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THEORIES AND MODELS OF PARTY FUNDING

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ABSTRACT

Political party funding occupies a pivotal position in the democratisation process globally, particularly in the Global South, and especially in Africa. It plays a critical role in shaping the organisation of political competition. Yet it also poses risks of inequality, state capture, and corruption. In this article, we analyse party funding as a regime-dependent political process. Our central thesis is that the design, operation, and effects of party finance systems must be understood within the broader political context, particularly in terms of regime typologies. The study follows a qualitative methodology based on desk research. We collected and analysed secondary data from published works and online sources. While cognisant of a multiplicity of regime-typology frameworks, we utilise two, namely, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. Our analysis situates African political regimes along a democracy–autocracy continuum. We examine how variations in regimes and their accountability can shape incentives for party funding as well as outcomes. The study is anchored in two analytically contrasting theories, public goods theory and clientelist theory. These theories illuminate contrasting logics of political finance under different regime typologies. Using the selected frameworks, we assess five major party funding models as politically embedded arrangements rather than neutral institutional choices.

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INTRODUCTION

Political parties occupy a central position in representative democracy. They are the principal vehicles for interest aggregation, interest articulation, political mobilisation, political education, and leadership development (Heywood, 2013; Matlosa, 2007). Parties' abilities to discharge these roles depends primarily on the level of their institutional capacity, which, in turn, requires access to various resources, including financing. However, party financing is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be an asset to advance democratisation under conducive conditions. On the other, it can become a liability that corrodes multi-party democracy under unfavourable conditions. The conditions in question are circumscribed by the nature of a regime in power.

Given favourable political conditions, party financing sustains day-to-day administration and outreach. It is indispensable for electioneering, policy development, and continuous linkage with citizens throughout the electoral cycle (Ashiagbor, 2005; Scarrow, 2007; Nassmacher, 2009). As Ashiagbor (2005, p. 5) noted, parties 'need money: to mobilise supporters during campaigns and in between elections; establish and maintain party offices and administrative structures; conduct issue and policy research; and communicate with members and the public.' Party funding is therefore not a peripheral technical matter. It shapes the organisational viability of parties and, by extension, the democratic quality of electoral competition.

Under unfavourable conditions, party funding is a recurring site of democratic vulnerability. Where rules are weakly designed or poorly enforced, political finance can facilitate undue influence, policy or state capture, corruption, and the entrenchment of incumbency, thereby corroding public trust in institutions (Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002; Transparency International, 2024). Comparative political finance scholarship shows that rising campaign costs and declining membership-based resources have increased parties' dependence on large donors and state resources. This reality raises concerns about inequality in political influence and the integrity of electoral competition (Scarrow, 2007; Nassmacher, 2009; Norris & van Es, 2016). In African contexts, these risks often intersect with weak oversight, uneven regulatory enforcement, neo-patrimonialism, and the politicisation of state resources. Overall, party finance is central to broader debates on democratic consolidation and institutional accountability (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994; Matlosa, 2007; Ahmed & Salih, 2003).

In this article, we analyse party funding as a regime-dependent political process. We demonstrate how variations in democratic quality shape incentives, funding sources, and regulatory outcomes. To operationalise this conceptualisation, we situate African countries within the regime classifications developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index 2024 and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. We recognise that some variations exist regarding the conceptualisations and measurements in these two frameworks, which can generate disparities between their classifications (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Nord et al., 2025).

The paper is organised into eight sections. The next section outlines the methodology we used to ideate and craft this article; we employed a qualitative method and drew on desk and document analysis. The third section delves into regime typologies and classifications in Africa. While recognising a plethora of regime typology assessment frameworks, we highlight just two, namely the EIU Democracy Index and V-Dem. The significance of this section is that party funding theories and models resonate with the specific regime in a given country.

The fourth section focuses on party funding theories. Although there are about six theories, we again examine only two, which are polar opposites, namely, public goods theory and clientelist theory. The fifth section discusses specific party funding models (public, private, mixed/hybrid, grassroots/membership-based, and illicit). The sixth section interrogates the interplay between party funding theories, regime typologies, and party funding models. In section seven, we make the case for party funding reforms, arguing that party funding – like democracy itself – is always a work in progress. Regular reforms are required if funding is to be an asset rather than a liability in terms of boosting democratisation and political stability.

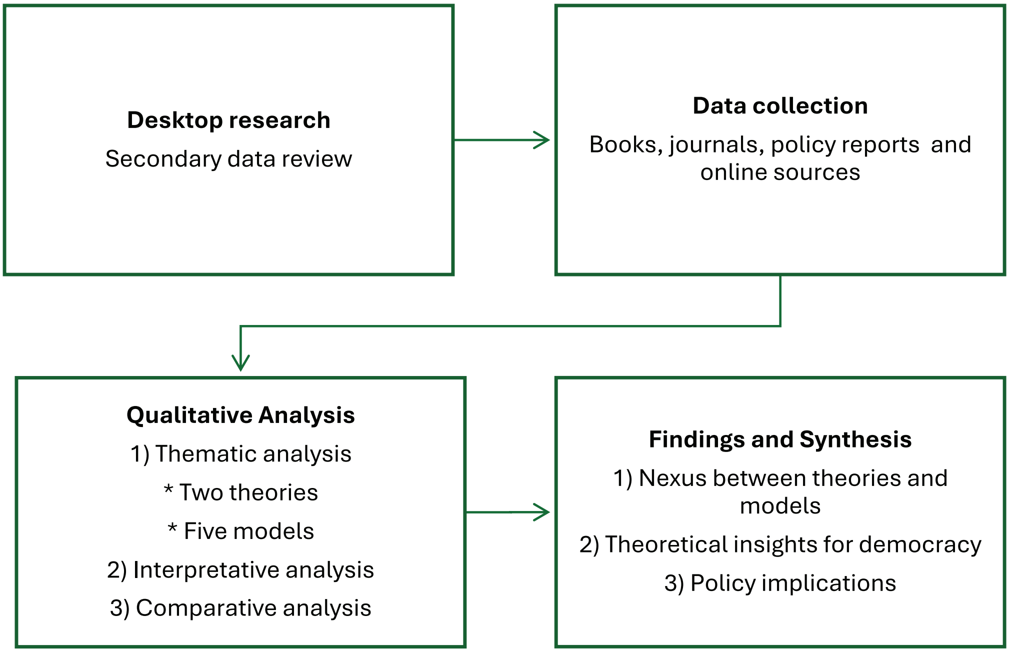
METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven desk research design aimed at addressing two linked research questions. The first question is 'How does regime type shape the incentives and constraints that structure party funding regulation and implementation?' The second is 'Which party funding models are most compatible with specific regime conditions, and why do particular models generate predictable distortions when they 'travel' across regimes?'

