

Research Article

Time to go: Paths of term limit resilience in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Although term limit violation is a widely examined form of autocratisation in sub-Saharan Africa, this research focuses on the relatively understudied but increasingly frequent cases in which term limits prove resilient. We distinguish two forms of term limit resilience, namely, compliance and enforcement, and we offer the first regional-level study of its determinants using qualitative comparative analysis. We find democracy – that is, the factor that is often considered the strongest predictor of term limit resilience – to be decisive when term limits are threatened or likely to be threatened. However, other mechanisms resulting from the interplay of factors that can be present in both democratic and non-democratic regimes stand out for their explanatory power – most notably, path dependence, regime legacies and opposition. Conversely, factors such as the international promotion of democracy and military autonomy appear to play a secondary role, at least from a comparative viewpoint.

Keywords

Term limits, Africa, qualitative comparative analysis, autocratisation

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Introduction

As they transitioned to multiparty politics in the 1990s, the majority of sub-Saharan countries adopted limits to the number of terms presidents can serve.¹ Hopes ran high that these constitutional provisions would depersonalise political power in a region historically vulnerable to the ‘big man’ syndrome (Carbone and Pellegata, 2020). However, the consolidation of presidential term limits proved to be more of an uphill battle than the natural continuation of a process of political institutionalisation of sub-Saharan polities started after the end of the Cold War. In the past three decades, the question of term limits has been central to the autocratisation strategies of several leaders who have tried to extend their stay in office and revive personal rule, often successfully (Cassani, 2020).

The politics of term limits in Africa has attracted much scholarly debate, especially regarding the violation of these rules (Grauvogel and Heyl, 2020; Mangala, 2020; Posner and Young, 2018; Reyntjens, 2020). Less attention has been given to the fact that the regional record of term limit resilience has progressively improved. The resilience of term limits may result from two main processes. Term limit *compliance* occurs when presidents relinquish power after having served the total number of terms allowed

by the constitution at the time they were first elected, without trying to violate the existing rules in their own favour. In turn, term limit *enforcement* occurs when presidents step down only after having attempted and failed to overstay in power. Accordingly, we address the following questions: why does a growing number of African presidents comply with term limits? Moreover, why have some violation attempts failed, eventually leading to the enforcement of term limits?

As the violation of term limits can lead to the reconsolidation of personal rule, investigating term limit resilience provides guidance for contrasting the ongoing autocratisation upsurge (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021; Tomini et al., 2023). In this article, we study the determinants of term limit resilience in sub-Saharan Africa using fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (QCA). To our knowledge, this is the first investigation of Africa's term limit politics that employs QCA. The empirical literature on term limits in this region has mostly consisted of in-depth studies of single or few cases (Baker, 2002; Cheeseman, 2019; Leininger and Nowack, 2022; Saliu and Muhammad, 2020; VonDoepp, 2019; among others). Most region-level statistical analyses are descriptive and/or test causal factors separately due to the relatively small number of available observations (Posner and Young, 2018; Reyntjens, 2020; Tull and Simons, 2017; but see Dulani, 2011). Accordingly, although several causal factors have been identified, their explanatory power has rarely been tested against each other in a comparative setting. Using QCA, we offer not only methodological pluralism but also a systematic, comparative account of multiple conditions favouring term limit resilience and their interactions.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. In the first and second sections, we conceptualise the notions of term limit resilience, compliance and enforcement, and we map the phenomenon empirically with reference to sub-Saharan Africa. In the third section, we review the literature to identify the factors that may influence term-limited presidents' willingness to refrain from undertaking actions aimed at manipulating term limits as well as the factors that may hinder an aspiring overstayer's ability to hang on to power. Subsequently, we illustrate how we conducted the empirical analysis, present the findings and discuss their relevance. We conclude with a discussion of a few issues that research on term limit resilience should address in the future.

In a region characterised by a limited number of democratic regimes, our analysis challenges the idea that term limit resilience is mainly contingent on the quality of democracy (Reyntjens, 2020; Tull and Simons, 2017). Indeed, although we find democracy to be decisive when term limits are either under threat or likely to be threatened, the analysis assigns strong explanatory power to mechanisms resulting from the interplay of factors that can be present in both democratic and non-democratic regimes, most notably, path dependence, regime legacies and opposition. In turn, factors such as the international promotion of democracy and military autonomy seem to play a relatively minor role, at least from a comparative viewpoint.

Conceptualising term limit resilience

Presidential term limits are constitutional provisions aimed at limiting the number of terms a president can serve either continuously or in total. Term limit resilience, in turn, is the ability of term limits to survive a critical juncture. Because, in general, heads of government want to remain in office (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003), the time when an incumbent president is about to reach the end of his or her last constitutionally allowed mandate represents a critical juncture. We opt for a broad understanding of resilience: term limits prove resilient every time they are not successfully violated in such critical junctures. A violation of term limits is an attempt to either remove, alter or circumvent constitutional provisions about term limits, and violation is successful when a president actually manages to overstay in office for one or more additional terms.

We distinguish two main situations corresponding to the resilience of term limits. In some cases, term limits *withstand* a critical juncture: presidents relinquish power after having served the total number of terms

allowed by the constitution at the time they were first elected without trying to violate the existing rules in their own favour. We refer to this phenomenon as *term limit compliance*, or the ability of a political system to prevent an outright challenge against term limits to materialise. In other cases, term limits *recover* from a threatening situation: presidents step down (either peacefully or through force) only after having attempted and failed to violate term limits and overstay in office for additional terms. We refer to this phenomenon as *term limit enforcement*, or the ability of a political system to react to an outright challenge against term limits.

