

An African Re-Immersion

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Thanks to my colleague, Leonardo Villalón, and my wife, Brenda Chalfin, I've had the opportunity once again to don my "Africa hat." In addition to quite literally wearing it in Niger (that's me eating "yellow cake" at the US Ambassador's house on the 4th of July with Florida Circuit Judge, Nikki Clark), I figuratively sported it twice across the Sahel with Leo, and during the fall in Ghana with Brenda and our two kids. Whether spending time in Africa makes one an Africanist, I'll leave to others to decide. But my interactions with activists in six Francophone countries as part of a U.S. State Department grant, and doing research at the Center for Democratic Development in Ghana, allowed me to once again plant my scholarly feet in Africa.

As part of our two-year Trans-Saharan Elections Project funded by the Department of State, Leo and I hosted 15 African visitors and exposed them to the politically charged world of American voting and elections. For three weeks they met with dozens of voting rights activists, elections administrators, elected officials, and scholars in Gainesville, Tallahassee, and Washington, DC. After just the first week, they were ready to comment publicly on the retrenchment of voting rights in Florida. Exposed to the inner workings of the American electoral process, the participants returned to their own countries, satisfied that achieving our standards of voting and elections might be setting the bar too low. Lia Merivaki efficiently orchestrated the organization and logistics of the program, and fellow political science grad students Mamadou Bodian and Dan Eizenga helped along the way.



After our reconnaissance trip in January, Leo and I headed back to Africa during the summer, accompanied by three Americans—a judge, a journalist, and a campaign consultant. Our month-long trek across the Sahel provided us with an opportunity to meet with our participants, partner organizations, and representatives from the US embassies. We also had fruitful discussions with elected officials, judges, journalists, political party operatives, and members of national election commissions. In addition, our small delegation offered at least one major public event in each country, discussing the trials and tribulations of voting and election administration in the US. We even found time for some cultural exchanges, visiting the sacred Tijaniyya Sufi village of Kiota in Niger, watching the catch of the day being hauled in on Mauritania's Atlantic coast, witnessing first-hand the vibrant democratic deliberations of a rural council meeting in Fissel, Senegal, and braving a torrential dust (and then, rain) storm following a hike around Blaise Compaoré's wildlife park in Burkina Faso.

During the fall semester in Ghana, I had the fortune to serve as a Research Associate at the CDD, the country's preeminent think-tank. After a week on the ground, I realized

that the research I had conducted as a Senior Fulbright Scholar a decade earlier on the malapportionment of parliamentary seats and the incidence of invalid ballots was still relevant. The Director of CDD, Professor Gyimah-Boadi, encouraged me to pursue the topics and provided insightful comments as chair of a public lecture I delivered at the University of Ghana. Needless to say, my argument—that in its conscious effort not to be perceived as partisan, the independent Electoral Commission has become obsequious, catering to the demands of political parties, and acceding its constitutional responsibility to guarantee equal representation in Parliament to all Ghanaians and ensure that all ballots are counted equitably—contributed to the ongoing palaver Ghanaians were having during the build-up to the 2012 elections. Though flickering at times, Ghana's electoral maturity as it enters its third decade as a constitutional republic serves as a beacon for the rest of the continent to follow.

Thanks to Brenda and Leo, my interest in African politics has been rekindled. Thanks to the Chair of Political Science, Michael Martinez, I was able to take leave of my teaching and mentoring duties to follow my episodic African passion. And thanks to the enriching experiences in the Sahel and in Ghana, I know I will have new insights into how political institutions shape electoral behavior in my own country.

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