

UNDERSTANDING HANDOUTS IN CANDIDATE SELECTION: CHALLENGING PARTY AUTHORITY IN MALAWI

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Abstract

This article discusses the purposes and drivers of handouts in party primaries in Malawi. We argue that existing explanations of handouts are incomplete because they are developed to identify dynamics in presidential or legislative elections. Rules of national elections are constitutionally protected, and their fairness is monitored by both local and international observers. In contrast, rules guiding candidate selection in parties are less institutionalized and, in some contexts, such as Malawi, a secret ballot cannot be taken for granted. This underlines the need for empirical studies of the logic of handouts at the candidate selection stage to study how differences in institutional context affect the strategic choices behind engaging in the practice. We demonstrate why such an analysis needs to be informed by in-depth knowledge about the party organisations in which the candidate selection process itself takes place. Through qualitative interviews with members of selectorates and party primary contestants, we find that the institutional environment affects the propensity to use handouts. Mechanisms such as leadership interventions and the opportunity to stand as independent candidates make primary outcomes less final. This reduces the authority of local party organizations to control candidate selection and appropriates the use of patrimonial strategies.

MONEY IS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF POLITICS all over Africa. In countries like Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia, as in Malawi, previous studies have found that campaigning is a very expensive business.¹ Several factors make campaigning expensive, such as payments for vehicles,

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¹ Paul Nugent, 'Winners, losers and also rans: Money, moral authority and voting patterns in the Ghana 2000 election', *African Affairs* 100, 400 (2001), pp. 405–428; Paul Nugent, 'Banknotes and symbolic capital: Ghana's elections under the fourth republic' in Matthias Basedau, Gero Erdmann and Andreas Mehler (eds), *Votes, money and violence: Political parties and elections in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Nordic Africa Institute, 2007), p. 254; Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand, 'Political parties and democratic consolidation in Africa', *Democratization* 9, 3 (2002), pp. 30-52; Sam

posters, media coverage, campaign workers and registration fees. On top of this, the practice of distributing handouts prevails in many countries, not just in contestations for a seat in the national parliament, but also in the nomination processes within political parties.² So far, most studies of handouts in Africa address the relationship between electoral candidates and voters in parliamentary or presidential elections,³ and there is less research on the causes and consequences of handouts in party primaries.⁴ The few studies that discuss the relationship between handouts and intra-party dynamics suggest that handouts can serve as a material inducement that mobilize new and old local party members to become more involved in the party's campaign efforts.⁵ This argument is supported to some extent by Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justice Willis who in their book on the moral economy of elections in Africa argue that even if handouts are likely to be rejected by voters when they are perceived to represent a financial transaction, they are more accepted when they occur as a part of a longer-term relationship between politicians and their constituencies.⁶ It is thus crucial, we argue, to study the relationship that develops between the contestants and the voters in the candidate nomination process organized by the local party branches to provide more knowledge about how actors involved in these processes justifies the use of handouts. In this article, we apply an institutional approach in which we focus on the rules, procedures and practices surrounding party candidate selection processes to understand why handouts have developed as an important aspect of the relationship between the contestants and

Wilkins, 'Who pays for pakalast? The NRM's peripheral patronage in rural Uganda', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, 4 (2016), pp. 619-638; Leonardo Arriola, Donghyun Choi, Justine Davis, Melanie Phillips, and Lise Rakner, 'Paying to party: Candidate resources and party switching in new democracies', *Party Politics*, online first, doi.org/10.1177/1354068821989563.

² Nahomi Ichino and Noah L Nathan, 'Do primaries improve electoral performance? Clientelism and intra-party conflict in Ghana', *American Journal of Political Science* 57, 2 (2013), pp. 428-441; Gretchen Bauer and Akosua K. Darkwah, 'Some money has to be going...' Discounting filing fees to bring more women into parliament in Ghana', in Ragnhild Muriaas, Vibeke Wang and Rainbow Murray (eds), *Gendered electoral financing: Money, power and representation in comparative politics* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 131-153; Happy Kayuni and Ragnhild L. Muriaas, 'Alternatives to gender quotas: electoral financing of women candidates in Malawi', *Representation* 50, (2014), pp. 393-404.

³ Staffan I. Lindberg, 'It's our time to "chop": Do elections in Africa feed neo-patrimonialism rather than counteract it?', *Democratization* 10, 2 (2003), pp. 121-140; Pedro C. Vicente and Leonard Wantchekon, 'Clientelism and vote buying: Lessons from field experiments in African elections', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 25, 2 (2009), pp. 292-305; Eric Kramon, 'Electoral handouts as information: Explaining unmonitored vote buying', *World Politics* 68, 3 (2016), pp. 454-498; Dominika Koter, 'Costly electoral campaigns and the changing composition and quality of parliament: Evidence from Benin', *African Affairs* 116, 465 (2017), pp. 573-596.

⁴ Ichino and Nathan, 'Do primaries improve electoral performance?'

⁵ Paula Muñoz, *Buying audiences: Clientelism and electoral campaigns when parties are weak* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019); Ichino and Nathan, 'Do primaries improve electoral performance?'

⁶ Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justice Willis, *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa: Democracy, Voting and Virtue* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 281.

the voters in candidate selection processes within Malawian parties. Institutions are defined as ‘rules and procedures (both formal and informal) that structure society by constraining and enabling actors’ behaviour’.⁷ As such, we see handout distribution in nomination processes as a type of electoral behaviour that is shaped by the interplay of institutions and the authority of different levels of party organizations. We agree that some actors are likely to be motivated by material inducements and argue that there are certain features of the institutional context that help sustain this controversial practice.⁸

We selected nine constituencies in Malawi for in-depth studies of how candidates and voters in party nomination processes described and explained the use of handouts at this stage of the electoral process. The study was conducted in 2017 in constituencies where there was competition for a seat in the parliament. Actually, most constituencies in Malawi can be considered as competitive, because even if the main parties in Malawi do have strongholds, “safe” seats are rare because the salience of independent candidates reduces the incumbency advantage of sitting parliamentarians⁹ and the value of the party labels. Furthermore, it is also important to note that even though Malawians use the word “party primaries” which implies a system of candidate selection that is decentralized at the constituency level and inclusive in the sense that at least all members can participate, the nomination systems in Malawian parties must be considered a hybrid and informal.

