



When Do Strong Parties “Throw the Bums Out”? Competition and Accountability in South African Candidate Nominations

Evan Lieberman¹ · Philip Martin² · Nina McMurry³

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Abstract

Existing accounts of centralized candidate selection argue that party elites tend to ignore constituent preferences in favor of internal party concerns, leading to accountability deficits. Yet this claim has been largely assumed rather than demonstrated. We provide the first detailed empirical analysis of the relationship between constituent opinion and candidate nominations in the absence of party primaries. We study contemporary South Africa, where conventional wisdom suggests that parties select candidates primarily on the basis of party loyalty. Analyzing more than 8000 local government councillor careers linked with public opinion data, we find that citizen approval predicts incumbent renomination and promotion in minimally competitive constituencies, and that this relationship becomes more pronounced with increasing levels of competition. By contrast, improvements in service provision do not predict career advancement. Under threat of electoral losses, South Africa’s centralized parties strategically remove unpopular incumbents to demonstrate responsiveness to constituent views. However, party-led accountability may not improve development.

All authors contributed equally.

✉ Philip Martin
pmarti5@gmu.edu

Evan Lieberman
evanlieb@mit.edu

Nina McMurry
nina.mcmurry@wzb.eu

¹ Political Science Department, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 30 Wadsworth St, Cambridge MA, USA

² Schar School of Policy & Government, George Mason University, 3351 Fairfax Drive Van Metre Hall, Arlington VA, USA

³ WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Reichpietschufer 50, 10785 Berlin, Germany

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Introduction

Electoral accountability is foundational to most theories of democratic governance. Every few years, citizens can express dissatisfaction with incumbents by “throwing the bums out” at the ballot box (Ashworth 2012; Mill 1962; Przeworski et al. 1999). But how much control do citizens really have if party elites decide which candidates are nominated in the first place? In many democracies, the nomination of candidates for local political office is tightly controlled by party leaders (Katz and Mair 1992; Bille 2001; Rahat 2009). Given that citizens often vote along deep-seated partisan and social cleavages, centralized party control over candidate selection has raised concerns about an accountability deficit: party leaders may favor loyal political cadres, while constituents’ opinions about their representatives go unheeded. This concern echoes Michels’ “Iron Law of Oligarchy,” which posited that without active input from voters, power within political parties would tend to become concentrated and ultimately less democratic (Michels 1915).

Despite a growing literature on the role of political parties and party systems in young democracies (Ichino and Nathan 2013; Pitcher 2012; Riedl 2014), claims about the un-democratic nature of centralized candidate selection have received little empirical scrutiny. The lacuna is surprising: Observers of developing democracies have long noted that even electorally dominant and centralized parties must worry about upholding their popular legitimacy and appearing responsive to “the people” (Zolberg 1966; Widner 1993). Even as they engage in patron-client politics and reward loyalists, party leaders may also strategically nominate candidates to signal that they are “in touch” with the electorate. In other words, critics of centralized candidate selection overlook the possibility that parties themselves may inject citizen agency into the system by renominating and promoting incumbent candidates on the basis of constituent opinion.

These contrasting perspectives suggest that the question of citizen agency and accountability under party-led candidate selection requires further investigation. Do party elites in centralized candidate selection systems respond to constituent preferences when making nomination decisions? And if so, under what conditions?

In this article, we examine the role of citizen views in determining the retention of incumbent politicians by political parties in South Africa. Contemporary South Africa is an electoral democracy characterized by a nationally dominant ruling party and centralized candidate selection methods, but also significant inter-party competition at the local level. Conventional wisdom suggests that representative-level accountability in this case — especially within the nationally dominant African National Congress (ANC) party — is low. We analyze the career paths of over 8000 local councillors between the 2011 and 2016 elections, linked to fine-grained data on public opinion and constituency conditions. These unique data allow us to empirically evaluate for the first time, to our knowledge, the role of constituent preferences in political parties’ human capital strategies under centralized nomination rules.

Our analysis suggests a surprising level of party responsiveness to citizen opinion. In wards and municipalities where citizens expressed greater satisfaction with councillor and municipal government performance, incumbent councillors were more likely to be renominated and promoted. We observe this relationship for ward councillors elected in single-member districts, as well as for councillors elected to municipal councils through proportional representation (PR) party lists. Among PR councillors, this relationship is more pronounced for ruling party councillors at the top of the party list, who generally take on executive governance functions and are most public-facing and directly responsible for municipal government performance. For both ward councillors and executive PR councillors, the relationship between citizen opinion and nomination outcomes is strongest in politically competitive constituencies, suggesting that parties are more likely to strategically discard unpopular incumbents when threatened with electoral losses. Sensitivity analyses suggest that confounding from unobserved factors, such as political patronage, is unlikely to fully account for this relationship. Importantly, however, neither citizen approval nor renomination appear strongly influenced by incumbents' actual service delivery records.

These findings speak to important scholarly debates in the study of democracy and accountability. First, we contribute to the literature on candidate selection by demonstrating an unexpected degree of individual accountability under centralized nomination rules, at least in areas exceeding a minimum threshold of electoral competition. Scholars ought to revisit existing assumptions about the un-democratic nature of centralized candidate selection, recognizing that even nationally dominant parties in young democracies can wield nomination powers in democratic ways as a strategy of political survival. Second, our study builds on an emerging research stream on party-citizen relations in developing democracies. We show that while voters may not always be able to “throw the bums out” directly, strong parties can and do take citizen preferences into account in their strategies of human capital retention when inter-party competition is sufficiently high. Finally, our study speaks to the link between democratic accountability and development. While party-controlled candidate nominations may allow more political agency for citizens than previously realized, the weak links we find between service delivery improvements, citizen opinion, and politician renomination suggest that party-led accountability, like other forms of democratic accountability, cannot be assumed to improve development outcomes.

Centralized Candidate Selection and Electoral Accountability

In modern democracies, the most visible expression of citizen agency is the casting of votes on election day. The scope of this agency, however, is mediated by the process determining which candidates appear on the ballot. When national party elites exercise control over candidate selection, citizens are limited in their ability to choose their individual representatives directly, potentially distorting accountability linkages between citizens and government. Yet this is precisely the case in many democracies around the world. An expert survey of 71 parties in Western Europe

found that between 1960 and 1990, over half (51%) employed candidate selection rules that gave national party organs the power to either directly select or approve candidates for local office. By contrast, only 23% allowed party members to vote for their candidates (Katz and Mair 1992). A more recent survey covering 64 parties across 25 countries in sub-Saharan Africa found that a large majority (84%) employed rules for parliamentary candidate selection that depended on party leaders or internal delegated bodies like central committees and congresses (Seeberg, Wahman and Skaaning 2018, 967). Only 27% of these parties had clearly stated rules guiding candidate selection decisions, affording party elites considerable discretion.

A common complaint about party-controlled candidate selection processes is that they are fundamentally un-democratic (Bille 2001; Rahat 2009). Party elites can nominate their preferred candidates or block the renomination of popular incumbents, irrespective of constituent preferences. As Bille (2001, 364) argues, “It is hard to imagine how a regime can be classified as democratic if the political parties have an organizational structure that leaves no room for citizens to participate and have influence.” These concerns are not limited to closed-list proportional representation systems where voters choose parties rather than individual candidates. Even where citizens vote for individuals in single-member districts, parties with strong brands may exercise discretion in candidate nominations if they believe citizens will vote primarily on the basis of partisan identification (Brader and Tucker 2012; Lupu 2013) or other factors unrelated to individual politician performance (Boas, Hidalgo and Melo 2018; Dunning et al. 2019).

