

Politics without Positions: Party Loyalty and Voting Behavior in Malawi

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Abstract

In most countries there are meaningful issues over which politicians and voters take varying positions. Countless scholarly approaches to understanding political or voting behavior engage such policy preferences as a salient political cleavage, the most common of which places political actors on a left-right spectrum defined by opposing views on the role of government or the notions of liberal and conservative. How would we understand politics if neither politicians nor voters could not be positioned by differences in policy preferences? Sub-Saharan Africa provides arguably the world's best venue for exploring this question, and in this study I investigate the motivations that shape politics when this fundamental axis of organization and competition is absent. I offer a theory about the incentives facing politicians and voters in African countries with competitive party politics, and I test several implications of my theory with respect to two major empirical questions: First, what determines the loyalty a politician has to his party? Second, what cues do citizens use to guide their vote-choice? Using the case of Malawi - a small but populous country in south-east Africa - I find evidence in support of the idea that politicians have weak loyalty to parties except insofar as parties help further short-term, office-related goals, and that politicians often switch parties to pursue those goals. I further show that voters have weak attachments to individual candidates, and rely on the ethno-regional reputations of parties in making their choice. Interestingly, the behavior of both groups contributes to a very modest re-election rate in a region where personalistic politics is supposed to rule. With respect to each question I also highlight the exceptional place of independents, who are both more mobile in terms of adopting a new party label and more likely to be re-elected than their party-affiliated counterparts.

Issues and Positions in Established Democracies

In established democracies we know quite a lot about both political behavior and voting behavior, at least with respect to electoral competition. Scholars model the competition of politicians and parties in issue-spaces, and such models contribute to a better understanding of how politics works.¹ In several different contexts researchers have used ‘NOMINATE’ scores in positioning politicians relative to one another in two-dimensional space, where the scores are based on voting behavior.² A well-developed literature on political parties also relies on differentiable policy positions. Parties are routinely described as interest aggregators, that is groups of individuals who band together to accomplish common goals or translate the goals of others into policies. And these goals, which are numerous if one considers all established democracies,³ form the basis of policy cleavages over which parties compete for support. Normatively speaking, Schmitter (2001: 72) says, “Political parties should provide most citizens with a stable and distinctive set of ideas and goals (symbols) that anchor their expectations about democracy, orient them in a general way towards policy options, and make them feel part of the process of collective choice.”

Similarly, with respect to voters nearly all scholarly conceptions in established democracies places them on a left-right spectrum where their (electoral) goal is to locate the politician or party who stands closest to their position.⁴ Even scholars of politics in the United States - where individual success in primary elections rather than party leaders determine who gets the nomination, candidates run in single-member districts, and parties in the legislature cannot form or remove the executive, all contributing to more individualistic politics - have shown that party identification (“Party ID”) plays an important role in vote choice.⁵ While Party ID may be passed down through generations and adopted as a simple shortcut by citizens who lack a sophisticated, ideologically-oriented world view, such “mass publics”⁶ are still making a choice between representatives of parties that disagree about policies and goals. Certainly the case could be made that positional

¹cf. Downs 1957, Tsebelis 2002.

²For the development of NOMINATE and its use in the U.S., cf. Poole and Rosenthal 1985; In France, cf. Rosenthal and Voeten 2004, and in the European Parliament cf. Hix 2002;

³See, for example, any number of the cleavage structures that Lipset and Rokkan (1967) discuss in their seminal work.

⁴For a notable exception, see Stokes 1963.

⁵cf. Campbell et. al. 1960, Bartels 2000

⁶Converse 1964.

politics are more clearly defined, and therefore more determinative of behavior, in parliamentary Europe.

Africa and the lack of Positional Politics

In Africa, more so than any other world region, neither voters nor politicians can be separated in terms of policy preferences. While African citizens are not harmoniously united in political agreement, they are, generally speaking, all looking for the same output from government - local development. And while there is no shortage of disagreements on African campaign trails, such disagreements bear no systematic relationship policy positions. Campaigns are largely contests where politicians promote their own credibility, and attempt to discredit their opponents' credibility, in terms of capability to deliver back to the constituency.

In discussing Africa's emerging political parties, van de Walle (2003: 304) cites "programmatic homogeneity" as a "striking feature" where "party platforms diverge little and campaign speeches rarely discuss policy issues." His broader claim about the lack of programmatic cleavages is buttressed by the observations of scholars writing about countries around the region.⁷ To be sure, it is difficult to find examples of African countries where either voters or politicians differ consistently on programmatic positions.⁸ My claim is not that African politicians and parties have no ideology, or fail to implement actual policies. Combining a market economy with programs to combat poverty could certainly be thought of as an ideologically-based decision made by political leaders on how to structure government. The point I wish to underscore here, which is readily observable to anyone who studies political competition in this region, is that African politics cannot be characterized by distinguishable issue-positions. Nearly all political parties champion the same government structure just described, voters simply look for local development, and disagreements in politics are over

⁷see for example Burnell (2001) on Zambia; Nugent (2001) on Ghana; or Rakner, Svaasand, and Khembo (2007) on Malawi.

⁸I do recognize a few exceptions. For instance, there were a handful of Communist and Socialist parties around the region who held (and often still hold) memberships in international organizations of like-minded parties. However even parties with a history of embarking on significant socialist experiments, like Julius Nyerere's "Ujamaa" carried out under the Chama Cha Mapinduzi party in Tanzania, have since tended to support the common position of market economies coupled with government initiatives for the poor. South Africa is also an exceptional case for having a meaningful left-right debate at certain points in its history.

the credibility of commitments to deliver on valence issues.⁹

To preview the case I use in this study, in a nationally representative survey of voting-age citizens in Malawi that I conducted in April 2007 I found that only 5 of 197 offered what could be considered a specific programmatic difference between parties when asked how the two most well-known parties (based on election results) in their area differed.¹⁰ I found further support of this broader observation with respect to politicians. In series of 25 interviews (23 of which were with Members of Parliament (MP's)) I asked an open-ended question about the motivation for joining politics. The *only* ideologically-oriented response I received was about opposition to one-party authoritarian rule as a regime type.¹¹ I assume that the results would be similar if these data gathering exercises were repeated in most African countries.¹²

While it is increasingly obvious to observers that African¹³ political competition lacks meaningful programmatic differentiation, *there exists very little research that questions the motivations, or studies the behavior, of politicians and voters in light of that observation.* In this study I offer a theory about the incentives facing politicians and voters in such a context, and I begin trying to gain some empirical leverage on non-positional politics by using the case of Malawi to explore

⁹Valence issues are those that everyone either wants more of (e.g. development), or less of (e.g. corruption). That is, they do not divide public opinion. See the Stokes citation above for the original definition and use of “valence” issues in political research.

