen	pulver
Botswana	1984	68.0	82.0	15	free	too dom	predom	dom	dom
	1989	65.0	91.0	9	free	too dom	predom	dom	dom
	1994	55.0	67.0	32	free	too dom	predom	dom	dom
	1999	57.0	82.0	15	free	too dom	predom	dom	dom
	1992	48.5	73.0	11	partly free	dom	predom	dom	dom auth
Burkina Faso	1997	69.0	91.0	5	partly free	too dom	predom	dom	dom auth
	2002	49.5	51.0	<b>15</b>	partly free	dom	predom	no class	dom auth
	1992	45.5	49.0	38	not free	not dom	not dom	fragnen	dom auth
	1997	48.0	61.0	<b>24</b>	not free	dom	predom	dom	dom auth
	2002	n.a.	83.0	12	not free	n.a.	predom	dom	dom auth
Cape Verde	1991	66.0	71.0	29	free	too dom	predom	dom	non dom
	1995	61.0	69.0	29	free	too dom	predom	dom	non dom
	2001	<b>49.9</b>	<b>55.0</b>	<b>42</b>	free	not dom	not dom	no class	non dom
	1990	n.a.	52.5	17	partly free	n.a.	predom	no class	dom auth
Gabon	1996	n.a.	70.0	<b>8</b>	partly free	n.a.	predom	dom	dom auth
	2001	n.a.	70.8	<b>5</b>	partly free	n.a.	predom	dom	dom auth
	1992	77.0	95.0	4	partly free	too dom	predom	dom	non dom
Ghana	1996	53.0	66.0	31	el dem	too dom	predom	dom	non dom
	2000	<b>45.0</b>	<b>49.7</b>	<b>46</b>	free	not dom	not dom	fragnen	non dom
Kenya	1992	24.0	49.5	15	partly free	not dom	dom	fragnen	non dom
	1997	n.a.	51.4	19	not free	n.a.	predom	no class	non dom
	2002	56.0	59.0	<b>30</b>	el dem	not dom	not dom	dom	non dom
Lesotho	1993	75.0	100.0	0	el dem	too dom	predom	dom	dom
	1998	61.0	97.0	1	el dem	too dom	predom	dom	dom
	2002	55.0	65.0	18	el dem	too dom	predom	dom	dom
Mali	1992	48.0	65.0	8	free	dom	predom	dom	non dom
	1997	75.0	87.0	<b>5</b>	free	too dom	predom	dom	non dom
	2002	n.a.	<b>44.9</b>	<b>40</b>	free	n.a.	not dom	not dom	non dom



Madagascar	1993	n.a.	34.0	11	el dem	n.a.	not dom	fragem	non dom
	1998	n.a.	<b>42.0</b>	<b>11</b>	el dem	n.a.	not dom	fragem	non dom
	2002	n.a.	<b>64.0</b>	<b>14</b>	el dem	n.a.	not dom	dom	non dom
Mauritania	1992	67.0	85.0	1	not free	too dom	predom	dom	dom auth
	1996	68.0	89.0	1	not free	too dom	predom	dom	dom auth
	2001	n.a.	79.0	5	not free	n.a.	predom	dom	dom auth
	1987	47.0	63.0	34	free	not dom	not dom	fragem	non dom
Mauritius	1991	55.0	45.5	41	free	not dom	not dom	fragem	non dom
	1995	<b>65.0</b>	<b>91.0</b>	<b>3</b>	free	too dom	not dom	fragem	non dom
	2000	52.0	82.0	11	free	not dom	not dom	fragem	non dom
	1989	57.0	57.0	29	free	not dom	predom	no class	dom
Namibia	1994	74.0	74.0	21	free	too dom	predom	dom	dom
	1999	76.0	76.0	10	free	too dom	predom	dom	dom
	1991	54.0	60.0	38	free	not dom	not dom	dom	non dom
São Tomé & Príncipe	1994	<b>42.0</b>	<b>49.0</b>	25	free	not dom	not dom	fragem	non dom
	1998	51.0	56.0	29	free	not dom	not dom	no class	non dom
	2002	40.0	44.0	42	free	not dom	not dom	fragem	non dom
	1988	71.0	86.0	14	partly free	too dom	predom	dom	dom auth
Senegal	1993	57.0	70.0	22	partly free	too dom	predom	dom	dom auth
	1998	50.0	66.0	16	partly free	dom	predom	dom	dom auth
	2001	<b>49.6</b>	<b>74.0</b>	<b>9</b>	el dem	not dom	not dom	not dom	non dom
Zambia	1991	74.0	83.0	17	free	too dom	predom	dom	dom
	1996	61.0	87.0	3	partly free	too dom	predom	dom	dom auth
	2001	28.0	46.0	<b>33</b>	partly free	not dom	dom	not dom	dom auth?
Zimbabwe	1985	77.0	64.0	15	partly free	too dom	predom	dom	dom auth
	1990	80.0	97.0	<b>2</b>	partly free	too dom	predom	dom	dom auth
	1995	81.0	98.0	<b>2</b>	partly free	too dom	predom	dom	dom auth
	2000	n.a.	52.0	<b>47</b>	partly free	n.a.	predom	no class	dom auth

