

**The Informational Face of Patronage:  
Reputation-Building in African Electoral Contexts**

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**\*\*Comments Welcome\*\***

## ABSTRACT

This paper offers a theoretical argument in favor of the conceptualization of the distribution of low-value goods by competitors during election campaigns—a phenomenon I term “petty patronage”—in Africa as, in part, a strategy for communicating costly signals to voters. First, I highlight some of the limitations that exist in the current literature on distributional linkage strategies in African electoral contexts, primarily in terms of ongoing difficulties in explaining the ubiquitous, campaign-time distribution of relatively low-value items, such as T-shirts, food and drink, bars of soap, and phone cards, as attempts at loyalty- or vote-buying. Next, I argue that African voters derive certain informational cues from witnessing the distribution—or non-distribution—of goods of varying volumes and values, which they use to make electoral decisions. Voters can generate assessments of a distributor’s commitment to redistribution, rather than personal hoarding; attitudes towards recipients’ ethnic group, village, or region; capacity as a potential governor; and electability through observations of such distributions. Following on this conceptualization, I hypothesize that in situations when other, possibly higher-quality sources of information about electoral competitors are available, voters will tend to weigh the cues they receive from observations of distribution less, *vis-à-vis* these alternatives. Empirically, therefore, I expect that we will observe that the marginal utility that electoral competitors derive from the distribution of petty patronage varies, across individuals, within and between countries, and over time, according to voters’ abilities to gather information from other sources, such as mass media. Finally, the paper presents a research strategy—involving survey experiments, focus groups, and local case studies in Uganda—for collecting data that will allow for testing of some of the observable implications of the model.

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Campaign time is commonly referred to, at least in much of anglophone Sub-Saharan Africa, as “harvesting season,” because of the benefits that ordinary voters can reap from the “party farms.” In the run up to elections, party activists often distribute—at rallies, *marches*, and other venues—large quantities of relatively low-value goods, including articles of clothing, food and drink, household items, phone cards, and even small amounts of money. Voters might receive largesse from an electoral hopeful even during intra-party primary campaigns, and they can often expect multiple candidates during a single campaign to favor them with a “gift.” The practice, which I refer to in this paper as “petty patronage,” occurs across a number of electoral contexts, although there is significant inter- and intra-country variation in the percentage of candidates participating, the types of goods distributed, and the legal attitudes towards such distribution.

The importance of goods distribution in the establishment of long-term political loyalties in the developing world is, of course, well documented (Weingrod 1968; Powell 1970; Scott 1972; Hall 1977; Clapham 1982). And the *élite*-citizen linkage strategy of exchange (Lindblom 1977) is ubiquitous not just in the nascent electoral democracies of Africa, but in the so-called developed democracies of Western Europe, North America, and Japan, as well. Electoral competitors, particularly incumbents, often have access to extensive resources—including government and private-sector jobs (sometimes sinecures or prebends), university slots, agricultural inputs, automobiles, and even large amounts of cash—which they can distribute to select individuals who occupy important nodes in social networks, and in doing so construct stable coalitions (Rothchild and Foley 1988).

Of course, some voters—many of them well-connected “brokers” for parties—do receive this kind of high-value largesse during “harvesting season” in Africa. However, the vast majority of African citizens will never be direct beneficiaries of patronage of anything approaching the value of a sinecure or plum university slot for a family member. Many will benefit indirectly via ties with recipient brokers, or from later pork allocations, but for most, “harvesting season” will only yield a few, relatively inexpensive items. Of course, these items are usually quite welcome, particularly for those who are poor rural-dwellers.

Despite the large number of African citizens who benefit during “harvesting seasons,” it remains unclear exactly why so many electoral competitors in Sub-Saharan Africa participate in the distribution of this low-value, or “petty,” patronage. For goods of higher value—say, a season’s worth of farm inputs—the fact that a smaller number of citizens receive these benefits directly makes monitoring of recipients’ behavior quite feasible. Failure to act “properly”—say, by recruiting large numbers of family and friends to vote for the distributing candidate on election day—is likely quite observable, and consequent punishment in the form of non-receipt of similar inputs for the next season could be quite devastating economically. However, distributors have much less ability to monitor how recipients of petty patronage behave, and there is a fair probability that a substantial number of recipients of party A’s largesse end up voting for party B. Still, unless electoral competitors in Africa are wasting huge amounts of resources every campaign season with distributional schemes that yield them few benefits, we should probably assume that petty patronage yields at least some returns for distributors’ troubles. Therefore, my primary motivating question for this research project is: *why do*

*electoral competitors in Sub-Saharan Africa engage in the distribution of low-value, or “petty,” patronage to individuals during campaign periods?*

The purpose of this paper is to explore an alternate way of thinking about a certain form of patronage politics in Sub-Saharan Africa. Namely, I argue that at least some of the value of petty patronage, both for the distributing candidate and for the reasoning voter, is in the information that it conveys. Petty patronage furthers distributors' abilities to build certain kinds of reputations—as committed to redistribution, as potentially “legitimate” office holders, as capable potential governors, and as viable candidates—that are highly desirable for electoral competitors. Voters, in turn, gain information about candidates' preferences and capabilities by observing these outlays.