¹⁰Overall there were 24 responses coded as programmatic. However 15 focused on either the United Democratic Front (UDF) party offering free primary school after taking over government at the end of the one-party era or the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) current fertilizer subsidy program, neither of which was opposed by other major parties but only criticized afterwards in terms of implementation. There were also four non-specific responses, e.g. “Party A and Party B have different laws.” Answers like these were coded as programmatic so as not to bias the results towards my expectation.

¹¹From 1964 to 1994 Malawi was ruled by Hastings Banda and his Malawi Congress Party (MCP), and membership in the MCP was compulsory.

¹²Africa may not be the only region where characterizing politics in terms of issue-dimensions would be inappropriate. For example, in the Brazilian context Lyne (unpublished manuscript) argues that voters prefer targeted benefits rather than public goods, and that when a majority can achieve such benefits the result is that, “rather than organizing parties to aggregate individual preferences based on competing national policy programs … politicians will be forced to organize parties to aggregate simple vote totals based on the distribution of targetted individual benefits in order to compete successfully at the polls.” To be sure, policy differentiation does not explain the whole of political behavior in any context, and varies not only across countries but also within countries over time.

¹³In the common parlance I use Africa as synonymous with sub-Saharan Africa.

two questions. First, what determines whether a politician will stay loyal to his party? Second, what do voters look for to inform their vote-choice? Certainly these are only two amongst many questions that merit attention, however I arrived at them as fundamental by asking what it is that issue-dimensions do for politics. Issue-dimensions organize politicians together in a party, and provide both organized groups and organized issues for voters to choose from. If that organizational force is removed, the questions of cohesion within a party and cues for vote choice are important starting points. In the conclusion I discuss other questions that merit attention.

The structure of this study is as follows: In the first section I explain my theory about motivations and constraints. From this theory I derive and test several expectations with respect to my two empirical questions. Following a presentation and discussion of the main results, I use Independent candidates as an alternative way to test implications of my theory. Then I reflect on the outcome of politicians and voters behaving the way they do in terms of prior expectations about how African politics works. The research design I employ for this study uses data on decision-making at the individual and constituency level, and I conclude by comparing such an approach to the dominant approach taken by a growing group of scholars who study political parties in Africa - which is to look cross-nationally at party systems.

1 Theory

1.1 Careers not Causes for Politicians

My theory begins with the claim that politicians will be motivated solely by office in places without positional politics. *More specifically, I argue that African politicians care about two office-related goals: short-term electoral security and access to government.¹⁴ Consequently, I expect that politicians will use parties not as a way to join ideologically like-minded colleagues, but as a vehicle to be harnessed or abandoned depending on its usefulness towards those two short term goals.* Thus loyalty is strictly instrumental because politicians are pursuing only careers, and not also causes.

Short-term electoral security, i.e. winning and maintaining office, is a motivation that politicians worldwide share. However, it is typically counterbalanced by other motivations, and in particular

¹⁴The government is, without exception in Africa's presidential regimes, controlled by the president's party.

by ties to issue-positions. I illustrate this point with a simple example. In an advanced democracy a conservative politician will not switch to a liberal party even if the liberal party seems poised to win the upcoming election because he likely opposes liberal party stances and prefers different policies. For its part, the liberal party is unlikely to accept him because of demonstrated positional incompatibility. Furthermore, if winning was so crucial for this politician that he abandoned his issue-positions, and the liberal party thought he would somehow help their electoral prospects, his constituents would unlikely re-elect him. The end result is that parties in most of the world are rarely abandoned by politicians pursuing office-related goals.¹⁵ Contrariwise, African politicians are unbound by issue-positional ties.

The motivation to gain access to government similarly not specific to Africa. However, a key aspect of the institutional setting in several African and Latin American countries results in government access meaning more than elsewhere. These regions are overwhelmingly presidential, and the president enjoys disproportionate control vis a vis his legislature over both appointments and the national budget.¹⁶ Speaking specifically of African presidents, they typically do not need parliamentary¹⁷ approval for ministerial appointments, and they, not the parliament, control spending. This means that the government has disproportionate control over both career advancement and constituency-level development projects.¹⁸

I have discussed two goals united under the heading of ‘office’ motivations. However, I end with two important points of clarification. First, politicians will not necessarily pursue both goals. In fact, that politicians care about both electoral security and access to government should result, at least for some, in an interesting balancing act. One politician may tradeoff uncertain re-election prospects because he¹⁹ is in the president’s party, just as another may forgo his pursuing access to government because of electoral security with his current party. Second, and related, the pursuit of

¹⁵In the next section I recognize the exceptional cases highlighted by a comparative politics literature on party switching.

¹⁶The implicit comparison for presidential regimes in the developing world is with the United States.

¹⁷African legislatures are typically referred to as parliaments, regardless of whether the executive structure is presidential or parliamentary in type.

¹⁸Please note that I make no claims here about politicians’ heartfelt aims. Whether a politician really cares about bringing development to his village, or simply wants to get rich, I am only concerned with his behavior. In my conception these underlying aims would not change political behavior.

¹⁹Most Malawian politicians are male, and so I use the masculine throughout.

these goals may not lead to optimal outcomes. Consistent with a rational choice framework I expect political behavior to bear out my theory about motivations and goals - and thus I expect to find evidence of politicians demonstrating instrumental loyalty in pursuit of re-election and access to government - even if the choices of other players (namely voters) combines with politicians' choices to result in sub-optimal outcomes. As I will show below, politicians rational pursuit of office-related goals often leads to their removal from office.