Notes: Seat share is calculated as a percentage of the total number of elected seats; for key to cell labels, see main text; bold indicates that the figure applies to a party different from the previous election.

Source: Nohlen et al. (1999), supplemented with information from various editions of 'Africa South of the Sahara' (London: Europa Publishers), the 'Africa Research Bulletin: Political, Social and Cultural Series', plus election results reported by the Interparliamentary Union (IPU) on their website: [www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports](http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports) and the Election Guide of the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) at: [www.ifes.org/eguide/elecguide.htm](http://www.ifes.org/eguide/elecguide.htm).

Table 2 confirms the tendency observed in the literature (Van Cranenburgh 1996; Bratton 1998; Giliomee & Simkins 1999a; Bogaards 2000): dominant parties dominate in sub-Saharan Africa. This result stands irrespective of the definition of dominance used. There is a very high correlation between the classifications of Blondel, Ware and Sartori, despite their different thresholds and Blondel's reliance on vote shares instead of seat shares. Van de Walle and Butler's classification occasionally diverges and when that happens, the result is invariably misleading. For example, Van de Walle and Butler would classify Ghana's party system after the 2000 elections as 'fragmented', even though one party won 49.7 per cent of the seats with 45 per cent of the votes and the runner up took 46.2 per cent of the seats. In case of disagreement, Sartori's typology and criteria yield what would appear to be the most informative and defensible classification. His four types have the advantage of covering the complete range of cases while providing information on the nature of one-party dominance. This last advantage is especially pertinent because even though 'the vast majority of African states are now multi-party electoral regimes', these 'vary from relatively liberal democracies to thinly veiled personal dictatorships' (Van de Walle 2002: 67).

Of the 18 African countries with three or more consecutive legislative multi-party elections, eight have a dominant party system while one (Senegal) had a dominant party system that was finally ended by opposition victory in the last elections. Eight countries qualify as contemporary dominant party systems since their ruling parties have won three consecutive absolute majorities: Botswana, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Lesotho, Mauritania, Namibia and Zimbabwe. Cameroon also falls into this category, even though the ruling party fell three seats short of an absolute majority in 1992. Contemporary Zambia is a more doubtful case. The ruling party won its third consecutive parliamentary and presidential elections in 2001, but secured only 46 per cent of the seats with a mere 28 per cent of the vote. Although Zambia's MMD still counts as a dominant party under Pempel (1990b) and Ware's (1996) criteria, and at least one observer has classified Zambia as a predominant party system before and after the 2001 elections (Burnell 2001, 2002), Zambia will be excluded from further analysis to err on the safe side. Bratton (1998: 64) observed how second elections in Africa show a trend towards 'domination by ruling parties' and the figures in Table 2 indicate that this trend has extended into third elections. The average seat share of the dominant parties for the most recent elections in this set of countries is 80 per cent. The average vote share, where it is known, is 59 per cent. By contrast, the average seat share of the runner up is 16 per cent.

