

# 34. Diffusion and practice of external voting in North and West Africa<sup>1</sup>

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INCLUSION AND  
SOCIAL COHESION



MIGRANT AND DIASPORA  
CONTRIBUTIONS

**Abstract:** This chapter discusses the diffusion of external voting in North and West Africa since the early 1990s, and diaspora participation in elections in countries of origin. It starts by examining the idea that the spread of external voting is attributable solely to the emergence of diaspora policies and political liberalization processes. It then looks at the influence of citizens abroad on elections by analysing their turnout and political preferences.

Since the early 1990s, the number of countries having adopted measures to enable citizens residing abroad to take part in elections in their countries of origin has quadrupled, to about 150.<sup>4</sup> External voting has also become widespread in Africa, where nearly three quarters of countries allow citizens residing abroad to vote, compared with only four before 1990. This spectacular development, which makes Africa one of the places with the widest experience of external voting, has spawned a new wave of research (Ahanda, 2015; Hartmann, 2015; Jaulin and Smith, 2015). In this chapter, we consider the differences in time and process leading to the diffusion and implementation of the right to vote from abroad in Africa. We start by reviewing the various reasons driving the phenomenon, before discussing the real and supposed impact of out-of-country voters on such “globalized” election contexts.

## 34.1. Definition and normative issues

In its current acceptance, external voting is defined as the right of all citizens to take part from abroad in an election in the countries of which they are citizens but in which they do not reside (International IDEA and Instituto Federal Electoral, 2007; Lafleur, 2013). External voting thus takes place, by definition, outside the national territory. This sets it apart from postal ballots and proxy voting, which do not necessarily concern residents abroad, and the practice whereby some emigrants return to their country of origin on the day of the election to vote.

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an abridged and updated version of Jaulin and Smith, 2015.

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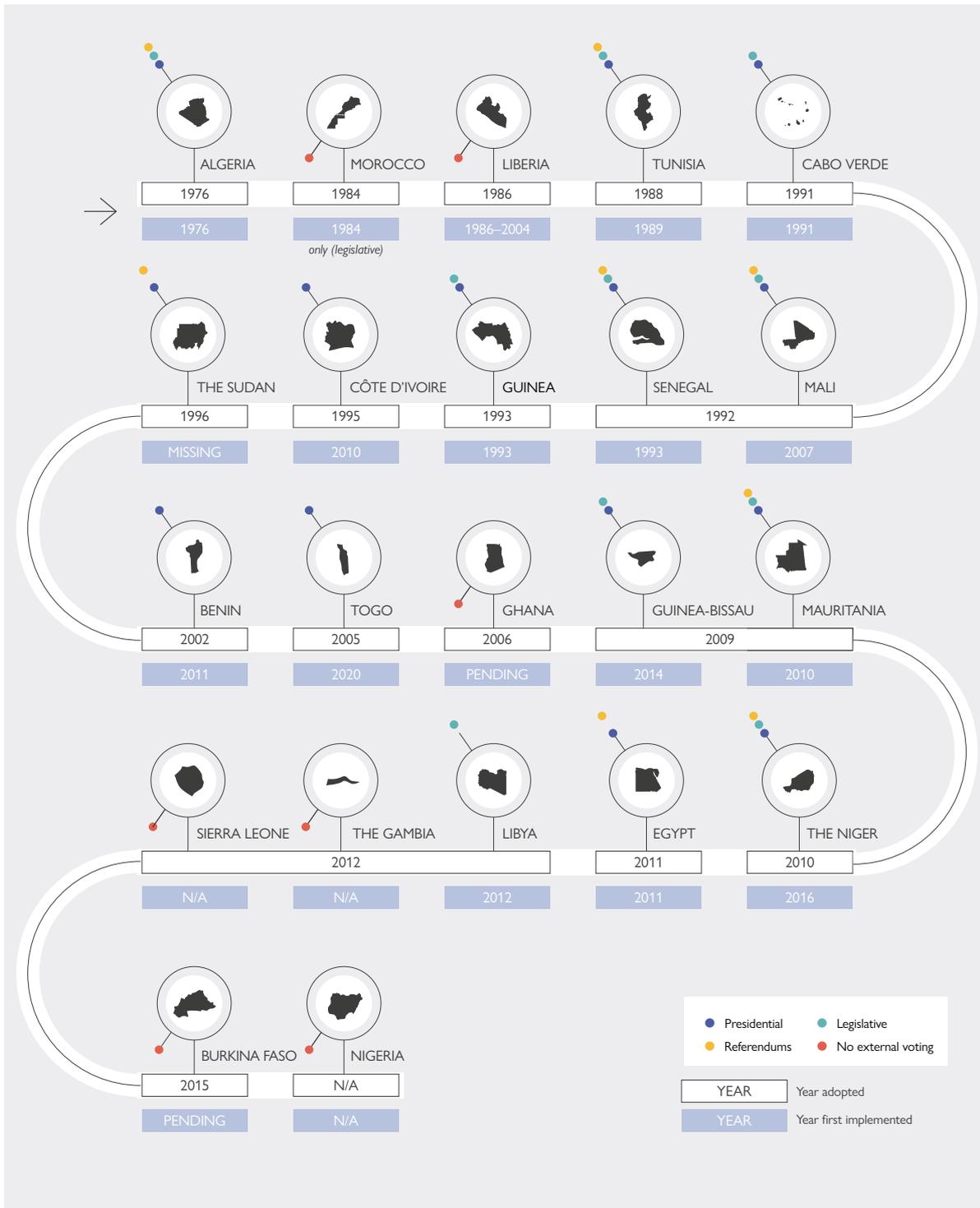
<sup>4</sup> Voting from abroad database, International IDEA, available at [www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voting-abroad](http://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voting-abroad); out-of-country voting, ACE The Electoral Knowledge Network. Available at [http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/va/explore\\_topic\\_new](http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/va/explore_topic_new).