1.2 Ethno-Regionalism and Party Reputation as a Voting Cue

Ethno-regionalism²⁰ is a ubiquitous explanatory factor in African studies, and has received attention in topics as diverse as clientelism, conflict, economic growth, and voting and elections. I argue here that ethno-regionalism partially substitutes for a policy axis in terms of providing cohesion, but does so more for voters than for politicians. I expect that voters rely on ethno-regionalism insofar as it forms the basis of party reputations that speak to credibility, and that ethno-regionalism constrains the original choice of party for politicians but will often be trumped by career motivations.

Voters look for local development as the most important output of government. In most scenarios it is safe for voters to assume that the resources for development are scarce and that individual politicians cannot themselves finance local development. Looking for power in numbers, that is, a block large enough to potentially form a government, I expect that voters will turn to party labels. Posner (2005) argues that transitions from one-party rule to multipartyism have the effect of nationalizing the political arena, thus causing voters to look beyond the personal characteristics of candidates. Reinforcing this expectation Shugart and Carey (1992, 1995) argue that concurrent presidential and first-past-the-post legislative elections²¹ give politicians incentives to use party label over personal appeals.

If the meaningful choice is between parties, how do voters distinguish? We know that voters are hardly aided by information from alternative campaign platforms since politicians and parties promote the same set of valence issues. I argue that this is where ethno-regionalism yields its

²⁰I use a broad definition of ethno-regionalism, which includes any identification with one group to the exclusion of other groups based on shared tribal heritage, primary language, religion, or geographic area.

²¹which Malawi has

strongest cohesive force, and it does so via reputations. The process by which it happens varies from country to country, and within a country over time, but many political parties in Africa develop reputations as the champion of a particular group or region. Most commonly these reputations are tied to the home ethnic, linguistic, or regional group of party leaders. The Kenya African National Union (KANU) party was for some time viewed by many Kenyans as the champion of President Jomo Kenyatta's Kikuyu tribe. Similarly the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (AFORD) party is seen by many Malawians as a northern party because the AFORD founder and party chairman Chafukwa Chihana comes from the north. Of course this oversimplifies the process by which reputations are established, and there are parties like the Chama Cha Mapinduzi in Tanzania that do not develop such ethno-regional reputations. The reputations themselves also vary in terms of accuracy. That is to say that in one country a president and governing party may heavily favor co-ethnics or the president's home region with development projects, while in another country the reputation of one party as a group or region's champion is an artifact of perceptions, not policies. Of course inaccurate reputations can have an equally significant affect on voting as accurate reputations.

Where these reputations exist, I expect that voters will use them as a cue in seeking the most credible deliverer of resources. But on this point it is important to recognize that credibility is not just a function of ethno-regional reputations but also a party's prospect for winning. Often these two go hand in hand since reputations tend to become politically salient only for recognizable national figures, and such figures tend to be tied to major parties. This indicates that the formation of reputations is partially endogenous to election results.²²

If ethno-regional reputations matter for the credibility of commitments to deliver development back to the village, would voters not also look at the background of individual candidates, especially in single-member district elections? While I gave reasons above why voters will tend towards parties, it is worth noting in addition that there is often very little variation amongst candidates' tribal backgrounds, especially in constituencies with one major tribal group. And in terms of regional ties, parties will rarely nominate a candidate who cannot make family linkages to a local village

²²In Section 3 I look at voting behavior with respect to incumbents, which allows me to take the first election as given and sidestep this issue. Setting up the test in this way also allows me to directly test for a decline in party-voting for parties who grow weaker in between elections.

and thus claim that he comes from that area.²³

Turning now to politicians, Bates (1983: 161) argued that “an ethnic appeal is an attractive and efficacious weapon in the competition for office,” and adds that “ethnic groups contain persons of all occupations, socio-economic backgrounds, lifestyles, and positions in the life cycle.” I agree that ethnic appeals could potentially be effective in the pursuit of office, especially if one is facing an ethnic outsider. But consistent with fact that that most constituency races are run between candidates without variation in ethno-regional backgrounds, we should expect that ethno-regionalism constrains politicians in terms of the parties they join since parties do vary in this regard. Put another way, ethno-regionalism should cause a politician to consider how parties are viewed in the electorate when pursuing his career goals. On this point I draw an important distinction between the original choice of what party to join for political newcomers, and the issue of party loyalty for incumbents.

Implicit in my earlier argument is that in places where ethno-regional reputations are solidified there will be a party who is widely regarded as an area’s “champion.” In this situation there should be significant competition to win the nomination²⁴ of the champion party, with the general election looking like an afterthought a la the Democratic Party in the American “Solid South.” The leaders of parties not considered the local champion still want to field candidates, at least insofar as they wish to contend as a legitimate national party. In an earlier section of my dissertation I find that champion parties do get the most interest from perspective politicians, and that non-champion parties employ a combination of recruiting those who lost out for the champion party’s nomination with efforts to sponsor well-known individuals from that constituency who were otherwise unaffiliated. In this chapter I only look at incumbents, and for this group I offer the straightforward expectation that that short-term electoral security and career opportunism will trump ethno-regionalism. My

²³I asked the Malawian politicians I interviewed how they came to run in the constituency that they did, which was especially curious for rural-constituency MPs who owned businesses or worked in the major cities. Without exception they cited maternal or paternal links, and would often say that they considered the rural area to be their “home village,” even if they grew up in the city.

²⁴In Malawi it is up to each party to decide who gets nominated. Party leaders of the major parties use both personal dictates and caucuses to decide on candidates. Leaders of smaller parties, who do not have the money nor the infrastructure to field candidates in all districts, often hand pick their candidate in advance and do not entertain competition.

justification for arguing that motivations will trump constraints is based on the idea that, while there is no substitute for career advancement, politicians are likely to feel as if they can overcome this constraint with personal appeals.

