

# Improving Open-Source Information on African Politics, One Student at a Time

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This article discusses Wikipedia page creation as a fruitful assignment for undergraduate political science courses on the Global South. Based on our experience teaching African politics, we argue that assigning students to write a Wikipedia entry achieves twin objectives. First, it engages students in helping to close the significant gaps in Wikipedia's coverage of politics in the Global South versus the Global North. Undergraduate students are highly motivated to address these disparities and are uniquely positioned to do so because of their access to gated scholarly resources, supervision by subject experts, and ability to "translate" academic sources into widely accessible language.

Second, the assignment is an excellent pedagogical tool whether teaching in person or online. Pedagogical benefits include (1) sharpening digital literacy skills, (2) honing research and citation skills, (3) learning and demystifying technical-editing skills on a web platform, (4) developing competency in writing neutrally, and (5) gaining confidence as producers of public-facing output. The assignment is uniquely positioned to achieve both objectives because it is so engaging to undergraduates.

## ACUTE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN POLITICS

As Ackerly and Michelitch (2022) note in this symposium, there is a significant disparity in Wikipedia's encyclopedic coverage of politics between the Global North and the Global South. These content gaps are particularly striking for countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). We begin by visualizing these gaps with data on English-language Wikipedia entries on "politics and government" for an illustrative sample of countries.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 depicts the number of articles on the three best covered countries (i.e., South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana), the three worst covered countries (i.e., Eswatini, Eritrea, and South Sudan), the average for SSA countries of each major language group (i.e., Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone), and a few comparison countries from other world regions. As figure 1 shows, the average number of articles for Anglophone SSA countries is far less than exemplar Global North countries, representing 0.3% of entries on the United States, 0.8% on the United Kingdom, and 5.2% on France. SSA is not alone; many Global South countries have significantly fewer entries, including extremely populous countries such as

India and China. Disparities exist within SSA as well, with the average Francophone and Lusophone country having 42.4% and 33.3% fewer articles, respectively, than the average Anglophone country.

Figure 1 captures only part of the problem. Entries on African politics also suffer from stark content gaps in terms of their quality. Figure 2 documents quality differentials using (a) the average number of citations, and (b) word count for eight standardized entries<sup>2</sup> on the same country sample. We also include the state of Alaska, which obtained statehood in the same period that most African countries gained independence, illustrating that coverage of many SSA (and other Global South) countries—sovereign states with millions of citizens—approximates that of one of America's least-populated states.

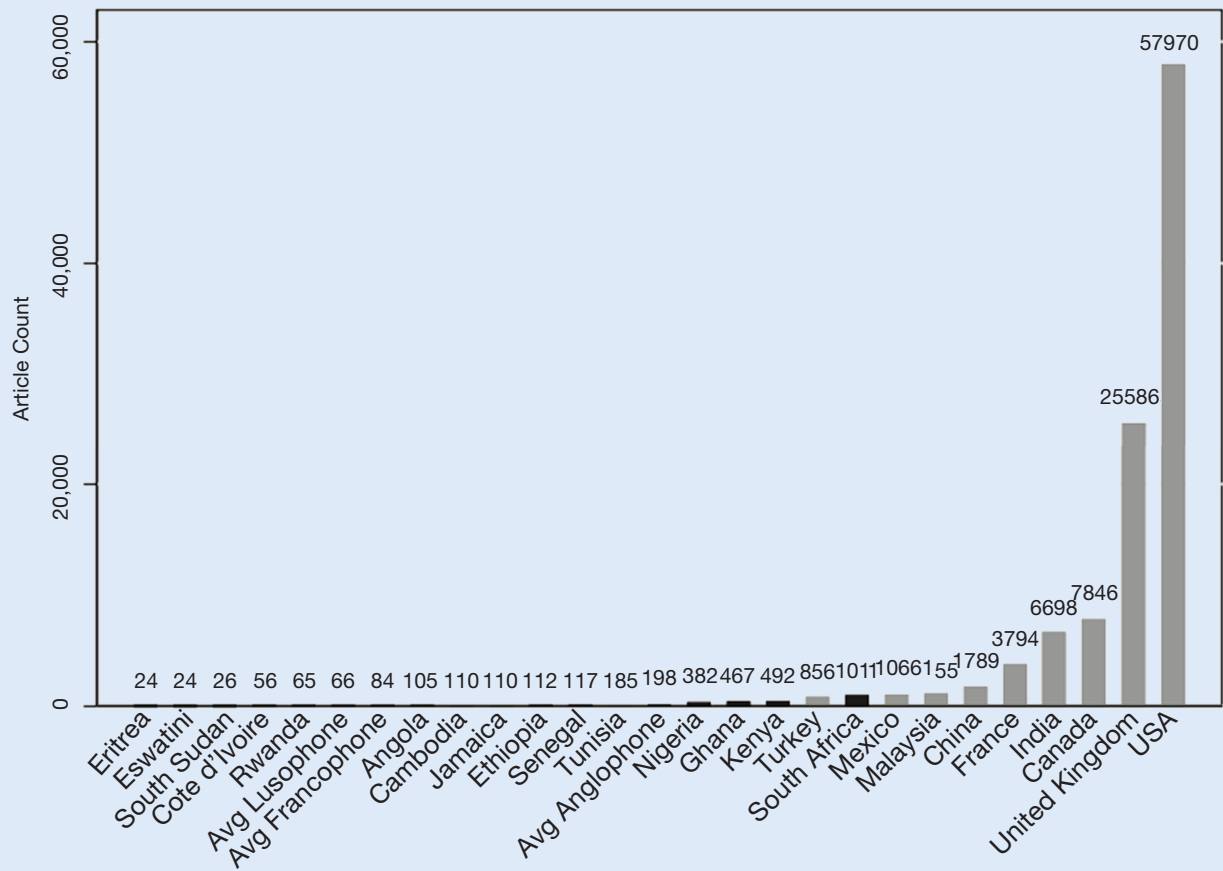
These content gaps are not inconsequential. Gated resources are generally poorly accessible in the Global South. In many of these countries, the highest quality political information comes from state news broadcasters, which rarely archive their content and can be heavily biased toward the incumbent regime. The rapid spread of smart phones across the Global South thus renders Wikipedia, as an open-access encyclopedic resource, a valuable addition to local media environments. Although we recognize that slow internet speed and the cost of technology and bandwidth remain limiting factors, evidenced in the continent's lower access rates,<sup>3</sup> the pressing need for more equal representation of the global population on sites like Wikipedia is clear.

