



Fertilizer and votes: Does strategic economic policy explain the 2009 Malawi election?☆



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ABSTRACT

Ethno-regional voting cleavages have featured in a number of sub-Saharan African states during the third wave of democratization. While these voting patterns are well studied, there have been few attempts to understand if pan-ethno-regional coalition building based on targeted economic policies can be employed to secure national electoral coalitions. We examine the 2009 Malawian parliamentary elections where a newly-formed national party used its incumbent position to promote an economic policy based on food security in order to overcome traditional ethno-regional voting patterns. After presenting a formal model of an optimal allocation of an economic resource to induce vote-switching, we use district-level data in a system of equations approach finding that this strategic allocation did indeed contribute to the nation-wide electoral victory.

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1. Introduction

While the third wave of democratization did not wash over Africa with the same force as other parts of the world, a number of African states have experienced a (re)-birth of multi-party democracy since the late 1980s (Schraeder, 1995). However, even in countries that have experienced relative stability, or successful democratic transitions,

ethno-regional voting patterns have largely dominated explanations of African electoral results. These narratives stand in stark contrast to established theories of Western democratic electoral processes where outcomes have been shown to be tied to the strategic and targeted use of distributive socio-economic programs and policy. In this context, we ask if the 2009 Malawian election stands as an example contrary to the African rule of ethno-regional electoral explanations. Despite a history of previous electoral results that largely fell along ethno-regional lines, in the 2009 election incumbent President Binguwa Mutharika was able to win a broad, national, coalition for his newly formed Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In this paper, we analyze if the DPP's victory was based on a strategic, pan-ethnic targeting of an economic policy based on food security.

To investigate the 2009 Malawian electoral outcome, we develop a formal model of targeted economic allocation to motivate our empirical examination of the election results. We argue that President Mutharika made strategic use of his successful, if not controversial, national fertilizer

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program to gather electoral support by targeting the poor but also exploiting districts with better land and lower ethnic identity-intensities. This strategy was “cross” or “pan” rather “post” ethnic, but provides an example of how economic policy can be used to build an alternative electoral coalition in a polity previously dominated by an entrenched ethno-regional divide.

We first review existing explanations for electoral outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa before briefly reviewing electoral history in Malawi. We make a theoretical contribution by outlining how knowledge of basic household (farm) primitives (preferences) can be used, in the context of a national fertilizer program, to build a pan-ethnic national electoral coalition. Using such primitives as instruments, justified by micro-foundations, within a system of equations that model voting and economic allocations, and at the electoral district level, we provide empirical evidence that President Mutharika's economic policies secured the 2009 election. We conclude with a reflection on how these results may have wider implications for the understanding of future electoral outcomes in Africa and beyond.

2. Explaining electoral outcomes in Africa

While significant heterogeneity exists, a number of cross-country and single-case studies have attempted to uncover the determinates of electoral results in African countries. Primary among these are explanations based on ethnic identity which are tied closely to the continent's colonial past. As Bayart (1993) argues, colonial legacy often deprived the state of any moral allegiance but instead came to be seen as the sole locus of resource access and distribution where an African elite came to straddle both government and business sectors. As post-colonial governments and territorial borders were often illegitimate, state actors were forced to shore up their structures by engaging in policies that led to poor developmental outcomes (Englebert, 2002: 78). Chief among these legitimization processes was prebendalism, a source of legitimacy seeking through distributing resources to local ethno-regional elites in return for a region's votes (Van de Walle, 2007).

Ethnicity-based identity as an explanatory factor has an engrained place in the empirical African comparative elections literature that dates at least to studies of South African elections in the 1970s (Peele and Morse, 1974). While the premise of ethnic-identity voting is straightforward, you vote for the candidate/party from your ethnic group, few studies suggest that this is the sole-determinant of vote-choice in Africa. While authors such as Norris and Mattes (2003), Bratton and Kimenyi (2008), Eifert et al. (2010) and Osei-Hwedi (1998) note the importance of ethnicity in electoral outcomes in certain countries, other authors, such as Basedau and Stroh (2012), Batty (2011) and Lindberg and Morrison (2008) find little evidence that ethnicity drives electoral choice. On balance, it is unlikely these patterns simply boil down to race. In revisiting South African elections, Ferree (2011: 2) argues that the “ethnic census” of electoral patterns is not the result of an “orangnic ... social identity” but rather of a “politically

engineered” frame. Likewise, in place of racial ethnicity, Posner (2007) suggests that other identities - regional, linguistic or religious - may have a larger impact on elections while Dunning and Harrison (2010) suggest that personal networks, or ‘cousinage’ may trump ethnic ties.

A number of authors have tied ethnic voting to Kitschelt's (2000: 849) notion of “clientelism”, or patronage, that employs a “logic of exchange” as an electoral linkage strategy where benefits to a voter can be distributed and/or withdrawn based on electoral support. This is in contrast to “programmatic” linkages which, as Kitschelt (2000) notes, form only an indirect linkage between voter and constituents. The nuances between different types of distributive politics are further unpacked by Stokes et al. (2013) who note that within “non-programmatic” electoral strategies there exists a further distinction between benefits that are contingent on an individual's vote (clientelism) and those which are targeted at constituencies rather than individuals (pork-barrel politics).

Fearon (1999) provides a formal treatment of how ethnic politics and “pork” can go hand in hand while Keefer (2007) notes how clientelism is particularly prevalent in young democracies where the absence of a track record hinders opposition from making credible commitments, leading to a citizen preference for targeted transfers. As Vicente (2014) makes clear, vote-buying can be an effective electoral strategy. One resource pool that can be used in clientelistic exchange is official development assistance (ODA) or foreign aid. Jablonski (2014) recently described the mechanisms by which foreign aid can be used to garner political support and finds suggestive evidence of this behavior in Kenya by showing that the geographic distribution of aid shifts following the ascendancy of a new regime. This supports other recent work suggesting that partner regimes can influence the locational distribution of aid (Hodler and Raschky, 2014). Yet non-programmatic distributive politics is not an all-encompassing explanation. While Wantchekon (2003) and Weghorst and Lindberg (2011) both note the prevalence of clientelistic explanations of African politics, both works express reservations that clientelism drives electoral outcomes. Evidencing this concern is Kasara (2007) who finds that, in certain sectors and under certain conditions, not only do co-ethnics fail to receive *preferential* treatment from those in power, but in fact face more *regressive* policies as they are more effectively controlled by their own-group leaders.

An emerging body of work sheds insights on if and why politicians in African states move beyond identity-based patronage to electoral strategies that reach broader constituencies. Bleck and Van de Walle (2011, 2013) suggest that African electorates have strong issue-based preferences which could provide grounds for pan-identity political parties. However, the authors note that, to date, and for a variety of reasons, parties have not yet mobilized around substantive issues. Arriola (2009) examines pan-ethno-regional coalition building in the context of political stability, finding that governments that expand their cabinets to include individuals from beyond their traditional support group leads to a decreased likelihood of coup. Likewise, in investigating multiethnic opposition, Arriola (2013)

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