Senegal is an exception in that it is the only African country where a dominant party lost to the opposition at the polls, after controlling multi-party elec-

tions for over two decades. In four other countries, ruling parties won two consecutive elections during the 1990s but lost the most recent ones. In Cape Verde and Mali, former opposition parties that came to power in the early 1990s lost the third elections. In Ghana and Kenya, former authoritarian parties that prolonged their rule through electoral victory in two successive multi-party elections finally lost to opposition forces in the new millennium. In retrospect, this outcome qualifies their party systems during the 1990s as non-dominant, even though the behaviour of the ruling parties in Ghana and Kenya often was very similar to that of dominant authoritarian parties. These cases can be regarded as examples of lost dominance (Senegal) or failed attempts to establish dominance (Ghana, Kenya and perhaps also Cape Verde and Mali) and should be studied for a better understanding of the factors that can end and pre-empt one-party dominance in Africa.

### Counting parties

Having established that many African countries have dominant party systems, the question is how well different rules for counting political parties capture this reality. As these counting rules are widely used in political science, especially in comparative politics, this question is of obvious importance.

What happens in the absence of a sound typology of party systems and clear and consistent counting rules for the number of parties is illustrated by Sandbrook's (1996) attempt to classify party systems in six African countries as either a stable two-party system or an unstable factional model. First, this typology does not even allow for the dominant party systems that prevail in Africa. Second, the dichotomy is *ad hoc* and loaded with assumptions about (in)stability that are better treated as empirical questions. A third problem is the lack of discerning power, as two-party systems are exceedingly rare in Africa. Third, characteristics are operationalised in an arbitrary way. Because of factions in the ruling party, Zambia's party system is said to be fragmented.<sup>2</sup> To count the number of parties in Mali, the total number registered is taken. Only through such arbitrary and changing operationalisations can these countries be placed under the heading of 'unstable factional models'.

Sartori has devised explicit rules for counting the number of systemically relevant parties. His counting rules are not strictly based on relative size, but on the number of relevant actors in party competition and government formation. Only those parties are relevant that have either coalition potential or blackmail potential. A party is said to have coalition potential when, regardless of its size, it 'may be needed as a coalition partner for one or more of the

possible governmental majorities' (Sartori 1976: 122). A party is considered to have blackmail potential 'whenever its existence, or appearance, affects the tactics of party competition' (Sartori 1976: 123). These counting rules apply to parliamentary systems in which the government rests on parliamentary majorities. For presidential systems, 'the counting criteria must be reformulated and relaxed, for the parties that count are simply the ones that make a difference in helping (or obstructing) the president's election, and that determine his having (or not having) a majority support in the legislative assemblies' (Sartori 1994: 34). Most African states have a presidential system of government. Whether concurrent or not, presidential and parliamentary elections in Africa as a rule return the same party to power. Divided government is very rare, but where it does occur it signals the presence of more than one relevant party.

Much more frequently used than Sartori's counting rules are mathematical indexes. The classic example is the 'index of fractionalisation' or F index, devised by Rae (1971). By now, the most used index is the 'effective number of parties' ( $N$ ) devised by Laakso and Taagepera (1979). Their index measures the relative size of parties by letting the vote or seat shares determine their own weights and then add up the weighted values for all parties, resulting in a Herfindahl-Hirschman concentration index. This index can be used to determine the effective number of electoral parties (using vote shares) or the effective number of parliamentary parties (using seat shares). The concentration index and the fractionalisation index can be derived from each other and contain the same information.

Pedersen (1980) already demonstrated that very different party constellations can hide behind the same value of Rae's fractionalisation index and, by consequence, the effective number of parties. By the same token, the same party format can go together with different effective numbers of parties. Using five hypothetical patterns of party system change, Pedersen applied seven indexes to see how well they reflect these changes. Rae's index stands out because it faithfully reports the same value every time, despite the very significant changes in the number and/or size of parties. A concentration index is composed of dimensions (size and number) that can vary independently. This is the technical reason that more than one distribution can generate a given value of the index. On top of that, an index is 'colour blind' (Pedersen 1980: 393). Unlike Sartori's counting rules, which take into account the relative value-positions of parties, an index reports on size only, not on identity. This is not only important for government formation, but also for an assessment of the party system over time, as will become evident below.

Molinar (1991) has exposed much the same flaws in the effective number of parties as Pedersen. As an alternative, he proposes his own index,  $NP$ : 'The

trick in *NP* is to count the winning party differently from the rest, *counting the winning party as one* and weighting *N* by the contribution of the minority parties' (Molinar 1991: 1385; emphasis in original).