We identify two mechanisms that are crucial for understanding how institutional features affect the propensity of handouts being given in Malawian nomination processes. First, we find that if the nomination process organized by local party branches is not authoritative, this may contribute to an escalation of handouts. Both features internal to the party (e.g. uncertainties in internal candidate selection rules) and rules external to the party (e.g., the right of candidates to stand as independents) affect the power of the local party branches. When the decision of the local party is not respected by upper branches of the party or the aspirants themselves, the process of candidate selection at the constituency level loses some of its authoritative power. When members of party selectorates

⁷ Georgina Waylen, ‘Informal institutions, institutional change, and gender equality’, *Political Research Quarterly* 67, 1 (2014), pp 212–23.

⁸ Kristen Kao, Ellen Lust, and Lise Rakner, Poverty and clientelism: Do the poor embrace handouts? Unpublished Working Paper, GLD Malawi, 2020.

⁹ Tam O’Neil, Ngeyi Kanyongolo and Hoseph Wales with Moir Walita Mkandawire, “Women and power: Representation and influence in Malawi’s parliament”, Report, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, February 2016.

accept handouts it can be understood as a sign of resignation—or fatalism—where the lower party branches demonstrate that by receiving a gift, they accept whatever happens later in the process. Second, while the ballot is always secret in national elections,¹⁰ the lining-up-behind-the-candidate method is most common in Malawian primaries, which provides an added advantage for the aspirants in trying to buy votes, as they can to some extent monitor the electorate.

This article contributes important insights to two current concerns in the literature on African politics. First, our study sheds light on evidence produced by Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis about why the practice of giving handouts persists in Africa and why the legitimacy of a candidate is based on much more than ‘simply the amount that they give out’.¹¹ Like other contemporary studies of African politics, we demonstrate how institutions structure political outcomes in important ways.¹² Second, we add to the scholarship on African parties by expanding our knowledge of the role of party grassroots. Studying the role of local party presence can serve as a lens to improve our understanding of political parties and electoral behaviour more broadly.¹³ Although parties in Africa are commonly defined as organizationally weak,¹⁴ the intense competition in candidate selection processes in African parties is similar to those observed elsewhere and plays a significant role in developing party organizations on the ground.¹⁵

The article is organized as follows. First, we give a brief overview of the literature on electoral handouts, candidate selection and the development of party organizations in Africa. Second, we provide the background to two important institutional features, candidate selection rules and procedures and the salience of independent candidates in Malawi. We then give a short presentation of our methods and data. After this, we provide an in-depth analysis of how handouts are appropriated by actors involved in the Malawian primaries. Finally, we conclude by discussing

¹⁰ Ernesto Dal Bo, ‘Bribing voters’, *American Journal of Political Science* 51,4 (2007), pp. 789–803; Elena Gadjanova, ‘Electoral clientelism as status affirmation in Africa: evidence from Ghana’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 55, 4 (2017), pp. 593–621; Kramon, ‘Electoral handouts as information’.

¹¹ Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis, ‘*The Moral Economy*’, p. 7.

¹² Nic Cheeseman, ‘Introduction: Understanding African politics: Bringing the state back in’, in Nic Cheeseman (ed.) *Institutions and democracy in Africa: How the rules of the game shape political developments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1–38.

¹³ Matthias Krönke, Sarah J. Lockwood, and Robert Mattes, ‘Party footprints in Africa: Measuring local party presence across the continent’, Afrobarometer, Working Paper No. 186. For more information on the Political Parties in Africa project, see <http://www.idcppa.uct.ac.za/politicalparties>.

¹⁴ Lars Svåsand, ‘Regulation of political parties and party functions in Malawi: Incentive structures and the selective application of the rules’, *International Political Science Review* 35, 3 (2014), pp. 275–290.

¹⁵ Shane Mac Giollabhui, ‘Battleground: candidate selection and violence in Africa’s dominant political parties’, *Democratization* 25, 6 (2018), pp. 978–995.

why the actors at different levels have different goals and aspirations and underline some further implications for the scholarship on parties in Africa.

Handouts, candidate selection, and party organizations

Contesting elections is an expensive business for all concerned and just the costs of getting registered as a candidate with the Electoral Commission are, as argued by Paul Nugent, ‘usually enough in themselves to exclude most people from running’.¹⁶ Additionally, candidates are expected to distribute material benefits to voters at election time, which further raises the cost of campaigning.¹⁷ The giving of Handouts in elections are problematic not just because contesting is so expensive that it limits the pool of eligible candidates to the wealthy, but also because the vote choice may be skewed towards those that give the most.

Previous studies on vote buying or handouts in inter-party competitions for seats in the national legislature point to two crucial factors that make it difficult to buy an election: the secret ballot and institutional quality.¹⁸ Scholars studying handouts in elections tend to agree that the purpose of a handout is not ‘buying votes’ but something else, like turnout or abstention buying,¹⁹ or a way for candidates to send out information cues to the voters signalling electoral viability.²⁰ As highlighted by Eric Kramon, because weak party organizations in Africa cannot monitor the clientelist exchange in secret elections, the purpose of handouts is not to buy an election, but to give signals that make promises about distribution of resources in the future more credible.²¹ Elena Gadjanova argues that in contexts where all candidates give handouts the practice is partly status affirmation through public displays of wealth, and an attempt to match the inducements of other candidates to

¹⁶ Paul Nugent, ‘Banknotes and symbolic capital’, p. 254.

¹⁷ Koter, ‘Costly electoral campaigns’.

¹⁸ Jordan Gans-Morse, Sebastián Mazzuca, and Simeon Nichter, ‘Varieties of clientelism: Machine politics during elections’, *American Journal of Political Science* 58, 2 (2014), pp. 415-432; Valeria Brusco, Marcelo Nazareno, and Susan C. Stokes, ‘Vote buying in Argentina’, *Latin American Research Review* 39, 2 (2004), pp. 66-88; Susan C. Stokes, ‘Perverse accountability: A formal model of machine politics with evidence from Argentina’, *American Political Science Review* 99, 3 (2005), pp. 315–25.

