Lagos as a Political Leadership Laboratory: Elite Recruitment, Political Succession and National Power in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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Abstract: Lagos is a singularly important subnational political space in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria where electoral competition, party organisation, executive government, elite networks and access to electoral office overlap. The central question is not just why Lagos is economically and electorally relevant, but how political institutions and networks have worked over time to recruit, socialise, select, test, succeed and reproduce political actors, and when and how some of their accumulated political capital has become relevant to the national political arena. This article builds on the notion of the political leadership laboratory as an integrated meso level approach to analyzing these interrelated processes. The concept is not that recruitment, socialisation, candidate selection, political careers, patronage, and elite reproduction are new mechanisms. Its value is in its ability to combine these well-known processes in a lasting subnational political space and in its clear analysis of the potential for turning subnational political capital into national political influence. The study is based on academic scholarship, party documents, legal records, fiscal data and contemporaneous reporting, and a qualitative longitudinal case study and process tracing from 1999 onwards. The empirical analysis is organised around seven dimensions: recruitment, socialisation, selection, testing, succession, reproduction and nationalisation. The Tinubu period is a moment of political and organisational formation, the Fashola period is a moment of consolidation and adaptation, the Ambode period is a moment of testing the executive autonomy and coalition politics, the Sanwo Lulu period is a moment of reproduction and adaptation, and the national career of Lagos based political networks is a contingent moment of nationalisation. The study reveals the existence of enduring political networks and somewhat regularised recruitment and succession processes, as well as exclusion, conflict, replacement and adaptation. Lagos is thus an analytically relevant case to theorise how subnational political spaces can be used for leadership production and national elite circulation, but not as a case study that can be used to explain national political realities, nor as an example of mechanisms that are found everywhere.

Keywords: Political recruitment, Political succession, Elite reproduction, Subnational politics, Political leadership

1. Introduction

Lagos State is in an exceptional position in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria. It is a significant space for political contestation and leadership nurturing due to its economic value, voting power, organisational density and historical role in politics (Cheeseman and de Gramont, 2017; Kifordu, 2011). Research on Nigerian politics has explored the circulation of elites, party competition, patronage, clientelism and urban political organisation, but the processes by which the subnational arena can regularly recruit, socialise, select, test and reproduce political actors, and sometimes link the resulting political capital to national politics have not been fully engrafted into a single analytical framework (Ekundayo, 2017; Ojo, 2023).

The puzzle here is thus more precise than just saying that Lagos is politically relevant. The economic scale, population and electoral weight and historical importance of the city give reasons why political actors want to be influential in Lagos, but these alone do not show a political leadership laboratory. The analytical question is whether observable processes in the Lagos State political arena offer a sustained environment for political actors to enter into networks, gain political and organisational experience, gain access to political offices, face electoral and governing tests, become involved in succession, stay connected to the political network after a change in personnel, and, in certain cases, mobilise accumulated political capital beyond the state. This separation is crucial as it differentiates between the political conditions of structures and their modes of leadership production.

Based on classical elite theory and more recent studies on political recruitment, political selection, informal institutions, party organisation, political careers and political patronage, this article introduces the concept of the political leadership laboratory as a combined meso level concept. Classical elite theories focus on issues of concentration and circulation, as well as organisational control, while contemporary theories offer more specific explanations of who enters into political organisations, who becomes a candidate, how careers evolve and how formal institutions work with informal practices (Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1935; Michels, 1962; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Helmke and Levitsky, 2004).

The contribution is thus integrative rather than novel mechanisms are responsible. Political recruitment accounts for entry, socialisation accounts for acquiring political knowledge, norms and relationships, filtering of aspirants accounted for by candidate selection, movement across offices and territorial levels accounted for by political career scholarship, organisational mobilisation accounted for by patronage and intermediary research, and continuity and replacement accounted for by elite reproduction. The political leadership laboratory poses the question of how these mechanisms interact repeatedly in a specific subnational context and how political capital gained through these mechanisms can later be applied to the national arena. (Rahat and Hazan, 2001; Borchert and Stolz, 2011).

