



Does electoral competition affect public goods provision in dominant-party regimes? Evidence from Tanzania



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ABSTRACT

Does electoral competition improve public goods provision in dominant-party regimes? In such regimes, localized electoral competition does not threaten dominant parties' hold on power. Still, I argue that competition can promote improved local public goods provision because of the ruling party's desire to generate overwhelming governing majorities. Studying Tanzanian districts, I show that greater local electoral competition leads to substantially greater access to local public goods. Moreover, at least one important mechanism linking electoral competition to public goods outcomes is the dominant party's propensity to target more competitive districts with greater government resources. The findings demonstrate that, even in a country with imperfect elections characterized by single-party dominance, greater electoral competition can generate better public goods outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Scholars often argue that electoral competition improves public goods provision because it forces public officials to respond to citizen demands.¹ In dominant-party regimes,² however, ruling parties are subject to multiparty elections, but the party's hold on power is never seriously at risk. Though elections in these regimes are not *nationally* competitive, the level of competitiveness tends to vary across subnational units. As a result, the ruling party may face rather stiff competition in some areas while continuing to dominate in others. This begs the question:

does local electoral competition improve local public goods provision in dominant-party regimes, even though control of the government is never really in doubt? If so, why and how? And what does it say about the effectiveness of multiparty elections, however imperfect, in improving government accountability? This study addresses these questions by analyzing the effect of electoral competition on public goods outcomes in Tanzania.

In this paper I argue that greater local electoral competition improves the provision of local public goods in dominant-party regimes. In particular, where the ruling party must make decisions about how to best allocate money and effort between more and less competitive districts, the party will focus on improving public goods provision in the most competitive districts, resulting in a higher level of access to local public goods. There are two reasons for this. First, the ruling party in a dominant-party regime seeks not just to win a simple majority so as to maintain control of the national government but, for the reasons outlined below, to maximize its number of seats held. Second, the party knows that it is only in the more

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¹ See e.g. Barro (1973), Besley and Burgess (2002), Ferejohn (1986), Gottlieb (2011), Hiskey (2003), and Wittman (1989, 1995).

² Throughout this paper I refer to Tanzania and similar cases—where multiparty elections are held but the ruling party never loses power—as dominant-party regimes. I choose not to distinguish between the authoritarian and democratic varieties due to the lack of a satisfactory way to do so empirically. See Sartori (1976), Przeworski et al. (2000), Schedler (2002), and Magaloni (2006) for alternative views.

competitive districts where public goods provision can swing the vote margin enough to make the difference between winning and losing. As a result, the ruling party will focus on improving public goods provision in more competitive districts, either by allocating more resources to these districts and/or by reducing rent-taking and improving efficiency in translating allocated resources into public goods outcomes.

I test the relationship between the level of electoral competition and access to local public goods in Tanzania, a country that holds multiparty elections but has been governed by a dominant ruling party since independence. Exploiting district-wise variation in the level of competition that developed after the country transitioned from single party to multiparty elections, I construct an original dataset and use a difference-in-differences strategy to analyze the effect of electoral competition on access to local public goods in Tanzania. I find that higher levels of local electoral competition result in better access to local public goods. To explore the logic linking competition to public goods outcomes, I use cross-sectional time series data to analyze the relationship between competition and central government budget transfers to the districts and find that greater competition is associated with greater budget allocations, suggesting that a swing-district logic of distributive politics is one reason why more competitive districts enjoy greater access to public goods. I then describe a particular election in one Tanzanian district as an example of this logic at work.

This paper makes several contributions. First, it establishes a link between electoral competition and public goods *outcomes*—not just allocations. This is important because, while there is a large distributive politics literature analyzing the relationship between electoral competition and resource allocation, there are few empirical studies that go a step further to determine whether additional resources actually translate into better outcomes. Ultimately, of course, it is these outcomes that matter most to scholars and citizens alike. Second, by studying the effect of competition on public goods outcomes *and* allocations in the same context, I am able to draw conclusions about the mechanisms linking competition, allocations, and outcomes that studies of one or the other cannot. Third, and most importantly, I extend previous theoretical insights from work on dominant parties and distributive politics to explain why electoral competition can affect public goods provision even in dominant-party regimes where control of the government is never in doubt, and I show empirically that this is the case.

The following section frames the research question and related literature and lays out the theory in more detail. After describing the Tanzanian political context, I explain the research design and the data I use to estimate the effect of electoral competition on access to public goods and present results from the analysis. To explore causal mechanisms, I analyze the relationship between electoral competition and budget allocations and describe an exemplary case that illustrates how competition affects public goods provision in practice. Finally, I discuss the findings and their implications and offer some concluding thoughts.

2. Research question and theory

Does local electoral competition improve local public goods provision in dominant-party regimes, even though control of the government is never really in doubt? That is, should more competitive localities in dominant-party regimes enjoy better public goods outcomes than less competitive ones? If so, why and how? And what does it say about the effectiveness of multiparty elections, however imperfect, in improving government accountability? The existing literature does not provide us with answers to these questions.

2.1. Existing literature

One set of perspectives that is useful in answering these questions comes from the literature on distributive politics, particularly the debate over whether parties target swing or core voters with distributive goods. There are two main variants of the argument in favor of a core voter strategy. The first, perhaps most relevant to the dominant-party context, argues that the ruling party may determine that its optimal long-run strategy is to pursue an explicit strategy of rewarding the most loyal districts and punishing those supporting the opposition in order to deter future defections and encourage opposition supporters to think twice about the consequences of voting against the incumbent party (Hiskey, 1999). An alternative perspective argues that if a party has “relatively precise and accurate ideas about how [core voters] will react” due to their frequent and intensive contact with the party, then risk-averse parties will target pork toward core voters in competitive elections because they constitute a safer electoral investment (Cox and McCubbins, 1986). Similarly, Dixit and Londregan (1996) argue that when a party has an advantage in distributing redistributive benefits to a group of voters (i.e. it can target them more efficiently) then this group—the party’s “core” constituency—will be targeted with a greater allocation of such goods. Empirically, Ansolabehere and Snyder (2006), Hiskey (1999, 2003) and Weinstein (2010) find evidence of a core voter logic at work.

On the other hand, arguments in favor of a swing voter logic generally start with the simple observation that voters with policy preferences that make them nearly indifferent between two competing parties are the most likely to be swayed by material inducements from one party or the other, so strategic parties will target those voters with transfers (Dixit and Londregan, 1996; Lindbeck and Weibull, 1987; Stokes, 2005). Magaloni’s “entry-deterrence” model, which shares features of both swing and core voter models, predicts that a dominant party determining how to best allocate distributive goods will target the most competitive districts with transfers yet severely punish those that vote even slightly in favor of the opposition. Thus, her model shares with swing voter theories the prediction that more competitive districts will receive more transfers than less competitive districts. On the other hand, it is in agreement with core voter theories that predict that parties will target supporters and not opposition voters according to a logic of reward and punishment. There is a good deal of evidence in the literature in support

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