

Introducing

Michael Wahman

Scholar of African Democracy and an Associate Professor of Political Science at Michigan State University

Michael Wahman is a Scholar of African Democracy and an Associate Professor of Political Science at Michigan State University (MSU). He is also a core faculty member at MSU's African Studies Center. Michael focuses on the challenges facing newly democratized countries in arranging free, fair, and credible elections in his work. In this interview, Michael shares what sparked his research interest in African elections and democracy, the role of regionalism in elections, and finally, what emerging areas he plans to explore in the future.



Hi Michael! Your work focuses on issues related to elections and democracy in Africa, such as political regionalism, election violence, representation, and party-system development. Could you expand on your research focus and how you developed an interest in African elections and democracy?

I think it is inevitable that research interests evolve; one question leads to another. In my early career, I was interested in opposition parties competing in electoral authoritarian regimes. In my dissertation project, I interviewed opposition politicians in Kenya. After finishing my dissertation, I became more interested in electoral integrity and, especially after focusing more on Malawi and Zambia, I became interested in electoral integrity and how it varied across space. This is also where I found my interest in election violence. These days, I am increasingly interested not only in how elections can become more free and fair but also

in how elections can translate into effective representation where voters feel like democracy is really working for them to represent their interests and their communities.

Your work emphasizes the importance of regionalism and political competition. How do elections in Africa differ from those in other regions in terms of their impact on these crucial political dynamics?

I think regionalism matters in elections worldwide, but to varying extents. In some countries, elections are more nationalized, and people may identify themselves in relation to identities that transcend regional divisions, such as social class. In other countries, elections are highly structured around regional competition.

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African countries are young state formations, culturally diverse, with staggering spatial inequality. National communication is also more limited than in many other contexts. In much of the Africanist electoral research, researchers have had a primary interest in ethnicity and how ethnic identity affects electoral behavior. Ethnic groups are spatially segregated in Africa due to historical and institutional processes. Without denying that ethnicity matters, much of my research tries to disentangle ethnic and regional explanations for voting behavior and political organization.

Lastly, we know research tends to raise new questions - are there any emerging areas within your field that you plan to explore in the future?

I am increasingly interested in political representation. African democracies are coming of age, but survey data indicates that Africans are still unhappy with how democratic institutions represent their interests. I am particularly interested in parliaments. Members of parliament have a particularly important role in representing their constituents and constituencies, but dissatisfaction with parliaments is significant across the continent. I want to do more work to establish how parliaments can be more representative, both descriptively and substantively.

Listen to Governance Uncovered with Michael!

In October 2023, Michael guested an episode of GLD's podcast, Governance Uncovered, to talk about his book *Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters*, published by Oxford University Press in 2023

[Link to the episode \(via Acast\).](#)



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