¹⁹ Simeon Nichter, ‘Vote buying or turnout buying? Machine politics and the secret ballot’, *American Political Science Review* 102, 1 (2008), pp. 19-31.

²⁰ Lindberg, ‘It’s our time’; Ichino and Nathan, ‘Do primaries improve electoral performance?’; Kramon, ‘Electoral handouts’; Koter, ‘Costly electoral campaigns’

²¹ Kramon, ‘Electoral handouts’.

break existing reciprocity norms.²² Paula Muñoz, studying elections in countries with weak parties in Latin America, argues that candidates use handouts to buy audiences at rallies to compensate for the lack of party grassroots mobilization.²³ Candidates induce voters to show up at rallies by giving them a reward, and simultaneously get the voters' attention by, for instance, promising benefits to specific constituencies.²⁴

Understanding handouts in candidate selection necessitates an analysis of parties as organizations and a realization that neither secret ballots nor institutional quality can be taken for granted. As argued by Merete Bech Seeberg, Michael Wahman and Svend-Erik Skaaning candidate selection in Africa is mostly 'left to the discretion of poorly institutionalized parties, free of the involvement of electoral management bodies and external monitors, and violence often results'.²⁵ Still, after experiencing electoral setbacks²⁶ and intra-party power struggles,²⁷ party leaderships throughout the continent have started paying more attention to demands from their local party branches, including more decentralized and inclusive nomination processes, partly as a strategy to challenge what Nicholas Van de Walle has termed 'the big man syndrome'.²⁸ African parties are clearly not just 'elite clubs without any grassroots organization' anymore, as argued by Shane Giollabhuí.²⁹ Rather, as Staffan Lindberg has noted, we should be aware that even parties that originated as 'creations of personal or elite rule' may develop into more broad-based, deep-rooted entities.³⁰ Indeed the organization of nomination processes within political parties has been a critical aspect of building grassroots organizations, but they are constantly under development.³¹

The type of candidate selection procedure adopted affects the party building potential of intra-party competitions. The mainstream literature on candidate selection has identified two critical dimensions that define variation in parties' candidate selection systems: is the decision

²² Elena Gadjanova, 'Electoral clientelism as status affirmation'.

²³ Muñoz, 'Buying Audiences'.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Merete Bech Seeberg, Michael Wahman, and Svend-Erik Skaaning, 'Candidate nomination, intra-party democracy, and election violence in Africa', *Democratization* 25, 6 (2018), pp. 959-977.

²⁶ Lawrence LeDuc, 'Democratizing party leadership selection', *Party Politics* 7, 3 (2001), pp. 323-341.

²⁷ Nic Cheeseman, 'The Kenyan elections of 2007: An introduction', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2, 2 (2008), pp. 166-184.

²⁸ Nicolas van de Walle, 'Presidentialism and clientelism in Africa's emerging party systems', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 2 (2003), pp. 297-321.

²⁹ Giollabhuí, 'Battleground'.

³⁰ Staffan I. Lindberg, 'Institutionalization of party systems? Stability and fluidity among legislative parties in Africa's democracies', *Government and Opposition* 42, 2 (2007), pp. 215-241.

³¹ Giollabhuí, 'Battleground'.

decentralized and is the process inclusive?³² We expect that a decentralized candidate selection system is most conducive for developing local party branches. In centralized systems candidates are selected exclusively by a national party selectorate, and in decentralized systems the final decision is taken at the constituency level. This means that rules regarding decision-making power between different levels of the party organization need to be established and that there must be some activity on the ground to organize the event. Many systems are a mixture of centralized and decentralized in practice and even in centralized systems, party leaders ask for recommendations from local branches.³³ As argued by Magnus Ohman, African parties are more grounded than assumed and candidate selection tends to be more decentralized than the party literature emphasizes.³⁴ Yet, even in parties with decentralized candidate selection procedures the party leaders may use their power to intervene if the decision taken on the ground goes against their wish.³⁵

Inclusiveness, the second dimension, can be understood ‘as the degree and nature of participation at each site of selection’.³⁶ If all members can vote, this is seen as inclusive, while if party bosses at the constituency or national level pick the candidates, the system is exclusive. It is however sometimes difficult to establish when a system is inclusive in countries like Malawi, where party organizations do not keep lists of registered party members. Some parties in Ghana, have also experimented with expanding the primaries to include non-members.³⁷ Here again, inclusive structures involve a larger machinery and may facilitate party building, although this is not straightforward as the benefits of active engagement might be reduced as a larger group of voices are heard. For instance, using handouts to mobilize a large selectorate in an inclusive selection system can be discouraging for more active local party members with a stronger commitment to the party.

³² Gideon Rahat and Reuven Y. Hazan, ‘Candidate selection methods: An analytical framework’, *Party Politics* 7, 3 (2001), pp. 297–322.

³³ Elin Bjarnegård and Meryl Kenny, ‘Comparing candidate selection: A feminist institutionalist approach’, *Government and Opposition* 51, 3 (2016), pp. 370–92.

³⁴ Magnus Öhman, *The heart and soul of the party: Candidate selection in Ghana and Africa* (Uppsala Universitet, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2004).

³⁵ Vibeke Wang and Ragnhild L. Muriaas, ‘Candidate selection and informal soft quotas for women: gender imbalance in political recruitment in Zambia’, *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7, 2 (2019), pp. 401–411.

³⁶ Shane Mac Giollaibhuí, ‘How things fall apart: Candidate selection and the cohesion of dominant parties in South Africa and Namibia’, *Party Politics* 19, 4 (2013), p. 580.