Term limit compliance and term limit enforcement thus represent two different forms of term limit resilience. They both correspond to the absence of a successful violation of term limits, but they result from the ability of a political system to either prevent or react to an attempt to violate term limits, respectively. Figure 1 summarises the above-described conceptual framework.

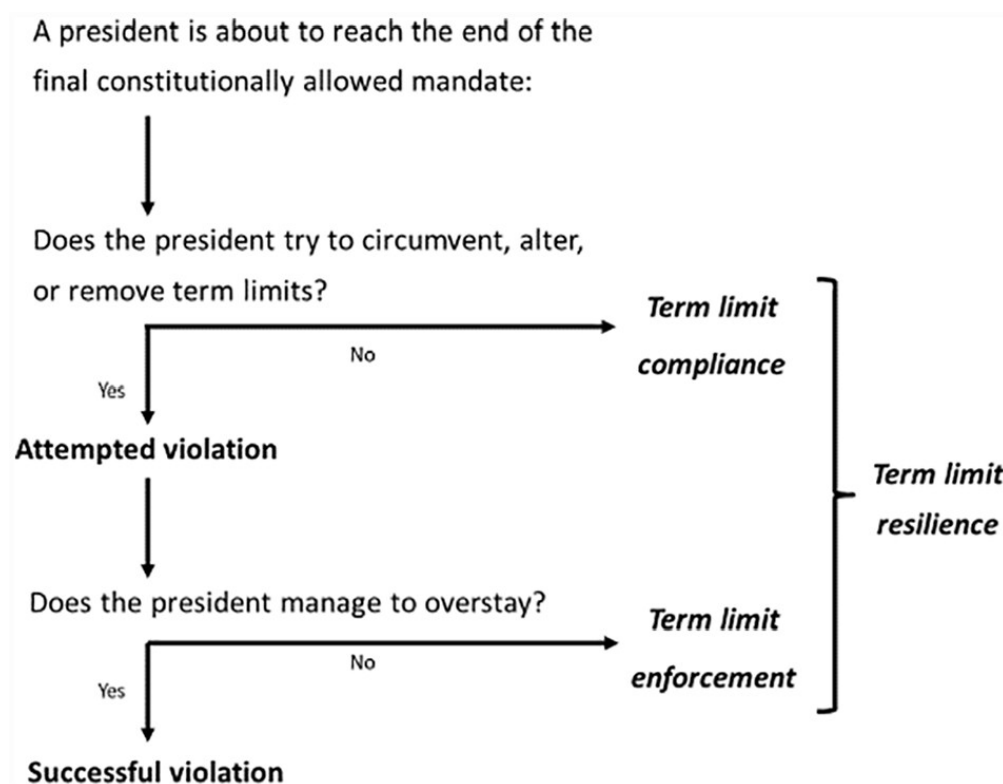


Figure 1. Term limit resilience: a conceptual framework.

Our definition of term limit resilience deliberately draws on the literature on democratic resilience (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021), and a clarification is in order, as the relationship between term limits and democracy remains disputed. In principle, limited tenure does not represent a requisite of democracy, as long as voters are periodically given the opportunity to either confirm or dismiss an incumbent president in free and fair elections. Moreover, limiting re-election arguably also limits voters' choices and weakens the accountability mechanism.

However, we consider term limits as a bulwark against autocratisation. In itself, the act of manipulating these institutions often entails the weakening of institutional checks and balances (Cassani, 2020). Moreover, the successful violation of term limits taints political competition by consolidating the incumbency advantage (Baturo, 2022) and paves the way to personal rule. In an age of rising autocratisation (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), investigating term limit resilience and its determinants thus contributes to understanding how to prevent and resist this political syndrome (Tomini et al., 2023).

Term limit resilience south of the Sahara: an overview

We study term limit resilience with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa for three main reasons. First, sub-Saharan Africa is one of the regions most affected by the contemporary trend in autocratisation and one in which autocrats' strategies have typically targeted term limits (Cassani, 2020). Second, this region has historically proven vulnerable to personal rule (Carbone and Pellegata, 2020). Third, against this backdrop, sub-Saharan Africa's record of term limit resilience has experienced a modest, rarely acknowledged, but meaningful improvement.

Overall, 40 sub-Saharan states have thus far adopted presidential term limits. As of the end of 2021, we count a total of 49 'term limit events' – that is, critical junctures in which an African president was about to reach the end of his or her last constitutionally allowed mandate and thus had to face term limits – occurring in 32 of these countries. In the remaining eight countries, presidents have not yet reached term limits for various reasons, whereas term limits were never introduced in nine other countries. Our dataset, which updates the information available in the Africa Executive Term Limits (AETL) dataset (Cassani, 2021), thus includes the full population of sub-Saharan term limit events (as of 2021). A full list of these cases is available in Appendix A (see online supplemental material for appendices).

Figure 2 summarises the record of term limit resilience in the region. Consistent with the definition formulated in the previous section, we classify a term limit event as an instance of resilience when term limits are not violated successfully (i.e. the president does not overstay for additional terms). Overall, the resilience of term limits is more frequent (69%) than the successful violation of these institutions. As we will show, however, this is a relatively recent achievement. Moreover, Figure 2 identifies substantial variations across sub-Saharan Africa, as term limits have thus far proven more resilient in western and southern Africa than in the central and eastern areas of the continent.