Recently, Taagepera (1999) has acknowledged the problem of misrepresentation of his index, which in his view becomes especially urgent when one party has an absolute majority. In the examples discussed by Taagepera, an effective number of parties of three goes together with various party constellations. In several of them, one party has an absolute majority. To characterise the starkest differences among same-*N* constellations, Taagepera recommends the use of a supplementary index, calculated as one divided by the vote or seat share of the largest component. When this complementary index is lower than two, one party has an absolute majority of votes or seats.

### Counting parties in Africa

To verify how well the different counting rules for parties reflect the dominant parties and party systems in Africa that were previously identified, Table 3 provides the effective number of parties (*Ns*), the value for Taagepera's supplementary index (Taag2), Molinar's number of effective parties (*NP*), the effective number of electoral parties (*Nv*), the number of relevant parties following Sartori's counting rules and four different ways to identify the party system.<sup>3</sup> Included in Table 3 are all nine countries that were identified as having dominant party systems. This section compares the values for the different counting rules, while the next section evaluates the different ways to identify the party system.

According to its proponents, 'the use of effective number *N* . . . has become widespread because it usually tends to agree with our average intuition about the number of serious parties' (Taagepera 1999: 498). However, intuitions can be misleading in Africa. Almost half of the elections return an effective number of parties of around two (i.e., within the range of 1.6 to 2.4). On the face of it, this suggests a two-party system, but the reality can be very different. To give just one example: in Gabon the number of effective parties has been exactly two in the last two elections. The average over the three multi-party elections conducted since 1990 is 2.33. Does this mean there are two parties in parliament, let alone that there is a two-party system? Far from it. In the 1996 and 2001 legislative elections, the *Parti Démocratique Gabonais* (PDG) won 70 and 71 per cent of the seats, respectively. In those parliaments, the most successful opposition parties had 8 and 5 per cent respectively. President Omar Bongo, the leader of the PDG, has been in office since 1968, making him the longest serving president on the continent after Eyadéma of

Table 3. Counting parties and identifying dominant party systems in Africa

Country	Election year	Seat share winner	Ns	Taaq2	NP	Nv	Relevant parties	Cohen conversion	Mainwaring & Scully conversion	Coppedge conversion	Sartori
Botswana	1984	82	1.4	1.2	1.0	2.0	1	dom	dom	two	dom
	1989	91	1.2	1.1	1.0	2.0	1	dom	dom	two	dom
	1994	67	1.8	1.5	1.3	2.3	1	dom	two	two	dom
	1999	82	1.4	1.2	1.0	2.4	1	dom	dom	two	dom
Burkina Faso	1992	73	1.8	1.4	1.0	3.6	1	dom	two	moderate	dom auth
	1997	91	1.2	1.1	1.0	2.0	1	dom	dom	two	dom auth
	2002	51	3.3	2.0	1.1	3.6	1	multi	limited	moderate	dom auth
	1992	48.9	2.5	2.0	2.0	2.9	1	two	two&half	moderate	dom auth
Cameroon	1997	61	2.3	1.6	1.3	3.3	1	two	two	moderate	dom auth
	2002	83	1.4	1.2	1.0	n.a.	1	dom	dom	n.a.	dom auth
	1990	52.5	3.0	1.9	1.5	n.a.	1	multi	limited	n.a.	dom auth
	1996	70	2.0	1.4	1.0	n.a.	1	two	two	n.a.	dom auth
Gabon	2001	71	2.0	1.4	1.0	n.a.	1	two	two	n.a.	dom auth
	1993	100	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.6	1	dom	dom	dom	dom
	1998	97	1.0	1.0	1.0	2.3	1	dom	dom	two	dom
	2002	65	2.2	1.5	1.1	2.7	1	two	two	two	dom
Mauritania	1992	85	1.4	1.2	1.0	2.1	1	dom	dom	two	dom auth
	1996	89	1.3	1.1	1.0	2.1	1	dom	dom	two	dom auth
	2001	79	1.6	1.3	1.0	n.a.	1	dom	dom	n.a.	dom auth
	1989	57	2.4	1.8	1.5	2.4	1	two	two	two	dom
Namibia	1994	74	1.7	1.4	1.1	1.7	1	dom	dom	dom	dom
	1999	76	1.7	1.3	1.0	1.7	1	dom	dom	dom	dom
	1988	86	1.3	1.2	1.0	1.8	1	dom	dom	dom	dom
	1993	70	1.8	1.4	1.2	2.4	1	dom	dom	two	dom auth
Senegal	1998	66	2.1	1.5	1.1	3.2	1	two	two	moderate	dom auth
	2001	74	1.8	1.3	1.0	3.3	2-3	dom	two	moderate	non dom
	1985	64	2.2	1.6	1.2	1.6	1	two	two	dom	dom auth
	1990	97	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.5	1	dom	dom	dom	dom auth
Zimbabwe	1995	98	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.5	1	dom	dom	dom	dom auth
	2000	51.7	2.0	1.9	1.9	n.a.	1	two	two	n.a.	dom auth