## CLOSING GAPS WITH "STUDENTS AS PRODUCERS"

We argue that asking undergraduate students to create a Wikipedia page provides a vehicle for university instructors to address disparities in the representation of Global South politics while simultaneously providing distinct pedagogical benefits for students. To do so, instructors can easily collaborate with WikiEdu, a nonprofit organization that promotes student contributions to Wikipedia, to assign students to create or expand a Wikipedia entry related to course content. Instructors customize an assignment timeline that includes tutorials and small assignments that scaffold student skill development for evaluating, editing, and ultimately publishing an article on Wikipedia. Peer-review exercises and the option of end-of-term student presentations encourage peer-

Figure 1

### Assessing Content Gaps in the Number of Articles on Politics



Note: English language Wikipedia only.

to-peer learning. Students' final entries often are complemented with a reflective essay.

Undergraduate students are uniquely positioned to contribute to Wikipedia's content gaps. Namely, they have access to an unparalleled wealth of gated academic material as well as

such, students may choose articles skewed toward their own interests rather than those of local populations. For example, enthused by the idea of improving coverage of under-represented voices, students often choose to write on marginalized groups or political inequalities that resonate

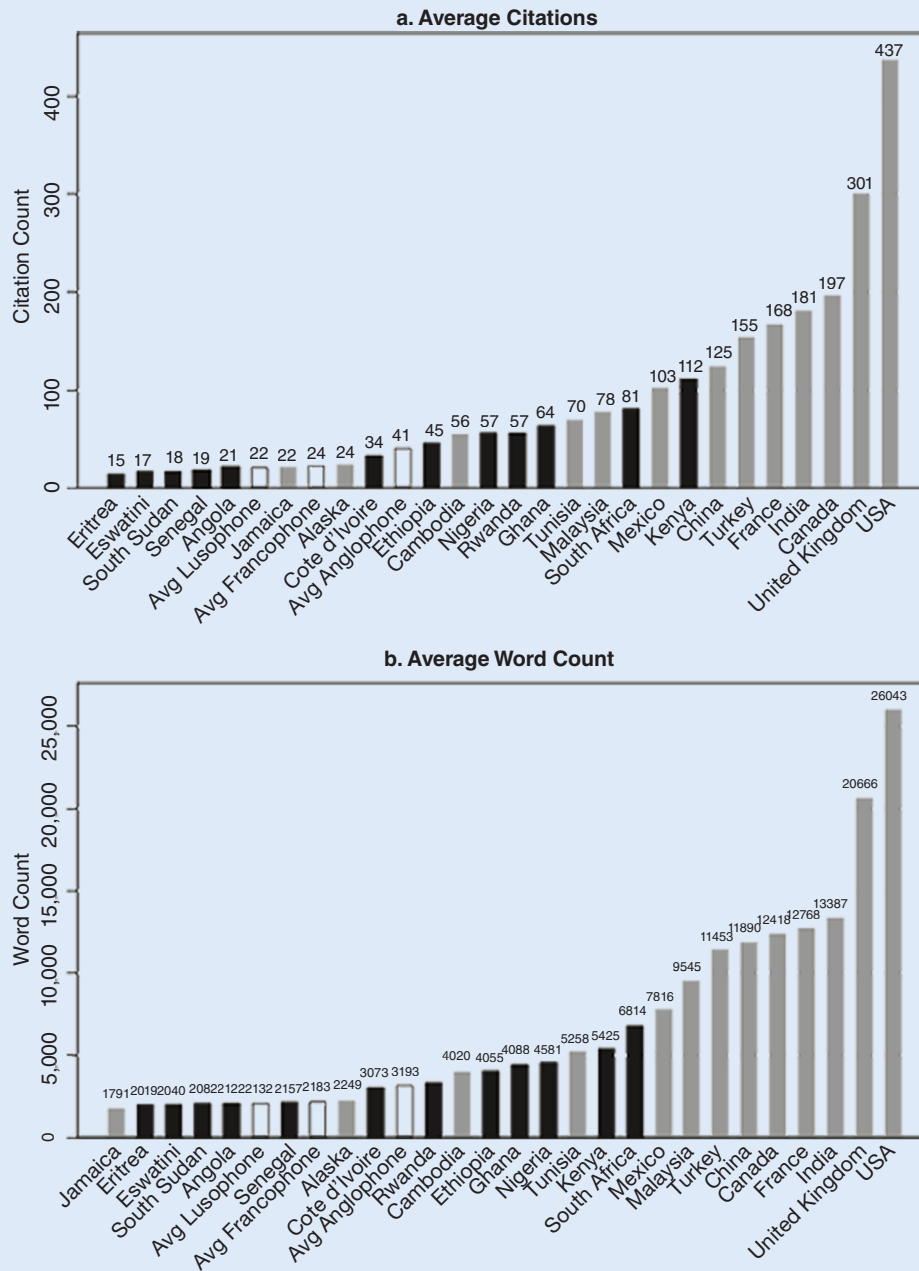
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subject experts (i.e., instructors and librarians) to assist them. Our students have contributed to articles on topics as diverse as political parties, political leaders, coups, marginalized groups, and health policy. To date, their articles have been viewed more than 4.5 million times.

We recognize that this assignment is not a panacea for closing content gaps. Two critical biases are difficult to address. First, those writing about the Global South tend to be from the Global North, as are most of our students. As

