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What is This?
Have the cake and eat it: The rational voter in Africa

Staffan I. Lindberg
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Abstract
A vast literature suggests that voters in new democracies ‘sell’ their vote to patrons providing private or small-scale club goods, or, alternatively, that such goods are distributed along ethnic lines to reinforce ethnic voting. In either case the outcome is undermining democratic accountability. This study finds that citizens in one new democracy – Ghana – expect (and get) the patronage but at the same time engage in economic voting. Eighty-five percent of citizens first and foremost expect their legislators to supply private or small-scale ‘club’ goods. This acts as a strong incentive for politicians to actually supply such goods, which is confirmed by participants’ observational data and more than 250 interviews conducted by the author. Despite this, citizens do not vote based on how well or how poorly incumbent MPs provide clientelistic goods. A multivariate analysis reveals that voting for the opposition or the incumbent is determined by evaluations of the state of the national economy and of the government’s policies. What the literature has portrayed as an ‘either-or’ is ‘both’, and this is perfectly rational: Extract as much as one can in terms of private and small club goods but vote based on economic factors. The literature suggests that clientelism dominates elections in newer democracies and thus undermines democracy. The findings from this study suggest that while distribution of clientelistic goods is common, this does not necessarily undermine the mechanism of democratic accountability in elections.

Keywords
clientelism, democracy, elections, Ghana, voting

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Introduction

Imagine a newly established democracy with somewhat chaotic election campaigns where parties and a host of affiliated candidates of all kinds struggle to win votes. Rural, poor and uneducated voters are mixing in the electorate with the modern, well-dressed urbanites. As a candidate for, and perhaps incumbent of, legislative office, you face innumerable demands and expectations: Pay the school fees for this poor family’s children, hospital charges for that old woman, build toilets for a village in your area and construct a well for another, give cell-phones and motorbikes to your ‘boys’ who will campaign for you, provide a car and petrol for the transportation of a diseased constituent to the far away cemetery, roofing sheets for a family whose house is damaged, cement for building another school block in your area’s elementary, lobby for tarring of the main road, cash handouts for young men to have a beer, find a development organization that will bring some kind of project to your constituency ... and so on in eternity. Everything seems implicitly or explicitly to be tied to support in the upcoming election.

Based on over 250 personal interviews and two years of participant observation data, I can testify to the vast presence of clientelism in one of Africa’s most developed new democracies: Ghana. Clientelism is expected and is what you do. It can also become a campaign strategy where individual candidates as well as parties systematically distribute bags of rice, cash, favours and jobs in order to garner votes. But does it work? We would expect that if voters feel that the goods distributed in clientelistic networks are really important to them, they would evaluate politicians on their provision of such goods and vote accordingly. The literature on vote-buying and clientelism builds on this premise as an assumption. If we observe many clientelistic exchanges around election time, vote-buying or turnout-buying is taking place and is successful. After all, if it did not work why would rational power-seeking politicians engage in such activities in a world of limited time and other resources? But does clientelism influence vote choice?

Based on evidence from a pre-election survey in Ghana (N = 1,600), this article ventures into the still relatively unknown area of citizens’ expectations and demands on their political representatives and to what extent evaluations of their performance in terms of provision of clientelistic goods shape vote choice.\(^1\) The findings are counter-intuitive and question the fundamental assumption of a large body of literature: Clientelism does not influence whether voters vote for or against the incumbent. Rather, evaluations of the national economy or living conditions in general are the strongest determinants. The interpretation here, based also on the interviews and participant observation data, is that voters are rational. They pressure legislators to provide as much private and small club goods as they can around elections that will meet some immediate material needs but at the same time use their vote to further long-term goals such as national economic development.

