

# Introducing Lauren Honig

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Lauren's research focuses on the research and teaching focus on the political economy of development and comparative politics in African countries. She focuses on the politics of property rights, the roles of informal and customary institutions, and state-citizen linkages. Her current research projects examine land rights and plural systems of authority.



**Your recent book and ongoing projects examine the interaction between customary institutions and formal state authority, particularly in land governance. How does your work align with existing theories of institutional pluralism and state capacity, and what implications does it have for how scholars conceptualize authority and legitimacy in contexts where state presence is uneven?**

My initial interest in these issues began when I was an undergraduate studying in Madagascar and continued as I moved to Burkina Faso before graduate school. I was struck by how smallholder farmers drew upon a mix of local community institutions (including councils of notables and village chiefs) and state institutions to secure their property rights. The mixing of these different sets of land rules in the same communities, which I later learned was known as "institutional pluralism," was fascinating to me.

When I started graduate school and turned to the literature to understand the causes and implications of this institutional pluralism, I was surprised to see that these different land tenure regimes were often studied in isolation. The state was depicted as the central actor in determining how property rights developed, and land titling was considered the ideal type of property rights. Yet if this were the case, why weren't people clamoring to register their land with the major donor- and state-funded titling projects in the communities where I had spent so much time? If customary authorities were all corrupt strongmen, co-opted by the state, why did some seem to have popular legitimacy?

This led me to research the differences among customary institutions and push back against notions of the state as a monolith. In my book on Zambia and Senegal, I consider how the institutional structures in which chiefs are embedded impact their behaviors and, ultimately, where formal state property rights develop (Cambridge University Press, 2022). This draws attention to the role of customary institutions in determining the uneven geographic reach of the state and the nature of institutional pluralism. My current work with Adam Harris and Ellen Lust also explores the differences among customary land institutions and examines how the state's uneven reach within Malawi predicts whether customary institutions offer gender-equitable land rights (World Politics, forthcoming). The results suggest how customary institutions can change to become more equitable without being replaced.

I also think it's important for scholars to consider the political implications of living in contexts with institutional pluralism. While the underlying justifications for the legitimacy of customary and state authorities differ, both systems of authority can offer strategic resources to citizens. In my work with Karen Ferree, Ellen Lust, and Melanie Phillips, we show that Malawian citizens valued the legibility of property rights most, regardless of whether they were issued by a customary or state authority (APSR, 2023). This reinforces some of my findings from Zambia, namely that the land documents invented by different chiefs made residents feel more secure on their land (African Affairs, 2022).

Additionally, my project on forum shopping with Patricia Funjika also attempts to de-center the state's authority, while centering citizens' experiences of costs and benefits for engaging with different authorities in institutional pluralism contexts (World Development, 2025). We used fantastic [LGPI data](#) from Malawi, Kenya, and Zambia for this project!

**After years of fieldwork in places like Zambia, Senegal, Malawi, and Burkina Faso, what is one surprising insight you've gained about how people experience property rights and interact with both customary and formal state systems?**

The most important insight I've gained from this fieldwork is that there isn't a universal fix—even within the same country—for property rights issues. There are significant trade-offs to leaving all property rights under customary land tenure or implementing statutory titling on all of a country's land. Some people benefit from securing land through local and socially embedded customary tenure regimes that include complex systems of secondary property rights and establish ties of mutual dependence among communities. Others suffer under these types of customary regimes and would benefit from state titles.

What I've discovered from years of talking to smallholder farmers, land authorities, and civil society activists about these issues is that both statutory and customary property rights regimes create winners and losers, and the stakes of these debates over land tenure regimes are very high for smallholder farmers in low-income countries. Who benefits or loses from a change to statutory property rights depends on status within local institutions, access to enforcement mechanisms, and the quality of these enforcers. For me, the insight that one land tenure type is not universally superior highlights the need for land governance reform in both systems. This has led to my next major research focus, on the drivers of good land governance of state and customary property rights.

**Texts referenced in this interview:**

Honig, L. (2022). *Land Politics: How Customary Institutions Shape State Building in Zambia and Senegal*. Cambridge University Press.

Honig, L. (2022). "The Power of the Pen: Informal Property Rights Documents in Zambia," *African Affairs*, 121(482), pp. 81-107. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adab034>.

Ferree, K.E., Honig, L., Lust, E., and Phillips, M. (2023). "Land and Legibility: When do Citizens Expect Secure Property Rights in Weak States," *American Political Science Review*, 117(1), pp. 42-58. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000417>.

Harris, A., Honig, L., and Lust, E. (Forthcoming). "State Reach and Gender Norms: Examining the Uptake of Equitable Land Rights," *World Politics*.

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**You've spent significant time traveling for research—from rural communities to academic collaborations abroad. How have your experiences living and working in different African countries influenced how you pursue your research?**

I appreciate spending significant time in the countries I research because it helps strengthen collaborations with other researchers, particularly those based in the countries I'm studying. I really value the intellectual back-and-forth of collaborative work and the diverse perspectives that other researchers bring to a project. I also find that so many new insights into my research questions have come from reading daily newspapers and chatting with non-academics about the topics at hand. When I'm doing fieldwork, I always try as much as I can to catch up with friends, acquaintances, and local research organizations, in addition to my more immediate data-collection goals.

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