with a contemporary American liberal arts education (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights issues). Others choose topics amenable to building a pre-law or pre-policy resumé (e.g., a country's constitution). Although important, these topics may not be the most pressing subjects to local readers. Instructors could address this bias by guiding students toward articles designated as high priority by Wikipedia user groups, which exist for most countries and often include some in-country representation.

Figure 2  
Assessing Content Gaps in Article Quality



Note: English language Wikipedia only.

Second, although we view the synthesis of gated resources for open-access consumption as a primary benefit, it effectively asks students to rely on resources that are produced mostly in the Global North and that carry their own biases (Ackerly and Michelitch 2022). This means that Wikipedia often reifies existing biases in knowledge production, a concern evidenced by the fact that less than 0.2% of entries on Central African

countries in English Wikipedia cite local sources (Sen et al. 2015). Furthermore, these resources can be neocolonial in their gaze—that is, “othering” or “exoticizing” Global South populations (Smith 1999). Students could be incentivized to move beyond easily available resources and encouraged to locate and cite African or in-country authors to mitigate this bias; however, this may not be feasible for all topics.

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## POTENTIAL PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS (AND CHALLENGES) FOR STUDENTS

WikiEdu trainings and student production of Wikipedia pages yields a range of pedagogical benefits, primarily:<sup>4</sup>

- In an era of “fake news,” students learn needed digital literacy. They learn to critically evaluate existing Wikipedia articles by examining the number and quality of citations as well as the number of editors involved by looking at an entry’s history, thereby effectively becoming “skeptical consumers.” Of particular relevance for

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African politics (and political science more broadly), students learn to think critically about informational sources that emanate from state news broadcasters in nondemocratic regimes or from private partisan channels. They also must reckon with some topics as contested issues (Sengupta and Ackerly 2022; Cassell 2018). In-class discussion can help students apply this learning to knowledge consumption more broadly.

