Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a Rip Van Winkle awakening in 2009 will find sub-Saharan Africa’s political landscape profoundly changed. Many more Africans now enjoy basic political rights, and a clear yet partial move toward accountable governance offers a better platform for tackling the region’s steep challenges of economic development and poverty reduction.

When the Cold War ended, most of Africa was ruled by a mixed bag of single-party, military, and other personalized “big man” regimes. According to the Washington-based Freedom House, in 1989 the region (south of the Sahara and excluding island microstates) was home to only three “electoral democracies”—Botswana, Gambia, and Mauritius—with a combined population of less than 3.5 million. By this count, less than one in every hundred Africans lived in countries that met minimum standards of free and fair electoral competition. The most recent ratings, for 2007, paint a very different picture. The number of sub-Saharan democracies has swollen to 20, accounting for more than a quarter of the region’s population.

Two decades ago, Africa’s economic and military powerhouse—South Africa—was ruled by a white minority government that regularly destabilized its neighbors, while its most populous country—Nigeria—was suffering under a series of corrupt military dictatorships. More recently, these same two countries have been at the forefront of initiatives to promote regional peace and development. They helped launch a new African Union (AU), whose founding principles reflect growing commitment to “good governance” among political leaders. For example, when a military coup followed the death of Ghana’s long-time president late last year, the country’s AU membership was immediately suspended.

Despite these promising trends, major tragedies of the past 20 years have highlighted obstacles to democracy and development in the region. Perhaps most destabilizing was a sharp spike in violent conflict during the mid-1990s, with the Central African Great Lakes region especially hard hit. Following the horrors of the Rwandan genocide, a civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) spilled over the borders into neighboring countries. According to the International Rescue Committee, the conflict has directly and indirectly claimed more than five million lives since 1998.
would require benevolent “developmental states” insulated from the cut and thrust of democratic politics.

In general, skeptics have interpreted Africa’s wave of democracy as almost a “historical accident”—the product of wily rulers’ responses to an external reform agenda and lacking structural foundations in African societies. Just as African leaders managed to sidestep economic conditionality in the 1980s, they were now dodging the substance of political conditionality. By staging periodic elections they created a facade of democratic legitimacy and kept donor funds flowing. But even where the facade was maintained, any genuine developmental benefits of democracy seemed unlikely to materialize.

Prospects for Democracy and Development

Two decades of hindsight offer an empirical basis for greater optimism about the durability and performance of democracy in Africa. The wave of democratization in the region is partial and potentially reversible, and skeptics have identified important vulnerabilities. Yet Africa’s democracies have lasted longer and performed better than initially expected.

International factors have played an important role in supporting African democracy. Since the end of the Cold War, the global climate has become decidedly better than initially expected. While the Zimbabwean crisis starkly illustrates how difficult it is to dislodge a skillful and intransigent dictator, democratic norms are much more influential in Africa than they were two decades ago. Meanwhile, emerging evidence seems to confirm that, in African countries where democracy has been established, states have tended to perform better as agents of economic development. These effects seem to hinge on the benefits of imposing institutional checks on leaders’ discretionary authority, backed by the ability to remove governments that fail to improve the well-being of their people. By contrast, the region’s most catastrophic development failures—including Zimbabwe’s current plague—have only spun out of control when constitutional checks and balances have been absent or dismantled. Democratically elected governments have no monopoly on economic insight, but under democratic regimes “bad economics” eventually becomes “bad politics,” giving government’s strong incentives to change course.

In light of Africa’s diversity, any sweeping generalization about prospects for democracy and development would be misleading. In conclusion, I briefly discuss four bellwether countries that are particularly worth tracking in the coming months and years.

First, the Democratic Republic of Congo is a crucial case of postconflict peace building. Like Sierra Leone and Liberia before it, it has benefited from considerable assistance from the United Nations and regional organizations. Credible but technically flawed presidential elections in 2006 reinforced a fragile political settlement of civil war. The country is plagued by complex political divisions and extremely weak infrastructure and does not currently meet accepted standards of electoral democracy (despite its name). Even the most modest progress would boost regional development, but a collapse of the relative peace now prevailing could again destabilize Central Africa.

Second, Nigeria is a country that slipped out of the club of electoral democracies following 2007 presidential elections plagued by massive fraud and violence. The victory of the current president, Umaru Yar’Adua, survived lengthy legal appeals, and Yar’Adua has promised electoral reforms. A common weakness of Africa’s democracies is that few have yet combined intense party competition with effective electoral administration. In Nigeria, a hotly contested election put the administrative machinery under strain it could not withstand. As one of the region’s leading powers, Nigeria’s next round of national elections will be closely scrutinized.

Third, South Africa faces a somewhat different challenge to its young democracy. Though the country’s record of electoral administration has been exemplary, its first three general elections have seen the ruling African National Congress (ANC) win large and increasing majorities—its 2004 vote share approaching 70 percent. However, the party’s decision to “recall” President Thabo Mbeki before the end of his term has prompted an internal split. The breakdown of the Congress of the People (COPE), though very unlikely to overtake the ANC in a general election in mid-2009, poses the greatest challenge so far to the ruling party’s dominance. More important than the final vote count is how the added dose of political contestation affects the conduct of the campaign and election.

Finally, the most positive recent development among Africa’s democracies was Ghana’s December 2008 presidential election. The opposition party’s candidate, John Atta-Mills, won a run-off over Nana Akufo-Addo by a razor-thin margin of thirty thousand votes, out of over nine million cast. When Akufo-Addo conceded and Atta-Mills was inaugurated, it marked the second time power had changed hands constitutionally since the country’s 1992 democratic transition. Ghana thus became the largest African country ever to pass the “two-turnover test” of democratic consolidation. The achievement was widely reported and praised throughout the region, clearly demonstrating the possibilities of democratic practice in Africa.