

POLICYMAKING IN THE PERIPHERY
DEBT AND DISTRIBUTION IN DEVELOPING DEMOCRACIES

by

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Abstract

What drives public allocation in the periphery? In developed democracies, parties win elections by exploiting mass cleavages and governments smooth consumption through domestic borrowing. In peripheral democracies, parties typically emerge as national movements with regional bases. To stay in power, leaders in the periphery must craft coalitions beyond their base, winning over elites who can deliver local votes. However, reliance on external finance means that the resources available to broker elite coalitions vary with the swings of global financial cycles. Across three empirical studies, this dissertation unpacks how politicians negotiate access to resources in this context. I show that as the budget constraint tightens, executives channel discretionary resources to win over strong elites while maintaining the loyalty of their base through recurrent spending. In the first paper, I explore the demands that legislators make by analyzing a novel database of over 9,000 parliamentary questions and corresponding government assurances from the Zambian National Assembly. When borrowing costs rise, weaker legislators make fewer requests for the kinds of spending that would allow them to cultivate a personal vote. The second paper draws on subnational budget data to show how public investment in Zambia and Kenya is constrained by local elections and global markets. I show that tight budgets force executives to concede discretionary resources to electorally strong legislators. The final paper explores legislator leverage relative to other subnational elites in Zambia and Malawi, revealing how the existence of alternative electoral mediators undercuts legislator's bargaining position but sets the foundation for collective action. Drawing on novel data on parliamentary speech and subnational allocation, elite interviews, and public opinion data, I show that executive discretion over public distribution is constrained by local elites and access to international finance. These findings caution against isolated views of either executive-dominated clientelism or donor-driven policymaking. Rather, domestic electoral bargains are forged in the shadow of global markets.

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Looking back, I realize that I had no idea what I was getting into when I started graduate school. Nonetheless, a host of friends, mentors, and cheerleaders have taken me up and borne me along this journey. Acknowledging this web of dependence is integral to my scholarship, making transparent the process through which I have come to all that follows.

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Behold Baby Democracy, he called. The Ruler then grandly proclaimed the advent of multiparty democracy in Aburĩria, to everyone's shock. But he added that the new Aburĩrian system was only making explicit what was latent in all modern democracies, in which parties were basically variations of each other.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, The Wizard of the Crow

This sort of thing happens with nations, and tales, and humans, and signs. You go hunting for a source, some ur-word or symbol and suddenly the path splits, cleaved by apostrophe or dash. The tongue forks, speaks in two ways, which in turn fork and fork into a chaos of capillarity. Where you sought an origin, you find a vast babble which is also a silence: a chasm of smoke, thundering.

Namwali Serpell, The Old Drift

Chapter 1

Introduction

When finances are tight, how do leaders in developing democracies hold together electoral coalitions? An extensive literature chronicles the distributive strategies of developing country governments, debating the degree to which leaders target role of core and swing regions and the relative role of voters and brokers (Stokes et al. [2013](#); Golden and Min [2013](#)). However, few studies consider that the state's ability to finance these transfers is not unlimited. Unlike in wealthy nations, where governments can rely on local bond markets to finance budgets in hard times, leaders in the periphery are exposed to the volatile shifts of global markets. These shifts tighten the budget constraint, forcing leaders to make difficult decisions about where to invest. With no economic cleavages to leverage, parties can't rely on ideological cues to shape agendas. Instead, allocation choices are driven by the need to sustain an electoral coalition.

In this dissertation I show that when money is tight, leaders concede discretionary resources to electorally strong legislators. Strong elites are those who can bring voters with them into other parties. This leverage allows them to demand the type of spending that gives them the strongest electoral boost: investment in local infrastructure. At the same time, executives seek to maintain their legitimacy with loyal voters through recurrent funds, which are attributed to the party leader. As finances tighten, executives make risky concessions to win over strong politicians. To test my theory, I collect original data on allocation across multiple sectors through the entire fiscal cycle: legislative debate, budgets, disbursement, and project completion. I complement these with evidence from elite interviews and public opinion data.

At each stage, I find evidence of executive concession to strong legislators, especially when government finances are constrained by drops in global liquidity and commodity prices.

These findings build on the distributive politics literature, showing how and when leaders use distinct strategies across different parts of their coalition. Executives convince voters where they can make a direct appeal and rely on intermediaries where legislators can threaten exit. I contextualize these bargains within the global political economy, revealing mechanisms of dependency beyond aid. Countries' dependence on creditors beyond their borders makes them vulnerable to global financial cycles, and the impacts of squeezes are concentrated in the leaders electoral base. I also contribute to an emerging literature on legislative politics in Africa (Barkan et al. 2010; Opalo 2019; Arriola et al. 2022; Choi 2018; Frantzeskakis 2023; Collord 2021; Bowles and Marx 2022; Wahman and Seeberg 2022), showing that even where executives dominate politics, financial constraints can force them to make concessions. However, these concessions should not be mistaken for legislative development or democratic responsiveness. Strong legislators demand spending that is personally attributable, not what voters demand nor what benefits their peers in the legislature. Finally, I also provide several new datasets on whole-of-government spending, legislator demands, and fund utilization in Zambia, Malawi, and Kenya.

1.1 Background

Debt and democracy fit together in the context of the alliances that political leaders make to maintain power in postcolonial democracies. The material cleavages that shaped politics in Western Europe (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Meltzer and Richard 1981), are less salient in countries where parties emerged out of nationalist struggles for independence or multiparty democracy. Consequently, the starting point for distributive politics in Africa has been leaders serving some set of core supporters, whether urban (Bates 1971), ethnic (Posner 2005), or regional (Boone 2024). A broad and well-established literature explores how public resources disproportionately flow to leaders' base (Van de Walle 2001; Bayart 2009).

However, the transition to multiparty democracy shifted political settlements and subsequent distributive strategies (Burgess et al. 2015). Movements that began as opposition alliances entered office and had to govern. To keep power in majoritarian contexts, lead-

ers in these democracies needed to win over new voting blocs without losing core voters. Scholars have documented a wide range of strategies used to stay in power. Much of the evidence points to favoured allocation to supporters (Bomprezzi et al. 2024; Harris and Posner 2019; Ejdemyr, Kramon, and Robinson 2018), but parties may ignore or even extract from strongholds (Kasara 2007; Choi 2018; Briggs 2021a). By contrast, allocation may be designed to convince voters in marginal areas (Schady 2000; Masaki 2018). To make inroads in competitive districts, governments typically rely on elite intermediaries who can deliver votes in exchange for material favours or top appointments (Stokes et al. 2013; Arriola 2009; Sishuwa 2024; Seekings 2022). The overall evidence is mixed, and results vary by country and sector (Kramon and Posner 2013; Golden and Min 2013).

At the same time, the ability of governments to finance these distributive transfers is not constant over time. Significant exposure to international debt and commodity markets leaves governments with little room to weather swings in global markets. Unlike developed economies, they cannot tax or borrow domestically to manage economic downturns. Drops in access to credit can limit governments ability to finance their agendas (Wibbels 2006). The impacts of creditors on the amount, type, and distribution of public spending has been widely studied for concessional finance from both traditional (Van de Walle 2001; Briggs 2021b; Bomprezzi et al. 2024) and non-traditional actors (Tang 2026; Hernandez 2017). An emerging literature examines countries' choice to take on internal and external private debt (Cormier 2024; Bunte 2019; Manger et al. 2025) and its impact on their policy autonomy (Zeitz 2024). However, there is less known about the impact of access to market-based debt on government's distributive choices. Unlike donor funding, which comes with a long list of terms and conditions, these financial flows are rooted in the cycles of the global economy. Bundled and financialized, the rates and availability of private credit depends on global capital cycles, not developing countries' fiscal prudence or democratic bona fides (Rey 2015; Brooks, Cunha, and Mosley 2015; Cormier and Naqvi 2023). These changes challenge our assumptions of how political leaders stay in office, highlighting the constraints of the international economy on policy autonomy (Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Mkandawire 2015; Getachew 2019). The cost that countries pay to borrow is a significant constraint on the kinds of electoral bargains that leaders can pursue.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

In this section, I define key concepts, and then introduce my core argument, which I substantiate in the following chapters. In the global periphery, leaders often emerge from regional parties but must contest elections through national coalitions. As turnovers become a regular feature of multiparty competition, opposition alliances are navigating their way as ruling governments. Formal groupings like the Tonse Alliance in Malawi or National Rainbow Coalition in Kenya have been crucial to toppling incumbents, and elite brokering has been crucial bringing new parties to power in Zambia (Sishuwa 2024; Resnick 2022). Once in power, leaders must find their way to another electoral victory by maintaining both their party supporters and broader coalition. This leads them to a dual strategy, cultivating party loyalists while winning the allegiance of strong elites. When borrowing costs rise, executives narrow their focus to investments with the highest electoral payoffs. For legislators (and legislatures), awareness of their own bargaining power relative to the executive shapes their advocacy for different policy priorities.

1.2.1 Investment and Attribution

Despite their status as ‘big men’, developing-country parliamentarians are surprisingly vulnerable. Caught between voters with high expectations and executives with singular ambitions, local politicians struggle to make a career of their office. By one measure, just 32% of African legislators are re-elected (Bowles and Marx 2022). This is matched in the public opinion data. Over ten waves of Afrobarometer surveys in 39 countries, 57% of respondents approve of presidential performance, but just 44% of legislators’. Voters regularly remove legislators who fail to deliver development (Hern 2019; Bleck and Van De Walle 2013). Facing incumbency *disadvantage*, parliamentarians hustle to get themselves into the centre of political bargains.

Legislators fight for geographically particular investment that they can use to demonstrate that they have delivered development to voters. While legislators typically build a following with extensive personal financing, once in office, they can leverage government investment, claiming credit for local infrastructure like roads, boreholes, or classroom blocks. By contrast, it is much harder to hold a ribbon cutting ceremony for teacher salaries or medical procurement. While voters value these investments in service delivery, they credit them

to the party leader rather than local politicians. For example, youth employment schemes or mass hiring sprees are almost always executive initiatives and are managed by public sector commissions or the office of the president in the capital. Where executives want to limit shared credit, they will invest in salaries and similar service provision. Investment in infrastructure depends on the executive being willing to boost the reputation of local politicians.

1.2.2 Legislator Strength

Not all politicians can find their way into privileged allocation. A *strong* politician is one that can credibly threaten to bring voters in or out of the ruling coalition. They mobilize local voters through their personal reputation by wielding a mix of material, cultural, hereditary, or religious power. They leverage “organized capacity to make real and continuing political trouble” (Higley and Burton 2006, p. 6)¹. When they choose to switch party allegiance, they can bring voters with them.²

Strong elites can be found across electoral geography. In some places, party has no strong links with voters. This is increasingly the reality in urban areas, as well as regions outside historic voting blocs (Boone 2024; Ichino and Nathan 2013). The politicians who win elections in these places are those that can command credible local support. They have significant bargaining power because party leaders cannot simply replace them in primaries and maintain electoral competitiveness. Leaders need local politicians who can deliver them presidential votes. The current party affiliation of these politicians is irrelevant, as leaders need them for future elections. In other places, voters are strongly attached to the party, often on a regional or ethnic basis (Boone 2024). In these places, parties enjoy hegemony over candidate selection, and prevent the emergence of rivals by demanding that MPs engage in party service (Choi 2018). However, MP strength still matters in these places. Since parties offer so few campaign resources, candidates can refuse to mobilize turnout or mount independent campaigns. It is these legislators who can threaten leaders’ chances at re-election.

¹“Trouble” is similar to Arriola (2009), but rather than focusing elites who are a coup risk, I consider electoral loss as the main mechanism of leader replacement.

²Strong legislators might also be conceptualized as those who can bring home pork. I treat access to this type of government investment as my main outcome.

There are also institutional checks on legislator strength. First, where executives can mobilize voters through alternative actors like subnational officials, religious leaders, or traditional authorities, legislators will have less bargaining power. Second, individual bargains are less likely when legislators can work collectively, leveraging experience or legal authority to check executive power through the legislature itself.

1.2.3 Borrowing in the Periphery

A key reason why developing countries' politics is different is that they are on the periphery of the global economic system. Peripheral countries' policy autonomy is limited by the core, whether through the preferences of a compradorial domestic capital class or the demands of international financial institutions (Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Kentikelenis, Stubbs, and King 2016). However, even without these actors, fiscal space is limited by countries' access to markets. In the post-HIPC era, private borrowing has increased dramatically, oustripping concessional finance in most African countries (Manger et al. 2025). Access to finance is driven by many factors, but a key consideration is the degree to which a country is at the periphery of the global financial system. When global liquidity drops, investment flows out of the periphery toward safer investments in the core (Rey 2015). This raises the cost of new borrowing and servicing existing debt—often dollar denominated—with borrowing costs reflecting investor biases more than economic fundamentals (Olabisi and Stein 2015). While liquidity crunches raise borrowing costs everywhere, they hit hardest in countries with shallow domestic markets and limited tax bases. Unable to continue with similar levels of expenditure, leaders must make cuts. This impact is distinct across sectors. High borrowing costs are more likely to limit debt-financed infrastructure projects than recurrent budget components like wages.

This comes through in cross-national data. Figure 1.1 shows different measures of government expenditure, with global interest rates (US 10-year treasuries) on the horizontal axis and the vertical axis showing government expense, debt service, wages, and capital formation³. Solid lines show the trend for lower income (gdppc < 5000) and hashed lines for upper income countries. In both groups, higher interest rates are associated with drops in public spending and a higher proportion of expense allocated to debt service. However, the impacts

³Capital formation is not the same as government expenditure on capital. However, in low income countries, government investment is a major component of overall capital investment.

of this squeeze on the composition of spending is different in the periphery. In high-income countries, neither wage spending nor capital formation drop with rising rates, reflecting a degree of insulation or countercyclical fiscal management. In low income countries, higher borrowing costs are associated with cuts to wage spending and decreased capital formation. In the next section, i show how this dependency impacts domestic political bargains.

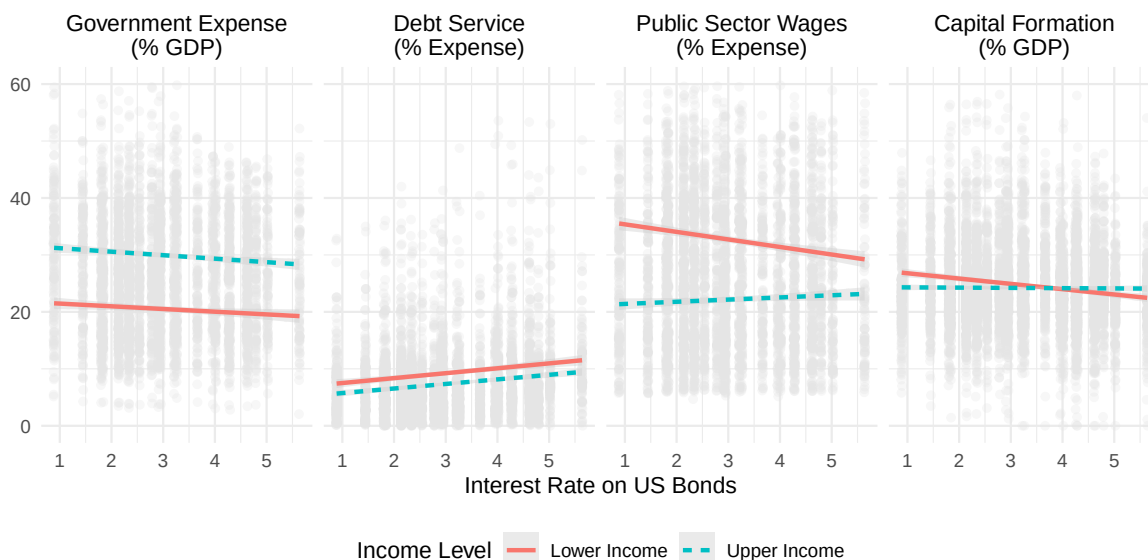


Figure 1.1: Impact of Rising Rates on Sectoral Spending, 2000-2023

1.2.4 Argument

As the budget constraint tightens, executives concede discretionary spending to strong elites. This is because they become a more cost effective way to win electoral support. I develop this argument in a majoritarian context, where executives must win a popular vote, and are thus indifferent to the geographic source of votes. In this context, voters elect legislators and executives separately. To win support, executives can allocate funds for public sector employment (wages) or local infrastructure investment (capital) in each constituency. Voters attribute wages to the central government, with limited opportunity for local legislator to claim credit. Capital boosts the popularity of the executive, but also the local legislator. Capital spending carries risks and benefits. It can win over local legislators, who will leverage their mobilizing power for the incumbent. However, it also increases that legislators' strength, increasing the likelihood that they will have the independence to act as a rival in the future.

In some constituencies, executives have a strong linkage with voters through ethnic, reputation, or historical ties. In these places, parties can effectively mobilize supporters through wage or capital spending. Where local elites control voters' allegiance, executives can buy these elites allegiance through capital spending. As the budget constraint tightens, the value of winning votes by conceding patronage to strong elites rises relative to directly mobilizing loyal voters.

Local infrastructure projects are planned and financed on a project-by-project basis. When rising borrowing costs make accessing external resources gets more expensive, these are harder to implement. By contrast, wage expenditures are part of the recurrent budget, primarily funded through domestic resources and less susceptible to volatility. In the diagram below, I show how government investment translates into electoral support in each constituency.

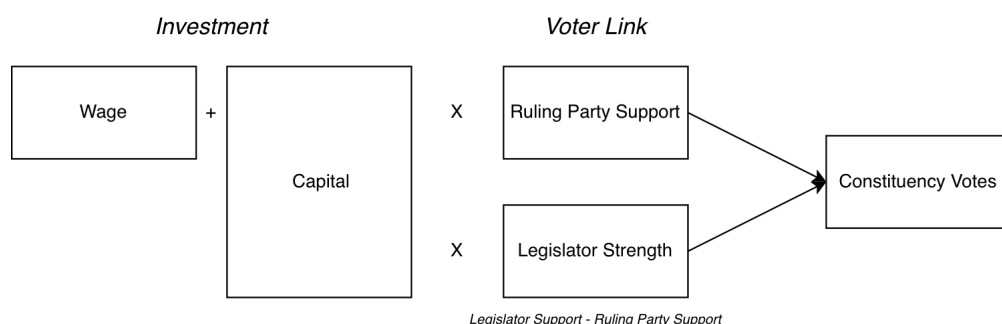


Figure 1.2: Logic of Executive Allocation

In the diagram above, *Ruling Party Support* is the degree to which voters credit investment to the ruling party, *Legislator support* is legislator's independent electoral support. The difference between these two represents a legislator's bargaining *strength*. These act as multipliers on government investment. *Wages* and *capital* are spending in each sector. When the budget constraint tightens, executives must decrease overall spending. Vote-maximizing leaders will shift the composition of spending based on the strength of party and legislator in each constituency. Where party strength is high, electoral returns to wage investment are most beneficial. Where party support is low and legislator support is high, executives can win votes by spending on capital.

Where neither the party nor legislators can mobilize votes for the ruling party, as in opposition strongholds, investment does not yield electoral support, so I expect minimal in-

vestment. Where legislators and parties both have significant support, parties do not need intermediaries. They may spend on either sector, but may limit capital spending to prevent legislators from further entrenching their personal constituency.

Rising rates make capital spending especially costly. However, the electoral benefit of making concessions to strong legislatures will at some point outweigh the cost of empowering future rivals. I expect executives to maximize votes by mobilizing loyal voters with wage spending and allocating infrastructure funds on elites who dominate electoral intermediation. For legislators, this means that their ability to deliver local public goods—and consequent likelihood of remaining in office—is both local and global, contingent on their own pull with voters and the swings of global capital markets.

1.3 Outline

In the chapters that follow, I trace this executive-legislator bargaining through the budget process, showing a persistent pattern across legislator demands, ministerial promises, annual budgets, fiscal disbursements, and project completion. I collect novel data on each and show that at every stage, when the budget constraint tightens, discretionary resources flow to strong legislators.

After this introduction, Chapter 2 shows that legislators are aware of this leverage and respond to changes in borrowing costs according to their own electoral position. Chapter 3 demonstrates that this matters for the allocation choices made by executives. Chapter 4 reveals how these deals change with legislators' relationship to other subnational elites, and that legislator-executive bargains can undermine legislative development. A final chapter concludes by discussing implications for scholarship and directions for future research. I outline my three empirical chapters below.

1.3.1 Chapter 1: Loaded Questions: Global Liquidity and the Legislative Agenda in Zambia

In this chapter, I examine how Zambian legislators use their platform in parliament to petition the state, adapting to electoral and fiscal pressures in their quest to deliver development. Interviews reveal that both politicians and bureaucrats treat parliamentary questions as an

effective lever for bringing investment to the constituency. I create a database of over 9,000 parliamentary questions raised in the Zambian National Assembly and corresponding responses tracked by the parliamentary committee on Government Assurances (2006-2024). I show that strong MPs demand local public goods that will cement their influence over voters, while MPs in a weaker electoral position will ask for spending in areas where they will share credit with the executive. MPs also shift their focus with the government's budget constraint, responding to high borrowing costs by petitioning for investment funded by the recurrent budget. These results interact, such that the weakest MPs are most sensitive to changes in the borrowing environment, while strong MPs are relatively insulated and more likely to receive assurances. I find support for my theory across multiple modelling strategies and after accounting for citizens stated policy priorities.

1.3.2 Chapter 2: Sharing a Shrinking Pie: Public Spending and Electoral Coalitions in the Global Financial Periphery

While chapter 2 reveals that legislators are aware of their leverage, the second demonstrates that this matters for what they actually get. Flipping the analytic lens to the executive, I show that need to maintain the loyalty of voters and elites forces leaders to adopt a two-pronged allocation strategy. Where leaders risk losing voters, they extend patronage through wage spending. These cement the relationship between voters and the party. In places where legislators can credibly threaten to exit (or enter) with voters, executives invest in infrastructure, which boosts legislators' personal pull with voters. Rising borrowing costs bring these strategies into sharp relief. Facing pressure, leaders shift wage spending to core where they can shore up party support and use limited infrastructure funds to win over elites who can deliver votes.

To test this theory, I collect and digitize 15 years of Zambian budget allocations, representing 383,666 budget items over 27,961 pages. This data covers district-level spending across sectors: health, education, agriculture, administration. In line with my expectations, as the budget constraint tightens, recurrent funds flow to loyal voters and capital to strong elites. I find a similar effect for drops in copper prices, affirming that the government's tight budget constraint shapes allocation choices.

To ensure that this result is not driven solely by Zambia’s heavy reliance on external finance, I extend my analysis to Kenya, which has a considerably deeper domestic market but sharp coalitional politics. Once again, I find that strong legislators are allocated more infrastructure funds, and when borrowing costs rise, regions where the president relies on intermediaries are shielded from cuts to infrastructure spending. This is an important corrective to our understanding of patronage and pork, highlighting that leaders use distinct tools across different parts of their network of support.

1.3.3 Chapter 3: Careful Concessions: Legislative Bargains in Developing Democracies

In the final empirical chapter, I probe legislators’ role as intermediaries for the executive. While all legislators seek discretionary resources with which they can cultivate a personal constituency, their leverage depends on whether the president has alternatives for winning local votes. Legislators are less able to extract concessions from the executive when leaders can bypass them and win votes through party labels, traditional authorities, or local officials

For executives, delegating resources to legislators risks empowering future rivals, so they would rather rely on alternative intermediaries. It is only those legislators who can out-compete these alternative channels who can successfully bargain. However, when sidelined from electoral brokering, legislators turn to other sources of power. Working collectively in the legislature, they leverage procedural power to extract discretionary resources

To test this, I draw on contingent variation in the role of legislators and administration of Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) in Zambia and Malawi. Due to colonial era differences in administrative boundaries, legislators are key subnational actors in Zambia, but in Malawi are one of several district-level elites. This difference has shaped the implementation of CDFs. In Zambia, executives target their concessions such that strong legislators enjoy higher disbursements, fewer incomplete projects, and faster approvals. By contrast, in Malawi CDFs are negotiated by the legislature, and distribution is relatively equal. To make electoral inroads, the executive relies on other financial channels controlled by traditional leaders and district councillors.

This chapter establishes an important scope condition for the argument made in the first two chapters. Legislators are not automatically effective electoral brokers. Executives make

concessions to strong legislators only when they have no alternative mediators. It also qualifies an important assumption in the literature on legislative development. Many scholars argue that strong legislators make for strong legislatures. However, when leverage is uneven, strong legislators have less incentive to take part in collective action through the institution. Therefore, the targeted concessions seen in Zambia strengthen individual legislators but weaken the legislature as a whole.

1.3.4 Conclusion

Taken together, these papers paint a picture of distributive politics constrained by both electoral competition and international economic conditions. I show when to expect bargains between legislators and executives, and how these will shape distributive politics. I expect discretionary spending to follow strong legislators and recurrent spending in regional strongholds. Democratic development in the periphery requires that scholars look beyond the executive, understanding the role of local politicians who can meaningfully connect with voters and the government's ability to finance transfers to voters and elites.

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Chapter 2

Loaded Questions: Global Liquidity and the Legislative Agenda in Zambia

Why do some politicians push for local spending in their constituencies while others focus on broad national goals? In developing countries, delivering concrete local development is crucial to re-election, but many members of parliament (MPs) focus their attention on other areas. Why is this? I suggest two forces shaping on MPs attention. First, the ability to defect to other parties extends MPs bargaining power and thus, their focus on local issues. Second, volatility in government revenue shifts the likelihood that their advocacy will be successful. Rising interest rates limit infrastructural investment, while resource revenues expand operational budgets. These forces interact, such that electorally weak MPs are more responsive to changes in borrowing costs. Using a new dataset of 9,362 parliamentary questions from Zambia, I show that MPs shift their attention toward infrastructure when global interest rates drop and when they have electoral leverage over the party. These strong MPs are also more likely to receive government assurances of investment in response to their petitions. This paper shows that MPs are aware of both local and global constraints on fiscal policy choices, acting strategically when choosing which issues to foreground in the public agenda.

2.1 Introduction

Every night you go to sleep with a lot of assignments...Someone is asking, help me employ my daughter, find a school place for this one, this one is in a police station, help us repair the police [station], the classroom is broken here, the dam is [out]...So you are a jack of all trades. And I think that is the most challenging thing: to focus, to say “*What should I do?*”

- MP Joseph Munsanje¹

When I sat with Hon. Munsanje in Zambia’s National Assembly complex, he was wearing a lapel pin with the logo of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals: a circle with segments of seventeen different colors, reminding wearers of the importance of solving every problem: *no poverty*, *climate action*, *economic growth*, and fourteen other goals, each with its own equal slice. It is no wonder that Munsanje is up late wondering what he should do.

With limited time and resources, what problems do politicians focus their attention on solving? In Sub-Saharan Africa—where needs are greatest and resources most limited—the context in which these decisions are made has shifted significantly over the last twenty years. Multiparty competition has been institutionalized even as parties remain weak. Rapid turnover has ratcheted accountability demands, forcing politicians to go into overdrive to deliver local public goods to their constituents (Hern 2019; Bleck and Van De Walle 2013; Opalo 2022). This kind of constituency service is especially salient in Sub-Saharan Africa, where less than a third of parliamentarians are re-elected (Bowles and Marx 2023). At the same time, debt relief, alternative lenders, and private markets have ushered in an ‘age of choice’ for governments seeking to finance development projects (Greenhill, Prizzon, and Rogerson 2016). For much of the 2010s, just about anything could get financed. In this context, how do politicians prioritize?

¹Interview, Lusaka, January 2025 (L008)

In this paper, I show distributive politics in postcolonial democracies plays out in both domestic and international spheres. First, intra-elite conflict is resolved through a shifting set of electoral coalitions. Local politicians who can threaten to bring voters to other are best positioned to demand investment projects that are particular their constituencies. At the same time, politicians must pay close attention to global economic conditions. Rising borrowing costs and volatile resource prices can dramatically change the resource envelope in recurrent and investment spending, shifting the calculus of what can be financed. Drawing on twenty years of Zambian parliamentary debate and key stakeholder interviews, I help explain why politicians prioritize different issues.

To demonstrate this, I introduce a new framework which nuances the distinction between pork and policy, showing how different types of development have different costs and benefits for MPs. Public investment varies in the degree of geographic particularity and the level of local attribution. Nonetheless, MPs advocate for sectors that will not win them popularity with voters. I contend that the degree of concern over re-election and re-adoption as well as the governments' budget constraint shapes what kinds of benefits MPs prioritize.

I then test this empirically by examining a new dataset of 9,362 parliamentary questions from the Zambian National Assembly. Classifying them sector, I find that drops in the cost of borrowing are associated with increased demands for infrastructure spending relative to spending on agriculture, health, or education. These drops in borrowing cost are most salient to strong MPs, who have higher re-election costs and less concerns about re-adoption. These MPs are also more likely to receive promises of government spending in response to their petitions.

Understanding the interaction between these effects helps clarify a tension in the literature on comparative and international political economy. The central role that executives play in policymaking is well known in African politics. This paper contributes to the emerging understanding of a broader range of elites and the importance of regional coalitions and politicians with independent power bases (Handley 2024; Boone 2024; Choi 2018). At the same time, while there is research on how domestic political arrangements impact borrowing choices (Bunte 2019; Cormier 2024), there is less attention on how this access shapes domestic distributive politics. This project demonstrates that local MPs are sensitive to changes both in the international political economy and in their own electoral leverage. Strong MPs

who can successfully secure infrastructure will further entrench their own future in politics, while party strongholds will be left behind. This has important implications for the future of democratic accountability and distributive politics.

2.2 Theory

To date, research on policy priorities in developing democracies has focussed on presidential patronage or donor dominance. As democracy deepens and financing diversifies, these explanations lose analytical leverage. Before presenting my argument, I contextualize my approach within two stylized trends across the developing world and especially sub-Saharan Africa. Domestically, multiparty competition has taken root. Simultaneously, sources of international finance have greatly expanded.

2.2.1 Context

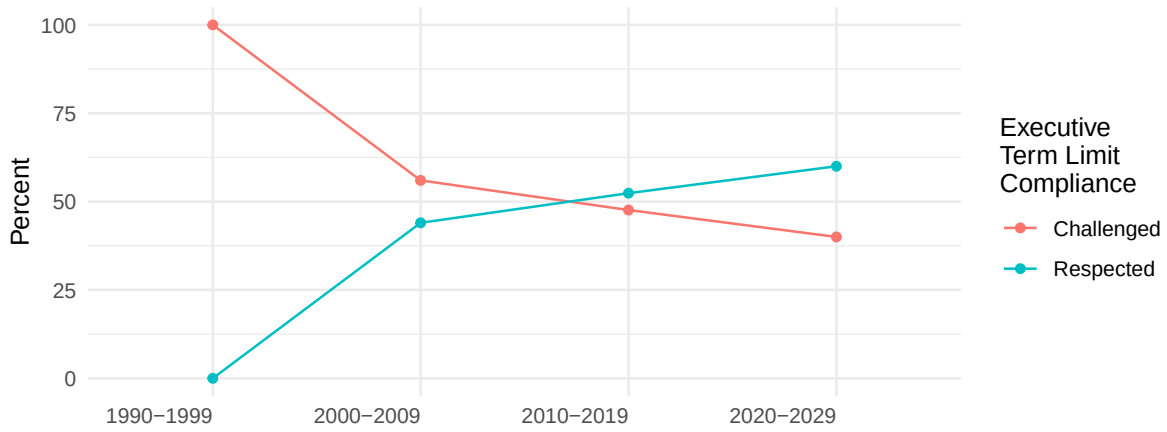
2.2.1.1 Multiparty competition is here to stay while parties come and go

While democratization is uneven and incomplete across the continent, electoral competition is an increasingly strong norm. Afrobarometer surveys show consistent and increasing support for democracy (Afrobarometer 2023). Urbanization, education, and information technology have all eroded the ability of politicians to score easy electoral wins (Bob-Milliar and Paller 2023). Turnover at the constituency and executive level is norm (Bowles and Marx 2023). Cassani (2021) highlights that the share of executives challenging term limits is on the decline Figure 2.1.

Despite this development, parties remain weakly institutionalized. Figure 2.2 shows that across Africa, the level of party personalization has changed little since 1990. Party organizational strength increased throughout the nineties, but has failed to sustain that trajectory.

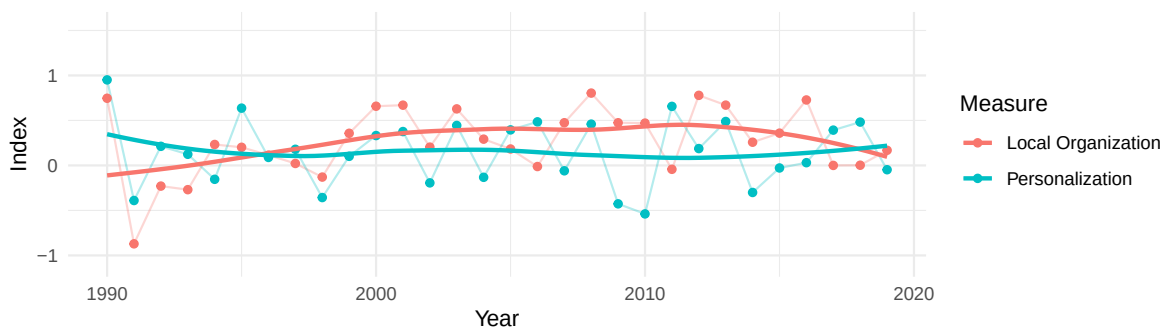
2.2.1.2 Concessional Finance no longer sets the agenda

At the same time, the financial ecosystem has shifted substantially for several factors. From 2000-2010 many heavily indebted countries achieved substantial relief from multilateral debt through HIPC. Many developing countries were able to access alternative sources of finance from China, Gulf countries, and Private Markets (Mihalyi and Trebesch 2022; Dreher et al.



Source: Cassani (2021) with recent additions from John Dotse

Figure 2.1: Challenges to Executive Term Limits are Waning



Source: V-Party, 2022

Figure 2.2: Measures of Party Strength in Africa

2022; Cormier and Naqvi 2023; Manger, Mihalyi, et al. 2025). Even where countries continue to borrow from traditional lenders, many have more agency to negotiate the terms of debt (Zeitz 2024; Winter et al. 2025). Official Development Assistance no longer dominates the landscape as donors retrench and reallocate to other political priorities like security and refugees. The post 2010 period also saw a commodity boom that gave many countries significantly more discretionary revenue. Figure 2.3 provides a snapshot of the changing ecosystem of financial flows.

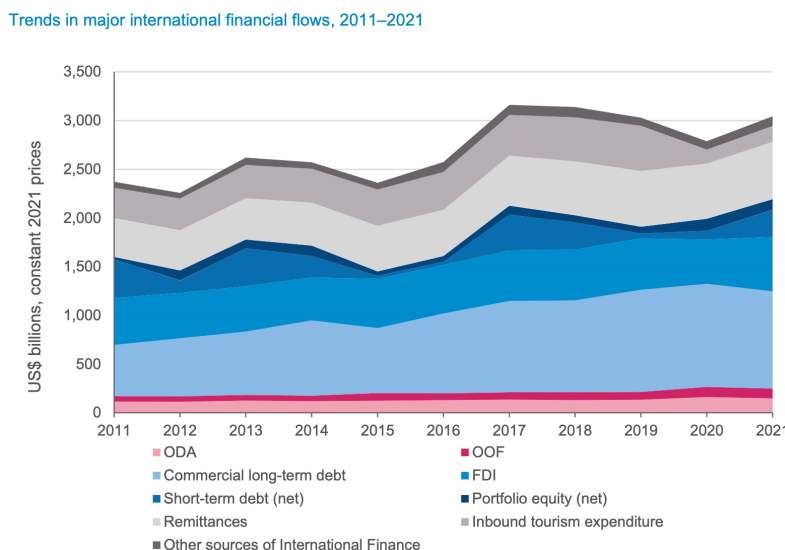


Figure 2.3: Financial Flows to ODA Eligible Countries

In the next section, I outline how these two changes have changed the domestic political setup, such that political elites can make make different demands based on the domestic and international environment.

2.2.2 Argument

Politicians' agendas emerge out of both domestic and global constraints. Domestically, politicians must be re-adopted by their parties and re-elected by their constituents. Legislators are trying to minimize their re-election costs by delivering tangible, attributable benefits through the state. Their strength vis-à-vis the executive determines the types of benefits which they can successfully pursue. Externally, the availability of finance shape how realistic it is to expect certain types of benefits to be delivered. When politicians expect that the government has access to external credit they can push for more geographically

particular benefits, while they turn to nationally shared sectors like service delivery when borrowing is constrained.

In developing countries, there are fewer broad cross-cutting cleavages through which to mobilize the electorate. In this context, executives remain in power by forging an electoral coalition in a fragmented landscape of potential rivals and defectors (Khan 2017; Adebaniwa and Orock 2021; Lupu and Riedl 2013; Riedl and Dickovick 2014; Sartori 1976; Momba 2007; Kim 2017; Arriola 2009). Parties typically emerge from regional strongholds, but winning a single region is not enough for a legislative majority. Due to the winner-take-all institutions in place across much of Africa, regional parties are largely untenable. Consequently, leaders court elites from regions outside their typical bases of support with promises of important positions or policy favours (Arriola 2009). For example, in Zambia, waves of leaders have promised increased autonomy to separatist Western province during electoral campaigns in hopes of winning over the province as a bloc (Sishuwa 2024). Urban areas are particularly volatile, with fewer traditional ties making conventional ethnic appeals less relevant (Seekings 2022; Bob-Milliar and Paller 2023).

Executives need to recruit winners, but cannot offer anything ahead of time. Potential MPs cannot expect campaign support from the executive. In fact, most MPs contribute personal resources to presidential campaigns (Chizonde et al. 2024). A candidate’s ability to fund their own campaign is a key criteria for adoption (Arriola et al. 2022). In stronghold areas, executives can be assured of the vote, and can therefore exercise discretion in their selection of candidates (Choi 2018). In areas where elections are competitive, they must be willing to adopt whichever candidate can deliver them a victory. MPs then, face two challenges, they must be re-adopted by their party and re-elected by their constituents. The importance of these two concerns determines what issues they will prioritize.

2.2.3 Re-election

MPs seeking re-election are evaluated on their ability to deliver development: provide concrete benefits like jobs, education, health, and roads to their constituents (Hern 2019; Opalo 2022; Bleck and Van De Walle 2013). Due to their distinct history, parties in Africa do not fall into typical left-right typologies of redistributive politics. Instead, parties across sub-Saharan Africa campaign on valence issues—those which all voters agree on—such as

building infrastructure, delivering education, or fighting corruption (Bleck and Van De Walle 2013). Survey results from Zambia show that citizens strongly reward politicians who can deliver local goods (Hern 2019; Manger, Cormier, and Winter 2026). Rather than staking out an ideological position, leaders—at both local and national levels—must demonstrate their competence in addressing common challenges.

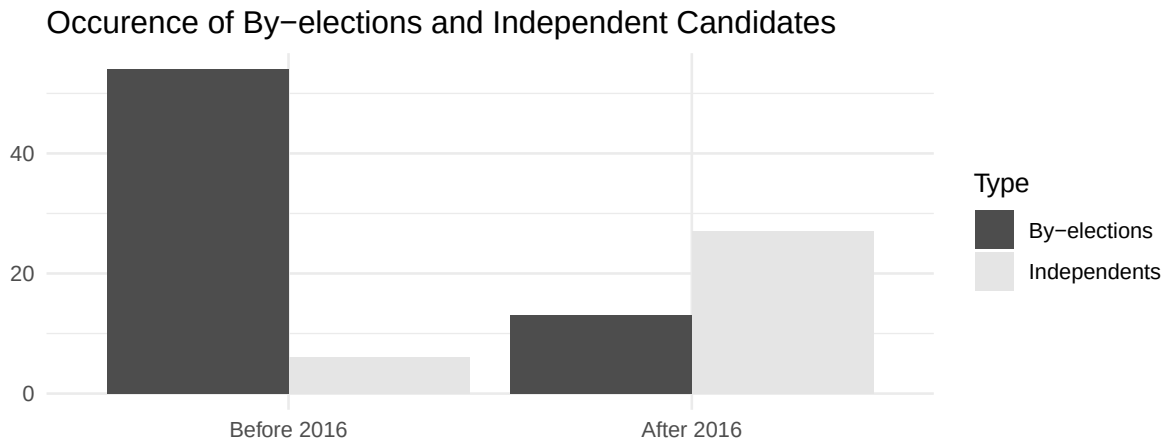
The institutional context reinforces the dynamic of MPs being evaluated on constituency service. In single member, first-past the post systems, voters have a direct link to a single politician to evaluate performance (Lijphart 1994). Clientelist links exacerbate this dynamic, making politicians strongly motivated to deliver tangible benefits to voters (Barkan 2009). Voters evaluate politician competence on their service delivery—visible, salient investments like school blocks, bridges, or agricultural inputs. Unlike in developed countries, retrospective voting gives African legislators an incumbency disadvantage, as incumbents must defend their track record against the promises of challengers (Opalo 2022; Barkan 2009).

This creates a challenge for politicians. Their parties do not have the resources to develop programmatic benefits to the majority of their populations. Even clientelistic benefits are strongly constrained (Kramon 2016). In executive-dominated systems, these sources of patronage are rarely under the discretion of MPs. Instead, members are expected to win re-election through self-funded campaigns (Arriola et al. 2022; Opalo 2022). In 2021, Zambian politicians funded more than 85% of their own campaign expenses (Chizonde et al. 2024).

2.2.4 Re-adoption

MPs also need to be readopted by their parties as candidates in future elections, which is far from guaranteed. Across 12 African countries, just 57% of incumbents stand for re-election (Bowles and Marx 2023). Some politicians may be powerful enough to win office regardless of support from a particular party. These politicians are strong: relying on material, symbolic, and organizational resources to mobilize voters (Adebanwi and Orock 2021; Khan 2017; Riedl 2016). When elections are competitive, executives have to recruit these candidates to win tough races. However, in areas where the party dominates local elections, parties can control the nomination process. They attempt to limit the emergence of strong politicians who might disrupt party hierarchy. Instead, whenever they are assured

of electoral victory, leaders choose weak candidates without an independent power base. Choi (2018) shows that in Kenya, these politicians are forced to substitute constituency service for party service- boosting the popularity of the president. Independent mobilizing power gives politicians leverage because they can bring voters with them away from their current party. Strong politicians with independent power bases are a regular feature in Zambian politics, evidenced in the persistence of floor crossing, defection, and independent MPs. This persists despite shifting institutional environments. Before 2016, it was common for the ruling party to convince MPs to cross the floor, triggering by-elections in their constituencies. After a constitutional amendment in 2016 banned MPs who crossed the floor from standing for re-election, the number of by-elections dropped. At the same time, the number of independent MPs rose dramatically.