The empirical study is qualitative and longitudinal in nature with a period from the fourth republic (1999–present date). It does not see the four careers of Bola Tinubu, Babatunde Fashola, Akinwunmi Ambode and Babajide Sanwo Olu as four separate biographies. Instead, these administrations and political episodes are used as evidence in a process tracing sequence. Political and organisational formation is explored during the period of Tinubu, consolidation and adaptation during Fashola, stress testing executive autonomy and candidate selection during Ambode, reproduction and adaptation during Sanwo Olu, and nationalisation of Lagos based networks during the subsequent national period. This is an analytical sequence and not a deterministic sequence. The seven dimensions are represented throughout the period, and specific episodes highlight certain mechanisms.

The study is guided by three questions. How are political actors recruited and socialised into the Lagos political arena? Second, what are the effects of formal and informal processes on selection, testing, succession and reproduction? Third, when can political capital generated in Lagos be useable in national politics? There is clearly a limited response to these questions. Lagos is not seen as representative of the nation, but as an analytically relevant case and national outcomes are interpreted as the result of interaction between Lagos-based resources, broader regional networks, individual political entrepreneurship, national party organisations and federal political incentives.

The rest of the article goes on like this. In Section 2, the theoretical framework is elaborated and adjacent concepts are differentiated. In Section 3, the methodology, evidence strategy, unit of analysis, process tracing design, alternative explanations and analytical transferability are outlined.

Section 4 argues that Lagos State becomes a subnational political arena and that the structural conditions that are brought into the leadership production process can be seen through tangible mechanisms. The laboratory is explored in section 5, through a sequence of formation, consolidation, stress testing, reproduction and adaptation. The contingent nationalisation of political capital is followed in section 6. The implications of the findings are explored in Section 7 and the scope conditions and limits of the argument are presented in Section 8.

2. Theoretical Framework: From Elite Domination to Subnational Political Leadership Production

Classical elite theory offers a basis for the analysis of the focus and reproduction of political power. Mosca (1939) points to the organisational benefits of a governing minority, Pareto (1935) focuses on the rotation and replacement of elites, Michels (1962) focuses on the tendency to the concentration of power within the organisation, and Mills (1956) emphasizes the relationship between control over strategic institutional positions and wider patterns of political, economic and organisational power. These views provide a crucial initial context: political power is not shared equally among all citizens, and formal democratic processes do not necessarily account for the acquisition of enduring power.

Classical elite theory, however, is not adequate to explain the mechanisms explored here. It cannot on its own make sense of access to political networks, selection of candidates, the processes of political career growth in subnational institutions, the organisation of party networks to access office and the potential for political resources created at the subnational level to be mobilised in the national arena. This study thus follows the classical theory but not as an exhaustive account of subnational leadership production.

The concept of political recruitment scholarship focuses on how people get into the party, into the legislative body, into the executive branch and other political roles rather than on the fact that there is an elite. The recruitment process consists of filtering, selection and career development and a large number of actors can be recruited for political activity while only a small number get influential positions (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Norris, 2009). This literature serves as a foundation for understanding who accesses the political network in Lagos, how they access it, and the types of political capital they bring to the network.

A second mechanism is provided by candidate selection research. Selection processes influence who gets promoted to candidacy and who doesn't, and political parties regulate who can be a candidate by formal rules and informal practices (Rahat and Hazan, 2001; Hazan and Rahat, 2010). The literature on party systems in Africa also reveals that the nomination process can become a battleground over the control of state power, with the capacity for those who control nominations having the power to control the state (Bogaards, 2004; Weghorst and Bernhard, 2014). Nigerian scholarship also reveals the interplay between formal party processes and informal influence, sponsorship and elite negotiation (Ikeanyibe, 2014; Demarest, 2022).