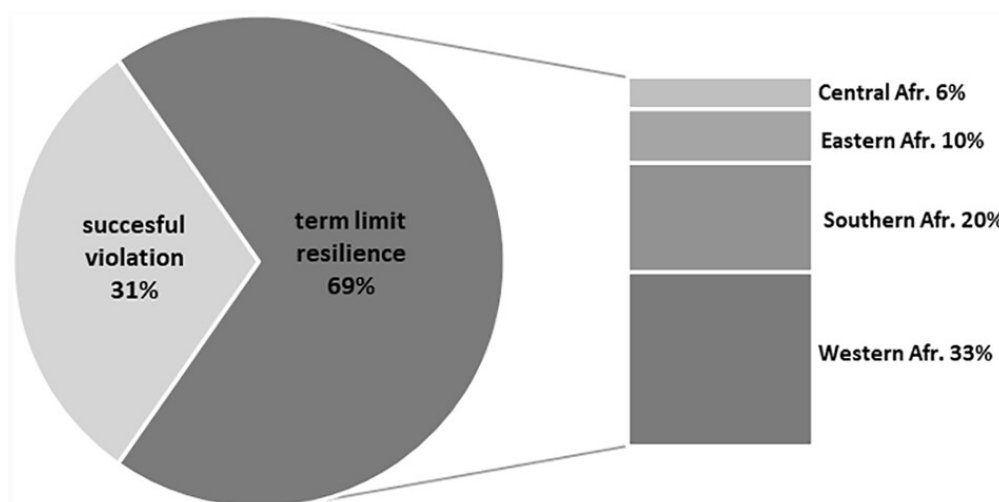


Figure 2. Term limit resilience in sub-Saharan Africa. The graph considers all term limit events until 2021.

Figures 3 and 4 analyse term limit compliance and enforcement separately and track the historical record. Based on our definition, we classify a term limit event as an instance of compliance in the absence of violation attempts, whereas term limit enforcement results from the failure of such violation attempts. Violation attempts occur when a president takes initial formal steps to circumvent, alter or remove term limits (e.g. tabling a constitutional amendment or asking the court to rule over the interpretation of term limits). Overall, term limit resilience in sub-Saharan Africa has mainly resulted from cases in which presidents complied with tenure limitations (25 cases), whereas term limit enforcement has been relatively rare (9 cases).

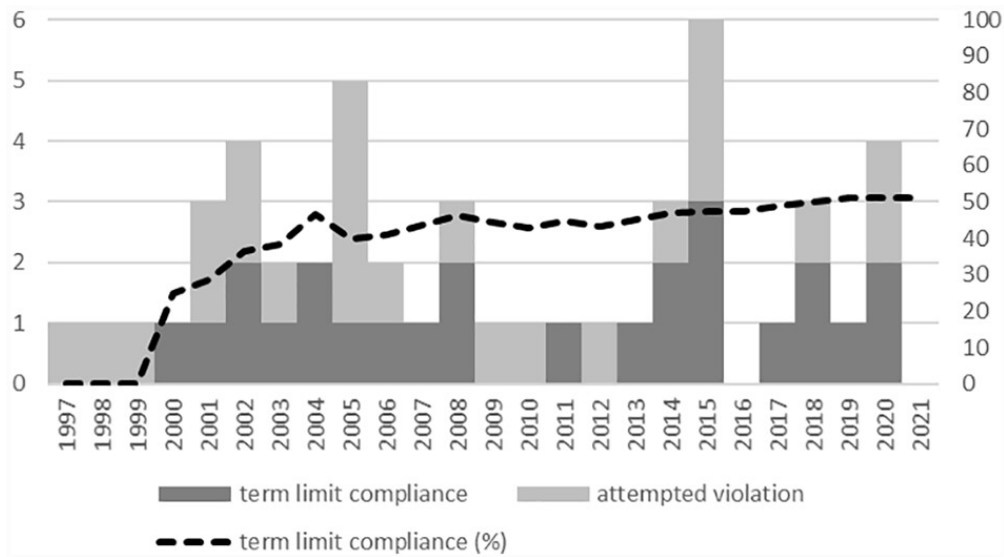


Figure 3. Term limit compliance in sub-Saharan Africa.

The graph considers all term limit events until 2021. The columns (left-side vertical axis) track the yearly raw number of cases of compliance and attempted violation. For each year, columns are stacked on top of each other (i.e. they do not overlap). The dotted line (right-side vertical axis) tracks the term limit compliance’s cumulative share (%).

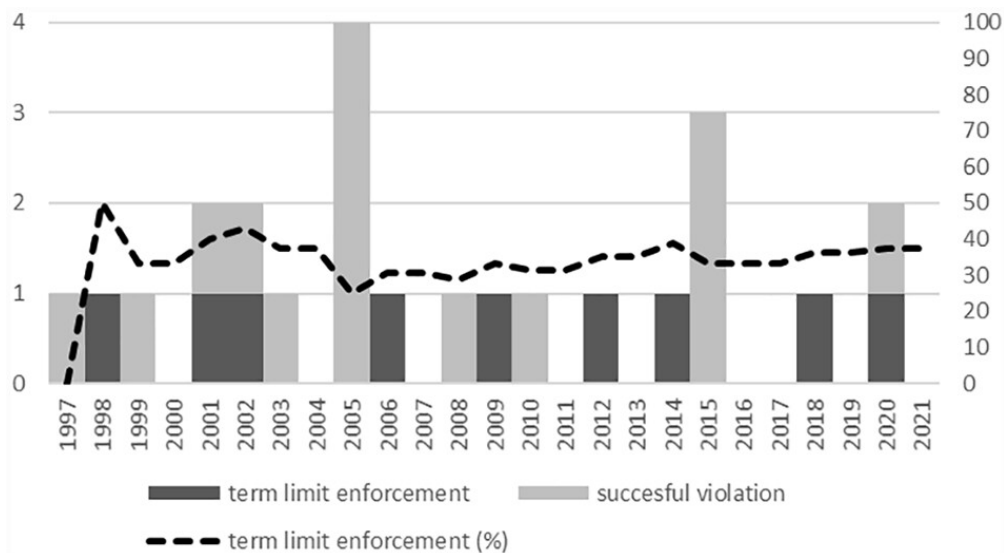


Figure 4. Term limit enforcement in sub-Saharan Africa.