NB: By-elections can be triggered for several reasons, not just floor crossing

Figure 2.4: Candidate Strength in Zambia

The experiences of politicians in different areas highlight this difference. The first was running in a party stronghold. Despite securing his nomination in the 2011 primaries, “Two days before nominations, my ticket was changed. And they gave it to somebody, the adoption”. With significant support “on the ground” he decided to run as an independent, with five out of seven ward committee chairs supporting his bid. However, he ran up against a strong party machine and lost the election. He reported “The official candidate who was selected by the party only remained with two ward chairmen and they had to recreate the constituency leadership and the like. And then they had to bring actually the national management people, had to come to campaign to help that guy. To get him across the line” [L008]. After his loss, this politician appealed to the party leader, and was told that he

needed to give his replacement two terms before running against him again. He acquiesced and was not permitted to run until 2021, when he secured his party’s nomination and the election. While the adoption process is nominally democratic, this politician highlights a more nuanced reality: “[While] the primary was a vote, the decision process, that’s the structures at the constituency level, structures at the district level, and the structures at the provincial level....They give their views, and that’s how you are vetted.”

A second politician faced an a similar setback, but was running in a province where voters had less party loyalty. Menyani Zulu spent years learning from Michael Sata in the Copperbelt, and was sent back to his home in Eastern province, with Sata telling him: “I know your strength, you can change the political wind”. However, the Patriotic Front wouldn’t adopt him in his home constituency, so he ran as an independent. In 2016, he lost narrowly in an election he considers rigged². In 2021, he again ran as an independent, and won with 39% of the vote. He credits his reputation as a successful businessman for winning over voters.

In nearby Kaumbwe, Aaron Mwanza achieved the Patriotic Front nomination against the incumbent MP, the son of the local chief. According to Mwanza, voters were swayed by his experience building roads for the Chinese. For both Mwanza and Zulu, personal reputation was much more important than party nomination.

2.2.5 Policy Priorities

Given the importance of both re-election and re-adoption, which policy issues do politicians prioritize? I suggest a typology of spending which distinguishes between whether investment is geographically particular and the degree to which it can be directly attributed to an MP. This nuances the typical dichotomy between programmatic and clientelistic policy, addressing the “vast grey area of regionally targeted policy” (Boone 2024, p. 236).

I identify two primary axes of variation in spending sectors. First, *particularity*: some spending is concentrated in specific geographies, while other types require sharing across the country. Second, some types of spending are easily *attributed* to local legislators, while others are diffuse, more readily attributed to president or party.

²Zulu is not alone, most observers highlighted widespread irregularities in Zambia’s 2016 election (See Resnick 2022; Seekings 2022)

Table 2.1: Sectors by Particularity and Attribution

	Broad Attribution	Local Attribution
Geographically Particular	Routine Maintenance	New Infrastructure (Roads, bridges, buildings, wells)
Nationally Shared	Teacher Salaries; Health Supplies	CDF; Agricultural Inputs (FISP)

First, sectors vary in their degree of geographic particularity. Construction of local infrastructure primarily benefits the targeted area, with few spatial spillovers. Road building is the quintessential example of this type of benefit, which involves using state resources to benefit a particular location. In Ghana, parties received electoral boosts for providing roads (Harding 2015) and electrification to constituents (Briggs 2021). Maintaining infrastructure like roads, buildings, and (parts of) the electrical grid is also geographically particular.

By contrast, nationally shared benefits involve investment across a large number of districts. For example, MPs might push for social protection policies or clearing public salary arrears, but any resources allocated to these areas are shared across the country. Of course, not all spending will benefit everywhere—fertilizer will benefit rural areas, and universities will benefit urban—but investment is not tied to a particular place. For example, constituency development funds (CDF) give MPs total discretion over resources but must be allocated equally across all constituencies. Nationally shared items like health, education, and agriculture constitute what Mkandawire (2016) labels agrarian welfare regimes. Boone (2024) expands: ‘Agrarian welfare regimes’ seek to provide a subsistence floor for most of the poor by upholding the peasant model of rural household consumption and production. Prime instruments for doing so are land policy, regionally and locally targeted “rural development” schemes (including farm input subsidies), locally targeted social service delivery (especially schools and health facilities) and, in some circumstances and places, food transfers and food subsidies (p.245).

Second, benefits vary in the degree to which local MPs are attributed for success. When benefits are both contingent and visible, voters can attribute them to their elected representative (Bowles and Marx 2023). MPs have significant discretion over distributing

	MP	Prez	MP	Prez	MP	Prez
Household Service Demand	-0.141+	-0.053				
	(0.076)	(0.077)				
Difficulty Accessing Clinic			-0.038**	-0.097***		
			(0.014)	(0.015)		
Difficulty Accessing School					0.047**	-0.0039
					(0.016)	(0.0167)
Urban	0.135+	0.140*	0.026	-0.017	-0.025	-0.047
	(0.073)	(0.071)	(0.025)	(0.026)	(0.030)	(0.031)
Lived Poverty	-0.181***	-0.118**	-0.181***	-0.188***	-0.155***	-0.167***
	(0.038)	(0.039)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.019)
Female	0.058	0.0073	0.030	-0.050+	0.0075	-0.064*
	(0.054)	(0.0530)	(0.025)	(0.026)	(0.0270)	(0.028)
R2	0.055	0.199	0.052	0.075	0.132	0.059
Num.Obs.	1105	1159	5372	5485	4451	4494

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

agricultural inputs or using constituency development funds and will often be present at ribbon cutting ceremonies or distribution events. By contrast, it is much more difficult for MPs to claim credit for the release of public sector salaries or restocking clinics. Citizens will not attribute spending to their local MP if it is not immediately visible, or hard to link to the efforts of politicians. The key to re-election is attribution rather than representation: MPs' policy focus is not driven by voter priorities as much as whether voters credit them for investment.

We see preliminary evidence of this in survey data, where Zambian voters show less approval for different leaders depending on the kinds of services they have attempted to access. I show results from Zambian Afrobarometer data, using Presidential/MP approval as the dependent variable, and service availability as the explanatory variable. Citizens who had attempted to secure household level service like water or electricity were less less supportive of their MP, but showed no change in their evaluation of the president. By contrast, citizens who had difficulty accessing medical care were less supportive of the president and MP, but the effect was larger and more precisely estimated for the executive. Difficulty in accessing education was associated with higher support for MP but no change for executive. While rough, this supports the idea that citizens are able to distinguish between levels of government and accurately attribute credit and blame.

How are these two dimensions distinct? In most cases, geographically particular benefits can be attributed to local MPs. The exception to this is routine maintenance, which may not be visible to voters. By contrast, nationally shared benefits are attributed to the party or executive. There are exceptions like constituency development funds, which MPs can still claim credit for delivering locally, despite shared allocation. I take up the puzzling dynamics of CDFs in chapter 4. By contrast, MPs have little discretion over public sector salaries or medical stocks, so voters will not readily attribute it to their local politicians.

2.2.6 Explaining Sectoral Focus

MPs get their biggest popularity boost from highly attributable spending. Therefore, I expect that MPs focused on re-election will push for this type of spending. However, the legislative record shows MPs pushing for spending in many different sectors. What explains this variation? MPs must balance electoral pressures with the need to maintain their position in party hierarchy. Re-adoption pressures give them varying degrees of success in delivering attributable to their constituents. MPs will push for these benefits when they are in a position of strength. In the European context, heavyweight MPs can shift policy in their preferred direction (Alexiadou 2015). There is indicative evidence that this occurs in Zambia as well. For example, after Hastings Imasiku won a by-election in a swing constituency, he made explicit demands for attributable benefits:

I am compelled to deduce that since Liuwa Constituency has always been the domain of the Opposition, these sceneries were, perhaps, not brought to the attention of the Government...we are requesting our listening Government to construct an all-weather paved road...ultimately upgraded to a bituminous finish.

While all MPs would like funds for attributable projects, strong MPs should be more incentivized to seek them out because of their increased chances of success. As I detail below, this is because MPs are not just speaking to represent their constituents, but in order to get government assurances that the project will move forward. This leads to my first hypothesis:

- *H1: Strong MPs will make more claims for attributable benefits.*

2.2.7 Fiscal constraints

These dynamics are tempered by exogenous changes in global conditions which alter the government’s budget constraint. Changes in interest rates and commodity prices dramatically shift the resources available to governments to build coalitions. Wide ranging scholarship has highlighted the ways in which developmentalist policy aspirations in the Global South are constrained by international financial forces (Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Mkandawire 2015; Getachew 2019). Fluctuations in global liquidity limit developing country fiscal policy because they are highly exposed to global markets and have limited access to credit to smooth economic downturn (Wibbels 2006). When borrowing becomes cheaper, MPs will push for debt-financed expansions to the capital budget. One MP explicitly rationalized his choice to push for local infrastructure in terms of government borrowing: “Say, for example, the government sits and says, they want to acquire a loan, so that they electrify certain places. So, what will happen? The minister will remember..that the MP was asking about these places” [L109]. However, capital projects are almost always geographically particular, which means MPs compete to have funds allocated to their regions. Strong MPs are more likely to make successful claims than those without. On the other hand, when credit is tight, capital budgets are the first to be frozen. In this context, MPs will make claims on the recurrent/operational budget, which are more likely to be released.

- *H2a: When budget constraint is high, all MPs will push for shared benefits.*
- *H2b: When budget constraint is low:*
 - *Strong MPs will push more for geographically particular investment.*
 - *Weak MPs will push for shared attributable benefits.*

Table 2.2: Expected Focus

	Tight Credit	Loose Credit
Strong MPs	Social spending	Local infrastructure
Weak MPs	Social Spending	CDF, Fertilizer, Regional Infrastructure

2.3 Data and Empirical Setup

2.3.1 Parliamentary Speech: Why listen to Legislators?

In order to examine which sectors MPs prioritize, I pay attention to what they say. The stance of individual legislators is difficult to identify (Alexiadou 2015), but legislative speech can be a meaningful indicator of their priorities (Laver 2021; Martin 2011a). There are several reasons to pay attention to legislative speech in the institutional context of the Zambian National Assembly. Zambia is a hybrid presidential system with separation between the executive and legislative branch, so legislative proceedings cannot make or break governments. In this context “legislative speeches may be more informative about the policy preferences of individual legislators” (Laver 2021, p. 22). Zambian legislators are elected in single member FPP districts. Proksch and Slapin (2012) show that this gives MPs freedom from the pressure of party lists, as they have less need to toe the party line in parliament. Where votes are not instructive and MPs are not muzzled by parties, speeches are an instructive indicator of the issues which they focus on. In interviews, several Zambian MPs from multiple parties told me that they were totally free to submit questions as they please. They consider it as one tool in the arsenal of getting development to their constituencies.

Existing methods of analyzing legislative speech are ill-suited to measuring attention paid to valence issues. Literature on legislative speech has focused on explaining who speaks, often driven by the identity of the speaker, such as gender, experience, and status in government (Bäck, Debus, and Fernandes 2021; Clayton, Josefsson, et al. 2019; Frantzeskakis, Wahman, and Yildirim 2021; Frantzeskakis and Seeberg 2023). Studies that have analyzed the content of MP speech attempt to scale legislator stance or compare it to an ideological spectrum or party platform (Proksch and Slapin 2012; Clayton and Zetterberg 2021; Herzog and Benoit 2015; Kristensen et al. 2023). This is not useful where party platforms do not vary across the left-right distinction typical of Europe. However, an emerging literature examines the constituency orientation of parliamentary speech. Martin (2011b) finds that in Ireland, geographically peripheral MPs ask constituency focussed questions. Motolinia (2021) uses a difference-in-differences approach to show that increasing electoral incentives led Mexican politicians to focus on particularistic legislation. Wegmann and Evequoz (2019) show that in Zambia and Kenya, MPs with narrower margins and less experience are more likely to ask constituency focused questions. A few studies extend this type of analysis to substantive

policy areas. Espírito-Santo, Sanches, and Kartalis (2024) find that female MPs in South Africa focus their questions on ‘soft’ policy issues, but electorally vulnerable women focus their attention on ‘hard’ policy issues to signal competence. Other work focuses on speech and electoral prospects. Frantzeskakis (2023) demonstrates that MPs who speak about local issues are more likely to be re-elected. York (2024) finds that Moroccan opposition MPs who ask constituency-focused questions receive more votes in subsequent elections.

Building on this literature, I examine the policy areas which MPs emphasize in parliamentary questions (PQs). Most parliamentary democracies include structured institutions through which members can ask questions of the government in written or verbal form (Franklin and Norton 1993). Many authors focus on PQs because MPs enjoy significant latitude over the topic and timing of their questions (Espírito-Santo, Sanches, and Kartalis 2024; Wegmann and Evequoz 2019; Martin 2011a). Questions are a crucial tool for representing constituency issues and—more than many other forms of legislative activity—“discern the true preferences and interests of individual members” (Martin 2011a, p. 260). Despite this attention, there is much less work linking legislative speech to policy outcomes. Though voters certainly value representation, it seems likely that they would appreciate resources actually allocated to the issues that their representatives highlight. When I spoke to MPs, they recognized the representative role of questions- one told me that it would be normal to expect a constituent to text him thanking him for raising local issues in the assembly. However, MPs overwhelmingly emphasized that questions were a tool to get government assurances. This is an legally institutionalized form of speech from ministers which MPs use as leverage in their advocacy for local spending.

In Zambia, questions are enshrined in the Standing Orders of the National Assembly, which gives MPs broad latitude. Additionally, MPs confirmed that they face no constraints from their parties in submitting questions to the clerk (L001, L009). Once submitted, the clerk dispatches them to the relevant ministry, which must offer a response within seven days, or 14 for non-policy questions (80.2, 80.3). This is taken seriously—one interviewee told me about how a question he asked shut down Parliament for three days because the minister could not provide an answer. Responses often include assurances- specific promises from the minister (eg. *construction will start in July*). Ministerial responses are tracked by the Committee on Government Assurances, one of five general purpose committees established

in the Standing Orders of the National Assembly. The committee is mandated to scrutinize promises from the vice president and ministers as well as “Comment on delays in implementation and adequacy of the implementation of the assurance, promises or undertaking by the Executive”. The committee releases reports for each legislative session tracking the progress on each assurance made, executive responses, and their comments on the executive responses. MPs highlight that is effective: “This goes to the committee to assure the people of Nyimba. Not just me. The government is called to assurances for deceiving the people of Nyimba” [L006]. Questions might also speed implementation by bringing bureaucratic attention to projects [L009]. A retired government minister told me that responding to questions required significant research by their permanent secretary and staff [L001]. This was affirmed by MP Joseph Munsanje, among the most prolific questioners in the assembly. He told me that when you ask questions,

It helps them at least to put it in their plans. If it’s not in their plans, it will go into their plans. Because once when you ask a parliamentary question here, the whole research process in the ministries implies that they have to go to the ground. So they have to go and check: how is that road? The districts road engineer, provincial road senior engineers, will all be queried and they may put it in the plans and they may prioritize it. Because it’s been queried. So that is the whole essence of asking parliamentary questions.

Though getting an assurance is no guarantee of resource allocation, it is one way in which MPs conduct oversight of the executive branch. Munsanje concluded: “when I saw the trick that these questions prompt things, then I increased my number of questions” [008].

2.3.2 Questions in the Budget

Parliamentary questions fit within the larger structure of the legislative power of the purse. Though legislative oversight of the budget in new democracies is relatively weak, MPs fulfill legal obligations in scrutinizing and approving government revenues and expenditures. The budget process is an annual cycle culminating in the passage of the appropriations act each December. The fiscal year runs from January to December, and the annual cycle is summarized in the table below. Until 2008, the budget was drafted in the first three months of the year, during which time a provisional budget was used, and the annual

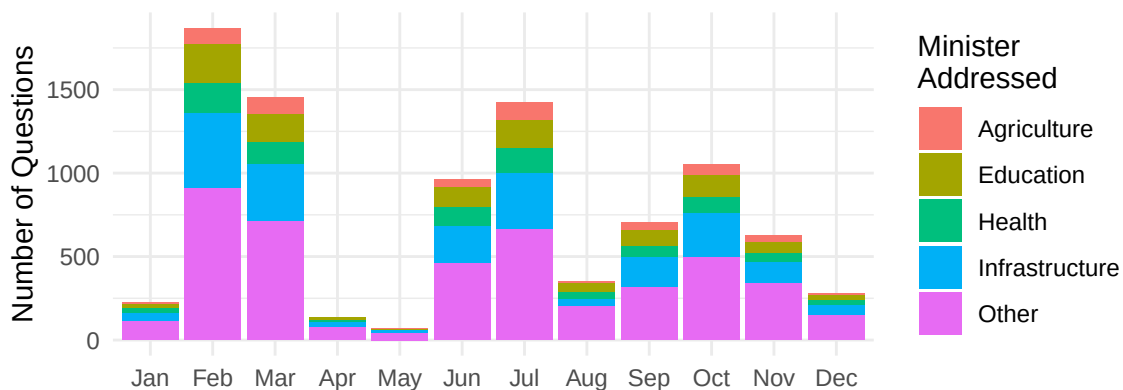
budget was applied to the remaining nine months of the year. Reforms in 2008 led to an adjusted calendar which was codified in the 2020 National Planning and Budgeting Act (Bwalya, Phiri, and Mpembamoto 2011). While the outline below draws on the 2020 Act, the annual cycle has been in place since 2008 (National Assembly of Zambia, 2017). The first deadline is mid-April, when each department (head) submits a budget policy paper. These papers contain a review budget performance and a list of proposed projects which have been appraised. The last Friday in April is also the date for budget proposals which can be submitted by the public. There are then public consultations on the budget policy paper in May. In the second Friday in June, each department's policy paper is submitted to cabinet for approval. Two weeks later at the end of June, Budget Performance Reports are due. By the first Friday of July, the Ministry of Finance and National planning publishes a green paper with estimates of expenditures by department. By the second Friday in August, the budget framework paper is due, and is reviewed throughout August. Formal budget debates happen in the fall. The Minister of Finance presents the budget on the last Friday of September. The budget speech includes a sectoral breakdown of revenue, borrowing, and expenditure and highlights the governments goals and major policies. It is accompanied by the Budget Yellowbook, a 1500-page book of itemized expenditures. Over the next month, the National Assembly debates each spending area of the budget. This culminates in the approval of the appropriations bill, usually in early December. Most years also have supplementary appropriation bills, usually in June and December (Interview L005, Parliamentary Staff).

Table 2.3: Annual Budget Cycle

Month	Budget Activities
Jan	Review of priorities based on progress reports and mid-term evaluations.
Feb	
Mar	
Apr	Department Heads submit Budget Policy Paper
May	Public Consultations
Jun	Department Policy Papers, Department Budget Performance Reports

Month	Budget Activities
Jul	Green Paper (first estimates)
Aug	Budget Framework Paper
Sep	Budget Speech
Oct	Budget Debates
Nov	Budget Debates
Dec	Appropriations Bill (Supplementary Appropriations in June/December)

By the time the budget is presented in parliament, it has undergone considerable refinement. If MPs want to have a project in their constituency brought forward, then they need to make their case much earlier in the process. I expect that MPs make their constituency needs known to ministers during the period in which ministers are preparing their proposals to be shared with the budget committee in April. I also expect that MPs would push to have their projects retained in the budget when public consultations are happening in July, before the Yellow Book is drafted. The figure below shows that this is the case, as parliamentary questions are concentrated in February/March and June/July.



Source: Hansard and Order Paper National Assembly, 2001–2024

Figure 2.5: Questions by Month and Sector

MPs petition most in February and March, when ministers are preparing the list of appraised projects and positions to be brought forward to the ministry. Questions are structured to elicit specific assurances around the progress of particular projects. For example, take this question from February 2013:

Mr Mpundu asked the Minister of Mines, Energy and Water Development when the Government would employ the following staff in the Water Affairs Department in Nchelenge District: (a) District Water Engineer; (b) Assistant District Water Engineer; (c) secretary; (d) driver; and (e) watchman.

In this case, the minister responded negatively, highlighting the limits on the budget process, stating:

“Recruitment for these positions cannot take place anytime soon since these positions...were not budgeted for...The ministry will, therefore, employ officers to the positions within the establishment once Treasury authority has been granted by the Ministry of Finance.”³

MPs also ask questions in June and July, when department heads are preparing their to submit final policy papers to the ministry of finance. MPs are using questions to ensure allocations and releases for preferred projects. For example, this question from June 2017 shows an MP attempting to have a road project in his constituency:

Mr Zimba (Chasefu) asked the Minister of Housing and Infrastructure Development: Why the tarring of Lundazi/Chama Road had stalled; whether the initial contract had been terminated; if so, who the new contractor was; when the works would resume; and what the time frame for the completion of the project was.⁴

Along with government assurances, questions also force bureaucratic attention to the issue, especially for projects which were announced but not implemented, such as the question above. Responses from ministers often include details on schedules and budgets that show that they have researched their response.

2.3.3 Data and Variables

2.3.3.1 Dependent variable: Question Sector

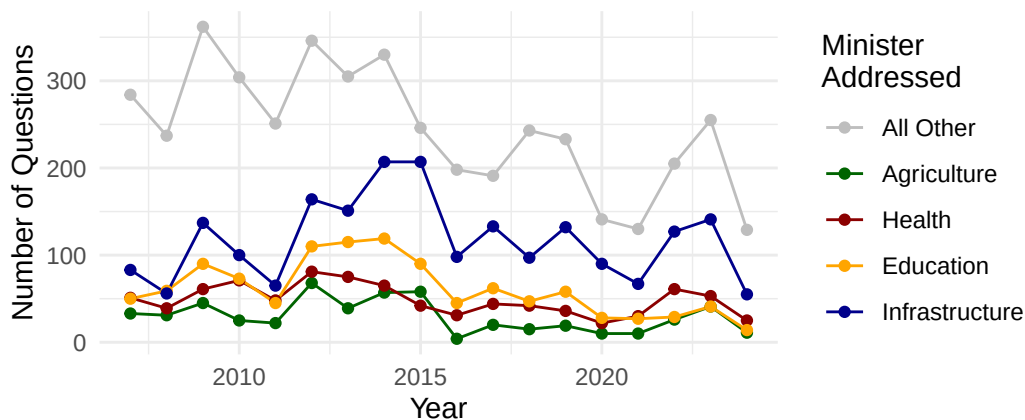
The main dependent variable is the *sector* of questions asked by MPs. I focus on four sectors: infrastructure, health, education, and agriculture. As described above, infrastructure

³Debates, February 28, 2013: <https://www.parliament.gov.zm/node/732>

⁴Debates, June 28, 2017: <https://www.parliament.gov.zm/node/6413>

is the most geographically particular and attributable sector. Education and health are less particular but still attributable, and agriculture is more particular but less attributable. Regardless of sector, most questions are demands for particular projects (clinic construction, classroom upgrades). However, social sector spending is still largely shared, as contracts in the social sector are usually announced and negotiated en masse, such as the construction of 650 health posts in 2017, or the recruitment of 30,000 teachers in 2021 (Kabir 2023). By contrast, road projects are planned and contracted individually (Manger, Cormier, and Winter 2026). To classify sector, I identify the minister to whom MPs address their questions, similar to (Martin 2011b). Wegmann and Evequoz (2019) examine Zambian PQs, but sample only 500 questions from a single year of debates, limiting the ability to draw inferences over time. I collect PQs available on the Zambian National Assembly Website using Hansard Transcripts going back to 2001. Since coverage is uneven, I also use order papers, which also list PQs and have better coverage. Questions are structured in a consistent many which allows for easy identification. I end up with 9362 questions, of which 562 are written and 8794 are oral.

Ministry portfolios shift over time, so I merge categories to create a harmonized list over time. *Infrastructure* is labelled Works & Supply, Infrastructure, Housing, etc. In other cases, housing is included in the Ministry of Local Government. Since the questions addressed to Local Government are almost always requests for local infrastructure spending, I treat Housing, Local Government, and Infrastructure all as infrastructure spending requests in my models.



Source: Hansard and Order Papers, National Assembly, 2006–2024

Figure 2.6: Questions by Year and Sector

Still, over half of the questions are still addressed to other ministers such as defense, home affairs, or culture. Questions addressed to other ministers are much more likely to be about national issues rather than local investment. For example:

- “Whether the Government has any plans to deploy military personnel along the Zambia-Democratic Republic of the Congo”⁵
- “How many tourists visited Zambia from 2010 to 2014, year by year”⁶
- “How many public service workers retired from January, 2014 to June, 2018; and how much money is owed to the retirees”⁷

Therefore, I treat questions addressed to other ministers as more likely to be about national issues.

2.3.3.2 MP Strength

I argue that strong MPs are more likely to make costly demands for particular, attributable benefits. However, the mobilizing capacity of an MP is largely unobservable. Therefore, I proxy strength by examining whether an MP was able to emerge victorious in competitive elections. Since citizens make simultaneous choices for parliamentary and presidential elections, it is easy to determine which MPs are locally popular compared to their parties. I create a variable *MP Strength*, which shows how much higher (lower) an MP's vote share is relative to their party. Figure 2.7 below shows the distribution of this variable, which is quite widely dispersed. It also highlights the NA% of cases in which the MP won their constituency though the party did not win the popular vote. One such MP explained “sometimes the electorate go beyond the party. They concentrate on individuals”. In his experience, this “sometimes” occurs when an opposition party has not won over the electorate, but they have recruited a ‘local son’ as their candidate. These MPs have considerable leverage. Data are from the electoral commission from Zambia, as well as archival research to track the results of over 100 by-elections.

⁵Debates, February 2, 2016: <https://www.parliament.gov.zm/node/4924>

⁶Debates, February 1, 2016: <https://www.parliament.gov.zm/node/4929>

⁷Debates, March 1, 2019: <https://www.parliament.gov.zm/node/7893>

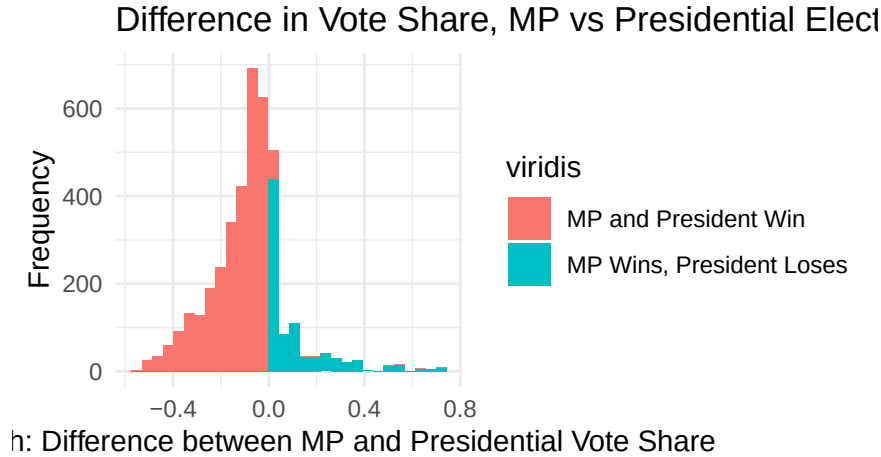


Figure 2.7: Difference between Ruling MP and Party Vote Share

2.3.3.3 Government Resources

To measure the government’s budget constraint, I examine the cost of borrowing and the level of resource rents, both of which change independently of Zambian political dynamics. Borrowing costs is measured by the 10-year US treasury bill rate, aggregated to the monthly average (or average over the period of the sitting, depending on the unit of analysis across models). For the period of default, I set interest rates to the maximum in the data (4.84) to reflect the tight budget constraint that the government was under.

2.3.3.4 Citizen Priorities

A key alternative to my theory is that MPs’ choice of question is driven by the needs and priorities of their constituents, such as rural MPs prioritizing agriculture. To control for this possibility, I create a variable measuring the level of citizen priority for each sector using Afrobarometer data.

Each round, Afrobarometer asks respondents “In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?” Enumerators code responses into categories including *infrastructure*, *health*, *education*, and *agriculture*⁸. For each sector, I create a variable indicating whether respondents included the sector as their first (1.0), second (0.5) or third (0.25) priority. I then create a province-level⁹ average for each sector. I use rounds 3-10 of the surveys (2003-2024), and use the most recent survey wave available

⁸I additionally code *transportation* as infrastructure, since demands for roads go to the minister for works.

⁹Afrobarometer surveys are stratified at the province (ADM1) level. With just ~1200 respondents per wave, it is unfeasible to create constituency-level measures.

for each year. This measure varies considerably both over time and between provinces Figure 2.8.

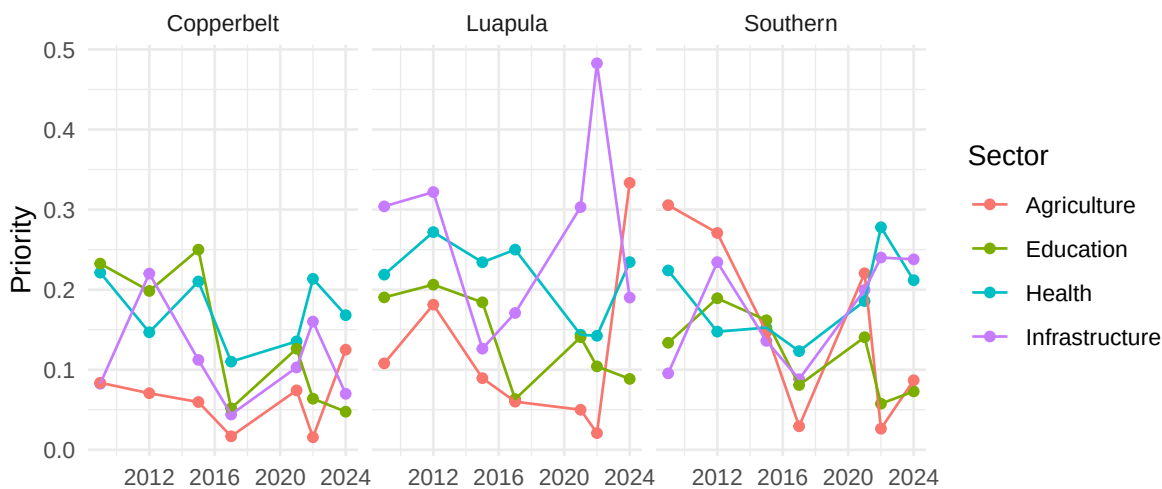


Figure 2.8: Voter Priorities in Selected Provinces

2.3.3.5 Other controls

I also collect information on whether an MP is part of the ruling party and if there is an election in the next twelve months (including surprise elections caused by deaths in office). To control for the level of development in each constituency, take the average nightlight luminosity from Chiovelli et al. (n.d.). While nightlight data has significant limitations, I use stabilized annual measures over large geographic areas. This provides a fair proxy for the level of development. Finally, I include an indicator for whether Zambia was in default (2021-2024).

2.4 Models

The key research question is the focus of legislator's attention. I use multiple modelling strategies to get at distinct aspects of MPs' choice to ask questions. First, I examine why MPs address questions to one minister over the other. Taking the question itself as my unit of analysis, use multinomial logit to model the choice of which minister to address. In the appendix, I show similar results using a classification forest.

However, this approach only examines questions that are asked, ignoring the many MPs who stay silent or question multiple ministers within a legislative session. To address this,

I shift the unit of analysis to the MP and sitting, examining when MPs choose to speak up about a particular issue. In the appendix, I show similar results for a count model which uses the total number of questions asked by an MP.

2.5 Results

Across specifications, I consistently find that strong MPs behave differently than their peers. They are more likely to ask for infrastructure in their constituencies, and when borrowing costs rise, they continue to request spending.

2.5.1 What sector? Multinomial Logit

First, I explicitly compare MPs' choice of which minister to address their question. In these models, the unit of analysis is the *question*, and the dependent variable is the minister to whom it is addressed. I use a multinomial logistic regression to predict the sector. To simplify the model, I drop the smallest category (agriculture) and merge health and education into a single category ("social").

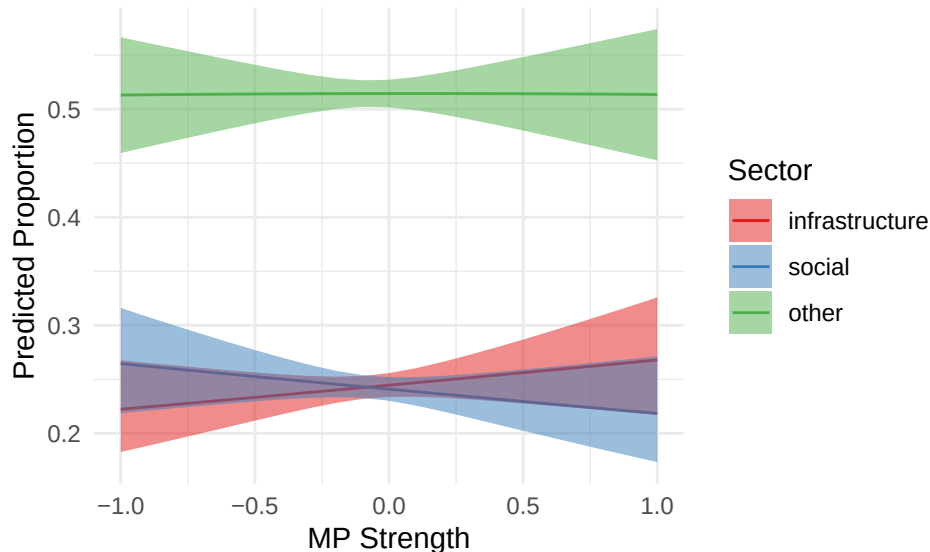


Figure 2.9: Predicted Sector across Electoral Margin (Multinomial Logit)

Results are best interpreted graphically. Figure 2.9 shows results across MP strength. Stronger MPs are more likely to address their questions to the minister of infrastructure, strongly supporting H1.

Table 2.4: Results: Multinomial logit

	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	other	social	other	social	other	social
MP Strength	-0.093 (0.138)	-0.19 (0.16)	0.33* (0.17)	0.36 (0.19)	0.71* (0.28)	1.14*** (0.22)
Interest Rates	0.272*** (0.036)	0.141*** (0.042)	0.129** (0.041)	0.084 (0.046)	0.244*** (0.038)	0.093* (0.043)
Strength x Interest					-0.34** (0.12)	-0.556*** (0.099)
Copper Price	0.0018*** (0.0005)	0.00268*** (0.00058)	0.00133* (0.00054)	0.00216*** (0.00063)	0.0019*** (0.0005)	0.00278*** (0.00058)
Ruling Member	-0.088 (0.067)	-0.33*** (0.08)	-0.244** (0.086)	-0.477*** (0.096)	-0.079 (0.067)	-0.32*** (0.08)
Nightlights	-0.007 (0.004)	-0.0078 (0.0048)	-0.0235*** (0.0051)	-0.0373*** (0.0056)	-0.0072 (0.0040)	-0.0079 (0.0048)
Num.Obs.	6587		6587		6587	
R2	0.009		0.056		0.010	
R2 Adj.	0.009		0.056		0.010	
AIC	13490.4		13443.8		13489.0	
BIC	13585.5		15522.4		13597.7	
RMSE	0.45		0.44		0.45	
Constituency FE	N	N	Y	Y	N	N

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

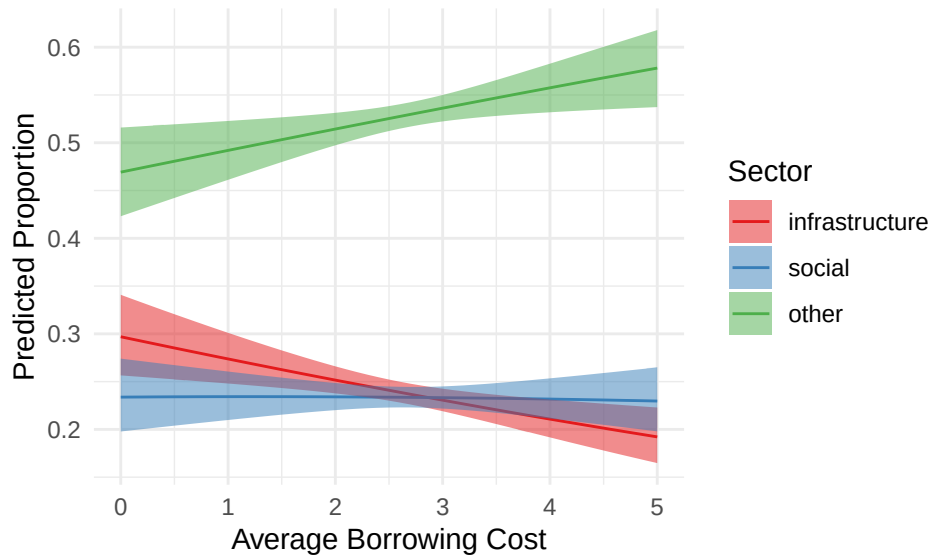


Figure 2.10: Predicted Sector across Interest Rates (Multinomial Logit)

Figure 2.10 shows predicted question across values of US interest rates. The results show that when borrowing costs are low, MPs ask more questions to the minister of infrastructure. In line with hypothesis 2a, When borrowing is expensive, questions shift to social sector.

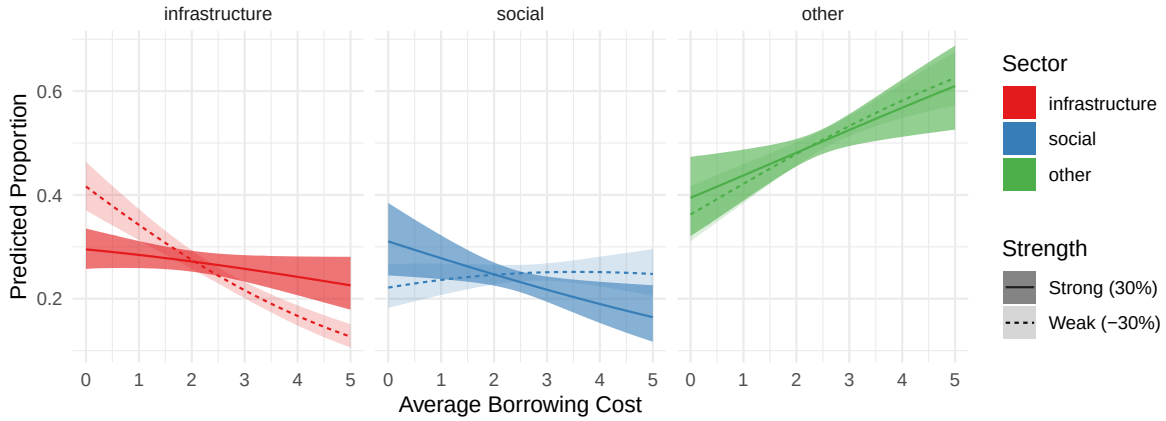


Figure 2.11: Predicted Sector across Interactive Effect (Multinomial Logit)

Finally, I test the interactive effect Figure 2.11. The results compare the predicted probabilities for a strong and weak MP, who score 30 points better or worse than their party's presidential candidate. When borrowing costs rise, strong MPs are less sensitive- the decrease in infrastructure questions primarily comes from weaker MPs. These weaker MPs seem to switch to more “other” questions when this occurs. This is in line with the expectations of hypothesis 2b.

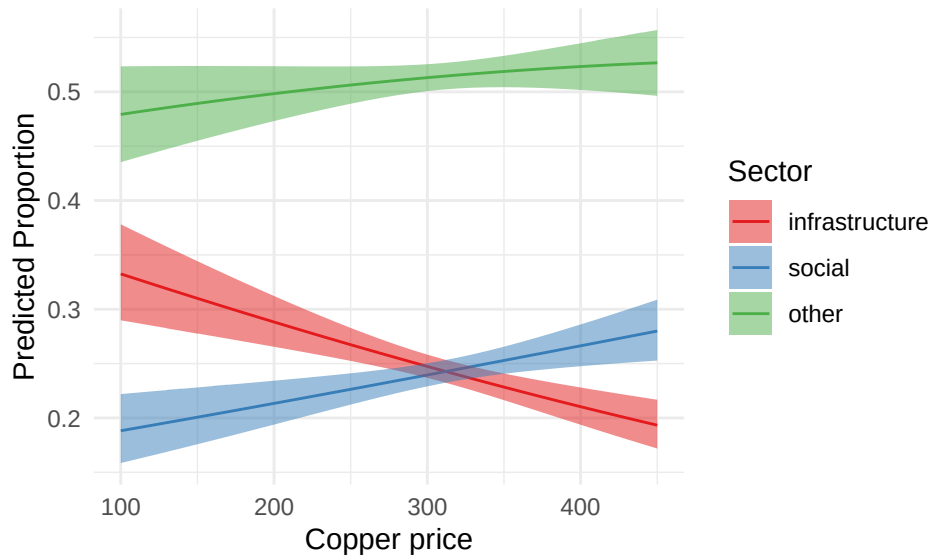


Figure 2.12: Predicted Sector across Copper Prices (Multinomial Logit)

Figure 2.12 shows that as copper prices rise, MPs flip the priority of infrastructure and social questions. This suggests that the pattern identified above is not just about budget constraint, but the pattern of loan-financed infrastructure. Unlike loans, which are tied to particular projects, copper revenues enter state coffers and can be used for recurrent spending.

2.5.2 Why speak up?

The models above show how MPs choice of question sector changes. However, it cannot model politicians' choice to ask questions at all. Therefore, I shift the unit of analysis to MP-sitting. I create a count variable indicating the number of questions that an MP asks a question in a given sitting. Since MPs are able to ask questions of multiple ministers, I run separate regressions for each sector, as well as for all questions. I model the likelihood of asking a question for sector j in constituency i in sitting t as:

$$E(\text{Questions}_{itj} \mid \mathbf{X}) = \exp \left(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Strength}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{Interest}_{t-1} + \beta_3 \text{Strength}_{it} \times \text{Interest}_{t-1} \right. \\ \left. + \beta_4 \text{Afrobarometer}_{itj} + \beta_5 \text{RulingMember}_{it} + \beta_6 \text{ElectionYear}_t \right. \\ \left. + \beta_7 \text{Nightlights}_{it} + \beta_8 \text{Default}_t + \theta_i \text{Constituency}_i \right)$$

Where *Strength* is the difference between an MP's vote share and their party president's share and *Interest* is the average of US bond rates over the previous 12 months. *Afrobarometer* is the degree to which citizen's in the MP's province prioritize this issue in the most recent survey round, *Ruling Member* is an indicator for if an MP is in the ruling party, *Election Year* is an indicator for if there is an election in the next 12 months, *Nightlights* is the average luminosity of the constituency that year, *Default* indicates if Zambia was in default that year, and *Constituency* indicates fixed effects for the MP's electoral constituency.