We present a comparative analytical framework that we developed to support predictions about expected party funding outcomes under different regime conditions. The analysis is based on a structured review of secondary sources, including scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles on political finance, democratisation, and party organisation. We also reviewed policy reports and institutional handbooks. Literature identification was combined with keyword-based searches and targeted author or institution tracing, using Google Scholar and ChatGPT 5.2 as a search-term expansion. Search terms included 'political parties', 'party funding', 'political finance', 'party funding theories', 'party funding models', 'campaign finance regulation', and 'party finance reforms'. The search resulted in 85 books, reports, and articles that we examined.

Analytically, the study applies an interpretive and comparative strategy. Desk research was well suited for the paper's purpose, as the topic under investigation offers abundant data. However, the methodology required substantial time to filter data and control for potential bias. The methodology is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Methodological Framework: Political Party Funding Study



Source: Authors' compilation

REGIME TYPOLOGIES

Globally, various frameworks exist to measure and classify regimes along a democracy–autocracy continuum. The five most widely used in academic and policy discourse are as follows:

(1) The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, called Regimes of the World, developed by the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. It classifies regimes into four categories: liberal democracies, electoral democracies, electoral autocracies, and closed autocracies.
(2) The EIU Democracy Index. It categorises regimes into four clusters: full, flawed, hybrid, and authoritarian regimes.
(3) Freedom House's Freedom in the World report. It measures the state of human rights in the world, with a focus on political rights and civil liberties. Countries are classified into three categories: free, partly free, and not free.
(4) Polity data series (Polity V). It measures regimes against a three-pronged scale, namely democracies, anocracies, and autocracies.
(5) The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's (IDEA) Global State of Democracy report. It provides a three-tiered measurement and classification of countries into democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes.

We employed the first two regime typology frameworks, namely V-Dem Regimes of the World and the EIU Democracy Index. We focused on these two classifications to situate African political systems along a democracy–autocracy continuum, as shown in Table 1. Unlike other frameworks, EIU and V-Dem both propose four-pronged classification systems, although their nomenclatures differ. As Table 1 on the next page illustrates, the categories of the two frameworks are comparable, despite some misalignments.

The EIU employs a fourfold typology based on aggregated scores across the following aspects: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, political culture, political participation, and institutional performance (EIU, 2025). Similarly, V-Dem adopts a multidimensional approach based on disaggregated expert-coded indicators, which capture both formal institutions and their practical operations (Nord et al., 2025). These methodological differences produce classification disparities, but such variation reflects divergent conceptual emphases, not measurement error. Accordingly, for our analytic purposes, we treat the regime categories as heuristic tools rather than definitive labels.

Table 1. Regime Classification in Africa

EIU Regime type	**V-Dem Regime type**	**EIU Country examples**	**V-Dem Country examples**	**EIU Measurement** Democracy Index	**V-Dem Measurement**
Full Democracy	Liberal Democracies	Mauritius	Seychelles	Score 8.01–10.00. Strong electoral integrity, civil liberties, institutional checks, and democratic political culture.	Liberal Democracy Index (LDI). High score; electoral democracy plus strong liberal constraints.
Flawed Democracy	Electoral Democracies	Cabo Verde; Botswana; Namibia; São Tomé and Príncipe; Seychelles; South Africa; Ghana; Lesotho	Botswana; Gambia; Ghana; Lesotho; Liberia; Malawi; São Tomé and Príncipe; Senegal; Kenya; Namibia; Nigeria; South Africa	Score 6.01–8.00. Free elections with weaknesses in governance, participation, or civil liberties.	Electoral Democracy Index (EDI). High score, but weaker liberal components.
Hybrid Regime	Electoral Autocracies	Senegal; Malawi; Zambia; Liberia; Madagascar; Tanzania; Kenya; Morocco; Tunisia; Uganda; Gambia; Benin; Sierra Leone; Côte d'Ivoire; Nigeria; Angola	Mauritius; Benin; Algeria; Angola; Burundi; Cameroon; Chad; Comoros; Congo (Rep.); DR Congo; Djibouti; Egypt; Equatorial Guinea; Ethiopia; Guinea-Bissau; Madagascar; Mauritania; Sierra Leone; Tanzania; Tunisia; Uganda; Zimbabwe Zambia	Score 4.01–6.00. Elections exist but are undermined by irregularities, weak rule of law, and constrained opposition.	Elections occur but fail to meet the minimum standards of fairness and competiti-veness.

Authoritarian Regime	Closed Autocracies	Mauritania; Algeria; Mozambique; Rwanda; Ethiopia; Togo; Zimbabwe; Congo (Rep.); Egypt; Djibouti; Eswatini; Cameroon; Burkina Faso; Mali; Libya; Niger; Gabon; Burundi; Guinea; Guinea-Bissau; Eritrea; DR Congo; Equatorial Guinea; Chad; Comoros; Sudan; Central African Republic	Burkina Faso; Eritrea; Eswatini; Gabon; Guinea; Libya; Mali; Morocco; Niger; Somalia; South Sudan	Score 0.00–4.00. Absence of meaningful pluralism, severe restrictions on civil liberties, and executive dominance.	No meaningful multiparty elections for executive power.

Sources: EIU, 2025 (p.67–68); Nord et al., 2025 (p. 14)

Matlosa (2017) warned that many African regimes defy neat categorisation. These regimes often combine electoral competition with elite dominance, weak enforcement, and patronage politics. A recent conceptual critique similarly warned that hybrid labels, such as 'electoral autocracy', risk obscuring important regime differences and exaggerating categorical precision (del Río, 2022). We used the EIU and V-Dem classifications instrumentally to provide a structured comparative context for analysing party funding dynamics. Our aim was not to judge democratic legitimacy. Employing both indices allowed for triangulation between stable regime categories and sensitive measures of institutional change.

Table 1 above reveals interesting dynamics highlighting the vicissitudes of democratisation in Africa. First, only Mauritius is classified as a full democracy by EIU, and only Seychelles is classified as a liberal democracy by V-Dem. Second, EIU ranks eight countries as flawed democracies (Cabo Verde, Botswana, Namibia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Seychelles, South Africa, Ghana, and Lesotho). Comparatively, V-Dem classifies several countries as electoral democracies (Botswana, The Gambia, Ghana, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, and South Africa).