³⁷ Nahomi Ichino and Noah L. Nathan, ‘Democratizing the party: The effects of primary election reforms in Ghana’, *British Journal of Political Science* (2021), p. 1–18.[DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123421000028>]

Rules and procedures of candidate selection in Malawian parties

Candidate selection processes within political parties is formative for the party's organization as rules need to be developed and events organized. As in most countries in the world, the Malawian Constitution does not mention the candidate nomination process in political parties per se. Parties are free to choose their own candidate nomination rules and method.³⁸ By 2014, none of the four main parties had in their charter clear rules and procedures for nominating parliamentary candidates.³⁹ The process of conducting primaries and practical rules of procedure is the same among the major Malawian parties, with only some small differences. One of the major explanations is that there have been continuities in ways of doing things⁴⁰ because the main party that emerged after democratization in the early 1990s, the United Democratic Front (UDF), had its roots in the Malawi Congress Party (MCP)⁴¹, and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) emerged as a breakaway of UDF. As none of the parties possess a written official set of internal rules on candidate selection, rules are defined based on the conduct of the actual candidate nomination processes. These are transmitted orally using each party's hierarchical structure that runs from the national executive party leaders to other relevant party leaders at the regional, district, constituency, area, and branch level.⁴² Knowledge of the primary nomination rules is mainly based on what the party constituency or previous aspirants relay to them. Party selection process thus continues to be informal and unstandardized.⁴³

Nandin Patel and Andrew Mpesi⁴⁴ and Asiyati Chiweza, have identified the main procedures in their works on party primaries in Malawi.⁴⁵ Chiweza shows that although the constituency is the

³⁸ Svåsand, 'Regulation of political parties'.

³⁹ Asiyati L. Chiweza, 'Party primary candidate nomination institutions, informality, and women's candidature in Malawi's parliamentary elections', in Diana Madsen (ed), *Gendered institutions and women's political representation in Africa* (ZED Books, London, 2021), pp. 103-128.

⁴⁰ Harri Englund. 'Introduction: The culture of chameleons', in H. Englund (ed.) *A democracy of chameleons: Politics and culture in new Malawi* (CLAIM, Blantyre, 2002), pp. 11-24.

⁴¹ The only party allowed in the one-party era (ended in 1994).

⁴² This hierarchical structure of parties is discussed in Patel (2005)

⁴³ Viwemi Chavula, 'Challenging informality as a patriarchal dividend' (A policy brief of the 50-50 Management Agency, 2019).

⁴⁴ Nandini Patel and Andrew Mpesi, 'Between choice and imposition: The politics of nominations', in Martin Ott and Fidelis Edge Kanyongolo (eds), *Democracy in progress: Malawi's 2009 parliamentary and presidential elections* (Kachere Books No. 48, Zomba, 2009), pp. 295-316.

⁴⁵ Chiweza, 'Party primary candidate nomination'.

main centre of action, like in most primaries, other levels are also partly engaged, as in more centralized systems. The constituency is composed of smaller units called areas and branches and there is a party committee at each level. The first step of the candidate selection process is that an individual seeking nomination must identify himself or herself to the area committees at the grassroots level and express an interest in running as a candidate to the constituency committee. The constituency committee can accept or refuse a candidate (although refusal is rare), and introduce the candidate to the district officials, who later introduce the candidate to the regional officials.

Voting in the constituency primaries occurs through a structure built on area committees. Each of the party's area committee operates like a caucus and has three sections: a youth wing, a women's wing, and a main structure. In the case of the DPP, for example, 15 members from each area committee (that is, five individuals from each wing) form the selectorate. These 15 individuals, along with those selected in other area committees, vote. The MCP and the UDF area committees contribute nine delegates to the primaries, with three from each wing.⁴⁶ One reason why this method is chosen is that party membership is not common in Malawi due to strict enforcement rules of the MCP in the one-party era. The major challenge for parties is identifying members of the selectorate and the number of area committees that a constituency can have. The numbers of selectorates vary with the number of areas the party has in a constituency. According to Seeberg and Wahman, it is not unusual for local primaries to include a few thousand delegates, although this varies from party to party and from constituency to constituency.⁴⁷ For example, in most MCP primaries, the selectorates may range from 500 to 1500. In the DPP, the numbers could reach as high as 5000. Primaries are therefore quite inclusive, even if the screening of delegates at the area level adds an aspect of exclusivity. The candidates do not have clear details of the selectorates until the actual voting day. Constituency leaders and incumbents may influence the creation of additional areas to create an advantage for a preferred candidate.

⁴⁶ For PP, the procedure was slightly different in 2014. PP decided to enlarge its local selectorate from a few local committee leaders to rank-and-file members in order to identify the most popular candidate. They also used ballot boxes instead of a process where members of the selectorate lined up behind their favored candidate.

⁴⁷ Merete Bech Seeberg and Michael Wahman, 11. March 2019, "Why does Malawi have 1,331 candidates running for 193 seats in parliament?" *The Washington Post* [Accessed April 27 2021 at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/11/why-does-malawi-have-candidates-running-seats-parliament/>]

On the day of candidate elections, the event is facilitated and presided over by a team from the party's regional committee. In terms of voting procedure, queuing behind the candidate, not secret ballot, is the dominant method in all major parties. The process is so open that the people working for the candidate know who did not keep their part of the deal. Even when candidates are blindfolded, they remove the cloth so they can see the length of the line behind them. The method is extremely transparent and usually photographs and videos are taken. Consequently, candidates can monitor clientelistic exchanges. Votes for each candidate, counted by the team presiding over the elections and results of the vote are supposed to be announced publicly by the leader of the team. The candidate with most people lining up behind him or her will win, even by just one person. Regional party governing structures exercise power by either accepting or refusing the nominations. Since the system remains informal and unregulated it is difficult to establish how it best fits into the established typology that classifies systems based on decision-making power and inclusiveness.

The salience of independent candidates in Malawi

One critical question regarding the power of political party organizations is whether they have formally or in practice a monopoly on nominating candidates for parliamentary elections. Robert Moser's study of elections in Russia show that electoral systems that allow independents to compete at a level playing field with partisan candidates, is 'robbing', as he writes, parties of the preferential treatment they 'need to get established in the initial years of democratic governance'.⁴⁸ Some definitions even see electoral contestation as the *raison d'être* of a party as one of their core tasks is to field candidates to compete for government office.⁴⁹ In the context of Malawi, parties do not have a monopoly on nominating candidates for elections and this, we argue, has repercussions for the authority of internal candidate selection procedures within political parties. The likelihood that party members at different levels of the party organization dedicate effort to developing and enforcing rules that handle these activities might be reduced when there are alternative channels to electoral success. For instance, if candidates are dissatisfied with the

⁴⁸ Robert G. Moser, 'The impact of the electoral system on post-communist party development: The case of the 1993 Russian parliamentary elections', *Electoral Studies* 14, 4 (1995), p. 377.