Table 2.5 shows the results across sectors, revealing that strong MPs ask for more, especially when borrowing costs are low. Across infrastructure, health, and education, strong MPs are more likely to raise questions (H1). When borrowing costs rise, strong MPs are less likely to ask for infrastructure (H2a), as well as education. The interaction term is only

Table 2.5: Results: Negative Binomial

	Infrastructure	Health	Education	Agriculture	All Other	Any Question
MP Strength	2.56** (0.83)	2.2* (1.1)	1.92* (0.97)	0.97 (1.15)	3.34*** (0.87)	3.06*** (0.78)
Interest Rates	-0.177*** (0.051)	-0.096 (0.078)	-0.209** (0.065)	0.061 (0.088)	-0.241*** (0.054)	-0.23*** (0.05)
Strength x Interest	-1.1*** (0.3)	-0.75 (0.45)	-0.71 (0.38)	-0.08 (0.43)	-1.22*** (0.33)	-1.2*** (0.3)
Citizen Priority	0.17 (0.47)	4.1* (1.6)	4.3*** (1.2)	1.4* (0.6)		
Ruling Member	-1.06*** (0.13)	-1.22*** (0.18)	-1.19*** (0.17)	-0.92*** (0.22)	-1.30*** (0.13)	-1.34*** (0.12)
Election Year	0.089 (0.106)	0.071 (0.131)	0.0096 (0.1222)	-0.19 (0.17)	-0.093 (0.086)	-0.132 (0.082)
Nightlights	-0.00082 (0.05882)	-0.13 (0.13)	-0.063 (0.085)	-0.27* (0.11)	-0.020 (0.051)	-0.012 (0.046)
AIC	6292.0	3522.8	3891.1	2499.2	9826.4	13874.9
BIC	7377.3	4608.1	4976.4	3584.5	10934.2	14982.7
RMSE	0.88	0.50	0.63	0.41	1.73	3.19
Num.Obs.	5528	5528	5528	5528	6610	6610
Constituency Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Standard errors clustered at the constituency level.

significant for infrastructure (H2b), affirming that this is the sector that MPs pursue when borrowing costs drop.

Citizen priorities are only a significant predictor of MP questions for health, education, and agriculture, but not infrastructure. This suggests that while MPs choice to focus on infrastructure is driven by their own strategic concerns rather than voter priorities.

Figure 2.13 plots the interactive effects, showing the marginal effect of MP strength across values of US Interest rates. Panel 1 shows that when rates are low, MP strength has a positive effect of the likelihood of requesting infrastructure, but a negative effect when rates are high. At high interest rates, strong MPs are less likely to speak up (though, as seen above, they are more likely to ask for infrastructure). For health, there is some interactive effect, but none for education. This aligns with my expectations and findings above, showing that when borrowing costs drop, strong MPs are more likely to ask questions, especially for infrastructure.

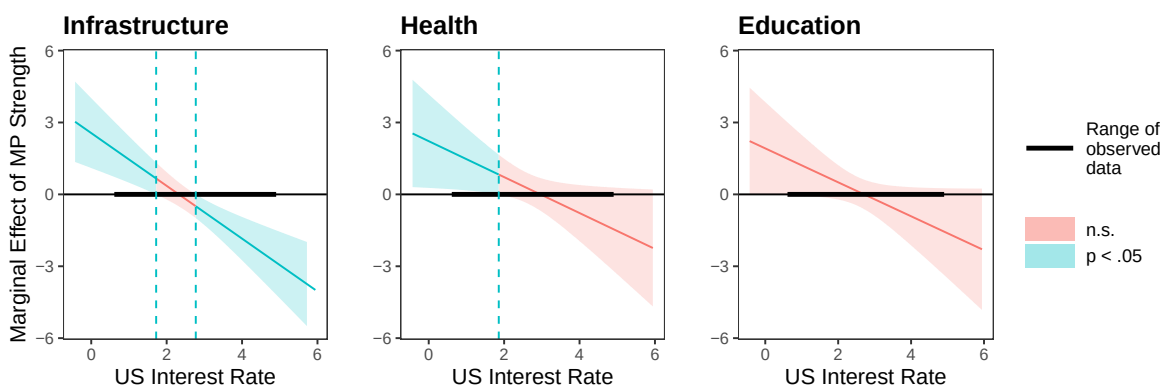


Figure 2.13: Effect of Interest Rates and MP Strength on Likelihood of Questions

2.5.3 Who gets assurance?

It is one thing to raise a question, but another to get an answer. When do MPs get favourable responses to their petitions? I now examine the responses that MPs receive from the government, showing that strong MPs are more likely to receive assurances from the state, even after addressing selection issues.

A key challenge in coding responses is that ministers rarely completely dismiss MP questions. Instead, they divert attention to areas where their government is taking action or affirming that MPs raise an important issue. This makes coding ministerial answers highly subjective.

However, the Zambian legislature provides a unique opportunity to clearly identify promises through the work of the Committee on Government Assurances. According to the standing orders, this committee examines “all contributions made by Cabinet Ministers and Deputy Ministers as recorded in the Daily Parliamentary Debates and extract[s] all statements which, in their view, amount to assurances”. The committee is hardworking, holding as many as 23 meetings a year to identify assurances and follow up with relevant civil servants.

For example, in December 2014, the MP from Lubansenshi asked the Minister of Works “when the Government would facilitate the construction of communication towers in [Lubansenshi Parliamentary Constituency]”. The minister responded:

Mr Speaker, the construction of communication towers in the mentioned areas of Lubansenshi Constituency will be done under Phase II of the programme, which is scheduled to commence in April, 2015 and end in 2016.

This was tracked as an assurance, and the committee notes in its report that the work was indeed complete.¹⁰ Assurances are not a guarantee of implementation, for example, the 2005 report notes the lack of progress made on an assurance from 1988. Nonetheless, as described above, MPs seek them out. One MP explained that even if the government doesn’t have the resources, having an assurances on the record means that when there is a “window” such as the government “acquiring a loan”, they can go to the minister or the bureaucrats and have priority [L109]. This statement affirms that MPs are sensitive to the governments borrowing choices. Bureaucrats affirmed the importance of assurances, with one from the Ministry of Infrastructure highlighting that clearing old assurances was a barrier to starting new projects [L107].

I download committee reports from 2006-2024, extract the assurance texts, and match them to questions. I find 2207 unique assurances, of which I match 399 directly to MP questions (assurances are made in many other contexts). This means that out of the 9,000 questions in my data, assurances are made in response to just under 5% of them.

¹⁰Despite assurances, many projects remain incomplete. I leave the analysis of assurance implementation to future research, maintaining my focus here on parliamentary speech.

Table 2.6: Bivariate Probit Selection Model, Base

Equation	Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(> z)	Sig
Selection	Sitting Months	0.134	0.022	6.164	0.000	***
Selection	Nightlights	-0.007	0.002	-3.229	0.001	**
Selection	Election Year	-0.175	0.050	-3.466	0.001	***
Selection	Ruling Member	-0.524	0.045	-11.734	0.000	***
Selection	Infrastructure Q	7.564	442.502	0.017	0.986	
Selection	MP Strength	0.070	0.120	0.585	0.558	
Selection	Interest Rates	0.041	0.019	2.210	0.027	*
Outcome	Nightlights	-0.003	0.006	-0.449	0.654	
Outcome	Election Year	-0.016	0.101	-0.155	0.877	
Outcome	Ruling Member	0.411	0.100	4.125	0.000	***
Outcome	Infrastructure Q	-0.962	0.669	-1.437	0.151	
Outcome	MP Strength	0.581	0.213	2.729	0.006	**
Outcome	Interest Rates	-0.027	0.036	-0.756	0.450	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

2.5.3.1 Analysis

An analysis of assurances must first take into account that MPs likelihood of receiving an assurance is conditional on asking a question in the first place. I use a selection model to estimate the likelihood that an MP asks a question and whether they receive an assurance. Since both outcomes are binary, two probit equations are estimated jointly with maximum likelihood.

To address the exclusion restriction, I need a first stage variable that impacts the likelihood that an MP asks a question but not whether they receive an assurance. I use the length of the parliamentary session, which varies between two and four months depending on the parliamentary calendar. Otherwise, I use the same set of regressors from above, with MP strength and interest rates as the key explanatory variables.

The results show that sitting length is a strong first-stage predictor. In the outcome equation, it is no surprise that ruling MPs are much more likely to receive assurances. However, ministers do not just play to their base: strong MPs are also more likely to get assurances Table 2.6. When I interact my two main regressors, I find a similar relationship see Appendix 2.8. I display the result graphically in Figure 2.14, which shows that the strong MP advantage in receiving assurances is positive only when interest rates are low. When rates are higher, there is no difference in the likelihood of assurance. Overall, MPs who

outcompete their parties are both more likely to ask questions and receive promises of state action, but this is driven by periods of low interest rates.

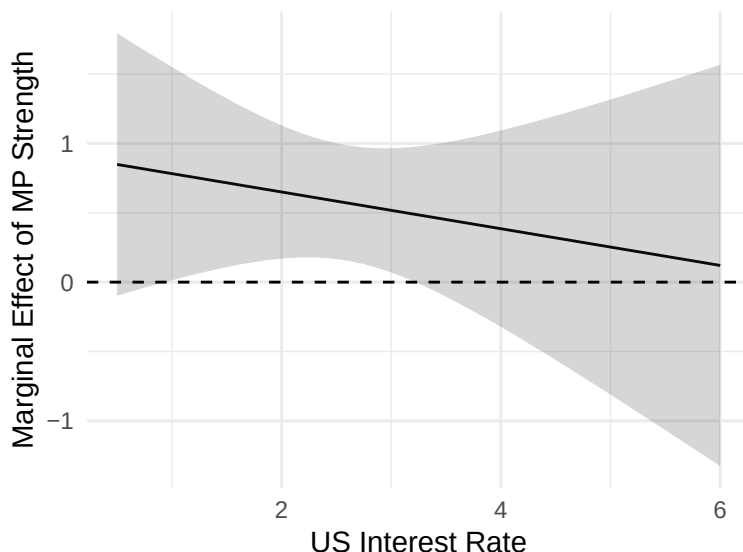


Figure 2.14: Interaction effect: Government Assurances

2.5.4 Robustness

In the appendix, I perform several additional checks. First, I complement the multinomial model with random forests to test for nonlinear effects in the outcomes. The results hold, and suggest a break point above US interest rates of 3%.

Additionally, I test whether the number of questions that an MP asks in sitting. My results hold when I shift the dependent variable to a binary indicator of MP question using a probit. All substantive results are identical in sign and significance. The only difference is that the interaction terms on health and education become significant.

2.6 Conclusion

In emerging democracies, what issues do local politicians focus their attention on solving? In this paper, I show that the issues that that Zambian parliamentarians bring to agenda do not correspond to citizen priorities but rather their own electoral calculus. MPs are concerned about delivering development to their constituents, but priorities are primarily shaped by their own need to seek party nomination and the government's budget constraint. MPs who need to be adopted by their party will focus things that can be attributed to the political

centre, while those who have cultivate a strong, independent base can demand infrastructure without worrying about party pressures. This effect is strongest when the government's budget constraint is weak- when Zambia is loaded, strong MPs demand infrastructure for their constituents. When budgets shrink, these questions dry up, but particularly from weaker MPs.

I test this theory with new data on Zambian parliamentary questions, MP electoral strength, and borrowing costs. The evidence largely confirms my theoretical expectations. First, strong MPs direct more of their questions towards infrastructure, but this decreases with rising borrowing costs. This suggests that MPs are making careful decisions about how to use their parliamentary questions and allocate them accordingly. However, rather than choosing between local infrastructure and social spending, it seems that MPs are deciding between local or national questions. Across models, the priority of citizens revealed in Afrobarometer surveys do not predict MPs choice to focus on infrastructure. Finally, there is good evidence that these questions matter, as MPs seek out government assurances of investment. Governments make assurances to strong MPs, especially when rates are low.

These questions open fruitful avenues for future research. First, future studies could expand the scope of the analysis, as parliamentary questions are a common format across Westminster systems. Borrowing costs may matter less in countries less exposed to global financial markets. Future research could also explore temporal dynamics, tracking the implementation of government assurances and changes in individual MP trajectories across electoral cycles.

These findings have implications for citizens, policymakers, and scholars. Citizens should be aware of the electoral constraints of their representatives, and may have more success in advocacy campaigns which recognize the constraints under which MPs operate. They might differently target MPs and national government depending on what they are fighting for. For scholars, broadening the scope of attention from executives to regional electoral bargains is crucial for understanding how political agendas are set. Similarly, going beyond aid-dependence to understanding government's borrowing options is crucial for understanding the pressure faced by leaders on the global periphery.

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2.7 Appendix

2.7.1 Alternative Modeling Strategies

I now run additional tests of my theory with alternative variables and modelling strategies.

2.7.2 Random Forest Classification

While the multinomial logit approach shows support for my theoretical expectations, the model quickly loses power with interactions or added controls. Moreover, the theory developed above suggests nonlinear patterns in the data. To model this, I turn to Random Forests, which are useful in identifying complex relationships (Funk, Paul, and Philips 2022; Jordan, Paul, and Philips 2023). Jordan, Paul, and Philips (2023) lay out a methodology for integrating machine learning models into inference-focused social science in which researchers specify a parametric model, check robustness with machine learning tools, then use insights from the ML model to update a model that allows more traditional inferential methods. This allows the researcher to take advantage of the flexibility of many ML models without resorting to “dredging” up empirical findings from data.

2.7.2.1 Results

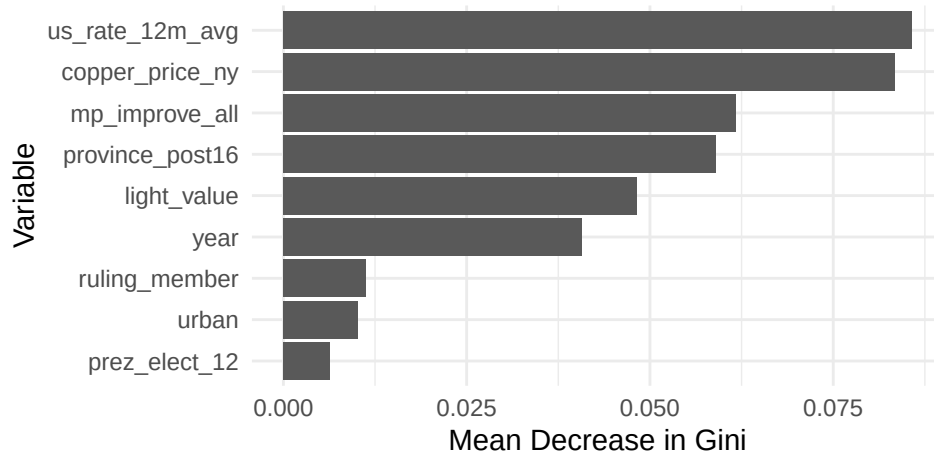


Figure 2.15: Variable Importance in Random Forest Model

Results are displayed with partial dependence plots, which show the impact of changing the value of explanatory variables. This approach fixes the value of a variable in the entire dataset (eg. `us_rate=2`), then calculates the mean and standard error of the predicted outcomes across all observations. The explanatory variable is then shifted, allowing for

plausible estimations across a curve. Note that these plots do not show confidence intervals, but simply a two-standard-error range.

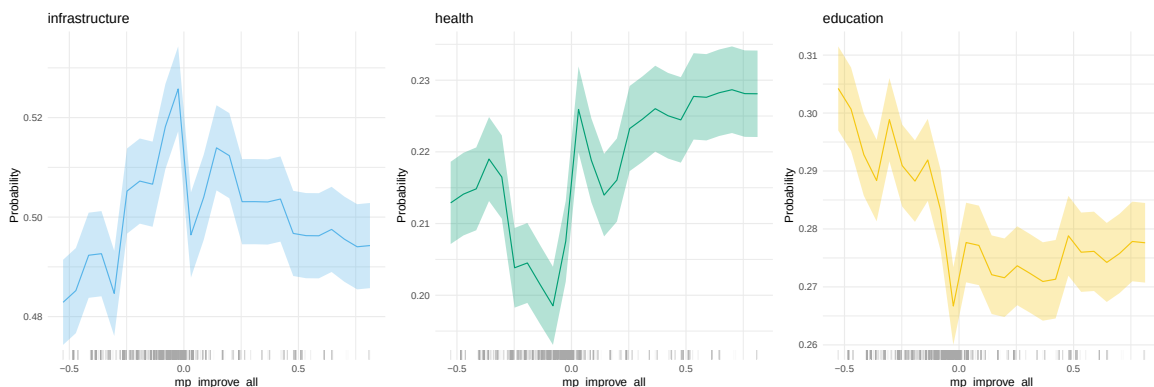


Figure 2.16: Predicted Question Sector across Ruling Margin

The partial dependency plots show a similar u-shaped dynamic, though it is less symmetric than the quadratic model. For infrastructure, it is still MPs from tight races who ask the most questions. However, ruling MPs ask more than stronghold opposition MPs. For Health and Education, the dynamic is flipped. Swing MPs ask the fewest questions, core MPs ask more, but stronghold opposition MPs ask the most. This corresponds to the amount of leverage each type of MP has against the executive.



Figure 2.17: Predicted Question Sector across Interest Rates

On US rates, results align with previous findings in direction. However, the forest suggests a nonlinear “breakpoint” style pattern (Funk, Paul, and Philips 2022). After US Rates hit 3%, MPs are far less likely to ask for infrastructure, and much more likely to ask for health spending. Education questions are much more variable. Overall, this supports the contention that as interest rates rise, politicians shift their demands toward domestically funded social sectors.

2.7.3 Copper Prices

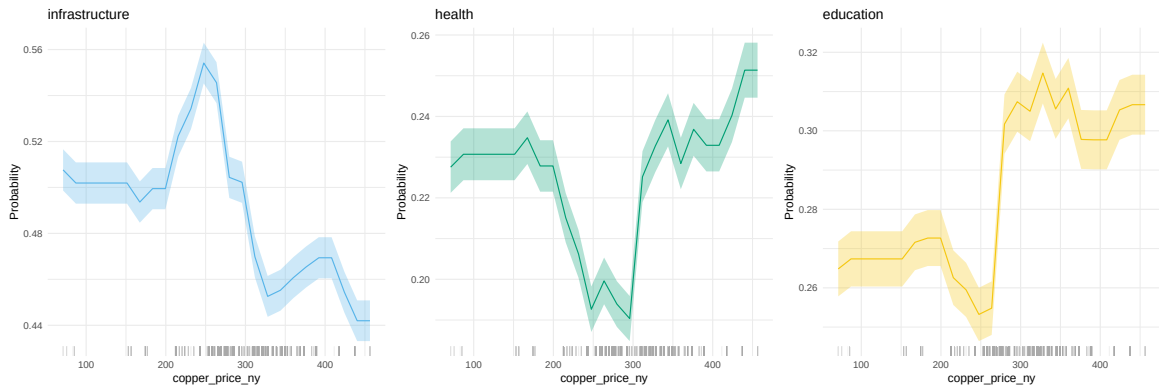


Figure 2.18: Predicted Question Sector across Copper Prices

In line with our theoretical expectations, when copper prices rise, MPs ask for less infrastructure and more for health and education. As noted in Figure 2.15 above, this is the most important predictor. At extremely low copper prices, MPs may shift back toward social sector spending, though there are fewer observations in this range.

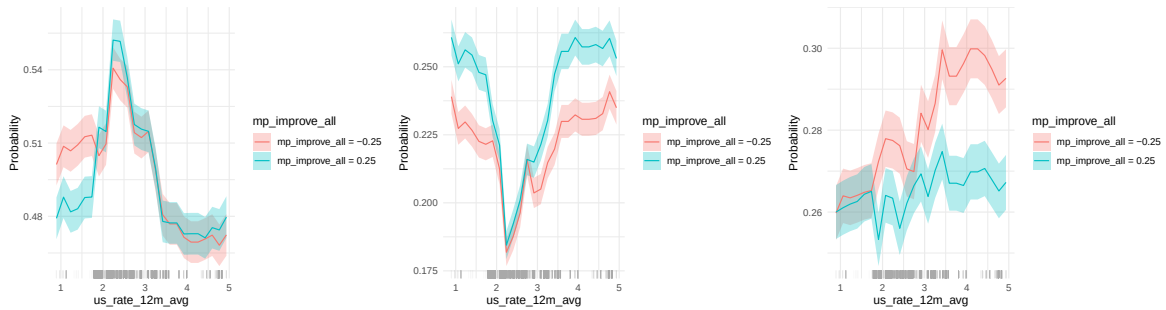


Figure 2.19: Predicted Question Sector across Ruling Margin and Interest Rates

Figure 2.19 shows the impact of interest rates on different MPs. Overall, there is little difference between the two groups.

Finally, I combine these two variables to create a response surface. In some cases, this kind of visualization can falsely highlight unlikely combinations, but the rug plots on the side suggest that observations occur across the full range of both values. These grids offer a kind of heat map of which politicians are prioritizing which issues. Infrastructure questions come from swing MPs when interest rates are low. Health questions come from the opposition, especially when rates are high. Finally, education questions come from ruling MPs.

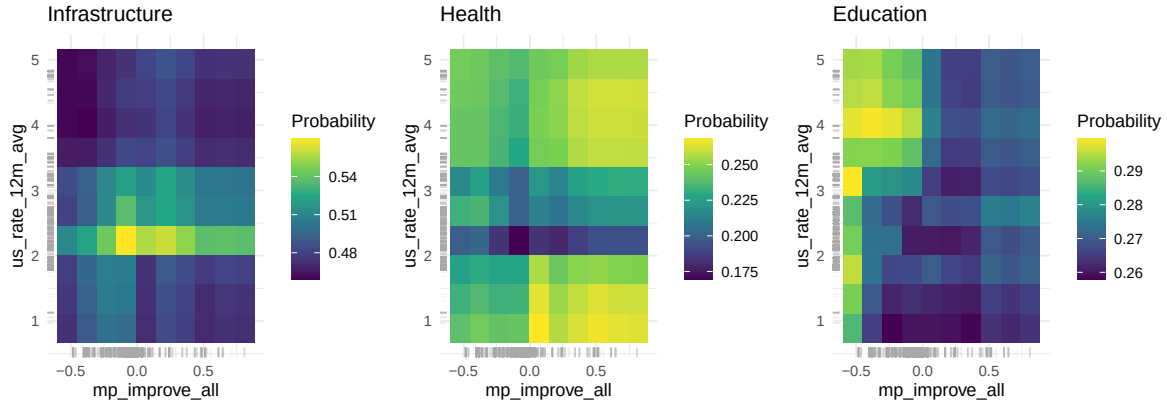


Figure 2.20: Heatmap: Predicted Question Sector across Ruling Margin and Interest Rates

Table 2.7: Results: Binary DV (All MPs)

	Infrastructure	Health	Education	Agriculture	All Other	Any Question
MP Strength	1.87*** (0.55)	1.34* (0.53)	1.36** (0.52)	0.62 (0.62)	1.14* (0.51)	1.17* (0.51)
Interest Rates	-0.098** (0.032)	-0.045 (0.037)	-0.091* (0.038)	0.024 (0.045)	-0.069* (0.032)	-0.060 (0.033)
Strength x Interest	-0.72*** (0.19)	-0.45* (0.20)	-0.46* (0.20)	-0.17 (0.23)	-0.41* (0.18)	-0.40* (0.19)
Citizen Priority	0.22 (0.29)	1.9* (0.8)	1.69** (0.61)	0.51 (0.31)		
Ruling Member	-0.548*** (0.075)	-0.676*** (0.089)	-0.573*** (0.093)	-0.59*** (0.11)	-0.665*** (0.078)	-0.72*** (0.08)
Election Year	0.0096 (0.0571)	0.034 (0.068)	0.030 (0.067)	-0.031 (0.083)	-0.093* (0.046)	-0.131** (0.044)
Nightlights	0.029 (0.032)	-0.025 (0.062)	-0.003 (0.036)	-0.132* (0.056)	0.024 (0.032)	0.038 (0.036)
AIC	4051.0	2657.3	2826.0	2005.8	5514.7	6369.5
BIC	5129.7	3735.9	3904.6	3084.4	6615.7	7470.5
Num.Obs.	5528	5528	5528	5528	6610	6610
RMSE	0.32	0.24	0.25	0.20	0.35	0.39
Constituency Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

2.7.4 Binary Models

Table 2.7 shows the results for an indicator variable for MPs asking *any* number of questions to the relevant minister. Findings are substantively similar to the main table. Interactive effects appear significant for three sectors, but the coefficient on infrastructure is much larger and more precisely estimated. This aligns with the evidence that infrastructure is the primary change in MP speech.

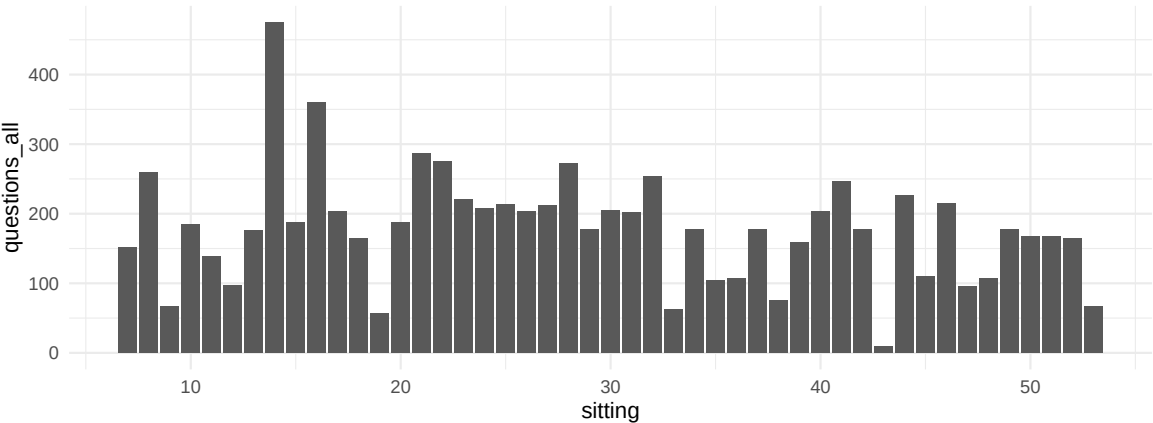


Figure 2.21: Number of Questions per Sitting

Does this vary by constituency? This shows the dependent variable by unit (constituency_sitting). Not every MP asks a question every constituency, but that is expected.

2.7.5 Assurances Interaction Table

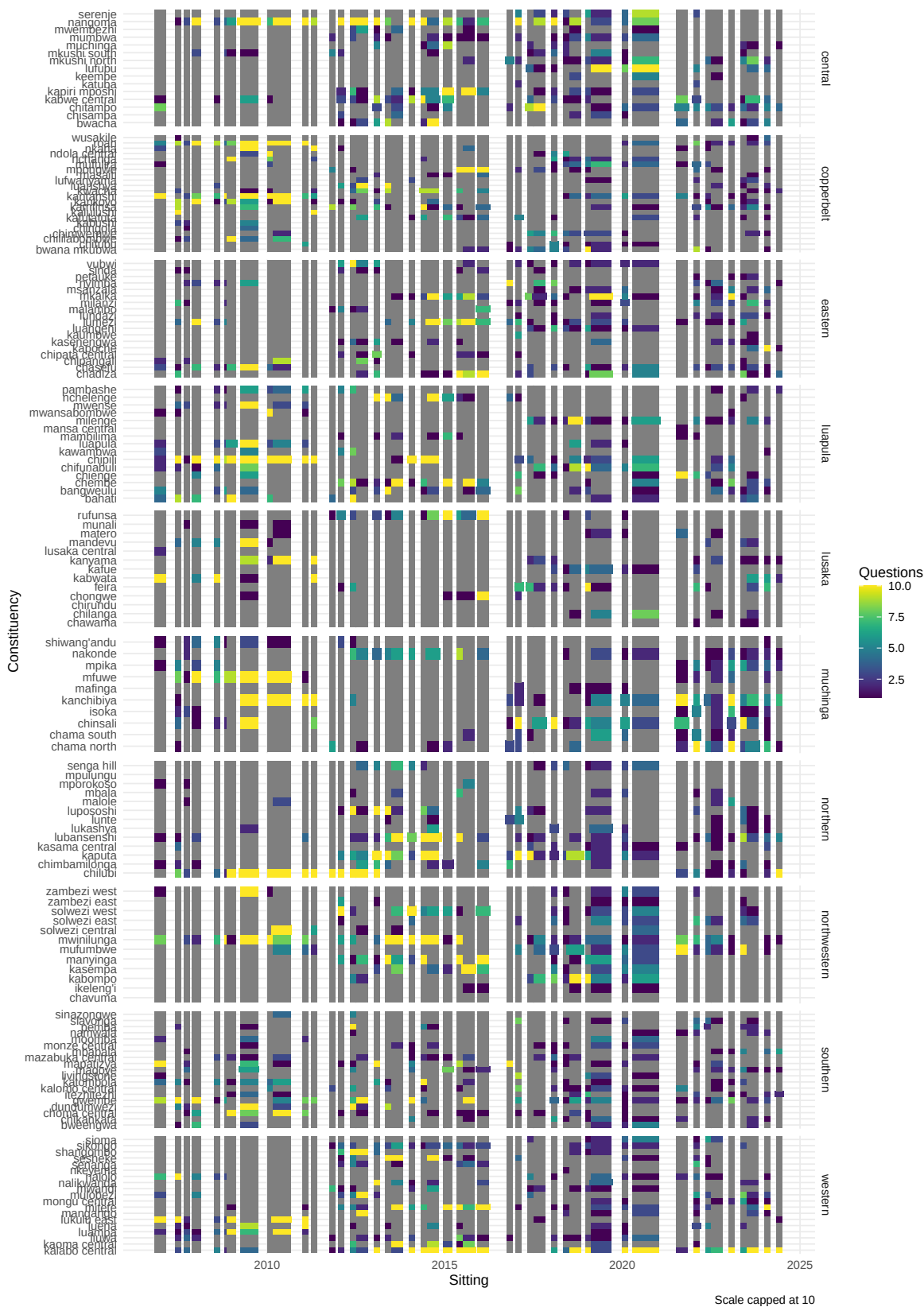


Figure 2.22: Number of Questions per Constituency and Sitting

Table 2.8: Bivariate Probit Selection Model, Interacted

Equation	Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(> z)	Sig
Selection	Sitting Months	0.133	0.022	6.104	0.000	***
Selection	Nightlights	-0.007	0.002	-3.226	0.001	**
Selection	Election Year	-0.175	0.050	-3.476	0.001	***
Selection	Ruling Member	-0.523	0.045	-11.690	0.000	***
Selection	Infrastructure Q	7.560	439.777	0.017	0.986	
Selection	MP Strength	0.149	0.358	0.416	0.677	
Selection	Interest Rates	0.038	0.022	1.786	0.074	
Selection	Strength x Interest	-0.029	0.120	-0.239	0.811	
Selection	Nightlights	-0.002	0.006	-0.364	0.716	
Selection	Election Year	-0.013	0.099	-0.131	0.896	
Selection	Ruling Member	0.418	0.098	4.266	0.000	***
Selection	Infrastructure Q	-1.105	0.650	-1.699	0.089	
Selection	MP Strength	0.915	0.578	1.583	0.113	
Selection	Interest Rates	-0.040	0.040	-0.988	0.323	
Selection	Strength x Interest	-0.132	0.207	-0.638	0.523	

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Chapter 3

Sharing a Shrinking Pie: Public Spending and Electoral Coalitions in the Global Financial Periphery

How do political leaders hold together coalitions when they are financially constrained? A vast literature on distributive politics records conflicting findings on whether leaders use resources to reward supporters or make inroads with the unconvinced. This paper shows that in developing democracies, politicians build coalitions across identities by using varying their sectoral and geographic strategies. The type of investment depends on whether leaders are more vulnerable to losing their candidates or voters. Leaders build infrastructure in places where they need to keep local elites onside and spend on public employment in places where they need to keep voters loyal to the political centre. However, the ability to fund these transfers changes with the cost of taking on new debt. As borrowing costs rise, governments protect spending among key elites. I find empirical support for this theory on constituency-level infrastructure and wage budgets in Zambia and Kenya. This study highlights the importance of contextualizing national coalition building within the global political economy.

3.1 Introduction

[Some say that the president] is like a step-father who says “I will give my biological children whatever they want, but this step-son, it is just to be given leftovers.”

Which is not true...we MPs are all one, serving the same government...No, I can’t complain I’m a stepson.

- *Hon. Dr. Aaron Mwanza, Opposition MP*¹

Dr. Mwanza had good reason to claim that the president wasn’t playing favourites. Despite his status as an opposition member of parliament (MP), he had just signed an agreement to build new police housing and headquarters in his constituency. But this sunny sentiment wasn’t shared by his peers. Mwanza’s colleague Mulenga Fube told me that his repeated demands for road repairs fell on deaf ears, and that newly recruited teachers in his constituency were “openly partisan” government supporters. Why were these two opposition MPs treated so differently? Moreover, why would Zambia’s government— under massive pressure to finalize its debt restructuring— sign off on a deal for a big capital project in an opposition constituency?

Answering this question requires developing an understanding of how executives use different types of spending strategically to maintain political coalitions. When tight budget constraint threatens the distribution of spoils, leaders direct attributable capital spending to key electoral allies while using wage spending to solidify loyalty among their voters.

This dynamic occurs within two large contextual shifts in the political economy of developing countries. First, although democracy’s progress has been uneven, competitive elections continue to be a major feature of many countries’ politics, forcing leaders to craft coalitions to stay in power (Boone 2024; Weghorst and Lindberg 2013; Arriola 2009). Executives win elections by balancing resource allocation across sectors and regions. Second, access to international financial markets has dramatically shifted the menu of options available to developing countries (Mosley, Paniagua, and Wibbels 2020; Cormier 2024; Zeitz 2024; Wibbels 2006; Manger, Mihalyi, et al. 2025). This “age of choice” (Greenhill, Prizzon, and Rogerson 2016) enables discretionary spending, but risks a painful squeeze when global markets dry up. When borrowing costs rise, governments face a tighter budget constraint

¹Interview, Lusaka 2025

and real political threats. This forces them to act strategically, using spending to prioritize political survival over ideological or in-group provision.

To explain this, I consider the degree to which government spending is locally attributed and politicians' strength: their ability to amass votes apart from their party label. Public good provision is a major boost to MPs' popularity, decreasing the resources they have to invest into re-election. By contrast, public sector employment is more likely to be attributed to the political center, the president or party. MPs vary in their strength- degree of bargaining power they hold against the centre- depending on whether voters are more loyal to local or national elites. Some MPs can credibly threaten to run for other parties or as independents. By contrast, other MPs will not be re-elected without being nominated and supported by their party, limiting their ability to demand from the centre (Choi 2018). Leaders use infrastructure to win elite support, preventing defection and wooing MPs from rival parties. Conversely, where parties can connect directly with voters, governments will instead spend on public employment which directly increases support for the executive.

I test this theory with new data on subnational budgets for infrastructure and emoluments in Zambia (2006-2020) and Kenya (2013-2021). I find strong support for my argument: when rising borrowing costs limit government finances, infrastructure spending shifts to places with strong MPs and salary spending to loyal voters. These results are robust to a variety of alternative measures of the cost of debt. Falling copper prices also leads to shifts to protect strong MPs. These findings are important for understanding the implications of financial structural dependence on domestic policy priorities. Zambia's history of competitive elections and embrace of external debt make it an ideal case for testing this argument, while Kenya's long history of ethnic mobilization provides a critical case from which to assess generalizability.

This paper contributes to understanding the puzzling heterogeneity in studies of distributive politics, showing how pork and patronage work are attributed in different places. I also contextualize domestic political settlements within the international financial system, showing how shifts in policy choices in the Global North constrain the ability of developing countries to realize their political agendas. Finally, I contribute new data on Zambian subnational spending across different types of goods, a valuable resource to test further hypotheses.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a review of the literature on discretionary spending in developing countries. The third develops a theory of strategic sectoral budgeting and presents hypotheses. Section four describes the context of debt and democracy in Zambia and Kenya. Section five outlines data and empirical approach. Section six presents results from quantitative tests of these hypotheses. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for scholars, citizens, and policymakers.

3.2 Background: Debt and Distributive Politics in the Developing World

Politicians in the developing world win elections by convincing voters that they can *deliver development* (Bleck and Van De Walle 2013). Consequently, the questions of distributive politics- who gets what, when, and why (Lasswell 1936) - are at the centre of electoral competition. Unlike in developed countries, where distributive conflicts are assumed to be rooted in class cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Meltzer and Richard 1981), political movements in the developing world evolved around national goals like independence and multiparty democracy. Without cross-cutting material cleavages, politicians mobilize voters on geographic terms (see Bates 1981; Boone 2024; Posner 2005; Hallink and Siachiwena 2023).

In many cases, ethnic ties serve as a shortcut for coordinating regional interests. However, ethnic pleas are rarely sufficient to win elections. In recent elections across Africa, less than half of voters had the opportunity to vote for a co-ethnic executive (Horowitz 2019). Moreover, winner-take-all electoral institutions limit regional parties. To win office, a leader must forge a complicated mix of loyal followers, opportunists, and rivals from across the country into a winning coalition. Party institutionalization remains weak as coalitions form and dissolve around leaders' attempts to hold groupings together and concentrate power between elections.²

Allocation strategies may vary across voter types, groups, and electoral cycles (Golden and Min 2013). Theoretical work comparing voter targeting are based on models by Dixit

²Data from V-Dem show that across Africa, party institutionalization has stagnated since the 1990s.

and Londregan (1996), contrasting cases where parties target core or swing voters. In the original model, parties primarily target swing voters, but may switch to core voters (machine politics) if the informational advantage allows them to significantly reduce wasted spending. There is evidence that developing country governments target “weakly opposed” voters (Stokes 2005), though they may leverage loyalists as a vote bank when they need to rely on intermediaries (Stokes et al. 2013).

Empirical results are mixed. A large literature points to in-group favoritism as a primary driver of geographical allocation for infrastructure (Ejdemyr, Kramon, and A. L. Robinson 2018; Harris and Posner 2019; Malik 2021; Stokes et al. 2013), aid projects (Bomprezzi et al. 2024), and agricultural inputs (Mason, Jayne, and van de Walle 2017). However, other studies point to the importance of winning over unaligned electoral constituencies (Schady 2000; Gottlieb et al. 2019). Further work highlights heterogeneity across types of goods (Albertus 2013) party (Briggs 2021), or regime (Burgess et al. 2015). In many works, the existence of organized blocs and unaligned brokers is crucial turning state funds into votes (Stokes et al. 2013; Gottlieb et al. 2019, @baldwin2014). In a widely cited study, Kramon and Posner (2013) use household survey data as a proxy for government spending, finding that patterns of ethnic favoritism vary unsystematically across countries and sectors. They conclude that generalizations are largely futile without a full picture of spending. How do we reconcile these competing stories? Different kinds of spending do different political work, benefiting different constellations of politicians and voters. Leaders follow different strategies depending on whether they risk alienating voters or elites.

3.2.0.1 Debt and the Budget Constraint

Optimal allocation strategies vary with the pool of funds available. The existing literature on distributive politics, designed around the choices faced by developed-country governments, assume that a governments’ ability to fund distributive transfers is constant. By relying on broad tax bases and deep domestic markets, developed country budgets are essentially redistributing resources within the country over time. By contrast, developing countries- by definition- have limited access to additional capital. In the last twenty years, these countries have tapped external finance and developed domestic markets to fund government priorities.

However, the accessibility of this finance is driven by global factors rather than country-specific conditions (Wibbels 2006; Mosley, Paniagua, and Wibbels 2020; Rey 2015; Cormier and Naqvi 2023). Global investors' appetite for risky assets from developing countries depends on the returns to safer assets like US treasuries (Miranda-Agrippino and Rey 2020; Rey 2015). For countries with shallow capacity for taxation or domestic borrowing, global capital cycles determine the cost of borrowing. This in turn, shapes how much money the government can spend on other priorities.

Rising costs limit the ability to undertake new debt-financed projects and shrink resources available for wage growth. Higher interest rates also increase the size of debt service, which is typically the second largest category of spending after emoluments³. When debt costs rise, everything else gets squeezed. This shifts the distributive calculus, making leaders more sensitive to how their spending translates into political support.

3.3 Theoretical Approach

How do political leaders hold together a ruling coalition in the context of debt dependence? The executive can rely on the fact that local politicians are vulnerable. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, just over half of sitting legislators contest, and less than a third are re-elected (Bowles and Marx 2022). In the multiparty era, voters are eager to oust politicians who are not delivering (Bleck and Van De Walle 2013; Seekings 2022). In electoral strongholds, leaders can offer politicians the security of a party nomination. Outside of strongholds, they must offer concrete benefits that voters attribute to the local politician.

When debt costs squeeze fiscal space, politicians allocate resources to loyal *voters* and strong *politicians*. In electoral strongholds, leaders rely on spending that voters attribute to the political center to maintain voter loyalty while limiting the emergence of rivals. By contrast, where MPs can credibly threaten to leave the coalition, leaders concede geographically particular investments that boost the popularity of local politicians.

³Just before default in 2022, Ghana's debt servicing costs exceeded its total wage bill

3.3.0.1 Keeping Voters Loyal

Most parties emerge from a particular region, enjoying hegemony over on a voter base that will never to an opposing party. Leaders can exploit these voters, extracting extra because of their lack of alternatives (Kasara 2007). In particular, parties control nomination in these areas, selecting who will run under the party banner (Bleck and Van De Walle 2013; Choi 2018). This leaves sitting MPs vulnerable to the party hierarchy. Take the example of Joseph Munsanje, who was ousted from the party nomination after the party brought in an external candidate:

“When we were doing the primaries and the like, I won...then some provincial officials and a few district officials decided to replace me. And the constituency chairman and his team...supported me that I should run as an independent. And then they had to bring actually the national management people, had to come to campaign to help that guy. To get him across the line. So that is the only way they managed to beat me” [L008].

Despite his attempts to run as an independent, voters aligned with the candidate of the dominant local party, and Munsanje had to wait until 2021 to be granted nomination and win office.