The paper proceeds in five parts. First, I define more concretely what is meant by the term “petty patronage” and discuss briefly its practice in electoral campaigns in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the second section, I examine several alternate explanations for the efficacy of petty patronage and discuss some problems with each. Next, I lay out a new argument for conceptualizing the distribution of petty patronage as at least partly a communicative strategy on the part of electoral competitors. In doing so, I discuss four reputational qualities—commitment to redistribution, favoritism toward the identity group of the recipient, capacity for effective governance, and electability—that electoral competitors seek to convey to voting publics through their distributional schemes. Following that, I discuss the elastic nature of the value of information conveyed through such distributions and how the salience of petty patronage in electoral campaigns in Sub-Saharan Africa might vary according to other contextual factors, such as media

environment. Finally, I lay out a research strategy, which will involve survey experiments in Uganda in early 2008, for testing some of the implications of this hypothesis.

## **1. The Phenomenon of “Petty Patronage”**

In the 2006 presidential election in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there were widespread reports that activists, particularly from the ruling party, were handing out items such as bars of soap to voters. Many recipients—a great number of whom lived in remote rural areas—said that visits by the soap-distributing representatives of the candidates were their only real connection to the ongoing campaign (IRIN 2006). The implication that citizens were making voting decisions based on soap distribution was especially jarring, given the historic import of the Congolese elections.

These practices involving the widespread distribution of relatively low-value goods to voters during electoral campaigns are common across a range of African countries. In fact, voters in what Kanchan Chandra has called “patronage democracies” (2005) have come to expect such “gifts” from competitors around election time (Lindberg and Morrison 2007): “We want money, beer, or T-shirts,” one resident of Kisangani said during the Congolese campaign (IRIN 2006). In Tanzania, these distributions are commonly referred to as “*takrima*” (Kiswahili for “hospitality”). In recent elections, party activists have distributed food (sugar, *pilau* rice), drink, clothing (a *kitenge*, shirt, or pair of *khanga*), or envelopes with small amounts of cash. Such distributions are common in elections at all levels, although the value of the goods is typically greater for presidential and other national elections than it is for local ones. The main beneficiaries of such practices are party middle people, or *wahamasishaji*, who often keep substantial portions

of the funds or goods to be distributed to voters for their personal benefit. The value of goods or cash that most voters receive—enough for a meal or one article of clothing—is relatively low, although such gifts can be quite a boon to the poorest of Tanzanians (Achien 2005; Joseph 2005). Such *takrima* practices—which were declared legal just before the 2000 elections, but were banned by an April 2006 High Court ruling—have also been quite common in intra-party electoral competitions.<sup>1</sup> In other countries, small cash distributions are known as “chop-money” (Ghana) (Lindberg 2003) or “a little something for tea” (Kenya). While such practices are common across the continent, they are by no means universal. For example, my observations of the three-week campaign preceding the June 2007 National Assembly elections in Senegal yielded little evidence of parties engaging in this kind of distribution.<sup>2</sup> Still, most Africans’ experience with patronage is likely to be with items of this type of low value, despite the attention in analysis given to higher-value distributions (Williams 1987; van de Walle 2003: 312-3).

I refer to these practices, whether they be known as “*takrima*,” “small-chops,” or some other local variant, as “petty patronage.” Here, I borrow Scott Mainwaring’s definition of patronage as “the use or distribution of state resources on a nonmeritocratic basis for political gain” (Mainwaring 1999: 177); however, I broaden his conceptualization slightly to encompass more classical views of patronage, by loosening the restriction that the resources must be controlled by the state. I add the qualifier “petty” in order to

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<sup>1</sup> In late August 2007, ten *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (CCM) militants, including two members of the Bunge, were questioned on suspicion of involvement with *takrima* practices in the run-up to elections for the party’s National Executive Committee (“Corruption Charges...” 2007). Many of those races ended up being highly competitive, and a number of high CCM officials lost their Committee seats in the balloting.

<sup>2</sup> My direct observations were limited to those areas—the *départements* of Dakar, Saint-Louis, and Podor—in which I was physically present during the campaign, although interviews with academics, NGO activists, and *militants* from governing and opposition parties confirmed that, in Senegal, campaign-time distribution of goods was more limited to food and beverages at political rallies. In fact, at several opposition rallies I observed in the commune of Ndioum (*Département de Podor*), nothing more than cold water was being distributed, at least overtly. (Of course, one should not discount how valuable a cold drink can be during the oppressively hot weeks before the start of the *bivernage* on the Fuuta!)

differentiate the mass distribution of relatively low-value items, such as cloth, food and drink, household items, and small amounts of cash. As discussed previously, higher-value items can only usually be distributed to a limited number of individuals, and these individuals are in turn likely to be expected to assist the distributing competitor in mobilization efforts. These individuals' behaviors are often monitored in order to ensure that they behave properly, and they are subsequently rewarded or punished accordingly. Due to its lower value, however, petty patronage can and is distributed more widely, which has important implications for the mechanism through which such distribution has its effects on electoral outcomes.