Democracy, clientelism and vote choice

Democracy is an institutional framework that makes rulers principally dependent on citizens for power (e.g. Bollen and Jackman, 1989: 612–618; Coppedge and Reinicke,
This way democracy makes vertical accountability take on paramount significance (Schedler, 1999). Although hotly debated, the thesis that representative democracy should solve public and collective goods’ deficit provision hinges on the role of elections as ‘instruments of democracy’ whether in the majoritarian or proportional mold (Lijphart, 1994; Powell, 2000). Through elections, citizens can select leaders and then hold them accountable for the implementation of policies that benefit the broader populace. Making a political system more democratic thus in a broad sense entails expanding the scope of citizens’ possibilities of ensuring that rulers act in ways that are better for society and better for them as individuals.

However, other literature has shown that political clientelism and patronage are instruments elites can use to subvert the logic of democratic accountability (e.g. Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Stokes, 2005). This is equivalent to analyses of political parties providing private goods and policy favours to groups who are responsive to material incentives, rather than to constituencies prone to vote on evaluations of performance, ideology or programmes (e.g. Lindbeck and Weibull, 1987; Persson and Tabellini, 2000). Candidates can also use clientelistic goods to drive up turnout (mobilization rather than persuasion) much along the lines suggested by Nichter (2008) and by Dunning and Stokes (2008), or do both as evidenced by Magaloni et al. (2007).

As research on voting behaviour in the United States and Europe confirms, these issues are critical to understanding in what way and to what extent citizen-representative relationships make a difference to political outcomes. In short, if politicians supply clientelistic goods in order to secure re-election, it is generally seen to undermine democratic principles. If citizens expect and take clientelistic goods (either because of poverty or as a result of path-dependent expectations, for example), the existing literature assumes that it impacts on vote choice. If it does, the literature we have is correct in making the inference that prevalence of clientelistic goods around election time is evidence of political corruption. But if the analysis shows that while clientelism is expected and exists yet vote choice is primarily determined by other factors, much of what counts as established knowledge in this field must be re-evaluated.

With regard specifically to the literature on African politics, it is full of references to patrons building on clientelistic links with supporters, dating back to at least Lemarchand (1972) and including early contributions, among many others, by Médard (1982), Reno (1998) and Hyden (1980). In different variants of this argument, patronage rather than policy drives political choice and behaviour (e.g. Bates, 1981; Hyden, 2006; Joseph, 1987; van de Walle, 2003). Students of elections in Africa have typically approached the subject from the perspective of the patron and on how political and other leaders use clientelistic politics to stay in power.

It is known from both past and present election studies that ‘treating’ (the term that was used in the 1960s) is quite common. In an electorate that is poor and may conceive of elections in instrumental and opportunistic ways, the temptation to give in to such offers cannot be underestimated. Yet, as Lindberg and Morrison (2005, 2008) argue, much of what passes as knowledge, especially about African voters is still assumed rather than empirical. Valuable efforts have been made to try to make inferences from Afrobarometer data (e.g. Bratton and Kimenyi, 2008; Cheeseman and Ford, 2007; Eifert
and Posner, 2007; Logan, 2008; Moehler and Lindberg, 2009) but without questions specifically designed regarding voting behaviour, and with surveys carried out sometimes as much as two or more years away from elections, these conclusions are at best tentative. Thus, for instance, the conclusion by Bratton and Logan (2006) using Afrobaborometer data that Africans are ‘voters but not yet citizens’ is an indication, not a conclusion.

Specific research on voting behaviour is only beginning to emerge (e.g. Erdmann, 2007; Fridy, 2007; Kuenzi and Lambright, 2005; Mulenga, 2001; Posner and Simon, 2002; REDET, 2004; Weghorst and Lindberg, 2011). One indication comes from the literature based on field experiments (see Vicente and Wantchekon, 2009), where the marginal effects of vote-buying seem rather limited. Ikpe (2000: 148–150) in a survey of voter attitudes in the 1991 gubernatorial election in Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria, shows that a larger percentage of poor (65 percent) than well-off voters (39 percent) view elections as occasions to derive benefits from parties and candidates because they reason that once they are in office they will forget the voters. With respect to Ghana, the largely ignored (outside of Ghana) edited volumes by Ayee (1996, 2000) provide some insights based on systematically collected data but do little in terms of analysis employing multiple controls and, just like Lindberg and Morrison’s (2005, 2008) studies, must be seen as tentative.