While parties may enjoy hegemony over *nomination*, they are not guaranteed electoral victory. Local politicians with strong grassroots support can successfully run as independent candidates, beating the party’s nominee. For example, Menyani Zulu cut his political teeth mobilizing youth in the Copperbelt for Michael Sata, and was sent to China to learn rural organizing. But when he returned to his home in Eastern province, he was not selected for the PF ticket. However, he still contested elections, winning in his second attempt in 2021. He attributes his victory to his history in the village and the reputation of his trucking company [L009].

Party leaders also fear the emergence of fellow party members becoming popular and rivaling their claim to represent the region. They must walk a fine line, building support for the party rather than its local representative. To achieve this, they must spend in ways that strengthen voters’ links to the party rather than individual candidates.

3.3.0.2 Winning Strong Politicians

By contrast, outside of strongholds, leaders need to recruit and reward politicians who can deliver votes in competitive elections. These local politicians can rely on material, symbolic, and organizational strength to deliver electoral victory (Adebanwi and Orock 2021; Khan 2017; Riedl 2016). However, these strong politicians can exit parties, defecting into new alliances and bringing voters with them. Even when floor crossing is banned, it is common for politicians to vote with other parties. Often, these elites are bought with high level positions (Arriola 2009). However, these MPs also need to be re-elected, to do so, they must deliver benefits to their constituents that maintain their personal popularity. Importantly, the current party affiliation of these MPs is irrelevant, they are being won over to a future political coalition.⁴

These MPs typically push for spending that boosts their personal popularity (see previous chapter). MPs who can credibly threaten to leave the coalition are more likely to have their requests granted. For example, in the 2006 presidential election in Vubwi constituency, the MMD lost by 5%. However, local MMD candidate Eustakio Kazonga won by a margin of 10%. He reflected: “When I was competing for the first time in 2006, my president lost. But I won. So, what it is that, sometimes the electorate go beyond the party, right? They concentrate on individuals” [L001]. Unlike Munsanje, who needed party backing to win, Kazonga won on his own resources. “[Voters] didn’t fully believe in the MMD. But they took me as an individual”. This paid off— In 2012, Vubwi was separated into its own district, a move that brought significant investment for more administrative, housing, and police infrastructure [L104].

Executives manage their coalition through a dual strategy: where they risk alienating citizens’ allegiance to the party, they must keep voters loyal, but where citizens’ allegiance is to local politicians, they must keep these elites in the fold. Since these MPs have leverage, they can extract concessions from the executive. By contrast, in districts where voters will follow the party no matter what, MPs have little claim to make demands from the centre. This is why politicians like Mwanza and Kazonga could win support for spending in their constituencies.

⁴Strong opposition MPs may be the cheapest to win over, as voters in these constituencies can expect more from joining the ruling coalition. Strong ruling MPs must defend the record of their own party performance under status quo.

3.3.1 Sectors & Attribution

Leaders balance these twin pressures by using different types of spending to maximize their political payoff. I consider how different types of spending vary in the degree to which it is geographically targeted to particular places and whether local MPs can claim credit for successful implementation. These dimensions are mapped below:

Table 3.1: Sectors by Particularity and Attribution

	Broad Attribution	Local Attribution
Geographically Particular	Routine Maintenance	Reward politicians: Roads, bridges, buildings, boreholes
Nationally Shared	Reward voters: Teacher Salaries, Public Jobs, Health Supplies	CDF; Agricultural Inputs

First, spending varies in its geographic particularity, the degree to which the spatial spillovers of investment are limited. Providing local public goods like roads or office blocks benefit a single area. These types of investments typically involve significant discretion, and so are most often used in studies of distributive politics (Robin Harding 2015; Briggs 2021; Díaz Cayeros, Magaloni Kerpel, and Estevez 2016). Nationally shared benefits require that the government divide spending across a large number of districts. For example, recruitment of staff for schools and clinics happens at the national level. Constituency Development Funds often involve local discretion, but the choice to fund them is national, and funds are split across districts. Many parties adopt this type of agrarian welfare regime, focussing on mass provision of basic services, agricultural inputs, and land (Mkandawire 2016; Boone 2024).

Spending also varies in the degree to which a local MP can claim credit for successful delivery. Cutting the ribbon on a new bridge does much more for an MP's popularity than ongoing spending for teacher salaries. Voters credit politicians for spending which is contingent and visible, such infrastructure or agricultural inputs (Bowles and Marx 2022). By contrast, MPs cannot claim credit for public sector salaries or social entitlements, which are the

remit of the political centre. Of course, presidents do take credit for local infrastructure provision, flying in to be present at opening ceremonies for highways and hospitals. I focus here on the degree to which local politicians can also claim credit.

These different types of spending have different costs and benefits, and therefore I expect to find distinct allocation strategies between sectors. Executives enjoy significant discretion over the location of capital investments, but this kind of spending gives both the president and local politicians a strong boost. By contrast, the party can take full credit for shared spending, but this cannot be targeted to particular places. Local legislators prefer ‘pork’ projects that bring lucrative contracts and infrastructure to their constituencies. By contrast, national programs such as service delivery in health and education boost the popularity of the political centre. Examining fifteen years of MP speeches reveals this pattern to hold in the Zambian parliament (Winter 2025). This approach builds off Albertus (2013) in suggesting that different types of spending might be allocated differently. However, where Albertus considers the *durability* of different spending, I consider the attribution of different types of spending.

3.3.1.1 Sectors

Infrastructure spending is large, durable and hard to renege on. It provides ample opportunities for strategic contracts and kickbacks. Most importantly, it boosts the popularity of the local MP, decreasing the costs they pay for re-election. An extensive literature discusses the politicized allocation of capital projects in developing countries (Robin Harding 2015; Blimpo, R. Harding, and Wantchekon 2013; Burgess et al. 2015; Bompreszi et al. 2024).

By contrast, wage spending is far less explored, and studies typically examine the impact of austerity on civil service as a whole (eg. Madimutsa et al. 2021). The public sector wage bill is typically the largest single spending item for states. These jobs are attributed to the centre, where hiring decisions are made. Public appointments may function as incentives or rewards for party loyalists, and may also act as inducements for rivals not to run (Bob-Milliar 2012). J. Robinson and Verdier (2013) spell out additional logic, highlighting that “a job is a credible, selective, and reversible method of redistribution, which ties the continuation utility of a voter to the political success of a particular politician” (p. 261). Their model suggests that patronage is more effective when productivity is low and political stakes are

high, which is the case across most of Sub-Saharan Africa. Wages are less costly to leaders because they are reversible, delay-able, and more generally subject to ongoing discretion. Where parties are seeking to keep the loyalty of voters, rather than elites, wage spending is an optimal tool.

H1: Executives will allocate infrastructure funding where they risk exit by strong politicians.

H2: Executives will allocate wage spending where they risk losing loyal voters.

3.3.2 Debt

If the same dollar can be used to appease loyal voters with wages/service or win over elite with infrastructure, which will a leader choose? The cost of debt changes the attractiveness and flexibility of each of these investments. When debt costs rise, there will be cuts, but these won't be the same across goods. Manger, Cormier, and Winter (2026) explore the comparative statics of allocation under a multi-period model which includes a shifting budget constraint. When the cost of borrowing rises, parties shift resources to districts with higher marginal utility and/or swing density. I follow a similar argument, but highlight the importance of elites to the leader's coalition and differences across sectors.

I expect that my hypothesized strategies will drive outcomes when budgets are most pressed. Shrinking fiscal space will force leaders to be more strategic with their funds, shifting allocation in such a way as to maximize political impact. However, this too can vary across sectors. While money is technically fungible, there are several reasons to expect rising borrowing costs to have differential impacts across types of spending. Governments think about infrastructure in the context of debt, because borrowing is often explicitly tied to financing particular projects. Inasmuch as borrowing costs constrain the governments budget, it is through cuts to infrastructure spending. By contrast, spending on emoluments is much less lumpy, and is typically a large part of the general operations of government, which are assumed to be funded by the regular government revenues. Wage spending is also more flexible: governments can reverse, delay, or freeze wage spending more easily than they can back out of investment contracts. While wage spending typically rises in nominal terms, inflation-based erosion is common. Moreover, public sector salary arrears are very common across the developing world. Combined with high inflation, they represent an opportunity

to borrow at negative real rates. This discretion can be useful for smoothing cash flow and responding to high formal borrowing costs.

My interviewees also suggested a switching effect, where lower infrastructure leads governments to “compensate” with local hiring. As one interviewee explained, the Zambian government’s choice to recruit 30,000 teachers while cancelling numerous infrastructure projects was because: “[President] Hichilema knew that he had to take with one hand, so he had to give with the other” [L101]. For aid-dependent countries, donors may also play a role. High rates make concessional finance more attractive, which can directly finance teachers and nurses or indirectly pressure governments to do so.

H3: Rising borrowing costs will be associated with lower infrastructure spending

H4: Rising borrowing costs will be associated with protected wage spending

3.3.3 Interaction

Finally, I test whether these two factors will interact, such that rising interest rates will have different impacts in different places. When their budget constraint tightens, governments will shift investment away from weak politicians’ districts toward stronger ones in order to maintain their loyalty. At the same time, a squeezed budget will require that wage spending be used to full advantage, so it will be shifted to where it can continue to ensure regional dominance. This also serves as a test of whether a “shrinking pie” is a necessary condition for these patterns to emerge.

H5: High borrowing costs lead to reallocation of infrastructure spending to stronger politicians.

H6: High borrowing costs lead to protection of wage spending where voters are loyal to parties

3.4 Context: Debt and Democratic Competition in Zambia

To test this theory, I first turn to Zambia, a country which has seen decades of democratic competition and seesawing relationships with global markets, making it an ideal case to

observe the implications of this theory. I then examine Kenya, testing the generalizability of my theory to a country with a history of much more fractious ethnic politics.

Since the transition to democracy in 1990, Zambian politicians have been forced to make coalitions to win and keep power. Financially, Zambia's path matches many other post-colonial contexts: structural adjustment in the nineties, debt forgiveness in 2006, a flush of foreign capital when interest rates hit zero in the developed world, and finally, the pandemic-era crisis. Through all this change, spending on different sectors has varied considerably. Zambia was one of the earliest third wave democracies, embracing elections in 1990. While most of Zambia's parties emerged from a particular region, there is no single ethnic group large enough to win a political majority on its own. Consequently, politicians have been forced to build coalitions to win power. Alignments have shifted over time, leading to distinct arrangements between and within the MMD, PF, and UPND governments. Broadly, each political party has emerged from a home region and has won over urban areas and a few other key constituencies to force a turnover. The case of the PF is slightly distinct, as Michael Sata had urban support early in his political career and won office by making significant inroads with Bemba speakers (Sishuwa 2024; Banda et al. 2020). Politics is often aligned along the North-South axis of the colonial rail line, pitting the Copperbelt and its unions in the north against commercial agriculture in the south (Hern 2019). Nonetheless, Zambia's Eastern and Western provinces play important roles as well (Seekings 2022). In the West, a long history of separatism has cultivated generations of political elite eager to extract regionally particular concessions (Sishuwa 2025; Banda et al. 2020). A series of elites from the East were at the centre of the early multiparty regime. Politicians frequently change allegiance between elections, with parties staging elaborate defection ceremonies at rallies to bring voters along with the switch.

Figure 3.1 maps the total number of MP defections, cases in which a sitting MP previously ran under a different party over 5 assemblies (2001-2021). The map shows significant elite switching in the Eastern and Western provinces as well as in the urban areas of the Copperbelt and Lusaka (inset).

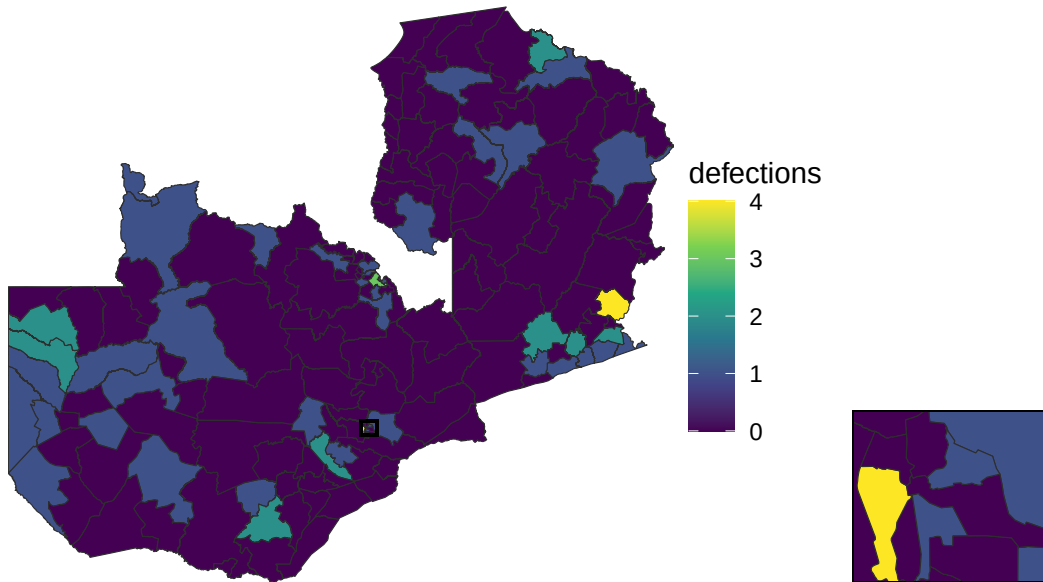


Figure 3.1: Number of MPs incumbent MPs defecting to another party in subsequent election (2001-2021)

3.4.1 Infrastructure and Wage Spending in Zambia

With each realignment, Zambia’s government pursued a distinct and regionally targeted spending strategy (Kim 2017; Kim 2018). For example, Michael Sata’s signature policy was nationwide road building campaign, while Hakainde Hichilema made waves for announcing recruitment of 30,000 teachers in 2021. Qualitative evidence affirms that leaders exercise strategic discretion over these flows.

Officially, infrastructure upgrades are awarded according to technical criteria, prioritizing rural areas and those with least access to services. However, as in politics everywhere, there are numerous levers through which the president and cabinet can influence outcomes. Bureaucrats in charge of budget choices reported that they only make *recommendations* which are passed on to the relevant minister (L104, L107, L115). One civil servant in charge of infrastructure planning clarified: “Decisions are made at two levels. As the ministry, you look at things like district size and population and plan where to put these facilities. But you do not have final say. Other decisions happen further up with other criteria” (L115). Leaders also channel resources by creating new districts, which require significant funding for new infrastructure: administrative blocks, police stations, and staff housing (L109). Between 2006 and 2012, the Patriotic Front government increased the number of districts from 72 to 116. This was ostensibly done under the mantra of decentralization, but also

allowed the government to allocate new resources and create jobs in the newly created districts. Typically, district delimitation occurred by taking a district that covered two constituencies and splitting it such that each constituency had its own district. Individual MPs also lobby for infrastructure in their constituencies, and have more leverage if the minister is behind them (L001, L109).

Wage spending is also subject to political pressure. Zambia has seen waves of reforms of its civil service, with donor-instituted new public management curtailing the size and leverage of the public sector in the 1980s and 1990s (Madimutsa et al. 2021). After the transition to democracy, the MMD continued this process, finalizing the privatization of many state owned enterprises. When Michael Sata came to power in 2011, one of his first actions was to dramatically increase the public minimum wage, effectively doubling the salaries of the lowest paid civil servants. This improved morale and reduced the number of people leaving (L003). As a largely urban, somewhat richer constituency, this was basically a transfer enhancing consumption for the middle class.

However, the PF also had to reward everyday Zambians who had brought them to power. Under the PF, political cadres became a major public issue as young party supporters took thuggish control of markets and bus stations (Resnick 2022). The violence actions of these cadres and the inability of the regime to reign them in was a major factor in the PF's loss of public support [L016]. When the UPND came to power in 2021, they promised the end of violent cadreism. However, there were still many young party supporters that had done the work of mobilizing votes for the party, who expected commensurate benefit. Another expert told me "[Teaching] provides a good platform for the government to provide employment. Right. But if we were to be critical, teaching doesn't pay that much. Right. So you can afford to recruit at a large scale" [L016]. As discussed above, recruitment is also an important lever for delivering benefits to voters.

MPs also have much less interest in and ability to impact recruitment (Kabir 2023, p. L102). Recruitment is done centrally by the ministries with input from minister (L109, L115, L116). In the ministry of health, wage budgets are typically incremented from previous years. However, completed capital projects (new clinics or hospitals) are considered for recruitment (L115). Both infrastructure and wage spending are subject to significant political discretion in Zambia.

3.4.2 Debt and Policymaking

Debt is also a major consideration in budget planning. Policy documents explicitly link increased borrowing costs to reduced capital expenditure. In the 2025 budget framework, the ministry of Finance and National Planning (MoFNP) lists “tight global financial conditions” as a key risk to budget implementation. They elaborate “high global interest rates increase the cost of borrowing, reducing fiscal space for development spending” (MoFNP, 2025, p. 26). Similarly, in 2024 the Ministry notes that rising debt costs will “negatively affect investment expenditure” (p. 24). This is in contrast to other types of resource inflows like mineral royalties. Fluctuating copper price is also listed as a risk, but the consequence is not particular to any type of spending, with the ministry only remarking that lower copper prices would lead to “widening fiscal and external imbalances” (p. 26). Borrowing costs can impact spending in two ways. First, governments may be more willing to take on loans when rates are low, and more wary when costs are higher. For example, in 2010, MP Peter Daka argued in favour of debt: “no businessman has ever developed without borrowing and we are borrowing this money at a reasonable interest rate.’’⁵ Christiother Mvunga, the PF’s deputy minister of Finance in 2015, was more explicit, justifying his government’s borrowing in terms of global interest rates:

As we talk about the cost of contracting debt, we also need to look at the current global trends in the capital markets. So, when we assess the affordability of the interest rates, we should look at what is happening on the international markets. We have heard the Federal Reserve Bank announce that it will increase interest rates...When we borrow money, it is at market rates...the rate at which we have contracted this debt is actually very competitive.⁶

Higher borrowing rates can also limit investment by increasing the cost of debt service. In the case of road construction, many debts are kept on the books of implementing agencies rather than at the ministry of finance. Debt payments on completed projects and interest on arrears for incomplete projects choke off the ability to start new projects [L112, L113]. General government debt service decreases the overall envelope available for wage

⁵Debates: March 4, 2010, Retrieved from: <https://www.parliament.gov.zm/node/1574>

⁶Debates, July 28, 2015: <https://www.parliament.gov.zm/node/4547>

and investment spending. In the next section, I operationalize these measures and test the observable implications of my theory.

3.5 Empirical Approach

3.5.1 Data and Methods

Scholarship on distributive politics has taken a variety of empirical approaches (see Cox 2010). I use constituency level expenditures drawn from administrative data (Schady 2000; Albertus 2013; Robin Harding 2015) rather than survey-based reports of clientelist transfers (Stokes et al. 2013; Kramon and Posner 2013). I also use electoral data to evaluate constituency type retrospectively, rather than judgement based measures of “competitive” districts. I elaborate and justify my choices below.

3.5.1.1 Dependent Variable: Constituency-Level Expenditures

To examine allocations to different groups, I use the Ministry of Finance *Activity Based Budgets* (Yellow Books), published from 2006-2020. These documents offer a granular view of the geographic allocation of resources across sectors. Each yellow book is around 1500 pages, and the total archive runs 27,961 pages. Figure 3.2 shows a sample page from 2009. I convert these into a machine readable format, collecting 383,666 budget line items. I then tag spending on infrastructure, health, education, and agriculture. I also distinguish wage and non-wage spending. Wage spending includes salaries and benefits, while non-wage spending includes goods and services.

In interviews, politicians, civil servants, and academics all cited the Yellow Book as authoritative. One senior civil servant told me: “If it’s in there, that’s what they did”. An MP recalled finding a mathematical error in the budget, leading parliamentary proceedings to be paused for three days while the numbers were re-checked [L001]. Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered copies of the printed Yellow book in offices across a number of ministries. The printed document weighs several kilograms, and in several offices served double duty as a robust doorstop. The document is regularly referenced in legislative debate as the official measure of government spending.

HEAD 80/41 MINISTRY OF EDUCATION - BASIC SCHOOLS - SOUTHERN PROVINCE				
Programmes under which this Head will be accounted for by the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education		Approved Estimates	2008 Supplementary Estimates or Savings Declared	Total Authorised
				2009
		K	K	K
1 Choma District				
Programme: 1 Personal Emoluments - (PRP)				
Activities:				
01 Salaries Division I	1,977,604,788	-	1,977,604,788	2,645,225,951
02 Salaries Division II	423,282,550	-	423,282,550	2,680,963,404
04 Wages	185,835,700	-	185,835,700	582,049,484
05 Other Emoluments	2,951,069,295	-	2,951,069,295	1,749,983,179
06 Salaries -Teaching Service	6,259,010,760	-	6,259,010,760	17,064,210,851
Programme Total	11,796,803,093	-	11,796,803,093	24,722,432,868
Programme: 7 Equity - (PRP)				
Activities:				
01 Grants to Basic Schools(1)	1,329,287,298	-	1,329,287,298	1,289,173,159
Programme Total	1,329,287,298	-	1,329,287,298	1,289,173,159
Unit Total	13,126,090,391	-	13,126,090,391	26,011,606,027
2 Gwembe District				
Programme: 1 Personal Emoluments - (PRP)				
Activities:				
01 Salaries Division I	1,289,392,108	-	1,289,392,108	400,611,521
02 Salaries Division II	609,986,176	-	609,986,176	190,300,160
04 Wages	118,411,684	-	118,411,684	98,370,462
05 Other Emoluments	1,966,145,563	-	1,966,145,563	699,526,134
06 Salaries -Teaching Service	7,798,812,824	-	7,798,812,824	10,434,572,098
Programme Total	11,782,748,355	-	11,782,748,355	11,823,380,375
Programme: 7 Equity - (PRP)				
Activities:				
01 Grants to Basic Schools(3)	671,189,952	-	671,189,952	778,286,222
Programme Total	671,189,952	-	671,189,952	778,286,222
Unit Total	12,453,938,307	-	12,453,938,307	12,601,666,597
3 Itezhi-Tezhi District				
Programme: 1 Personal Emoluments - (PRP)				
Activities:				
01 Salaries Division I	-	-	-	509,620,622
02 Salaries Division II	1,955,133,338	-	1,955,133,338	1,128,164,357
04 Wages	-	-	-	369,133,148
05 Other Emoluments	2,666,488,190	-	2,666,488,190	938,281,625
06 Salaries -Teaching Service	5,693,127,017	-	5,693,127,017	7,511,846,710
Programme Total	10,314,748,545	-	10,314,748,545	10,457,046,464
Programme: 7 Equity - (PRP)				
Activities:				
01 Grants to Basic Schools(5)	699,015,071	-	699,015,071	781,788,589
Programme Total	699,015,071	-	699,015,071	781,788,589
Unit Total	11,013,763,616	-	11,013,763,616	11,238,835,053

Figure 3.2: Sample Budget Page

Amounts reported in the yellow book are imperfect measurements of my dependent variable, but I still find reason to value them as a source of information. Side payments to voters and elites are certainly part of governments' strategy. To the degree that this type of graft exists, it may be captured by infrastructure spending, as corruption often occurs through inflated procurement contracts (Auditor General, 2024). By contrast, wage spending comes through the centre and flows directly to employees. Typically corruption in wage spending occurs through absent employees (Kabir 2025), which would leave the political work of hiring unchanged.

At the same time, budgets may instead underestimate spending. Releases often do not always match budgeted amounts. If releases are systematically different, then my conclusions may be biased. However, I add two points in favour of my approach. First, the budget itself matters— even if imperfectly implemented, the institution allows for contestation and offers ways for politicians to remedy non-releases. Second, I would expect bias to go in the opposite direction that I observe. If anything, I would expect the budget to show distribution according to technocratic criteria. Instead, I find significant evidence of discretionary spending in favour of swing politicians. This is more consistent with the idea that the Yellow book is the *result* of a process of discretionary allocation, not simply cover for it.

Finally, these data do not represent the universe of government spending. The Yellow book misses some individually targeted transfers such as agricultural inputs or cash transfers, which have been shown to be distributed according to clientelist principles (Mason, Jayne, and van de Walle 2017). However, the coverage is still quite broad, covering health, education, agriculture, and administrative spending over a 15 year period, much broader than many similar studies. While imperfect, I maintain that this is nonetheless an illuminating source of information of the priorities of the Zambian government.

Funds are allocated at the district level, but I group data by the constituency level. Districts contain one or more constituencies. For example, Lusaka district contains seven constituencies. In all except one case, constituencies are contained within a single district. In cases where a district contains multiple constituencies, I divide the budget allocation equally across constituencies.

This matters because creating new districts is a major way to allocate new resources to particular areas. I track shifting district and constituency boundaries across this era.

3.5.1.2 Wage and Non-wage Spending

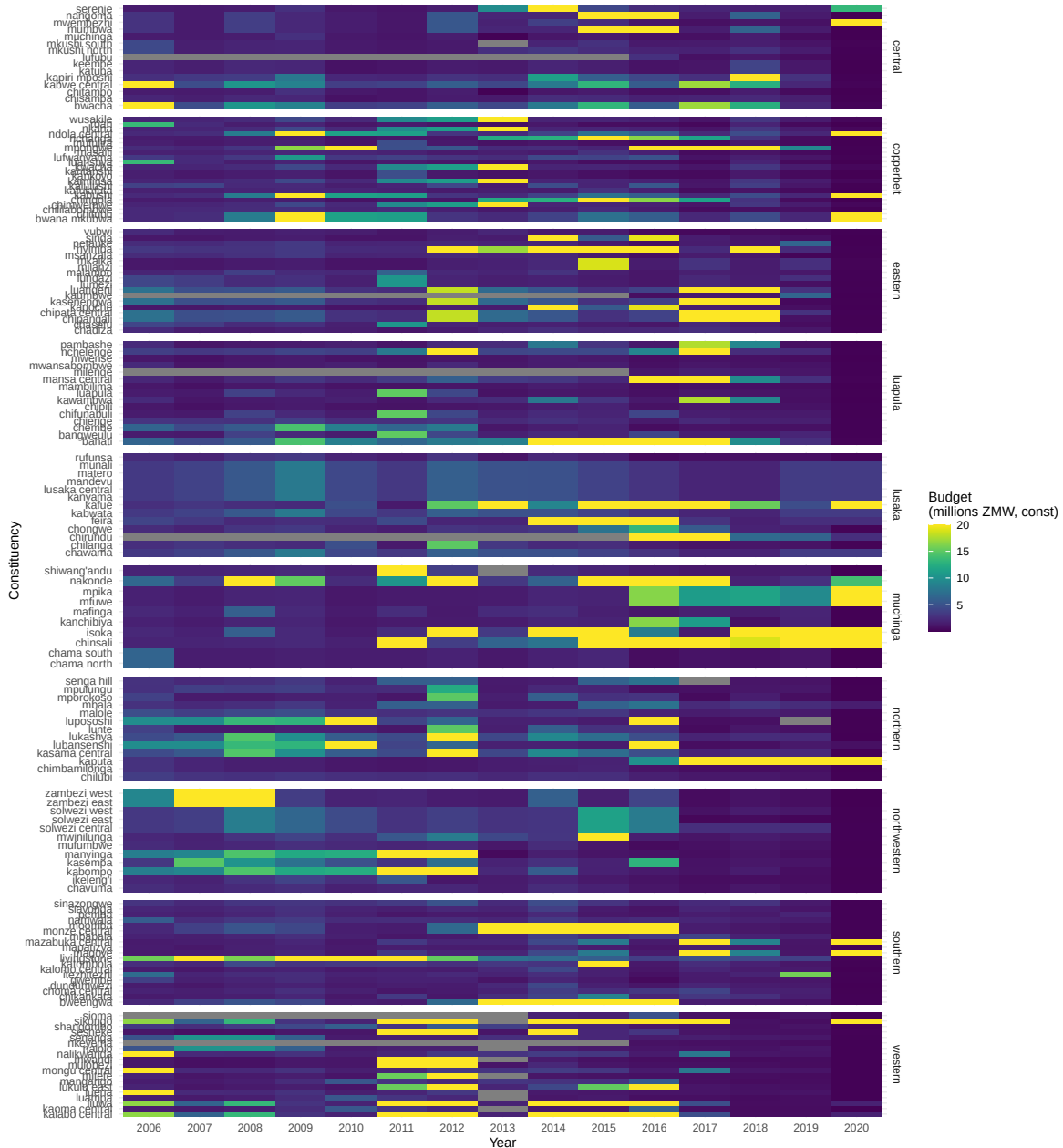


Figure 3.3: Nonwage Budgets in Zambian Constituencies 2006-2019

This figure shows non-wage spending, which includes both administrative and capital spending. As hypothesized, this spending is far more lumpy, with large single-year allocations to different constituencies. Some patterns emerge from the data. Muchinga province re-

ceives significant investment after Edgar Lungu takes office in 2015 ⁷. Western province also receives significant investment between 2011 and 2015, when Michael Sata was trying to win support from Barotse elites in the West, and the number of districts in the province doubled.

Wage allocations also vary considerably between constituencies. For example, in 2014, Tier 1 salary allocations for Health services doubled from 1 million to 2 million kwacha. Meanwhile, an hour down the road in Sinda, they went from 963,658 to 261,130, a significant reduction. Despite a similar official technocratic logic, wages are also politicized, though variation is less lumpy than for infrastructure Figure 3.16.

3.5.1.3 Independent Variable: MP Strength

I hypothesize that MPs can successfully secure costly concessions from the centre when they can threaten to bring voters with them to an alternate party. This is something that many MPs contemplate (Sishuwa 2025). MP strength is a uniquely difficult concept to measure. However, Zambia’s hybrid political system allows for a meaningful comparison between candidate and party popularity. Citizens vote for parliamentary and presidential candidates at the same time. If candidates are indistinguishable from their parties, then we would expect no difference between vote shares for MPs and presidential candidates. In reality, we find significant variation, including cases where a party’s MP wins the local election but their presidential candidate does not. This occurs in 18.8% of my observations. I measure MP strength as the difference between the MP vote share and presidential vote share in the last election, though this can change between elections with byelections. MPs who get higher vote shares than their parties are strong.

3.5.1.4 Borrowing Cost

I use several measures of borrowing cost. My first measure is the yield on US ten year bonds, a common measure of global liquidity. This is my preferred measure because it is plausibly exogenous. US rates move globally and independently of country conditions. Rates vary considerably throughout this period.

⁷Districts that ended up in Muchinga are displayed as such

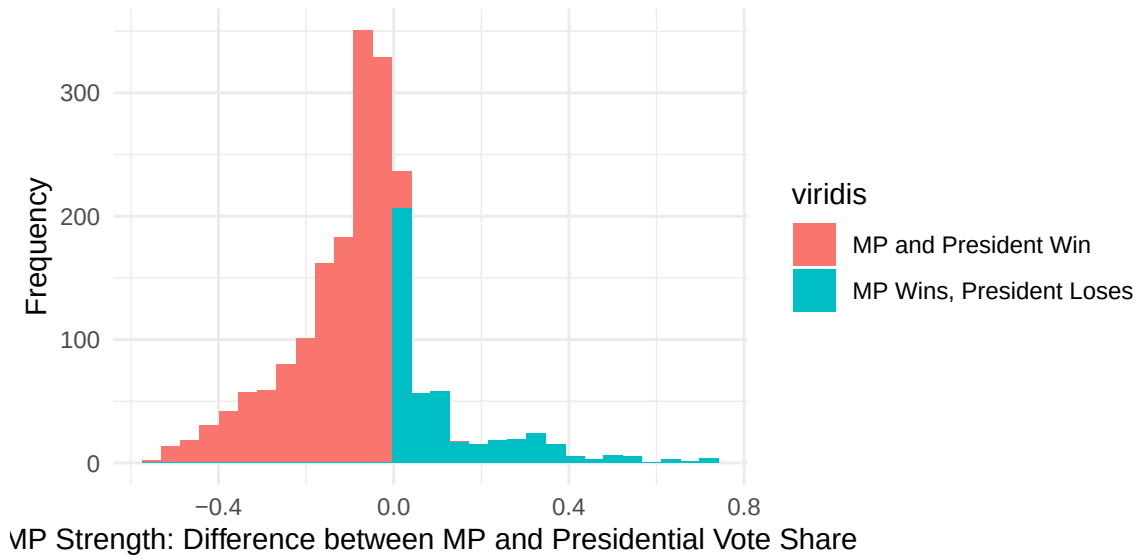


Figure 3.4: Difference in Vote Share, MP vs Presidential Elections

I use debt service to measure the impact of debt costs. In particular, I use the annual change in debt servicing costs. As shown in Figure 3.5, this is correlated with US interest rates. When US rates are high, Zambia increases its debt service by less. By contrast, when rates are low, debt service increases.

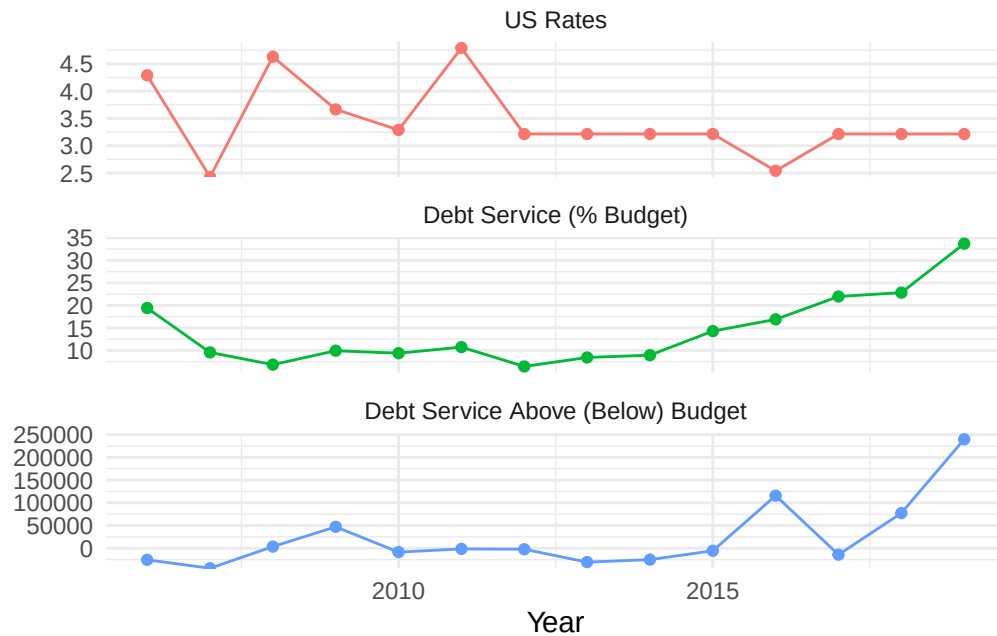


Figure 3.5: Measures of Debt Pressure

3.5.1.5 Controls

I also include several controls. First, I control for whether an constituency's MP is a member of the ruling party. I also control for the level of development, proxied by the average annual nightlight intensity (Li et al. 2020).⁸ Since copper prices also shift the government's budget constraint, I control for the price of copper on the London Metals Exchange. Finally, I include constituency effects for unobserved fixed characteristics.

3.5.2 Models

As theorized earlier, I expect that MPs' bargaining position relative to the executive will vary based on the strength of the MP and the government's ease of borrowing. I model this interactively using the variables above. I also control for the level of development by using nightlight value as a proxy and include constituency level dummies. The specification for the interactive relationship is:

$$\begin{aligned} Spending_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 Strength_{it} + \beta_2 Interest_{t-1} + \beta_3 Strength_{it} * Interest_{t-1} \\ & + \beta_4 Nightlights_{it} + \beta_5 Ruling_{it} + \beta_6 Copper_{t-1} + \theta Constituency_i + \epsilon_{it} \end{aligned}$$

3.6 Results

I show both un-interacted and interactive models for both dependent variables in Table 3.2. Model 1 shows that stronger MPs get higher infrastructure spending, confirming H1. While the relationship between MP strength and wage spending is negative, the estimate is indistinguishable from zero, giving little support to H2. Similarly, the relationship between interest rates and infrastructure spending is null, and the relationship with wage spending is negative. Model 5 shows wage results for only ruling MPs, as I don't expect wage allocations to go to loyal *opposition* voters.

The results are closer to theoretical expectations once the interaction term is included. Most importantly, between models 2 and 4/5, the sign of the interaction is flipped. This means

⁸Nightlights are not a perfect measure of economic activity, but in this case, the geographic regions are large and intensities are averaged over a year, they do capture differences between more developed and highly rural Zambian constituencies.

Table 3.2: Main Results

	Infrastructure	Infrastructure	Wage	Wage	Wage (Ruling)
MP Strength	1.4** (0.5)	-2.7 (1.6)	-0.11 (0.20)	0.62 (0.62)	2.5* (1.0)
Interest	0.18 (0.11)	0.29* (0.12)	-0.428*** (0.046)	-0.447*** (0.049)	-0.414*** (0.069)
Strength * Interest		1.43* (0.57)		-0.26 (0.21)	-0.74* (0.32)
Light Value	-0.036 (0.040)	-0.033 (0.040)	0.493*** (0.025)	0.492*** (0.025)	0.537*** (0.035)
Ruling	-0.087 (0.217)	-0.25 (0.22)	0.116 (0.099)	0.15 (0.10)	
Copper Price	0.0011 (0.0015)	0.0014 (0.0015)	0.0057*** (0.0007)	0.0057*** (0.0007)	0.00633*** (0.00098)
R2	0.238	0.242	0.776	0.776	0.860
Num.Obs.	1806	1806	1806	1806	966
Constituency Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

that rising rates have an opposite distributive effect in different sectors. In models 2 and 5, the interaction term is significant, which is strong evidence of a true interactive relationship (Pepinsky 2018). In the next section, I probe the interactive effect for both sectors.

3.6.1 Interactive Effect

To explore the interactions, I proceed graphically (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006). Figure 3.6 and Figure 3.7 plot the marginal effect of an increase in global interest rates for each value of MP strength. Following Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu (2019), I also check for nonlinear interaction effects by binning the moderator variable. I split the data into three groups and calculates conditional marginal effect for the median value in each bin. This also prevents over-interpretation of the results based on extrapolation of moderator values that lack support.

The opposite signs of the interaction terms are more clear in these figures, highlighting the difference between how constituencies with strong and weak MPs are treated differently. In other words, impact of rising interest rates is different for infrastructure and wages. In both plots, the horizontal axis is MP strength, with MPs who outperform their parties on

the right. First, for infrastructure, rising rates are associated with lower spending for weak MPs and more spending for strong MPs.

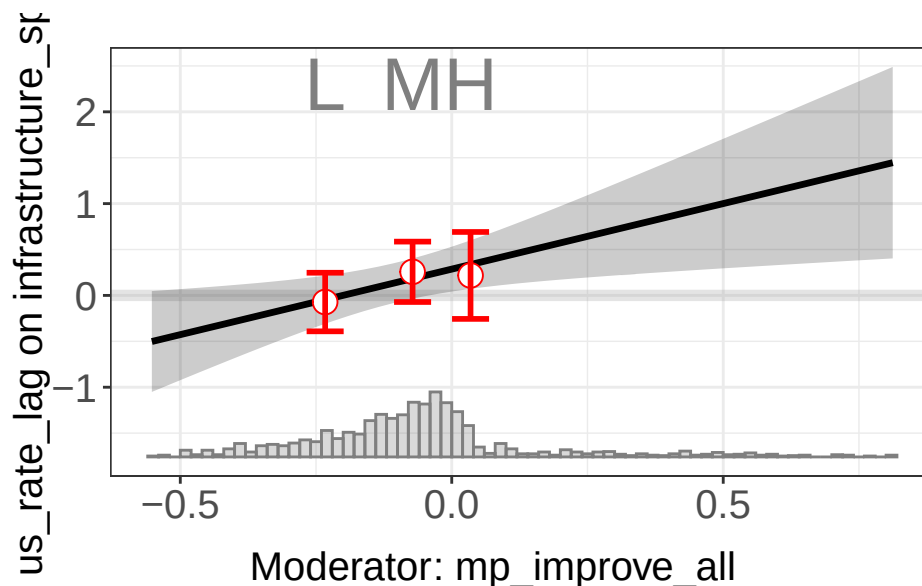


Figure 3.6: Marginal Effect of Rising Rates on Infrastructure Spending

For wages, the effect is opposite. Rising rates are associated with decreases in spending across all MPs, but the cuts are much higher for strong MPs, the same ones who are getting more infrastructure spending. While the slope is not as steep, and does not cross zero, the binned estimates suggest that the impact of rising rates distinct for the weakest (L) vs stronger MPs (M, H). In the appendix, I exclude Lusaka and find a negative slope, suggesting that results may be swayed by the concentration of government jobs in the capital.

The results are clearer for the sample with ruling MPs only (Model 5). When interest rates rise, wage cuts are concentrated in constituencies with strong MPs, the same areas where infrastructure funds are allocated. In other places, wages are unchanged.