The term “petty” might seem misplaced, given the poverty endemic to much of Sub-Saharan Africa. Certainly, one should not underestimate how valuable a bag of sugar or bar of soap can be to many on the continent. However, what distinguishes petty patronage from other forms of distribution is the low probability that its disbursement will significantly affect the recipient's life, at least in any long-term way. A bar of soap or T-shirt might be quite welcome, especially for a particularly struggling individual, but it will not raise that individual out of poverty, or even ensure a certain standard of living for any moderate length of time. On the other hand, more valuable forms of patronage—agricultural inputs, such as seeds and fertilizers; university slots; and government positions—can have profound and long-lasting effects on individuals' lives. But while receipt of petty patronage will not significantly raise a recipient's standard of living, the popularity of such distributional schemes suggests that they can have significant impact on political competition in Sub-Saharan Africa.

## **2. Explaining the Efficacy of Petty Patronage**

There are several possible arguments as to why petty patronage seems to be a productive strategy for electoral candidates. First, one might assume that the distribution of petty patronage represents attempts on the part of distributors to buy recipients' votes. Also, arguments could be made that voters support the distributors of petty patronage during campaigns because they fear the consequences that voting for an alternative would bring. However, both of these arguments seem lacking.

First, these distributional practices do not seem to fit the pattern of vote-buying, as defined by Frederic Schaffer and Andreas Schedler (2006) as “a market transaction in which parties, candidates, or intermediaries pay (in cash or kind) for ‘electoral services’ delivered by individual citizens—a favorable vote or a favorable abstention,” for at least two reasons. First, in many of these distributional acts, there is no established *quid pro quo*. Much petty patronage is distributed in relatively anonymous settings, such as *marches* or rallies, where little attempt is often made to note whom is receiving what. The distributor is clearly trying to communicate to the voter that she desires his vote, and she clearly expects that her largesse will further her cause come election day, but there is no established contract between the voter and the distributor that a certain type of participation has been purchased.<sup>3</sup> For example, in Tanzania, there appears to be no widespread monitoring of whether and how recipients actually vote (Achien 2005; Joseph 2005).

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<sup>3</sup> In some countries, buying voters' non-participation is quite common. In cases where parties can identify likely opponents, they often attempt to ensure individuals' abstention by temporarily buying their voting cards or paying for them to be traveling away from their home constituency on election day. For a discussion on abstention-buying, see the work of Gary Cox and J. Morgan Kousser (1981) on Upstate New York.

Second, as Fabrice Lehoucq (2002) points out, parties are likely to engage in vote-buying only when they have reasonable expectations of their ability to monitor compliance with any agreement they could reach with sellers effectively. Those interested in buying certain forms of electoral participation must take steps to avoid problems of “slippage”—namely, that recipients will vote for another candidate, or that they will not vote altogether. Parties can employ multiple methods to monitor compliance. In some countries, such as Senegal, the absence of an Australian ballot makes it relatively easy for sellers to monitor voting behavior; since citizens in legislative elections receive one ballot for each competing party or coalition, and vote by placing their selected list’s ballot into the box, parties can simply pay voters who can, after returning from the polls, brandish the ballots of all competitors. However, as secrecy increases, the market for votes will decline, due to increasingly intractable principal-agent problems (Lehoucq 2002: 6). There are ways for parties to try to solve the ecological inference problem they face in trying to read individual behavior from data (electoral results) that only indicate macro-behaviors, and these monitoring costs increase as population mobility and urbanization rise (Conroy-Krutz 2006). Numerous studies have stressed that electoral competitors can enhance their abilities to monitor compliance (i.e., whether or not a ‘bought’ individual actually voted for the donating competitor), even in the presence of Australian ballots, by mobilizing large numbers of grassroots workers who are particularly knowledgeable about their neighbors’ political preferences and behavior (Chandra 2004: 139; Stokes 2005). However, in Africa, very few, if any, political parties have the organizational capacity to solve these principal-agent problems (Sandbrook 1972; Bienen 1979: 62-77; Banégas 1998); constructing these political machines requires significant resources to recruit and equip these grassroots workers, and, in turn, to monitor them.

Yet another possible explanation for the apparent efficacy of petty patronage during electoral campaigns is that voters, who clearly enjoy the benefits of “harvesting time,” fear that non-support of a patronage-distributing candidate will threaten their ability to receive future largesse. Surely, a candidate who distributes goods widely in a certain location during a campaign, yet ultimately receives very few votes there, may decide to eschew distribution in that area in any future campaigns she may run. But while voters do have an interest in having as many candidates as possible distribute petty patronage in their home area during election campaigns, I am doubtful that fears of deterring future such distributions by a single candidate will have any substantial impact on most individuals’ electoral decision-making processes.

As I outlined previously, petty patronage is unlikely to alter the life trajectory of any recipient in any substantial way. Meanwhile, the results of elections are often thought to have the potential to impact significantly an individual’s or community’s long-term prospects; given the resource scarcity and the central importance of the state in economic life, post-colonial African politics have taken on a winner-take-all mentality (Lewis 1965: 65-84). Victory by the “wrong” candidate might mean the difference between a village receiving a new school, paved road, or borehole, and exclusion from post-election distributional coalitions. Therefore, a voter will likely make his electoral decision primarily on the basis of which candidate he feels will provide him and his community with the greatest utility, and not on some strategic calculation of how his choice will affect the probability that he will receive a bag of sugar during a future campaign.