Yet, it seems plausible that citizens in new democracies are not only at the receiving end of the electoral and political process. They are in all likelihood aware of the opportunities that elections provide to further their own interest. In elections for legislative representatives – especially in single-member district systems – rational voters will consider how well an incumbent candidate has responded to local and individual needs. To the extent voters place a high premium on such goods, evaluations of the provision of immediate tangible benefits that are distributed by incumbents and challengers alike during the actual campaign should also play a role on vote choice. That is what the vote-buying literature is banking on. In order to better understand on what grounds Africans vote and how their attitudes and choice shape – maybe perpetuate – clientelism, it is necessary to focus more coherently on the voters themselves. What does the demand-side of politics look like and to what extent does the demand-side influence voting, rather than the supply-side in terms of national economic development?

**The ‘demand-side’ of private and public goods in Ghana**

Ghana is a presidential democracy with a single-member district, first-past-the-post system for elections to the legislature that in many ways is a ‘best case’ country for this type of analysis (see Lindberg and Morrison, 2008; Morrison, 2008; Weghorst and Lindberg, 2011). The multiparty elections on 7 December 2008 were the fifth in an uninterrupted series since their reintroduction after a period of authoritarian rule ending in 1992. The following analysis is based on a pre-election survey carried out in August 2008. The survey focused on elections of legislators (MPs) and was carried out in ten purposely selected constituencies with a random selection of respondents in each of them \(N = 1,600\). For a series of reasons, in particular since this data collection was one in a series of four surveys in the same constituencies, the aim was to get a representative sample of constituents in each district, rather than a nationally representative sample; yet, the
purposive selection of districts makes for a relatively representative sample of the nation as a whole. But even for a reader who would disagree with that position, the unique attributes of the analysis below in the context of new democracies in Africa should justify the relevance of the analysis.

On the demand-side of politics, the survey asked respondents two related questions: What is the main thing you hope or expect that the candidate elected as MP in this election will do? and What do you perceive to be the main issue that the candidates are campaigning on in the election campaign? The results are presented in Table 1.

First, almost 15 percent indicate personal help, favours and jobs as the primary and main expectation and almost 70 percent respond that they most of all expect their MP to provide their community with development projects. In all, almost 85 percent of the citizens in these constituencies expect legislators to first and foremost deliver personal or very narrow, small-scale ‘club’, goods. Overall, these results reflect the expectations voters have, as also indicated in the over 250 personal interviews the author has made over ten years in Ghana, and several years collecting participant observation data. In terms of substantive interpretation, this finding naturally corroborates, but also refines, the general understanding of elections in Africa found in the existing literature that tracks back to the early post-independence elections. Legislative elections are not about legislation, or executive oversight for that matter. They are about local small-scale club and private goods. There is a lot of ‘push’ for personalized clientelism and small-scale ‘club’ goods – the latter generally regarded as a form of clientelism as well (e.g. Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). These data indicate what the ‘demand-side’ of the accountability relationship between citizens and representatives looks like in these ten Ghanaian constituencies that we believe are relatively representative of the country.

### Distribution over party and tribe

Before the explanatory analysis, it may be prudent to provide some descriptives on the voters and particularly on the volatility across parties and ethnicity given the prevalent views that African elections are ‘ethnic censuses’ and party volatility, for whatever reason, is severely limited. Table 2 reports on the share of respondents who in the past three elections have voted consistently for one party (‘core voters’) and those who have switched (‘swing voters’). The table also shows the shares of each of those groups who...
decided to split their vote between candidates from two different parties in the last (2004) presidential and legislative elections. The first striking thing is that almost 30 percent of respondents are swing voters. This is significantly higher than in earlier surveys of Ghana (e.g. Lindberg and Morrison, 2005, 2008) and contradicts much of the literature. In itself, this suggests that ethnicity is not necessarily a solid predictor of voting behaviour even in a country like Ghana where a close similitude of geographic-ethnic and party voting patterns has been evident throughout its post-independence period (Fridy, 2007).

