

Drivers of Distributive Preferences: Symbolic Politics vs Self-Interest in Africa

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Finished? Not Yet.

Theoretical Problem, Main Hypotheses, and Contributions

Sub-optimal allocation of political goods may arise not due to nefarious politicians or special interests but because citizens in a democratic society express preference for sub-optimal allocation. Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes [-@przeworski_democracy_1999] describe how such sub-optimal allocations can arise when politicians pander to voter preferences that are not in the voters' best interests. Within the American politics literature, the theory of symbolic politics can explain why and when voters hold preferences contrary to their objective material self-interests [@sears_whites_1979, @sears_self-interest_1980]. Individuals acquire predispositions toward political objects through socialization at a young age which guide preferences later in life; in particular, symbolic politics theory emphasizes racial prejudice, political ideology, and partisan identification as drivers of political preferences. As far as we are aware, this theory has not yet been applied in an African context. Especially in light of recent research that demonstrates the limits of ethnic favoritism in the distribution of African political goods [@kasara_tax_2007, @kramon_who_2013, @burgess_value_2015], the question of whether ethnic identity drives distributive preferences rather than material self-interest merits investigation.

We will investigate the following hypotheses:

- Symbolic predispositions toward ethnic identity, party identity, and political ideology explain greater variation in African distributive preferences than material self-interest.
- Symbolic predispositions will explain greater variation in abstract or generalized issue attitudes, but less variation in attitudes toward issues with clear and immediate impact on individuals' lives.
- The explanatory potential of symbolic predispositions will vary by country. For instance, we expect ethnic identity to explain greater variation in distributive preference in Kenya than in Tanzania, as ethnic identity is less salient historically in the latter.

This project will make the following contributions to the literature:

- If symbolic politics explains greater variation in distributive preferences than material self-interest, one implication will be that welfare enhancement may not accompany democratization.
- If material self-interest explains greater variation in distributive preference than symbolic predispositions like ethnic identity, we will clarify the debate over the salience of ethnic identity in African politics.
- Our project will expand the literature on political psychology to developing countries, where it has not been extensively applied.

Countries (context) studied

We propose to use individual-level data collected in the sixth round of the Afrobarometer survey (2014, 2015) to study this topic. We will use two measurements as dependent outcomes. The first outcome is participant response to a question (Q65C) asked to respondents in all 36 countries about willingness to have taxes raised if it results in better access to health care. The second outcome is a question (Q86F-LIB) asking respondents in Liberia and Sierra Leone how much they agree with the statement "The government should devote many

more resources to combating Ebola even if this means that less money is spent on things like education.” We will measure self-interest through questions that measure exposure to ebola such as having close relatives or friends who contracted Ebola, as well as how ebola disrupted their regular lives.