### **3. The Informational Value(s) of Petty Patronage**

If we accept that petty patronage is an efficacious strategy for political competitors, and that it does not produce votes for the distributor primarily because of *quid pro quos* or recipients' fear of loss of future petty patronage benefits, what explains competitors' persistent use of it? I argue here that much of the value of petty patronage as a tool in electoral campaigns stems from its capacity to convey information about the qualities and preferences of the distributor to voters. Electoral competitors, then, distribute petty patronage in order to build the types of reputations that will make victory on election day more likely. Before addressing the specific reputations that competitors try to build by distributing petty patronage, it is perhaps worthwhile to re-examine some general points on campaign spending and signaling.

#### **3.1. Petty Patronage as a Costly Signal**

Election campaigns can be conceptualized as series of two-player games involving asymmetric information, in which the candidate has information about how she would likely act as a future incumbent. The voter, in turn, lacks this information, but desires to possess it. During campaigns, competitors have incentives to misrepresent their really-existing preferences (Banks 1990; Callander and Wilkie 2003), discuss policy as ambiguously as possible in order to maximize the breadth of their support (Downs 1957: 135-7; Shepsle 1972; Page 1978), and overstate their capabilities for competent governance. Realizing this, all but the most naïve of voters will practice some discounting of the type of information they receive from candidates' self-pronouncements (Calvert 1980). In other words, voters are aware that candidates engage in quite a bit of

“cheap talk.” In Sub-Saharan Africa, rare is the campaign speech or party platform that does not make strong, yet vague promises to commit to economic development and the fight against corruption. Again, most voters will discount this type of information accordingly. However, the candidate can convey desired messages through sending costly signals (Spence 1974), which will be less subject to heavy discounting on the part of voters. The distribution of petty patronage is such a costly signal.

Before proceeding with the argument, it may seem contradictory to argue on the one hand that the distinguishing feature of *petty* patronage is its lack of substantial value to the recipient, while in turn suggesting that it is a *costly* signal. But while a bag of sugar, snack, or piece of cloth might not be substantial enough as to alter the life path of the recipient, the distribution of such items to hundreds of people represents a moderate, and perhaps even significant, cost to the electoral competitor. In any event, such distributions are more costly than mere speeches.

It is possible to draw an analogy between costly patronage-distributing practices during electoral campaigns with costly advertising campaigns conducted to market consumer products. Firms engage in expensive advertising campaigns not just to raise awareness of their products, but also to send a signal that their products are of sufficiently high quality as to merit such lavish outlays (Kihlstrom and Riordan 1984; Milgrom and Roberts 1986). As consumers, we would not expect a firm to spend heavily promoting a new product if early tests and focus groups suggest that early buyers are likely to be dissatisfied with it. Therefore, the heavy spending in and of itself is a signal of the product’s quality, the argument goes.

Electoral competitors employ similar strategies. Again, it is relatively costless for a political party to issue a statement that it has a highly qualified, hard-working, or effective candidate for a certain position, and such a statement would likely be discounted by voters as mere “cheap talk.” However, when a party chooses to spend heavily to promote a candidate, the signal that is sent to voters is that the party has some confidence that the candidate could win office. This confidence, it follows, could stem from the party’s special knowledge that the candidate is in fact especially charismatic or skilled. The very act of campaign spending, then, is a communicative strategy on the part of electoral competitors, and it has value independent of the specific content of the messages (Prat 2002a, 2002b; Roumanias 2005). And a form of campaign spending quite common in African contexts is the delivery of petty patronage to potential voters.

### **3.2. Reputation-Building Through Petty Patronage**

African voters derive certain informational cues from witnessing the distribution—or non-distribution—of goods of varying volumes and values, and they can use these cues to make electoral decisions. The conclusions that voters make on the basis of these distributions are heavily context-specific, and will vary significantly according to local norms, socioeconomic conditions, and the disposition of the recipient or observant (Schaffer and Schedler 2006). However, given the central importance of redistribution in African politics, it seems likely that a top priority of instrumental voters will be to gather information to try to predict how electoral competitors would perform as incumbents with access to the resources of the state. After all, elections are increasingly likely to be won or lost on the basis of incumbents’ abilities to “deliver the goods” to constituencies. Therefore, it is extremely important for any electoral competitor that wishes to be viable

to demonstrate 1) committed support for redistributive politics, and 2) the capacity to participate in such acts. I argue that electoral competitors in Africa use petty patronage to signal their distributive orientations, as well as their capacities to actually participate in significant redistribution in the future. Specifically, petty patronage can generate messages about competitors' 1) commitment to redistribution, rather than personal hoarding; 2) preferences for likely beneficiaries, particularly in terms of ethnicity, region, or village, in post-election distributive coalitions; 3) capacity for future, more substantial distributions; and 4) electability. I next briefly discuss these types of signals in turn.