⁴⁹ Leon Epstein, *Political parties in western democracies* (New York, Praeger, 1967).

nomination process within a party, they can exit the party and stand as an independent instead of using their voice inside the party organization to demand change. Contestations over the rules and practice of candidate selection within party organizations along with a party system that allows candidates to stand as independents affect the authority of party organizations.

The party system in Malawi is quite competitive considering the majoritarian electoral system. On average, 4-5 parties tend to win seats in the legislature each election. The party system has regionalist features with the DPP having its stronghold in the southern and MCP in the central region. For candidates seeking to win a seat in parliament, winning the nomination of a party in its stronghold may have some advantages. For instance, candidates nominated by MCP in the central region can use the party label to win votes in their party strongholds, but the existence of independent candidates means that there are very few safe seats. Sambo observes that the country has one of the highest MP turnovers in the region and a significant number of independent candidates win elections.⁵⁰ The number of independent candidates is clearly higher than in similar countries, like Ghana and Zambia.⁵¹ Table 1 shows that while the DPP was the only fully nationalized party—with the capacity of running candidates in all 192 constituencies—there were on average 2.6 independent candidates standing per constituency in 2019. Independent candidates also had success at the polls. After the 2014 and the 2019 elections, independents formed the largest group in parliament, counting 52 of the 193 seats.⁵² As discussed above, this salience of independent candidates challenges the authority of the Malawian parties.

Table 1 Parliamentary candidates by party, 2009-2019

	2009	2014	2019
<i>Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)</i>	192	191	192
<i>People’s Party (PP)</i>	NA	193	81
<i>Malawi Congress Party (MCP)</i>	133	160	189
<i>United Democratic Front (UDF)</i>	168	183	124

⁵⁰ Gift Sambo, *The cost of party image: Electoral turnover in Malawi from 1999 to 2014* (Unpublished MA Political Science Thesis, University of Malawi, 2015).

⁵¹ John Ishiyama, Anna Batta, and Angela Sortor, ‘Political parties, independents, and the electoral market in sub-Saharan Africa’, *Party Politics* 19, 5 (2013), pp. 695–712.

⁵² Nandini Patel and Michael Wahman, ‘The Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Elections in Malawi, May 2014’, *Africa Spectrum* 50, 1 (2015), pp. 79-92.

<i>United Transformation Movement (UTM)</i>	NA	NA	191
<i>Independent candidates</i>	479	419	501
<i>Others</i>	187	137	53
<i>Total</i>	1159	1293	1331

(Source: Malawi Electoral Commission) ⁵³

Methods and data

Our data collection was part of a broader study of gender and electoral financing that focused on identifying the different ways in which resources affect political recruitment in Malawi. Our aim was to show the challenges of the current electoral system and understand why the use of patrimonial strategies persists, rather than develop theories about the effects of a particular candidate selection system or a type of party. Interviews were done in nine constituencies based on information about the distribution of seats in the 2014 elections.⁵⁴ Table 2 shows the summary characteristics of the constituencies and provides information of the character of the incumbent and the party. Six of the constituencies were strongholds of the DPP, MCP or the UDF, and three constituencies were not considered a stronghold of any party.

Table 2 Summary characteristics of selected constituencies

	Type of Constituency	Region
1	No stronghold Ruling party won 2014 election Incumbent MP did not run again	Southern Region
2	MCP stronghold Opposition party won 2014 election Incumbent MP did not run again	Central Region

⁵³ Results can be retrieved on Malawi Electoral Commission website, < <http://mec.org.mw/> >

⁵⁴ The DPP splinter, the People's Party (PP), won 26 seats in these elections, but as its presence is more ephemeral we decided to keep it out of our selection.

3	DPP stronghold Ruling party won 2014 election Incumbent MP ran again	Southern Region
4	MCP stronghold Opposition party won 2014 election Incumbent MP ran again	Central Region
5	No stronghold Independent member won 2014 election Incumbent MP ran again	Southern Region
6	UDF stronghold Opposition party won 2014 election Incumbent MP ran again	Eastern Region
7	MCP stronghold Independent candidate won the 2014 election Incumbent MP elected ran again	Central Region
8	DPP stronghold Independent member won 2014 election Incumbent MP ran again	Southern Region
9	No stronghold Independent member won 2014 election Incumbent MP elected ran again	Northern Region

All interviews were conducted between February and October 2017 by the authors, supported by a team of research assistants. Through the data collection process, we conducted 60 interviews and collected detailed descriptions of the rules and practices surrounding party primary elections in the constituencies highlighted on the map in figure 1.