Another interesting finding is the split-ticket votes. One in five of Ghanaian citizens in these ten constituencies voted for candidates from different parties already in the 2004 general elections. Ghana has two major parties (NDC and NPP) that together typically capture over 90 percent of the votes in presidential elections. We note that while NDC core supporters vote for another party’s presidential candidate more often (15.1 percent) than NPP core voters (7.3 percent), the real difference is with the smaller parties’ core voters and swing voters. The latter two categories vote ‘skirt and blouse’ as they say in Ghana, i.e. for presidential and legislative candidates from different parties, in 44.4 percent and 39.6 percent of the cases. The reasons for doing so, however, vary. Small parties’ supporters often have a relatively good shot at getting their local legislative representative elected in the context of geographically concentrated minorities. In this sample, many of these voters are found in Bolgatanga constituency with a long tradition of voting for the PNC party and which also currently holds the legislative seat. Meanwhile, these voters most likely realize that voting for the PNC presidential candidate equals a wasted vote and thus go for their second-order preference choosing between the NDC and the NPP candidates.

Ethnicity, or tribe, remains a perennial issue in the study of African politics and needs to be included in the analysis as a control variable. Mozzafar et al. (2003), for example, argue that voter alignment follows from the politicization of ethnic cleavages. Others such as Posner and Simon (2002) and Erdmann (2007) have questioned this and some

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**Table 2. Core and swing voters splitting their vote?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Split vote in last election?</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NDC core voters</td>
<td>84.9%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>259</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPP core voters</td>
<td>92.8%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other core voters</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swing voters</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>298</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>1029</td>
<td>1029</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sign.: Split vote: $\chi^2 = 136.175$, d.f. = 3, $p = 0.000$.  
*Source:* Author’s survey, August 2008.
have tried to explore how far voters are ‘ethnic’ or ‘rational’ (Lindberg and Morrison, 2008). As these and other studies (e.g. Mattes and Piombo, 2001) show, being rational does not necessarily mean voting based on specific policy preferences and/or evaluation of government performance.

Yet, there is a tendency to assume that voters are caught between choosing one or the other, while in reality, as suggested above, it is equally realistic to hypothesize that they are able to be ‘ethnic’ and ‘rational’ in one and the same choice. In Table 3, the voting behaviour is tabulated with self-reported data on tribe. The two main parties in Ghana have a historical association with two ethnic groups: the NDC with the Ewe group (which constitutes about 15 percent of the total population) and the NPP with, in particular, the Ashantis and Akyem (about 25 percent of the population). Yet, Table 3 shows that significant proportions of both these groups also vote for other parties or are swing voters, so there is obviously no inevitability in the relationship between ethnicity and voting behaviour even in these two groups and elections are not merely ‘ethnic’ censuses (cf. Fridy, 2007). In the other ethnic groups represented in the survey, the relationship between vote choice and ethnicity disappears completely. So while ethnicity may be a powerful predictor for vote choice in some ethnic groups, it is not so in many others.

### Table 3. Core-swing voters and ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>NDC core</th>
<th>NPP core</th>
<th>Other core</th>
<th>Swing</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashanti/Akyem</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewe/Anlo</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ga/Adangbe</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dagomba</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fante</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frafra/Nzema</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>423</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>1112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sign.: Chi² 554.564, d.f. = 18, p = 0.000.
Source: Author’s survey, August 2008.