***Commitment to Redistribution and Aversion to Hoarding:*** Numerous scholars have drawn attention to a norm prevalent across African societies—and throughout much of the developing world, in fact—that the resource rich should share with the resource poor (Scott 1976; Hydén 1980; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Olivier de Sardan 1999). The advantaged élite who do not redistribute, but rather hoard their resources for their personal use, will never experience legitimated rule, this argumentation says. As Michael Schatzberg writes, “[p]olitical legitimacy in this corner of the globe rests on the tacit normative idea that government stands in the same relationship that a father does to his children” (2001: 1). A “*bon père de famille*,” he goes on to argue, is one who does not “eat too much” and commits himself to redistribution. As Joel Barkan describes in a study of Kenyan MPs, citizens’ support for incumbents is highly contingent upon the success of local development projects, such as *barambee*, to which elected officials are expected to contribute heavily on a personal basis (Barkan 1979). In fact, the vast majority of candidates in Africa—or throughout the world, for that matter—are from their society’s middle, if not upper socioeconomic stratum. Therefore, a candidate who does not participate in campaign-time goods distribution runs the very

real risk of sending a message that he does not subscribe to the norms of Africa's so-called "moral economy," despite his likely possession of above-average amounts of resources (Banégas 1998). In other words, voters may draw conclusions on the basis of observations of non-distribution of petty patronage during campaign periods that a competitor is, for whatever reason, unlikely to engage in significant redistribution of goods, jobs, monies, and other resources after the election. A candidate who is (comparatively) wealthy, yet does not share, may become an incumbent who commits the sin of "eating" too much, or even one who engages in corruption without redistribution (i.e., predation).

To some extent here, the type of the goods distributed as petty patronage matters. Even those candidates who do distribute goods may be perceived as violating (or as likely to violate, as incumbents) the norms of the "moral economy" if the value or utility of those goods for recipients seems to be less than what the distributor could easily afford. For example, a candidate for a legislative seat in Alego-Usonga, in western Kenya, received mostly jeers when cars from his campaign tossed calendars bearing his likeness. Rather, citizens there felt that a worthy candidate would have distributed "tea money" (Connors 2007). Few, if any, expect that an electoral competitor will distribute items of truly significant value—e.g., motorcycles, substantial amounts of cash, ruminant animals—to individual, non-élite voters (at least not without clear *quid pro quos* and some attempt to monitor the recipients' voting practices), but even among the more commonly distributed, cheaper forms of patronage, all goods are not created equal.

There are a number of reasons why an electoral competitor might have a commitment to redistribution—she might be an especially generous individual, subscribe

to a political ideology that stresses the justice of redistribution and egalitarianism, or simply understand that incumbents who are viewed as hoarders rather than sharers have short political careers<sup>4</sup>—and it is largely impossible for an individual voter to know definitively the competitor’s motivation. This, however, is largely irrelevant; of primary importance to the voter is not why an electoral competitor is likely to commit to redistribution and eschew hoarding as an incumbent, but merely that said competitor will do so.

***Ethnoregional Biases:*** Next, voters not only strive to separate which competitors are likely to engage in significant post-election redistribution from those who are more likely to hoard, but they also need to try to predict whether they, or some group in which they have membership, are likely to be included in any redistributive coalition that does develop. In other words, electing a candidate who is strongly committed to redistribution does little good for the voter if the targets of her largesse do not include that voter. In the zero-sum mentalities that often infuse African distributive politics, ethnicity has emerged as an effective focal point around which to organize collective efforts to control resources, distributive networks, and political access (Bates 1974; Joseph 1983; Fearon 1999). In many political systems, therefore, equilibria develop in which voters expect the distribution of resources and access to economic opportunities according to these ethnic networks, while élites target co-ethnics for votes and other political support (Bates 1983; Hardin 1995; Hechter 2001; Chandra 2004; Posner 2005). Of course, other category sets—such as regional, religious brotherhood, or even village

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<sup>4</sup> In the case of the latter, it is true that voters could send a message to a competitor who, once elected, fails in these redistributive obligations through ouster at the next election. But voters would rather have forward accountability (i.e., an enhanced ability to predict how a candidate will act as an incumbent) and choose someone likely to engage in favorable distributive policies, rather than to have backward accountability, and have to punish an incumbent for unfavorable distributive practices that have already been enacted (see Powell 2000).

identities—are also the bases for politicized cleavages in Sub-Saharan Africa, and distributional coalitions might be constructed around these divides, as well.

Electoral competitors might choose to distribute petty patronage in certain areas in order to signal to resident populations their commitment to favor them and their ethnic group in post-election distributional policies. Again, voters care not only about candidates' propensities to redistribute resources, but also about their preferences for recipients' identity categories (i.e., ethnic group A vs. ethnic group B). Therefore, in their observations of the distribution of petty patronage, voters note not only the type, quantity, and value of the goods being distributed, but also the identity of the recipients. If a member of ethnic group A, visiting a village (for a market day, perhaps) populated nearly entirely by members of ethnic group B, observes a candidate distributing bags of sugar there but never sees the candidate come to his own ethnically homogeneous village, he may conclude that the candidate, if elected, would be a committed redistributor as an incumbent, but mainly for the benefit of members of group B. That candidate, then, is rather unlikely to get the individual's vote.

**Capacity:** The very ability to distribute petty patronage, and the quantity and value of the goods distributed, are themselves indicative of the competitors' capacities to be an effective governor. Such distributions, I argue, give citizens important cues about competitor capacity for at least two reasons. First, a competitor that fails to distribute such patronage—at least in a polity in which such campaign-time distribution is fairly common—risks suggesting to the public a lack of either a personal resource base or position in networks that could provide access to such resources. As noted previously, elected officials are often expected to contribute heavily to local development projects.

Those who lack the personal resources to be able to distribute petty patronage during a campaign might be viewed as rather unlikely to be able to devote significant personal resources to development projects as an incumbent; such a reputation is certainly not one that an electoral hopeful would like to have.