3.6.2 Alternative specifications

Are politicians really sensitive to global capital cycles? As described above, the main mechanism through which rising rates influence planning seems to be by driving up debt service costs. Therefore, I rerun my analyses with two alternative measures of borrowing cost which are more proximate to the policy process. First, I use the share of national expenditure spent on debt service from the World Bank. Debt service costs are a highly

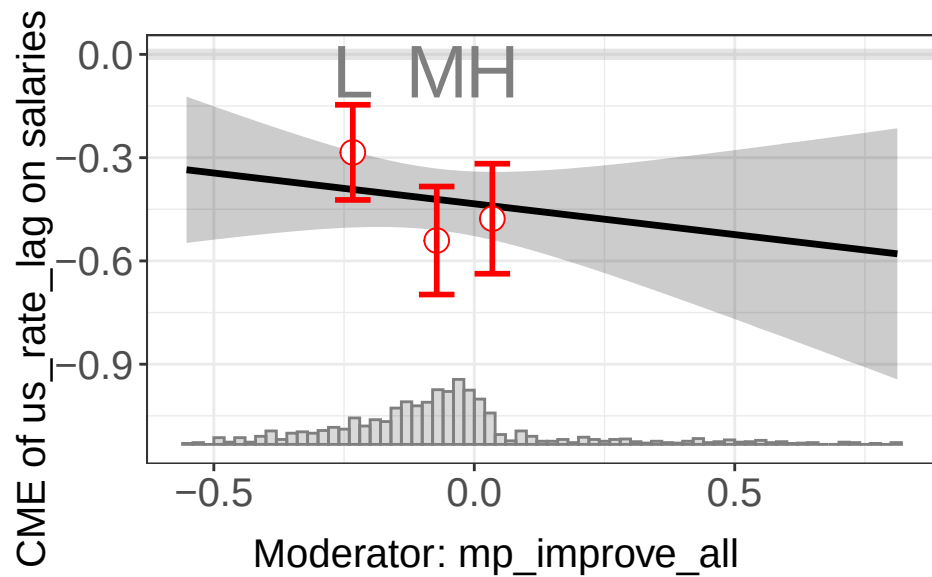


Figure 3.7: Marginal Effect of Rising Rates on Wage Spending

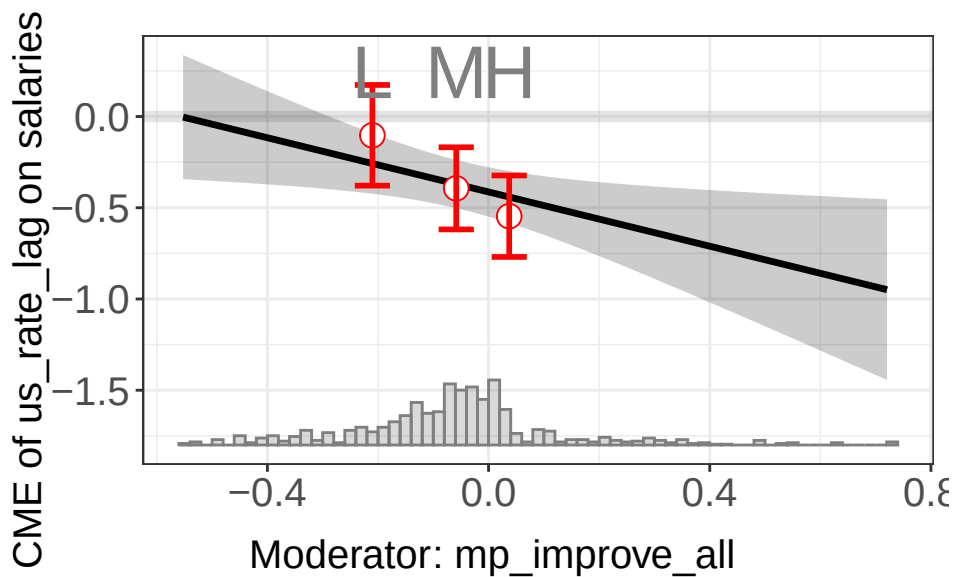


Figure 3.8: Marginal Effect of Rising Rates on Wage Spending, Ruling/Swing only

salient metric, reported each year in the budget speech and frequently cited in both political discourse and popular media. Politicians routinely lament the share of funds going to debt service that could have been invested in development projects.

I rerun identical models using debt service as a share of government spending. Figure 3.9 shows very similar results. In this case, the interpretation of the levels is also more intuitive: When debt service rises, weak MPs receive lower infrastructure spending and higher wage spending.

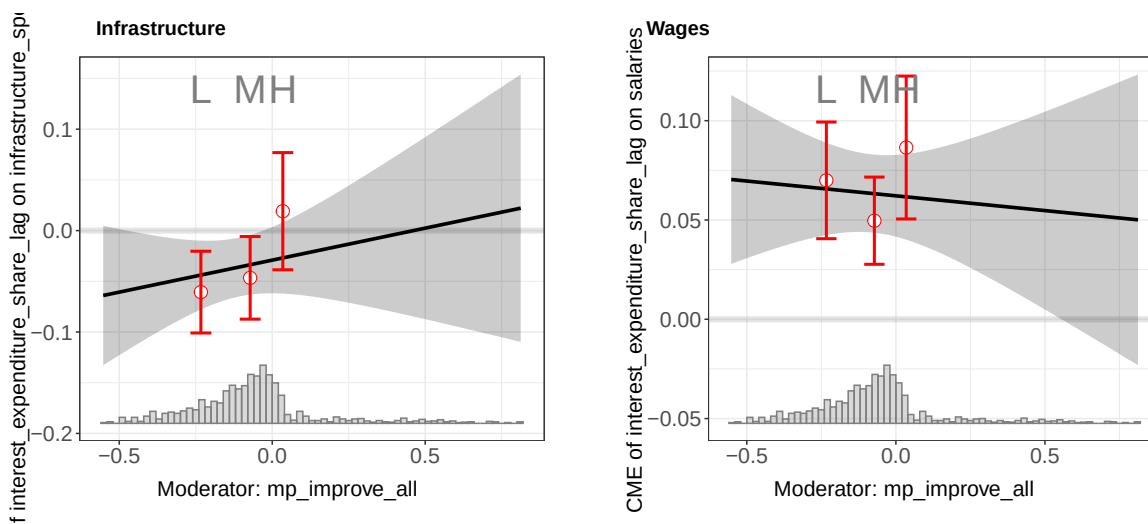


Figure 3.9: Marginal Effect of Debt Service Costs on Infrastructure and Wage Spending

Finally, I check the impact of unexpected changes in debt service costs. I calculate the difference between the target and actual debt service costs from Bank of Zambia annual reports. This difference is driven by increased interest rates. This variable combines the strengths of the first two operationalizations, taking into account both exogenous changes in interest rates and the overall level of debt service. One again, the interactions have opposite slopes, and rising costs are associated with weak MPs receiving less infrastructure and strong MPs receiving less wage spending.

In the appendix, I report several other tests. I find identical results when I exclude urban Lusaka from the analysis. There is also some evidence that copper prices operate in a similar manner, with strong MPs protected from lowered spending when copper prices drop.

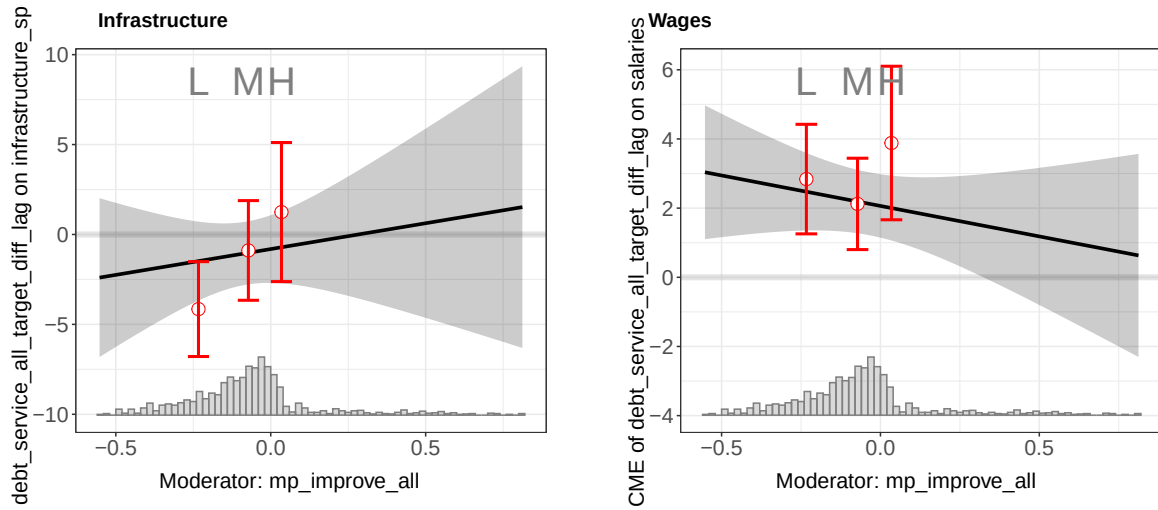


Figure 3.10: Marginal Effect of Above Target Debt Service Costs on Infrastructure and Wage Spending

3.6.3 Kenya

Is this pattern limited to Zambia? I now turn to Kenya, showing that international financial conditions discipline fiscal allocation in a context where ethnic politics are much more salient. While in Zambia a presidential candidate might rely on up to a quarter of votes from coethnics, in Kenya, Kikuyu's are the largest group but make up less than 2% of the population and most groups are much smaller (Horowitz 2019). Ethnic identities are also much more salient, especially after post-election violence in 2007/08 (Horowitz 2019)

Kenya's politics in the multiparty era have been characterized by dramatic shifts in political coalitions as elites seek to win support of the majority of Kenyans. As in Zambia, none of Kenya's ethnic groups holds a majority. Consequently, political change in Kenya involves an rapidly shifting grouping of political elites, each promising to deliver votes from their respective ethnic blocs. In 2002, Mwai Kibaki headed the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) to oust KANU and consolidate multiparty democracy. In 2007, post-election violence threatened stability until Kibaki crafted a government of national unity. Kibaki also passed a new constitution stipulating that presidential candidates win a 50%+1 majority and 25% of the vote in more than half of counties [Constitution of Kenya, 138:4]. This intensifies the need for regional bargaining. Appendix Figure 3.21 shows that a third of Kenyan counties could be considered unaligned to either major grouping.

In 2013, Uhuru Kenyatta won the presidency with the Jubilee Alliance, an partnership between himself and William Ruto to defeat Raila Odinga. By 2017, this transitioned into the Jubilee Party, but political stability was only achieved after a handshake truce between Kenyatta and Odinga, in which Kenyatta agreed to support Odinga in 2022. This led Ruto to split with Kenyatta and incorporate urban residents and a different set of elites, to win the presidency under the banner of the UDA in 2022.

Even more so than in Zambia, Kenya's parties are ephemeral vehicles for elite groupings. In fact, it is typical that presidents have only been elected under *alliance*, *coalition*, *movement* groupings rather than parties. However, Kenya's political alliances have been characterized by high-level deals made by pinnacle elites involving key positions (as in Arriola (2009)). Do leaders also use public spending to hold together coalitions?

A wide body of evidence highlights that Kenya's presidents channel resources to their core supporters. Under autocracy, resources flowed to the president's base (Robin Harding 2015; Briggs 2014). At the same time, these core voters could be exploited for their loyalty (Kasara 2007). However, democratic pressures shifted the pressures toward coalition building, as increasingly powerful legislators pushed for independence (Opalo 2019; Robin Harding 2015; Choi 2018).

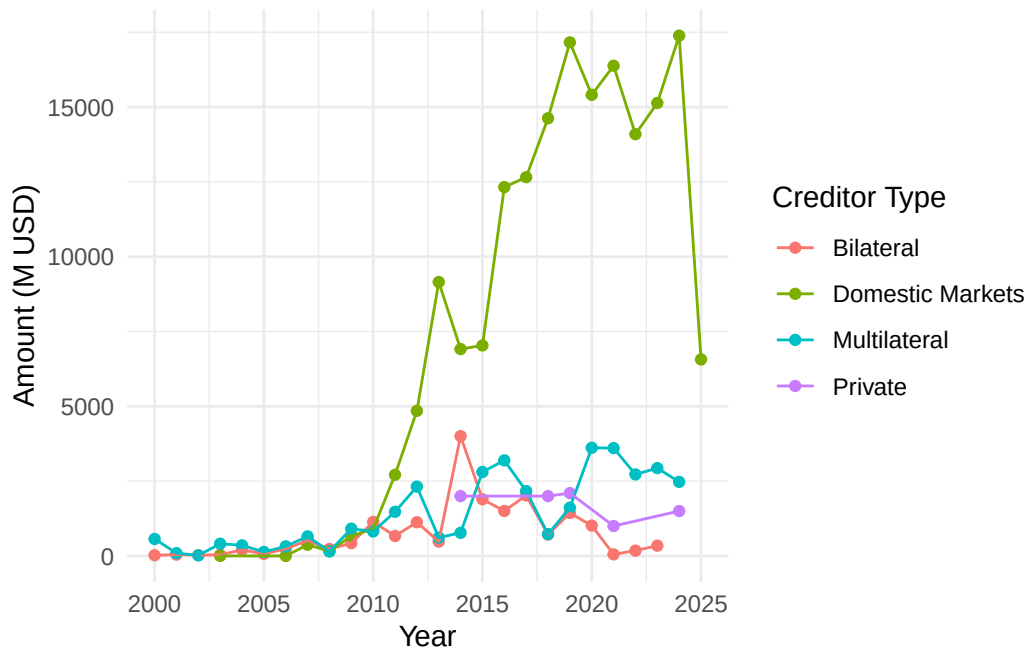


Figure 3.11: Kenya Borrowing Composition

Kenya also has a distinct borrowing trajectory, with a much stronger tax base and domestic debt market. Kenya did not participate in HIPC, and tapped international market international markets later than Zambia, issuing its first Eurobond in 2014. Private borrowing expanded dramatically after 2010 and again in 2016-2019, even as bilateral finance dropped off. From 2018 onward, private external finance was higher than bilateral flows. While Kenya has managed to avoid defaulting on its debt obligations, Eurobond repayments in 2024 drove significant fiscal pressure, driving Ruto's ill-fated tax hike and subsequent protests. While Kenya remains structurally dependent on foreign capital, it is much less vulnerable than Zambia. This makes it a somewhat harder test for identifying the role of shifts in borrowing costs on policymaking.

3.6.3.1 Empirical Setup

Data are from the World Bank BOOST program, which accesses information directly from the Treasury payment system. County level expenditures are available for 2013-2021, and constituency level data are available for 2019-2021. Electoral data are from IEBC reports. For the 2017 election, I use first round results, which more accurately represent public support⁹. The closest setup to the Zambian case is to use constituency-level spending. However, here the data are limited, only available for 2019-21. Constituency-level capital spending represents 4% of all capital spending volume, but 25% of transactions, which leaves significant room for political discretion. Wage spending is not grouped at the constituency level.

I don't have enough leverage to test an interactive effect, so I examine only the political support variables. I find that an MP's vote share is not a good predictor of capital expenditure. Similarly, vote share for Kenyatta is negatively associated with capital allocation, though this relationship is not significant. However, in line with my theoretical expectations strong MPs receive higher capital expenditure Table 3.3.

Table 3.3: Results - Kenya Constituencies

	MP Share	Prez Share	MP Strength
MP Vote Share	5.4 (3.5)		
President Share		-118 (205)	
MP Strength			4.7* (2.3)
Interest	-29 (189)	-29 (197)	18 (108)
Ruling member	-153 (111)	-76 (149)	-141 (111)
Nightlights	-16.2*** (3.9)	-16*** (4)	-17*** (4)
Num.Obs.	787	748	748
Year Effects	Y	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

3.6.3.2 Results: Kenya

To further test my hypothesis, I turn to county-level data, which is available from 2013 to 2021 and accounts for 85% of the spending on wages and capital in the BOOST data. Since counties are comprised of anywhere from 2 to 17 constituencies, I cannot identify MP strength at the county level. Instead, I take the average share of votes for president Kenyatta across each county.

As seen Table 3.4, the base effects are in line with the expectations of the theory. Counties that voted for Kenyatta received more wage spending, and higher interest rates are associated with lower spending overall.

Electoral results have little moderating effect on wage spending, which decreases with borrowing costs across constituency types (Appendix Figure 3.20). However, for capital spending, there is reallocation to non-aligned constituencies. Figure 3.12 visualizes heterogeneous effects. When interest rates rise, capital spending decreases in at both ends of the spectrum of Kenyatta support: places where Kenyatta's party received either *all* or *none* of the votes. However, counties in the *middle* group are insulated from rising borrowing costs,

⁹The August 2017 election was annulled by Kenya's Supreme court after being challenged by Odinga. However, the ODM was not satisfied by the changes made leading up to the rerun, instead boycotting the election. Kenyatta won 98% of votes on turnout of 39% (Cheeseman, Bertrand, and Husaini 2019, p. 2018).

Table 3.4: Results, Kenya Counties

	Wages	Wages	Capital	Capital
Interest	-1099*** (92)	-1041*** (161)	-273** (83)	-410** (144)
Ruling	1534* (613)	1680* (748)	346 (553)	346 (671)
Swing	722 (434)	895 (606)	362 (392)	-291 (543)
Ruling x Interest		-79 (217)		33 (194)
Swing x Interest		-86 (217)		351 (194)
Nightlights	50.0*** (6.6)	50.2*** (6.6)	1.3 (5.9)	0.1 (6.0)
Num.Obs.	368	368	368	368
County Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

they do not receive less when costs rise. This is consistent with executives protecting capital expenditure to places where they need votes at the expense of their core supporters.

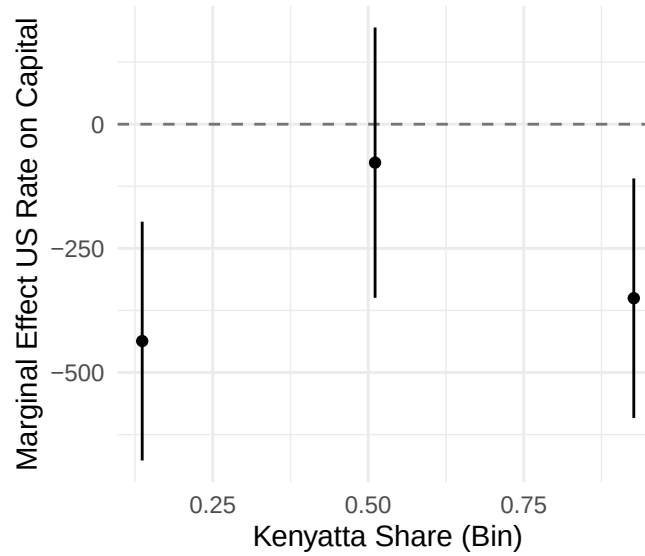


Figure 3.12: Marginal Effect of Rising Rates on Infrastructure Spending

Kenya's ruling coalition shifts rapidly. However, there is little evidence that the Jubilee party shifted funds to their core supporters. Instead, the budget was used to build a coalition of support, winning over strong MPs. When rising interest rates shrank the pie, swing constituencies were insulated from cuts to capital expenditure.

3.7 Conclusion

How is policymaking different in the periphery? This paper shows that in a context of debt dependence, distributive strategies shift with the cost of the pie. When interest rates rise, the government shifts infrastructure spending to where it relies on intermediaries to deliver votes. By contrast, where parties are strong, leaders respond to budget pressure by increasing wage spending to main their party popularity. This has important implications for understanding both policy outcomes and political coalitions.

First, this paper builds on the literature on distributive strategies in the developing world. I affirms that the “outcome affects the answer” (Kramon and Posner 2013), but builds from this point to suggest why and how distributive strategies might be different across contexts. By using data on infrastructure and wage spending across sectors, I can identify strategic discretion across sectors. I also bridge the literature that focuses on winning over elites vs voters by showing that elite concerns matter more when elites have electoral leverage.

Second, it adds to the literature on the international determinants of domestic policy outcomes. In the context of multiparty competition, political elites are not “untethered” from accountability demands, but rather that these pressures are mediated through elites outside the ruling parties’ base. Understanding electoral coalitions as a patchwork of regional interests (Boone et al. 2022) is an important corrective against simplifying electoral competition down to identity politics. These findings also suggest a self-undermining dynamic relationship impacting politicians’ survival. Today’s infrastructure spending is tomorrow’s debt service. Taking on debt to win over elites in marginal constituencies increases debt costs, thereby limiting the ability to maintain their coalition in the future.

As access to different sources of capital expand, leaders’ ability to expand their coalition will expand, securing their tenure. However, the global cycle of liquidity means that when cut off, leaders will be more vulnerable. This may lead to stronger regional dynamics in political turnover and regime stability (see, Wibbels (2006) and Cormier and Shea (2025)) . Future research could explore comparative dynamics on whether debt-constrained distributive spending is a driving factor in elections and regime change.

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3.8 Appendix

3.8.1 Without Lusaka

Lusaka is an outlier for many reasons, with higher population, many central government services, and seven constituencies in a single district, I rerun my models excluding it. Results are unchanged, and the models for wage spending align more closely to my expectations.

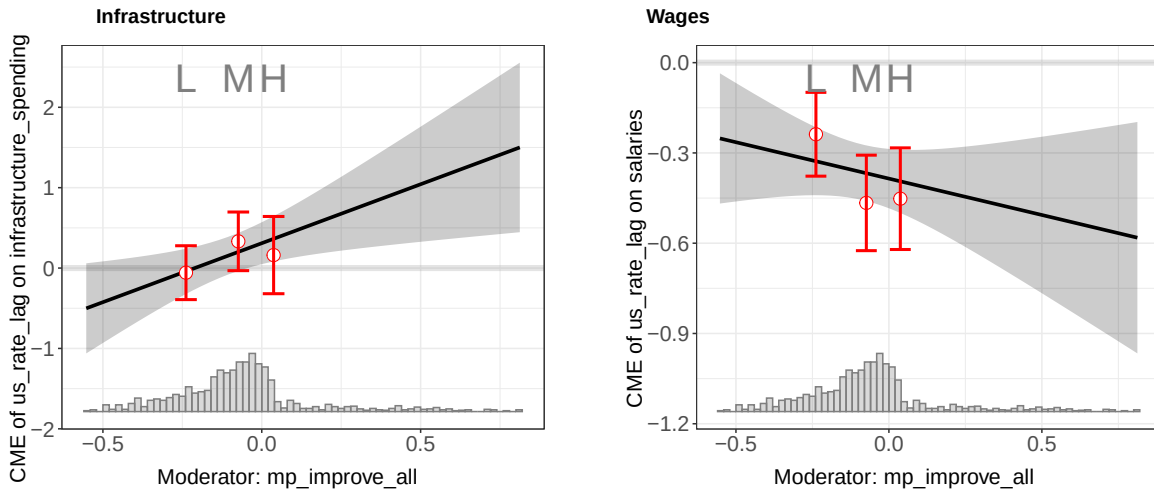


Figure 3.13: Marginal Effect of Rising Rates on Infrastructure and Wage Spending, Lusaka removed

3.8.2 Dynamic

3.8.3 Alternative Specification Tables

3.8.4 Copper Prices

Copper is a significant revenue earner for Zambia, and changing prices have a similar effect of shifting the government's budget constraint. I test whether they have an interact effect, and find similar results. To align with above visualizations, I flip the sign of copper price, so that increases are interpreted as a drop in government budget.

When copper prices drop, weak MPs receive lower infrastructure allocation, while strong MPs are protected. For wages, lower copper prices decrease allocations across the board.

Table 3.5: Results for Alternative Specifications

	Infra	Infra	Wage	Wage	Infra	Infra	
MP Strength	1.3*	0.38	0.057	0.27	1.3**	0.98	
	(0.5)	(1.18)	(0.200)	(0.61)	(0.5)	(0.78)	
Debt Service	-0.034*	-0.029+	0.063***	0.062***			
	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.010)	(0.010)			
Debt Service Above Target					-0.96	-0.81	2
					(0.90)	(0.96)	
Strength * Debt Service		0.063		-0.015			
		(0.071)		(0.040)			
Strength * Debt Above Target						2.9	
						(4.4)	
Light Value	-0.016	-0.015	0.478***	0.478***	-0.049	-0.049	0
	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.041)	(0.041)	
Ruling	-0.074	-0.048	0.067	0.061	-0.061	-0.031	
	(0.220)	(0.222)	(0.098)	(0.098)	(0.220)	(0.222)	
Copper Price	-0.00061	-0.00047	0.00904***	0.00900***	0.00082	0.00085	0.0
	(0.00156)	(0.00156)	(0.00082)	(0.00082)	(0.00151)	(0.00151)	(0.00151)
R2	0.239	0.240	0.777	0.777	0.237	0.238	
Num.Obs.	1806	1806	1806	1806	1806	1806	
Constituency Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 3.6: Copper Prices

	Infrastructure	Infrastructure	Wage	Wage
MP Strength	1.4**	7.7*	-0.11	-1.1
	(0.5)	(3.4)	(0.20)	(1.1)
Copper	-0.0011	0.000034	-0.0057***	-0.00591***
	(0.0015)	(0.001744)	(0.0007)	(0.00075)
MP Strength * Copper		0.021+		-0.0035
		(0.011)		(0.0038)
Light Value	-0.036	-0.034	0.493***	0.492***
	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Ruling	-0.087	-0.094	0.116	0.117
	(0.217)	(0.218)	(0.099)	(0.099)
Interest Rate	0.18	0.16	-0.428***	-0.425***
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.046)	(0.046)
R2	0.238	0.241	0.776	0.776
Num.Obs.	1806	1806	1806	1806
Constituency Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

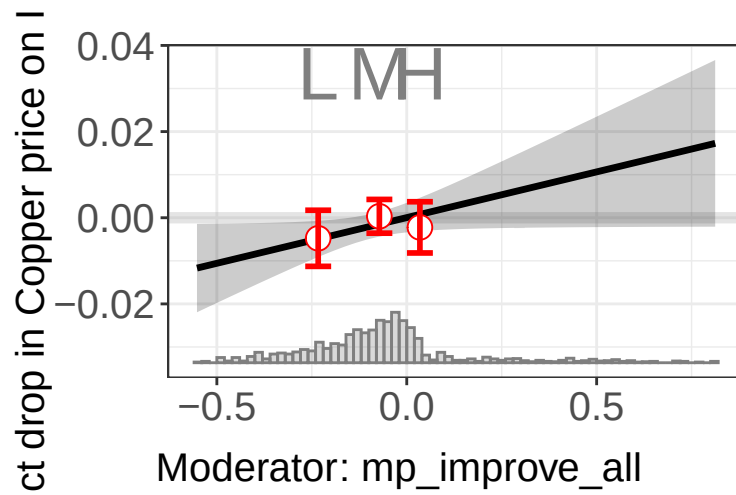


Figure 3.14: Marginal Effect of Rising Copper prices on Infrastructure Spending

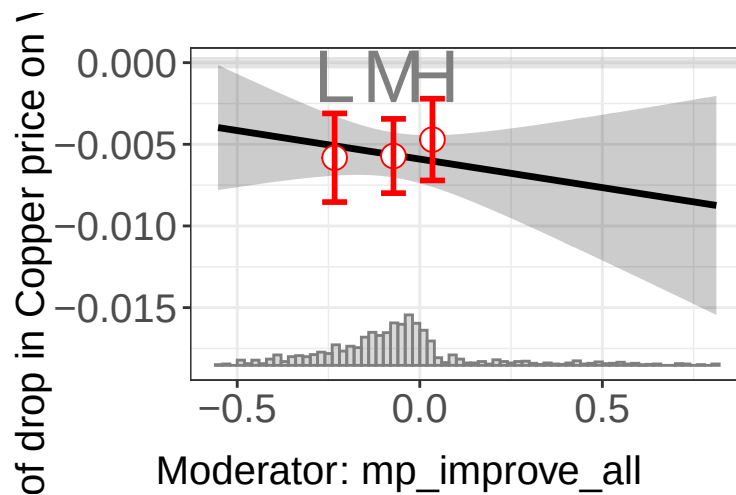


Figure 3.15: Marginal Effect of Rising Copper prices on Wage Spending

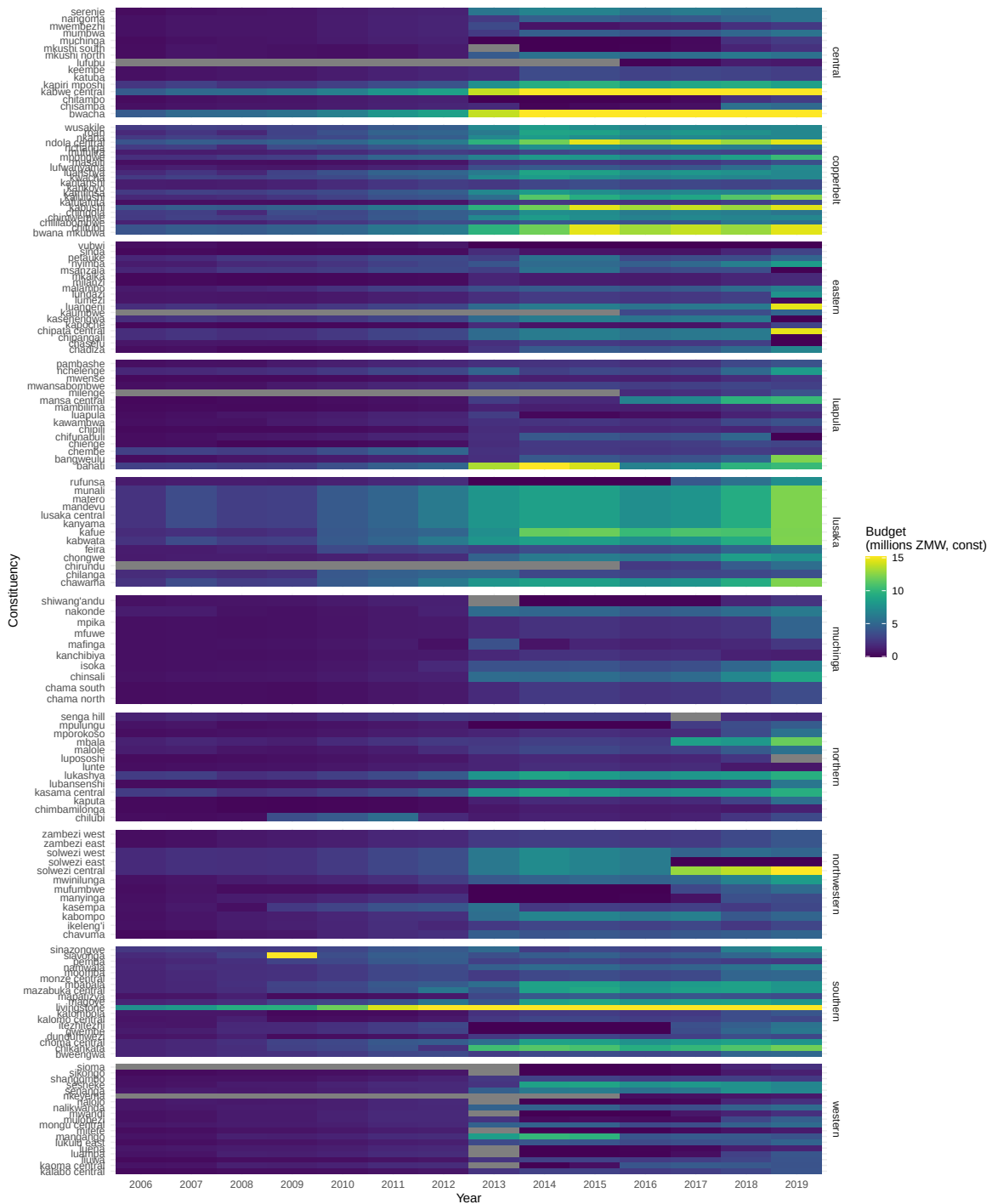


Figure 3.16: Wage Spending by Unit

3.8.5 Descriptive statistics

Figure 3.16 shows the levels of wage spending across constituencies. There is significant variation, with both increases and decreases (const ZMW) over time. Spending jumps in 2013 when Michael Sata greatly increased salaries in the civil service, including doubling the minimum wage. Spending is highest in the Copperbelt, as well as provincial capitals. Spending for Lusaka is lower because district level spending is divided across urban Lusaka's seven constituencies¹⁰. For ease of visualization, I cap the top 1% of observations.

Is there a time trend in MP Strength? Not really, they average slightly below zero, suggesting that overall, presidents are more popular than MPs Figure 3.17. Margins spike after the 2015 presidential by-election, when Lungu just barely kept office, increasing the relative 'strength' of many MPs. Otherwise, margins are fairly constant across time.

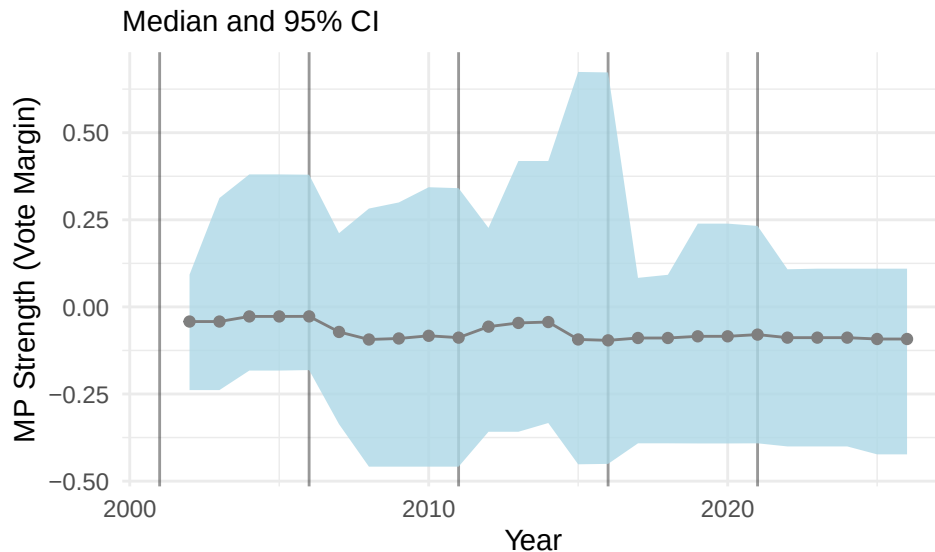


Figure 3.17: MP Strength Over Time

3.8.6 Interaction Diagnostics

The diagnostic plots show the bivariate relationship between the independent and the dependent variables across groups of the moderator (see Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019). In this case, I show the relationship between borrowing costs and spending for weak, medium, and strong MPs. In line with my expectations, the slopes change across groups, affirming an interactive data generating process. Figure 3.18 shows the results for infras-

¹⁰I also exclude spending on national institutions headquartered in Lusaka.

structure spending. The first panel is flat, suggesting no relationship for weak MPs, but the slope steepens for medium and strong MPs.

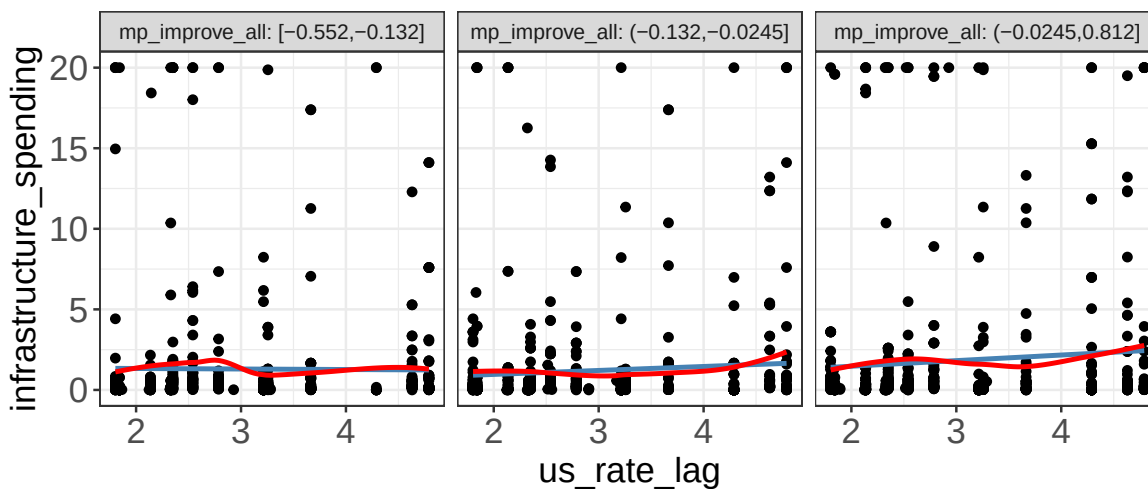


Figure 3.18: Interaction Model Diagnostics - Nonwage

Conversely, Figure 3.19 shows the impact of raising rates on wage spending in different bins of MP Strength. Once again, the relationship for the weakest MPs (left) is flat, but is steeper for stronger MPs. In this case, the slope is negative rather than positive.

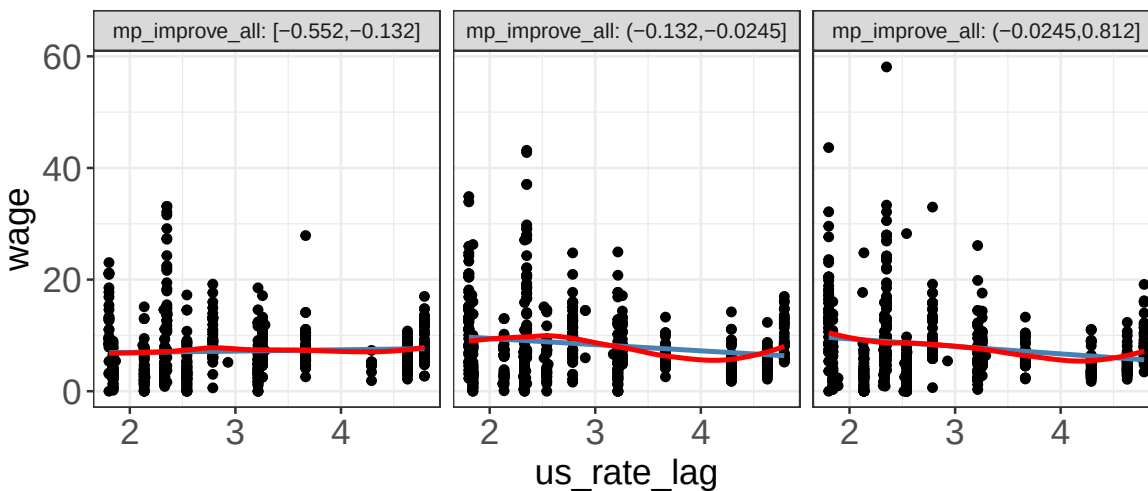


Figure 3.19: Interaction Model Diagnostics - Wage

3.8.7 Kenya Wage Results

Rising rates are associated with decreased wage spending, with no variation between county alignment.

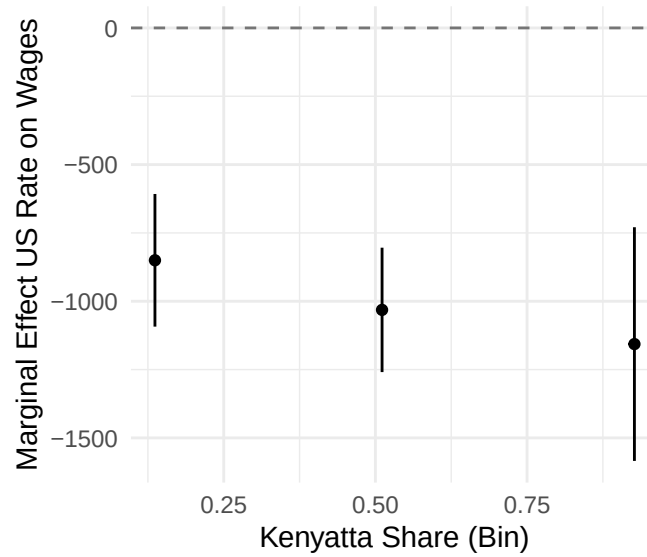


Figure 3.20: Interaction Results, Kenya Wages

3.8.8 Incumbent Support, Kenya

Figure 3.21 shows that across Kenyan counties, incumbent support is not totally bimodal. The colors show the thresholds between evenly sized groups, and show a clear trimodal distribution, meaning that a third of counties would be considered swing counties, with no clear party alignment.

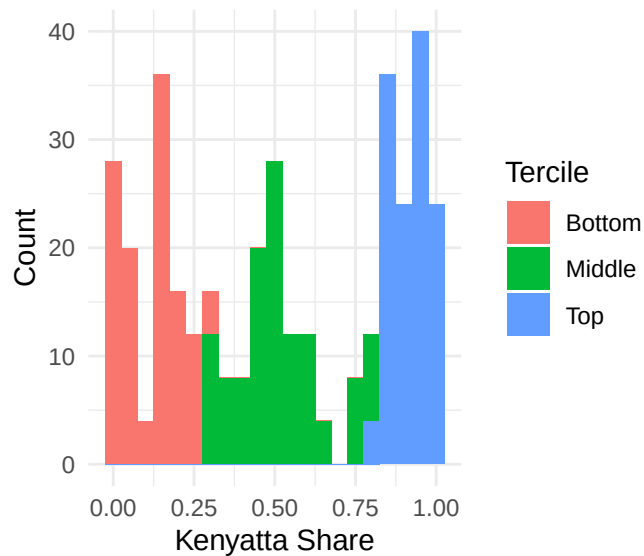


Figure 3.21: Incumbent support, Kenya 2016-2021

Chapter 4

Careful Concessions: Legislative Bargains in Developing Democracies

When do strong executives grant discretionary resources to legislators? In developing democracies, executives often play a central role in controlling rents, while most legislators struggle to stay in office beyond a single term. Nonetheless, legislators often gain control over unrestricted funds for local infrastructure. Drawing on evidence from Constituency Development Funds (CDF) in Malawi and Zambia, I show that executives grant discretion to legislators who can monopolize electoral intermediation, those who can bring voters in or out of the ruling coalition. Facing exit threats, executives manipulate CDF implementation, padding committees, expediting approvals, and adjusting guidelines to trap rivals in red tape while boosting allies. By contrast, when executives can bypass legislators to win voters through traditional authorities, subnational officials, or party labels, individual legislators have little leverage. These sidelined legislators are more likely to turn to institutional bargaining, using legislative chokepoints to ensure discretionary transfers. I test my theory on new data on CDF disbursement in Zambia and Malawi. My findings highlight the importance of parallel subnational elites in legislator-executive relations and the electoral roots of legislative underdevelopment.

4.1 Introduction

In August 2021, after twenty years in opposition, Hakainde Hichilema was sworn into office as Zambia’s president. In his inaugural budget, the flagship policy was reviving the country’s constituency development fund (CDF), allocating the equivalent of USD 1 million to each electoral constituency, a sixteen-fold increase over the previous year. Scholarship on CDFs emphasizes that they are championed by strong legislatures and conceded by weak presidents. Yet Hichilema had just won a landslide victory and enjoyed broad public support. Zambia’s National Assembly rarely challenges the executive, approving more than 90% of bills. If Hichilema was free to choose any distributive policy, why opt for a transfer that sends such flexible resources equally to friends and foes?

In this paper, I show that distributive choices like Hichilema’s emerge from a bargain between legislators fighting for local credibility and executives recruiting electoral intermediaries. CDFs solve a particular problem for executives: they allow them to bypass the machinery of the state to direct rents directly to other politicians while retaining options for manipulation. Leaders concede discretionary funds only when members of parliament (MPs) can threaten the ruling coalition through individual or institutional actions.

Legislators in sub-Saharan Africa face an incumbency disadvantage, and re-election is highly dependent on delivering development: providing highly visible public goods. When MPs have discretion over CDFs, they are able to take credit for government investment, cultivating a personal vote. It is no surprise that accessing CDFs is a high priority for MPs. For executives, the key to re-election is building a coalition that extends beyond their base. Outside of party strongholds, they must recruit local intermediaries to deliver votes. Leaders can turn to various groups with mobilizing capacity: politicians, local officials, religious leaders, or traditional authorities. These elites need discretionary resources from the state to act as effective intermediaries. When possible, executives will bypass politicians as intermediaries, as they are the mostly likely to emerge as future rivals, especially when they are empowered with resources to cultivate a personal vote.