Explaining the vote

With these preliminaries, we can now proceed with the explanatory analysis. If some 85 percent of citizens in a new democracy like Ghana care so much about personal support and community/club goods, one would expect that their evaluation of the incumbent MP in terms of these provisions would play an important role in any explanation of their...
## Table 4. Determinants of opposition and incumbent vote (for MP) in 10 districts in Ghana 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>m1</th>
<th>m2</th>
<th>m3</th>
<th>m4</th>
<th>m5</th>
<th>m6</th>
<th>m7</th>
<th>m8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female*</td>
<td>-0.032</td>
<td>0.084</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.141</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married*</td>
<td>-0.156</td>
<td>-0.062</td>
<td>-0.101</td>
<td>-0.121</td>
<td>-0.149</td>
<td>-0.129</td>
<td>-0.112</td>
<td>-0.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (cohorts)</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>-0.083</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
<td>-0.042</td>
<td>0.141</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td>-0.056</td>
<td>-0.072</td>
<td>-0.211</td>
<td>-0.185</td>
<td>-0.205</td>
<td>-0.158</td>
<td>-0.196</td>
<td>-0.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of own wealth</td>
<td>0.237***</td>
<td>-0.076</td>
<td>-0.018</td>
<td>-0.037</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akan*</td>
<td>1.537***</td>
<td>1.620***</td>
<td>1.195***</td>
<td>1.217***</td>
<td>1.223***</td>
<td>1.001***</td>
<td>1.061***</td>
<td>0.938***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewe*</td>
<td>-0.775***</td>
<td>-0.288</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.042</td>
<td>0.191</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic voting</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt. policies have helped most people*</td>
<td>1.110***</td>
<td>0.845***</td>
<td>0.908***</td>
<td>1.142***</td>
<td>0.976***</td>
<td>1.010***</td>
<td>0.961***</td>
<td>0.961***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living conditions improved last 12 months*</td>
<td>0.356</td>
<td>0.386</td>
<td>0.305</td>
<td>0.290</td>
<td>0.498</td>
<td>0.290</td>
<td>0.275</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country’s economy improved last 12 months*</td>
<td>1.092***</td>
<td>1.011***</td>
<td>1.046***</td>
<td>0.997***</td>
<td>0.852**</td>
<td>0.989***</td>
<td>0.860**</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Incumbent MPs performance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Provision of private goods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constituency development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Law-making</td>
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<td>Executive oversight</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support own party</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support own ethnic group</td>
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<td><strong>Control for endogeneity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Voted for NDC candidate 2004*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voted for NPP candidate 2004*</td>
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<td>_cons</td>
<td>-0.575</td>
<td>-1.230**</td>
<td>-0.933</td>
<td>-0.980*</td>
<td>-1.107*</td>
<td>-1.411***</td>
<td>-0.607</td>
<td>-1.156*</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>1118</td>
<td>1075</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>1021</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>887</td>
<td>725</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudo R-square</td>
<td>0.1223</td>
<td>0.2128</td>
<td>0.3486</td>
<td>0.3431</td>
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<td>189.422</td>
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<td>483.253</td>
<td>426.771</td>
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<td>1194.105</td>
<td>817.357</td>
<td>959.636</td>
<td>804.491</td>
<td>685.873</td>
<td>827.35</td>
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*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

Dependent variable is vote for the incumbent (1) or an opposition (0) candidate in the legislative election.
Robust standard errors clustered around constituencies.
voting behaviour. In simple terms: Voters indicate that clientelistic (personalized and small-scale club) goods are the primary things they expect the MP to deliver on, and if they are rational actors one would expect them to evaluate the incumbent on this basis and vote accordingly. This is also the premise that most studies of electoral clientelism and vote-buying are banking on in their assumptions. But is it the case that demands for and provision of clientelistic goods influence vote choice?

Table 4 presents the results of a logit regression with hypothetical vote at the time of the survey for the incumbent (1) or an opposition (0) candidate for legislative office as dependent variable. The first model is run with only the controls; the second adds indicators for economic and egotropic voting. Models three to eight then add the different indicators for the respondent’s evaluation of the incumbent MP’s performance which we would expect to influence the vote. Each one is run at a time chosen to avoid losing too many cases. In these models, I also include dummies for which party’s candidate the respondent voted for in the last election in order to mop up the endogeneity positive evaluations of incumbents by party stalwarts being the effect rather than the cause of support.