Third, most African countries are classified by the EIU as hybrid regimes or electoral autocracies. This trend confirms the thesis that the global democratic recession that began in the early 2000s has pushed many countries toward hybridity rather than full-blown autocracy (see Diamond, 2022; James et al. 2023; Matlosa, 2023). Fourth, EIU classifies many countries as authoritarian regimes, whereas V-Dem classifies relatively fewer as closed autocracies. Given the democratic backsliding in Africa, especially since the 2020s – marked inter alia by unconstitutional changes of governments – more African countries may in the future become EIU authoritarian regimes or V-Dem closed autocracies (Bermeo, 2016). The militarisation that has manifested since 2019 in the Sahel region, including Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, is a harbinger of this accelerated autocratisation. There will be dire consequences for party funding. In the next section, we shift our focus to that topic.

PARTY FUNDING THEORIES

The six main theories for understanding the political dynamics surrounding party funding are pluralist theory, elite theory, public goods theory, clientelist theory, institutional theory, and rational choice theory. Given its scope, this article does not cover all those theories. We examine two diametrically opposed perspectives, namely, public goods theory and clientelist theory.

The literature suggests that party funding systems cannot be understood in isolation from the political and institutional contexts in which they evolve and operate (Nassmacher, 2009; Scarrow, 2007; Norris & van Es, 2016). Funding arrangements reflect underlying assumptions about political competition, accountability, and the role of parties in governance, whether democratic or autocratic. Building on these insights, we develop a framework for analysing party funding as a regime-dependent political process rather than a benign administrative or technical one. Accordingly, this section discusses the two most relevant theoretical perspectives. First, public goods theory provides the dominant justification for public regulation and state support of political parties in democratic multiparty systems. Second, clientelist theory provides a countervailing epistemological logic. It foregrounds selective exchange, distributive politics, and uneven accountability, features typically associated with hybrid or autocratic regimes (Scott, 1972; Wantchekon, 2003; Keefer, 2007).

Public Goods Theory

Public goods theory provides the dominant normative and analytical justification for public regulation and state support of political parties in democratic countries. At its core, the theory concerns the collective action problem inherent in the provision of goods whose benefits are shared but whose costs are borne individually. Samuelson's (1954) classical formulation defined public goods as non-rivalrous and non-excludable. Olson (1965) demonstrated that large groups are structurally disadvantaged in producing such goods voluntarily, owing to rational free-riding. In political systems, this logic translates into a persistent tendency to under-provide collective democratic goods in the absence of coordinated institutional support.

Dahl (1961) extended this logic to democratic governance. He argued that competitive party systems, electoral accountability and pluralistic representation generate collective benefits that accrue to citizens regardless of their direct participation in party organisations. Hence, political parties function not merely as private associations but also as institutional carriers of democratic public goods. Goods include representation, accountability, political mobilisation, and peaceful alternation of power (Ahmed & Salih, 2003). If parties are weak, under-resourced, or captured by narrow interests, these collective democratic goods are undermined.

In full or liberal democracies, public goods theory provides a coherent justification for public funding and regulation of political parties as institutional mechanisms designed to safeguard democratic competition. As van Biezen (2003) demonstrated, declining party membership and rising campaign costs render traditional forms of party financing unsustainable, exposing parties to dependence on wealthy donors and special interests. In response, public subsidies, spending limits, and disclosure requirements have emerged as institutional correctives aimed at preserving the collective benefits of electoral competition (Nassmacher, 2009; Scarrow, 2007; Ewing & Issacharoff, 2006). In such contexts, public funding is treated not as discretionary patronage but as a democratic investment in political pluralism.

The above logic plays out well in full/liberal systems such as Seychelles, where public funding systems have been introduced to stabilise party systems, limit illicit finance, and reduce excessive dependence on private donors (Hatchard, 1993). South Africa is an example of a flawed or electoral democracy. In this country, the *Political Party Funding Act* institutionalises a public funding regime that combines proportional and equitable allocations, justified in terms of democratic fairness, transparency, and political inclusion (Matlosa, 2004; Electoral Commission of South Africa & Human Sciences Research Council [IEC/HSRC], 2025).

International IDEA synthesises institutional rationales into the following three core objectives: 1) preventing illicit financing, 2) levelling the electoral playing field, and 3) enabling parties to meet the rising costs of political competition (Falguera et al., 2014). Each objective corresponds to a collective action problem identified in public goods theory. If unaddressed, party finance systems tend to become conduits for unequal influence, policy capture, and informal resource mobilisation (Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002; Matlosa, 2004).

However, the explanatory power of public goods theory is conditioned by regime type and institutional capacity. In flawed and electoral democracies, public funding may formally exist but operate under conditions of weak enforcement, politicised oversight, and neopatrimonial political cultures. As Bratton and van de Walle (1994) stated, many African regimes combine electoral competition with personalised power relations, patronage networks, and discretionary authority. In such contexts, public funding is vulnerable to selective enforcement and political manipulation, mutating from a democratic corrective to a mechanism of incumbency entrenchment.

This distortion is captured by Katz and Mair's (1995) cartel party thesis. These authors warned that public subsidies can stabilise party systems while insulating political elites from societal pressure. Similarly, van Biezen and Kopecký (2014) showed that extensive state support may weaken the incentives for parties to cultivate membership and civic engagement. In Africa's flawed and electoral democracies, these dynamics are evident when allocation formulas tied to parliamentary representation benefit dominant parties and regulatory institutions lack the autonomy to sanction such abuse. Public funding then reproduces political inequality rather than correcting it.

Public goods theory is therefore most relevant to regime conditions characterised by meaningful electoral competition, credible risks of alternation in power, strong regulatory capacity, and institutional independence (Norris & van Es, 2016; Falguera et al., 2014). Where these conditions are absent – as in hybrid regimes (e.g., Angola, Nigeria, and Malawi) and electoral autocracies (e.g., Cameroon, Uganda, and Zimbabwe) – the theory loses its explanatory traction. Public funding systems may exist in law, but they are absorbed into clientelist and neopatrimonial political logics and end up serving regime maintenance rather than democratic competition. In authoritarian or closed autocracies (e.g., Gabon, Eritrea, Mali, and Eswatini), the benefits of party funding accrue only to the regime or ruling party; again, party funding as a public good loses its meaning and value.

We employ the analytical lens of public goods theory while acknowledging the theory as a normative model whose relevance depends on the regime being studied. The theory helps to explain why public funding and regulation perform their intended democratic functions in full and flawed democracies yet become distorted or instrumentalised in hybrid and authoritarian regimes. In this sense, party funding systems can serve as a diagnostic indicator of democratic quality. Where public goods logics fail, one could assume poor democratic quality; where it succeeds, democratic consolidation is probably at play.

