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How party finance shapes the politicised distribution of government jobs

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Most studies of political patronage in Africa assume that politicians widely politicise government jobs, distributing both ministerial and bureaucratic posts in exchange for political support. But new research from Benin and Ghana shows that incumbent leaders politicise government jobs selectively, which is based on the strategies they use to extract and control state money for political financing.

The politicised distribution of public sector jobs is widely seen as a major governance challenge across Africa. When leaders distribute jobs based on political criteria, rather than merit, they increase the likelihood of **corruption** and undermine the **performance** of bureaucratic agencies. Recent research, however, recognises that the politicisation of state jobs in African countries is not as pervasive as previously thought. Leaders politicise some jobs but not others. For example, leaders might seek to **preserve capacity** in prioritised economic sectors, politicise jobs that are best suited for their **campaign workers**, or balance political needs with **demographic representation** in public service.

My **research** points to another reason why leaders politicise some jobs but not others: party finance. As elections in Africa become more **expensive**, many incumbent political leaders and their parties rely on money extracted from the state to fund their election campaigns. To secure this money, leaders look to place trusted allies into positions with access to extraction opportunities and, importantly, keep untrusted individuals – who might use the money to support the opposition – away from those positions. As I show in the cases of Benin and Ghana, who leaders trust to extract political money, and by extension how they politicise different types of jobs, depends on the nature of their party institutions. As recent **research** has shown, party institutions vary widely across African countries.

How party institutions and finance shape politicisation in Benin and Ghana

Political party institutions in Benin and Ghana are very different. In Benin, three of the four presidents elected between 1991 and 2021 won their first elections as independent candidates, creating parties only after they won power. Parties in Benin generally lack organisational structures, face frequent defections and do not hold primaries or internal elections. By contrast, Ghana's two main parties – the National Democratic Congress and the National Patriotic Party – are among the most institutionalised in Africa. They possess extensive organisations, stable social bases of support and clear internal rules and procedures for advancement, including internally democratic elections to select party officers and candidates.

These different party institutions are important for understanding when and how leaders politicise appointments to executive positions (minister posts or other high-ranking positions) versus hiring in the state bureaucracy. In Benin, because elites often defect from the ruling party, incumbent leaders cannot trust other political elites to extract money from the state on their behalf. When staffing the state's *executive positions*, Benin's presidents clearly favour the appointment of technocrats over politicians – with nearly 60% of minister portfolios between 1991 and 2016 going to individuals with no visible political experience. Unlike politicians, technocrats are less likely to use their positions to extract state money for their own political advancement, making them a safer choice for the incumbent.

Although Benin's leaders cannot trust other political elites, they can co-opt or coerce rank-and-file bureaucrats to extract rents or divert state revenues on their behalf. In a survey of Beninese public servants that I conducted, 75% of respondents said that they perceive the diversion of state resources to politicians to be a serious problem in their organisation. Additionally, those who saw political resource diversion as a problem were significantly more likely to report that employees of their organisation were hired with the help of a politician and that they fear being dismissed from their job for political reasons. These findings provide strong evidence of a link between the extraction of political money and politicised hiring (and firing) of public service personnel.

In Ghana, I find an inverse pattern. Ghana's executive is far more politicised than Benin's. Over 80% of minister positions between 1993 and 2016 were distributed to elite members of the president's party, many of whom have run for elected office or occupied leadership roles in the party. These ministers, in turn, extract money for the party by ensuring that the ministry's public procurement contracts are awarded to party financiers. In fact, when I analysed data on Ghana's public procurement contracts, I found that as a ministry's volume of procurement contracting grew, so too did the likelihood that the president would appoint a minister with a more robust history of service to the ruling party.

The elite extraction that is made possible by greater party institutionalisation allows recruitment to the Ghanaian public service to remain notably less politicised than in Benin. In Ghana, the extraction of money for political finance is led by appointed party elites overseeing public procurement, not rank-and-file bureaucrats diverting rents and revenues. Only 13% of bureaucrats surveyed in Ghana saw the diversion of rents and revenues to politicians as a serious problem in their organisation. Compared to their counterparts in Benin, Ghanaian bureaucrats also reported significantly lower levels of politicised hiring and fear of political dismissal. In short, because Ghanaian political leaders can depend primarily on trusted party elites to extract for them, they need not extensively politicise the distribution of public service jobs.

Broader implications

This study has important implications for studies of politics and governance in Africa. First, understanding patterns of politicised job distribution helps us to

know where and why effective organisations are more or less likely to emerge in the state apparatus. Second, it underscores the importance of incorporating party institutions and party financing more centrally into theories of political management of the state's governing institutions.

Whereas much of the literature on state politicisation focuses on the exchange of jobs for political support, my research shows that a party's financial imperatives – and the trust problems they induce – are integral to understanding varied patterns of politicisation in the governing apparatus. The findings also reinforce the need to focus not only on *how much* politicians extract from the state, but also on the varying *ways* in which such extraction occurs. This shift is critical for understanding variation in state capacity and for moving beyond conceptions of African states as uniformly weak or **neopatrimonial**.

Photo by cottonbro.

About the author



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Rachel Sigman is Assistant Professor at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California and a Project Manager with the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg. Her recent and ongoing research focuses on the politics of state capacity, bureaucratic institutions, autocratisation and international influence. Her forthcoming book, *Parties, Political Finance and Governance in Africa* (Cambridge University Press), explains how the strategies political parties use to extract money from the state shape government performance. The views expressed here are those of the author alone.

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