

Introducing

Andy Harris

Assistant Professor in Political Science at New York University Abu Dhabi

Dr Andy Harris is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at New York University, Abu Dhabi. His research focuses on African political economy, governance, bureaucracies, and research methodology. Andy tells us how he ended up studying politics in Kenya, the perks of moving abroad, and gives us insight into his current work on the quality of election day administration processes.

Andy, you study institutions, bureaucracy, and political behaviour in Africa, focusing on Kenya. Where did the interest to study politics in African countries come from?

I actually spent the first half of my undergrad years focusing on something totally different -- a double major in religious studies and Italian. After my first two years, I took a year off to volunteer near Phokeng, South Africa. By the time I returned to university (at Washington University in St. Louis), I had travelled all around Southern and Eastern Africa. I quickly changed course and started majors in Anthropology and Economics. At the time Douglass North (1993 Nobel laureate in Economics), had assembled a great crew of social scientists and economic historians at WashU. Among those was the economic anthropologist Jean Ensminger, who served as a role model for me. I worked as her research assistant for a year right after she'd moved to CalTech. Around this time, the Working Group in African Political Economy was gaining steam in California, so I was lucky to get to know the work of people like Karen Ferree, Dan Posner, Ted Miguel, and Clark Gibson.

Intellectually, Professor Jean Ensminger sparked my interest in doing the kind of social science research I do now. I really admire



her positivist anthropological research with the Galole Orma in Tana River, Kenya. The book *Making a Market* remains one of my favourite social science pieces. I particularly appreciate the anthropologist's long-term focus on a specific context, which I try to approximate in my work on Kenya. I tend to focus on specific institutions -- the electoral commission and the judiciary, most recently -- and spend a lot of time cultivating networks and relationships with the people that animate those bureaucracies (and adjacent civil society groups). From those relationships, I learn what motivates people within the institutions, how policies are made and implemented, and start to piece together research agendas linking the reality of social processes in these bureaucracies with questions of interest to social scientists.

As a researcher, it is common to move across countries to join different Universities. You are in Abu Dhabi right now, and you also lived in the UK for two years as a postdoc at Nuffield College, Oxford. What are the main pros and cons of moving to a new country for work, in your opinion?

I think that many academics, particularly those trained in the U.S., tend to think that a move abroad for work is a move towards the periphery. That is not consonant with my experience. There have been so many positives to moving abroad. Simply being closer to Kenya makes life so much easier, from scheduling calls to making research trips. Moving to this side of the Atlantic also brought me closer to other excellent academic communities, like GLD, Lise Rakner's team at Bergen, the work coming out of Aarhus/CBS/UCopenhagen, and the nexus of UCL/KCL/LSE/Oxford/Durham in the UK, among many others. It has also positioned me well to do some relational arbitrage, build links between my Kenyan colleagues and the US through WGAPE meetings, and support NYUAD students as they navigate the U.S. grad school application process.

These things have been among the most rewarding parts of my career and wouldn't have been possible from a U.S. base. Needless to say, moving to a new country takes a lot of logistical, social, and emotional work. But, for me, these "cons" are all sorted out in a month or six weeks after arrival; a very small price to pay for the opportunities to be found working in a new place.



Citizens at the polls in Kenya. Photo Credit: Andy Harris

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Finally, what can you tell us about your current research on measuring the quality of election day administration processes?

This project came out of a discussion with a colleague at a large international NGO that supports domestic election monitoring groups worldwide. I was describing my recent *Comparative Political Studies* piece, which uses data that tells us how long it took to count ballots at a polling station, as a proxy for election day lines at the station. In that paper, I show that election day lines significantly decrease turnout at polling stations and that polling stations with such lines often take an hour or more to report their results due to these lines. My colleague was intrigued and remarked that domestic observers often detailed data on timestamps similar to those I used in my work. So now, we're working to validate a set of uniform procedural measures using timestamp data to understand what inequalities in electoral processes and administration exist in government versus opposition areas in many countries and elections.

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