On the basis of these literatures, this article introduces the notion of the political leadership laboratory. A political leadership laboratory is a long-term subnational political space where political actors are recruited, socialised, selected, experienced in electoral and government roles, placed in succession processes, integrated into ongoing political networks, and may be able to translate political capital that they have been building over time into broader national political influence.

The idea is different from neighbouring approaches in three ways. First, it is not strictly actor-centred, it is arena centred. Questions of recruitment and career studies typically focus on the question of who enters politics, and how individual careers unfold, while the laboratory also addresses the question of whether a specific subnational environment repeatedly offers the organisation, political opportunities and networks within which such careers can take shape. Second, it is process integrative. Analytically these are different from each other but empirically related: recruitment, socialisation, selection, testing, succession and reproduction. Third, it thoroughly explores subnational to national conversion. The question is not only what happens as an actor moves up, but what resources, relationships and organisational capacities will be useful in the broader political playing field.

The dimensions are not fixed stages. Not everyone recruited is selected, not everyone who is selected succeeds in the testing and not everyone who is selected to participate in Lagos will be nationalised. Failed candidates, excluded actors, interrupted careers and displaced networks are thus analytically significant, as they show the limits of leadership production. The framework also does not assume the continuity through reproduction is constant. Reproduction can be by replacement, by bargaining, by adaptation and by incorporation of new actors.

The framework produces four propositions to be empirically tested. Firstly, the continued existence of political arenas may provide ongoing opportunities for recruitment and socialisation in the future when party organisations, state institutions and local networks interact over time. Second, the formal rules of political selection are complemented by informal organisational relationships, and the degree of informal influence varies from contest to contest. Third, succession may involve a transfer of power at the polls alongside elite controlled succession processes that determine who is in the pool of successors. Thirdly, nationalisation is a process which is contingent, not automatic, with respect to political capital conversion and not subnational office holding. These propositions are open to disconfirmation if recruitment fails, organisations break down, they lose elections or if there is no meaningful national conversion.

3. Methodology

A qualitative longitudinal case study design with process tracing and structured qualitative analysis is employed. This period starts in 1999 after the return to civilian government and continues to the present day in the 4th Republic. The design enables continuity, change, conflict and adaptation to be explored over successive administrations and not as singular events.

The empirical approach is structured around the seven dimensions of the political leadership laboratory, but also maintains a longitudinal sequence. The aim of process tracing is not to deduce cause from a sequence of events, but to explain how events change, to discover evidential mechanisms, to compare competing explanations, and to evaluate the evidence for each explanation.

Lagos State is chosen as an analytically important case because of its high economic and electoral significance, but also because of the continuity of political parties, political networks, and political institutions, and the frequent interaction between these three groups. The following features make it a valuable context for studying the recruitment, socialisation, selection, testing, succession, reproduction and nationalisation that are proposed.

The unit of analysis is the subnational political and institutional unit of Lagos State rather than the urban space of Lagos metropolis. The political processes considered – such as the role of the governor, party organisation, selection of candidates, state administration, legislative politics and local political networks are largely institutionalised in Lagos State.

The evidence base is based on primary documentary sources, official records, electoral sources, party sources, legal, fiscal sources, academic scholarship and credible contemporary reporting. Where possible, primary materials are employed to determine the occurrence and sequence of political events. Secondary scholarship, as it was called, both provides theoretical and historical background and is employed especially to reconstruct political contests, public utterances and elite struggles that are not necessarily fully documented in official records, and contemporaneous reporting is used to try to reconstruct political contests, public statements and elite conflicts that may not be fully documented in official records.

The evidence hierarchy is clearly stated. Level one consists of direct evidence such as official records, election results, party documents, appointments, government documents, court records and documented public decisions. Evidence at level two is confirmed independently from credible sources, or from several documentary sources. Analytical inference of informal bargaining, motivation, patronage or network effects (level three) is based on limited evidence. This hierarchy is expressed in the prose, with the use of phrases like 'the electoral results show', 'contemporaneous accounts indicate', and 'taken together, these developments suggest'.