For parties with centralized candidate selection systems, existing accounts identify two general reasons why party leaders may be motivated to override constituent preferences when it comes to selecting candidates. First, party decision-makers may favor stalwarts and loyalists in order to advance a cohesive ideological agenda (Doorenspleet and Nijzink 2013). Parties, according to Hazan (2002, 119), fear that “if party lists are assembled not by the party organs, but instead by more inclusive selectorates ... the party’s ability to aggregate policies and present a cohesive ideological image is weakened.” Second, party elites may favor certain candidates for self-serving purposes. By selecting loyalists, party elites can grow internal factions that will support their own bids for leadership (Hazan 2002, 124). Along these lines, both Michels (1915) and Schattschneider (1942) emphasize the importance of candidate selection as a means for party leaders to control the distribution of power within the party and prevent the emergence of new challengers. Elites may also prioritize the selection of candidates who are willing to participate in corruption and graft. Päckel (2008, 7) notes that many countries have established non-partisan local government elections precisely to counter such nepotistic tendencies, since “[w]here local elections occur on a partisan basis, nomination rules that favor national parties can serve as impediments to downward accountability.” In short, when unconstrained by primary systems, party elites across a range of democracies are presumed to prioritize organizational or personal agendas over constituent preferences in candidate nominations.

A striking omission from this literature is virtually any empirical evidence to evaluate the role of citizen preferences. Past studies have reviewed the procedures through which candidates are selected, but not the determinants of actual nomination

outcomes, nor whether party choices reflect constituent opinion (e.g., Katz and Mair 1992; Bille 2001; De Luca, Jones and Tula 2002; Lundell 2004).¹ Wegner (2016) finds a positive relationship between councillor renomination and some service delivery outcomes in South Africa's 2011 elections, but does not examine constituent perceptions and preferences. To understand whether citizens have agency over the nomination of candidates in the absence of primaries, it is necessary to estimate the impact of public opinion in a more direct fashion.

This gap is surprising, since the assumption of out-of-touch party elites belies the reality that modern political parties, including dominant ruling parties in young democracies, invest heavily in political polling, research, and outreach to keep their finger on the pulse of the voting public. Moreover, while parties may lean heavily on their brands to carry elections, they also know that the public “faces” of their parties — the individual candidates they choose to represent them on the ground — will mediate the success of their mobilization efforts. Particularly in developing democracies, local office-holders are often on the front lines of forging the link between voters and parties (Packel 2008; Stokes 2005). Party elites concerned with long-term political survival, therefore, are likely to take public sentiments into account during the candidate nomination process. By removing unpopular incumbents, the party can hope to signal to voters that they seek to address their concerns. Such a mechanism of party-led accountability through candidate (re)nomination is consistent with recent scholarship highlighting how changes to candidate rosters can affect citizen views of parties (Somer-Topcu 2017).

If party elites *do* respond to citizen views of incumbents in their renomination decisions, we expect this mechanism will be most likely to operate under two conditions. First, responsiveness to citizen opinion in candidate renominations should be more prevalent within ruling parties compared to opposition parties. Citizens are more likely to blame ruling party politicians for poor government performance, creating a stronger electoral incentive for ruling parties to be seen as “cleaning house” by showing new faces in the next election. Second, party elites should be more sensitive to citizen views of politician performance in constituencies where incumbents face strong political competition. Going back to Schumpeter (1942), and in more recent studies on service delivery (as reviewed in Pepinsky, Pierskalla and Sacks 2017, and Wegner 2016), electoral competition is thought to generate pressure on politicians and bureaucracies to serve citizen interests and provide higher levels of public goods and services.² We expect that in electorally competitive areas, governing parties should be more attentive to factors that might affect re-election prospects, and that they will be more likely to replace unpopular candidates in these areas.

¹Mikulska and Scarrow (2010) find that more inclusive candidate selection rules adopted in the UK in the 1990s resulted in greater convergence between citizen and candidate policy positions. However, their study does not address the question of whether party-controlled nominations respond to citizen approval.

²By contrast, Packel (2008) finds that the evidence concerning whether electoral competitiveness leads to greater service provision has been mixed.

Case Selection, Data, and Research Design

We seek to understand the extent to which citizen preferences affect candidate nomination outcomes in parties governed by centralized nomination rules. As Duverger pointed out, however, “parties do not like the odours of the electoral kitchen to be spread to the outside world” (Duverger 1959, 354, as quoted in Gallagher 1980, 489). In other words, party elites — particularly in closed systems where they enjoy broad discretion — are unlikely to provide reliable information about how they make decisions. We therefore adopt an inferential approach, evaluating the relationship between public opinion among the electorate and observed nomination and promotion outcomes.

The Case of South African Local Government Elections

We study candidate selection at the local level in contemporary South Africa. Specifically, we examine nominations for ward- and municipal-level positions ahead of local government elections held on August 3, 2016. This case offers several advantages for our study. First, national party organs in South Africa retain control of candidate selection at all levels of government, and virtually all major parties have strong “brands” (Pitcher 2012, 6). In these ways, South Africa’s major parties resemble parties across Western Europe and sub-Saharan Africa (Katz and Mair 1992; Seeberg, Wahman and Skaaning 2018) where decision-making power over candidate selection is vested in national elites. South Africa thus provides a highly relevant context in which to study the drivers of candidate nominations by strong parties amid inter-party electoral competition. Second, we benefit from access to rich data on individual candidates, citizens, and constituency characteristics at multiple levels of analysis. Finally, the case affords us the opportunity to study candidate selection outcomes at different levels of local political competitiveness and under different electoral rules.

Conventional and scholarly wisdom about South African party politics echoes the assumption that existing candidate selection methods prioritize internal party interests over constituent preferences. The ANC, the liberation party that has governed since 1994, is routinely accused of “cadre deployment,” a euphemism for the nomination and appointment of individuals who are loyal to the party but lack qualifications or a commitment to serving citizens (Shava and Chamisa 2018). In a critique of the growth of “gatekeeper politics” within the ANC, Beresford (2015, 233) argues that the nepotistic distribution of opportunities has created a “perception that appointments at all levels of public office ... are made on the grounds of political loyalties over competence, and that those on the wrong side of ANC power holders could expect to be purged from their public office.” Du Toit and de Jager (2014) bemoan the PR party-list system in particular, arguing that it undermines accountability, and that the ANC uses power of appointment to place party loyalists into key positions. Similarly, Gaventa and Runciman (2016) argue that the ANC may be taking its power “for granted” and overlooking the needs of constituents, while Lotshwao (2009, 909) describes the general lack of internal party democracy within the ANC and its “increasing remoteness from the electorate.”

Local government has emerged as an important political arena in South Africa, and questions about the input of citizens into the nomination of their local representatives have been at the forefront in larger debates about the quality of democracy in the country. Writing at the end of the first decade of democratic elections following the end of apartheid-style government, Friedman (2005, 16), argued that a “trend with the ANC to centralization, the chief feature of which is the selection of provincial and local government candidates by the national leadership rather than regional and local branches, is mirrored in the other larger parties.” In response to concerns from constituents, the ANC promised greater “community involvement” in the 2011 candidate selection process, including through ward-based screening committees comprised of representatives from various community organizations. However, reports that regional structures did not always follow those decisions gave rise to intra-party conflicts (Seethal 2012, 11–12), raising questions about actual responsiveness. Piper (2012, 37) described the candidate selection processes of both the ANC and the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) in that election as largely controlled by the national party leaders, thus undermining local accountability.