The rapid diffusion of external voting, in the world and in Africa, tends to mask the debate on whether non-resident citizens can justifiably be allowed to participate in elections, and the differences in the legislative frameworks and practices relating to external voting (Collyer, 2014). The proponents of external voting usually advance two types of argument. The first is economic, and holds that external voting is a means of promoting the development and reach of the country by reinforcing its bonds with migrants. The second is legal, and considers that the absence of measures enabling citizens residing abroad to vote constitutes a breach of equality between citizens (Ahanda, 2015). However, the difficulties inherent in the implementation of external voting (extra costs, greater risk of fraud), for a generally low turnout abroad, frequently trigger strong reservations about whether it is necessary (Nohlen and Grotz, 2000; Rubio-Marín, 2006; López-Guerra, 2005). These reservations are often compounded by the fear – justified or not – that external voting will be a vector of foreign interference and/or that citizens abroad will exert undue influence on “internal” political life. In this respect, external voting is debated along much the same lines as the transformation of the concept of citizenship and multiple allegiances (Bauböck, 2007; Faist and Kivisto, 2008; Manby, 2009; Spiro, 2016).

## 34.2. The diffusion of external voting in North and West Africa

In the 1970s and 1980s, the countries of the Maghreb, which were governed by authoritarian regimes that held sham elections and sought to control their citizens working abroad, were among the first African countries to adopt external voting provisions (Brand, 2010). After Liberia in 1986, several West African countries (Senegal, Cabo Verde, Mali and Guinea) adopted the right to vote overseas in the 1990s, in a context of relative democratization. External voting spread throughout Africa starting in the mid-2000s, in a third wave that saw it become the rule rather than the exception, despite the absence of major players such as Nigeria. There is a huge gap, however, between adoption of the right and its implementation. While countries such as Cabo Verde and Senegal applied external voting as of the first elections following adoption of the right, in many other instances several elections were held before the right was implemented, in some cases restrictively. For example, after years of hesitation and delay, Burkina Faso, Togo and Ghana have made plans for external voting for the first time in 2020. Lastly, the fact that the right to external voting has been suspended in some countries, such as Morocco and Liberia, is a reminder that it is not irreversible.