Negative cases are also considered in the study. An open office and an institutionalised succession system cannot be proven by successful office holding alone. Candidates who do not get nominated, incumbents who lose party backing, challengers who are not able to challenge established networks, and actors whose careers never break out of Lagos are relevant as they show the boundaries of political mobility. Recruitment is thus considered both entry and exclusion in the analysis.

The study is not statistically generalized to other states in Nigeria, but is a qualitative single case study. It's analytical and theoretical. Lagos offers an empirically rich environment for the study of the mechanisms of recruitment, socialisation, selection, testing, succession and reproduction, and the nationalisation aspect allows for an examination of how subnational political capital can become meaningful in other settings than the original one.

Analytical transferability is still subject to conditions. The mechanisms found can vary in their nature under varying party systems, institutional configurations, fiscal regimes, electoral contexts and regional political systems. Comparative research is thus needed to establish if the propositions derived from Lagos can be found elsewhere. Recent sources are selectively used for contemporary theoretical or comparative purposes, whereas historical claims are supported by the available documentary evidence and contemporaneous materials, if any, or by the established scholarship.

4. The Subnational Political Arena of Lagos State

Structural characteristics of Lagos are only relevant insofar as they can be identified as political resources, opportunities or constraints. Electoral concentration may give rise to increased organisational demands of electoral competition, economic concentration may result in dense professional and commercial networks, media concentration may lead to increased political visibility, associational density may create opportunities for mobilisation, electoral weight may increase the stakes of coalition building, historical political importance may transmit organisational memory, and fiscal capacity may widen administrative space in which governing experience is accumulated (Cheeseman and de Gramont, 2017; Olukoju, 2005).

Lagos politics is a game of formal and informal/ associational actors. Community organisations, market associations, transport unions, traditional authorities and other intermediaries can have various roles within the administration. Politically, they are important for their ability to mobilize constituencies, negotiate access, negotiate with government, and respond to regulation — they do not necessarily have a fixed division of labor between the state and informal organisations (Fourchard, 2010; Koter, 2013).

The role of formal democratic institutions remains significant. Elections, party primaries, legislative rules and procedures, and courts and constitutional rules shape political opportunities and formal rules of office transfer. Informal networks, endorsements, consultations and organizational relationships, however, can affect candidate viability and the conditions under which formal procedures are put into practice (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004; Rahat and Hazan 2001).

5. The Lagos Political Leadership Laboratory in Action

Recruitment in Lagos is not linear, but a process of multiple pathways. These routes are more visible in the documentary record. Babajide Sanwo Olu got into the Lagos State political and administrative arena via appointment; from 2003, he was appointed with the position of Special Adviser on Corporate Matters, through

to 2004-2005 when he was appointed Acting Commissioner for Economic Planning and Budget; and in 2007, he was appointed Commissioner for Commerce and Industry. Later, he was the Commissioner for Establishments, Training & Pensions under Babatunde Fashola's administration. Then there's the other recruitment route of Akinwunmi Ambode. Prior to his political career, he served in the public service and local government treasury in Lagos State before becoming Auditor General for Local Government, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance and the Accountant General of Lagos State. It is noted from these records that recruitment was not solely based on the electoral competition but also through political and professional administrative channels (Lagos State University, n.d.; Ambode, n.d.).

Exclusion and unsuccessful recruitment also are visible in the documentary record. The 2014 Lagos APC governorship primary is a clear negative case of recruitment and selection as 12 aspirants were shortlisted for the contest but one got the party ticket. Ambode has won 3,735 votes while Obafemi Hamzat got 1,201 votes and the other aspirants, including Ganiyu Solomon, Adeyemi Ikuforiji, Olasupo Shasore, Leke Pitan, Tola Kasali and Tayo Ayinde did not make it to the nomination list (Channels Television, 2014; The Nation, 2014). The episode illustrates that it was not the case that all political involvement and all elite status was automatically rewarded with being a candidate. It also indicates a competitive edge in the recruitment pool: actors could gain access to the recruitment field without moving on to the governorship.