1.3 Domain Considerations

I have presented this argument in general terms for the domain of Africa, but variation within political contexts around the region makes the theory more or less applicable. In particular, the presence or absence of a dominant party²⁵ makes the political movement associated with office-related motivations more or less dynamic. With a dominant party present, as in Botswana, Namibia, or Tanzania, that party acts as a “pole of attraction,”²⁶ political movement is fairly predictable, and the relevant question is how much the dominant party tries to grow its coalition. To be sure, in places where competition is more balanced, as in Benin, Ghana, and Malawi, appeals to join the government still exist. Furthermore, the power of the presidency is so great in Africa to make his party powerful even when it does not obtain a qualified majority. The crucial difference is that in these places predicting the winner (who will form government) before an election is difficult, and this *pre-electoral uncertainty* makes political movement more dynamic as electoral success is plausible for several parties. Almost necessarily, the oversized coalitions that are dominant parties encompass several ethno-regional groups. And so specific to my claims about ethno-regionalism, the reduced uncertainty that comes with a dominant party means that voters need not rely so heavily on ethnicity as a cue for which party can reliably deliver to their group or area. One party controls government, and with it, the national budget and public development agenda.

As final domain distinctions, I note that my argument is explicitly aimed at competition taking place in single-member districts and in the broader setting of presidentialism. I am not trying to account for the incentives of politicians who compete internally in a party for ranking on a list, or for voters who (literally) cast their vote for parties rather than individual candidates. Similarly, in my theory I assume the presence of a powerful, budget-controlling president.

²⁵A dominant party as one that wins with clear or qualified majorities such that there is no real rival, and has this success over repeated elections.

²⁶Laver and Benoit 2003

2 The Determinants of Party Loyalty in Malawi

Since the outset of multiparty politics in 1994, politicians have switched parties on 134 occasions and to seven different parties. While more politicians stayed loyal to party from one election to the next,²⁷ this sort of political movement is substantial. Having established the lack of salient issue-dimensions as an organizing force, can we find common factors that increase or decrease loyalty? By trying to answer this question I join a research agenda in comparative politics on party switching²⁸ that includes studies of a small but diverse set of countries.²⁹ In extending the agenda to include Africa I follow the aim of these researchers by attempting to explain the incentives facing individual politicians, and I further echo their normative concerns about why party switching is potentially troublesome for democratic accountability. The major point of departure here, aside from the regional setting, is the use of a policy-free model. Of course for as much as it would be inappropriate to use competing policy preferences in my model, leaving this motivation out would be inappropriate in theirs. As Reed and Scheiner argue: “Politicians, like the rest of us, live in a complex world of competing incentives. In order to understand the behavior of political parties, one must consider at least three motivations: policy, office, and votes. The same is true of individual politicians.”

2.1 Office as *The Goal*

I argued above that in the context of non-ideological politics politicians are solely motivated by office, in particular the goals of electoral security and access to government, and that party loyalty is instrumental. The testable implications that pertain to the question I am addressing here are clear. Politicians will remain loyal only if being tied to their party furthers one or the other of those two goals.

In terms of electoral security, I test the hypothesis that the lower a politician’s personal electoral strength - measured by his own vote share in the previous election - the higher his likelihood of

²⁷65% of the time politicians chose to stay. Note that I use one electoral cycle as the time in which a politician could switch.

²⁸I refer to “switching” and “defecting” synonymously throughout.

²⁹cf. Reed and Scheiner (2003) on Japan, Heller and Mershon (2005) on Italy, Zielinski, Slomczynski, and Shabad (2005) on Poland, and Desposato (2006) on Brazil.

switching. A second way of measuring security is to look at the local strength of the party to which one belongs, so I also test the hypothesis that the weaker the strength of a politician's party - measured by the average vote share of he and all others in the same party who hold seats in the district³⁰ - the more likely he is to defect. I note that while one could reasonably argue that all politicians prioritize re-election, it is quite rare that changing parties is part of the calculus to achieving that goal for politicians in most of the world. The mechanism behind these two hypotheses is straightforward. In a context where opinion-polls are not available, perhaps the best measure of a politician's security is his electoral performance and that of his party. For politicians who won large majorities electoral security is high, and switching parties may jeopardize that security. But for politicians who won with narrow pluralities security is low, and thus switching parties may be perceived as a way to increase security and leave a party label that seems vulnerable. Again the uncertainty of election outcomes in competitive settings, not to mention the inherent uncertainty in new democracies with few electoral precedents, is relevant. If loyalty is not instrumental to the goal of electoral security, then these factors will not be significant determinants of party switching.

I test for the importance of access to government with the hypothesis that being in the president's party will increase party loyalty. Put another way, MPs not tied to the president will demonstrate weaker party loyalty. To reiterate the mechanism, there will be a presidential pull because the president controls the scarce pool of budgetary resources as well as the power of ministerial appointments. If access to government is not an important goal, the president's co-partisans should be no less likely to switch. And to capture a slightly subtler effect of being motivated by career advancement, I test the hypothesis that MPs who hold a ranking office in their party³¹ have less need to try and advance their careers and will therefore demonstrate greater loyalty than their non-ranking colleagues.

³⁰Administratively, Malawi is divided into 193 electoral constituencies, all of which fit within one of 26 districts, all of which fit within one of three regions. These numbers were increased from 176 constituencies and 24 districts between the 1994 and 1999 elections.

³¹which I can determine with the roster of party officials that I obtained from the Registrar of Political Parties.

2.2 Ethno-regionalism as a Constraint

To test for the constraining effect of ethno-regionalism, I operationalize the concept of a ‘stronghold.’ As researchers who take constructivist³² approaches to ethnicity have shown, individuals have multiple ethnic identities that are potentially politically salient. In the case of Malawi’s multiparty era (which begins in the lead-up to the 1994 election), the most politically relevant cleavage is region. In other work I suggest that a North-Center-South cleavage developed because of a combination of historical events: Scottish Missionary education leading to higher education levels in the north; The political decisions of former ruler Hastings Banda (who came from the center), including the decision to remove teachers of northern origin from schools in the central and southern regions; And the decision in 1993 by Chafukwa Chihana (the late leader of the AFORD party mentioned above) not to ally with the UDF party chairman and former president Bakili Muluzi in the 1994 election. The direct result of this last event was the solidification of two separate opposition parties, which in turn led to an election characterized by three major presidential candidates,³³ one from each region, and three major political parties each led by a presidential candidate. For the purposes of this study, I take the non-controversial stance that region provides the most important constraint for politicians in Malawi, and further, that Malawi’s founding multiparty election caused each party to be seen as the champion for the region of its presidential candidate.³⁴

I operationalize this constraint as follows: I code a district as a stronghold if it does not border another region and does not have a major border with the lake.³⁵ Then I code each incumbent politician as being constrained by representing a stronghold if he is both in a stronghold district and belongs to the party that is the traditional representative of that region - AFORD for the

³²Constructivism stresses that ethnicity is a social construct and that individuals possess multiple ethnic identities which can rise or decline in importance depending on one’s environment. Primordialism, on the other hand, takes ethnicity to be inherited from the beginnings of time, and fixed in place.