While the ANC has dominated national-level electoral competition since the 1994 election (Beresford 2015; Du Toit and de Jager 2014), its position has become increasingly precarious. Under the administration of Jacob Zuma, the party has faced a barrage of corruption allegations, and the media has documented the various ways in which the party allowed the state to be “captured” by cronies and private interests (Bhorat et al. 2017). Amid such charges, at the local level, the ANC has faced increasing competition, in particular from the DA, a classically liberal party with a racially diverse support base and roots in the anti-apartheid Progressive Party. More recently, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a far-left party founded by several expelled members of the ANC, has emerged as another important challenger. Ten different parties controlled at least one municipality in the 2011–16 councils.

Our analysis includes two types of councillors: ward councillors, who are elected in single-member districts under “first-past-the-post” rules; and PR councillors, who are selected via proportional representation with closed lists. The numbers of ward and PR councillors are roughly equal within municipalities.³ National party executives furnish candidate lists directly to the Electoral Commission for all local contests in the country. Interviews with local politicians in Gauteng province suggest that while candidate lists are approved at the national level, local party branches have greater potential to influence the selection of ward councillors compared to PR councillors. As such, we examine these two councillor types separately. Among PR councillors, we also distinguish between those at the top of the ruling party’s PR list, who generally form the municipality’s executive committee, and those lower down on the party list and from opposition parties, who may be less likely to be blamed or rewarded for municipal government performance.

South African councillors have wide-ranging responsibilities, including some that develop informally via custom. While some government competencies are shared across levels of government, citizens have come to expect councillors to be

³Seat allocation rules are described at <http://www.etu.org.za/toolbox/docs/localgov/local.html>.

responsible for the delivery of basic infrastructural services, such as potable water, sanitation, electricity, and refuse removal (Booyesen 2007; de Kadt and Lieberman 2020). In addition to basic services, the South Africa Councillor Handbook describes the responsibilities of councillors to include improving the lives of all citizens, the development and growth of the economy, and job creation. During the period under study, the performance of local politicians with respect to services was particularly salient, with groups of citizens across the country engaging in occasionally violent “service delivery” protests, in some cases seeking the removal of elected officials (Bianco 2013; Lockwood 2019). We therefore consider both citizen approval of local councillors directly and citizen ratings of local service delivery as potentially relevant indicators of constituent opinion.

Data

To estimate the relationship between public opinion and party selection of candidates, we link several highly detailed datasets, combining electoral, administrative, and public opinion data at the ward- and municipality-levels.⁴ Our entire dataset includes 8377 councillors elected in 2011 in all 234 municipalities in South Africa (226 local municipalities and 8 metropolitan municipalities using 2011 boundaries).

Our main dependent variable, *Renomination*, is a binary variable indicating whether an incumbent councillor was renominated by the same party for any elected position in either the August 3, 2016 local government elections or the 2014 provincial/national elections. We identify nomination status using automated name-matching against candidate lists made available by the Electoral Commission.⁵ If renominated, a councillor was put forward as a ward candidate, a PR candidate, or in some cases promoted as a candidate for national or provincial elections. If nominated as a PR candidate, the candidate was assigned a rank on the PR list, determining the likelihood of being seated on the council after the election and of membership on the executive committee for the municipality’s governing party.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of 2016 nomination outcomes for all councillors elected in 2011, and separately for ward and PR councillors. Approximately 48% of councillors were not renominated. Conditional on being renominated for any position in 2016, most 2011 ward councillors were renominated as ward councillors (52%) and most 2011 PR councillors were renominated as PR councillors (72%). Only a small handful were nominated for a national position in 2014.⁶ For incumbent PR councillors, we also create an ordered categorical outcome variable, *Promotion*, ranging from 0 to 2, which captures information about their position on the PR list (see Appendix Fig. 1).

In our ward-level analyses, we examine the renomination of ward councillors in Gauteng province, due to the availability of representative public opinion data at that

⁴ Summary statistics are presented in Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix.

⁵ Name-matching could be a small source of measurement error in our analyses, which we have tried to minimize with manual inspection.

⁶ In cases where individual names appear more than once on nomination lists, we classify candidates according to the most prestigious nomination by our criteria, captured in the *Promotion* variable.

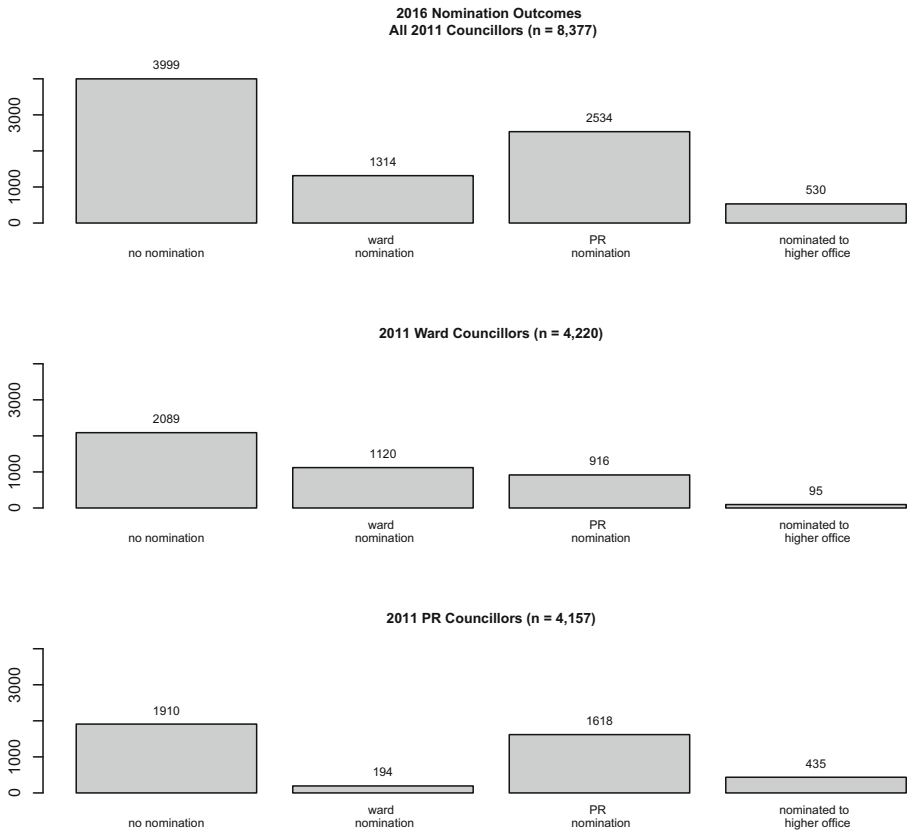


Fig. 1 Distribution of 2016 nomination outcomes for ward and PR councillors elected in 2011, all municipalities in South Africa. Source: Author analyses of candidate lists furnished by the Electoral Commission of South Africa

level. Gauteng contains three of the country's eight major metropolitan municipalities and 25% of the population, and is South Africa's economic center. (Thus, on its own, it contains a larger population and economy than many African countries.) The province is also diverse in terms of racial and economic demographics, electoral competition, and party support. We limit our analysis to the 478 (out of a total 508) wards for which no by-election took place between 2011 and 2016.⁷ Figure 2 in the Appendix shows the distribution of 2016 nomination outcomes for this subset.

To measure citizen views of councillor performance, we use public opinion data collected prior to the June announcement of candidates for the 2016 local government elections. The Gauteng City Regional Observatory (GCRO 2018) Quality of Life Survey enumerated more than 27,000 respondents with face-to-face interviews

⁷ By-elections take place when an elected official dies or resigns.