Political socialisation here is the learning of political knowledge, political organisation, political relations and political expectations via campaigning, party organisations, executive government, legislative institutions and political networks. **(**Ewetan, 2020) The documentary career histories illustrate this process of cumulative history. Sanwo Olu moved up the ladder of special adviser and commissioner before taking over in successive executive roles before becoming governor. The process of Ambode's up-and-down the ranks of treasury positions at the local government level in Lagos, and subsequent appointment as Auditor General for Local Government, Permanent Secretary and Accountant General, offers another avenue of governance knowledge and public sector connections that were built. Ambode's skips and skips through treasury roles within Lagos local governments and his eventual appointment as Auditor General for Local Government, Permanent Secretary and Accountant General, is another governance pathway through which knowledge and public sector relationships were acquired. Another instance of this is the professional expertise that was brought into the Lagos State Executive and then linked to national political office as in the case of Osinbajo who served as the Lagos Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice between 1999 and 2007 (National Boundary Commission, n.d.; Ambode, n.d.; Lagos State University, n.d.).

The Ambode episode is the best documented case of the displacement of the leadership. Ambode was the APC candidate in 2015 and as an incumbent, he sought re-election in 2018. Hence his displacement is analytically significant as it took place after the successful recruitment, selection, election to the formal executive office and the acquisition of executive power. Sanwo Olu and Hamzat then went into the next selection contest, Hamzat withdrew and endorsed Sanwo Olu, and at the time, it was reported that political actors in the Mandate Movement were supporting Sanwo Olu. The National Working Committee of the APC allowed direct elections in Lagos. Once again, the Lagos APC declared Sanwo Olu winner with 970,851 votes against Ambode's 72,901, though the primary was disputed at the time, but later confirmed (Premium Times, 2018). The episode thus illustrates displacement following political success. It does not prove that one actor was the whole master of the situation, but it does demonstrate that incumbency was not a safe bet for continued access to the governing party. (Adegboye, et al, 2020)

The documentary order of events between Ambode and Sanwo Olu makes the relationship between electoral succession and elite managed processes more tangible. Ambode had been beaten in the 2018 primary by the governing party and he subsequently declared himself a winner and called on party members to back Sanwo Olu. INEC later declared Sanwo Olu winner of the 9 March 2019 election for governor in Lagos with 739,445 votes. The evidence thus confirms that there is a process beginning with the contestation of the party nomination, continuing to the formal resolution of the party nomination, and then to the formal transfer of executive office by election. It does not prescribe a fixed succession rule across the board, but it does bring a case study of how informal political relationships and formal electoral processes came into play (Premium Times, 2018; INEC, 2019).

The negative cases are not examples of the supplementary kind; they are tests of the laboratory proposition. There are 4 different boundaries evident in the evidence. The first is when politically active aspirants compete for a party's nomination and fail to secure it, like in the Lagos governorship primary of the APC in 2014. Second, failure is when an actor with a great deal of political or administrative experience fails to translate it into the

office he/she desires to occupy. Third, an incumbent who has already won an elective position later loses the party's nomination, like Ambode's 2018 case. Fourth, non-nationalisation happens when people are involved in the political networks of Lagos, but do not seem to be moving into national office. The negative cases confirm the main thesis: Although Lagos can be a place of accumulation and testing of political capital, entry, progress, retention and nationalisation are conditional outcomes. The laboratory is thus not a natural leadership generator and is an environment of opportunity and constraint that is structured.