Second, voters might conclude that a candidate who seems to lack the resources to participate in campaign-time patronage distribution also lacks the skills, aptitudes, or connections necessary to be successful in business and politics. Voters might not necessarily approve of the way that the game is played in local business and politics, but most would at least like to be represented by an individual who knows how to participate and can therefore probably bring spoils to the benefit of his constituents. In sum, the dispersal of any patronage, even of the petty variety, requires that competitors have some amount of resources, as well as the social capital and labor necessary to distribute those resources. Petty patronage sends a signal to the recipient that the distributor has certain resources that would improve the likelihood that it would be a capable governor (or at least more capable than an alternate competitor that apparently lacked the resources to distribute patronage).

***Electability:*** Finally, a candidate who engages in the distribution of petty patronage sends important signals about her electability, while those who do not risk being perceived of as being weaker competitors. Those who do not spend significantly on petty patronage during campaigns might be viewed as less-than-electable because they lack 1) the necessary personal commitment to fight in the race, and 2) the resources necessary to engage in other types of campaign and mobilizational strategies that will bring victory.

First, significant campaign spending, such as the distribution of petty patronage, may be a minimum hurdle that any candidate who wants to present herself as committed to the work necessary to go the distance, both as a campaigner and as a potential elected official, must clear (Le Borgne and Lockwood 2002). Those who are not willing to raise the necessary resources or dig into their own pockets to finance such distributions risk being perceived as less-than-completely committed to victory. Former Senator Fred Thompson's failure to meet expectations for fundraising in his long run up before declaring himself to be an official candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 2008 certainly contributed to an early and persistent narrative that the candidate was lazy and lacked the stamina necessary for a likely brutal general election campaign.

Second, those candidates who do not distribute petty patronage in a community might be viewed by those in that community as having insufficient resources to mobilize voters through other means, either in said community or in others. The distribution of goods during campaign periods is not only a candidate's way of telling a recipient, "I can communicate with you, and my qualities are X," but also that, "I can also communicate with other voters, and they will also hear that my qualities are X."

In all countries in which private funding of campaigns is significant, access to resources is taken as a sign of electability (although it is certainly not the only determiner of final outcomes), due to the fact that communication and mobilization require significant funds. This gives the hunt for resources added importance, since not having enough funds will not only impede one's abilities to communicate and mobilize at a time  $T+1$ , but it makes the candidate seem less competitive at time  $T$ . For example, in an

entreaty to his supporters for contributions, the campaign of Senator Barack Obama wrote that the third-quarter donation totals would “be a signal to voters in the early crucial states that our movement has the support it takes to win” (Santora 2007). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where régimes for public transparency in fundraising and asset management are weak or non-existent, candidates can signal their ability to compete by spending significantly on the distribution of petty patronage.

Demonstrating electability is absolutely essential for any competitor at early stages, and this is true to an especially large extent in Sub-Saharan Africa. Few citizens want to feel as if they are “wasting” their vote, so strategic decision-making is quite common. Although much more empirical research needs to be done on this topic, one might suspect that strategic voting is actually quite common in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the pressures to be part of the winning coalition are quite substantial. Residence in an area where a majority is known to have pro-opposition sympathies could very well condemn a citizen to below-the-mean spending on public goods in her area for many years to come. During the 2006 presidential campaign in the Gambia, for example, President Yahya Jammeh quite explicitly told crowds in areas that had voted in substantial numbers for the opposition in the past that, if they repeated such behavior, their regions would be overlooked when decisions about allocation of development resources were made in the future. There is a powerful incentive, then, to support the winner, and risk-averse voters will think twice before supporting a candidate who seems unlikely to win.

These pressures are not limited to Sub-Saharan Africa by any means. In his study of the Democratic political machine in Chicago, Milton Rakove describes how the organization’s achievement of dominance—particularly in establishing a monopoly over

the ability to name patronage appointments—in turn contributed to the long-term perpetuation of that dominance. Potential dissidents were deterred from supporting Republican or independent candidates by the knowledge that, in the very likely event that their opposition proved unable to unseat the machine, exclusion from the machine's largesse would be the likely punishment. "I've got two rules," one career politician told Rakove when asked for the secret of his success. "The first one is 'Don't make no waves.' The second one is 'Don't back no losers'" (1975: 11). In other words, in systems where machines or dominant parties monopolize redistributable assets that are essential to economic survival or advancement, supporting the likely winner is a good strategy for any risk-averse citizen.

In sum, a candidate who is able to deliver significant amounts of petty patronage is likely to appear more electable, both because she seems to be spreading her name to large number of voters, and because she appears confident enough in her viability to be willing to make such an investment (van de Walle 2006). Voters might then discern that a competitor capable of distributing pre-election patronage also enjoys a degree of electability, and, since it is better in patronage-based systems to support the winner rather than the loser, opt to support said competitor.

#### **4. The Elastic Value of Patronage-Derived Information**

With the above points in mind, I argue that the value of petty patronage for a voter cannot be measured solely with respect to the utility that said voter gains from consumption of the material goods obtained. Rather, there is an additional value in the information conveyed by the distribution; this information is valuable to the recipient, in that it helps her to maximize the utility of her vote. And electoral competitors can use it

to send costly signals to voters and burnish reputations as committed to redistribution to the recipient's group, capable, and electable.