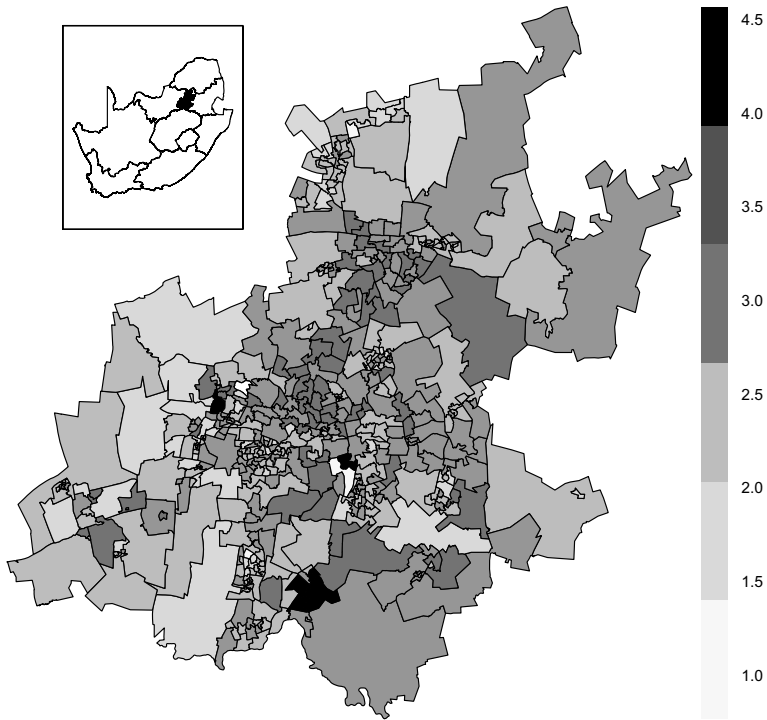


Fig. 2 Satisfaction with local ward councillor in Gauteng wards (source: GCRO 2015). Inlay shows location of Gauteng province within South Africa

and is representative of the adult population at the ward level.⁸ We define *Councillor Satisfaction* as the average rating of satisfaction with one’s local councillor, ranging from “Very dissatisfied” (1) to “Very satisfied” (5). We also construct a *Service Satisfaction Index*, which includes citizen ratings of water, electricity, refuse removal, and sanitation services, using the same five-point scale.⁹ At the municipal level, we draw on the 2016 Community Survey (StatsSA 2016), conducted in March–April of that year by South Africa’s statistical agency, StatsSA, which sampled 1.3 million households across the country and is representative at the municipal level. As with the ward-level analysis, we aggregate ratings for water, electricity, refuse removal, and sanitation into a single index (*Service Rating Index*). The geographic distributions of *Local Councillor Satisfaction* at the ward level and *Service Satisfaction Index* at the municipal level are depicted in Figs. 2 and 3. To account for “objective” measures of politicians’ performance, we also construct indicators of change in access to basic

⁸ Our main analysis uses the 2013 and 2015–6 survey waves, which have sample sizes of 27,490 and 30,002, respectively.

⁹ The index is created by de-meaning and standardizing the satisfaction ratings for each of the four services, then taking the equally weighted average for each municipality (as recommended by Kling, Liebman and Katz 2007). We use data from 2015 in the analyses below, but results are similar with 2013 data.

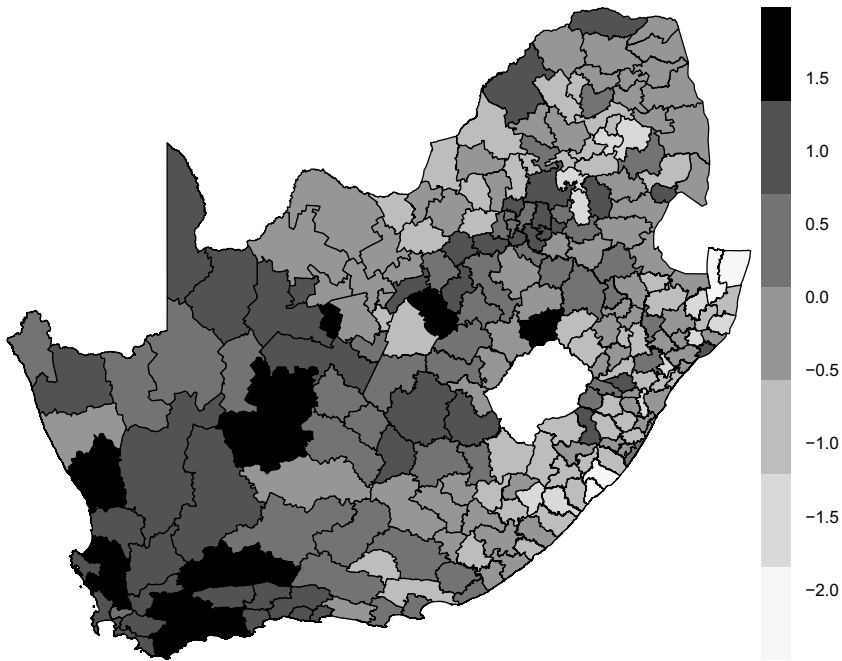


Fig. 3 Index of satisfaction with public services in South African municipalities (source: Community Survey 2016)

services such as flush toilets, piped water, electricity, and refuse removal (*Service Coverage Change*); changes in access to formal housing (*Formal Housing Change*); and, at the ward level, changes in employment levels (*Employment Change*). Details for these indicators appear in the [Appendix](#).

To capture the “loyalist” credentials of councillors, we control for the number of years the councillor had been in office as of 2016 (*Years Incumbent*), and whether the councillor ever switched from one party to another prior to 2016 (*Switched Party*). To account for the level of political competition within each constituency, we measure *Win Margin (2011)* as the difference between the number of votes received by the winning candidate (within wards) or party (within municipalities) in the 2011 elections and the candidate or party who won the second highest number of votes, divided by the total number of votes cast.¹⁰ Finally, we control for a number of constituency-level covariates, including ward- and municipal-level education rates, ethnic demography, income, population, and rates of civic engagement.

¹⁰In the 2011 elections, all winning parties won more than 50% of the vote.

Analysis

We estimate the relationship between citizen evaluations of incumbent performance and the renomination decisions of political parties (Eq. 1). We also test whether these relationships vary according to the degree of electoral competition (Eq. 2). While we cannot infer a causal relationship between public opinion and candidate selection (as the former is clearly not exogenous), we consider possible confounding variables, including through sensitivity analysis, and alternative theoretical accounts.

$$\Pr(\text{Renomination}_{i,w,m} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\alpha + \beta_1 \text{CitizenOpinion}_{w,m} + \gamma \mathbf{X}_{i,w,m} + \epsilon_{i,w,m}) \quad (1)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(\text{Renomination}_{i,w,m} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\alpha + \beta_1 \text{CitizenOpinion}_{w,m} \\ + \beta_2 \text{Competitiveness} \\ + \beta_3 \text{CitizenOpinion} * \text{Competitiveness}_{w,m} \\ + \gamma \mathbf{X}_{i,w,m} + \epsilon_{i,w,m}) \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

In all equations, $\mathbf{X}_{i,w,m}$ represents a vector of control covariates, i indexes each incumbent councillor, m indicates the municipality, and w indicates the ward. We include municipality fixed effects for ward-level analyses, and province fixed effects for municipal-level analyses.