Clientelist Theory

Clientelist theory provides a more context-sensitive lens for explaining party funding dynamics in flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and electoral autocracies, and closed autocracies. In these contexts, political competition often rests less on programmatic appeals and more on selective exchange, patronage, and discretionary control of resources (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994). Where public goods theory treats party finance as a collective investment in democratic competition, clientelism focuses instead on how money is mobilised and deployed to secure loyalty, manage elite coalitions, and convert resources into political support under conditions of weak accountability.

In its classical formulation, clientelism is a mode of political exchange characterised by personalised, hierarchical, and reciprocal relationships through which material benefits are traded for political support (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994). Scott (1972) conceptualised clientelism as a system of patron–client ties in which political loyalty is secured through selective benefits, such as cash, jobs, contracts, or protection. These benefits are delivered through discretionary authority, typically under conditions of inequality and weak institutional mediation. In party politics, funding is prized not for sustaining organisational capacity or policy development, but rather for its usefulness in financing machines, brokers, and targeted inducements that can be monitored and rewarded (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994).

The relevance of this lens becomes clear regarding the regime typologies discussed earlier. In closed autocracies, clientelism is oriented less toward persuading voters through credible policy promises and more toward maintaining elite cohesion and regime survival through rents, patronage, and coercive advantage (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994). In Cameroon, for example, electoral management lacks institutional independence. The dominant-party system enables incumbents to exercise discretion over appointments and state resources, with weak accountability constraints. The ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement can convert public resources and administrative power into partisan advantage, including through patronage-based mobilisation and the distribution of material benefits during election periods (Freedom House, 2024; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024a).

Zimbabwe reflects similar dynamics. Governance assessments point to an uneven electoral field, where the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic

Front (ZANU–PF) benefits from state-resource dominance and a coercive environment that undermines accountability. The persistence of clientelist finance is reinforced by patterns of impunity, including allegations that involve politically connected elites, where prosecution is delayed, stalled, or unevenly applied. These issues weaken deterrence and sustain rent-based political competition (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024b).

Burundi exhibits a striking neopatrimonial pattern. The ruling Conseil National pour la Défense de la Démocratie–Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD–FDD) and security-sector actors have been repeatedly implicated in large-scale capture of public resources and trading in influence. Ordinary citizens face coercive extraction and administrative corruption (Prusa, 2024). An example was the 2020 election financing scheme, in which authorities deducted funds from civil servants' salaries, and local officials and ruling-party youth structures extorted 'donations'. Access to basic services was sometimes conditioned on the proof of payment, illustrating coercive resource mobilisation that advantaged the incumbent party (Prusa, 2024). Preferential access to foreign currency and state contracts is given to well-connected elites, with systematic impunity, and anti-corruption bodies are weakened or reorganised. High-profile cases are handled opaquely, and suspects may be quietly compelled to return funds, without meaningful sanctions (Prusa, 2024). Together, these mechanisms of coercive extraction, discretionary allocation of rents, and selective enforcement reflect neopatrimonial governance. Public resources and institutions are instrumentalised to sustain loyalty, elite cohesion, and electoral dominance (Prusa, 2024).

African political finance contexts often exhibit these enabling conditions precisely. Bratton and van de Walle's (1994) analysis of neopatrimonialism highlighted how formal electoral institutions coexist with personalised power relations and patronage, generating incentives for parties to mobilise resources through selective distribution rather than programmatic competition. Similarly, van de Walle (2003) underscored how clientelist strategies are especially salient in emerging party systems where presidents or dominant elites command state resources and distribute them through partisan and personal networks.

Matlosa (2007) extended this diagnosis to party systems in Southern Africa. His work showed how weak institutionalisation and leader-centred party organisation often intensify dependence on private patrons, access to state resources, and informal financial flows. These are all conditions that make clientelist finance strategically attractive. Comparative studies emphasise that where enforcement and disclosure are weak, private finance can readily translate economic power into political influence, reinforcing elite capture and undermining accountability (Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002; McMenamin, 2012). This logic is evident in African contexts where 'godfather' politics and elite sponsorship prevail, such as several West African countries. These dynamics shape party competition through finance-backed patronage networks (Matlosa, 2007). Party finance thus becomes a mechanism for bargaining over access to state resources, rather than a means of funding programmatic competition.

Clientelist theory also illuminates why vote-buying and broker-mediated mobilisation remain resilient under poverty and inequality. Nichter (2008) distinguished strategies for purchasing votes versus strategies for purchasing turnout. His work demonstrated how parties invest resources to secure observable compliance in competitive environments. Wantchekon's (2003) evidence from Benin indicated that clientelist appeals can outperform programmatic appeals if voters doubt the credibility of broad promises, or when immediate material benefits carry greater weight. Keefer (2007) connected these dynamics to state capacity and credibility. Where governments cannot credibly commit to universal public goods, politicians turn to selective benefits delivered through intermediaries as a more reliable strategy of political mobilisation.

Clientelist theory sharpens the understanding of public funding under weak accountability. Where oversight bodies lack autonomy and enforcement capacity is uneven, public subsidies may be absorbed into patronage networks to reinforce incumbency instead of levelling the playing field. This idea is consistent with the broader neopatrimonial argument that public resources are often appropriated and redistributed through partisan channels, producing formal multi-party competition, yet without substantive democratic accountability (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994; van de Walle, 2003). In such settings, public funding does not displace clientelism but merely becomes an additional resource for it.

We employ clientelist theory as a regime-contingent analytical lens to explain why party funding practices in flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and closed autocracies tend to prioritise liquidity, discretion, and selective distribution. The theory helps to explain why reforms centred on transparency and compliance often underperform in settings with weak accountability structures. Conceptually, the theory complements public goods theory. Clientelism clarifies that the key issue is not simply the presence or absence of funding rules but the political logic governing how money is raised, controlled, and deployed under varying regime conditions. As the second half of this paper will demonstrate, party finance systems are best understood as politically embedded arrangements that reveal the operative accountability structures of a given regime, and, by extension, its democratic quality.

PARTY FUNDING MODELS

Political parties across the world mobilise resources through different funding models. These models are shaped by historical experiences, institutional frameworks, and regulatory environments. We consider the following five models of political party funding: private, public, mixed, grassroots, and illicit.