The graph considers only attempted term limit violation events. The columns (left-side vertical axis) track the yearly raw number of cases of enforcement and successful violation. For each year, columns are stacked on top of each other (i.e. they do not overlap). The dotted line (right-side vertical axis) tracks the term limit enforcement’s cumulative share (%).

Figure 3 shows that sub-Saharan Africa’s debut with term limit politics was inauspicious. The first term limit event occurred in Burkina Faso in 1997, when Blaise Compaoré removed tenure limitations from the constitution. The next year, Abdou Diouf did exactly the same in Senegal, whereas Namibia’s leader Sam Nujoma obtained permission to remain in his post for one extra term in 1999. In Ghana, Jerry Rawlings was the first African elected leader to comply with term limits in 2000. Although sub-Saharan presidents have been more likely to challenge rather than to comply with term limits until recently, Figure 3 shows that the trend started to progressively change around 2011. In truth, by the end of the 2010s some presidents such as Paul Biya, Ismail Omar Guelleh and Yoweri Museveni no longer had to worry about term limits, as they had scrapped these constitutional provisions years before. However, focusing on those presidents who still had to grapple with term limits, Figure 3 shows that between 2011 and 2021 compliance occurred in 13 out of 21

term limit events (i.e. 61% of cases), which contrasts quite significantly with the compliance rate recorded between 1997 and 2010 (12 out of 28 term limit events, i.e. 43% of cases).

Figure 4 shifts attention from compliance to enforcement. As anticipated, term limit enforcement represents a relatively rare outcome in sub-Saharan Africa: when presidents have not complied with term limits, they have successfully overstayed on approximately two-thirds of these occasions overall. However, even in this case, some improvements are discernible. Between 2011 and 2021, term limits were enforced half of the times they were challenged and in two out of the three most recent such episodes. Notably, consistent with our definition, our dataset includes a relatively broad range of term limit enforcement situations, from Frederick Chiluba in Zambia, who eventually agreed to step down, to Abdoulaye Wade in Senegal, who did run for a third term but was voted out of office, to Alpha Condé in Guinea, who was ousted by the army.

The determinants of term limit resilience

The countering of autocratisation is an emerging but still understudied area of inquiry (Tomini et al., 2023), and the subfield of term limit resilience is no exception. The politics of presidential term limits has recently attracted much scholarly debate (Baturu and Elgie, 2019), and sub-Saharan Africa represents one of the most studied regions (Grauvogel and Heyl, 2020; Mangala, 2020), along with Latin America (Corrales, 2016; Kouba, 2016; Negretto, 2022). However, attention has focused prevalently on the violation of these constitutional provisions and the related risk of (re-)autocratisation. Scholars have investigated the reasons behind presidents' attempts to violate term limits, the strategies adopted, the factors affecting the probability of success and the consequences of these actions (Baturu, 2014; McKie, 2019; Versteeg et al., 2020).

However, how can we explain the modest but meaningful progress made in sub-Saharan Africa in term limit resilience, which we have highlighted in the previous section? In one of the regions most affected by autocratisation and one in which autocrats' strategies have typically targeted term limits, what persuades presidents to comply with term limits? Moreover, why have some violation attempts failed, eventually leading to the enforcement of term limits?

Our point of departure is that, in general, heads of government want to remain in office (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). Hence, although we cannot rule out the possibility that a president genuinely believes in the rightfulness of term limits, we assume that neither the decision of a term-limited president to comply with term limits nor the latter's enforcement (in case the president chooses not to comply with term limits) should be taken for granted; rather, we assume that these cases represent outcomes resulting from the interplay of multiple factors. In this regard, we identify two main approaches proposed in the literature. On the one hand, the quality of democracy has been recognised as the most important predictor of term limit resilience in sub-Saharan Africa (Reyntjens, 2020; Tull and Simons, 2017). On the other hand, research on term limit manipulation points to a number of other factors that can be present in both democratic and non-democratic regimes.

The democracy-centred mechanism rests on the idea that democracy gives citizens the freedom to express their views and allows them to influence political decisions. Accordingly, given the strong popular legitimacy term limits enjoy (McKie and Carlson, 2022), in democratic regimes, presidents ought to be strongly incentivised to comply with term limits, and their attempts to violate term limits should generate harsh disapproval and have little chance of success. Although intuitive, this argument can be challenged from several angles. First, with few exceptions, sub-Saharan states display relatively weak democratic institutions, which could hardly be considered insurmountable obstacles for aspiring overstayers. In fact, constitutions on the continent have proven malleable even in countries such as Namibia, which scores comparatively high in the efficacy of its democratic institutions.

Our data confirm that term limit resilience is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond democracy. Term limits have thus far proven resilient in approximately 88% of African democracies but also in 48% of African autocracies, which in turn represent approximately two-thirds of the total cases of term limit resilience in this region. Term limits have been routinely respected in democracies such as those of Botswana and Ghana but also in non-democratic states such as Mozambique and Kenya. Moreover, presidents in countries as different as Liberia and Mauritania have recently complied with term limits, which have been enforced even in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo-DRC) after a relatively long dispute.