Ward-Level Results

Before presenting our quantitative findings, we highlight two ward councillors from the City of Johannesburg municipality, whose contrasting career trajectories illustrate our broader claims. Janice Ndarala, an ANC candidate, was elected in Ward 8 with a margin of victory of 19% in 2011, making Ndarala's ward among the most politically competitive in the province.¹¹ Constituents of Ward 8 expressed considerable dissatisfaction with their local government's performance during her tenure. Faced with controversies over local housing relocation and electricity access, Ndarala was "unfavorably compared by community members to Bovu [the previous ward councilor] in terms of performance, energy, and knowledge" (Ngwane 2016, 280). In November 2015, a group of citizens marched to the municipal government office, upset about perceptions of corruption and self-dealing by local officials (Mokwena 2015). One constituent complained: "We voted for a better life. But the government lied to us and gave us empty promises ... Why is the councillor [Ndarala] not here? Whenever the community wants to speak to her she is not here!" (cited in Le 2015, 106). Overall, constituents in Ward 8 reported an average *Local Councillor Satisfaction* rating of 2.1 on the GCRO survey in 2015, well below average for Gauteng province. By contrast, in Ward 81, another competitive ward in the same municipality, the incumbent ANC councillor Margaret Radebe enjoyed relatively high constituent ratings (*Local Councillor Satisfaction* for Ward 81 was 2.82). Consistent with the logic of party-led

¹¹As we demonstrate in supplementary analyses in Appendix Fig. 9(a), even wards with 2011 win margins as large as 35% were often lost by the ANC in 2016.

accountability, Radebe was renominated by the ANC to represent the party in Ward 81 once again in 2016, whereas Ndrala in Ward 8 was not (Ndrala was replaced by another ANC candidate, Ezekiel Tsotetsi).

While we cannot determine the motives of party leaders in any particular case, our analysis aims to assess whether this kind of association between citizen views of politicians' performance and councillor career outcomes reflects broader patterns across South Africa.

Table 1 presents estimates of the likelihood of party renomination of single-member district ward councillors as a function of ward- and councillor-level characteristics. As shown in column 1, average citizen satisfaction with an incumbent ward councillor (*Councillor Satisfaction*) is a significant and positive predictor of that councillor's renomination by his or her party in 2016. When we control for the average satisfaction with public services (column 2) — which are managed primarily by the municipal government but likely affect satisfaction with individual ward councillors¹² — the coefficient on local councillor satisfaction increases in size and becomes more precisely estimated. Moreover, when we control for ward-level change in the provision of various public services (column 3), which may simultaneously affect party elite and citizen evaluations, the link between citizen satisfaction and councillor renomination remains.¹³ These findings suggest that public opinion is indeed predictive of party decisions about politician renomination. The relationship between councillor ratings and renomination is substantively meaningful: a one standard deviation increase in the average level of citizen satisfaction with councillor performance is associated with an (average) 7.5 percentage-point increase in the predicted probability of renomination for that councillor.

In columns 4–9, we examine the relationship between citizen views and renomination separately for the ANC and the DA. During the 2011–2016 term, the ANC governed eight of the nine municipalities in Gauteng province, while the DA was in the opposition and held 154 of the total 508 ward seats in Gauteng. Consistent with our expectation, the relationship between citizen satisfaction and renomination holds for ruling party councillors within the ANC subset. The coefficients are positive in the DA subset as well, although they fall short of statistical significance at the conventional 0.05 level. As shown in Table 7 in the Appendix, the results are similar when we exclude Midvaal, the only municipality governed by the DA during this period.

Our findings do not entirely discount the role of loyalty and cohesion as important concerns for party elites in South Africa. For instance, we find that past party-switching by councillors is a consistently negative predictor of renomination for both ANC and DA councillors, suggesting that councillors with demonstrated loyalty to

¹² These two measures are positively correlated, but not to the extent that multicollinearity is a concern ($\rho = 0.3$).

¹³ In Table 9 in the Appendix, we estimate the relationship between ward-level change in public service provision and renomination, excluding measures of councillor satisfaction, and find no statistically significant relationship.

Table 1 Determinants of councillor renomination in Gauteng (Logit)

	Dependent variable: Renomination								
	All (1)	All (2)	All (3)	ANC (4)	ANC (5)	ANC (6)	DA (7)	DA (8)	DA (9)
Councillor Satisfaction	0.486* (0.238)	0.553* (0.252)	0.568* (0.256)	0.633* (0.298)	0.682* (0.315)	0.657* (0.319)	0.880 (0.537)	1.122 (0.581)	1.100 (0.604)
Service Satisfaction Index		-0.116 (0.139)	-0.098 (0.144)		-0.076 (0.154)	-0.074 (0.159)		-0.320 (0.274)	-0.317 (0.289)
Service Coverage Δ			0.132 (0.161)			0.199 (0.178)			0.755 (0.427)
Formal Housing Δ			-3.693* (1.425)			-3.095* (1.488)			-7.818* (3.661)
Employment Δ			0.318 (0.905)			0.548 (0.992)			-1.865 (2.150)
High Income (%)	-2.270 (1.204)	-2.062 (1.229)	-2.219 (1.247)	-2.798 (1.470)	-2.649 (1.502)	-2.669 (1.524)	-0.523 (2.816)	-0.513 (2.813)	-1.266 (2.890)
Post Secondary (%)	1.691 (1.685)	1.789 (1.691)	1.786 (1.718)	2.214 (2.342)	2.359 (2.362)	2.449 (2.400)	-2.503 (3.464)	-1.743 (3.540)	-1.846 (3.704)
Ethnicity — African (%)	-1.693* (0.745)	-1.631* (0.747)	-1.637* (0.754)	-1.453 (1.814)	-1.370 (1.824)	-1.484 (1.844)	-3.471* (1.551)	-3.494* (1.524)	-4.024* (1.586)
Civic Engagement	-0.171 (0.227)	-0.157 (0.227)	-0.140 (0.229)	-0.198 (0.268)	-0.185 (0.270)	-0.187 (0.271)	0.109 (0.513)	0.175 (0.517)	0.272 (0.537)
Log Population (2011)	0.311 (0.321)	0.288 (0.322)	0.310 (0.325)	-0.171 (0.364)	-0.177 (0.364)	-0.160 (0.370)	0.842 (0.694)	0.845 (0.696)	0.759 (0.723)

Table 1 (continued)

Dependent variable: Renomination									
	All (1)	All (2)	All (3)	ANC (4)	ANC (5)	ANC (6)	DA (7)	DA (8)	DA (9)
Win Margin (2011)	-0.419 (0.464)	-0.338 (0.474)	-0.276 (0.479)	0.151 (0.776)	0.216 (0.788)	0.332 (0.799)	-2.566* (1.161)	-2.265 (1.188)	-2.147 (1.210)
Years Incumbent	-0.010 (0.042)	-0.010 (0.042)	-0.007 (0.042)	-0.0005 (0.048)	0.0005 (0.048)	0.003 (0.049)	0.206 (0.110)	0.208 (0.112)	0.198 (0.112)
Switched Party	-1.595* (0.566)	-1.570* (0.566)	-1.621* (0.566)	-0.709 (1.262)	-0.684 (1.263)	-0.832 (1.268)	-2.999* (1.132)	-2.908* (1.111)	-3.244* (1.171)
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	477	477	477	343	343	343	142	142	142

* $p < 0.05$

their party appear to gain a premium in the eyes of party elites. Nevertheless, our findings indicate that this tendency to favor loyal cadres can co-exist with party responsiveness to constituent views.