Public Funding

Public funding refers to direct financial transfers or indirect support provided by the state to political parties through enabling legislation. Subsidies may take the following forms: proportional allocations tied to votes or seats won; equal allocations to all registered parties; matching funds that mirror private donations; reimbursements of documented campaign expenses; and in-kind support, such as free media time or office space (Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002; Scarrow, 2007; Ohman, 2012). The rationale is that parties provide collective democratic goods, such as representation, accountability, and political mobilisation; therefore, the parties deserve support from the public purse (Nassmacher, 2009; Catt et al., 2014).

Comparative evidence illustrates the diversity of this model. In South Africa, for instance, two-thirds of party funding is allocated proportionally, according to the number of seats each party occupies in the National Assembly and provincial legislatures; the other third is distributed equally among all represented parties (Matlosa, 2004; IEC/HSRC, 2025). Equal allocation systems, by contrast, support all legally registered parties. Critics argue they waste funds on non-viable contenders (Scarrow, 2007).

Matching systems in several Western democracies encourage grassroots mobilisation by rewarding small donations with public top-ups. Reimbursement systems tie funding to actual expenditures, verified by electoral authorities (van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014; Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002). Where institutions are robust, public funding has curbed illegal finance and promoted programmatic competition, as in Finland and Costa Rica (van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014; Scarrow, 2007). In many African countries, however, weak oversight and seat-based formulas have entrenched ruling parties rather than fostered pluralism (Matlosa, 2004; Catt et al., 2014; Kyei-Poakwah et al., 2024).

Private Funding

The private funding model relies primarily on voluntary contributions from individuals, corporations, trade unions, and other non-state actors, as well as party-owned businesses, fundraising events, or merchandising activities (Scarrow, 2014; Smilov & Toplak, 2007; Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002; McMenamin, 2012). Some scholars have argued that private finance strengthens the organic link between parties and their constituencies, which reinforces pluralism and responsiveness (Ewing, 2007; Scarrow, 2016; Fisher, 2023; Pildes, 2020).

Types of private funding include individual contributions, corporate donations, trade union support, and event-based fundraising. Each type has distinct implications. Individual donations can enhance citizen engagement, but large donors may dominate. Corporate contributions provide substantial resources but risk policy capture. Trade union funding supports worker representation, whereas membership fees can strengthen party–member ties but generate limited revenue (Scarrow, 2014; Smilov & Toplak, 2007; McMenamin, 2012).

The regulatory environment is decisive. In the United States, strong disclosure rules and limits on donations coexist with minimal public subsidies (Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002). In the United Kingdom, large private donations are permitted, but campaign expenditures are capped (Fisher, 2023; Ewing, 2007). In many African contexts, however, weak regulation results in opaque financing, clientelism, and elite capture (Matlosa, 2004; Ohman, 2012). While private funding promotes flexibility, it is vulnerable to corruption in the absence of strong oversight.

Mixed or Hybrid Funding

Hybrid systems combine public subsidies with private contributions, seeking to balance the equity advantages of public funding with the flexibility of private finance (Scarrow, 2007; Ohman, 2012). This approach is common in Europe. For example, Germany and the Netherlands provide state subsidies linked to electoral performance, while permitting private donations that are subject to disclosure requirements (van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014; Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002).

In theory, the hybrid model reduces overreliance on any one source, spreading risks and preventing capture by state elites or wealthy donors (Nassmacher, 2009; Catt et al., 2014). In many African states, the hybrid model exists only on paper and is undermined by weak enforcement, opaque disclosure, and the abuse of state resources (Matlosa, 2004; Ohman, 2012).

Scholars warn that the hybrid model can produce the worst of both worlds, where incumbents exploit subsidies and private donors continue to capture policy influence (Katz & Mair, 1995; Norris & van Es, 2016). Administrative burdens also complicate the hybrid model, as it requires independent and well-resourced oversight institutions to monitor compliance (Ohman, 2012; Catt et al., 2014). In the absence of strong institutions, the hybrid model risks entrenching ruling parties and maintaining elite influence rather than creating balance and fairness.

Grassroots or Membership-Based Funding

Grassroots funding relies on contributions from party members and ordinary citizens through membership dues, small donations, community fundraising, and merchandise sales (Scarrow, 2007, 2014; van Biezen, 2004). Recently, digital platforms have facilitated micro-donations and crowdfunding, expanding the reach of this model (Fisher, 2023; Pildes, 2020). Historically, grassroots finance sustained mass-based and ideologically rooted parties such as the United Kingdom's Labour Party as well as South Africa's African National Congress during its liberation struggle against the apartheid regime (Booysen, 2011; Mattes & Piombo, 2001).

Normatively, grassroots funding embodies participatory democracy and pluralist ideals, in which citizen engagement is the lifeblood of a democratic system (Pateman, 1970; Dahl, 1989). By relying on members rather than elites or state subventions, such funding fosters accountability and preserves party autonomy (Ewing, 2007; Nassmacher, 2009). However, in poor and unequal societies, including in the Global South (e.g. Asia, Africa, and Latin America), grassroots contributions are negligible and membership is weak. Organisational infrastructures are often fragile, which means parties cannot sustain their operations (Matlosa, 2004; Ohman, 2012; Catt et al., 2014).

Different funding types have different grassroots strategies. Membership fees build accountability but yield limited revenue; small donor fundraising expands participation, but requires a broad support base; event-based fundraising boosts visibility but is costly; merchandise sales strengthen the party's identity but generate little profit; and digital donations offer scalability, but exclude people who lack online access (Scarrow, 2014). In competitive multiparty contexts, grassroots-funded parties often struggle against rivals with wealthier funding bases, unless the former are bolstered by state subsidies or innovative technologies (Fisher, 2023; Pildes, 2020).

Illicit Funding

Illicit funding involves unlawful or opaque resource flows, such as the abuse of state resources, proceeds from organised crime, and untraceable anonymous donations (Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002; Scarrow, 2007; Check et al., 2019). Unlike the other models, illicit funding directly undermines democracy because it bypasses regulations and weakens accountability. In Africa, illicit financing often involves inflated procurement contracts, the diversion of public funds, and proceeds from gangs and organised crime.

In Lesotho, *Famo* music gangs reportedly channel criminal money into party campaigns in exchange for protection, which blurs the line between politics and crime (Sekoboto, 2022; Check et al., 2019; Letsie & Matlosa, 2025). These gangs are organised groups of Basotho who were originally migrants to the South African mines. In the late 1940s, they began to compete among themselves using Sotho traditional songs and distinctive colours in their attire, such as blankets and hats. Over time, what started as competition over the sales of music has become a deadly competition involving illegal mining (*zama zamas*) in South Africa, along with political rivalry at home in Lesotho. In the past, these gangs fought each other using sticks and stones, whereas they now use deadly weapons, including knives and guns.