If democracy alone cannot explain term limit resilience, the literature on term limit manipulation suggests several factors that do not necessarily correlate with democracy but could nonetheless influence presidents' willingness to undertake actions aimed at violating term limits. Some of these factors help explain compliance with these institutions. Personal traits are one category of such factors. Such traits include presidents' age and previous career, which arguably represent critical issues in sub-Saharan Africa, which has a history of irregular takeovers and is home to some of the oldest world leaders (Carbone and Pellegata, 2020). On the one hand, older incumbents are expected to be less inclined to risk challenging constitutional rules (Posner and Young, 2018), as they might also consider the reputational loss entailed by this kind of action. On the other hand, presidents who took power through electoral competition should accept the principles of limited tenure and executive rotation more easily than incumbents who previously ruled the country as non-elected or military leaders (Dulani, 2011).²

The legacies of the past represent another set of factors that could influence term limit compliance. We distinguish between remote and proximate legacies, in reference to the period before and after the institutionalisation of term limits in a given country, respectively. Concerning the former, Hartmann (2022) argues that single-party autocracies have created a favourable context for term limits to be respected in the future, especially when the ruling party has remained in power in spite of the transition to multipartyism. In this kind of autocracy, leadership is less personalised (Osei et al., 2020), and there is often a consolidated habit of discussing leadership succession collectively. Regarding more proximate legacies, the first time a term limit is reached could represent a highly consequential event (Hartmann, 2022). Accordingly, an incumbent who chooses to comply with the rules of the game at such a juncture starts a path from which it is difficult for his or her successors to deviate (Posner and Young, 2018). Similarly, we expect previous failed attempts to violate term limits to represent powerful deterrents for newer attempts.

The regional context could also be precedent setting. Certainly, African regional organisations enjoy limited constraining power in the domestic politics of their members. For instance, in 2015, the Economic Community of West African States failed to approve a regional obligation to adopt term limits, whereas the African Union's response to the violation of term limits 'remains highly uneven and ineffective' (Wiebusch and Murray, 2019: 134). However, as much as term limit violations in neighbouring countries incentivise imitation (Cassani, 2020; Lofty, 2022), respect for term limits by a president's regional peers could favour the diffusion of virtuous behaviours and raise the reputational costs of manipulation attempts.

The literature also suggests several other factors that could hinder an aspiring overstayer's ability to violate term limits and thus favour the enforcement of these institutions. Starting from the political arena, political parties represent the actors most frequently involved in presidents' attempts to bypass term limits, as constitutional revisions require the support of qualified majorities in virtually all sub-Saharan states. On the one hand, opposition parties have a strong interest in defending term limits (Corrales, 2016), which periodically offer the possibility of competing in elections in which the incumbent cannot run and thus indirectly raise opposition candidates' chances of winning (Baturu, 2022). However, opposition parties' actual ability to enforce term limits depends on their strength, as suggested by the fact that power asymmetries between opposition and ruling parties are key to explaining the successful violation of term limits (McKie, 2019; Negretto, 2022).

On the other hand, McKie (2019) notes that ‘the decision to lift or uphold term limit laws ultimately lies in the hands of the president’s own party’ (1502), which is not necessarily willing to indulge in the president’s ambition to hang on to power. Institutionalised ruling parties that operate autonomously and are not simple vehicles for the will of the president are likely to oppose such ambitions (Kouba, 2016), for instance. This opposition is likely to hold true even in non-democratic settings, as term limits ease the management of intra-elite relationships within ruling parties by providing a mechanism for career advancement and leadership rotation (Ezrow, 2019).

In addition to political parties, the military and the international donor community represent two other key players in term limit disputes, although their commitment to defending the rule of law remains uncertain (Carbone and Pellegata, 2020; Cheeseman, 2019). Concerning international actors, recent research suggests that external aid is effective in protecting term limits only when it is specifically targeted at capacitating pro-democratic actors (Leininger and Nowack, 2022). In turn, the inclination of the armed forces to either side with the overstaying president or defend term limits is likely to depend on their loyalty to the president or their level of autonomy from him or her (Dulani, 2011; Harkness, 2017).

Research design

In addition to the quality of democracy, in the previous section we discussed a plurality of factors that can be found in both democratic and non-democratic regimes and that could favour term limit resilience, either by inducing presidents to comply with the rules of the game or by enforcing these rules when they are challenged. However, the explanatory potential of several of the above-discussed factors has yet to undergo a systematic comparative test able to assess which factors count most in the African context and how they interact with each other. To fill this gap, we use fuzzy-set QCA, which offers several advantages (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). First, it promotes methodological pluralism and innovation, since this is the first time that QCA has been used in this research field, to our knowledge. Most importantly, QCA is sensitive to conjunctural causation and equifinality, thus allowing for the examination of multiple specific factors while simultaneously highlighting their combined effects and the presence of alternative paths leading to the same outcome.

The analysis proceeds through two main steps, each addressing a specific form of term limit resilience. In the first step, we analyse all 49 episodes in which an elected African president was about to reach the end of his or her last constitutionally allowed mandate between 1997 (i.e. the year the first such event occurred) and 2021 (i.e. the last year under observation). The outcome under examination is term limit compliance, which occurs when presidents relinquish power and do not attempt to manipulate the existing rules for their own benefit. We operationalise term limit compliance as a dichotomy using the data presented in Figure 3. The second step shifts attention to term limit enforcement, which occurs when presidents step down only after having attempted and failed to overstay in power. Even in those cases, we operationalise term limit enforcement as a dichotomy, but we work on a smaller sample of 24 cases – that is, all the term limit events in which an African president did not comply with term limits and attempted to overstay. We use the data depicted in Figure 4.

Consistent with the theoretical discussion, each step focuses on a different set of factors with one exception, namely, democracy, which is deemed to favour both compliance with term limits and the enforcement of those limits. More specifically, we expect term limit compliance to be favoured when the following conditions (in parentheses are the labels we use in the analysis) are present: a democratic political system (*democ*); an elderly president (*age*); a president who came to power through multiparty elections (*elect*); a history of party-based autocracy (*exparty*); a precedent of one or more cases in which term limits already proved resilient in that country (*precedent*); and the resilience of term limits in a majority of a country’s regional partners (*region*). In turn, we expect term limit enforcement to be favoured by the

presence of the following conditions: a democratic political system (*democ*); strong opposition parties (*opp*); an autonomous ruling party (*rulp*); autonomous armed forces (*mil*); and elevated levels of democracy assistance (*dema*id).