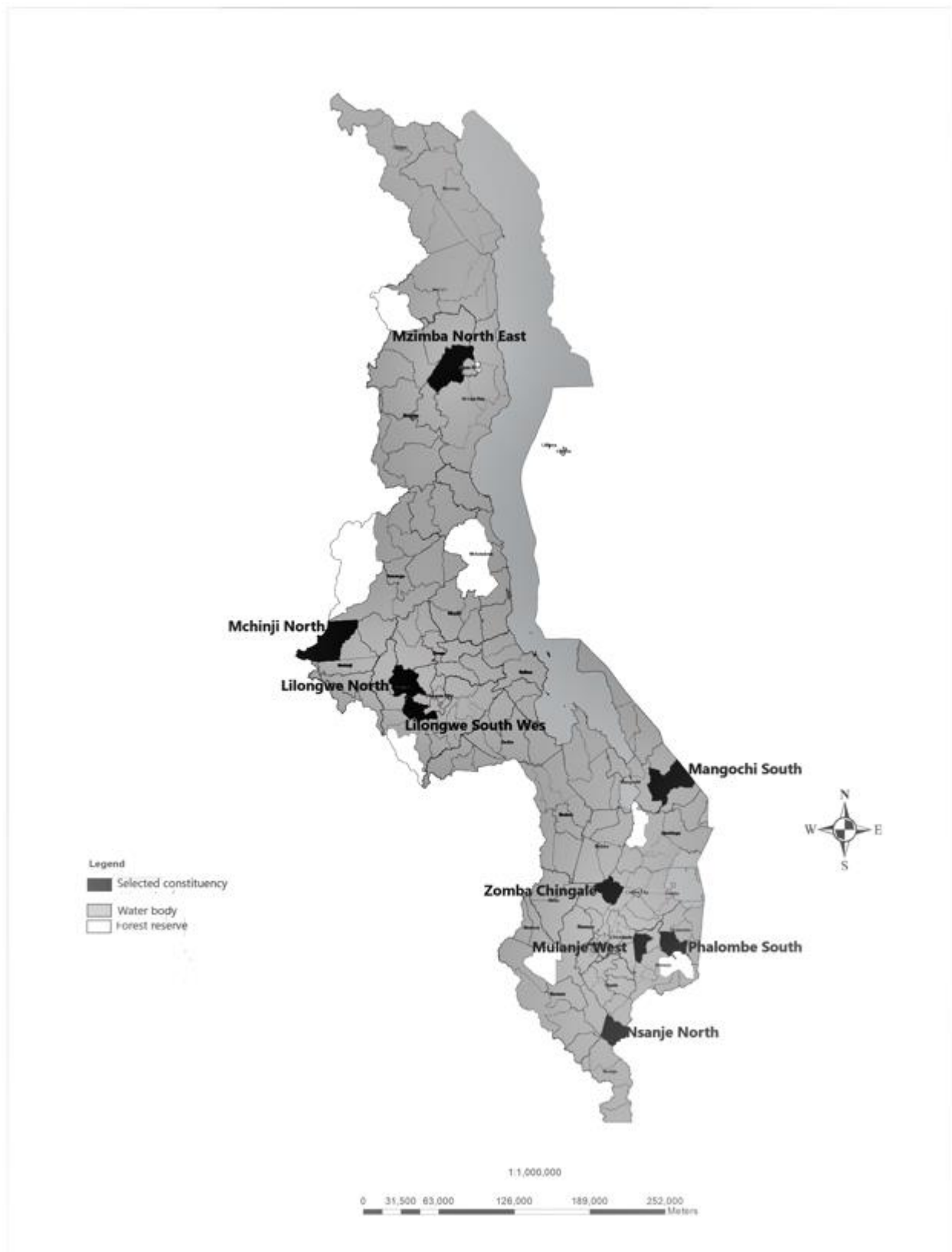


Figure 1: Map of Malawi with the location of the selected constituencies.

We sampled key informants—people who could provide useful information about party primary rules and the use of handouts. In each constituency we conducted open ended in-depth interviews with aspirants who competed during the party selection process. In each constituency, we spoke with those who won the party primary elections and those who lost selection processes. We also spoke with those who decided to stand as independent candidates after they lost the party selection processes. We also interviewed male and female party officials at the area, constituency, and district levels of each of the selected parties who knew the party election process for their parties.⁵⁵ The aspirants and local party officials we interviewed enabled us to identify the relevant selectorates who had participated in the party election process. By using a common set of questions summarised in an interview guide, all the respondents were first asked to describe the rules and procedures of the primary election process for their party. Thereafter, they were asked to narrate their experiences. Data triangulation⁵⁶ was used as a qualitative research strategy to check for common descriptions of rules and processes by all respondents from each party and to test the validity of the evidence through the convergence of information about the rules and processes from the different candidates.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by research assistants. Data analysis began during data collection. For each interview, the assistants wrote a narrative summary related to the research questions and these formed the basis of the authors' preliminary discussions about the themes that were emerging. Our team also read through the transcripts and listened to the audio tapes and had several analysis meetings to discuss the transcripts and the emerging findings. Content analysis was used to describe and categorize common words, phrases, and ideas in qualitative transcripts. Our analytic process was informed by the interpretive description approach that focuses on pragmatic knowledge creation from qualitative data.⁵⁷ Our assumption during the data collection that those engaged in constituency primaries could find handouts in elections morally problematic is supported by other studies conducted recently in Malawi. For instance, a survey conducted by Kristen Kao, Ellen Lust and Lise Rakner in 2017 about handouts in national elections found that the practice had a negative effect on the likelihood that poor Malawians would

⁵⁵ Area is the smallest unit, then the constituency, while the districts (the local municipality) are the largest.

⁵⁶ Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Michael Q. Patton, 'Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis', *Health Services Research* 34 (1999), pp. 1189–1208).

⁵⁷ Sally Thorne, *Interpretive description: qualitative research for applied practice* (New York: Routledge; 2016).

support a candidate.⁵⁸ This study inspired us to look deeper into the question of handouts as it suggest that even the propensity of using handouts is high, there are moral concerns about how it affects electoral politics.

Appropriating handouts: uncertain rules and outcomes

All the respondents who contested for a parliamentary nomination confirmed that there was a demand for handouts in the party primaries. Similar to Gadjanova, we found that candidates were not particularly happy with having to engage in the practice but saw it as an unavoidable evil to match others' inducements.⁵⁹ This was exemplified in the words of one aspirant:

If you join politics, you should be ready to give out money. I had to give money to the area committees, I had to give money to the chiefs, and I had to give! You give, you give throughout! And then buying party materials — party clothes, t-shirts.⁶⁰

Still, the question was not just if a candidate did give handouts, but also how they did it, something that Muñoz also emphasizes in her work.⁶¹ Members of the selectorate, across all parties in constituencies where there was intra-party competition for nominations, argued that aspiring candidates had to demonstrate their capacity to spend to be considered, as this passage illustrates:

For example, if a candidate is giving out 500 [Malawian kwacha] to every area committee member, it means that for a group of nine selectorate per area, that candidate will spend K4,500 on each area committee. But then competition comes in when you go with another candidate to the same zone and he/she gives out K500 to the area committee members, but at the same time cooks food and kills a goat for the people to eat. That's where the people start to differentiate among aspirants and begin to identify the winning candidate.⁶²

Supporting the findings of what Dominika Koter observed in Benin, those without financial capacity were not competing as they knew they could not win, and the pool of eligible aspirants was limited to only a small cohort of the population.⁶³ Still, practicing cash handouts did not seem to build the credibility of aspirants in our study. Members of the selectorate explained that this was more about what they themselves wanted to gain from the situation. For them, party primaries were an event where members of selectorates had an opportunity to receive private material goods from

⁵⁸ Kao, Lust and Rakner, 'Poverty and clientelism'.