Next, we examine the interaction between citizen opinion, councillor renomination, and electoral competitiveness. Figure 4 depicts changes in the predicted probability of councillor renomination as a function of citizen satisfaction, across levels of electoral competition. Consistent with the notion of party responsiveness, the predictive power of citizen satisfaction increases with electoral competition: in the most competitive wards, a one standard deviation increase in *Councillor Satisfaction* is associated with a 22.7 percentage-point increase in the predicted probability of renomination. This relationship decreases as wards become less competitive, becoming statistically indistinguishable from zero when prior election win margins surpass 70%. As shown in Table 3 in the Appendix, we estimate similar interaction effects in the full sample of Gauteng wards, among ANC wards only, and among DA wards (although the coefficient within the DA subset is not statistically significant).

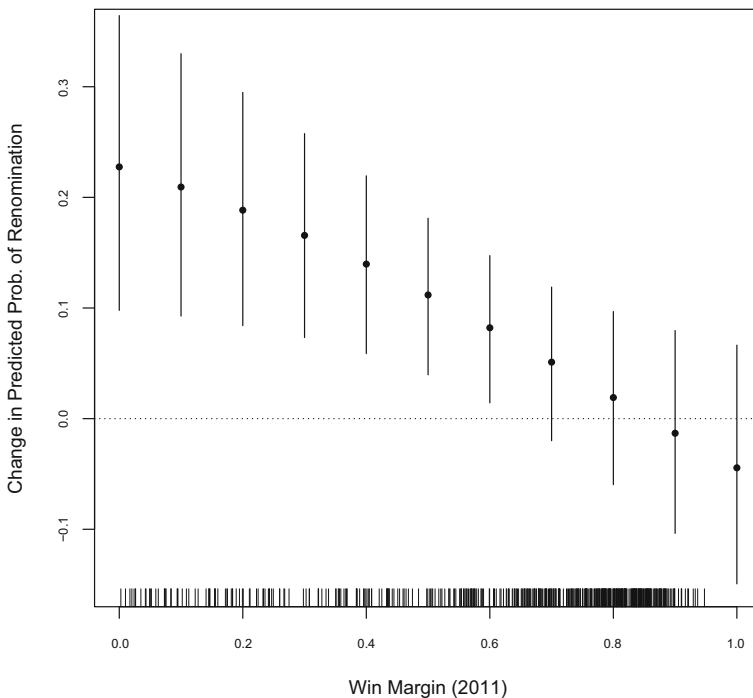


Fig. 4 Change in the predicted probability of councillor renomination associated with a one standard deviation increase in *Councillor Satisfaction*, at different levels of margin of victory for the ward councillor in 2011. Includes ward councillors in Gauteng. Lines show 95% confidence intervals; rug plot shows raw distribution of observations

Municipal-Level Results

Analysis of municipal-level patterns allows us to study the full range of local councillors in South Africa. These include the set of PR councillors nominated through closed party lists, who represent an especially hard case for party responsiveness to constituent views.

In Table 2, we present estimates of the relationship between citizen ratings of local government performance, averaged at the municipal level, and the likelihood of renomination among all incumbent local councillors in South Africa.¹⁴ We consider three subsets. First, we include all councillors who were members of the ruling party in their respective municipalities in 2011.¹⁵ Second, we restrict the analysis to ANC ruling councillors. Third, we consider non-ruling party councillors. For the latter group, we did not expect to observe any particular relationship between citizen ratings of municipal services and renomination outcomes, since non-ruling councillors should not be held accountable for municipal service quality by citizens or by their respective parties. Finally, as with the ward-level analysis, we examine how the effects of constituent ratings on councillor renomination vary with the level of political competition.

Examining the first column in Table 2, we find that favorable evaluation of local government services is positively associated with renomination for councillors from ruling parties; however, the coefficient falls below conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = 0.12$). The coefficient shrinks slightly in the subset of ruling ANC councillors. Contrary to expectations, we find a similarly positive but non-statistically significant relationship among non-ruling party councillors.¹⁶

In columns 4–6 we include controls for two government performance indicators: change in service coverage and change in access to formal housing within the municipality. The coefficients on constituent opinions remain virtually unchanged. And as with the ward-level results, actual government performance measures are not themselves significant predictors of councillor renomination.¹⁷ Again, we find that party responsiveness to constituents can co-exist with concerns for party loyalty: both councillor experience (*Years Incumbent*) and councillor fidelity to their party are positive predictors of renomination at the municipal-level. In contrast to the ward-level findings, we do not find evidence that the relationship between service satisfaction

¹⁴ While we lack councillor-specific citizen evaluations at this level, we also would not expect that citizens would be able to offer evaluations of all members of the municipal government. Rather, it is more plausible that citizens would have views about the quality of municipal-level government performance *writ large*. Because “service delivery” is primarily a municipal government responsibility, we use average citizen ratings of public services in the municipality.

¹⁵ We define the ruling party as the party with the largest number of councillors.

¹⁶ As shown in Table 11 in the Appendix, however, the relationship between service ratings and renomination is statistically significant when province fixed effects are excluded, only for ruling party councillors and ANC ruling party councillors.

¹⁷ In addition, when we exclude service ratings, modeling renomination as a function of our performance metrics and covariates, we still find no significant relationship and the coefficients remain stable in size. See Table 10 in the Appendix.

Table 2 Determinants of councillor renomination — all municipalities (Logit)

	Dependent variable: Renomination					
	All ruling (1)	ANC (2)	Non-ruling (3)	All ruling (4)	ANC (5)	Non-ruling (6)
Service Rating Index	0.094 (0.061)	0.072 (0.061)	0.144 (0.090)	0.090 (0.060)	0.070 (0.061)	0.150 (0.091)
Service Coverage Δ				-0.051 (0.104)	-0.044 (0.106)	0.069 (0.149)
Formal Housing Δ				0.210 (0.501)	0.071 (0.459)	-0.509 (0.707)
Log Population Δ	1.610* (0.715)	1.492* (0.735)	-0.538 (1.221)	1.552* (0.714)	1.466* (0.730)	-0.365 (1.258)
Ethnicity - African (%)	-0.288 (0.368)	-0.219 (0.402)	0.762 (0.491)	-0.319 (0.382)	-0.246 (0.417)	0.782 (0.495)
Post Secondary (%)	-9.849* (2.625)	-8.807* (2.724)	13.720* (4.831)	-10.153* (2.717)	-8.995* (2.807)	14.188* (4.951)
Win Margin (2011)	0.104 (0.284)	0.028 (0.295)	-0.257 (0.340)	0.088 (0.279)	0.022 (0.279)	-0.195 (0.352)
Ward Councillor	-0.171* (0.061)	-0.173* (0.064)	0.079 (0.100)	-0.171* (0.061)	-0.174* (0.064)	0.081 (0.100)
Years Incumbent	0.030* (0.011)	0.032* (0.012)	0.077* (0.019)	0.030* (0.011)	0.032* (0.012)	0.077* (0.019)
Switched Party	-0.980* (0.142)	-1.180* (0.167)	-0.925* (0.110)	-0.981* (0.142)	-1.182* (0.167)	-0.925* (0.111)
N Councillors	5841	5315	2536	5841	5315	2536
N Municipalities	234	202	234	234	202	234
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
RSE clustered at municipal level						* <i>p</i> < 0.05

and renomination varies significantly with levels of political competition for any of these three subsets at the municipal level.¹⁸

Thus, we find weaker evidence for party responsiveness to public opinion in renomination decisions at the municipal level compared to the ward level. One plausible explanation is that the municipal analysis pools together different types of councillors with different levels of responsibility and visibility to the public. Among PR councillors, in particular, parties may face different incentives when it comes to renominating “executive” members of their party, who are more directly responsible for municipal service delivery and are more visible as their party’s public faces. To assess this possibility, we repeat our analyses among PR councillors listed in one of the top 10 positions on their party’s municipal PR list in 2011. The results of this analysis appear in Appendix Table 5. We do find a positive and significant relationship between service satisfaction and renomination for top ruling party councillors. This relationship also holds when restricting to the ANC, although the coefficient falls just below statistical significance at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level in this subset ($p = 0.056$). For non-ruling party councillors, the coefficient is positive but smaller and not statistically significant. We estimate that a one standard deviation increase in service satisfaction is associated with a 4.3 percentage-point increase in the probability of renomination for a top ruling PR councillor. We also find weak but suggestive evidence that parties face greater pressure to replace their top ranking councillors when they face higher levels of political competition (Appendix Table 6).