To assess the presence or absence of the above 10 conditions we create as many indicators. A codebook is available in Appendix B, along with a description of the calibration process. Calibration is a crucial preparatory task in fuzzy-set QCA, which requires transforming the raw data into fuzzy-set membership scores and measuring the degree to which a given case belongs or does not belong to the set of cases in which a given condition is present (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012).

Following an established practice in the QCA literature, we first conduct a test aimed at identifying conditions that, taken individually, are necessary either to term limit compliance or to term limit enforcement. Since we do not have specific expectations concerning relations of necessity, the results are presented in Appendix C. In brief, according to the analysis, there are no necessary conditions for term limit compliance or term limit enforcement in sub-Saharan Africa.

The most important part of our empirical investigation is the analysis of sufficiency, which is based on the creation of truth tables that list all the possible logical combinations of conditions. Truth tables are available in Appendix D. Through a process of logical minimisation, QCA identifies one or more configurations of jointly sufficient conditions, representing as many equifinal paths associated with the outcomes under examination – that is, term limit compliance and term limit enforcement, respectively. Depending on the inclusion of so-called logical remainders (i.e. logical combinations of conditions for which there is no empirical evidence), three kinds of solutions can be obtained: a complex or conservative solution, in which no logical remainder is considered; a parsimonious solution, in which all logical remainders are considered; and an intermediate solution, which considers only the logical remainders that fulfil some theoretical assumptions. Concerning the latter, we consider all the logical remainders in which the condition *democ* is present, given the importance other scholars have attached to democracy as a driver of term limit resilience (Reyntjens, 2020; Tull and Simons, 2017).

The full output of the analysis of sufficiency (parsimonious, intermediate and conservative solutions) is presented in Appendix E. In the next sections, we present and discuss the findings based on Tables 1 and 2, which summarise the results of a cross-analysis between parsimonious, intermediate and conservative solutions aimed at providing a comprehensive interpretation of the results (Haesebrouck, 2022; see also Baumgartner, 2015; Schneider, 2018). In these tables, each row represents a configuration of jointly sufficient conditions leading either to term limit compliance (Table 1) or to term limit enforcement (Table 2) in sub-Saharan Africa. We conducted several robustness tests (Oana et al., 2021), which are available in Appendix F.

Table 1. Paths of term limit compliance: summary of the findings (analysis of sufficiency).

Mechanism	Configuration
<i>Path dependence</i>	1 precedent * elect Explained cases: Ghana2; Sao Tomé and Príncipe2; Kenya2; Benin2; Niger2; Mozambique2; Botswana2; Seychelles2, Sierra Leone2; Tanzania2; Namibia3
<i>Regime legacies</i>	2 exparty * age Explained cases: Kenya1; Sierra Leone1; Liberia; Kenya2
	3 exparty * region Explained cases: Mozambique1; Seychelles1; Tanzania1; Botswana1; Liberia; Mozambique2; Botswana2; Seychelles2, Sierra Leone2; Tanzania2
<i>Democracy</i>	4 democ * ~region * ~elect * ~precedent * ~age * ~exparty Explained cases: Benin1; Ghana1 Deviant cases: Senegal2; Burkina Faso2 Unexplained cases: Burundi2; Mauritania; Mali, Namibia; Sao Tomé and Príncipe1

*stands for the logical operator AND; ~ stands for 'absence of'. The table summarises the results of a cross-analysis between parsimonious, intermediate and conservative solutions. The full output of the analysis of sufficiency is available in Appendix E (step 1) (see online supplemental material). The conditions in bold represent the most relevant in terms of causality, according to the parsimonious solution. The conditions in italics are empirically plausible additional parts of the configurations based on the intermediate solution.

Table 2. Paths of term limit enforcement: summary of the findings (analysis of sufficiency).

Mechanism	Configuration
<i>Opposition</i>	1 opp * ~democ * ~demaid Explained cases: Congo-DRC; Guinea2; Nigeria
	2 rulp * ~military * opp Explained cases: Nigeria; Malawi
<i>Democracy</i>	3 democ * ~opp * ~demaid Explained cases: Niger1; Senegal1
	4 democ * ~opp * military Explained cases: Senegal1; Senegal2; Zambia

Unexplained cases: Burkina Faso3

*stands for the logical operator AND; ~ stands for 'absence of'. The table summarises the results of a cross-analysis between parsimonious, intermediate and conservative solutions. The full output of the analysis of sufficiency is available in Appendix E (step 2) (see online supplemental material). The conditions in bold represent the most relevant in terms of causality, according to the parsimonious solution. The conditions in italics are empirically plausible additional parts of the configurations based on the intermediate solution.
Congo-DRC: Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Why African presidents comply with term limits

The analysis identifies four configurations of conditions corresponding to three main mechanisms of term limit compliance centred on path dependence, regime legacies and democracy. Concerning the first mechanism, Configuration 1 in Table 1 highlights the binding power of the precedent for those presidents who came to power via elections. This mechanism helps explain approximately 45% of the African cases of term limit compliance. The interaction between precedent and elections suggests that this form of path dependence is closely related to the expected electoral cost of deviating from the path. Accordingly, in countries with a precedent of term limit compliance and/or enforcement, elected presidents seem to be aware

that violating term limits will be perceived as the infringement of a pre-existing and relatively consolidated contract, and they expect voters to punish such infringement.