**Figure 34.1.** Adoption and implementation of external voting provisions in North and West Africa



Note: These maps is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on these maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

### 34.3. An instrument of emigration and diaspora policies

In Africa, since the 1990s, emigrants have been perceived less as “deserters” and more as resources to be harnessed and players to be co-opted (Akyeampong, 2000). One of the common explanations for the diffusion of external voting is the desire of labour-exporting countries to encourage financial transfers by emigrants, who are often an essential source of foreign currency (Lafleur, 2013; Hartman, 2015). As such, the right to vote “out of country” is one of various political, economic, social and cultural measures implemented by States to forge closer links with their emigrants and the diaspora. However, as is illustrated by the case of Morocco, for example, the fact that a State is strongly invested politically in its diaspora does not necessarily mean that it gives its citizens residing abroad the right to vote (Iheduru, 2011; Dufoix et al., 2010; Burgess, 2014). Conversely, many countries, having adopted the right to external voting, are apparently not directly motivated by the desire to increase the volume of diaspora remittances. Rather than a possible correlation between the adoption of external voting and the economic and demographic weight of the diaspora, which is hard to measure (Collyer and Vathi, 2007), it is the contexts and mechanisms spurring many African States to “work” harder than before on their relationship with the diaspora that calls for inquiry.

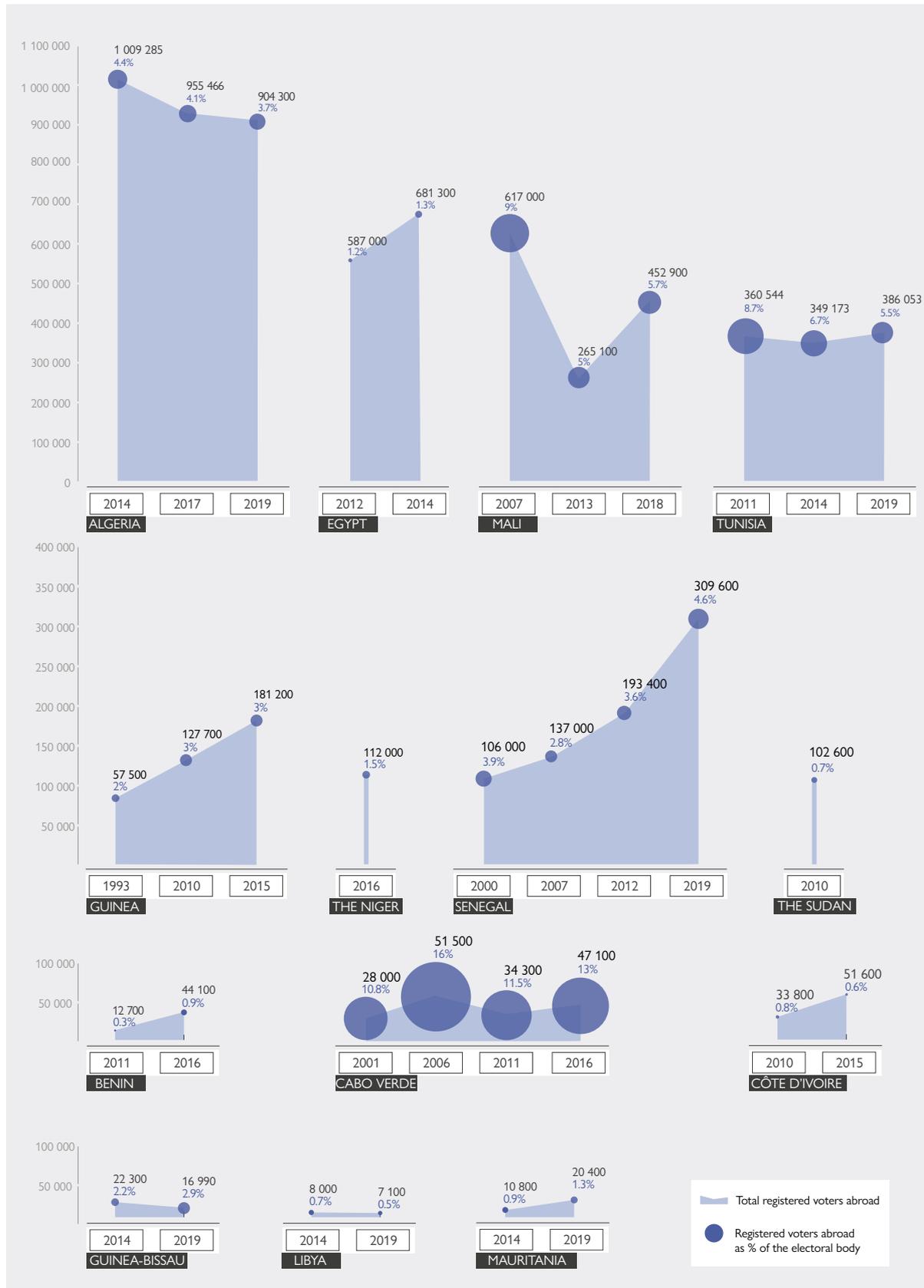
### 34.4. An effect of the process of democratization