We also investigate variation in PR list position for the top 10 PR councillors, a more fine-grained measure of politician career advancement. Here we use an ordered logit model to estimate the change in the predicted probability of each categorical promotion outcome given a one standard deviation upward shift in *Service Rating Index*, controlling for performance indicators and other municipality- and councillor-level characteristics. As shown in Fig. 5, the simulated point estimates indicate that an upward shift in constituent service ratings has a significant and positive association with career advancement for executive-level PR councillors. Substantively, a one standard deviation increase in municipal-level service ratings is associated on average with an 8.1 percentage-point decrease in the predicted probability of demotion, a 3.2 percentage-point increase in the predicted probability of being renominated at the same position or as a ward councillor, and a 9.3 percentage-point increase in the predicted probability of promotion. However, these estimates are significant only at the $\alpha=0.1$ level.

Alternative Explanations and Robustness Checks

We conduct a range of diagnostics to probe the robustness of our findings. First, given the heterogeneity in constituency conditions, we consider whether our findings (that public opinion predicts renomination among ward and executive PR councillors but actual improvements in service delivery do not) could be driven by ceiling

¹⁸See Table 4 in the Appendix.

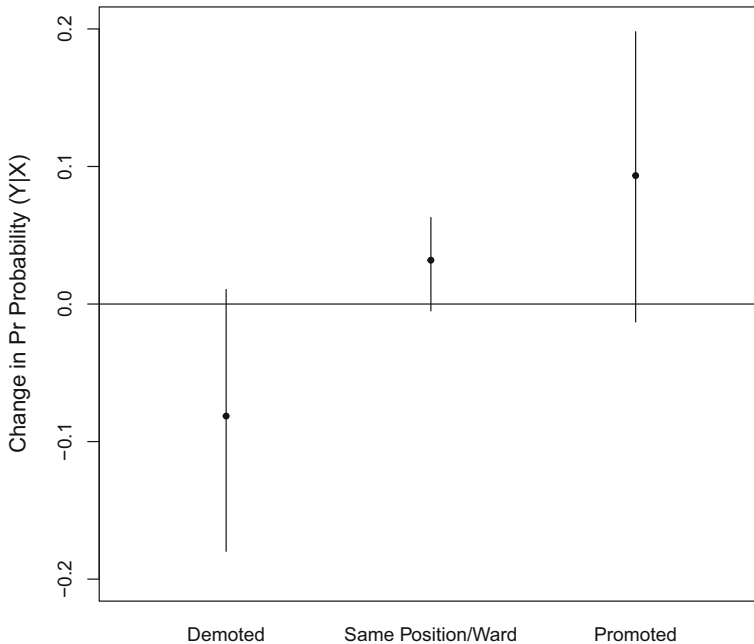


Fig. 5 Change in the predicted probabilities of councillor promotion outcomes associated with a one standard deviation increase in *Service Rating Index*, using ordered logistic regression. Top 10 ruling party PR councillors elected in 2011 in all municipalities. Lines show 95% confidence intervals

effects or other baseline conditions that limit some councillors' abilities to demonstrate their value to citizens through service provision. We subset to constituencies that were not fully serviced at baseline, control for baseline levels of service delivery across wards and municipalities, and interact change in service delivery with baseline levels to see if changes in service delivery absorb the effect of constituent opinions in areas that are not well-serviced initially. Across all of these analyses, the positive relationship between citizen opinions and councillor renominations remains stable in size, although it drops below conventional statistical significance levels in some specifications.¹⁹

Second, a potential concern is that using ward-level averages of citizen opinion may mask measurement error due to survey sampling. While the GCRO sample is large, estimates for some wards are based on as few as 30 observations. To generate more conservative standard errors, we use a non-parametric bootstrap, resampling observations within each ward cluster. As shown in Fig. 3 in the Appendix, our substantive conclusions remain unchanged.

Third, to address the possibility that the interaction between citizen opinion and political competition might be driven by a small number of cases at particular levels of competitiveness, we re-estimate our interaction models using binary indicators of competitiveness based on win margin thresholds. As shown in Table 14

¹⁹ See Tables 15, 16, and 17 in the Appendix.

in the Appendix, our ward-level findings are upheld using this operationalization of political competition, and are robust to a range of electoral margin threshold choices.

Finally, we consider the possibility that political patronage accounts for the link between public opinion and councillor renomination. Consistent with the literature on electoral clientelism and vote-buying (Ichino and Nathan 2013; Stokes 2005), it is possible that local councillors in South Africa boost their popularity by providing citizens with private rents (e.g., cash payouts, access to formal housing, assistance with relief for school fees). If party elites bestow more patronage resources on favored councillors, this could confound the link between constituent views and renomination. While we lack direct evidence on such transfers, we believe it is unlikely that clientelist exchanges of this variety confound our findings, for several reasons. First, our survey samples are representative of the entire constituencies being studied, not merely party supporters. It is unlikely that these respondents have themselves received direct material transfers from their councillor, since that would imply an improbably large number of payoffs. Second, whereas party investments in patronage are likely to be concentrated around elections, our opinion data were collected almost a full year *before* municipal elections occurred. Third, if party elites selectively distributed patronage resources to boost the popularity of councillors to help them win elections, we would expect this to occur most often in competitive constituencies. Yet we find no general association between levels of political competitiveness and citizen approval of councillors.²⁰

Nonetheless, we cannot rule out completely the possibility that political patronage, or another unobserved source of confounding, may account for the observed relationship between citizen approval and councillor renomination. We therefore conduct a sensitivity analysis to determine how strong such confounding would need to be to nullify our results. Following Cinelli and Hazlett (2020), we parameterize potential omitted variable bias in terms of partial R^2 values and compute the robustness value (RV), which represents the strength of association between a hypothetical confounder (or set of confounders) and both the explanatory and the outcome variable necessary to reduce the estimated effect to zero. As shown in Table 18 in the Appendix, computing the RV for our main Gauteng specification yields a value of 9.84%.²¹ Thus, unobserved confounding (orthogonal to covariates) must explain more than 9.84% of the residual variance in both *Councillor Satisfaction* and *Renomination* to reduce the absolute value of the effect size by 100%.

The existence of such a strong confounder appears unlikely in our case. We again follow Cinelli and Hazlett (2020) in using observed covariates to bound potential omitted variable bias. Table 19 in the Appendix shows, for each of the covariates included the model, the consequences of including a hypothetical confounder comparable to that covariate for the estimated effect of citizen satisfaction on councillor

²⁰ At the ward level, the Pearson correlation between *Win Margin (2011)* and *Councillor Satisfaction* is -0.036 .