Configurations 2 and 3, in turn, show that in some cases, the proximate legacy of the precedent overlaps with another more remote legacy, namely, a history of party-based autocracy. Overall, regime legacies help explain 14 African cases of term limit compliance, but this second mechanism works as long as regime legacies combine with other favourable conditions, such as the age of the incumbent and the regional context. For instance, all the presidents who were protagonists in the cases explained by Configuration 2 were either in their eighties or close to the end of their seventies and thus probably lacking motivation to challenge the rules of the game. Configuration 3, moreover, highlights that, in addition to a consolidated habit of respecting formal and informal succession rules within a particular party (and, in some of these cases, the example of their predecessors too), presidents in countries such as Botswana, Liberia, Mozambique and Tanzania received further incentives to step down based on the fact that most of their counterparts in neighbouring countries did so. In the absence of such interactions (e.g. when regime legacies do not combine with either the incumbents' age or the regional context and vice versa), more often than not African presidents did not comply with term limits.

Configuration 4 shifts attention from the legacies of the past to a third mechanism of term limit compliance centred on democracy. Although this configuration explains a relatively small number of cases, it sheds new light on the role of democracy as a driver of term limit compliance, particularly on the fact that democracy could represent a decisive factor in otherwise adverse contexts, characterised by the absence of virtually any of the other conditions that we expect would ease compliance with term limits. For instance, Ghana and Benin displayed no favourable regime legacies and were ruled by presidents such as Rawlings and Mathieu Kérékou, who came to power through the use of force and were the first leaders to reach term limits in their respective countries. Moreover, at the time when these leaders reached term limits, Western Africa was characterised by relatively low rates of term limit compliance. However, these presidents ruled two of the countries with the strongest democratic institutions on the continent, which proved crucial in shaping their decision to abide by the rules of the game, according to our analysis.

We also detected a few deviant cases, namely, the second term limit episodes that occurred in Senegal and Burkina Faso, in which the mechanisms of term limit compliance previously identified did not work. In this respect, President Wade's decision not to comply with term limits is somewhat surprising, as Senegal in 2012 represented a relatively fertile ground for the resilience of term limits, which, less surprisingly, were eventually enforced, as we will discuss in the next section. Wade's miscalculation is probably due to an 'atypical' precedent of term limit enforcement, as his predecessor Diouf succeeded in running for another term before being kicked out by voters. Ironically, Wade had exactly the same fate.

In turn, when, Compaoré successfully bypassed term limits for a second time in 2005, Burkina Faso displayed an unfavourable context for term limit resilience in quite the same way as the previously discussed cases of Ghana and Benin, where Rawlings and Kérékou stepped down gracefully. To be sure, given the unfavourable context characterising all these cases, the actual 'deviant' cases are Ghana and Benin, and the difference between them and Burkina Faso is probably related to variations in the strength of the democratic institutions in these countries. that the QCA failed to detect.

How to stop African overstayers

Concerning the enforcement of term limits, the QCA identifies four configurations of conditions corresponding to two main mechanisms centred on opposition and democracy. Configuration 1 and Configuration 2 in Table 2 show that in non-democratic countries (or weakly democratic countries, e.g. Malawi), a relatively strong opposition can successfully defend term limits from African presidents' attempts to overstay. The corresponding cases demonstrate the effectiveness of different forms of opposition, from

refusing to pass term limit reforms in the parliament, as in Nigeria and Malawi, to mobilising protests in the streets, as in Congo-DRC and Guinea, where prolonged turmoil eventually led Joseph Kabila to step down and the armed forces to overthrow Condé, respectively. Configuration 2 further specifies the opposition-centred mechanism of term limit enforcement by detecting in Malawi and Nigeria an interaction between opposition forces and the ruling party in resisting aspiring overstayers. In Malawi, for instance, an ‘open term’ bill did not pass, not only because President Muluzi failed to garner support among opposition legislators but also (and crucially) because he faced resistance within his own party (VonDoepp, 2019; see also Saliu and Muhammad, 2020 on Nigeria).

The second mechanism of term limit enforcement emerging from our analysis is centred on democracy. According to Configuration 3 and Configuration 4, even when opposition parties are weak, democracy can effectively contrast African presidents’ attempts to overstay in office. A closer look at the cases highlights civil society as a key democratic institution in similar situations. The role of civil society emerges most clearly in Senegal, where between 2000 and 2012 citizens voted out of office two aspiring overstayers in a row, and in Zambia, where a coalition of churchmen and trade unions persuaded President Chiluba to recede from his third-term bid (Baker, 2002).

The four configurations in Table 2 also shed some light on the role played by democracy aid donors and the armed forces, whose influence on term limit enforcement appears less pronounced than we expected. Concerning the former, although Leininger and Nowack (2022) illustrate how international democracy promotion can contribute to the enforcement of term limits, Configuration 1 and Configuration 3 show that term limits were enforced even in the absence of high levels of democratic aid. In turn, the QCA does not identify clear relationships between military autonomy and term limit enforcement. Although Configuration 4 shows that the democratic mechanism of term limit enforcement works more easily when overstaying presidents cannot count on the support of the armed forces, Configuration 2 provides evidence of term limit enforcement even in the absence of an autonomous military.

Term limit resilience: new insights and puzzling results from sub-Saharan Africa

What do we learn about term limit resilience in sub-Saharan Africa from the mechanisms of term limit compliance and enforcement discussed above? First, the QCA disentangled and specified the role of democracy, which previous studies considered one of the most powerful drivers of term limit resilience on the continent (Reyntjens, 2020; Tull and Simons, 2017). Our findings confirm the relevance of democracy as a determinant of both term limit compliance and term limit enforcement, but these findings also add some important caveats.