When and where will leaders give in to *legislators'* demands for discretionary resources? They only do so where they cannot win local votes with party brand or alternative elites. It is legislators who monopolize local electoral mediation who can extract concessions from the executive. These legislators cultivate direct relationships with voters and control flows to other local notables. By contrast, when MPs are just one of many influential local elites, then leaders will turn to less risky intermediaries.

However, sidelining MPs is not without cost, as legislators can act collectively to demand concessions through the *legislature*. When MPs are excluded from targeted financial flows, they are more likely to act collectively, blocking the executive agenda in parliament. Strong legislatures can modify or block legislation until they are placated with concessions from the center. By contrast, executives who use MPs as electoral intermediaries, face little pressure from the legislature, as they've already brokered the support of a winning coalition.

In sum, when executives need MPs to win *popular* votes, they will make targeted concessions to those legislators representing their preferred coalition. When the executive needs MPs for *legislative* votes, it must deal with parliament as a whole and will make collective concessions.

A key challenge in testing this theory is that MPs' ability to monopolize electoral intermediation is the consequence of past political competition. To get around this, I turn to institutional variation driven by the contingency of colonial districting. In Zambia, administrative districts are contiguous with electoral constituencies, making MPs key players in subnational administration. Neighbouring Malawi's districts contain many constituencies, and Malawian MPs compete fiercely with traditional leaders and council officials for access to discretionary state resources.

This has led to differences in the implementation of constituency development funds in these two countries. While CDFs are nominally distributed to each constituency, in practice they are a battleground for MP discretion. Executives often manipulate them to curtail the advantages that legislators enjoy from untied funds. In line with my theoretical expectations, I find that those Zambian MPs who can monopolize representation are granted discretion, enjoying higher CDF disbursements and faster approvals than their peers in places where parties have direct connections with voters. By contrast, Malawian MPs act collectively, demanding annual increases to the CDF in exchange for passing the budget. In Malawi, I

find no evidence that CDF administration is targeted, but show that parallel funds administered through traditional elites and local councillors are channeled to electorally important districts. My findings are summarized in the table below.

	MP	MP	Legislature	
	Mediation	Bargaining	Autonomy	Result
Zambia	Central	Individual	Low	Targeted Concessions
Malawi	Peripheral	Institutional	High	Legislative Tolls

This paper makes four main contributions to our understanding of legislative-executive relations and distributive politics in developing democracies. First, I highlight the importance of theorizing the role of politicians within a broader set of subnational elites. While there is literature examining the role of legislators relative to traditional authorities or councillors (Baldwin 2013; Chiweza 2010), there is little understanding of how this relationship impacts MPs relationship with the executive. This paper highlights how fragmented sets of subnational elites strengthens executive bargaining position, likely leading to further centralization.

Second, I probe assumptions around the determinants of legislative strength. I question a common assumption that “strong legislative incumbents make for strong legislatures, and vice versa” (Opalo 2019b, p. 17) and that MP electoral linkage “helps transform the legislature into a lively arena of intra-elite bargaining” (Collord 2018, p. 283). Instead, I find that when MPs are unevenly strong, they are more likely to pursue private bargains than institutional ones. Counter-intuitively, it is weak legislators who build strong institutions.

Third, I question the consensus that CDFs are always slush funds for legislators, instead showing how MP discretion varies between and within countries based on the nature of elite bargains. An extensive literature highlights how MPs use CDFs to win votes (Keefer and Khemani 2009; J. Harris and Posner 2019; Ejdemyr, Kramon, and A. L. Robinson 2018; Opalo 2022). However, when I zoom out to explore which MPs have access to discretionary CDFs in the first place, a different pattern emerges. CDFs are neither automatically nor uniformly under the control of legislators. Instead, central actors often retain significant

discretion over implementation. Identifying executive manipulation in CDFs is a hard test of my theory, as allocations are transparent and highly publicized compared to typical clientelistic transfers. I also highlight that CDF allocations are not always a sign of legislative strength. Finally, this paper provides new data on a several indicators of subnational fiscal performance in Zambia and Malawi.

The paper proceeds as follows. After this introduction, the second section outlines a theory of elite bargaining, showing how MP's ability to monopolize electoral intermediation allows them to make credible demands for targeted discretion. The third section reviews the literature on constituency development funds, highlighting the mechanisms through which executives manipulate their implementation. Fourth, I introduce the cases of Malawi and Zambia, showing how colonial district creation locked in the role of MPs as electoral mediators in Zambia but not Malawi. The fifth section offers an empirical analysis of constituency development funds in each country. In Zambia, MPs serving as electoral intermediaries benefitted from higher disbursements, fewer incomplete projects, and faster approvals. In Malawi, MPs collectively used CDFs as a bargaining chip to pass budgets in the legislature, but their marginal position in district administration means that electoral rents were channeled through alternative channels. A final section discusses implications and suggests directions for future research.

4.2 Attribution and Coalitions in Developing Democracies

In post-colonial African countries, subnational politics have been at the core of political contestation since independence. Leaders struggle to project power over their entire territory, and rely on local elites to mediate relationships (Herbst 2000; Mamdani 1996). Tensions between geographically distinct groups have shaped economic policy across the continent for decades (Bates 1981; Boone 2024). National leaders must bring together a constellation of elites to stay in power.

My model of elite bargains relies on several stylized facts about multiparty politics in the developing world. *Voters* value democracy for the ability to replace bad leaders, and have ratcheting expectations for politicians who can deliver local development (Bleck and Van De Walle 2013; Hern 2019; Afrobarometer 2023). Consequently, *legislators* face incumbency

disadvantage, and seek access to state resources to cultivate a personal vote (Bowles and Marx 2022; Choi 2018; Opalo 2019a). *Executives* can rely on electoral support from a home region, but need to make inroads elsewhere (Sishuwa 2024; Resnick 2022; Boone 2024; Weghorst and Lindberg 2013).

4.2.1 Elite Electoral Intermediaries

In a multiparty context, leaders must win over organized groups to keep power. Without clear class cleavages, political parties in developing countries typically emerge from regional strongholds and must build coalitions beyond their core supporters (Boone 2024; Arriola 2012; Baldwin 2014; Sishuwa 2021; Horowitz 2019). While democratic consolidation remains uneven, in many countries, multiparty competition means that elections are a real constraint on government behaviour. Leaders consider the geography of political coalitions when designing tax (Kasara 2007), land (Baldwin 2014), agriculture (Kim 2017; Bates 1981), and infrastructure (Manger, Cormier, and Winter 2026; Briggs 2021; Burgess et al. 2015) policies.

Mediating elites operate across domains, exercising political, religious, ritual, aesthetic, coercive, and economic power (Handley 2024). Many individuals carry power across domains, such as Malawian musician-turned-politician Lucius Banda or pastor Nevers Mumba, leader of the Zambian Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD). While “organized capacity” can take many forms, but it is often quite physical. One of my interlocutors put it plainly, claiming that all you need to make it as a politician in Zambia is a canter (medium duty truck) [L016]. A truck is a literal platform- for carrying bodies to morgues, speeches over the heads of crowds, and voters to ballot boxes. These all build connection and credibility, allowing elites to (often literally) deliver votes for the executive.

Voters support these elites because they can deliver the spoils of victory. Voters are not unsophisticated, they support elites because their organizing capacity goes both ways: it is a strong signal of future access state resources (Kramon 2016; Baldwin 2013). Elites receive official appointments to discretionary bodies and carry informal influence over public good delivery and de facto distribution (Nathan 2016; Basurto, Dupas, and J. Robinson 2020; Jablonski and Seim 2023). The ability to deliver votes and spoils is mutually reinforcing, bringing these elites to the center of the political system.

Elites will gain concessions when they can monopolize local vote delivery. They extract concessions from the centre by threatening to withdraw their endorsement, refusing to have ‘their people’ support the executive. If there are competing groups, the executive can turn to an alternative intermediary- if the chief won’t endorse them, the pastor will. Competition limits the ability of any single actor to cause trouble for the executive. Conversely, when there are fewer credible options for delivering votes, then executives will need to concede more to intermediaries.

Leaders most commonly win over these elites with cabinet appointments (Arriola 2009). However, number of portfolios is limited, and positions are typically not awarded until after an election. Shuffling in outsiders is also likely to anger the loyalists who have journeyed with the leader for a long time, and voters expect a degree of regional representation. Most importantly, the promise of a future cabinet position does not help a candidate win elections. Campaigns are very expensive, on the order of a year’s wages as an MP (Chizonde et al. 2024; Wahman and Seeberg 2022; Arriola et al. 2022). Parties do little to support their candidates: at best, politicians can expect to receive branded party material like chitenge cloths (Wahman and Seeberg 2022). Nonetheless, voters have high expectations, they expect candidates to deliver both private transfers and public goods: school fees, funeral costs, road repairs, school desks. State funds for local public goods defray these costs. Therefore, when relying on intermediaries, executives must enable them to build a personal constituency.

However, the regime’s need for intermediaries is not uniform across the country. Parties and leaders typically emerge from a home region, where they have the history, connections, and electoral machinery required to win (Choi 2018). In these areas, parties exercise regional hegemony, and the party leader does not need intermediaries because they can deliver local votes for their presidency. In strongholds, executives can push favoured candidates through primaries without worrying about a loss of support. Instead, they use resources to limit rival politicians’ ability to cultivate a personal constituency. However, outside strongholds, they need to rely on elite intermediaries.

When building coalitions, executives face a challenge: they must limit discretion in their strongholds while conceding elsewhere. Successful party leaders will maximize their votes while limiting the power and resources conceded to those who enabled their rise.

4.2.2 Legislative Strength

Postcolonial countries inherited intentionally underdeveloped legislatures. In Anglophone Africa, parliaments evolved from colonial Legislative Councils, which were designed to give settlers only a consultative role in governance (Barkan 2009). After independence, legislative representation was broadened, but strong executives quickly came to fill the gap left by colonial rulers. Nonetheless, some countries have developed assertive and independent legislatures while others remain marginal to political life. Why is this?

Legislative strength is the ability of parliaments to constrain executives and serve as an arena for resolving elite conflict. A strong legislature can limit executive power by obstructing bills, rejecting budgets, and de-legitimizing executive authority. Scholarship highlights both organizational and rational-functional explanations for legislative strength. On one hand, legislatures evolve, slowly acquiring “value and stability” (Huntington 1968). Over time, members of legislatures learn skills and establish norms that increase the institution’s influence. Organizational institutionalization involves tightening boundaries on membership, gaining complexity, and moving from discretion to rule-based decision making (Polsby 1968). Barkan (2009)’s work on reformist coalitions reveals patterns of organizational development in Africa.

For other scholars, legislative strength is functional bargain, reflecting the underlying power of elites (Myerson 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; North and Weingast 1989). Executives maintain power by making credible concessions to a group of elites who could collectively remove them from power. For example, the structure of state power can also influence legislative strength: Where the state does not have access to central rents, weak ruling parties may lead to fractious party systems and assertive parliaments (Collord 2024).

Recent scholarship draws on both these traditions. Opalo (2019a) suggests that legislatures which were subordinated to strong executives in the early independence period evolved procedural norms that persisted into the multiparty era. After the transition, these legislatures were able act as a focal point for elite bargains.

I follow Opalo and Collard in contrasting party and parliamentary bargains, suggesting that when leaders fail to coordinate elite interests through the party, MPs are more likely to act collectively in the legislature. However, when making policy prescriptions, both authors

suggest that “strong incumbents” who act as “linkers” are the key to stronger legislatures. This assumes that strong legislators beget strong legislatures. However, If the ability to cultivate a personal constituency is uneven, then the incentives for collective action break down. This kind of uneven autonomy is exactly what to expect from the kinds of coalitions that African leaders must build to win power in the multiparty era. In the next section, I explore how uneven legislator strength shifts the politics of constituency development funds.

4.3 Constituency Development Funds

Over a quarter of African countries have adopted some kind of constituency development fund (Collord 2018). While nomenclature varies, CDFs are a type of subnational transfer characterised by:

- **Local Deliberation:** Identification of spending priorities occurs through bottom-up mechanisms.
- **Equal Allocation:** Resources are allocated from the center relatively equally across all electoral constituencies.
- **Parallel Governance:** Resources are administered outside of the line ministries or departments responsible for development spending. While nomenclature varies, these policies can be identified by three common factors:

In sum, constituency development funds are *a fiscal transfer implemented in parallel to typical decision making structures, relying on citizen input to identify local interventions to be completed in each electoral constituency.*

This definition is a departure from previous work in that it does not assume that CDFs are always under legislators’ control.¹ While CDFs are usually adopted as a concession to parliaments (Tsubura 2013; Collord 2018; Opalo 2022; International Budget Partnership 2010; K. Harris 2021), when executives are in a position of strength, they rarely dismantle

¹Widely cited definitions include Keefer and Khemani (2009): “[CDFs] are budgetary resources [allocated] directly to individual legislators to spend on public works in their constituencies” (p. 99), And the International Budget Partnership (2010):

CDFs are funding arrangements that channel money from the central government directly to electoral constituencies for local infrastructure projects. Decisions about how these funds are allocated are heavily influenced by members of parliament.

them. Of the 20 countries identified by International Budget Partnership as having CDFs in 2010, 18 still operating in 2026 (International Budget Partnership 2010; van Zyl 2010). Instead, executives attempt to bend the rules to limit the degree to which legislators can use the funds to cultivate a local constituency.² CDFs are explicitly acknowledged as a means to lower the costs of incumbent MPs to defeat electoral rivals (Opalo 2022; Chiweza 2010; Bowles and Marx 2022). Consequently, the push and pull between legislators and executives has become a hallmark of CDF politics.

How do politicians battle for discretion while maintaining the overall policy? Shifting context and rule ambiguity allow leaders to “redirect institutions or policies toward purposes beyond their original intent” (Hacker, Pierson, and Thelen 2015, p. 180). Public opinion matters in these debates, with leaders adopting competing rhetorical frames to justify their position. MPs point to the democratic legitimacy of local deliberation, while executives highlight the need to reign in ‘unaccountable’ and corrupt MPs. Changes in the legislation, governance, composition, and implementation of CDFs can all shift the degree of MP discretion. I outline several mechanisms through which manipulation occurs:

First, CDFs may be renegotiated through legal challenges. Many national constitutions enshrine a separation of powers, restricting policy implementation to the executive branch (van Zyl 2010; Barkan and Mattes 2014). Legislators may attempt to amend constitutions to allow CDFs, while executives may use constitutional checks to retain control. Courts act as a referee, resolving competing claims. In Kenya, the CDF became the National Government CDF (NGCDF) after courts declared that project execution outside the responsibility of members of the legislative branch. Court rulings can shift responsibility for CDFs to local governments or line ministries.

Another area of contention is the annual allocation. In some countries, legislatures have institutionalized CDFs by making allocations a proscribed share of national revenue. In

²CDFs often operate as an electoral subsidy for MPs. Previous scholarship highlights the way that MPs successfully use CDF resources for electoral benefit (J. Harris and Posner 2019; Felitse and Owusu-Mensah 2024; Bowles and Marx 2022). My argument also assumes an institutional context in which MPs are motivated to access CDF. In India, legislators “pass on pork” in strongholds where voters are strongly attached to parties and MPs can coast (Keefer and Khemani 2009). However, Keefer and Khemani develop their theory in the context of Indian parliamentary democracy, where voters have a single vote for national government. In Zambia and Malawi, as in many third wave democracies, voters elect both local MPs and a president. As outlined above, legislative candidates can rarely coast, they cannot rely on party labels to win elections.

others, CDFs are subject to debate in the annual budget process. MPs can demand annual increases as a condition of passing the budget. On the other hand, leaders often initiate benchmark allocations (eg. one million per constituency) which can be quickly eroded in high inflation environments.

Leaders also take advantage of rule ambiguity to shift the arena or actors in which decision making occurs. CDFs are particularly vulnerable to this kind of challenge, as the parallel structure of administration and “bottom up” project identification is by definition outside of the standard operating procedures of bureaucracies. CDFs are often governed by a set of administrative guidelines which the regime can alter at will. Leaders can change the composition of the decision making committees, packing them with political appointees or watering down MP influence. They can also add and remove layers of red tape, requiring additional actors to sign off on projects or burdensome procurement policies. Revised guidelines often change the composition of CDFs, moving away from local infrastructure toward individual transfers. In many places, CDFs have gained earmarks for school bursaries, cooperative loans, or local administration. These all shift the degree to which CDFs serve as electoral subsidies for MPs, as local public goods are often the most effective way to maintain a personal following, while transfers cultivate party loyalty.

Finally, executives may turn to bureaucratic forbearance to informally limit implementation. Leaders can delay some MPs with slow approvals while ensuring that others succeed through constant monitoring and fast communication. In Pakistan, ruling party MPs received higher CDF disbursements, opposition MPs citing red tape as the key barrier to getting funds released (Malik 2021). Large releases can be a poison pill for MPs: boosting politicians’ popularity as they break ground on local projects, then eroding support as weak implementation capacity limits progress. For example, a concrete foundation is exciting after one month but disappointing after twelve.

By design, CDFs create a shortcut, a separate channel for discretionary spending outside of the bureaucracy. The very quality that enables local accountability and responsive delivery exposes the policy to manipulation. While MPs can benefit from CDFs to cultivate a network of support, this is not automatic or uniform. Instead, the degree of MP discretion is the result of elite bargains. I now outline my expectation of these bargains in the context of postcolonial parliamentary democracies.

4.3.1 Expectations

Formulaic transfers give incumbents a valuable tool to deliver tangible benefits to secure their reelection (Opalo 2019a). For MPs, control over CDFs means that they can cultivate a personal vote, defraying their private cost of staying in power. For executives, conceding CDF discretion is a double edged sword, empowering crucial intermediaries as potential rivals.

In this context, the relative strength of the legislature and legislators will determine leader's strategy. Where MPs are central intermediaries, they will demand large transfers. However, without capacity to formalize these demands through legislative action, concessions will be targeted: informal and uneven. Where parliaments can act collectively, they will demand uniform and formal concessions. However, when legislators are not crucial to delivering electoral victory, these concessions will likely remain small. These are the two scenarios which occur in my cases.³

Table 4.2: Variation in Bargaining Types

	MPs Peripheral	MPs Central
Strong Legislature	Legislative Tolls (Malawi 2006-2025)	<i>Devolution/Federalism</i>
Weak Legislature	<i>Authoritarian Exclusion</i>	Targeted Concessions (Zambia 2016-2026)

In the next section, I contrast two cases where CDF has been central to legislative-executive bargains, but in different ways. In Zambia, MPs are central actors, and executives manipulate CDF administration to ensure that key electoral allies benefit most from the fund. In Malawi, a strong legislature has repeatedly gained increases to CDF in exchange for passing legislation, but MPs are cut off from funds used for electoral targeting.

³In the other two quadrants, I do not expect CDFs to be central to political bargains. If MPs are important local intermediaries and the legislature is also powerful, I expect large and ongoing concessions to regions, along the lines of devolution or federalism. CDFs may exist, but are unlikely to be a primary site of political contestation, as in Nigeria. Conversely, where the executive can win elections without support from any other set of elites, there is little reason for them to make concessions. This is what happened in Uganda, where Museveni dismantled the CDF in 2011 as he consolidated power.

4.4 Cases

A key challenge in testing this theory is that MP intermediation is endogenous to past political competition. Strong leaders will eliminate rivals to entrench their position. I address this by leveraging a historical contingency that produced variation in the relationship between members of parliament and other political elites in two countries: constituency-district congruence in Zambia and Malawi.

These two countries make for a strong comparison, with overlapping ethnic groups and similar colonial history. The border between them follows the lake Malawi watershed (see Figure 4.1), a colonial artifact that split many political communities (Posner 2004). Colonial powers established administrative districts of similar magnitudes in each country. However, due to Malawi’s higher population density, electoral constituencies were much smaller. Consequently, Zambia’s electoral constituencies are largely contiguous with administrative districts, but in Malawi there are multiple constituencies per district. This difference has led to MPs in Zambia being center of public resource distribution, while their peers in Malawi are just one of several types of sub-district elites.

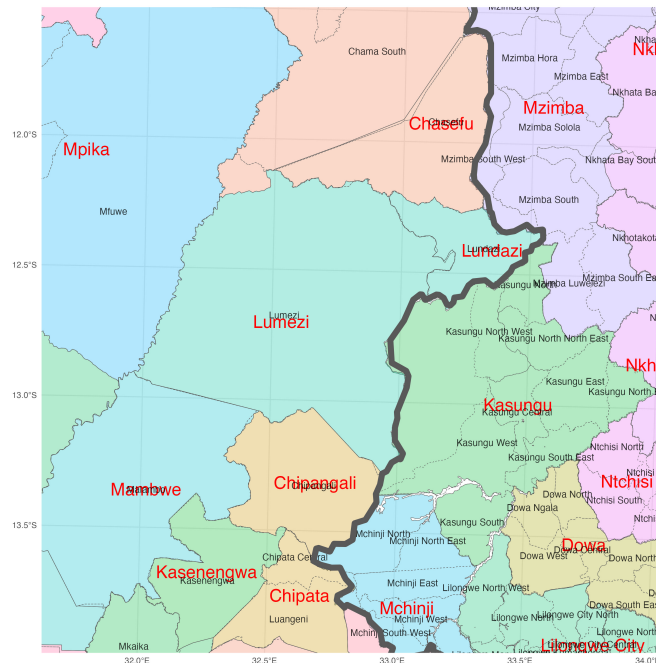


Figure 4.1: Administrative Districts (Red) and Electoral Constituencies (Gray) contiguous in Zambia (Left) but not Malawi (Right)

This difference shifts the types of concessions that MPs in each country can extract from the executive. In Zambia, MPs are the main actor for delivering local votes, and party leaders target key intermediaries with state resources to build coalitions. In Malawi, MPs cannot credibly threaten to take voters out of the ruling coalition, and so are peripheral to the distribution of discretionary funds. However, ignoring MPs is not without costs for executives, as they are often elected without a parliamentary majority. This allows legislatures to take advantage of procedural chokepoints to extract collective concessions from the executive.

4.4.1 Background

Zambia and Malawi share a history of precolonial political units that cross contemporary borders. Both were colonized by the British as Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. For several decades, the countries were party of a single colonial entity: The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Both countries achieved independence peacefully in 1964 and had short periods of democracy followed by one party rule under Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia) and Hastings Kamuzu Banda (Malawi). Zambia transitioned to multiparty democracy in 1991 and Malawi in 1993. In both countries, multiparty competition was cemented after popular mobilization against presidential third-term ambitions. Since then, both have seen several peaceful transfers of power between parties representing regional coalitions. MP defection, floor crossing, and party coalitions (and breakups) are regular features of the political landscape in both countries (Sishuwa 2025; Kadima and Lembani 2006; Momba 2005).

World Bank estimates put the population of both countries at approximately 21 million. In both countries, most of citizens are farmers: 55% in Zambia and 65% in Malawi.⁴ Zambia is significantly wealthier, with per capita income of USD 1187 compared to Malawi's USD 522.⁵ This is driven by Zambia's significant copper reserves and industrial workforce in the north. Median income is quite similar, with daily income \$1.92 in Malawi and \$1.68 in Zambia.⁶ Both countries had the majority of their external debt cancelled under HIPC in

⁴<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?locations=ZM-MW>

⁵<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=ZM-MW>

⁶Consumption-based measure, PPP adjusted 2021 USD, from <https://pip.worldbank.org/poverty-calculator>

2006. Donors also have much more leverage in the Malawian economy, amounting to 54.7% of government expenditure compared to just 19.6% in Zambia⁷.

In both countries, politics is marked by a chaotic tumble of defections and alliances. Parties are ephemeral vehicles that form and dissolve around agreements between elites. Yet the role of MPs and legislatures between the countries is very different. In Zambia, MPs play an important role in cementing the ruling coalition, but parliament itself is relatively weak. In Malawi, individual MPs have little influence, but the legislature as a whole often plays a role in constraining the executive.

This difference can be explained by the distinct role that MPs play in local administration. In both countries, the unit at which public investment and service delivery occurs is the district, which has devolved responsibility for health, education, agricultural extension, and other functions. Districts are the main channel through which central governments interact with citizens. In Zambia, electoral constituencies are contiguous with districts, and MPs are key district-level players. In Malawi, each district has many constituencies, and MPs are one of many actors mediating the state. While ongoing delimitation is endogenous to existing power relations (Grossman and Lewis 2014), the initial conditions were set by colonial administrators and perpetuated by the contrasting ideologies of postcolonial leaders.

At independence, Malawi had 23 districts⁸, and Zambia had 43⁹. These districts were established by British administrators early in the colonial period. Zambia's districts are somewhat larger, but are broadly comparable with Malawi's, reflecting the logic of colonial administration rather than local conditions Figure 4.2. By contrast, electoral constituencies, which are based on the number of citizens, are much smaller in Malawi, which is much more densely populated than Zambia. At independence, Zambia had 1.7 MPs per constituency, while Malawi had 2.3.

While geographic differences account for the initial difference in constituency district-congruence, the ideologies of postcolonial leaders entrenched the role of MPs as intermediaries. In Zambia, Kaunda's socialist-inspired Zambian Humanism directly challenged the authority of traditional leaders. Administrative districts became the key channel for

⁷ODA averaged over 100% of government expenditure from 2012 to 2017. World Bank

⁸<https://statoids.com/umw.html>

⁹<https://statoids.com/uzm.html>

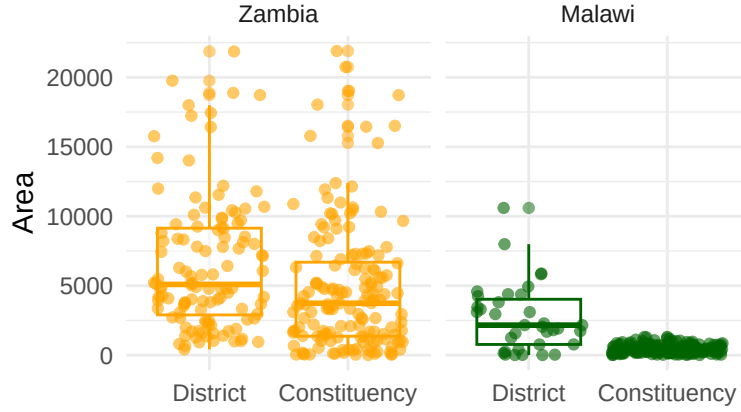


Figure 4.2: District and Constituency Size in Zambia and Malawi

distributing state resources, and thus district delimitation played an important role in distributing state funds. By contrast, Banda’s conservatism was much more deferential to both traditional authorities and the inherited structures of colonial indirect rule. Unlike Kaunda, who abolished the house of chiefs, Banda leveraged traditional leaders for control over the hinterlands.¹⁰ These historical differences have created significant differences in the role of MPs in delivering development to citizens.

4.4.2 MP Linkages

Variation in district-congruence shapes the role of MPs as intermediaries. The average Zambian district has 1.36 MPs, while the average Malawian district has 5.51. The vast majority (75%) of Zambia’s districts cover a single constituency, and there are just 6 out of 116 districts with more than three MPs. In Malawi, MPs are one of several sets of sub-district elites, while in Zambia they are the only game in town.

Table 4.3: Subnational Elites in Zambia and Malawi¹¹

	Zambia	Malawi
MPs	156	193
Administrative Districts	116	35 ¹²
Councillors	1858	462

¹⁰It is unlikely that this variation were driven by ethnic geography, as neither Banda’s Chewa base (25%) or Kaunda’s Bemba base (34%) were sufficient for majority rule. If ethnic geography drove strategy, we would expect a multi-ethnic strategy in Malawi, where the Chewas were an even smaller share of the overall population.

	Zambia	Malawi
Traditional Authorities	288	145 (up to 400 ¹³)

This plays out in the relationship between MPs and two other groups that executives might rely on to deliver votes: councillors and traditional leaders.

In both Zambia and Malawi, district councils have an average of ten members. Constituency incongruence means that there are 2.4 councillors for every MP in Malawi, compared to 11.9 to in Zambia. Malawian councillors win elections in wards that are almost half the population of an electoral constituency, making council seats an effective stepping stone to national politics. Unsurprisingly, Malawian MPs have a long history of bitter rivalry with councillors. They have repeatedly attempted to limit councillors power, refusing to legislate for council elections in 1998 and for councillor salaries in 2005 (Chinsinga 2005; Chinsinga 2008).

By contrast, district councillors in Zambia are usually MPs' subordinates. MPs sponsor ward-level campaigns for councillors, and whoever wins the legislative election typically wins most council races. Aligned councillors act as ward level proxies for the MP [L008, L116]. With 11 councillors per MP, councillors have a tougher time making the case that they can deliver votes at the same level as MPs.

A similar dynamic plays out for traditional authorities. There are 0.75 traditional authorities for every MP in Malawi, and 1.8 in Zambia. In Malawi, traditional authorities are key partners in direct government provision, while in Zambia they are co-producers with MPs.

¹¹As of 2024. Sources: https://www.sng-wofi.org/country_profiles/zambia.html; web.archive.org/web/20250917062859/https://mec.org.mw/BoundaryReview; <https://www.policyvault.africa/wp-content/uploads/policy/ZMB572.pdf>; <https://web.archive.org/web/20250503113421/https://localgov.gov.mw/chiefs.php>;

¹²I use the administrative divisions reported by the National Local Government Finance Committee, which separates city and town administrations, as this is the level at which finances are managed, rather than the 28 elected councils. There are 6.8 MPs in each elected district. Delimitation in Malawi (2025) and Zambia (2026) may change these numbers.

¹³Chiefs in Malawi are part of a parallel administrative structure which includes 7 paramount chiefs, 131 senior chiefs, 145 TAs, and 117 sub-TAs, along with thousands of group village heads and village heads (Ministry of Local Government, Malawi 2025). The traditional authorities are the most comparable to Zambia.

This difference is evidenced in the enabling legislation in Zambia (1965) and Malawi (1967). Both Chiefs Acts begin their definition of chiefs' function with exactly the same language:

the traditional functions of his office under African customary law in so far as the discharge of such functions is not contrary to the Constitution or or any written law and is not repugnant to natural justice or morality (10.1.a in Zambia; 7.a in Malawi)

In the Zambian act, Chiefs are then assigned “such functions as may be conferred or imposed upon him by this Act” (*Chiefs Act 1965*, 10.1.b), which essentially amount to keeping peace in their jurisdictions. By contrast, the Malawian act, adopted two years later, adds new language, giving chiefs responsibility for tax collection (7.d) and “to assist in the general administration of the District in which his area of jurisdiction is situate and for such purpose to carry out such functions as the District Commissioner may require” (*Chief's Act 1967*, 7.e). Amendments to these acts in 1996 (Zambia) and 2014 (Malawi) have not changed these definitions. Consequently, TAs in Malawi continue to serve as a parallel structure for local administration.

In Malawi, chiefs must “serve the government of the day” (Kayuni et al. 2019). When asked about their interpretation of this mandate, 86% of traditional leaders reported that they directly mediate between citizens and the government and just 3% selected “working with MPs” (Kayuni et al. 2019). Chiefs are often called upon to distribute government benefits such as fertilizer (Basurto, Dupas, and J. Robinson 2020) or tin sheets (Carlson and Seim 2020). Traditional leaders are integral to Malawi's system of local deliberative bodies: they serve as chairs of Village Development Committees (VDCs) and Area Development Committees (ADCs) (Cammack 2017). These bodies are responsible for prioritizing development needs, significantly shaping district development plans and local public investment. This leads to an “administrative duality” (Kayuni et al. 2019) or “functional fragmentation” (O'Neil and Cammack 2014), in which the flow of resources and responsibility is not concentrated in any particular actor. Nonetheless, traditional leaders may be effective electoral intermediaries. Kayuni et al. (2019) conclude “Chiefs influence the electoral outcome by deciding on who should have access to the electorate and who should be closed out to reaching constituents” (p. 50).

In Zambia, traditional leaders play a smaller role relative to MPs. Chiefdoms almost always fall within constituency boundaries, with the average constituency having 3 traditional areas (Baldwin 2013). Baldwin’s survey of traditional leaders finds that public goods are co-produced. She concludes: “in rural Zambia, chiefs and MPs must work jointly to provide local public goods and services, with the MPs providing financing, and the chief providing information” (p.798). Her survey experiment shows that citizens do not fear that Chiefs can cut them off from state benefits. Chiefs do play an important role in delivering public goods, but not in competition with MPs Baldwin (2019). Where Kayuni et al. (2019) highlight duality in Malawi, Baldwin’s work in Zambia emphasizes mutuality.

As a result of their more central role as intermediaries, Zambian MPs have more freedom to cultivate a personal vote and less dependence on party support. Strong politicians are able to win over voters who don’t support their party’s presidential candidate. I measure this by subtracting a party’s presidential candidate vote share from the MP’s vote share in each constituency. For example, in 2019, 46% of Mangochi East voters supported the DPP’s presidential candidate Arthur Peter Mutharika, while 49% voted for the DPP’s parliamentary candidate Francesca Masamba. Therefore, Masamba outperformed her party by 3%. Figure 4.3 compares the performance of elected MPs in the 2019 (Malawi) and 2021 (Zambia) elections. In both cases, MPs perform worse than presidents on average, but there is a difference between countries. The average Malawian MP performs 16% worse than their party candidate, while their Zambian counterparts are just 9% weaker.¹⁴

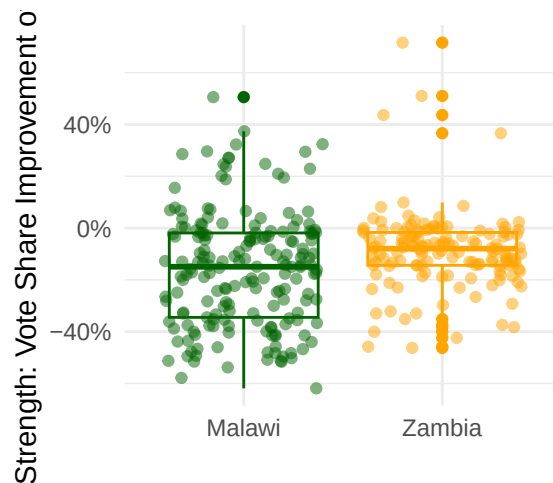


Figure 4.3: MP Vote Share Improvement over Party

¹⁴Significant difference in means (df= 320, p = 0.0006238)

Another sign of MPs' peripheral role in Malawi is the number who run without any party affiliation. Malawian MPs who affiliate with a party during the campaign period can expect little in the way of material support (Wahman and Seeberg 2022). While the constitution requires that MPs who defect *from* a party when to win a byelection, independent MPs face no constraints to *joining* the ruling party¹⁵. The consequence is that many MPs run as independents and join whatever party wins (Cammack 2017). In 2014, there were more independent MPs (52) than there were for the president's party (50).

While independent legislators are often seen as having a strong personal constituency, in Malawi, the increasing share of independents reflects the inability of parties to recruit and retain MPs as local intermediaries Figure 4.4. independent MPs show no higher vote shares or electoral margins than party-affiliated MPs (see Figure 4.25). For example, in the 2025 election, the DPP made major inroads with voters in the north, but had very few MPs elected from the region.

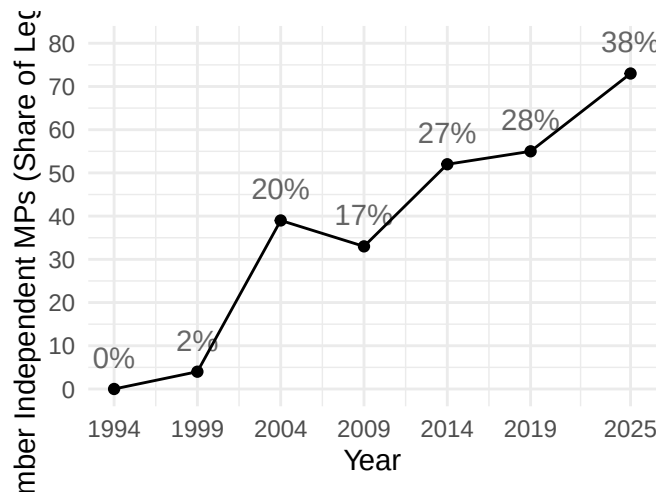


Figure 4.4: Independent MPs Elected, Malawi

Even where MPs can dominate other subnational elites, their relationship with national leaders is uneven. Many parties emerge from regional strongholds where leaders can rely on party labels or personal reputation to deliver votes. By contrast, outside of these strongholds, they need alternatives. This means that they cannot drive a hard bargain with potential intermediaries.¹⁶

¹⁵As of 2016, this is also true in Zambia.

¹⁶This also explains why Zambia's western elite gain such significant concessions: fusing traditional, political, and economic power, they are the only game in town for both voters and executives.

In both countries, legislators, district councillors, and traditional leaders are all powerful players often involved in patronage disbursement. However, because of electoral boundaries and colonial history, MPs in Zambia are closely aligned with district boundaries, so their leverage in delivering local votes is higher. By contrast, MPs in Malawi compete with other elite structures.

4.4.3 Legislative Strength

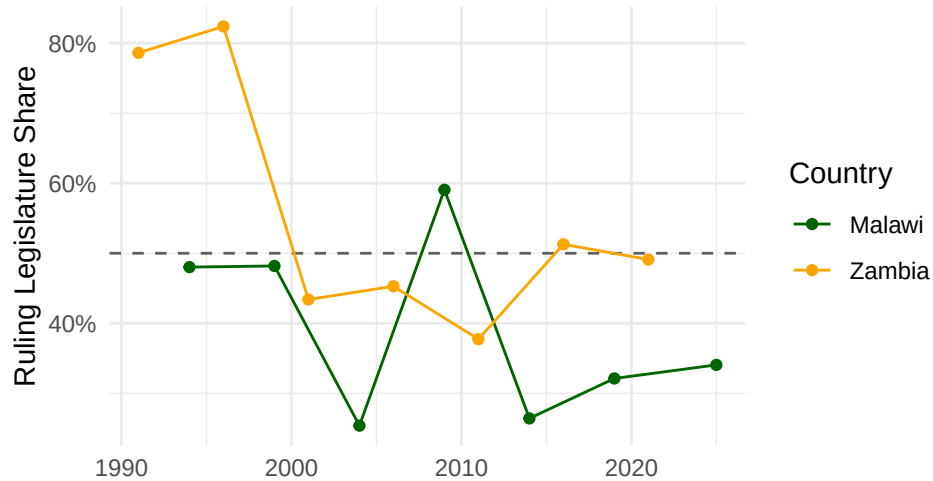
Measurement of legislative strength tracks both formal rules and actual outcomes. Fish and Kroenig (2009) examine de jure powers outlined in constitutions, determining the degree of executive influence, institutional autonomy, special powers and institutional capacity. The International Budget Partnership (2023) falls somewhere in between, assessing legislative budget oversight by checking for the delivery of outputs like performance reports and audits. Opalo (2019a) uses an outcome measure, tracking the proportion of executive-initiated bills rejected by parliaments.

Across every measure, Malawi outperforms Zambia. In Fish and Kroenig (2009)’s Parliamentary Powers Index, which measures legislative strength on paper, Zambia scores 0.28 and Malawi 0.38 (higher than Kenya and Tanzania, both 0.31). In actual budget oversight outcomes (International Budget Partnership 2023), Zambia’s legislature scores 33/100, and Malawi at 47/100 (equal to Kenya). Barkan, Mattes, et al. (2010) reports that Zambia’s parliament passed 91% of proposed bills (22/24) while Malawi’s passed just 65% (15/23).

Zambia’s MPs are much stronger than Malawi but have they been unable to strengthen their legislature? This is because Zambian executive’s party-centered deal making undercut legislative development, while Malawian leaders’ reliance on alternative brokers incentivized collective action for MPs.

In Zambia, MPs are *the* key actor at the district level. MPs have significant leeway to bargain their way into the ruling coalition. As a result, the ruling party has always enjoyed a legislative majority, and parliament has had little constraining power. By contrast, since Malawi’s post-independence leaders don’t rely on MPs as intermediaries, they often win the popular vote without support from a majority number of politicians.

This changes the nature of legislative bargains. In Zambia, leaders need MPs to deliver presidential votes, so bargaining happens before elections. As seen in Figure 4.5, this has led to Zambian legislatures in which the ruling party has a much stronger representation. On average, Zambian parliaments are 55% ruling party MPs, compared to 39% in Malawi. Just one Malawian legislature has started with a majority (Figure 4.5).



*Does not include floor crossing between legislatures

Figure 4.5: Share of Ruling Party MPs after Elections

The legislature was an impediment to Malawian executives from the start of the multiparty era. Kadima and Lembani (2006) recounts: “In 1994, though the UDF won the election, it won only 85 seats...the two [opposition] parties dominated the legislature...making the UDF government ineffective and the country ungovernable” (p. 123).

A watershed for Malawi’s legislature was the Press Trust Case, in which Muluzi tried to dismantle the Press Trust Corporation, the holding company for HK Banda’s assets and the financial base of the opposition. Opposition MPs staged a walkout, paralyzing parliament by denying quorum. While the case was eventually lost in the supreme court, several scholars point to this event as the genesis of acrimonious relationships between the executive and the legislature (Dulani and Van Donge 2005; Kadima and Lembani 2006; Cammack 2017). Early parliaments also rejected Muluzi’s attempts to appoint additional MPs and twice voted against bills that would have allowed Muluzi to run for a third term (Momba 2005; Dulani and Van Donge 2005). Even after luring MPs across the floor, Muluzi’s majority was never certain. In the first four years of multiparty competition, 19 MPs (10%) died in office,

repeatedly leaving Muluzi without a majority (Momba 2005)¹⁷. Even when executives can lure MPs over the line for party priorities, Malawian parliamentarians have resisted attacks on legislative independence.

By contrast, Zambia’s parliament has always been secondary to the ruling party. During one-party rule, it was not parliament but the ruling party which emerged as the “focal [arena] for intra-elite bargaining over power and the distribution of governance rents” (Opalo 2019b, p. 10). Even after the transition to multiparty democracy, Zambia’s legislature assented to almost everything demanded by the executive. From 1992-2001, it passed more than 90% of executive-initiated bills (Opalo 2019a). While the number of nominated members decreased from 10 to 8 after the transition to multiparty democracy, this practice went unchallenged in subsequent rounds of constitutional reform (National Assembly of Zambia 2021). Parliament only played a peripheral role in denying Chiluba a third term. While Malawi’s legislature repeatedly repudiated Muluzi, in Zambia, civil society spearheaded the challenge, and Chiluba only formally conceded after a party convention.