The results show that among the indicators for evaluation of the MP over a range from personal clientelistic goods, club goods and more pure public goods only, the MP’s performance in terms of conducting executive oversight counts positively towards re-election. Voters may put emphasis on, and be vocal about, how well the MP has done in terms of providing personal and club goods (as evidenced in not only the statistics above but also in the over 250 personal interviews by the author). However, when controlling for perceptions of how well the government (i.e. the president and his ministers) has done in terms of policies, and controlling for the respondent’s perception of how well the country’s economy has done in the past 12 months, the effect of the MP’s contribution in terms of small-scale club goods and the support in terms of private goods to an individual respondent are nil. Meanwhile, economic indicators and, centrally, evaluations of the government policies and the country’s economy are very important. Positive evaluations in these regards are consistently and significantly related to support for the incumbent.

Citizens who think that the country’s economy over the past year has become ‘better’ or ‘much better’ are much more likely to support the incumbent even when controlling for whether they voted for a candidate from the same party in the last election. The substantive effects are quite significant. A change in the evaluation of the national economy over the past 12 months from ‘better or much better’ to ‘worse or much worse’ increases the probability of a citizen voting for the opposition from around 45 to 60 percent. A change in the evaluation of the government’s policies from ‘helped most people’ to ‘hurt most people’ changes the probability of a vote for the opposition candidate from around 35 percent to almost 65 percent (see Figure 1).

Citizens in Ghana may believe that their choice at the ballot box is related to how well they think the MP has done in terms of providing personal gifts and favours and how well the legislator has done in terms of community goods. Yet, these concerns are dwarfed by evaluations of the economy and government policies. In short, at the fifth election since the re-introduction of multiparty politics in Ghana, citizens have become relatively sophisticated voters dominated by sociotropic concerns.
Conclusions

Much has been written about the neo-patrimonial or clientelistic nature of politics in Africa and its detrimental consequences for the alleviation of poverty, creation of sustainable economic growth and production of public goods. Understanding why politicians in Africa act as they do still evades us. The question of what the politicians’ landscape of incentives looks like is crucial to finding the answers. What citizens hold their political representatives accountable for in the era of democratic elections constitutes one important set of incentives.

Based on a pre-election survey carried out in ten strategically selected constituencies in Ghana in August 2008, we find that to the extent politicians in this country engage in supplying significant levels of clientelistic goods (as already indicated by Lindberg (2009, 2010)), they seem to be acting as rational actors in the sense of selecting efficient means by which to achieve their end (re-election). A vast majority of some 85 percent of citizens primarily expects their legislators to supply small-scale ‘club’ goods to communities or purely private goods to individuals. Based on this data, it seems that any politician who does not want to be unemployed after the next election would be foolish not to provide some level of collective, if small-scale, goods.

Yet, the performance in these regards does not pay off at election time. Rather, at the polls citizens are consciously or unconsciously placing a significant premium on their sense of the economy and of whether the government’s policies have helped or hurt most people.

Figure 1. Voting against incumbent MP

**Conclusions**

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Yet, the performance in these regards does not pay off at election time. Rather, at the polls citizens are consciously or unconsciously placing a significant premium on their sense of the economy and of whether the government’s policies have helped or hurt most people.
This finding is particularly interesting and new in the context of new democracies, especially in Africa but also Latin America. The literature on clientelism in new democracies (e.g. Auyero, 2008; Brusco et al., 2004; Keefer and Vlaicu, 2008; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; Kopecky et al., 2008; Medina and Stokes, 2007; Nichter, 2008; Stokes, 2005; Dunning and Stokes, 2008; Stokes et al., 2011) suggests that private goods, favours and small club goods dominate elections in these countries. The implication is that democracy is compromised and that elections contribute to undermining ‘good politics’ and democracy. The findings from this study in one of Africa’s most advanced new democracies suggest something very different.