However, if we accept that some of the value that voters derive from petty patronage stems from the information conveyed through the distributional act, then it follows that the utility of petty patronage to the voter—and therefore the very salience of petty patronage in its ability to impact electoral outcomes—will vary depending on what other types of information about competitors' preferences, abilities, and past behaviors are available. This suggests that the utility of a unit of petty patronage received by the voter will be a function both of the voter's general standard of living and also of the informational environment around him. In situations where information is quite scarce, such as in the rural zones of the DR Congo referenced in the introduction, petty patronage might provide a significant portion of the information a voter has about an electoral competitor. Therefore, observations of distributional behavior will go a long way toward forming a voter's final assessment of competitors. On the other hand, in situations in which voters receive substantial information about candidates' personal qualities, their past behavior, and their preferences, observation of petty patronage distribution will have a reduced impact on the formation of citizens' electoral decision-making processes.

First, it is important to note that the information that petty patronage provides is usually of limited quality; an ability to distribute bags of sugar is likely a weak indicator of a competitor's capacity for governance, and receipt of small items in the pre-election phase does not necessarily mean that voters should be confident that, in the post-election phase, they would be the recipients of higher-value goods and services. (Again, the vast

majority of voters in Sub-Saharan Africa receive no patronage of the non-petty variety from politicians.) Also, ability to deliver petty patronage is not among the best of indicators of candidate electability; while a candidate who cannot afford to deliver any petty patronage is likely to be viewed—rightly so—as a very long-shot, quite a few other non-incumbents will often be able to overcome this barrier to entry for serious consideration.

Next, a major determinant of absolute costs of other types of information in a given geographical area is the development level of the mass media environment. Most of Sub-Saharan Africa in the colonial and early post-independence eras could be characterized as having an underdeveloped mass media environment. Print media were rarely available outside the largest urban areas, and radio and television broadcasts were overwhelmingly either monopolized by the state, or came from abroad, and were therefore rarely in local vernaculars. While the region's media environment is still woefully underdeveloped when compared with the rest of the world, there has been significant advancement in many African countries', particularly since the mid 1990s. Today, a larger proportion of Africans than ever before can access multiple sources of political information via the mass media, through private and community-operated outlets, and in an increasing range of vernaculars (Bourgault 1995; Hydén, Leslie, and Ogundimu 2003; Nyamnjoh 2005).

In general, my argument is structured as follows: The development of mass media will lower the absolute costs of information collection for voters. As information generally becomes less costly, greater numbers of voters will be able to afford sources that offer them higher-quality data; they will rely to a lesser extent on those sources like

petty patronage that, while still cheap to obtain, tend to provide information of the lowest quality. Electoral competitors, in the meantime, will be able to present the higher-quality information that voters demand more efficiently. In essence, both the supply of and demand for higher-quality information in the system will increase.

For example, if broadcasts from multiple private and community-run radio stations in a hypothetical voter's vernacular become available in his area, it becomes more likely that he will obtain specific information on political developments, such as the launching or canceling of a government program, a new accusation of corruption against a highly placed official, or the entry of a new political competitor into the electoral arena. He might come, through Bayesian updating, to realize that a candidate's previous record as, say, a local police chief is a much better predictor of how he would perform on security issues if he were to be elected mayor than his ability to distribute T-shirts around election time is.

Skeptics of this argument will likely note that African mass media are unlikely to reach standards of Western investigative journalism, government monitoring, and political socialization anytime soon, and that this will severely limit the extent to which consumers can access higher-quality information that will, in turn, lead them to discount the information they receive from petty patronage. However, relatively simple media programs, which require neither tremendous political sophistication on the part of listeners nor highly trained journalists, can have a large impact. Ideally, the broadcasts that our hypothetical rural voter can now hear would include investigative and analytical journalistic pieces, but even programs as simple as so-called interactive, or call-in, shows provide significant political information to the voter. The voter might learn from a caller

from a distant region of the country that the government has launched a successful economic or social program in that area, while ignoring the voter's home region, thereby giving him important information about the incumbent's preferences. Similarly, he might hear complaints that an opposition legislator has performed poorly in another constituency, thereby making him skeptical of that legislator's party's overall competence. A farmer from his own region, with whom the voter would still otherwise be unlikely to have contact, might complain about cuts in government subsidies for fertilizer, thereby enabling the voter to assign blame for recent food shortages more definitively on the incumbent party's doorstep. In Table One, I summarize information conveyed by petty patronage distribution and alternate sources of similar, yet higher-quality informational cues. Much of this higher-quality information is often conveyed exclusively through mass media.

**Table One: Mechanisms for Communication of Electoral Competitor Attributes**

<b>Competitor Attribute</b>	<b>Distribution of Petty Patronage Suggests?</b>	<b>Other Sources of Information on Attribute</b>
Commitment to redistribution	Commitment to "moral economy" and rejection of hoarding	Involvement in past corruption; past distributional policies, both as an office holder and as a private citizen
Ethnic ties	Affinity with voter's identity group	Past favoritism toward particular groups in distributional policies and acts
Capacity for effective governance	Access to distributable resources and social capital	Educational background; past offices held and performance in those offices; competence in other areas, such as business
Electability	Commitment to running; ability to mobilize a significant number of voters	Opinion polls, reports from attendance at rallies and <i>marches</i> , endorsements by influential figures

Even in relatively well-developed media environments, electoral competitors might still try to establish reputations as committed to redistribution to specific groups, capable potential governors, and electability through these types of distributional practices. However, their reputation-building efforts will be hampered by the possible confounding cues available from other, increasingly cheap, sources. Over time, voters will likely learn that other sources provide higher-quality information about candidates' true preferences, capabilities, and characteristics. In turn, candidates who observe from vote returns that distribution of low-value goods during campaigns is declining in efficiency as a strategy might decide to limit their use of such practices.