Notes: For key to cell labels, see main text; bold indicates disagreement over party system type – for details, see main text.  
Source: see Table 1.

Togo. Clearly, to mistake Gabon for a two-party system would be a serious error.

The values for Taagepera's supplementary index are mostly in between the effective number of parties and Molinar's *NP*, although they are much closer to the latter than to the former. This is to be expected. The effective number of parties is calculated using relative weights of all parties, whereas Taagepera's supplementary index only takes into account the seat share of the largest party, and *NP* considers all parties but gives special consideration to the largest party. The sole purpose of Taagepera's supplementary index is to check for a party with an absolute majority of seats, indicated by a value below two. In other words, it does not contain any information that is not already in the column with the seat share of the largest party. The effective number of electoral parties is consistently higher than all other measures, further reducing its utility for identifying dominant party systems (calculations for incomplete voting data follow Taagepera 1997).

From Table 3, it is clear that *NP* handles dominance better than the effective number of parties. Whenever one party has a parliamentary majority, *NP* is below two. This is an attractive feature, but *NP* can also be below two without a majority party (Taagepera 1999: 498, Table 1). Therefore, *NP* does not consistently capture the distinction between multi-party systems with or without a dominant party, as Molinar (1991: 1389) claims. Moreover, the value of *NP* provides no information on the identity of the majority party; whether it is the same as in previous elections, or a different party. By itself, *NP* gives no indication that the majority party in Senegal in 2001 has changed and that more than two decades of dominance have ended.

The effective number of parties and its variants are calculated separately for each election. However, from the perspective of the party system, elections and electoral outcomes are not discrete events unrelated to each other. On the contrary, it is of greatest importance to identify the patterns established over time. Values of *Ns* and *NP* can be the same for a two-party system with alternating majorities and a dominant party system in which one and the same party enjoys a majority over time. Taagepera's supplementary index will indicate whether one party has a majority, but will not tell us whether it is consistently the same party or whether there is alternation in government. To identify the party system, we have to establish the identity of the winning party and verify whether it changes over time or not. Only in this way can we distinguish between a situation of non-dominance and a dominant party system.<sup>4</sup> Sartori's counting rules have no problem identifying dominant parties and party systems. The number of relevant parties is constant at one, indicating the presence of a majority party. With the exception of Cameroon in 1992, no particular country knowledge was needed to assign these values.

The failure of mathematical indexes to identify party systems illustrates the tension that exists between the assumption of a continuum underlying mathematical measures of party number and ‘jumps’ that occur in real-life politics and are incorporated in discontinuous classification (Sartori 1976: 315–319). In the words of Coppedge (1999: 471): ‘The real problem with continuous indicators is that they measure only thin, reductionist versions of the thicker concepts that interest nonquantitative scholars.’ Having half of the votes or seats plus one is quantitatively and qualitatively different from having just half or half minus one. While typologies of party systems assign empirical cases to mutually exclusive and exhaustive classes, the effective number of parties runs from one to many. In Africa, the effective number of parties ranges from a low of 1.0 after the 1993 elections in Lesotho to a high of 8.8 following the 1991 transition elections in Benin. Despite the predominance of dominant party systems, only three countries have or had exactly one effective party. What does this variation tell us? In other words: what is the difference between 1.1 and 1.9 effective parties, or between 1.7 and 2.3? Do these figures indicate different party systems? That is unlikely, although nothing can be said with certainty before we have looked at the actual configuration of parties. In Africa, anything from one to more than three effective parliamentary parties may indicate a dominant party system. Any variation between these numbers will not point at significant differences, but only distract us from noticing the overwhelming similarities. In this sense, the number of effective parties is actually misleading, because it suggests *relevant* variation where there is none.