Clientelism – whether in the form of very narrow-type constituency service or purely private goods – is expected and prevails as a common phenomenon, but it does not determine vote choice, so what does it do? It is probably in part a sort of ‘entry-ticket’ to be seriously considered in the race, a minimum level signal of the intensity of commitment and engagement to the area. Qualitative evidence (Lindberg, 2010) also suggests that traditional family norms of reciprocity have been crafted on to the office of the MP, such as they are perceived as the equivalent of a ‘father’ or a ‘mother’ of the constituency. As such, whoever is in office or strives to be elected needs to fulfil the obligations that come with the position, but it does not distinguish between various candidates. While clientelism will in all likelihood not disappear completely in Africa or elsewhere, the much higher electoral payoffs of economic development and good policies that help most people indicated by voters in Ghana suggest that rational politicians in the era of free and fair elections gain many more votes by improving on general policies and the national economy than they lose by disengaging from clientelism.

Interview data (reported in more detail in Lindberg (2009, 2010)) clearly support this interpretation and reveal that some MPs have begun to see this logic. A significant number of MPs, especially the more educated and politically more sophisticated, are increasingly disinvesting in the provision of private, clientelistic goods in favour of providing more collective goods. Paying fewer school fees they instead opt to set up scholarship schemes; paying fewer hospital bills, they pay for registration in the national health insurance scheme; giving less cash handouts to unemployed, they work to ensure that a local development bank provides reasonable micro-finance loans to many; and so on. Clientelism is not gone, and MPs are spending more than ever on their election campaigns, but the forces are there that can turn the tide in favour of, at least, small-scale collective goods and ultimately better government policies.

Appendix 1

Sampling procedure

The sampling procedure involved, first, stratifying constituencies in the 2008 elections by Ghana’s ten regions. Then, since a computer-generated, random selection procedure could lead to selection of extreme outliers, one constituency was strategically selected from each of the ten regions by weighting a number of both quantitative and qualitative indicators to ensure a representative selection of constituencies as far as possible. Within
each constituency, we used polling stations as sampling frame, and 16 of them were selected at random by a computer. The latter selection process was guided by a distance-rule in order to ensure geographic coverage of the constituency. Within these identified enumeration areas, survey administrators selected random walking paths from the designated sampling starting point. The final stages of sampling were guided by Afrobarometer protocol, where surveyors identify an interval of households to survey (survey every \( n \)th household determined by the day of the month) and within the household randomly select respondents from an assembled list of members above the age of 18 (cf. Afrobarometer Survey Methods 2009).