³³Banda, who accepted the vote for multipartyism in the 1993 referendum, contested as the MCP candidate. A fourth candidate ran but he and his party were relatively unknown, and he went on to poll less than 1% of the vote.

³⁴For support of this point see Chirwa 1998.

³⁵This coding scheme is based on two empirical realities. First, that each region has a capital which is centrally located and that more extreme areas of the region often share as many commonalities in terms of economic, linguistic, religious, and tribal ties with neighbors as they do with their region’s center; and second, that trade with neighboring countries and interaction with Indian Ocean routes resulted in non-typical settlement patterns around the lake.

north, MCP for the center, and UDF for the south. I code all other incumbents in that district, and those not in stronghold districts, as being unconstrained. In interviews with several Malawian politicians I noted remarks about border districts having as many similarities with other regions as with their own. For instance Nkhotakota is a district in the central region that shares a major border with the lake. There is a large Muslim population in Nkhotakota, much like there is in several southern districts,³⁶ but unlike most other central districts where Christianity is dominant. Applying this to my question, the expectation is that an MCP politician in Nkhotakota would feel greater freedom to switch than would an MCP politician in a central region district that is more closely identified with the center and, consequently, with the MCP party. By the same logic, all other politicians in Nkhotakota should feel less constrained because Nkhotakota is not a stronghold. While I tradeoff coding more narrowly according to particularistic observations about the identity of each constituency for clear coding rules, this operationalization should serve to capture the concept of interest.

2.3 Control Variables

The comparative literature on party switching cited above includes additional factors which can influence a politician's loyalty. In countries with mixed-member electoral rules researchers have exploited within-country variation on that institution to test the effect of running in single member districts vs. proportional lists on the decision to stay or switch.³⁷ In Malawi, however, all politicians are elected by first-past-the-post, making this factor inapplicable for my study.³⁸ Some researchers have suggested that politicians who belong to the governing party may, under certain circumstances, switch parties to avoid being sanctioned for poor economic performance.³⁹ I control for this by including time period dummy variables. This way if there is particularly strong or weak economic performance in any one period that might trigger an incentive to join or defect from the government (who is implicitly blamed or credited), I can capture that trend. Relatedly, because the president is the focal point in Malawian politics, major swings in his popularity for any other reason should affect both MP's from his party (who might defect should his popularity drop) and opposition MP's

³⁶The former president and still current UDF chairman Bakili Muluzi is also a Muslim.

³⁷see the Heller and Mershon piece cited above.

³⁸Lesotho is the only African country that uses a mixed-member electoral system.

³⁹see the Zielinski, Slomczynski, and Shabad piece cited above.

(who might be inclined to join the government if the president is very popular). By including time period dummies I can also control for this effect.

2.4 Test and Findings

I test my hypotheses about the determinants of party loyalty by using a dataset that I compiled, which combines data I gathered from the Malawi Electoral Commission and the National Registrar, as well as my own codings. For this test I have three time periods: Time period I starts after the 1994 election⁴⁰ and ends with the 1999 election; Time period II starts after the 1999 and end with the 2004 election; Time period III begins after 2004 election and continues through July of 2007.⁴¹ Despite being a truncated electoral cycle (the next election is slated for the spring of 2009), I use this third time period so as not to throw away information, and because my *central goal* is not to explain the rise and fall in overall levels of defection but rather to show how the incentives of politicians shapes their behavior. I include data on incumbent candidates in all of Malawi's electoral constituencies who ran in the subsequent election⁴² in time periods I and II, and for all incumbents in time period III. In order to improve the proportionality of legislative seats to population, the number of constituencies was changed from 176 to 193 in between the 1994 and 1999 elections.⁴³ This was accomplished by the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) dividing up existing constituencies, but unfortunately, they were not able to preserve their records of this redemarcation effort. I was able to obtain maps of the 1994 and 1999 constituency boundaries, and I use them in combination with interviews I conducted at the MEC and other constituency-level data that I gathered there to track the changes. For the first time period I include only constituencies which I could reasonably conclude had not been altered.

The dependent variable for this test is a politician's decision to stay loyal to (1) or defect

⁴⁰1994 was the first multiparty election, and because opposition parties were just becoming formalized in the lead up to it, it is not a comparable time period. Further, mine is not a theory of democratic transitions.

⁴¹I have the official roster of parliament as of June 2007 which allows me to code each 2004 incumbent as having switched or not.

⁴²While I cannot trace the motivations for incumbents stepping down (thereby dropping out of my dataset), I am mindful of the possibility that such decisions are not exogenous to the factors I am testing here. However, none of the two way relationships (between retirees and my independent variables of interest) showed strength.

⁴³5 seats were added to the central region and 11 to the southern region.

from (0) the party with which he was affiliated when last elected. In time periods I and II, if the politician runs on the ticket of a different party or as an independent in the following election, I code him as having switched. In time period III, if the politician is listed in the June 2007 official parliamentary roster as belonging to a party other than the one with whom he was elected (again including changes from a partisan to an independent), I code him as having switched. In all cases I also consider a move from being an independent to joining a party as a switch. I code switching 1, and staying loyal 0.

I account for this decision with several independent variables. First, to capture my central hypotheses I use an incumbent's vote share in the previous election ("Personal Security"), the average vote share of he and his co-partisans in the district in the previous election ("Label Strength"), a variable coded 1 if the politician's party is the same as the president and 0 otherwise ("In Government"), and a variable coded 1 if the politician held an official leadership position in his party and 0 otherwise ("Party Official"). To test for the constraining effect of ethno-regionalism, I include the stronghold variable discussed in Section 2.2 ("Stronghold"). Finally, as a control for government performance in the economy and the popularity of the president, I include time period dummies.