- Relatedly, undertaking library research and synthesizing and citing sources constitutes a transferable skill. Through WikiEdu’s training on citation, students develop a clearer sense of when and how to cite sources appropriately—a skill that we often bemoan students lack but to which we rarely devote sufficient attention.
- Students develop light coding skills that are increasingly in-demand, “real-world” skills (Kennedy et al. 2015, 380). WikiEdu’s step-by-step training demystifies web-editing skills for students who initially are less confident.
- It is critical to Wikipedia’s animating ethos that students learn to write neutrally. Most writing assignments in the social sciences, by contrast, require students to defend an argument. Writing neutrally and balancing multiple sides of an issue requires a different skill set that is just as important for our students’ future careers. In their own assessments, students frequently name “neutral-point-of-view” writing as the most valuable and challenging skill they learned.
- Finally, this assignment embraces the trend toward “students as producers”<sup>5</sup> by asking them to create something that is not only original but also targeted to the public domain. This can be challenging; when writing a research paper to be read by their professor, students can assume that their reader has a fair amount of background knowledge. However, this assumption is inverted when writing for a lay audience seeking entry-level information. The consequence is that students must give specific attention to organizing academic material logically while using clear, precise, and neutral language.

Expounding on this last point, writing for what Bruff (2019, 7) calls “authentic audiences” can motivate students to view their final output as more enduring and important by virtue of its public-facing mission. In our experience, the public nature of this project provides significant motivation to work well beyond the minimum grading criteria. Because instructors express growing concern that students are narrowly grade-focused, asking them to choose a topic that they care about *and* to produce something for the broader public alters their understanding of their own role as college students. That is, the assignment fosters intrinsic and social motivations to produce excellent work as students shift focus from their grade

to contributing something that will be read by millions and treated as a fact—much as they use Wikipedia themselves. In this way, writing for Wikipedia can encourage students to develop a global civic-mindedness, a core mission of a liberal arts education (Norell 2022). At a time when politically motivated students often feel frustrated by the pace of change in society, helping to close even a single content gap on Wikipedia imbues them with a sense that they are providing a concrete good for their broader communities.

Cumulatively, we see strong pedagogical benefits to this assignment, but there are challenges. First, we agree with WikiEdu’s recommendation that instructors stipulate a minimum number of citations in lieu of a minimum page or word count. However, some students struggle with this perceived lack of structure, missing a firm guideline for what is “enough” work. We encourage them to lean into this ambiguity: Are they happy with their work? Would a reader walk away with enough basic knowledge? If the topic is relatively large, can they settle on a good start—knowing that others eventually will add to the page?

Second, some students may feel more or less confident contributing to Wikipedia because of their social identity (e.g., disproportionate online incivility toward women) or previous experiences that may render them less experienced in these skills than their peers. Instructors should take notice and address systematic confidence gaps if they emerge.

Third, in rare cases when students choose controversial topics—especially related to contemporary events—it can be more challenging for them to take the last step to publish their page. Some topics are flagged for additional editor review before publication is permitted. This does not preclude grading but it might require additional post-semester attention from the student to formally publish, which can surprise some students.

## EASE FOR INSTRUCTORS

Collaborating with WikiEdu makes this assignment feasible across institutions and instructor types. Not only is it free of charge and thus cost effective for instructors at all types of

higher education institutions, the built-in training materials also mean that professors do not have to be concerned about creating “from scratch” materials to teach students the rules of Wikipedia editing.<sup>6</sup> Because WikiEdu also provides training for instructors, they need no previous experience in editing Wikipedia to embark on this assignment. In general, the grading requirements are relatively light—we have found, per WikiEdu recommendations, that grading based on incorporating a minimum set number of acceptable citable sources is

### *Collaborating with WikiEdu makes this assignment feasible across institutions and instructor types.*

effective.<sup>7</sup> It is important that even if a student’s work falls short, the very act of page creation increases the likelihood that other Wikipedia editors eventually will improve on these initial contributions.

The primary challenge for instructors, we have found, is helping students settle on their topic. Typically, we offer the following guidance: students should look for a topic that (1) they are passionate about, (2) has adequate scholarly resources, and (3) is currently missing or underdeveloped on Wikipedia. It is helpful to ask students to submit a one- to two-page memo discussing the feasibility of two or three ideas for feedback early in the semester. Whereas most students easily settle on a topic, a small percentage always needs more advice.