6. Lagos-Abuja: The Contingent Nationalisation of Political Capital

Political capital gained within the city of Lagos may be defined as a set of organisational, electoral, governing, relational, fiscal and reputational resources. Organisational capital refers to the party organisation and the skilled political staff. Electoral capital covers experience in engaging constituencies and winning in high stakes elections. Administrative experience and policy reputation are examples of governing capital. Relational capital encompasses cross-party, business, professional, community and regional relationships. Fiscal and administrative capacity sets the context for the operation of governing organisations, but it is not a measure of political financing.

The fiscal path of Lagos is a case in point of this difference. Similar figures reveal that IGR has grown significantly and that the recurrent revenue structure has been such that IGR has outstripped Gross FAAC during the period 2017-2022 (BudgIT, 2023). This suggests substantial fiscal decoupling from federal transfers. The political significance is indirect: more fiscal capacity means more room for administrative discretion and room for administrative development and experience. There is no evidence of direct transfers of state revenue to national elections.

In 2013 the ACN, CPC, ANPP and a group of APGA joined together to form the APC. The merger should thus be examined as a national alliance, and not as a Lagos project. Lagos based networks were an important organisational component, however, the coalition was also reliant on the national followership of Muhammadu Buhari, organisational resources of other parties, regional political actors and broader electoral incentives (Chidi, 2015; Sambo et al., 2022). While the national political trajectory of Tinubu is a clear example of vertical political mobility, the laboratory argument also calls for cases that did not nationalise. The historical evidence in the manuscripts suggests that a significant number of actors participated in the political and administrative system of Lagos, but did not later become national politicians. (Omodero and Alege, 2023). One such boundary case is the 2014 primary, where aspirants like Ganiyu Solomon, Adeyemi Ikuforiji, Olasupo Shasore, Leke Pitan, Tola Kasali and Tayo Ayinde vied for the governorship, without getting the ticket, and their career path was therefore not as vertical as the eventual winner. The Ambode case is another boundary: an actor who made it to the governorship through the same path did not get renominated and therefore did not follow through to the next stage in the governatorial succession. These cases illustrate that being involved in the Lagos arena doesn't automatically lead to political promotion, staying on as a minister or nationalisation. They thus serve as a negative proof for a deterministic reading of the laboratory concept.

7. Discussion: Rethinking Subnational Political Leadership

The Lagos case provides arguments for moving beyond a national perspective on elite formation to a multilevel perspective. Subnational spaces can serve as a partial preparation for national political careers, in which actors gain organisational experience, electoral knowledge, reputation and relationships. This does not imply that national elites are "made" in subnational governments, but simply that they are created there as well. Subnational arenas can be important locations in larger career and coalition-building processes (Stolz, 2003; Borchert and Stolz, 2011).

Recruitment is more understood as an act of entry and exclusion. The political leadership laboratory is not just made up of people who make it but also of those who are blocked from making it. This is a negative case logic because it helps to differentiate a truly permeable political space from a self-replicating political network. The study of competing candidates has further substantiated the need to focus on the study of both successful and unsuccessful candidates (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Hazan and Rahat, 2010).

8. Conclusion

The case of Lagos suggests that a subnational political space of consequence can offer multiple opportunities to recruit, socialise, select, test, succeed and reproduce politicians. The longitudinal sequence highlights the political and organisational formation in the Tinubu era, consolidation and adaptation in the Fashola era, a test of executive autonomy in the Ambode era and reproduction and adaptation in the Sanwo Olu era. Political

networks of Lagos are examined in terms of nationalisation, because they entered the national political arena in the following years.

The political leadership laboratory is not presented as a universal model or as a claim that Lagos invented the mechanisms through which political elites are produced. Its contribution is to integrate established mechanisms within a meso level subnational framework and to connect leadership production to the possible conversion of political capital across territorial levels.

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Note: The references are arranged alphabetically by author or institutional author. Before submission, verify missing publication details, particularly the volume, issue and page range for Ewetan et al. (2020), and the publication details for the APC website source.

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