I run two variations on a similar theoretical model in order to test "Personal Security" and "Label Strength" separately because of high collinearity ($r=.81$). I run each model using logistic regression, and in Table 1 I report the estimates in log-odds. In Table 2 I highlight the substantive impact of several factors using the more intuitive change in predicted probabilities because of the awkwardness in interpreting log-odds.

These estimates demonstrate several important effects. First, politicians do switch parties in response to their electoral prospects, demonstrating instrumental loyalty. Politicians who have greater individual strength in the electorate are less inclined to switch, as are politicians whose party shows local (district-level) strength. When a politician himself, or his party locally, won by narrower margins (remember, these are incumbent politicians, so everyone won in the previous election) then he is more likely to defect. Estimates on both variables are statistically significant at the highest level.

The data further show that being in government significantly increases loyalty. Politicians who enjoy access to the president, with his control of ministerial appointments and the budget, are less

Table 1: Accounting for a Politician Loyalty

	Model 1	Model 2
Personal Security	-.043***	
Label Strength		-.069***
Party Official	-.827*	-.646
In Government	-.855***	-1.055***
Stronghold	-.215	.150
Time I	.427	1.104***
Time II	.314	.714**
Time III (Dropped)		
Constant	2.153***	3.248***
N	374	334
Significant at the .01 level ***		
Significant at the .05 level **		
Significant at the .1 level *		

likely than others to switch, and the estimates of this effect are significant at the highest level in both models. Being an official takes on the expected sign, such that officials are more loyal, however, its statistical significance is less robust. In Model 1 the variable is significant at the .1 level, but in Model 2 the effect is insignificant. The lack of significance here is surprising from the perspective of career advancement within a party, perhaps emphasizing the degree to which ministerial positions outweigh other positions of power.

In terms of the constraints imposed by ethno-regionalism, I find no reliable evidence that politicians in stronghold areas are less likely to switch. The effect is never distinguishable from zero, and even switches from the expected sign (negative, such that being in a stronghold reduces the likelihood of switching) in Model 2. This result gels with my expectation that office-related goals will trump ethno-regional constraints with respect to the decision to switch. However, I do not try to offer an account here of how politicians come to make their original choice of which party to

join, and thus cannot weigh in on the expectation that ethno-regionalism will have a greater impact on that choice. I am also mindful of the possibility that personal security and label strength may be picking up the effect of belonging to a regional champion party. However I find only weak support of that possibility in the two-way relationships between stronghold and those two variables.⁴⁴

Finally, the time period dummies show that politicians were most likely to switch in the first time period, and more likely to switch in the second time period than in the third (the excluded period). Relative to the justification of these time periods as a control (section 2.3), the results are somewhat surprising. As for the economy, it was in the second period when Malawi's economy took the biggest downturn. And in terms of popularity, both the former president Bakili Muluzi and his governing UDF were perceived by many as corrupt in the second period once Muluzi began pursuing constitutional amendments to allow himself a third term.⁴⁵ Though I caution that the time period effects not be taken as conclusive since the third period is truncated.

In Table 2 below I highlight the substantive impact of four variables - Personal Security, Label Strength, In Government, and Stronghold - using predicted probabilities. I compute the change in likelihood of switching given minimum to maximum and standard deviation changes in the value of these four variables, holding all other variables from the model at their mean. I draw these figures from Model 1 estimates for Personal Security, In Government, and Stronghold, and the Model 2 estimate for Label Strength.

Its is clear from Table 2 that the factors which achieved statistical significance in Table 1 are also substantively meaningful. The politician who won by the narrowest margin is 63% more likely to switch parties than the politician who won by the largest margin. Even just an increase of one standard deviation in vote share (approximately 17%) results in a 16% decrease in likelihood of switching. The impact of changes in the local strength of a politician's party are similar, and even a bit stronger. Moving from being a politician who's party polled 40% on average in the district to one who's party polled about 53% on average (a standard deviation change) results in a 19% decrease in the likelihood of switching. Being in government also has a large substantive impact on loyalty. Members of the president's party are 18% less likely to defect from their party

⁴⁴The correlations are .23 and .29 respectively.

⁴⁵He pushed for two amendments that would have extended his ability to contest for the presidency. The first, which was an "open term" amendment that would have abolished term limits, failed by only three votes in parliament.

Table 2: Changes in the Predicted Probability of Switching

	Min. to Max.	Std. Dev.	Increase
Personal Security	-.63		-.16
min: 21.15, max: 96.7			
mean: 60.69			
std. dev: 17.42			
Label Strength	-.77		-.19
min: 26.95 , max: 92.08			
mean: 62.02			
std. dev: 13.47			
In Government	-.18		
37% of politicians are coded as being in government			
Stronghold	-.05		
53% of districts are coded as strongholds			

than opposition MP's. Again these results support the idea that politicians' loyalty to party is determined by the extent to which parties further office-related goals.

Finally, in Table 2 I include the predicted probability of switching for politicians who represent regional strongholds compared with those that represent areas not as strictly tied to their region. Consistent with the statistically insignificant effect from Table 1, being in a stronghold has little substantive impact on the decision to switch.⁴⁶ Politicians who are constrained by being in a stronghold are 5% less likely to switch than those who are not. However using the Model 2 estimate (not reported) results in a 2% greater likelihood of defecting.

⁴⁶Both the In Government and Stronghold variables are binary, making one unit changes the only meaningful basis for interpreting their effect.

3 Vote-Choice in Malawi

I now turn to vote-choice in Malawi's multiparty era. To reassert my aim for this issue, I am asking how voters make choices in places where competition does not revolve around positional issues, not attempting to explain voting patterns in Malawi per se. In this section I look at one crucial aspect of vote-choice - the decision to re-elect one's incumbent - which I expect will shed light on that broader question.