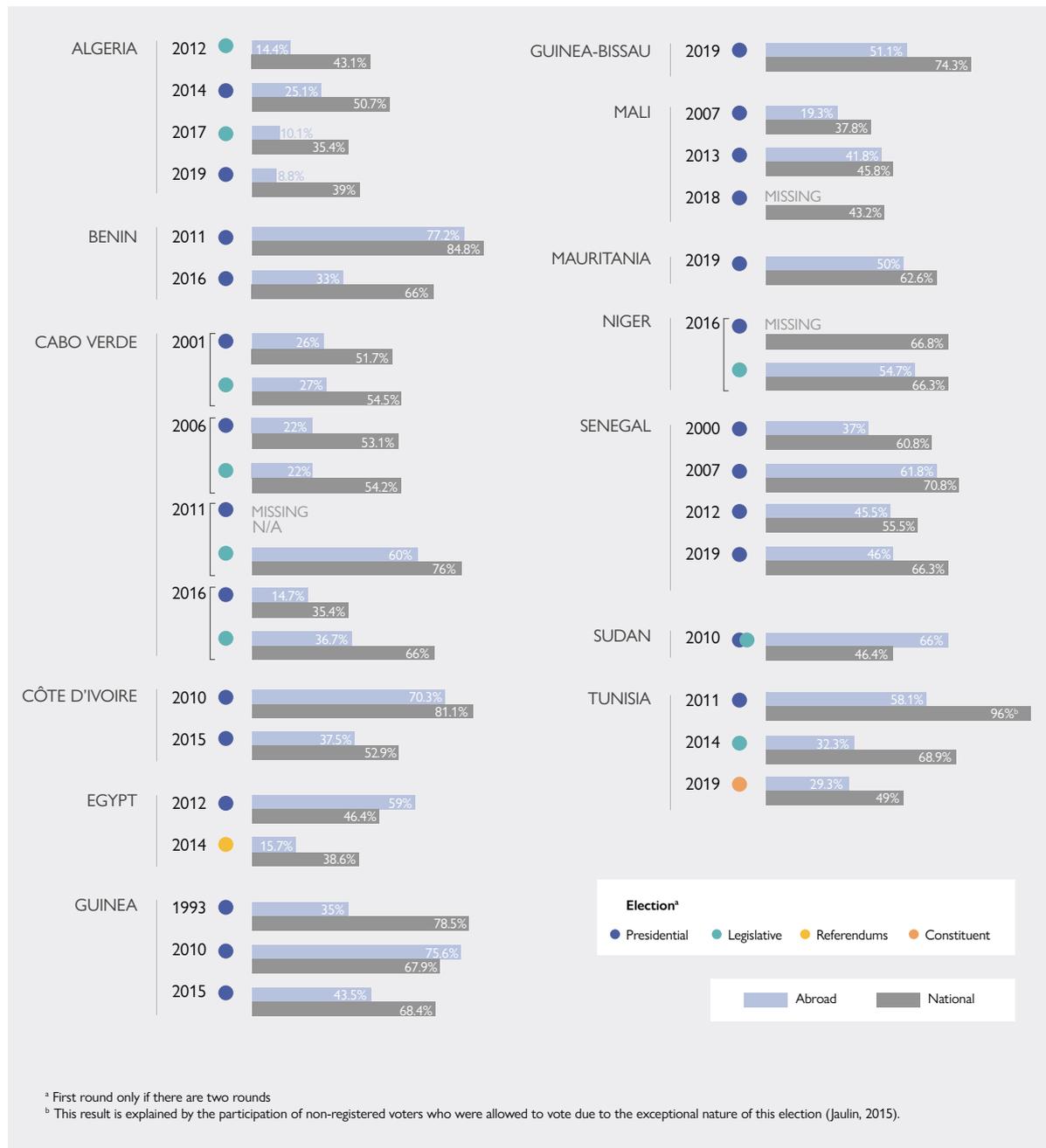
The diffusion of external voting can also be attributed to the widespread trend towards democratization that emerged in the 1990s as it relates to a threefold process: satisfying the demands of migrant associations; the general tendency of democratic regimes to expand the right to vote to new categories of individuals; and the diffusion of new international norms on migrant rights (Rhodes and Harutyunyan, 2010). It must be stressed, however, that the segments of the diaspora that have mobilized rarely have the means to impose, in and of themselves, the adoption and effective application of that right, even where expatriate communities have played a major role in a change of government. In other words, in a context of democratization, calls for external voting find it difficult to gain traction in the policy debate in the absence of a partisan relay (Burgess, 2018) or a perception on the part of both government and opposition that they stand to gain by the process (for the case of Senegal, see Smith, 2015). Moreover, while the adoption of the right to external voting in Africa was often concomitant to the process of political liberalization and constitutional reform, in particular during the “second wave” in the early 1990s, it is important to remember that external voting is not the prerogative of democracies, as demonstrated by the unilateral adoption thereof in the 1970s and 1980s by Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia (Brand, 2010). Lastly, while there are no binding international recommendations on external voting (Lafleur, 2015), IOM, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have helped organize out-of-country voting, notably for Mali (2013) and Libya (2012 and 2014). While the result of their operations was usually disappointing from the point of view of turnout, the three organizations helped spread the right to external voting, pursuant to a global strategy to mainstream the various migration issues (Geiger and Pécoud, 2014). At the same time, there also appears to be a link between the diffusion of external voting in Africa and the continent’s various colonial legacies. Indeed, there is a striking contrast between the French- and Portuguese-speaking countries, almost all of which have adopted – and in many cases implemented – external voting, and the English-speaking countries, which have been more reluctant to do so (Hartmann, 2015:8–9). Considered in that light, analysis of the diffusion of the right to external voting involves identifying – concretely and empirically – how norms, practices and know-how circulate from one country or continent to another.