Finally, students can vary in their acquaintance with and confidence to leverage university resources. Organizing a campus library visit early in the semester acquaints students with its resources and subject-specific librarians, better positioning them to find resources without the instructor’s help. Additionally, writing studios may provide in-class visits or one-on-one appointments to supplement and broaden WikiEdu’s training for those who have weaker writing skills.

#### CONCLUSION AND MOVING FORWARD

A recent blog post celebrating 10 years of WikiEdu states that more than 36,000 North American students have edited Wikipedia through its programming, adding more than 30 million words—or the equivalent of two thirds of the last print edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.<sup>8</sup> This article highlights how undergraduate students enrolled in African politics can achieve multiple important pedagogical learning outputs while addressing critical gaps in open-source political science information. Our point is not to narrowly suggest that this tool is useful only for African politics courses but rather that this assignment could be valuable for a broad range of political science courses wherever important content gaps exist.<sup>9</sup>

We conclude with final thoughts on how instructors could improve on our efforts. First, although we cannot address the issue of who our students are—primarily residents of the Global North—we can encourage them to undertake “metacognition” by interrogating their own biases that they bring to the assignment.<sup>10</sup> Identifying and addressing these

biases has become a desirable pedagogical goal in social science curriculum due to strong priorities of diversity, inclusion, and—more recently—privilege awareness.<sup>11</sup> On this latter point, we note that many of our students realize their privileged access to gated material only in the process of completing the assignment.

Second, instructors could engage in collaborations with other instructors teaching similar courses at universities in the Global South. Asking North American students to partner

with peers at African institutions would allow them to co-generate a topic and cull sources from their respective locations before coauthoring an entry to close a given content gap. Such a collaboration might address the issue of creating locally important content and improve our students’ access to locally produced books and resources.

Third, whereas our students are improving English-language Wikipedia, it is important that the information is available in other language Wikipedias, which are much less developed. In African politics, it is especially important to make information available in widely spoken African languages (e.g., French, Portuguese, Arabic, Amharic, Swahili, and Hausa). Instructors could partner, perhaps in sequential semesters, with foreign-language instructors to translate pages into other languages. Indeed, WikiEdu provides a distinct template for foreign-language classrooms.

The fourth challenge is that few students contribute to Wikipedia after their course project is completed. Broad concerns exist about the lack of diversity among Wikipedia’s editor base, as noted by Ackerly and Michelitch (2022). We might hope that students—who tend to be more diverse than Wikipedia’s editorship—would diversify the editor base over the long term if they continued as editors. One idea is to encourage them to organize “edit-a-thons” through student clubs or to participate in those organized in the broader community as a class assignment, for extra credit, or as an “immersion activity”—a practicum increasingly being required for graduation at many universities (Sengupta and Ackerly 2022). By continuing this engagement, students may hone skills and become more confident to continue as knowledge producers on Wikipedia.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IJUVUG>.

#### SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit APSA Educate at <https://educate.apsanet.org/resource/01-12-2022/improving-open-source-information-on-african-politics-one-student-at-a-time>. ■

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## NOTES

1. See online appendix A for more data details. See Michelitch and Wilfahrt 2022 for replication data.
2. Entries include the (1) current executive, (2) first executive, (3) incumbent party, (4) main opposition parties, (5) most recent executive elections, (6) second most recent executive elections, (7) country's constitution, and (8) the "Politics of [country]."
3. See <https://stats.wikimedia.org/wikimedia/animations/wivivi/wivivi.html>.
4. See also Kennedy et al. (2015), Lee and Jungblut (2020), and Timperley (2020). WikiEdu articulates its own pedagogical goals at <https://wikiedu.org/blog/2017/06/19/what-students-learn-from-contributing-to-wikipedia>.
5. This approach advocates "active" rather than "transmissionist" learning, shifting students from consuming and regurgitating information toward higher-order thinking activities in which they construct knowledge and understanding (Bransford, Brown, and Coking 2000).
6. See online appendix B for assignment details.
7. Our requirements range from five to 10 minimum sources cited. One author requires that these sources be scholarly and gated.
8. See <https://wikiedu.org/blog/2017/06/19/what-students-learn-from-contributing-to-wikipedia>.
9. PhD students could be similarly engaged in courses or individual projects (Baltz 2022).
10. See Bransford, Brown, and Coking (2000) on metacognition, which helps students to gain a level of awareness about their own biases and proclivities that can provide lessons transferable to other courses.
11. For example, the University of Michigan's Inclusive Teaching Website (<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching>) has a useful guide.

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