On the one hand, the democracy-centred mechanism emerges as the key explanation for a relatively modest number of cases. On the other hand, most of these cases constitute either episodes of term limit enforcement following a violation attempt or cases of term limit compliance in otherwise adverse contexts lacking any or most of the other favourable conditions. In other words, our analysis highlights that democracy is decisive for the resilience of term limits when term limits are either threatened (because a president attempts to overstay) or likely to be threatened (given a fertile ground for term limit violation attempts).

Relatedly, the analysis also emphasises the explanatory power and the interplay of other factors that can be present in both democratic and non-democratic regimes, some of which appear even more salient than democracy from a comparative viewpoint. For instance, the legacies of the past – notably, an experience as a party-based regime and the precedent – stand out as the strongest explanations of term limit compliance, often combining with each other, as well as with other favourable conditions such as a president’s age, the way he or she originally took power, and the regional context. Concerning term limit enforcement, in turn, the analysis specifies that democracy is key to giving African citizens a voice and the power to stand up

against aspiring overstayers, but the analysis also stresses the importance of other actors whose commitment to democracy should not be taken for granted, such as the opposition and the ruling party. Conversely, we found international democracy promotion and military autonomy to play a secondary role, at least from a comparative viewpoint.

As shown at the bottom of Tables 1 and 2, moreover, the analysis has left a few African cases of term limit resilience unexplained. A closer look at these events may provide further insights regarding the phenomenon under examination and tips for future research. Specifically, the analysis has failed to explain why presidents complied with term limits in Sao Tomé and Príncipe and Mali in the early 2000s; why Nujoma in Namibia and Pierre Nkurunziza in Burundi stepped down in 2004 and 2020, respectively, both having previously successfully obtained permission to serve extra terms; why Mauritania's president and former coup-maker Aziz did just the same in 2019; and why term limits were instead enforced in Burkina Faso in 2014, when Compaoré tried to lift them for the third time.

To some extent, term limit compliance in Sao Tomé and Príncipe (2001) and Mali (2002) confirms the relevance of democracy in otherwise adverse contexts, as both of these countries displayed relatively strong democratic institutions but various unfavourable conditions. Even Burkina Faso experienced substantial democratic progress during the 2000s, leading civil society to rise against a recidivist overstayer who had already bypassed term limits twice (Moestrup, 2019).

Although democracy is relatively advanced in Namibia as well, the second term limit episode in this country could be analysed along with the above-mentioned cases of Burundi and Mauritania, which occurred in fully authoritarian states. Both Nujoma and Nkurunziza previously proved willing and able to bypass term limits. Aziz was a coup-maker. Why did these presidents step down? One possible explanation can be derived from the so-called 'faithful agent' strategy (Versteeg et al., 2020), according to which a political leader formally complies with the rules of the game (notably, term limits) but at the same time retains influence over the government by handpicking a loyal member of his or her own party as a successor. A closer look at these cases confirms that all these presidents had relatively strong control over their parties and that their successor candidates faced a low risk of electoral defeat given the weakness of the opposition. Therefore, these three cases contribute to highlighting another rarely acknowledged but plausible mechanism of term limit compliance, which implies an incumbent controlling his or her succession in a scarcely competitive electoral arena.³

Conclusion

Although the politics of presidential term limits has generated a lively scholarly debate, the empirical literature on sub-Saharan Africa has mostly focused on the manipulation of these constitutional provisions. However, what has persuaded a growing number of African presidents to comply with term limits? What favours the enforcement of term limits when these are challenged? To address these questions, we conceptualised term limit compliance and term limit enforcement as two main forms of term limit resilience, and we conducted the first systematic region-level investigation of the determinants of term limit resilience in sub-Saharan Africa using QCA.

The analysis led us to reconsider the role played by the factor that previous research identified as the most powerful predictor of term limit resilience, namely, democracy (Reyntjens, 2020; Tull and Simons, 2017). In a region in which the number of democratic regimes remains relatively low, we found that democracy is decisive when term limits are threatened or likely to be threatened. However, we identified other mechanisms that can operate effectively in both democratic and non-democratic regimes, most notably, path dependence, regime legacies and opposition.

Term limit resilience is a relatively understudied phenomenon. Our article helps fill this gap, but several issues deserve further attention. First, the causal mechanisms that we identified through QCA need process

tracing through the in-depth analysis of specific cases. For instance, several recent ‘first’ episodes of term limit compliance – e.g., in Burundi and Mauritania – will soon represent interesting cases to reassess the explanatory power of path dependence. Moreover, the analysis suggested that controlled succession in a scarcely competitive electoral arena could represent an additional, relatively unexplored mechanism of term limit compliance.

Future research should also deepen the analysis of the international dimension of term limit politics and the involvement of the military. The role of the armed forces in Africa’s term limit disputes remains unclear, according to our analysis. Likewise, we found democracy aid donors to have limited influence, which apparently confirms the scepticism of some scholars (Cheeseman, 2019), although democracy aid sometimes operates ‘indirectly’ by strengthening opposition parties and civil society (Leininger and Nowack, 2022), which do emerge as relevant actors in our analysis. In turn, although African regional organisations often prove unable to impose respect for term limits from their members (Wiebusch and Murray, 2019), we found that they could ease the informal diffusion of virtuous behaviours.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. This article focuses exclusively on sub-Saharan Africa, defined as the region encompassing the 49 non-Mediterranean states on the African continent. The terms ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ and ‘Africa’ are used interchangeably in this article.
2. Other leader-related factors include personality, future professional opportunities and ideological commitment (Heyl and Llanos, 2022).
3. The strategy did not always pay off: Nkurunziza died soon after his handpicked successor took power, and Aziz was arrested on charges of corruption.

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