⁵⁹ Gadjanova, 'Electoral clientelism as status affirmation'.

⁶⁰ Interview, elected member of parliament from constituency #2 (central region), Lilongwe, Malawi, 27 April 2017.

⁶¹ Muñoz, 'Buying Audiences'.

⁶² Group discussion, area chairman and constituency committee chair from constituency #4 (central region), Mchinji, Malawi, 14th April, 2017.

⁶³ Koter, 'Costly electoral campaigns'.

candidates. Those who gave such handouts were not “big men” in the sense that they were local bosses who would engage in long-term clientelistic relationships. Rather, these handouts were viewed as one-off events. Members of a selectorate in one constituency described how this dynamic had developed over the years:

In past, we used to check the conduct of the aspirant and if he or she was really a genuine MCP member, his/her education, and if the aspirant had money. Nowadays it is not about school or conduct; it is about money. A candidate that has money is the only one that is popularly known in all the areas. When the candidate wins the election, they forget about the area chairmen who made it possible for him/her to pass. In 1999, the area chairmen sat down and decided that when someone wants to stand as a member of parliament on the MCP ticket, the chairmen should eat their share in advance. So, if someone doesn't have money, we will vote for the other one who has money during the primaries, because we just want to eat our share. What happens afterwards is not our concern. What is important is that we have eaten our share.⁶⁴

This passage signals that even those who had been participating in selecting party nominees as a civic virtue had adopted a more cynical view that included the appropriation of accepting handouts. Interestingly, even if the respondent had been concerned about partisanship earlier, the experience of engaging in multiple primaries had lowered the expectations and the concern for what would happen at later stages of the process. Going further it can be said that in some areas the main function of party primaries seems to be not so much to identify the candidate most likely to win the general election, or even to identify a credible candidate, but to identify someone who is willing and able to provide private benefits there and then.

We wanted to understand how this fatalism came about, and the aspirants we interviewed gave us insights into how fragile the processes of candidate selection are inside political parties. For instance, unwritten rules make it possible for party leaders to suddenly change how primaries are conducted. There might be an expectation that a primary election will be held, but the party leader(s) may suddenly refuse to hold primaries in selected constituencies. One case that illustrates how disconnected party branches are from party leadership is a situation that occurred during the 2014 election cycle in an MCP stronghold constituency. There were nine MCP aspirants when the local party branches began to prepare for the local primaries, and the local leaders allowed all nine

⁶⁴ Male member of MCP in a group discussion with area chairman and constituency committee chair from constituency #4 (central region), Mchinji, Malawi, 14th April 2017.

aspirants to start campaigning and spend money on their campaigns. Then, at the last minute, the national executive committee said it had decided not to have a primary election in that constituency:

We were spending thinking that we were going for primaries which did not happen. Eventually, at the last minute, we became independent candidates. So, when you are independent that means you have to stand on your two feet, you have to do everything alone. So, we continued campaigning, spending money, lots of money and time.⁶⁵

The reason for calling off the primary election was to give all sitting female MPs from the party the advantage of not having to contest in primaries, due to the low number and low retention rate of women in the Malawian parliament. The problem was that the central party leadership did not communicate this decision to aspirants or to constituency party members. This lack of communication made all those who had started to compete in the primaries decide to register as independent candidates in the general elections.

We argue that the demand for tangible benefits from local party members is at least partly connected to apathy related to not getting sufficient information and not feeling that their decisions were being respected. National party leaders may strike deals with members of parliament regarding the outcome of the primary elections without the grassroots knowing anything. Party leaders may sometimes need support for a bill in parliament and use party nominations as a bait. However, since local party members have no oversight of such agreements, members of the local electorate might never know whether their decision will be respected by the party's senior leadership. We suggest that this is one of the mechanisms that helps explain why members of party selectorates prioritize short-time benefits over long-term strategies.

The salience of independent candidates also reduces the function of constituency primaries. Aspirants who fail to secure a party nomination during the candidate selection process can stand as independent candidates, which sometimes makes primaries more similar to a popularity poll than an event where a decision about who can and cannot stand for elections is made. All aspirants can stand as independent candidates in the general election no matter the outcome of the primaries. Sometimes local party officials provide the same kind of support for independents during national elections as they do for party nominees. This blurs the demarcation between party and independent

⁶⁵ Interview, primary election candidate from constituency #7 (central region), Lilongwe, Malawi, 14th February 2017.

candidates and devalues the outcome of primaries, since no final decision is taken on who can compete in an election.

One justification many unsuccessful aspirants used to stand as independents was that they claimed — rightly or wrongly — that the process of candidate selection was manipulated. Wiseman Chijere and Nandini Patel have noted earlier that party presidents used imposition and coercion to get their favoured candidate nominated.⁶⁶ Quite often, aspirants exit the party rather than voicing their concerns when disputes over the correct interpretation of rules occurs. This case illustrates the problem:

Since the whole party machinery was behind my contender, she was favoured and had a lot of ballot papers that were completed fraudulently. In the end, she was declared the winner, and I decided to stand as an independent candidate. The party had advised that those who lose in primaries should not stand as independent candidates, but [should] pave [the] way for the winners. I decided to challenge the party's decision and stand as an independent candidate because the primary process was rigged.⁶⁷

Hence, aspirants who failed to win a nomination were concerned with all the resources they had lost in what they saw as a 'rigged process', and decided to stand as independents even if party leaders asked them to be loyal to the decision taken by the party. This behaviour illustrates the concern raised by Moser in his study of Russia in the early 1990s. Parties cannot impose any restrictions on those who want to further their own career rather than contribute to party development if they are allowed to run as independents.⁶⁸ As such, the lacking authority of local party branches in the nomination process is not just a consequence of absent formal selection rules, because high numbers of independent candidates in majoritarian electoral system in new democracies is likely to reinforce personalistic tendencies rather than contribute to building of party organizations.