Three constituencies reflecting safe havens for the two dominant parties in their geographical strongholds: the Ashanti region for the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the Volta region for the National Democratic Congress (NDC) were chosen. Ho West in the Volta Region, a stronghold of the NDC, was split into two for the 2004 election, so in the second round both these constituencies were sampled to ensure consistency over time. Kwabre, in the heartland of the Ashanti region, on the other hand, is considered a National Patriotic Party (NPP) stronghold. Akim Swedru in the Eastern region is another safe haven chosen to capture that region, but also to reflect the fact that the NPP have almost double the number of safe havens compared to the NDC. Besides being safe havens, each of these constituencies has a diverse population of urban and rural residents engaged in trading, farming and education. These three were selected because they were representative of the regions (cf. Lindberg and Morrison, 2005). Next, three competitive districts, in which the two dominant parties were equally competitive as neither had a clear majority or power had alternated between them, were also selected. The Central region and the Greater Accra region have been contested regions for both parties in several elections. Both Cape Coast and Ablekumah South had been an NPP constituency over the previous three election cycles but with radically decreasing margins, and both were eventually lost to the NDC in 2008. Both have a combination of fishing, farming, trading and small-scale cottage industry communities, and a mixture of urban and rural communities. Ablekumah South is also one of the most populous constituencies in the country and provides a fairly good cross-section of residents in the capital. The last competitive area was Bolgatanga in the far north of the country. In addition to contributing to geographical representation of the country and inclusion of some minority ethnic groups from the North, it is a constituency where one of the small parties has won a seat in the past. During the time of the survey, the PNC was holding the seat although it was lost to the NDC in the 2008 election. In addition to the six constituencies above, four semi-competitive constituencies were selected. Kpone-Katamanso lies on the outskirts of the Accra/Tema metropolitan area with a mixed population of various occupations ranging from farmers to traders and citizens who work in the city but live outside is a more rural community compared to the Ablekumah South constituency. Evalue-Gwira is located in the Western region and a traditional stronghold of the CPP, which is the party with the strongest historical link to the country’s founding father Kwame Nkrumah, but has become increasingly competitive over the years. Jaman South is located in Brong-Afahoe region, and while somewhat competitive is still relatively safe for the NPP. The Tamale Central constituency in the Northern region is also relatively competitive but has been comfortably won by the NDC.
Funding
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Acknowledgements
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Notes
1. Richard Crook kindly reminded me of earlier literature on Ghana that dwells on these issues and made insightful contributions, although not based on systematic data. See, for example, Austin and Luckham (1975), Dunn and Robertson (1973), Dunn (1980), LeVine (1980). There is also literature on the nature of elections in Africa during the one-party era, such as Hayward (1987) and Hyden and Leys (1972).
2. This is following a procedure established by Lindberg and Morrison (2005, 2008). While this strategy would not always be preferable to conducting a completely randomized, cross-national-wide sample, to the best of my knowledge only one work has been successful in generating such a sample close up to an election (Hoffman et al., 2009). The strategic selection of constituencies was done in this project in order to get enough respondents from each constituency, in turn, in order to make valid inferences possible about particular areas. With respect to demographic factors and regional distribution, the data collected in this survey roughly match the more desirable sampling procedure; see Appendix.
3. With regard to ethnicity, it has been argued that this occurs because voters have a real incentive to do so along Young’s (1976) original argument: voters also receive ‘psychic benefits’ (Chandra, 2004) and use ethnicity as a cognitive shortcut to preferences (Ferree, 2006). At its core, ethnicity captures a multi-faceted identity defined as a shared myth of common ancestry encompassing clan, language, religion, region and even nation (Chandra, 2004; Chazan, 1983; Fearon and Laitin, 1996; Horowitz, 1985; Young, 1976). Yet, ethnic identities are multi-faceted and their make-up and intensity can change over time (Posner, 2005). At any one point, individuals can hence be expected to be more or less ‘ethnic’ in their perceived identity.
4. Ashantis and Akyems are part of the larger group of Akans denoting a set of tribes with very similar language and to some extent customary traditions concentrated in the middle regions of the country. Of the Akans, Ashantis constitute approximately 42 percent; some of the other major groups are Akyem, Ahanta, Evaluate, Akuapem and Brong (Ghana Statistical Service, 2009). Fantes are usually also included among the Akans as a linguistic group, but in recent political history they have been less aligned with the Ashantis and the rest of the Akan tribes, and therefore it makes sense to treat them separately in the following analysis.
5. The Dagombas, Fantes and a host of smaller groups distribute almost evenly between the two main parties and swing voters, and among the Frafra and Nzema peoples swing voters actually make up the plurality. Fraf ras and Nzemas are distinct and are geographically concentrated in different parts of the country (Fraf ras in the Upper West region and Nzemas in the Western...
Region), but are put together in the table since their figures are similar and I wanted to simplify the presentation.

6. Differences simultaneously within and between groups: \( \chi^2 = 554.564 \), d.f. = 18, \( p=0.000 \).

7. The question was: ‘If elections were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate for MP would you vote for?’.

8. Any combination of the evaluation indicators reduces the sample size to around 800 or about 50 percent of the total \( N \). If all indicators of citizens’ evaluations of the MPs’ performance are included, the sample size is down to 538.

9. It should also be noted that tribe plays some part in the story. Akan is consistently and positively related to a vote for the incumbent, as expected with NPP incumbents in 6 out of the 10 constituencies, but being Ewe is not a very good predictor of opposition support.

References


Author Biography

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