### **From counting parties to identifying party systems**

Students of party systems and electoral systems are increasingly experiencing a need to go beyond the effective number of parties to arrive at a typology of party systems. Usually, the interest is not so much in the number of parties as such, but in the ‘patterned interaction’ between them. Since party system mechanics are thought to derive from party number, calculation of the latter should yield the former. However, it will be clear by now that the effective number of parties is not a good guide to understanding the party system and that attempts to go from one to the other are inherently problematic. Table 4 presents an overview of the various conversion methods.

The simplest, and crudest, way to convert the number of parties into types of party systems is to equate them. One effective party entails a dominant party system, two effective parties signal a two-party system, and three or more indicate a multi-party system. Decimals are rounded off.<sup>5</sup> Cohen (1997: 610) follows this approach – not in the definitions, where an effective party is



Table 4. From numbers to types: three conversion methods

Author	Specified number of effective parties per type of party system				
Cohen ( $N_s$ )	Dominant	Two-party		Multi-party	
	<2	2-2,9		>2,9	
Mainwaring & Scully ( $N_s$ )	Dominant	Two-party	Two-and-a-half-party	Limited pluralism	Extreme pluralism
	<1,8	1,8-2,4	2,5-2,9	3-3,9	>3,9
Actual variation of $N_s$ for dominant party systems in Africa (frequency in brackets)	<b>1</b> (4), <b>1,2</b> (2), <b>1,3</b> (2), <b>1,4</b> (4), <b>1,6</b> (1), <b>1,7</b> (2)	<b>1,8</b> (3), <b>2</b> (3), <b>2,1</b> , <b>2,2</b> (2), <b>2,3</b> , <b>2,4</b> , <b>2,5</b> , <b>3</b> , <b>3,3</b>			
Coppedge ( $N_v$ )	Dominant	Two-party		Moderate multi-party	Extreme multi-party
	<2	2-2,9		3-5	>5
Actual variation of $N_v$ for dominant party systems in Africa (frequency in brackets)	<b>1,5</b> (2), <b>1,6</b> (2), <b>1,7</b> (2), <b>1,8</b> (1)	<b>2</b> (2), <b>2,1</b> (2), <b>2,3</b> (2), <b>2,4</b> (3), <b>2,7</b> , <b>2,9</b> , <b>3,2</b> , <b>3,3</b> , <b>3,6</b> (2)			

Note: Data from Table 3.

defined as one 'with influence on the policy-making process', but in the operationalisation, where the effective number of parties is adopted (Cohen 1997: 619–620).

Initially, Mainwaring (1993) used the same simple conversion method. Mainwaring and Scully (1995: 31–32, Figure 1.1 and accompanying text) undertake the exercise of converting the continuous number of effective parties into discontinuous types of party systems in a more conscious and deliberate manner. They decide on a fivefold breakdown: any number below 1.8 stands for a predominant party system, a number between 1.8 and 2.4 indicates a two-party system, a number between 2.5 and 2.9 signals a 'two-and-a-half' party system, a number between 3 and 3.9 is said to correspond to Sartori's category of limited pluralism and any number beyond four points at extreme pluralism.

Power and Gasiorowski (1997) have adopted the same conversion method. Other scholars working on Latin America have developed their own conversion methods. Coppedge (1998: 562, Table 5) distinguishes three types of party system using the effective number of electoral parties: a two-party system (between two and three effective electoral parties), a moderate multi-party system (between 3 and 5 effective electoral parties) and an extreme multi-party system (more than five effective electoral parties).<sup>6</sup> Foweraker (1998: 660), who is especially interested in the question of a presidential majority in parliament, draws the line between party systems with more or fewer than 2.5 effective (parliamentary) parties, 'which is the threshold for a two-party or two-and-one-half-party system'.

These attempts to convert the effective number of parties into an indicator of party system type reveal four things. First, a general desire to go from numbers to types. Cohen, Mainwaring and Scully, and Coppedge all accept Sartori's typology of party systems and even while they do not use his counting rules, they are, in Cohen's (1997: 620) words, 'not looking for the number of effective parties specifically but for types of party systems as the theory generally refers to them'. Second, there is a lack of agreement on the proper conversion method. There are almost as many conversion tables as there are scholars using them. Third, this lack of consensus is inherent in the measure of the effective number of parties. While typologies of party systems assign empirical cases to mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories, the effective number of parties runs from one to many. Any cut-off points on this continuum will be arbitrary, as they are not logically and systematically related to what separates and distinguishes different types of party system. This is so because, fourth, very different party configurations can hide behind the same effective number of parties.