⁶⁶ Chijere Chirwa and Nandini Patel, 'Election situation room: Analysis of the 2014 tripartite elections in Malawi', (Open Society Institute for Southern Africa, OSISA Elections Report, 2014), p. 15, <<https://malawivote2014.org/malawivote2014.org/esrreport.pdf>>.

⁶⁷ Interview, elected member of parliament from constituency #9 (northern region), Mzimba, Malawi, 22nd May, 2017.

⁶⁸ Moser, 'Impact of electoral system'.

Factors decreasing the importance of handouts

The popularity of a party did affect the demand for handouts in a constituency. We found that candidate selection for a party label that was not popular in a constituency did not lead to high competition and the demands for handouts were lower. Sometimes there were no party primaries in parties that were not popular in a constituency and party leaders at other levels of the system just found (and even paid) someone who was willing to have their name on the ballot, in order for the party to have a national reach.

We also found that the demand for handouts dropped if the community members felt that the candidate was able to deliver development such as roofs on school buildings or boreholes. Voters were willing to keep voting for, bring back, or support new candidates if they expected better development in their areas because of the candidate's abilities. In some constituencies, the development performance reputation of the incumbent MP limited demands for handouts or resulted in no primary election. For example, in one southern constituency, the perceived positive development performance of the sitting MP, who had amongst other things helped bring electricity to the trading centre, maternity health clinics, solar electricity to schools and a Tele centre for the youth, was such that there had been limited challengers who expressed an interest in competing with her during primary elections. Although she needed to spend a lot during her first primary elections, she was later able to woo her selectorate with her development performance. She lived in her constituency and supported constituency members on a daily basis.

For incumbents with a poor development record, distributing handouts was unlikely to be a successful strategy for reselection. The election of an independent female candidate against an incumbent cabinet minister who was heavily supported by the party and gave a lot of handouts illustrates the incumbency curse phenomenon well:

I won because I capitalized on the weaknesses of the incumbent MP. Although she had everything and the whole government machinery behind her, she had a number of weaknesses. As a cabinet minister, she was not there when the community needed her.⁶⁹

This example illustrates an incident where the local party organizations had the authority to conclude the nomination process. In this example, they did not want to bring back an incumbent

⁶⁹ Interview, elected member of parliament from constituency #9 (northern region), Mzimba, Malawi, 22nd May 2017.

they felt had failed them, although that person was resourceful and gave handouts. Rather when given the authority to decide, they chose the candidate with least resources. This tap into a very interesting question of how long-term relationships is formed and that handouts may not really play an important role in fostering such relations.

Conclusion: building party authority

This article explains how and why the absence of a party with authority on the ground may exacerbate the use of handouts in candidate selection processes. This lack of authority occurs due to a combination of national legislation and party leaders' reluctance to develop formal rules for nomination processes at a time when local party branches are demanding—and gaining—more power. What we found on the ground was a vibrant engagement in party events, such as constituency primaries, but building on the perspectives of Jaimie Bleck and Nicholas van de Walle, we saw that uncertainty in processes and outcomes contributed to the appropriation of handouts.⁷⁰ Party leadership, even though it had responded to demands for decentralized candidate selection, had not adopted and enforced rules that govern nomination processes. The result of this was uncertainty regarding what rules to follow and uncertainty in whether outcomes will be respected, either by party leaders higher up in the organization or the aspirants who try to win a nomination. Two mechanisms that relate to the institutional context of constituency primaries seem crucial to understanding the propensity of distributing handouts: (i) unclear rules governing primary processes and (ii) the opportunity for unsuccessful aspirants to stand as independent candidates. In combination, these two mechanisms contributed to a sense of fatalism within party selectorates and increased the likelihood of choosing what seemed beneficial then rather than in the long run.

The implication of our party authority perspective for understanding handouts in candidate selection is that is a call for a need to revisit some of our common assumptions about local party structures in Africa. In our study, we have followed the advice from Elin Bjarnegård and Meryl Kenny, that if we want to capture how formal and informal aspects of candidate selection processes

play out, we need to explore exactly how recruitments take place.⁷¹ While research have established that candidates selection processes in Africa are marred with irregularities to the extent to which it can cause violence,⁷² we still lack grounded theories on the drivers of irregularity and how aspects of irregularity affect the propensity of using handouts. Studying handouts in this context, inspired a fresh look at the development of party organizations. Contrary to existing research that either see local actors as the drivers of ‘informal local patronage’⁷³ or that ‘material inducements distributed during primary elections encourage local party members (...) to be more involved’⁷⁴, we find that handouts are likely to harm local engagement as the local party machinery is reduced to mobilisers rather than having a function to play in the party hierarchy.

Future research could begin by considering an alternative way of interpreting the relationship between the central party leaders and the grassroots structure, by highlighting the weakness rather than the strength of the central party level and the strength of the grassroots organization rather than its weaknesses. The grassroots level plays an important role in arranging key events such as constituency primaries but may be less concerned with taking decisions that serve the long-term interest of the party and more interested in the gains of the local community. One explanation why grassroots actors are less concerned with party outputs, could be that the grassroots level is rarely a steppingstone towards more prominent national positions for local party branch members. This reduces the need for members of the local party branches to act strategically to enhance their chances to climb the ladder to national leadership. They oversee the process of recruiting those with sufficient resources to win elections, but rarely have the financial and educational resources to become that someone in the future. Party leaders’ reluctance to adopt and enforce strong party rules could explain the disconnection between the different party levels rather than the cause being a strong centralized party and a weak grassroots.

⁷¹ Bjarnegård and Kenny, ‘Comparing candidate selection’.

⁷² Seeberg, Wahman and Skaaning, ‘Candidate nomination’.

⁷³ Bjarnegård and Kanny, ‘Comparing candidate selection’.

⁷⁴ Ichino and Nathan, ‘Do primaries improve’.