MP intermediation is not the only determinant of legislative strength. Malawi’s three regions make it more likely that representatives from the other two regions would team up against the executive. Similarly, Malawi’s judiciary is more independent, repeatedly constrain executive ambitions. Both factors (and many others) also shape legislative independence.

Differences in MP linkages and legislative strength have resulted in very different bargaining processes for CDF. I now turn to these two cases, showing how these institutional forms led to targeted concessions in Zambia and legislative tolls in Malawi. Before I do so, I take a brief detour to probe a key assumption of my theory: that citizens attribute CDF projects to MPs more than executives.

4.4.4 CDFs Boost MP Approval

CDFs are only puzzling to the degree that they benefit local legislators rather than the president. I first confirm that CDFs do allow MPs to cultivate a personal vote. To do this, I turn to survey data from the Afrobarometer. The 2024 round (Zambia, n=1,200) included

¹⁷Baldwin (2019) records 27 MP deaths in Zambia between 1994 and 2004, but these did not threaten the MMD majority.

Table 4.4: Results - Politician Approval

	President Approval	MP Approval
CDF Exposure	0.10 (0.07)	0.17** (0.06)
R2	0.224	0.062
Num.Obs.	902	892
Controls	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

a question on whether respondents were *aware of any CDF project in their constituency*. This is a binary variable, and 47% are aware of a project in their constituency. This in itself is quite remarkable- in a huge country of 20 million people and limited state capacity, half of citizens can identify a policy impact from CDF.

The dependent variable is the respondent's approval of President Hichilema or their local MP, measured on a four-point Likert scale. I first run a regression with controls for respondent sex, lived poverty¹⁸, urban residence, and region.

Table 4.4 shows that respondents who know about CDF projects do not rate the president any better, but they do rate MPs more highly. In the appendix, I run additional tests across partisanship and region. The results hold, and reveal that the effect on MP approval is largest in areas where voters are not affiliated to any particular party. CDF spending does indeed benefit local politicians. However, not all MPs are equally free to take advantage of these funds. I now turn to the cases of Zambia and Malawi to show how differences in MPs' role in local administration shift the politicization of CDFs.

4.5 Zambia: Targeted Concessions

Zambia's CDF was the first on the continent, established in 1995. Over the last three decades, executives have repeatedly manipulated the guidelines while maintaining the narrative that CDFs are under MP control. However, repeatedly reforms have eroded MP agency, making successful implementation increasingly dependent on central discretion.

¹⁸I use the Lived Poverty Index (Mattes 2009), which measures the proportion of time in the last year that the respondent has gone without food, water, fuel, medical care, and cash income.

CDF deliberation starts at the ward level, where ward development committees (WDCs) identify potential projects for investment. The main decision making body is the CDF Committee (CDFC), which prioritizes projects from among the ward submissions. Constituency spending then approved by the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, and then implemented by the district council, which has the administrative machinery to implement projects. The CDFC and WDC are responsible for oversight. MPs sit on both committees, which are composed of representatives of different groups in society.

CDF allocations remained minimal until 2006. Allocations grew under Patriotic Front, releases were spotty after Lungu took office in 2015 (Figure 4.6). CDF was not in the public spotlight as the regime spent extensively on centrally directed infrastructure projects such as road projects, hospitals and administrative blocks.

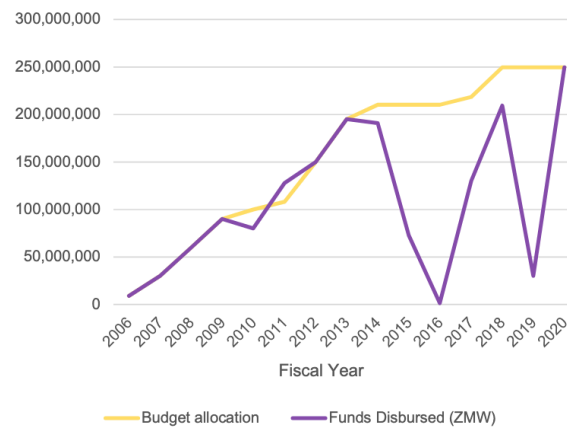


Figure 4.6: CDF Releases 2006-2020, Zambia (Casey et al. 2021)

However, MPs remained protective of the fund. In 2016, president Lungu wanted to force through a constitutional amendment, for which he needed a supermajority in parliament. The legislature used the process to preempt any legal challenge, adding an article formalizing the CDF:

- (1) There is established the Constituency Development Fund. (2) The appropriation of monies to the Constituency Development Fund and the management, disbursement, utilisation and accountability of the Constituency Development Fund shall be prescribed (a162).

However, this was only a partial win. The amendment legalized the parallel delivery structure, but not MP discretion, instead highlighting that management “shall be prescribed” by the executive. This intentionally vague policy created room for future manipulation. Figure 4.6 shows that allocations plateaued after 2016, which represents a significant decline in real terms. There was also significant variation in annual releases. One long-serving parliamentarian told me that during this time he was in opposition, and did not see a drop of CDF money [L116].

The prescription demanded in the constitution took another two years, but in 2018 a new set of guidelines was published. These guidelines maintained the WDC/CDFC structure. Importantly, the MP controlled appointments over most members of the CDFC. More importantly, they set the ground rules for allocation, formalizing much of what had been missing from the earlier guidelines published in 2006.

When Hichilema came into power in 2022, Zambia was in default. He faced a challenge, needing to establish his credibility as a national leader and reward those who brought him to power. He chose the CDF as a tool to achieve these goals.

First, he increased allocations dramatically: from 1.6 million in 2021 to 25.7 million (approx 1 million USD) in 2022, a 16-fold increase (Mumba, Musonda, and Mbewe 2024).¹⁹ This amount continued to rise to 28 million in 2023 and 30 million in 2024. Though this is just 2% of the national budget, for most district councils, it outstrips the entire annual expenditure of district councils. Several of my interviewees suggested that Hichilema increased CDF to allay fears that he would favour Southern province, establishing himself as a nationally legitimate leader [L004; L007; L016].

However, in line with Tsubura (2013), the 2022 increase was also used to interrupt and reset patronage structures. Hichilema released a new set of guidelines which shifted funds away from local public goods, reserving 40% for loans and grants. Before Hichilema’s election, many urban areas were under control of PF-aligned cadres: groups of youth who exerted thug-like control over urban spaces like bus stations. Flashing stacks of cash on social media and engaging in violent rent extraction, the unpopularity of these cadres was a key factor in

¹⁹He also cancelled all public work projects that were less than 80% complete, a move that both interrupted patronage structures, freed resources for CDF, and made CDF the main tool for delivering local infrastructure

turning public sentiment away from the PF (Siachiwena and Wahman 2024). Lungu used “empowerment funds” to channel resources to these cadres.

While the UPND did not rely on cadres to the same degree as the PF, there were a large number of youth who worked as local party brokers who were expecting payoff after Hichilema won office. While some could be accommodated through massive public hiring sprees- in which districts were able to put forward their own candidates- jobs were still short. Interviewees emphasized that pressure from these youths were a major driver behind the change in CDF composition [L016]. Grants and loans to cooperatives as well as skills training bursaries were widely seen as slush funds to channel benefits to supporters. While nominally a revolving funds, “soft” loans to local cooperatives rarely repaid. Others highlighted that the cooperatives were often nominal, with members splitting their share of cash rather than engaging in business together [L105; L109]. The regime needed to ensure that these funds would be winning over the right voters.

Component	Sub-component	Share
Community Projects	5% Disaster Contingency	60%
Youth, Women & Community Empowerment	40% Grants	20%
	60% Soft Loans	
Secondary Boarding and Skills Development		20%
Administration (from total)		5%

Despite generous allocation, many MPs found it difficult to transform these resources into development. They suggested that the increase set them up for failure: by using the language of discretion but adding constraining regulation, MPs were set up for failure. The regime’s presidential delivery unit (PDU) set up a goal of 85% CDF utilization²⁰. By regularly publishing performance audits, implementation failure quickly became a salient political concern. Electoral challengers could highlight money “left on the table” by incumbents who have failed to utilize all the funds.

²⁰<https://www.pdu.gov.zm/cdf>

MPs highlighted several sources of slowdown. First, projects need to go through a lengthy approval process, starting from ward development committees, moving up through CDF Committees at the constituency level and then centrally-appointed local government officers in each province. Second, the guidelines require that districts contract local firms for works, many of whom lack requisite skill to complete large projects like school blocks (L116, L109, L106). Getting projects to the finish line requires hands-on management from local engineers and close scrutiny from administrators. Since the contracts are set up in tranches, failure to meet contractual obligations makes it difficult for local administrators to release funds.

Tension between MPs and administrators can also lead to friction. While MPs do not face the same number of rivals as Malawi, they do often compete with district administrators (DAs).

DAs are centrally appointed, and are often a key representative of the ruling party in opposition constituencies. One MP said that he had no trouble implementing projects because “the DA is from my party” [L111]. However, this is not a given. The DA role is also a key stepping stone to national politics, there may be tensions between centrally appointed DAs and local MPs, who see each other as rivals in the next primary. Interlocutors did not suggest active sabotage, but rather that implementation was so challenging that only an “all hands on deck” approach could lead to success.

Hichilema also centralized discretion through “presidential directives” mandating that CDF be used for a monitoring vehicle, ambulances, and utility arrears. All this came off the top and limited MP control over spending, and limited MPs choice over priorities.

In 2024, the government passed an act amending the structure of the CDF. Nominally, the act added some changes designed to streamline implementation, the most important change was changing the composition of the CDF Committee (CDFC). The new CDFC the district commissioner (a central appointee), and several new positions over which the Local Authority was given appointment power. The table below shows the change, which cut MP appointments from half to just a third²¹. An opposition MP told me that adding these members “brought confusion to the committee” [L109]. Notably, none of these provisions explicitly limit MP discretion. In cases where the MP is aligned with the local administrative

²¹MPs typically play a large role in selecting and supporting councillors. It is expected that most councillors would support the MP, but this may not always be the case- in urban areas, mayors and councils have challenged the locally dominant party.

apparatus, they should still exert significant influence on outcomes. They should expect that the bureaucracy (council, administrative) which now have a larger role in implementation, to play a larger role.

As I show below, this change led to CDF expenditure to be concentrated in places where the executive needed allies.

Position	2018 Appointment	2024 Appointment
Community Representative	MP	WDC Elects // MP
Community Representative	MP	If 2+ WDCs, MP appoints
Councillor	Elected by Councillors	Elected by Councillors
Councillor	Elected by Councillors	Elected by Councillors
Councillor	MP	MP
Chiefs Representative	Chiefs	Chiefs
Chiefs Representative (if 2+ chiefs)	Chiefs	Chiefs
Planning Representative	Ex Officio	Ex Officio
Engineering Representative	Ex Officio	Ex Officio
Civil Society Representative	MP	Local Authority
Religious Representative	MP	MP
MP	Ex Officio	Ex Officio
Finance Representative	Ex Officio	Ex Officio
District Commissioner	—	Ex Officio
Zambia Agency for Persons with Disability Representative	—	ZAPD
Youth Representative	—	Local Authority
Women's Representative	—	Local Authority
“person with proven knowledge and experience in matters relating to development and community service”	—	MP
MP + MP Appointments	6/12	6/18

Was the regime successful in targetting concessions? If so, we should see electorally important constituencies getting preferential treatment. I now turn to constituency-level data on CDF implementation, finding evidence of implementation winning core voters and strong elites.

4.5.1 Data

In Zambia, I expect that the regime used targeted concessions to empower some MPs with discretion: the freedom to to use CDF to establish a personal constituency. I expect the regime to do so through higher, faster disbursements and increased bureaucratic attention.

4.5.1.1 Dependent Variable: MP Discretion

To measure discretion, I draw on detailed audits of CDF flows from 2022-2024 from the Auditor General’s Office and other archival documents and to create four variables: CDF utilization (burn rate), level of disbursement, number of unimplemented projects, and approval time.

Utilization is calculated as the volume of annual spending divided by the overall release. For 2024, the mix of ongoing contracts and loan repayments make it slightly more complex. I calculate utilization by taking the sum of “available funds” and “expenditure” reported for each of four CDF areas: projects, soft loans, grants, and bursaries. This excludes spending on centrally coordinated CDF projects, such as ambulance and desk purchases.

There is significant variation in how much of these funds constituencies have been able to spend. In the first year, constituencies averaged expenditures of 6.8 million, but this rose to about 80% of releases by 2023. Figure 4.7 shows expenditures across constituencies, showing wide variation within and between provinces.

While *burn rate* enjoys the most media attention, my conversation with MPs highlighted that getting funds released is a key barrier. Burn rate is expenditure over disbursement. Therefore, I test the level of fund *disbursement*: the total annual releases across all CDF areas. While this should be equal, I find significant variation between constituencies.

Second, I test the number of *incomplete CDF projects* in each constituency. I expect that MPs with regime favour will have less trouble finishing projects. This also allows me to

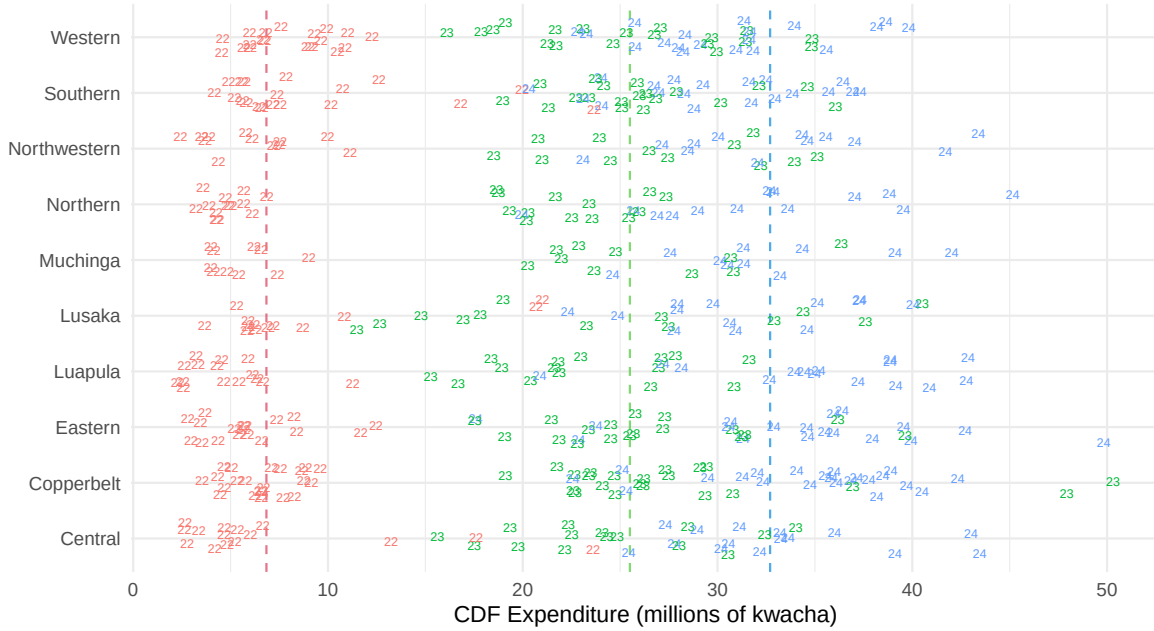


Figure 4.7: CDF Expenditure

draw on a longer dataset, as incomplete CDF projects are published in local government audits going back to 2015²² (Stewart-Wilson 2023). To account for changing CDF budgets through the year and temporal dependence, I also transform the variable into a binary indicator for if a constituency has more unimplemented projects than that year's average.

Finally, I test a core mechanism of my argument by measuring the *approval delays* for CDF spending. My argument is that differences in CDF implementation occur because of selective discretion: the regime is favouring its allies: core voters and potential opposition defectors. However, it could instead be the case that strong MPs who are good at garnering votes are also good at delivering projects. To test if these differences are indeed driven by central discretion, I examine a measure of CDF implementation which is constituency-specific but unrelated to MP capacity: approval time.

Before local councils can begin working on CDF projects, they must have them approved by the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development. Councils submit a list of proposed projects to the Provincial Local Government Officer (PLGO), who send councils a conveyance letter indicating their approval. These letters include the both the date of application and the response. This allows me to identify the *approval time*: how long it

²²Special thanks to Graeme Stewart-Wilson for sharing this data.



Figure 4.8: Conveyance Letter, dates highlighted

takes for the government to approve CDF spending. This time is out of control of the MP but within control of the government.

To collect this data, I check each council website, identifying 124 conveyance letters, from which I extract 109 dates for 60 different constituencies. An example letter is shown in Figure 4.8. I then calculate how many days were between the spending request and its approval, a summary of which is shown in Figure 4.9. On average, funds are approved in 18 days, with a few approved the day that they are submitted, up to a maximum of a five-month delay²³. Since CDF funds must be spent within the year they are approved, two weeks is a meaningful delay.

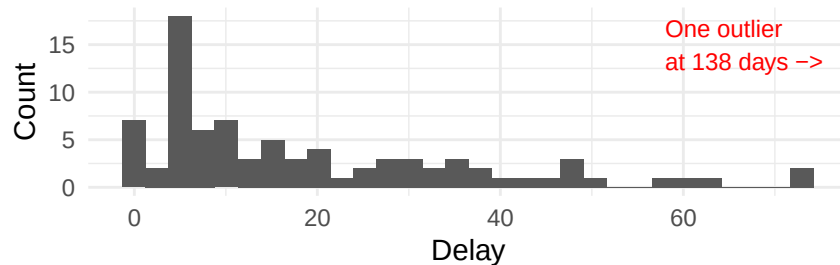


Figure 4.9: Distribution of CDF Approval Length

²³Since this observation is twice as high as any others, I omit it from analysis, but results are robust to inclusion.

4.5.1.2 MP Strength

Not all MPs are equally important. As outlined above, leaders need to build a coalition that mobilizes their base and wins over new partners. Therefore, I expect that leaders will not target all constituencies equally. I expect that the regime will target *strong* opposition MPs, those who have cultivated a strong personal following. I calculate *MP strength* as the difference between MP vote share and the vote share of their party president. Strong MPs outperform their parties, while weak MPs are less popular than their party's presidential candidate.

My main specification uses a continuous measure, but I also create an indicator variable which measures strength above/below the mean. This allows for a binary interaction which is easier to interpret. Data are from the Electoral Commission of Zambia, and I also include changes in members and vote shares for following byelections.

4.5.1.3 Ruling Member

Strength is a double edged sword. Within an executive's party, Strong MPs are potential rivals who can demand more from the centre. Strong opposition MPs have proven they can win elections without their party, and are potential allies in future elections. Therefore, I interact this variable with MP strength to test the degree of targeting. I track whether the MP is part of the ruling party at the time of their election. I draw on records from the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) to determine MP's party.

4.5.1.4 Model

I use standard OLS with robust standard errors. I also include several controls. The main specification is:

$$\begin{aligned} Performance_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 Strength_{it} + \beta_2 Ruling_{it} + \beta_3 Strength_{it} * Ruling_{it} \\ & + \beta_4 Nightlights_{it} + \theta Year + \epsilon_{it} \end{aligned}$$

Where *Performance* is the burn rate or expenditure level of CDFs for constituency *i* in year *t*. *Strength* is the difference between the MPs vote share and their party share, *Ruling* indicates if the MP is part of the ruling party. *Nightlights* is the average nightlight luminosity, a rough

Table 4.7: Results - CDF Disbursement

	Burn Rate	Burn Rate	Disbursements	Disb	Disb
Ruling	0.059*** (0.017)	0.055** (0.021)	0.50 (0.49)	-0.55 (0.61)	1.5* (0.7)
MP Strength	0.0015 (0.0652)	0.024 (0.088)	0.76 (2.05)	7.7* (3.4)	
MP Strength (Dummy)					1.5 (0.8)
Strength x Ruling		-0.035 (0.124)		-11.0** (4.1)	-2.2* (1.0)
Nightlights	-0.00253*** (0.00065)	-0.00253*** (0.00065)	-0.031 (0.019)	-0.032 (0.019)	-0.033 (0.019)
R2	0.773	0.773	0.572	0.582	0.578
Num.Obs.	426	426	424	424	424
Year Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

proxy for the level of development, and *Year* is a set of dummies for each year to account for time trends.

4.5.2 Results

4.5.2.1 Disbursement

If we focus on the regime's preferred metric of spending as a percent of release (burn rate), ruling party MPs slightly outperform their peers, using around 6% more of disbursed funds than opposition MPs (Model 1). There is no interactive effect (Model 2).

However, this masks differences in the volume of funds spent. When I examine actual disbursements, ruling MPs lose their advantage (Model 3). When I interact party with MP strength, the relationship reappears, but not for everyone. MPs who outperform their party get more CDF funding, but only if they are outside the ruling party. Figure 4.10 shows predicted disbursement across constituency types. The left panel shows clearly that weak opposition MPs have less funding released (Model 5). The right panel shows similar results using a continuous measure of MP strength (Model 4). There is also some evidence that for ruling party MPs, strong MPs get *less* CDF disbursement.

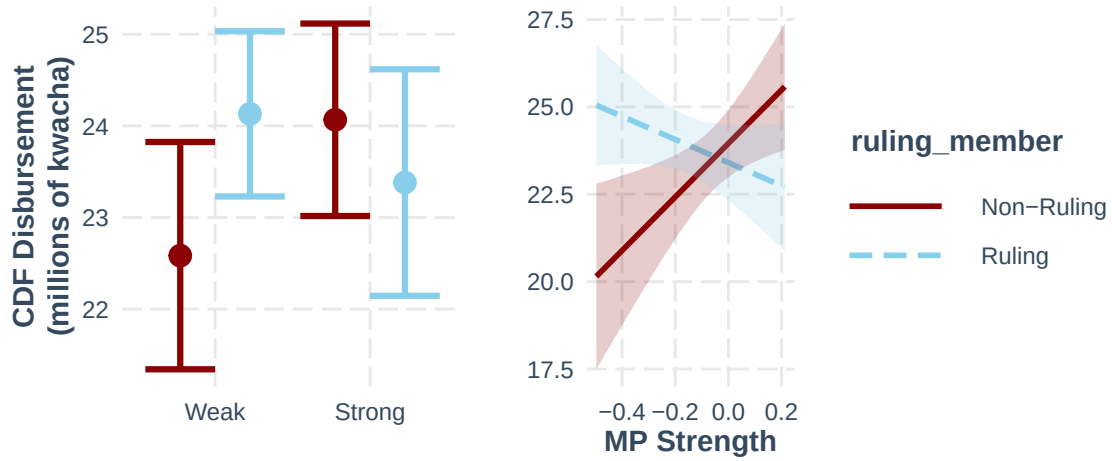


Figure 4.10: CDF Disbursements

Table 4.8: Results - Unimplemented Projects

	Binary	Binary	Count	Count
Ruling	-0.081 (0.102)	0.062 (0.119)	-0.058 (0.120)	0.062 (0.154)
MP Strength	0.13 (0.33)	-0.62 (0.42)	0.038 (0.356)	-0.73+ (0.39)
Strength x Ruling		1.50* (0.66)		1.29+ (0.73)
Nightlights	-0.00086 (0.00343)	-0.0015 (0.0035)	-0.0045 (0.0033)	-0.0049 (0.0033)
RMSE	0.46	0.46	6.73	6.75
Log.Lik.	-494.783	-492.666	-1926.798	-1925.542
Num.Obs.	813	813	813	813
Year Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y

+ $p < 0.08$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

4.5.2.2 Unimplemented Projects

I now expand my scope to include results from Local Authority audits from 2015-2024. I test the raw project count with a negative binomial model and the “above average” indicator with a probit, both against the same set of predictors.

Table 4.8 shows results. Once again, I find that important electoral allies are favoured, having fewer incomplete projects. Since the dependent variable is incomplete projects, the expected sign of the dependent variable flips. There is no effect in the base model (1)- leaders can credibly claim that their own voters receive no special treatment in CDFs! However, once interacted with MP strength, a pattern emerges. For MPs outside the ruling party,

electoral strength is associated with a lower likelihood of incomplete projects. For ruling MPs, the relationship flips, and strength is associated with a higher likelihood of incomplete projects. The interaction term is positive and significant. Models 3 and 4 include the raw project counts, and shows effects with similar signs but less precise estimation. The log odds from Model 4 are plotted in Figure 4.11 below.

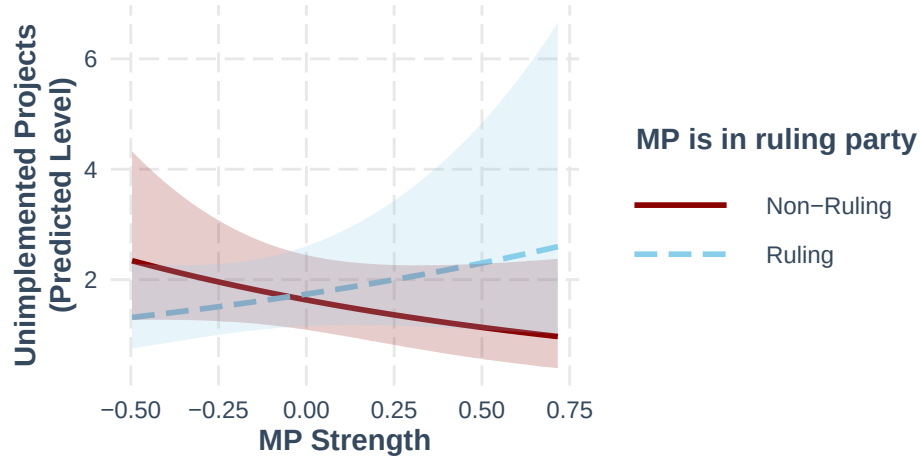


Figure 4.11: Unimplemented Projects 2015-2024

4.5.2.3 Approval Delays

Finally, I test a potential mechanism of the pattern, whether MPs outside the regime's core coalition face longer approval times. I include controls for province, as loan officers themselves might have differing performance. Since the dependent variable (approval time) is an integer bounded at zero, I use a negative binomial model.

Results are shown in Table 4.9. Just like in the first set of models, constituencies in the ruling party have shorter approval times (Model 1). However, interacted with MP strength, results show the same dynamic: for MPs in the ruling party, electoral strength is a disadvantage that is associated with more delays. For opposition MPs, electoral strength is associated with faster approvals (Figure 4.12). While my sample of conveyance letters is small and may suffer from selection issues, it provides confirming evidence of central influence over CDF implementation.

What does this look like in practice? I compare the experience of two MPs. Patriotic Front (PF) MP Yotam Mtayachalo won the 2021 election with 48% of the vote, while 55% of voters in Chama North supported the PF's presidential candidate. In 2024, it took the PLGO

Table 4.9: Results - Approval Delays

	Base	Interact
Ruling	-0.47 (0.32)	0.012 (0.333)
MP Strength	0.091 (0.923)	-4.7** (1.5)
Strength x Ruling		7.0*** (1.9)
Nightlights	0.038 (0.053)	0.0051 (0.0525)
RMSE	19.38	21.97
Log.Lik.	-280.348	-275.600
Num.Obs.	73	73
Year/Province Effects	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

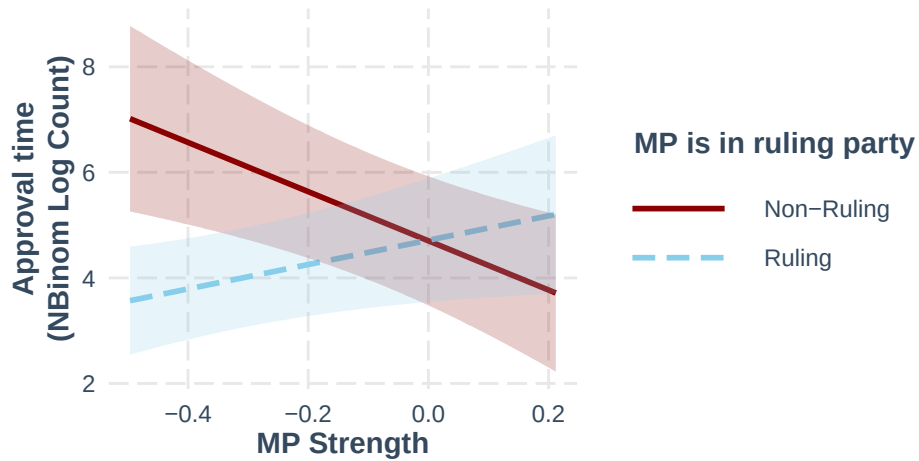


Figure 4.12: Project Approval Delays

40 days to approve CDF projects in Chama North. Mtayachalo complained in parliament: “We are being blamed as members of parliament that we are not working. Actually, money is not being released to local authorities”.²⁴

By contrast, Mtayachalo’s PF colleague Micheal Katambo won with 60% of the vote, 17% higher than the party share. In 2024, Katambo’s CDF projects were approved in 4 days, and in 2025, a single day. In 2026, Katambo defected to the UPND. Speaking at a public event announcing his defection, he explicitly linked his switch to Hichilema delivering CDF:

I have come to testify to the good works of President Hakainde Hichilema. When he was in the opposition, he said, ‘If you give me power, if you give me the presidency, I will pick up the calculator—my calculator—and calculate: pa pa pa! CDF; pa pa pa! bursaries; pa pa pa! skills development,’²⁵

Katambo went on to say that he would ensure that the people of Masaiti would support Hichilema in the 2026 election. Masaiti is in the Copperbelt, where UPND popularity has plummeted since 2021. Katambo is exactly the kind of politician the regime needs to win over voters. This supports my theory that the regime is using the CDF selectively to win key constituencies.

Across multiple measures, I find evidence of central discretion over CDF releases, approval, and implementation. In the appendix, I extend this analysis. First, I run identical analyses on Pakistani CDF disbursements reported by Malik (2021). Just like in Zambia, the ruling party advantage disappears for strong opposition MPs. I also show results for other measures of Zambian CDF: releases (identical) and expenditure (similar). The lower precision on the final expenditure metric confirms that the state exercises the most leverage over disbursement, but MP effort still matters for total spending. Overall, the evidence shows that Zambian leaders use leverage CDF transfers as tool to win over individual MPs in places where they need votes. In Malawi, the story is very different, as MPs play a distinct role relative to local spending.

²⁴<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=960515013604392> (April 10, 2026, Zambia Parliamentary TV)

²⁵<https://www.mwebantu.com/michael-katambo-defects-to-upnd-pledges-loyalty-to-president-hakainde-hichilema/> (March 29, 2026)

<https://www.mwebantu.com/michael-katambo-defects-to-upnd-pledges-loyalty-to-president-hakainde-hichilema/>

4.6 Malawi: Legislative Tolls

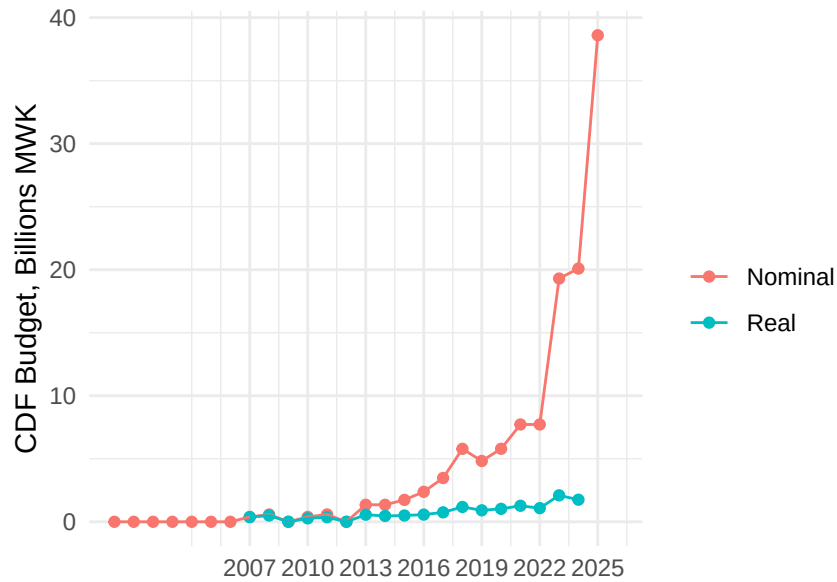
In Malawi, party leaders can bypass individual MPs when mobilizing voters, but must bargain with legislatures as a whole to enact their agenda. While MPs retain discretion over CDFs, they are excluded from other financial flows that leaders use to maintain public support

Malawi's CDF was established in 2006, a period when the country was facing significant donor pressure to decentralize. Fearing further marginalization relative to district councils, MPs leveraged their power over the purse as a "bargaining chip to force the government to bow down to demands for a CDF" (Chinsinga, in Kawerama 2021). Working collectively through parliament, legislators refused to authorize funds for council elections or councillor salaries until they were granted discretionary funds. While decentralization proceeded, the new CDF served to "make councillors redundant" as "development projects [became] the preserve of MPs" (Chinsinga 2008, p. 98)²⁶. Over the last two decades, increases in CDF have "tremendously pacified" MPs, who have continued their strategy of holding the budget hostage to exact increases in CDF- crucial in a context where inflation is often above 20% (Kawerama 2021). This was possible because Malawian presidents have faced near constant legislative minorities, leaving executives vulnerable to collective action from MPs on issues that threaten their control over discretionary resources.

Initially, CDFs were under sole discretion of the MP, but as allocations increased the regime attempted to curb MP control. In the original guidelines, there was no mandatory mechanism for citizen participation or MP accountability (Chiweza 2010, p. 37). Projects did not have to conform to the priorities identified through the TA-led VDP and ADP development planning process. This led Chiweza (2010) to conclude "the CDF in the manner in which it is currently being operationalised is creating a power centre for one dominant actor to consolidate and showcase his/her status and influence at the local level" (p. 4).

When Peter Mutharika took power in 2014, he released new CDF guidelines within a month of the election. The new guidelines put significant constraints on MP discretion, in particular, mandating that project identification occur through VDC/ADC structures

²⁶The 2006 guidelines state that "the CDF provides MPs and their constituents communities with the opportunity to make choices and implement projects that maximise their welfare in line with their needs and preferences" (Chinsinga 2008, p. 37).



*2019 decrease due to change in data source

Figure 4.13: CDF Amount, Malawi

(TA-dominated). Nonetheless, MPs retained significant discretion, and the 2014 guidelines assigned them “primary responsibility for ensuring that projects in the constituency are being implemented as planned” (p. 5). Reports suggest that CDF was still used as an MP slush fund (Network 2017).

Mutharika’s successor Chakwera did little to challenge CDFs, keeping them steady in the first half of his term then increasing allocations ahead of his reelection campaign. However, this increase came with constraint. A new set of guidelines in 2022 circumscribe MP discretion. While the MP “remains the main stakeholder of CDFWRF projects”, they “shall not handle CDFWRF²⁷ cash or procurement issues” (p. 9). The locus of local deliberation is also shifted. In 2014, the MP appointed 5-person implementation committee (PIC) for each project (2014, p. 4). In the 2022 guidelines, the VDC takes a much larger role in identifying, implementing, monitoring, and reporting. The ADC role (not mentioned in 2014) is expanded, but the language is once again ambiguous. ADCs are empowered to “[Organize] quarterly meetings, in liaison with the Member of Parliament, to identify, prioritize and prepare community needs of all VDCs under it and submit them to the Council through the Member of Parliament” (p. 8). The Local Authority (LA, the elected council

²⁷In 2018, CDF administration was merged with the Water Resources Fund to create the CDFWRF.

executive) also has expanded role. In the 2014 guidelines, the district executive essentially provides the administrative machinery to spend CDF money. In the 2022 guidelines, LAs' first responsibility is financial accountability, which emphasizes procurement procedures and reporting. The LA is also empowered to determine if CDF projects align with district development plans and handle fraud cases. However, MPs maintain meaningful discretion: a final section rules that CDF funds cannot be released without an MP signature.

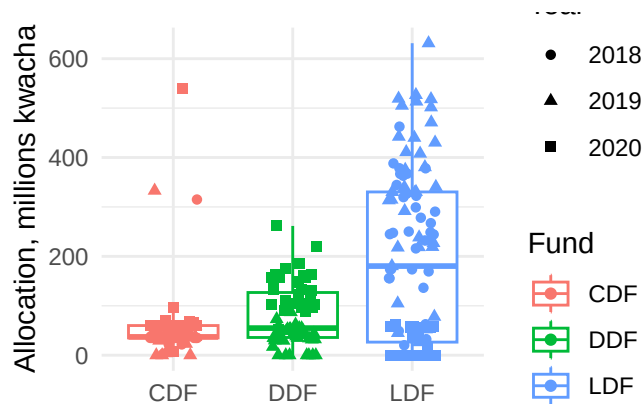
Table 4.10: Malawi CDF Structure

Component	Share
Community Projects (of which, up to 10% women and youth empowerment grants)	90%
Education Bursaries	5%
Administration Costs	3%
Constituency Administrative Assistant Operational Costs	2%

While CDF remained the preserve of MPs, CDF transfers exist within a dense ecosystem of subnational transfers, all claiming bottom up legitimacy for local public infrastructure delivery. Local deliberative bodies are not only responsible for prioritizing CDF projects, but Infrastructure Development Fund (IDF), Local Development Fund (LDF), District Development Fund (DDF), and Water Resource Fund (WRF) projects. Unlike CDFs, these flows are administered by traditional authorities and district officials.

Are these constituency development funds in all but name? While LDF and DDF run through parallel administrative structures and projects are prioritized with local input, their allocation is not equal across constituencies. While CDF releases per constituency are even, district level allocations to DDF and LDF funds vary considerably Figure 4.14. While CDF legitimacy comes from their equal allocation, leaders claim legitimacy of DDF/LDF by highlighting donor oversight and independent evaluation.

National leaders don't have complete discretion over these funds, but do not need to work through MPs to control them, as LDFs are administered through chiefs and DDF through district councils.



CDF per constituency, DDF/LDF per District
Figure 4.14: CDF, LDF, and DDF Allocations

LDF is a donor-funded transfer in which project identification occurs through area development committees (ADCs), which are chaired by local chiefs. LDF was established in 2009 as a pooled fund between the World Bank, African Development Bank, and KfW (German Development Bank), building on the success of the World Bank’s flagship MASAF (Malawi Social Action Fund) (Chasukwa, Dulani, and Zuka 2024).²⁸ Central administration is conducted by independent project implementation unit (Technical Support Committee - TST), with salaries, operating procedures, and procurement guidelines informed by World Bank (Chasukwa and Banik 2019). Unlike CDFs, districts do not have a set envelope, and local authorities apply directly to the TST for funds.

The DDF is funded solely by the World Bank. It is allocated directly to councils and administered via the council administration, which is overseen by elected councillors²⁹. DDF resources are disbursed based on a system of independent audits and council scorecards (the Local Authority Performance Assessment System, LAPAS), and strong performers were given bonus funds. Both DDF/LDF are subject to donor discretion, with oversight over procurement to prevent corruption in contracting.

For voters, these flows are hard to differentiate, undermining the link between CDF and MP reputation. Unlike Kenya and Zambia where CDF projects are heavily branded with national imagery, CDF, DDF, IDF, and LDF projects do not have distinct visual identities.

²⁸It is worth noting that the World Bank’s *flagship project* distributed district level funds that are less than the domestically funded CDF.

²⁹Elected councillors often clash with executive-appointed district administrators, the top bureaucratic position at the level of the district council.

It is not difficult to imagine that voters struggle to identify the funding structure behind a classroom block or borehole. Therefore, I expect that the regime will not use CDF for coalition management. Instead, it will leverage alternative flows that are less risky to manipulate. MPs in turn, bargain as a group for annual CDF increases.

4.6.1 Data

4.6.1.1 CDF

Malawi's CDF is administered through the National Local Government Finance Committee, which reports on annual allocations at the district level. Unlike in Zambia, where releases are tightly controlled and reports must be made before further expenditure can occur, Malawi's CDF is disbursed automatically. Reports from the NLGFC record full utilization of the fund 77% of district-years. Sources outside the NLGFC corroborate this. The National Audit Office reports the NLGFC's budget utilization above 98% from 2017 onward. Audits from civil society organizations highlight missing or manipulated funds, but never that funds were not released (Network 2017; Kawerama 2021). I test both approved and disbursed CDF. District-level disbursement is shown in Figure 4.15.³⁰

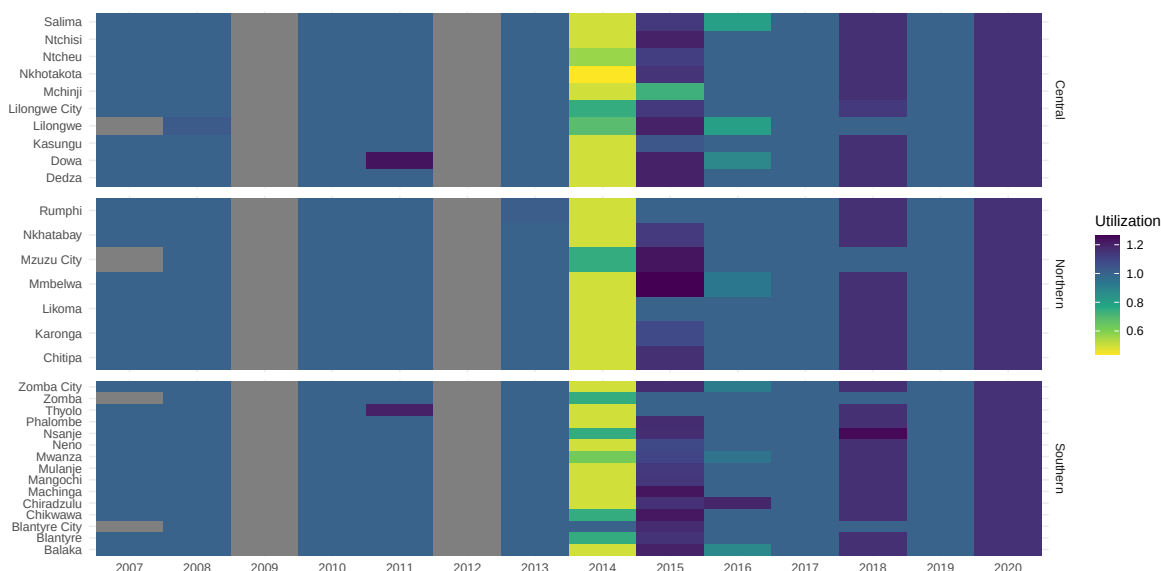


Figure 4.15: CDF Utilization, Malawi

³⁰There is some variation around the 2014 election. Disbursements were lower, just 55% in 2014, jumping to 113% in 2015. This was an interesting election because there were no incumbents after Bingu wa Mutharika's death in 2012. Joyce Banda's People's Party won in just a few districts in around Zomba in Southern province. Southern province did have 5% higher utilization in 2014. I explore this further in the appendix.