## 34.5. Is the diaspora an election kingmaker?

The influence that out-of-country voters exert on elections in their countries of origin differs from one election and one country to another; and depends on the relative weight of the external electorate, turnout, the type of vote and the structure of the political field. In most countries in Africa (as elsewhere), registered voters abroad make up a very small proportion of the electorate, even in countries with many emigrants and in which external voting has been widely institutionalized; for example, Algeria and Senegal (see Figure 34.1). Moreover, turnout among out-of-country voters (Figure 34.2) depends on how restrictive the procedures are for registering to vote abroad: deadlines, required documents, registration system, vote in person at a consulate or by mail-in ballot, by proxy or via the Internet (Lafleur, 2013). Turnout also depends on the relations between the authorities in the host country and the country of origin, on the willingness and capacity of political parties to campaign abroad, and on the specific characteristics – notably socioeconomic – of migrant communities (Dedieu et al., 2013) and the associative and political dynamics they encompass (Jaulin and Nilsson, 2015). Lastly, the system of representation (proportional, members of parliament abroad, etc.) has a significant impact on the potential of out-of-country voters to influence the election outcome. In Cabo Verde, for example, where the diaspora is represented by six members of Parliament, out-of-country voters tipped the balance in the 2006 presidential election in favour of Pedro Pires, who won despite trailing his rival by roughly 50 votes among “domestic” voters. Cabo Verde has since introduced a clause limiting the maximum proportion of external voters to 20 per cent of the total (Silva and Chantre, 2007:201; Hartmann, 2015:13). In Ghana, where election results are traditionally very close and the two main parties – the National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic Party – alternate in power, it is more than likely that the addition of voters abroad planned for 2020 will tip the scales in favour of one side or the other.

Figure 34.2. The numerical clout of the external electorate



**Figure 34.3.** Turnout at home and abroad

## 34.6. Whom do voters abroad vote for?

The commonly held idea that the diaspora will vote for the opposition has been borne out in only a limited number of cases, and has to be tempered depending on the period concerned. In fact, the preferences of out-of-country voters are heavily dependent on how the political parties see the diaspora and its relations with the country of origin. In most countries, the diaspora vote is not fundamentally different from that of the rest of the electorate. In Benin, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali and Senegal, various elections have shown that the diaspora vote tends to be influenced by current circumstances, such as the personality of the candidates, the Government's record, the conduct of the election campaign and voting procedures abroad (Jaulin and Smith, 2015).

Consideration of the political preferences of out-of-country voters requires a shift in focus from studies on diaspora political mobilization, which was often analysed from the point of view of its radical or conflictual dimension, to electoral sociology in a transnational context. At the same time, the study of external voting also serves to engage in a stimulating discussion of recent research into the influence of emigrants on values and political behaviour in their countries of origin (for example, Levitt, 1998; Boccagni et al., 2016; Chauvet et al., 2017). Recent studies that apply the tools of sociology and electoral geography to external voting provide an initial answer to the question of whether African out-of-country voters reproduce the political, social and community divides of their countries of origin or are influenced by their environment (Dedieu et al., 2013; Jaulin, 2014, 2015; Lafleur and Sánchez-Domínguez, 2015; Ahmadov and Sasse, 2016). One of the lessons drawn from that research is that diasporas are not uniform but are instead made up of various migrant communities that tend to reproduce the divides of their countries of origin, with the consequent constitution of partisan bastions abroad and a fragmented vote within each diaspora. Furthermore, and importantly, the diaspora can play a significant part even if it cannot vote or if its capacity to influence the election outcome is limited (because of the low number of voters). Moreover, diasporas are often a prime source of campaign funding. In the African cases, the representation of expatriates as “super electors” helps place the diaspora at the heart of the election and allows it to punch, in symbolic and media terms, far above its weight, as reflected in its real numerical clout (Smith, 2015). Analysis of migrant voter behaviour therefore implies taking account of several series of variables in relation to three distinct processes: the process of selection operated by migration; the socialization of migrants in their country of residence; and the recomposition of political and social control mechanisms in a transnational context.

## 34.7. Conclusion: more than a vote

A new “frontier” of citizenship, external voting in Africa, represents a largely unexplored topic of research, the study of which will serve to enrich the literature on elections in Africa and on types of participation and transnational political engagement among migrants. The events leading to the adoption – or not – of the right to external voting and its application remain largely dependent on the national context and the domestic balance of power. From this point of view, examination of the diffusion and practice of external voting in Africa is an opportunity to reflect on the effects of migration on the political, economic and social structures of labour-exporting countries, in particular through the implementation of new public policies (“of emigration”), the diffusion of new (“democratic”) norms and the appearance of new categories of voters (“abroad”).

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