The four columns on the right-hand side of Table 3 identify party system types. The last column uses Sartori's African typology and is based on the rel-

evant number of parties. The preceding three columns are based on the effective number of parties. Three different conversion rules by three different authors are used: Cohen's, Mainwaring and Scully's, and Coppedge's. Table 3 shows a high correspondence between the classifications based on the two conversion methods that use the effective number of parliamentary parties. However, the classifications yielded by Coppedge's conversion method based on the effective number of electoral parties differ in more than a third of the observations.

When the party system classifications based on a conversion from the effective number of parties are compared with Sartori's classification, one sees even more differences. There is substantial disagreement in 14 out of the 30 observations (47 per cent) for the nine countries where the same party secured at least three consecutive parliamentary majorities and the presidency (Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Gabon, Lesotho, Mauritania, Namibia, Senegal and Zimbabwe). Substantial disagreement means that two of the three conversion methods disagreed in their classification with Sartori. Differences between non-dominant types were ignored. Elections with substantially different classifications are highlighted in Table 3 by the emboldened entries. In all these cases, party system qualifications based on conversion methods fail to identify a dominant party and party system, despite consistent parliamentary majorities. It is important to remember that these classifications were not contested, as there was overwhelming agreement between the different definitions of dominant parties and party systems (see Table 2). Switching from elections to countries as the unit of analysis, conversion methods consistently fail to recognise the dominant party system of Gabon.

Another way of illustrating the incongruence between the effective number of parties and party system types is to establish how many observations of the actual number of effective parties in dominant party systems fall outside the boundaries specified for this type. Mainwaring and Scully (1995) place the threshold at 1.8 effective parliamentary parties. However, as can be seen in Table 4, 14 of the 30 observations for dominant party systems fall outside this range. The actual variation of  $N_s$  for dominant party systems in Africa runs all the way up to 3.3 (Burkina Faso in 2002). A total of 11 of the 30 observations fall outside Cohen's range. The results for Coppedge's conversion method based on the effective number of electoral parties are even worse: 15 of the 24 observations in dominant party systems fall outside the range he judges typical. The actual variation of  $N_v$  in African dominant party systems does not stay between the natural minimum of 1.0 and the imposed ceiling of 2.0, but goes as high as 3.6 (Burkina Faso in 1992 and 2002). These results clearly demonstrate that there is very little connection between the effective number of parties, whether parliamentary or electoral, and party system types.

As with the effective number of parties, party system classifications based upon them suggest relevant change where there is none and may obscure change when it does take place. Because of the arbitrary cut-off points in the conversion schemes, Namibia supposedly changed from a two-party system to a dominant party system in 1994, whereas Gabon allegedly changed in 1996 from a multi-party system to a two-party system. Both cases are in fact dominant (authoritarian) party systems in which the ruling party merely extended its majority lead in subsequent elections. Declining absolute majorities in recent elections in Burkina Faso and Lesotho are thought to signal a change to a multi-party and two-party system respectively, although the ruling parties still secured absolute majorities. Again, what we have here is variation *within* the category of the dominant party system, not party system change, as this entails a change from one type of party system to another (Sartori 1976; Mair 1997).

Different from much contemporary literature with its preoccupation with numbers, the interest of Sartori is not so much in the number of relevant parties as such, as in the dynamics between parties in a party system. The evaluation of conversion methods has shown that the effective number of parties has little to do with Sartori's rules for counting parties and, *per force*, has no systematic relationship to types of party system. This means that for the study of party systems, Sartori's counting rules are still indispensable.

## Conclusion

In most African polities, one party has an absolute majority of seats in the legislature and can govern alone. Definitions of dominant parties and party systems alert us to the worrying trend of one-party dominance in Africa and adequately reveal the wide spread of the phenomenon.