²¹ For the purposes of sensitivity analysis, we re-estimate the model using OLS.

renomination.²² We find that our results would remain robust even when taking into account potential unobserved confounding that is considerably stronger than observed covariates. Take, for example, constituency education levels. More educated citizens may generally be more satisfied with the performance of their local elected officials, due to a greater ability to engage these officials or a better understanding of their duties and constraints. At the same time, wards with more educated citizens may provide a higher quality “pool” of potential councillors, reflected in greater renomination rates overall. Indeed, post-secondary education rates are positively correlated with both satisfaction and renomination. As we see in rows 15–18 of Table 19, even a confounder three times as strong as education would fail to nullify the effect of satisfaction on renomination, or reduce it below statistical significance at the 5% level.

Implications for Accountability and Development

Our analyses document an under-appreciated pattern within South Africa: party decisions about whether to renominate or to promote incumbent councillors closely track public opinion about councillor performance, particularly in politically competitive areas. From the perspective of citizen agency, these findings are good news. Whereas commentators frequently criticize party-controlled candidate selection procedures as opaque and anti-democratic, we show that parties can indeed be attuned to citizen opinion and make consequential renomination decisions in accordance with constituent preferences. Inter-party competition can drive intra-party democratic practices.

But does party responsiveness to citizens actually incentivize better performance among politicians in terms of their “official” duties, such as the delivery of public services? In our main analysis, we find that actual constituency-level service delivery improvements are not significant predictors of renomination by parties. As shown in Tables 9 and 10 in the Appendix, this is the case even when excluding measures of public opinion. Parties, it seems, weight citizen opinion more heavily than service delivery performance when evaluating candidates. To what extent does service delivery inform citizen opinions? In supplementary analysis, we directly investigate the link between service provision and citizen evaluations. As shown in Tables 20 and 21 in the Appendix, we find that highly subjective dimensions of citizen-government relations, such as perceptions that councillors care about the community and views about councillor corruption and trustworthiness, are the strongest correlates of citizen opinions about local politicians. For instance, Afrobarometer survey respondents who agreed that local councillors “try their best to listen to what people like you have to say,” were significantly more likely to approve of councillor job performance and

²²For each observed covariate, we also include the consequences of including a hypothetical confounder two and three times as “strong” as that covariate (in terms of the relationship to both satisfaction and renomination).

to trust their local council.²³ In the open-ended responses that GCRO survey respondents gave to explain why they held the views they did about their councillor, many citizens focused on perceived responsiveness to constituency concerns, how personally accessible councillors are, and how much (or little) they seem to care about the community. Paller (2019) similarly reports that the social status and reputations of politicians in Ghana depend on efforts at “talking and listening” that make citizens feel valued and respected.

By contrast, we find that measurable service delivery only weakly predicts approval of local councillors. Individual access to services predicts councillor approval in Gauteng province, but in the national Afrobarometer sample we find a statistically insignificant relationship. We also do not find evidence that constituency-level changes in service coverage (which may capture sociotropic effects) predict individual attitudes toward government services or their individual councillors.

Thus, we arrive at a tempered conclusion about the long-run consequences of party-led accountability for development. Councillors, like many politicians, can pursue a range of tactics to influence citizen views and their own popularity. Councillors with the ability to persuade constituents that they are serving their interests and concerned with their problems are likely to enjoy more favorable evaluations, whether or not they live up to the standards of their formal job descriptions. Elected representatives may also garner popularity by spending more time campaigning, or by providing informal services for constituents. Our study suggests that local politicians in contexts with centralized candidate selection and sufficient inter-party competition have incentives to pursue these persuasion tactics not only to win constituent approval, but also to improve their chances of renomination by their party. In this regard, our findings resonate with the extant literature on politicians’ behavioral incentives in other types of political systems, which, as summarized by Ashworth (2012, 184), has taught us that incumbents seek to impress voters, whether or not that means advancing constituents’ material interests.

Conclusion

Evidence of significant party responsiveness to constituent preferences among parties with centralized candidate selection rules challenges popular and scholarly assumptions that party elites in such systems favor loyalist cadres, leaving citizens with little agency over the selection of their representatives. Party leaders who wish to stave off the erosion of political support — particularly where opposition parties threaten to woo away voters — can use the power of candidate selection to respond to public sentiments and, in doing so, provide at least a degree of political accountability. Analyses of the career trajectories of elected local councillors in South Africa confirm that party elites do appear to make renomination choices that are surprisingly consistent with constituent preferences, especially in electorally competitive areas.

²³We use data from Afrobarometer Round 6 (Afrobarometer Data 2016).

To what extent are our findings generalizable? While a definitive answer demands further data collection in other cases, we point to two conditions under which the dynamics of party-led accountability that we observe in South Africa may be especially likely. First, the presence of a minimally organized and effective opposition to the ruling party matters. Without a viable alternative to the incumbent party, potential swing voters may not exist in sufficient numbers to generate incentives for party responsiveness during the candidate nomination phase. Thus, we expect our findings to generalize better to democracies where strong parties face a relatively consolidated opposition (Doorenspleet and Nijzink 2013). Second, party-led accountability may be contingent on a sufficient level of party capacity. If weakly institutionalized or lacking the resources to support candidates on their own, a party may be pressured to back wealthy candidates who can “pay to play” (Ichino and Nathan 2012). Thus, our findings in South Africa may not extend to especially resource-poor democracies where parties lack the capacity to select on candidate quality.

The connection between public opinion and candidate renomination that we observe may operate through a variety of channels. The most obvious is simply that political parties regularly commission and have access to similar forms of data that we analyze in this article. At the municipal level, the GCRO data are commissioned in partnership with Gauteng provincial government and the respective municipalities; and the census data are, of course, the responsibility of the national statistical agency. As Geer (1996) points out, the advent of public opinion polling has made it easier for democratic governments to represent citizen views. As these tools become more widely available in new democracies, they have the potential to help bridge the gap between parties and citizens.²⁴ Additionally, citizen protests may provide visible signals of popular opinion about local representatives, serving as further cues to party leaders about the preferences of constituents (Booyesen 2007; von Holdt 2014).

Our findings come with caveats, however. Similar to public opinion in other democracies, including the USA (Achen and Bartels 2017), citizen opinion in South Africa about the quality of local government is affected by myriad factors other than observable service improvements. Despite widespread interest in public service provision as an engine of development, party-led accountability may not result in strong incentives for politicians to improve constituents’ material welfare through this channel. Moreover, citizens’ preferences appear influential *only* where inter-party competition is high; elsewhere, voters face little meaningful choice of party, and party elites may ignore citizen sentiments in favor of other interests.

Going forward, our study invites a broader research agenda focused on candidate nominations and political accountability. Future research could gauge party responsiveness beyond South Africa, requiring the collection of detailed data on public opinion and politician careers. Further comparative research could also investigate whether candidate selection under elite-controlled systems produces more or less representative outcomes than open primaries. Finally, our findings point to the need for

²⁴News items in the run-up the 2019 election emphasized the ANC’s focus on the use of polling data. See, for example, <https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/2039776/victory-is-not-a-given-mbalula-says-of-anc-polling-data/>, accessed January 10, 2019.

further research on the competing incentives faced by incumbent politicians between maximizing the subjective satisfaction of citizens, currying the favor of party elites, and improving constituents' material well-being.

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Evan Lieberman Total Professor of Political Science and Contemporary Africa, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Political Science Department.

Philip Martin Assistant Professor, Schar School of Policy & Government, George Mason University.

Nina McMurry Postdoctoral Research Fellow, WZB Berlin Social Science Center.