There is evidence of linkages between the famo music gangs and established political parties in Lesotho, including the All-Basotho Convention and the Democratic Congress, both of which have enjoyed unregulated financial support from the gangs. Both these parties have governed Lesotho during various historical periods. Such practices create shadow financial systems that erode transparency and entrench patronage (Catt et al., 2014).

Regulatory strategies include bans on anonymous and foreign donations, the criminalisation of illicit contributions, and strengthening oversight institutions to audit political parties' accounts and enforce compliance with regulatory frameworks. However, enforcement remains weak due to underfunded oversight bodies, regulatory capture, or deliberate obstruction by incumbents (Kyei-Poakwah et al., 2024; Catt et al., 2014). Overall, illicit finance remains the most destabilising form of political funding in emerging democracies.

Table 2 illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of the various funding models discussed in this section. In the next section, we explore the interface between party funding theories and regime typologies.

Table 2. Merits and Demerits of Party Funding Models

Funding Model	Merits	Demerits
Public Funding	Levels the playing field by reducing reliance on wealthy donors, strengthening opposition parties, and encouraging programmatic politics.	Often entrenches incumbents when tied to parliamentary seats; weak oversight allows manipulation.
Private Funding	Encourages pluralism by allowing diverse groups and individuals to support parties; strengthens constituency–party linkages.	Wealthy donors dominate, leading to elite capture; weak regulation creates opacity and corruption.
Mixed or Hybrid Funding	Balances the stability of public funding with the flexibility of private sources; diversifies the financial base.	Can combine the worst of both systems; requires strong oversight, often absent in emerging democracies.

Grassroots or Membership Funding	Promotes inclusivity and participatory democracy; enhances accountability by linking parties to citizens; ensures autonomy and protects from capture.	Provides limited revenue in poor societies; weak membership structures undermine sustainability.
Illicit Funding	Provides hidden resources that may stabilise ruling parties in fragile states.	Undermines transparency; fosters corruption; fuels clientelism and criminal infiltration.

Information sources: Nassmacher (2009); van Biezen & Kopecký (2014); Catt et al., (2014); Ohman (2012); Fisher (2023).

INTERPLAY OF REGIME TYPOLOGIES, THEORIES, AND FUNDING MODELS

Comparative political finance scholars have consistently demonstrated that party funding systems are not neutral institutional designs. Instead, they are politically embedded arrangements, whose structure, operation, and effects depend on the regime type as well as enforcement capacity and accountability structures (Scarrow, 2007; Nassmacher, 2009; Norris & van Es, 2016). As Ahmed and Salih (2003, p. 3) observed, 'In competitive systems, parties are organised by politicians to win elections; in authoritarian systems, parties are organised to affect the attitudes and behaviour of the population. In both instances, an organisational structure must be forged, money must be raised.'

The organisation of party finance is therefore inseparable from the political logic of the regime in which it operates. Funding sources, regulatory frameworks, and enforcement practices reflect the underlying power relations, not just technical policy choices. This section investigates the nexus of regime types (and theories) with the five party funding models. Our aim is to demonstrate how funding arrangements perform differently across regime types. Our core analytical proposition is that funding models 'travel' unevenly across regimes. When a model aligns with regime conditions, it supports democratic competition and political inclusion. When the two aspects are misaligned, funding models mutate into instruments of elite capture, patronage, criminality, and regime maintenance.

The relevant analytical question is therefore not which funding model is normatively superior, but what happens when a given model operates in a particular regime type. In this sense, party funding serves as a regime-diagnostic instrument. The model itself can reveal the quality of democratic accountability, institutional credibility, and the distribution of political power within a country.

Full or Liberal Democracies: Public Goods Logic and Institutional Alignment

Full or liberal democracies, such as Seychelles (Wiltse et al., 2019, Hatchard, 1993), are characterised by economic growth and political stability. In such democracies, party competition approximates a public good in the classical sense. It produces collective benefits, including accountability, alternation in power, representation, and policy responsiveness, which accrue broadly to the citizens (Dahl, 1961; Scarrow, 2007). In these regimes, public goods theory offers its strongest explanatory power. Parties are not merely private associations but also institutional carriers of democratic goods. This point justifies public regulation and state support to prevent capture by narrow interests and to sustain fair competition (Samuelson, 1954; Olson, 1965; Falguera et al., 2014).

Hence, the public funding model most closely aligns with its theoretical intent in full/liberal democracies. Independent oversight bodies, credible sanctions, high transparency, and pluralistic media environments constrain manipulation. In such settings, public subsidies stabilise party competition, without eliminating the contest (van Biezen, 2003; Ewing & Issacharoff, 2006). Allocation rules are combined with disclosure, audit, and spending limits, which prevents donor dominance and preserves electoral competitiveness (Nassmacher, 2009; Norris & van Es, 2016). Comparative evidence from Western Europe and Latin America showed that public funding reduced illicit finance, strengthened opposition parties, and supported programmatic competition when institutions were robust (Scarrow, 2007; van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014).

Private funding, when well regulated, can coexist with democratic competition. Disclosure requirements, contribution limits, and enforcement mechanisms constrain donors' influence and prevent overt capture (Scarrow, 2014; Ewing, 2007). Even so, scholars warn that rising campaign costs generate structural advantages for wealthy donors, which leads to the need for ongoing regulatory recalibration (Nassmacher, 2009).

Mixed funding systems also perform well, because strong institutions prevent either public or private finance from dominating the system. Public funding provides a baseline level of competitiveness, whereas regulated private donations enable societal participation (van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014). Grassroots funding is another model that performs best in full/liberal democracies where citizens possess disposable income, strong party identification, and organisational capacity (Scarrow, 2014; Fisher, 2023).

Illicit funding, by contrast, is structurally constrained by enforcement and transparency and is treated as a criminal deviation rather than a political norm. In full/liberal democracies, therefore, party funding models function as theorised by public goods theory. Where distortions occur, they reflect lapses in enforcement rather than a faulty regime logic.

Flawed or Electoral Democracies: Conditional Public Goods and Institutional Fragility

Flawed or electoral democracies, such as Kenya (Mwangi, 2008; Oloo, 2009) and Lesotho (United Nations Development Programme, 2021; Rakhare, 2019), are marked by fragmented party systems and fragile coalition governance. Here, public goods theory retains its analytical relevance but operates under constrained conditions. Electoral competition exists, yet enforcement capacity is uneven. Regulatory independence may be compromised. Party systems are often weakly institutionalised (Matlosa, 2007; Bratton & van de Walle, 1994), and democratic institutions coexist with informal power practices. The result is a hybrid political order in which formal rules operate alongside patronage and elite dominance.