This finding suggests an urgent need for systematic research into the nature, sources, conditions and consequences of dominant party systems in Africa. The general uneasiness about dominant parties in new democracies is well reflected in the title of a recent volume edited by Giliomee and Simkins (1999a): *The Awkward Embrace: One-party Domination and Democracy*. Observers fear the degeneration of dominant parties into dominant authoritarian or hegemonic parties (Giliomee & Simkins 1999b, 1999c). Empirical analyses of the experience with dominant parties in Africa suggest that they are detrimental to the quality of democracy (Van de Walle & Butler 1999: 25) and the prospects of liberal democracy (Du Toit 1999). Dominant-party systems may be especially vulnerable to the erosion from within that

Huntington (1996) identified as the greatest threat to consolidation of third-wave democracies. The emblematic case in Africa is Zambia, where former union leader Chiluba succeeded authoritarian president Kaunda in 1991 in multi-party elections, but has since turned increasingly authoritarian himself (Ihonvbere 1998). The distinction between dominant and dominant authoritarian party systems allows us to monitor changes in the nature of dominance.

By contrast, the effective number of parties and its derivatives fail to correctly identify African party systems and leaves us guessing about the dynamics of party politics on the continent. Mathematical formulas cannot give the information on party systems that is expected of them. The problems with the effective number of parties are increasingly visible as they are used to arrive at a classification of party systems through a conversion rule. Some of these problems are well known, but the African experience brings them out with unusual clarity and force. In Africa, the effective number of parties suggests a variety and changeability of party systems that is largely absent, and hides from view the fact that many third-wave democracies on the continent have dominant party systems. Sartori's counting rules for relevant parties and his discontinuous concept of dominance are still indispensable to come to a meaningful classification of party systems.

Problems with the conversion of the effective number of parties to types of party system suggest the inevitability of a choice between counting rules that are grounded in a conception of inter-party dynamics and a typology of party system, and those that are not. Rae (1968) recommended we opt for the latter, suggesting that we get rid of the 'awkward' and 'theoretically wasteful' concept of multi-partism, with its arbitrary cut-off points and crude categories, and replace it with his notion of 'fractionalisation'. Although indexes have increasingly been used to that effect, this was less a deliberate *choice* than an unintended *consequence*. Judged by the recent attempts to go back from the effective number of parties to types of party system, scholars have come to realise the limits of indexes and the importance of the party system as an analytical construct. This article has argued that the only effective remedy available is a return to Sartori's work, which integrates counting rules with a typology of party systems in a unified and coherent framework of analysis that is sensitive to context and time.

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## Notes

1. Ware's requirement that only a single party should ever govern leaves him with just one case of predominance: Japan until the opposition victory in the 1990s.
2. Burnell (2001) also highlights factionalism in Zambia, while stopping short of disqualifying Zambia as a dominant party system. The fact is that dominance and factionalism can go very well together, as attested to by the notoriously faction ridden LDP in Japan.
3. Mozaffar (1997) calculates the effective number of electoral and parliamentary parties in 27 sub-Saharan African countries, in most cases for only one election, in an exploration of the political consequences of electoral laws, not with the intent to identify party systems.
4. Katz (1997) seems oblivious to this problem. Katz uses a variety of methods to count the number of parties, including one of Sartori's counting rules. Katz (1997: 147; emphasis in original) operationalises coalition potential as 'any party with sufficient seats to be included in *some* potential minimum winning coalition in the legislature'. This operationalisation does not take into account position value and no attempt is made to operationalise blackmail potential. Even more problematic is the following addition to the counting rule: 'if a single party wins a majority, there is only one possible minimum winning coalition, and (by virtue of considering the largest opposition party as also significant) the result is counted automatically as a two-party outcome' (Katz 1997: 147). This way of counting ignores the very possibility of (pre)dominant party systems and results in the automatic (mis)classification of many African party systems as two-party.
5. Taking decimals into account, Lijphart (1994: 69) equates 2.23 effective parties with a 'two-and-a-quarter party system' and 2.41 effective parties with a 'two-and-a-half party system'. Following this logic, we may as well put the term 'party system' behind any given number of effective parties, but by then the concept of 'party system' has lost all meaning.
6. Although Coppedge (1998) does not explicitly introduce the category of dominant party systems, as it falls outside of his research interests, it is clear the threshold lies at two effective electoral parties. Because of limitations to the African data, calculations could not be made for all elections.

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