In Malawi, and Africa more generally, I claimed that voters seek local development from their elected officials. In support of this point, I refer again to the survey that I conducted in 2007. I asked Malawian citizens if they expect something in return when they vote, and if they answered "yes" (77%) then I asked what they expected. To this second question, which was open-ended, 25% simply answered "chitukoko," which is the chiChewa word for "development," and another 27% gave development-related answers. Only 4% gave what could be considered a materialistic answer.⁴⁷ Of the remaining 44% whose answers were grouped into the "other" category, the two most common expectations voters cited were: 1) that the politicians they voted for to win⁴⁸, and 2) a general statement about politicians and/or government fighting problems. While the latter of these two response-types were conservatively coded into the "other" category, there is little question that many citizens who answered this way also expected development. This implies that voters are asking: Who can most credibly deliver development to our area? But as I stated in Section 1, voters are hampered in gaining information by the lack of alternative development schemes to choose from, and by candidates campaigning over valence issues. To the extent that voters wish to vote for politicians that are part of the government (because governing party members have better access to the president-controlled budget), the added wrinkle in African countries with competitive party politics is that forecasting the winner is difficult.

I argued that voters use party reputations to reduce uncertainty. Consequently, I expect that voting behavior will be driven by a reliance on party where reputations provide reliable cues. How can we test this? The method I employ here is to look at incumbent re-election. Knowing that

⁴⁷Those who forward the more materialistic strand of theories about clientelism might have expected more citizens to say that they expected tangible goods, or money. Though I recognize that even if that is what citizens do expect, they might not admit that to surveyors.

⁴⁸a very literal answer!

many incumbents switched, using incumbent re-election to study vote choice often sets up a clear choice between politician and party. Based on my theory, I expect that voters will likely re-elect incumbents from regional champion parties who remain loyal, and sanction (in the form of not re-electing) those that defect from a regional champion. Using the same party reputational logic, I expect that sanctions are more of a sure thing when defection is to a party that I will call “pegged” - that is, thought to be another region’s champion - than to a non-pegged party. In cases where politicians switch into the regional champion party, voters should react favorably. But such a move begs the question of how such a politician would have been elected in the first place? The short answer, at least in Malawi, is that they would not have been elected in the first place. In the 1994 founding multiparty election the AFORD party won 36 seats, 33 of which were in the north; the MCP won 56 seats, 51 of which were in the center; and the UDF party won 85 seats, 72 of which were in the south. The combination of this strong regional sorting in the first multiparty election (as I said above, mine is not a theory of transitional dynamics) with the use of incumbents provides a clear test of voting in the context of established party reputations.

Before turning to the test, I offer two additional refinements that follow from my theory. First, I highlight the fact that voters use party labels to cast a vote that maximizes their chance of access to development, not because of some inherent or inherited identification. Since credibility is a function not just of reputation but also of a party’s prospects for winning (and running government after the election), I expect that voters’ loyalty to their champion party will decline if that party’s strength and stature decline for reasons exogenous to election results. I test for this by including variables for each major party, and I explain the particulars with respect to Malawi’s major parties below. Second, because the logic for relying on regional-based reputations is structured in part by uncertainty, I expect that a politician who can reduce uncertainty independently of his party label will have greater electoral success than one who cannot. I proxy for such an effect by looking at the electoral fortunes of politicians who have run in presidential, as well as parliamentary, elections. Presidential candidates are better known than others, and typically they are more senior politicians with established careers. As Chabal and Daloz (1999: 34) argue, “voters want to know whether the potential leader will be able to call upon significant resources,” and presidential candidates are likely to be seen as prominent figures who can deliver even if their party cannot.

3.1 Test and Findings

My dependent variable for this test is incumbent re-election, measured dichotomously where 1 is an incumbent victory and 0 is an incumbent loss.⁴⁹ There have been two elections where voters have decided whether or not to re-elect their incumbent - 1999 and 2004.

I use several variables to test my hypotheses. First I include a variable for whether or not the incumbent switched parties where 1 is switch and 0 is stay. Next I include variables for each of the three major parties - AFORD, MCP, and UDF. In the case of AFORD, their stature has, for several reasons, declined significantly over time. After the 1994 election, their leadership agreed temporarily to a governing coalition with then-president Bakili Muluzi and the UDF. The AFORD brass then dropped this alliance, and in the lead-up to the 1999 election formed an alliance with the MCP in an effort to oust the UDF. Then again when Muluzi was pushing for a third term he convinced some of the AFORD leadership to support his bid. All of these alliances were met with skepticism, and in some cases, feelings of betrayal from other AFORD politicians and their supporters in the north. For these reasons and others, AFORD has been beset by internal leadership struggles. Their financial decline is also well documented.⁵⁰ The UDF party also declined, particularly during its second term as the governing party. The lion's share of internal UDF problems can be traced to Muluzi's manipulative efforts to clutch onto power. Not only did he attempt to extend his term beyond the constitutionally prescribed limit (two consecutive terms, which meant his eligibility would end in 2004), but relatedly he pushed candidates loyal to him into constituency nominations, and sidelined several UDF top brass by choosing a relatively unknown politician as his successor (current president Bingu wa Mutharika). And as I mentioned earlier, it was Muluzi and the UDF that presided over a period of significant economic decline. These brief histories lead me to expect that voters may break from the tendency to use party label for AFORD and UDF because of their decline. I use three dummy variables to most accurately capture this affect: one for AFORD incumbents in both time periods; another for MCP incumbents in both time periods; and a third for UDF incumbents elected in 1999 (and therefore up for re-election in 2004, when the UDF's

⁴⁹To reiterate, I found no relationship between incumbents who decided not to run in the subsequent election and personal electoral strength.

⁵⁰The culmination of this came early in 2007 when the party was locked out of its headquarters for failing to pay rent.

internal problems were more evident).

While the 1994 election provided a fairly clear sorting of party with region I again include a measure of stronghold, though in this case every constituency within a stronghold district is coded 1 for being stronghold, and all others are coded 0. My reasoning for using strongholds (rather than regionally dummies) is that regional voting patterns are simply the aggregate product of constituency level races. Therefore, if there is reason to expect that not all areas of a region are equally tied to a regional identity, then one ought not treat those areas equally. Finally, I include time period period dummies, in this case as a control for the effect of national-level punishments or rewards for government performance.