Public funding addresses important democratic deficits in flawed/electoral democracies. It reduces funding asymmetries, limits overt vote-buying, and provides opposition parties with the minimum resources they need for electoral participation (Falguera et al., 2014; Fiorelli, 2021). In this sense, public goods-oriented funding can mitigate the worst distortions of unregulated private finance and help contain the corrosive effects of money in politics. However, the performance of such funding is often distorted. Allocation formulas tied to parliamentary representation tend to entrench incumbents, especially if regulatory bodies lack independence (Katz & Mair, 1995; van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014). Weak oversight allows a diversion of public resources, as well as selective enforcement, which leads to formal competition without real accountability.

Private funding in flawed/electoral democracies contributes to inequality. Weak disclosure regimes enable affluent individuals and business actors to dominate party financing, which means economic power can be translated to political influence (Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002; McMenamin, 2012). Rather than strengthening party–citizen linkages, private funding narrows access and deepens elite capture. Similarly, mixed funding systems often institutionalise asymmetry: public subsidies coexist with opaque private donations, which allows incumbents to benefit disproportionately while maintaining the appearance of pluralism (Matlosa, 2007; Norris & van Es, 2016).

Grassroots funding is structurally weak because poverty, inequality, and fragile party organisations limit citizens' capacity to sustain parties financially (Ohman, 2012; Catt et al., 2014). Illicit funding fills regulatory gaps, substituting for ineffective oversight and sustaining competition by informal means (Scarrow, 2014; Pinto-Duschinsky, 2002). Flawed/electoral democracies, therefore, exhibit a conditional public goods logic. Funding models may exist in law, but they operate through informal political logics that often obstruct the democratic purpose.

Hybrid Regimes and Electoral Autocracies: Clientelism and the Fusion of Formal Rules and Informal Power

The theory of clientelism is most analytically relevant to hybrid regimes and electoral autocracies. Examples are Benin (Duran et al., 2023) and Angola (Battera, 2018; Casal Bertoa, 2019), where elections are competitive, but accountability mechanisms are weak, uneven, or selectively enforced (Keefer, 2007; Wantchekon, 2003; Mosabala & Fombo, 2021). In such contexts, political actors face credibility constraints that undermine programmatic competition, making targeted and monitorable benefits a more reliable means of securing support. Parties are organised around patronage networks rather than ideological programmes; political loyalty is secured through selective exchange rather than collective policy commitments (Scott, 1972).

Party funding in hybrid regimes prioritises discretion, liquidity, and informality. Financial resources are mobilised to sustain patronage networks, electoral machines, and short-term mobilisation strategies, not long-term organisational development (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994; Matlosa, 2007). In addition, public funding often becomes a form of patronage. Formal subsidy schemes are absorbed into clientelist networks or selectively deployed to reinforce incumbency, rather than levelling the playing field.

Instead of displacing informal finance, public funding becomes an additional resource within patrimonial or prebendalist systems. These are rent-seeking governance systems that benefit powerful individuals at the expense of the country, especially poor, marginalised, and vulnerable people. Furthermore, private funding becomes explicitly transactional. Donors provide resources in exchange for access, contracts, or regulatory forbearance (Wantchekon, 2003; Keefer, 2007). Electoral competition intensifies the incentives for such exchanges, while weak oversight allows them to persist. Similarly, mixed funding systems subsidise the practices of clientelism rather than constraining them. Public funds complement informal finance, reinforcing elite dominance under formal legality (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994).

Grassroots funding is marginal, as poverty, repression, and weak party institutionalisation limit citizens' participation. Illicit funding becomes structurally embedded, linking parties to organised crime, rent-seeking, and the abuse of state resources (Check et al., 2019; Catt et al., 2014). Overall, in hybrid regimes, funding models reveal the coexistence of formal democratic institutions and informal authoritarian power, making clientelism the dominant explanatory logic.

Authoritarian Regimes/Closed Autocracies: Clientelism Without Electoral Mediation

Examples of authoritarian regimes and closed autocracies are Eritrea (Kidane, 2022) and Eswatini (Mzizi, 2004; 2005), which are characterised by de facto one-party or no-party settings. Here, party funding supports regime maintenance rather than electoral competition. Eswatini has banned political parties; Eritrea forbids the private funding of political parties (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.). In these countries, there are no real elections, only choreographed and predetermined selections. Electoral accountability is absent or tightly controlled.

Party finance is oriented toward elite cohesion, rent distribution, and political loyalty rather than voter mobilisation. Parties function as instruments of political control rather than vehicles of representation, and the funding systems reflect that logic. Public funding, where it exists, is symbolic or instrumental, serving regime legitimation or the control of opposition instead of enhancing political competition (Scott, 1972; Bratton & van de Walle, 1994). Private funding is also politically conditioned. Donors contribute to secure protection rather than ideological alignment, which reinforces dominance by the elite (Nassmacher, 2009). Similarly, mixed funding systems entrench party–state fusion rather than pluralism.

In these settings, grassroots funding is negligible because of repression and a weak civil society. Furthermore, illicit funding is structurally integrated into the regime's survival. This means that parties are linked to extractive rents, natural resource revenue, and criminal economies. Overall, in authoritarian regimes, clientelism operates without electoral mediation, functioning as a system of elite management rather than political mobilisation. Funding models therefore reveal not healthy competition but control.

IMPERATIVES FOR REFORM

Since 2003, International IDEA has developed and continues to update its comprehensive Political Finance Database, which covers 181 countries and 58 types of party finance regulations (Hamada & Agrawal, 2025). The first step towards party funding reform is the establishment of an effective regulatory framework. However, as we mentioned earlier, party funding reform cannot be understood as merely a technical or legal exercise. The success of such reform is fundamentally conditioned by the regime type, institutional capacity, and quality of democratic accountability. Regulation should not be viewed as an end in itself but rather as one component of a broader democratic transformation project.

The raison d'être for party funding reform is fourfold. The first justification is to prevent abuse and the buying of political influence; the second is to level the playing field between competing parties. The third reason is to empower citizens through transparency and access to information. The fourth justification is the strengthening of political parties as democratic institutions through better internal accountability and organisational development. These objectives correspond to the logic of public goods theory, which treats political parties as carriers of democratic goods, deserving of institutional protection against capture. Nonetheless, as this article has demonstrated, the objectives can only be realised under regime conditions in which enforcement is credible and accountability mechanisms are functional. Where these conditions are absent, regulation risks becoming merely symbolic or instrumental, rather than transformative.