4.6.1.2 Local Development Funds (LDF)

To examine LDF flows, I use annual financial reports of the program published by the National audit and the National local Government Finance Committee. These reports include an appendix indicating annual transfers to each district. LDF funds are divided in to allocations for Public Works Projects (PWP) and Social Cash Transfers (SCT). I include specifications for each separate flow and the combined total. Public works spending benefits local elites and communities as a whole, and are useful where parties have limited information. Social cash transfers, which can be targeted specifically to regime supporters, are more likely to be effective in party strongholds (Díaz Cayeros, Magaloni Kerpel, and Estevez 2016).

4.6.1.3 District Alignment

Since allocations are reported at the district level rather than constituency, comparable measures of MP electoral strength as in Zambia are not available. Indeed, Malawi's local authorities (districts) have been an embattled institution, with MPs as their primary opponent. To create a district-level measure of electoral importance, I draw on Boone, Crespín-Boucaud, and Kim (2025)'s work on electoral coalitions, which identifies persistent voting blocs across elections. I identify the core ruling and opposition blocs based on the home region of the top presidential candidates. Constituencies outside those blocs I consider unaligned.

To create a district measure of alignment, I count the number of constituencies per district and subtract any which are in the ruling party's core bloc or the opposition core bloc. this creates a count measure of unaligned constituencies per district. I include controls for the number of constituencies per district in all my models.

4.6.1.4 Model

I estimate with OLS using robust standard errors and year effects to account for time dependency. The dependent variables are CDF releases (2007-2020), then LDF, PWP, and SCT (2015-2021). The specification is:

Table 4.11: CDF vs LDF

	CDF Approved	CDF Actual	LDF	LDF - PWP	LDF - SCT
Unaligned MPs	-1.5 (1.8)	-1.6 (2.0)	-16 (13)	8.7* (4.1)	-25* (11)
# Constituencies	13.1*** (2.4)	13.8*** (2.7)	34** (12)	17.4*** (3.3)	16.2 (9.9)
Nightlights	1.85** (0.57)	1.98** (0.64)	-14.9*** (4.1)	-2.7* (1.3)	-12.2*** (3.2)
Southern	-3.7 (5.6)	-3.3 (6.2)	-308*** (83)	8 (25)	-316*** (75)
Northern	-3.7 (7.6)	-3.7 (8.7)	-259** (96)	-64* (28)	-195* (86)
R2	0.738	0.742	0.277	0.696	0.275
RMSE	60.72	67.53	400.05	128.53	357.55
Num.Obs.	397	397	210	210	210
Year Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

$$\text{Allocation}_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Unaligned}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{Number Constituencies}_i + \\ \beta_3 \text{Nightlights}_{it} + \theta \text{Region}_i + \theta \text{Year}_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

Where *Allocation* is the volume of funds disbursed to district i in year t for each channel (CDF, LDF, PWP, SCT). *Unaligned* is the number of MPs in the district that are not aligned with the ruling party. *Number Constituencies* is the total number of constituencies in a district. *Nightlights* is the average luminosity, a rough proxy for level of development. I also include indicators for *Region* (Northern, Central, Southern) and *Year*.

Results are shown in Table 4.11. Unlike in Zambia, unaligned constituencies do not receive higher CDF allocations. Instead, CDF releases are consistent across districts for both approvals and releases (Models 1, 2).

While I find little evidence of central discretion in CDFs, examining LDF shows that with significant discretion, leaders allocate cash transfers to core supporters and infrastructure to unaligned districts. As a whole, unaligned districts receive no systematically different allocation pattern as others (Model 3). However, unaligned districts receive more public works resources (Model 4) and less cash transfers (Model 5). This is in line with literature

on electoral targeting, which predicts that “distributive politics should favor swing districts but loyal individuals” (Stokes et al. 2013, p. 25).

4.7 Conclusion

What tools do executives use to manage their fragmented electoral coalitions? The risk of losing popular and legislative votes determines what concessions they must make to stay in power. When they need to win over voters, executives will make deals with key electoral intermediaries. When they need to pass legislation, they will deal with the legislature. These bargains are related. In strengthening some MPs and limiting others, executives limit legislative development. If *some* MPs are able to cultivate a personal constituency but others aren’t, then collective action less likely. Conversely, in bypassing MPs as electoral mediators, executives set themselves up for assertive opposition-led parliaments.

Powerful parliamentarians demand discretionary resources to bolster their fraught bids for re-election. To gain these resources as individuals, they must demonstrate that they are the only ones who can win the constituency for the leader, that voters will follow what they say rather than listening to other elites or following party labels. Alternatively, MPs may turn to their colleagues, working together to hold the line against executive overreach in parliament.

I examine this bargain in an unlikely policy: constituency development funds. While CDFs are commonly understood to be automatically under MP discretion, I show that over time, the administration of these funds has become a political battleground. CDFs do not automatically or uniformly empower MPs. Executives can pad committees, freeze allocations, or delay approvals to stymie some MPs and empower others. Examining a decade of allocations, I find that implementation is targeted in Zambia but uniform in Malawi.

This work opens several avenues for future research. In particular, extending the examination to countries could explore different variation in MP mediation and legislative strength. For example, this theory could explain why Kenyan MPs acted collectively to defend CDF after devolution in 2010, and the ongoing legal battles over MPs role in the CDF committee. Further work could also examine the timing of CDF increases. In both Zambia and Malawi, large increases to CDFs happened *after* elections. In cases where executives are reliant on

MP mediation, we would expect increases before elections, in line with the expectations of a political business cycle. Nonetheless, after elections, executives often need legislative support for significant shifts the political agenda, cutting of some sources of patronage while establishing others. Getting legislative buy-in for this change is difficult, as each part of the new winning coalition clamours for spoils. While post-election ‘transhumance’ is a common symptom of executive dominance, where individuals make deals with the executive (Cheeseman, Bertrand, and Husaini 2019), some legislatures may be able to extract collective concessions in this period. Further, repeated turnover suggests that leaders are not always successful in building coalitions, and fiscal pressures. Finally, recent developments in both countries highlight the role of the third branch of government in mediating conflicts between the other two. Judiciaries in both Zambia and Malawi have delivered challenges to executives, and their role in shaping concessions warrants further investigation.

In both Zambia and Malawi, the politics of CDFs are very much an ongoing story. However, these developments still follow the contours of the historical differences between the countries. In Zambia, Hichilema pushed through a constitutional amendment in December 2025 creating 70 new constituencies, a move that significantly undermines individual MP leverage. In Malawi, the legislature responded to a legal challenge to CDF with collective action, quickly passing a constitutional amendment to ensure continued discretion. However, president Mutharika vetoed the amendment and changed the guidelines to exclude MPs completely from the CDF process but granted significant discretion to the political center.

As of the time of writing, the implications of these changes are still to be seen. Hichilema faces a tough election in August 2026, and Mutharika will need the legislature to pass his next budget in November. In both cases, legislators will have leverage to demand concessions from the executive. Based on their history, we should expect individual level deals in Zambia, and legislative bargaining in Malawi.

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4.8 Appendix

4.8.1 Extension of Malik (2021)

Malik (2021) uses a close race RDD to identify higher CDF disbursement for ruling party legislators in Pakistan. While Pakistan’s context is quite different than in Zambia, a single class of elites monopolizes local vote delivery. Between 70-90% of legislators are Zamnidars, semi-feudal landlords, who fuse cultural, economic, and political power (Mangi, Soomro, and Larik 2021). In this context, I expect that party leaders will make targeted concessions to key allies.

Focusing on state discretion over CDF approval, Malik (2021) tracks disbursement levels for members of national assembly (MNA) in 40 districts in Punjab from 1991 to 2012³¹. She describes a similar dynamic in which local politicians are important party intermediaries, and opposition lawmakers find their attempts to spend CDF stymied by bureaucratic hurdles. She reports:

The main mechanism was through unnecessary and prohibitively long delays at various stages. Most interviewees mentioned such delays at the project approval phase, and every former opposition legislator I spoke with highlighted delays at the fund release stage (p. 14).

Using Malik’s data, I run similar models as reported for Zambian disbursement data. The dependent variable is the level of disbursement as a share of that year’s budget, which goes above 100% for many MNAs. This is closer to my *disbursement* measure, as it shows releases/budget (rather than burn rate, which is expenditure/budget). Since Pakistani voters do not vote separately for executives, I use margin of victory—Malik’s forcing variable—as a proxy of MP strength. I interact this with whether the MP is part of the ruling party. I include all the controls used in Malik’s models: days to election, previous experience, ministerial experience, number of candidates, turnout, and district fixed effects. Results are shown in Table 4.12 and the interaction plot in Figure 4.16.

I find almost identical results as in Zambia. Ruling members get higher disbursements, but once interacted with electoral strength, strong opposition politicians also get higher

³¹Military rule is excluded

Table 4.12: CDF Disbursements in Pakistan

	(1)	(2)
Ruling	55*** (5)	66*** (7)
Victory Margin	16 (26)	73* (37)
Victory Margin $\times$ Ruling		-79* (38)
Days to Election	-28*** (5)	-29*** (5)
Previous MNA	-0.4 (4.8)	0.3 (4.9)
Minister (Current or Past)	-3 (9)	-2 (9)
Number of Candidates	0.5 (0.8)	0.4 (0.8)
Turnout (%)	0.1 (0.5)	0.3 (0.5)
R2	0.200	0.203
Num.Obs.	1092	1092
District Effects	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

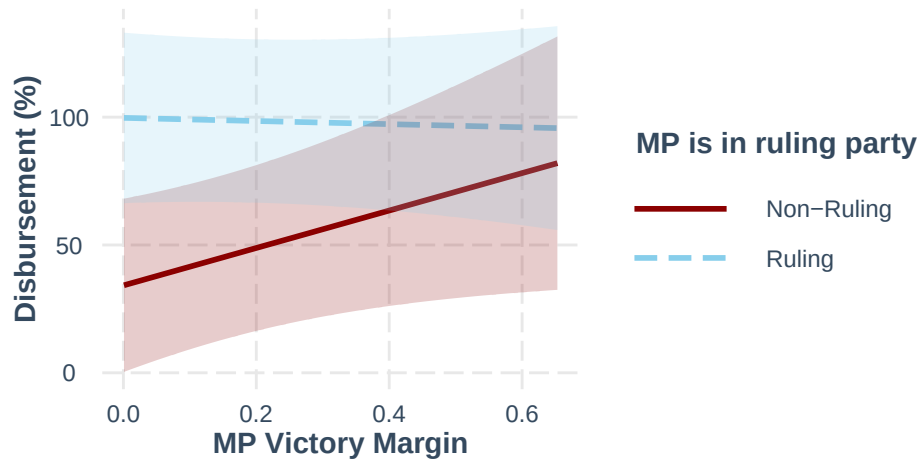


Figure 4.16: CDF Disbursement, Pakistan

disbursements. This is an important qualification to Malik’s argument, as the ruling party advantage she reports does not seem to apply to strong legislators.

4.8.2 Zambia CDF Attribution

In the main paper, I showed that citizens who were aware of CDF projects in their constituencies rated their MPs more favourably, but not the president. In this section, I test whether this result varies across partisan lines, as copartisans may be more likely to share credit with the executive. I divide respondents into three regions: UPND (Southern, North-western, Western), PF (Luapula, Muchinga, Northern) and Other (Lusaka, Copperbelt, Central, Eastern). While Lusaka and the Copperbelt formed an integral part of the early PF coalition, urban areas are much more volatile and no longer seen as core to the party (Siachiwena and Wahman 2024). While there are concerns about targeting (discussed at length below), exposure to CDF projects is roughly similar across regions Appendix 4.18.

Table 4.13 shows the numerical results, which are displayed graphically in Figure 4.17. Being aware of a CDF project in one’s constituency is associated with higher approval of MPs, but only in UPND and swing regions. In opposition (PF) areas, there is no effect. For presidential approval, CDF has no significant effect in any region, though it is close in swing regions. If CDFs can help win unaligned voters to the ruling executive, this may also explain why CDFs are adopted.

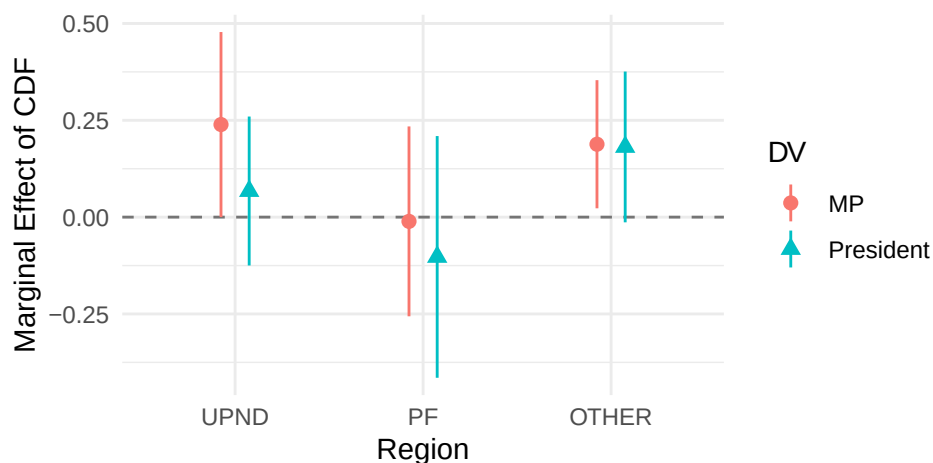


Figure 4.17: Effect of CDF on Support Levels

The lack of any relationship between CDF and Presidential approval on core regions may be due to ceiling effects. Examining the predicted *level* of support, Figure 4.20 shows that in

Table 4.13: Results - Politician Approval by Region

	Presidential Approval	MP Approval
CDF Exposure	0.07 (0.10)	0.2 (0.1)
PF Region	-0.9*** (0.1)	-0.1 (0.1)
Other Region	-0.9*** (0.1)	0.008 (0.110)
PF x CDF	-0.2 (0.2)	-0.2 (0.2)
Other x CDF	0.1 (0.1)	-0.05 (0.15)
R2	0.226	0.064
Num.Obs.	902	892
Controls	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

UPND regions, support for Hichilema is already 3.5 out of 4. This ceiling effect has political implications, as the marginal impact of increased spending is likely to be low. Voters in these regions are unlikely to defect from the party's presidential candidate, but may reject the party's local candidate for MP. This supports the hypothesis that CDF is important tool for building MP reputation, but not evaluation of the president.

This is an important qualification. existing literature already shows that CDFs help MPs get re-elected (Opalo 2022; Bowles and Marx 2022), but it is important to see that these do not increase support for the executive.

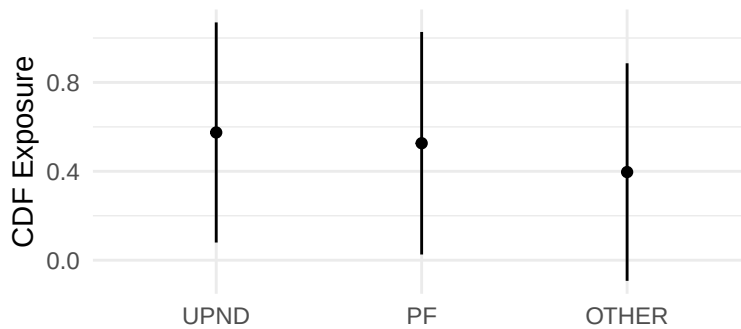


Figure 4.18: CDF Exposure Across Regions

If we use stated partisanship (vote intent) instead of region for H2, we find that CDF exposure is associated a boost in MP evaluation across all groups, but an increase in presidential evaluation only for undecided voters Figure 4.19.

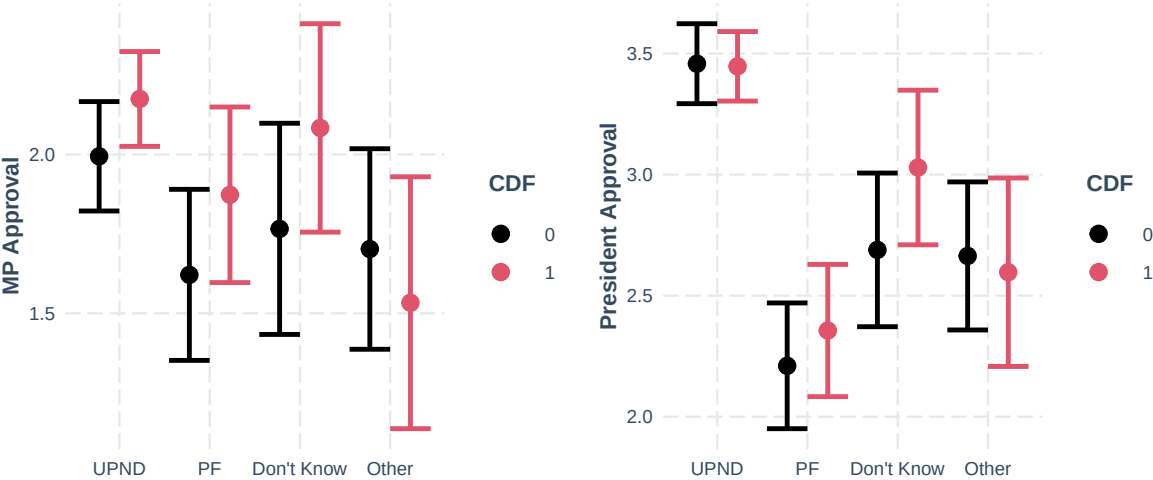


Figure 4.19: CDF Exposure Across Partisan Groups

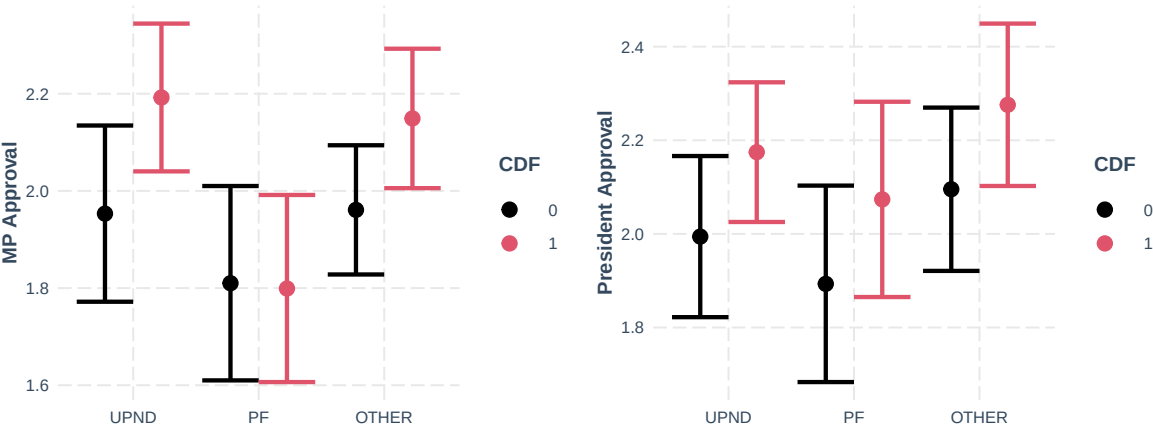


Figure 4.20: Predicted Levels of Support

Figure 4.18 shows levels of CDF exposure across regions. It is slightly lower in regions outside the core, but similar overall. ## Zambia CDFs

4.8.2.1 Unimplemented Projects

4.8.2.2 Releases

Funding release and disbursement are reported separately. Rerunning the models on releases show identical results (Figure 4.22).



Figure 4.21: Unimplemented CDF Projects

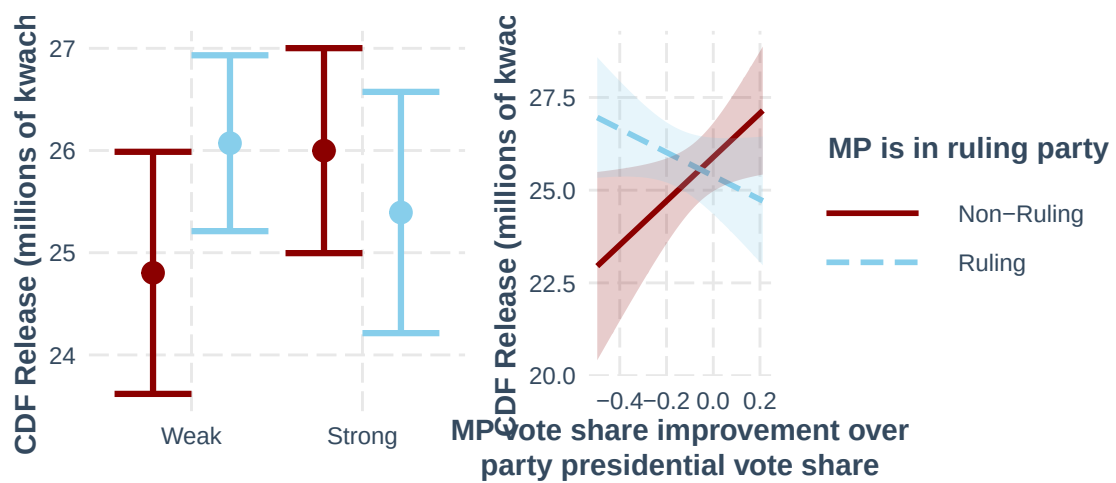


Figure 4.22: CDF Releases

Table 4.14: Results - CDF Expenditure

		Expenditure	
Ruling	1.37*	0.84	2.07**
	(0.54)	(0.65)	(0.75)
MP Strength	0.5	4.1	
	(2.0)	(3.0)	
MP Strength (Dummy)			1.06
			(0.78)
Strength x Ruling		-5.6	-1.4
		(4.0)	(1.0)
Nightlights	-0.050*	-0.050*	-0.052*
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.022)
R2	0.812	0.813	0.813
Num.Obs.	426	426	426
Year Effects	Y	Y	Y

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

4.8.2.3 Expenditure

Examining expenditure shows that ruling MPs are able to spend more. As before, the interaction favours strong opposition MPs, who are able to spend as much as ruling MPs Table 4.14. The interact effect is less precise than for disbursement. This may be because there are many factors influencing expenditure, while the level of disbursement is more tightly controlled by the regime.

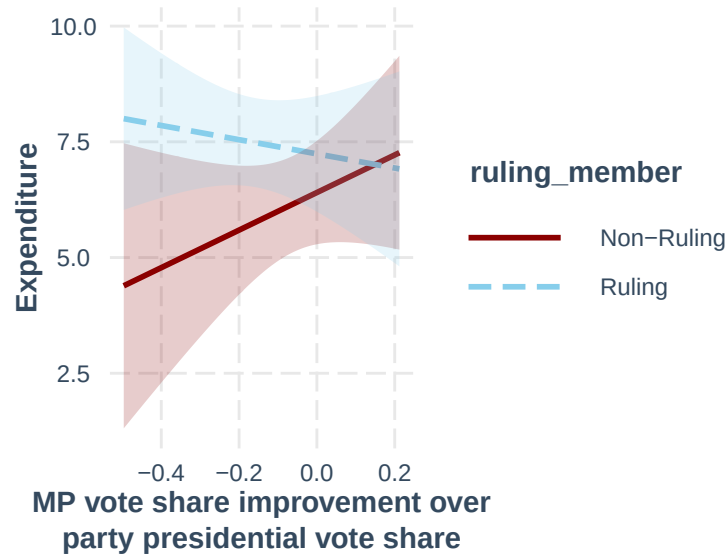


Figure 4.23: Expenditure

4.8.3 Malawi CDF in 2014

Figure 4.24 affirms the discretion in CDF releases prior to the 2014 election, showing that Southern districts used more CDF ahead of the election, but that there is no significant difference in utilization other years.

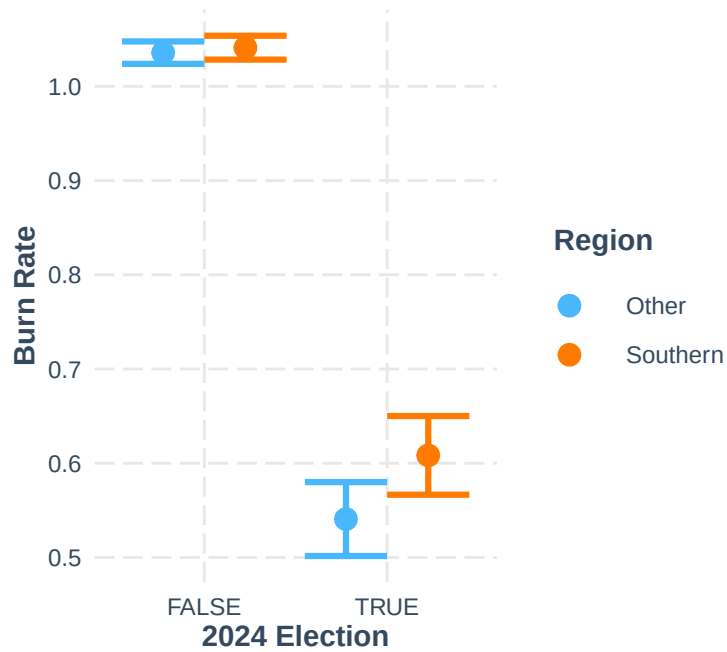


Figure 4.24: CDF Utilization, Malawi

4.8.4 Independent MP Electoral Strength (Malawi)

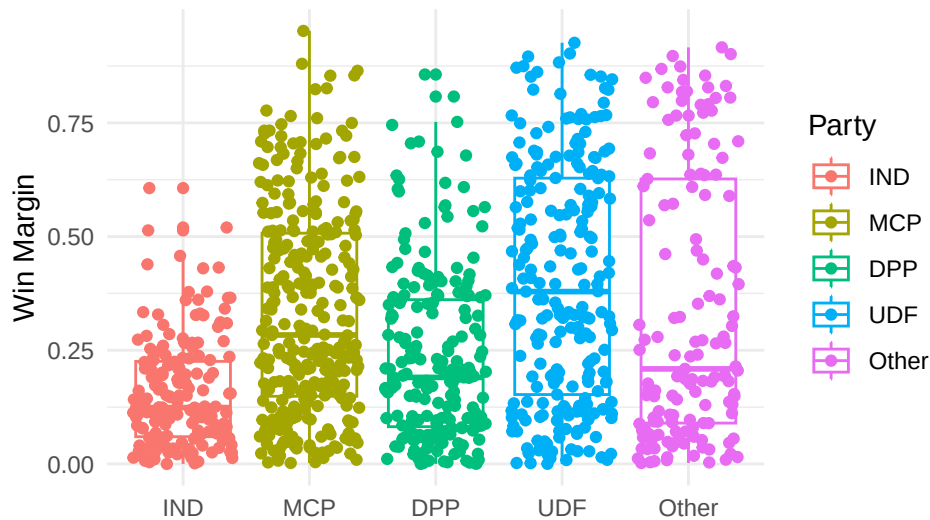


Figure 4.25: MP Margins by Party, Malawi

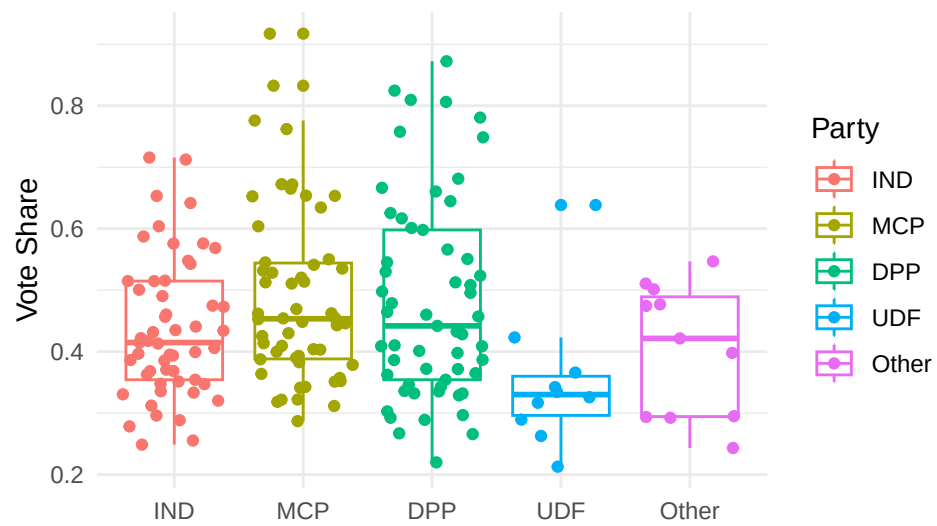


Figure 4.26: MP Vote Share by Party, Malawi

Chapter 5

Conclusion

[African] Legislative elections are a sideshow. To focus on them is the analytical equivalent of telling the tragedy of Hamlet through the eyes of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

(Van De Walle [2003](#), p. 310)

Do African legislators matter for democracy and development? Contrary to the dominant framing in the literature, I show that as multiparty competition takes root, legislators can play a crucial role in forging electoral coalitions. However, this role is not automatic or uniform. It is only those politicians who can credibly claim to bring voters in or out of the regime that can bargain with executives. Executives make concessions to these intermediaries when budgets are tight and their options for winning reelection are limited.

Why are some legislators able to bargain? I focus my attention of elites with exit options, those who can bring voters with them if they choose to exit their party. While parties can significantly limit legislator's options, especially by controlling nomination (Choi [2018](#)), strong legislators are found across electoral geography. Politicians with personal resources, cultural cachet, and institutional power can defect to another party or run successful independent campaigns because voters will follow their lead rather than party labels.

This shapes the distribution of public goods. A key consideration when allocating subnational investment is who will get the credit. Local legislators can easily claim credit for local infrastructure, but have a much harder time claiming credit for nationally shared in-

vestments like public employment or service delivery. These investments allow them to make executives facing rivals within and without their party seek to limit the degree that legislators can claim credit for government investment.

The government's choice is also shaped by budget constraint. Governments in the developing world are at the periphery of global financial systems, subject to swings in commodity revenue, concessional, and non-concessional finance that move independently of policymakers choices. A number of important factors shape the government's overall propensity to attempt to win over swing or core voters (Kramon and Posner 2013; Weghorst and Lindberg 2013; Horowitz 2016). My argument is narrower, that as the budget constraint tightens, the payoff of winning voters by recruiting strong elites is more attractive. Legislators bargain, demanding the kinds of goods that allow them to get a personal constituency rather than investments that are attributed to the executive.

I then followed this through the budget process, presenting novel data spanning three countries substantiated with evidence from elite interviews of Zambian politicians and bureaucrats. Chapter 2 examined legislator demands and government promises in parliamentary debate, showing that legislators change their demands of the state based on their electoral leverage and the state's budget constraint. Demands for costly public works dried up among the less influential legislators, especially as borrowing costs soared. Chapter 3 tested whether this matters for actual allocation decisions made by the state. Using subnational cross-sectoral allocation data in Zambia and Kenya, I compared how wage and capital spending was spent across districts. I found that when rising borrowing costs tightened government budgets, executives channelled infrastructure to strong elites and recurrent funds to loyal voters. The final empirical chapter tested two alternatives to legislator-executive bargaining: whether executives channeled benefits through alternative elites, and whether legislators opted for collective, rather than individual bargaining. I show that these are linked: when MPs monopolise electoral intermediation, executives cannot bypass them in favour of other leaders, but they have little incentive for cooperation. Data on the implementation of constituency development projects showed MP targeted in Zambia but legislative bargaining in Malawi.

5.1 Implications

Overall, this dissertation points to a nuanced role for different types of public spending in winning over elites, not just voters. I also highlight a need for comparativists to look beyond national borders to recognize the constraints that limit delivery in the periphery. This has particular implications for understanding distributive politics, dependency, legislative development, and democratic accountability.

My research provides several lessons to conventional understanding of distributive politics in peripheral democracies. In Kramon and Posner (2013), Kramon and Posner warned of the “pitfalls of not examining the full set of outcomes over which government leaders have control” (p. 468). I take up this challenge, using data on cross-sectoral, subnational public expenditure. In doing so, I find that strategies vary across both sectors and districts. This dissertation joins a growing literature which finds that governments use distinct distributive strategies across different parts of their coalition (Albertus 2012; Horowitz 2016; Díaz Cayeros, Magaloni Kerpel, and Estevez 2016; Choi 2018). However, these focus on the links between presidents and voters. My findings show that a key consideration is the division of credit between local and central actors. Executives will target core voters (bypassing elites) but cannot win swing voters without making concessions to the elites who can mobilize these voters. Partisan attachments, often rooted in ethnicity, do shape behaviour (Posner 2005; Chandra 2004), but the existence of strong elite intermediaries matters too. The meaningful proportion of independent MPs in Zambia and Malawi affirms that party labels don’t exclusively determine elections.

Scholars of developing countries also pay attention to the government’s budget constraint. This is often emphasized in the literature on aid and conditionality, which finds evidence of ethnic targeting in the gluts and cuts of development finance (Reinsberg and Abouharb 2023; Tang 2026; Bompreszi et al. 2024; Kentikelenis, Stubbs, and King 2016). Considering the influence of market access and commodity prices on budget constraint provides a richer picture of the full policy space of governments, which may be orthogonal to aid. Additionally, since volatility in market access comes with little additional scrutiny of government behaviour, tracing the impact of changes in borrowing cost may provide a more holistic picture of the underlying bargaining power of different groups and the government’s targeting strategy.

Conversely, studies of electoral politics carefully trace alliances and concessions made between groups of elites, but rarely consider the ability of governments to finance transfers (Resnick 2022; Horowitz 2019; Sishuwa 2024; Hern 2019). Foregrounding that these settlements are made in the periphery would allow scholars to identify times when limited government resources prevented parties from effectively winning over crucial constituencies. Rather than permanent crisis, African politics follow the swings of global markets. While loose finance may enable broad rewards, liquidity crunches will force leaders to make careful coalitions.

My findings have implications for the growing field of legislative politics in Africa (Barkan et al. 2010; Opalo 2019a; Arriola et al. 2022; Choi 2018; Frantzeskakis 2023; Collord 2021; Bowles and Marx 2022; Wahman and Seeberg 2022). Challenges to executive dominance are just as likely to come from strong legislators as strong legislatures. When executives bargain directly with individuals, legislators are less likely to turn to legislative tools to constrain the executive. Even if legislatures can build organizational knowledge (Opalo 2019a) or recognize citizen demand for oversight (Barkan et al. 2010), they will not act as effective checks on executive power if there are other forces undercutting the incentives for collective action. Nonetheless, changes in voter dynamics such as urbanization and migration (Ichino and N. L. Nathan 2013; Klaus and Paller 2017) may erode regional party hegemony. Politicians who can deliver to these voters- likely through public goods delivery- will be important players if they can sustain connections to their supporters. Empirically, many studies of African legislatures use data from constituency development funds, treating them as a concession extracted by legislatures that are allocated according to MP discretion (Bowles and Marx 2022, @opalo2022). Scholars should be careful to recognize the shifting legal landscape of CDFs and the degree of centralization over allocation and implementation. Local spending does not always mean local attribution.

Finally, these findings have implications for democratic accountability. I do not assume that *strong* legislators will be more accountable or representative. Despite Barkan et al. (2010) finding that African citizens value legislators' representative and constituency service roles roughly equally, MPs pursue constituency service. Electoral incentives do encourage MPs to deliver, but my findings suggest that MPs with autonomy will focus on whatever investments can be attributed to them personally rather than what voters want. Chapter 2 showed that

MPs overwhelmingly demand infrastructure spending from the state, and that unlike health and education, these demands did not vary with voter priorities. While Choi (2018) argues that MPs outside of electoral strongholds gain the freedom to represent voter interests, my findings suggest that what strong MPs seek is not representation but attribution. Similarly, many scholars see constituency development funds as a shortcut to both local accountability and legislative strength (Collord 2018; Opalo 2019b). My findings highlight that CDFs are not just locally politicized, but nationally contested. Where MPs bargain as individuals, MPs will not protect CDFs from manipulation, limiting local accountability and legislative development.

Nonetheless, as urbanization speeds across Africa, the regional and ethnic ties that link voters to party leaders will weaken. In Zambia, it is the cities who have repeatedly rejected incumbent executives. For parties to win cities, they need local politicians who can mobilize voters who are costly to buy and unevenly attached to ethnic identities (N. Nathan 2016). Politicians who can deliver to these voters will be important players if they can sustain connections to their supporters. This also suggests some normative tradeoffs. Strong MPs may enhance local service delivery and accountability, but impede the development of programmatic politics and strong parties.

5.2 Scope

There are several contextual factors which constrain the generalizability of my argument. Throughout this dissertation, I have referred to *peripheral democracies*, shorthand for a set of institutional and economic factors that make executive-legislator bargaining likely. I expect my theory to apply in countries where political competition is organized on non-ideological terms, and there are majoritarian institutions, competitive elections, and exposure to global markets.

First, elections must be fought primarily on valence terms. When voters make decisions based primarily on politicians' ability to deliver material, legislators can credibly threaten to exit parties. Where redistributive or ideological schisms drive electoral politics, politicians are more interchangeable by parties, and legislators cannot cultivate a personal vote.

While this seems a demanding condition, the history of political competition in postcolonial contexts make this common.

Second, I make this argument in the context of the main institutional form in sub-Saharan Africa: presidential systems with single member districts and first-past-the-post elections. Under presidential systems, the executive drafts and implements fiscal policy. Majoritarian elections with single members encourages legislators to cultivate a personal relationship with voters (Lijphart 1994; Hern 2019; Barkan 2009). Since voters elect presidents and legislators separately, legislators can be elected independently of party support. Presidents need to win a popular vote, but can win them anywhere. I take up the question of legislative checks and elite intermediation in chapter 4. Broadly, where there are parallel channels through which the executive can target voters, legislators will not have credible exit threats.

Third, this theory applies only where elections are competitive. While perfect polyarchy is not required, bargains will look very different without electoral threats. During Lungu's tenure, Zambia dropped in global democracy rankings, and VDem categorized the regime as *competitive authoritarianism*. However, Lungu still recruited elites to expand his electoral coalition. If there is no reasonable expectation that a national election could replace the leader, I don't expect elites to be able to bargain based on electoral leverage. Nonetheless, where leaders can tilt the playing field but elections are institutionalized (as in much of the developing world), executives may be forced to concede to elites to win elections.

Finally, this argument applies that countries are in the periphery, where drops in external finance, commodity revenues, or aid flows meaningfully constrain government expenditure. This is a spectrum rather than a binary, and may include many developed nations. For those

5.3 Future Directions

These findings suggest several directions for future exploration. First, it may be worthwhile to probe the electoral consequences of distributive spending. While the link between public good provision and electoral success is well established, it may be worth testing nuanced questions of attribution. Does investment in local and different sectors increase vote share for the relevant politicians? Afrobarometer surveys report that macroeconomic stability

is a high priority for many voters- do they see any tension between incurring debt and local delivery? Second, how do my theoretical arguments apply in a dynamic environment? Over time, both legislators and executives attempt to tilt the playing field to their favour. Under what conditions are leaders able to turn swing voters in party supporters? Executives can also turn to violent repression or direct manipulation to reduce electoral competition (Wahman 2024; Cheeseman and Klaas 2018). How does democratic backsliding limit MP leverage? More broadly, collecting data on subnational expenditures across more countries could help establish scope conditions and generalizability of my argument.

5.4 Debt and Distribution in the Periphery

For countries in the periphery, neither democracy nor development are taken for granted. Citizens continue to demand better from their leaders, putting them under pressure to deliver. As countries enter deeper into financial markets, global capital cycles will pressure electoral coalitions. At the same time, urbanization and institutional learning will cement the position of legislators as crucial partners for leaders forging coalitions. Those interested in promoting accountability and service delivery should think carefully about when to direct advocacy at the national, rather than local level. For those in the donor community, understanding government's overall debt position well before crises will help understand the electoral constraints faced by even the most earnest reformers. While my findings suggest limited autonomy for legislators, I leave open the role of ideas, learning, and effective leadership in both individual and collective negotiation with executives. The Zambian legislators who took time to speak to me as part of this research each showed an incredible level of knowledge of their constituencies and commitment to delivering for those who they represent. Against considerable headwinds, voters and legislators are fighting hard to make democracy work to deliver development, even in hard times.

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Chapter 6

End Matter

6.0.1 Record of Qualitative Research

I conducted two field research trips to Zambia in January and July 2025. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and chose the degree of attribution they preferred for published research. This research was approved under University of Toronto Human Participants Ethics Protocol #46913.

ID	Name	Role	Date	Location
L001	Eustackio Kazonga	Previous Minister of Agriculture, Minister Local Government, MMD MP Vubwi	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L002	George Manyele	Road Development Agency ex-CEO	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L003	—	Zambian Academic	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia

ID	Name	Role	Date	Location
L004	Elijah Mumba	Lead, Public Finance, Centre for Trade Policy and Development	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L005	–	Budget Analysts, Parliamentary Budget Office	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L009	Menyani Zulu	MP, Nyimba	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L010	–	Donor Representative	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L006	–	Zambian Debt Alliance	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L007	Jotham Momba	Academic, University of Zambia	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L008	Joseph Munsanje	MP Mbabala	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L011	Aaron Mwanza	MP Kaumbwe	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L012	Mulenga Fube	MP Chilubi	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L013	Edgar Singombe	MP Dundumwenzi	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L014	Aaron Mwanza	MP Kaumbwe	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L015	George Phiri	FDD National Secretary	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L016	–	Academic, University of Zambia	January 2025	Lusaka, Zambia

ID	Name	Role	Date	Location
L101	–	Academic, University of Zambia	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L102	Mulenga Fube	MP Chilubi	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L103	Jacob Mkandawire	Macroeconomic and Financial Management Institute of Eastern and Southern Africa (MEFMI), previously Bank of Zambia and ministry of Finance	July 2025	Online
L104	–	Ministry of Infrastructure, Housing and Urban Development	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L105	Program Officer	Alliance for Community Action	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L106	Program Officer	Alliance for Community Action	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia

ID	Name	Role	Date	Location
L107	–	Ministry of Infrastructure, Housing and Urban Development	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L108	Nicole Beardsworth	Lecturer, University of the Witwatersrand	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L109	Kalalwe Mukosa	MP Chinsali	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L110	Hangala Siachiwena	Researcher, University of Cape Town	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L111	–	Member of Parliament	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L112	–	Engineer, National Road Fund Agency	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L113	–	Manager, National Road Fund Agency	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L114	–	Zambian Academic	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia
L115	–	Planning Department, Ministry of Health	July 2025	Phone
L116	Edgar Singombe	MP Dundumwenzi	July 2025	Lusaka, Zambia