Therefore, I expect that the marginal utility that electoral competitors derive from the distribution of one unit of patronage varies, across individuals, within and between countries, and over time, according to voters' abilities to gather information from other sources, such as mass media and social networks. In the final section of this paper, I outline an experimental design that I hope will be able to allow for systematic testing of this hypothesis.

## **5. Testing the Hypotheses**

In January 2008, I will conduct survey experiments employing a “within-subject” treatment design, with approximately 350-400 participants, in two administrative units in Uganda.<sup>5</sup> Within political science, there is a significant tradition of the use of experiments

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<sup>5</sup> The Central Division of Kampala and Bbale County, in primarily rural Kayunga District. This work is being funded by a Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation (SES-0720275).

in order to understand how voters operate in limited informational environments (see, for example, Rapoport, *et al.* 1989; Rahn 1993; McDermott 1997; Banducci, *et al.* 2003). These strategies are valuable in that they allow for the isolation of variables of interest and simultaneous controls of other, possibly confounding factors. The strategy outlined below modifies previous designs by Sigelman and Sigelman (1982), Reeves (1997), and Matland and Shepherd (2004), all of which presented participants with a series of choices between two candidates and provided increasing amounts of information in each subsequent vignette, in order to examine the effects of informational context on the salience of candidate race in U.S. electoral settings. Field experiments on the relationship between public access to political information and various outcomes, such as voter turnout and corruption, have been carried out in a number of African countries, including Uganda (Reinikka and Svensson 2003; Moehler and Mwesige 2007), but my project would be the first of which I am aware that would use survey experiments to study relationships between informational context, ethnic identity, patronage, and electoral behavior in the region.

Generally, the purpose of the experiments will be to determine how support for goods distributors as candidates is affected by confounding information.<sup>6</sup> Subjects will be asked to listen to vignettes about different hypothetical two-candidate races for local government positions.<sup>7</sup> Initially, only one substantive piece of information—the candidates' distributional practices—will be presented, with one candidate always being a goods distributor and one a non-distributor. In subsequent vignettes, treatments will include cues such as candidates' educations, past performance as officials, party

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<sup>6</sup> The experiment will also be designed to test how support for co-ethnics varies in different informational contexts.

<sup>7</sup> There will be no deception of participants; all will be informed of the hypothetical nature of the races and of the personalities.

affiliations, popularity, and issue positions. This information will always be presented to depict the goods distributor in a “negative” frame (e.g., stances not compatible with the subject’s, poor past performance in office, etc.).<sup>8</sup> After each vignette, the subjects will be asked to choose which of the two candidates they would prefer to see win.

In the absence of other information, I expect that the modal response will be support for the goods distributor. In other contexts, I expect that support for distributors will be significantly lower. Such results would support my hypotheses, in that voters would be weighing distribution to a lesser degree as they are confronted with other information. However, I do not expect that all types of information will be equally likely in encouraging “defection” from a goods distributor, and a primary goal of the experiment is to identify which types of information are more salient than others. If rates of defection from a goods distributor do not vary significantly in different informational contexts, this will suggest that goods distribution remains a powerful driver of Africans’ electoral behavior even when confounding facts are present.

## **Summary**

The pervasive distribution of low-value goods during election campaigns has led to a lingering and mournful sense among many observers of African politics that citizens there are willing to exchange their vote and voice for the likes of cloth, a meal or drink, or a small amount of cash, merely out of a sign of graciousness for the benefaction. However, as Javier Auyero cautions, “We should avoid the mechanistic (and stigmatizing)

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<sup>8</sup> Information such as the subject’s ethnic identity, party leanings, and stance on controversial issues will be ascertained through pre-experiment interviews. Following the experiments, subjects will be asked a number of questions about their educational levels and media consumption habits.

view of poor people as Pavlovian agents who vote for and support political candidates in exchange for favors and services” (Auyero 1999: 300-1). And the nature of the distribution of petty patronage suggests that it cannot be easily characterized as attempts at vote buying, while much of our empirical evidence—attendance at rallies, turnouts that are often higher than those in industrialized democracies, and passions that too often erupt into violence—suggests that a large proportion of voters care deeply about which candidate wins office, and should not be willing to simply vote for the provider of a low-value good or amount of money.

Instead, I argue that we cannot fully understand the reasons behind the apparent efficacy of petty patronage as a campaign strategy without attention to its informational face. Candidates, I argue, use petty patronage to send costly signals to voters and, in doing so, build reputations as committed to redistribution, favoring of recipients’ identity groups, capable of effective governance, and ultimately electable. In this sense, both candidates’ and voters’ use of petty patronage during electoral campaigns represents rational responses to problems of communication and information-gathering in environments where high-quality information about politics and candidate characteristics tends to be costly and rare. My goal in upcoming research is to examine this other possible face of petty patronage and to test how its salience co-varies with other contextual factors, such as the presence of confounding information.

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