At the global level, the United Nations Convention Against Corruption identifies political finance regulation as a core instrument for combating corruption. Article 7.3 of the Convention calls on states to 'enhance transparency in the funding of candidates for elected public office and, where applicable, the funding of political parties' (United Nations, 2004, p. 11). Similarly, the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption obliges member states to prohibit the use of illicit funds in party financing and to entrench transparency as a governing principle (African Union, 2003). These frameworks establish party finance regulation as a governance norm and a democratic obligation.

However, the effectiveness of the above frameworks is mediated by domestic political settlements. Where authoritarian or hybrid regimes prevail, compliance is often formal rather than substantive. Regional and national regulatory frameworks in the form of party laws, electoral laws, and codes of conduct have proliferated across Africa. Yet empirical evidence indicates that legal and institutional arrangements remain weak, fragmented, or politically compromised (Hamada & Agrawal, 2025; Transparency International, 2024). In several African countries, civil society organisations and the media lack the autonomy and capacity to perform their watchdog functions effectively; oversight institutions are under-resourced, politically vulnerable, or selectively enforced (Kali, 2022). These points substantiate our central claim, namely, that party funding reform without regime reform is structurally limited.

Recent studies have also demonstrated that political finance reform is not a one-off event but a continuous process of institutional recalibration (Hamada & Agrawal, 2025; Transparency International, 2024). Regulation must therefore be treated as part of an evolving democratic architecture, not as a technocratic intervention. In this sense, party funding reform is best understood as both a diagnostic and a driver of democratic quality. Where such reform succeeds, it signals institutional alignment with democratic norms. Where it fails, it exposes deeper pathologies of the regime.

International IDEA identifies four core regulatory frameworks that underpin effective party funding governance. They are as follows: donation bans and limits; access to public funding; spending limits; and reporting, disclosure, and oversight mechanisms. Each of these instruments is normatively grounded in public accountability, but their practical operation varies markedly across regime types (Ohman, 2012).

Donation bans and limits are aimed at curbing undue influence and preventing the abuse of state resources. Most countries prohibit political parties and candidates from receiving funds from government institutions and restrict or ban foreign donations to protect their national sovereignty. In practice, however, these measures are difficult to enforce in flawed and hybrid regimes, where informal networks and illicit finance circumvent legal controls. Ruling parties often abuse state resources during election campaigns, which undermines the principle of competitive neutrality and reproduces incumbency advantage. Such practices illustrate how clientelist and neopatrimonial logics can override formal regulations in weakly institutionalised systems.

Public funding is among the most widely adopted democratic reforms, aimed at strengthening parties' institutional capacity and levelling the electoral playing field. In established democracies, public subsidies reduce the dependence on wealthy donors and support programmatic competition. In several African countries, public funding has been introduced as part of their democratic consolidation strategies. However, access is often restricted to parliamentary parties, with allocation formulas combining equity and proportionality (Catt et al., 2014). While this approach can stabilise party systems, it may also entrench dominant parties in contexts where the alternation of power is weak. Without independent oversight, public funding risks becoming a mechanism of regime reproduction rather than democratic competition.

Spending bans and limits constitute another cornerstone of political finance regulation. Vote-buying is universally prohibited, yet the practice remains pervasive across much of the Global South. In Africa, vote-buying is often rationalised in terms of poverty alleviation or constituency service (Ohman, 2012), which indicates the persistence of clientelist political cultures. Furthermore, although most countries impose campaign spending limits, enforcement remains weak. The monitoring of party expenditure requires sophisticated auditing capacity and political independence, both of which are often lacking in flawed and hybrid regimes.

The effectiveness of all the regulatory instruments depends on mechanisms for reporting, disclosure, and oversight. Parties and candidates are required to disclose their funding sources, the amounts they receive, and their expenditure patterns. Yet in many African countries, violations occur with impunity because of weak institutional coordination, politicised oversight bodies, and limited investigative capacity. Electoral management bodies (EMBs), which are often tasked with regulating party finance, are already overburdened with election administration. Assigning political finance oversight to EMBs without giving them additional resources only exacerbates the institutional fragility. Comparative experience suggests that specialised regulatory agencies, such as registrars of political parties, would be better suited to this mandate.

In sum, these regulatory instruments illustrate the limits of technocratic reform in the absence of regime transformation. Party funding regulation can only fulfil its democratic purpose under conditions of credible accountability, institutional independence, and political pluralism. Where regimes remain hybrid or authoritarian, funding reforms are likely to be absorbed into patronage networks and elite dominance. In this sense, effective party funding reform implies a broader transition toward democratic deepening. Without regime transformation, merely reforming party finance models and regulations can mean that the symptoms are treated but an underlying political pathology is left intact.

CONCLUSION

This article has advanced the often-stated principle in the literature that, across the world, political parties are the engine of representative democracy. The paper further demonstrated that like any other governance institution, political parties require institutional strengthening to ensure they can be effective in advancing democratisation and political stability. This, in turn, requires access to various resources, whether infrastructural, technological, human, or financial. With regard to the latter, it is clear that party financing represents a catch-22 for democratisation and political stability. It can either promote democratisation under a favourable environment or contribute to the corrosion of democracy under an unfavourable environment, thus generating political instability.

We first established that party funding cannot be understood outside its broader political context, particularly the regime in a country. We then analysed African countries within the framework of regime classifications developed by the EIU's Democracy Index and the V-Dem project. Both frameworks utilise a four-pronged categorisation of regime types to assess the state of democracy versus autocracy across the world, including in Africa. Few countries are classified as full/liberal democracies or authoritarian regimes/closed autocracies. Most are classified as flawed/electoral democracies or hybrid regimes/electoral autocracies. These classifications have implications for theoretical explanations of party funding as well as the prevalent party funding models.

We discussed two party funding theories, namely public goods and clientelism. Public goods theory resonates strongly with full/liberal democracies and, to some extent, flawed/electoral democracies. By contrast, clientelism resonates strongly with hybrid regimes/electoral autocracies and authoritarian regimes/closed autocracies. In addition, we investigated five party funding models. Our analysis showed that these models apply across different regime types to varying degrees or with varying dynamics, mutations, and impact.

Finally, we made a case for regular reform of party funding mechanisms, procedures, rules, and regulations. The aim is to ensure that party funding adds value to democracy and stability. In the absence of such reform, democracy's essence can become denuded, resulting in the current democratic backsliding and accelerated political instability.

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