Table 3: Accounting for Voters Decision to Re-elect the Incumbent

	Model 3	Δ in Pred. Prob.
Did Incumbent Switch?	-3.527***	-.66
AFORD	-.765	-.19
MCP	.511	.13
UDF(1999)	-.981	-.24
Stronghold	.345	.09
Time I	1.139**	.28
Constant	.650**	
N	211	
Significant at the .01 level ***		
Significant at the .05 level **		
Significant at the .1 level *		

The evidence presented in Table 3, which shows both the log-odds estimates and predicted probabilities⁵¹ for two separate models, bears out some, but not all, of the expectations I discussed. The most striking result is the proclivity of voters to sanction incumbents who are disloyal to their party - the estimate on switching achieves the highest level of significance while controlling for

⁵¹All independent variables are binary, therefore the substantive impact shown is the change in predicted probability given a one-unit change in the variable of interest, holding all other independent variables at their mean.

membership in each major party and time periods. Remembering, however, that the results in Table 2 confirmed my expectation that weaker candidates are more likely to switch, we need to consider whether the switching variable here is simply picking up the effect of being a less popular incumbent on incumbent re-election. I added the “Personal Strength” variable from Table 1 as a control (not shown) and found a nearly identical estimate on the effect of switching. Substantively, the risk of switching is huge. Those who do are almost 66% less likely to be re-elected than incumbents who remain loyal to the party with which they were elected.

The effect of affiliation with the major parties shows suggestive but not conclusive results. While I show substantive impacts for each explanatory variable, the reader should remain mindful that the predicted probabilities for the party (and stronghold) variables were generated from statistically insignificant estimates. Of the three groups shown⁵² MCP incumbents are the most likely to be re-elected, AFORD incumbents less likely, and '99 UDF incumbents least likely. The result on UDF incumbents is worth highlighting from two perspectives. The first it that voters seem to be sanctioning for poor performance, thus acting retrospectively (economic performance was poorest, and corruption highest, between 1999 and 2004). The second perspective, the expectation for which works in the opposite direction, is that of targeted benefits. One may have thought that UDF incumbents, who formed the government under President Muluzi and thus enjoyed access to state resources, should have been best positioned to gain re-election. These results suggest that either the UDF incumbents were unsuccessfully using their access to bring development, or what they did deliver was offset in voters’ minds by poor performance on issues of the economy and corruption, or both. This seems to have damaged UDF MP’s ability to make credible commitments to provide benefits in the future.

The results show that incumbents in stronghold areas are not statistically more likely to be re-elected than incumbents in areas less closely tied to a regional identity. The variable is positive as expected, but insignificant. We can dismiss the possibility that voters in stronghold areas who would have re-elected their incumbent could not do so simply because he switched (the model controls for that, and Table 1 showed that incumbents who run in strongholds are not statistically more or less likely to switch). A logical explanation for this result is that the distinction between

⁵²In order to test the most theoretically appropriate model, the omitted group is an awkward combination of UDF incumbents from 1994 and Independents. I discuss the unique place of Independents in the next section.

lake and regional-boarder areas and strongholds is overstated.

I also tested for the effect of being a presidential candidate and switching to “pegged” parties. The results were so much in line with my expectations that each perfectly predicted one of the vote-choice outcomes (and consequently, was not included in Model 3). Incumbent MP’s who have also run for president⁵³ were always re-elected. Of these seven politicians, five remained loyal to their party and won, and two defected and won. As for the notion of pegged parties, each incumbent that made the dangerous switch to a pegged party lost.⁵⁴ These results give credence to the idea that it is a rare politician who can wield enough personal reputation to overcome party disloyalty.

4 The Movement and Electoral Fortune of Independents

To this point I have not discussed the place of Independent candidates, either in terms of what I expect from their loyalty, or voters reaction to them. In this section I do just that, then I re-run the two major tests of my study including a variable for Independents.

With respect to the question of loyalty, I expect that an Independent, like any other politician, will be driven solely by the two office related goals of electoral security and access to government. Towards this end, however, Independents occupy a unique position relative to their party-affiliated counterparts which leads me to expect that they will be the most mobile type of politician. Independents are not bound by party label,⁵⁵ and can therefore act on the motivation of gaining access to government without having to defect from a party. This is important because a politician’s calculus is affected not only by the incentives offered by the party to which one would be joining, but also by the risk of sanction that comes from breaking one’s current party loyalty. Such sanctioning, which is particularly difficult to measure even when it is clear to observe, can be as harsh as harassment, but more commonly amounts to former party bosses making disparaging comments in the media. Mild as that threat might be Independents have no former bosses to fear if they chose

⁵³The law in Malawi is that presidential candidates can simultaneously contest the presidency and a constituency seat, but if elected to both posts, must resign as an MP.

⁵⁴Of the 62 that switched, 50 switched to non-pegged parties (6 of these switchers were re-elected, and two of these were presidential candidates) and 12 switched to pegged parties. It is noteworthy that the re-election rate for loyal politicians was just under 70%.

⁵⁵though we have seen that party label is often trumped for party-affiliated MP’s

to become affiliated with a party.⁵⁶ From the government's perspective, Independents' lack of affiliation makes them easier to approach than rival party MPs when building post-electoral coalitions. These reasons lead me to expect that Independents will be more mobile than party-affiliated MPs in terms of leaving their Independent status and joining a party.

With respect to voting behavior, I expect that Independents face an uphill battle to win office in the first place because they have no party label to leverage. The fact that less than 9% of Independents who ran became elected bears about this difficulty. However, if Independents can win office, there are two unique factors that help their re-electoral bid. First, independents offer voters flexibility in an context of uncertain electoral outcomes. If the government that emerges is willing to pursue development in his constituency, an Independent can easily ally himself, be it formally or informally, with that government. In point of fact an Independent may be actively encouraged by his constituents to support the government. Second, voters have less to sanction by way of disloyal behavior for an MP elected originally as an Independent.

In Table 4 I add a variable for being elected as an Independent (1) vs. being elected on a party label (0) to Models 1 and 3. What I have labeled Model 1i tests the claim that Independents are more likely to leave their status and join a party than MPs tied to a party are to switch. I leave the rest of Model 1 intact, except for dropping the "In Government" variable, which is perfectly orthogonal to being an Independent. What I have labeled Model 3i tests the claim that voters are more likely to re-elect incumbents who won originally as Independents than incumbents who won on a party ticket. I keep the remainder of Model 3 intact, and note that the inclusion of Independents leaves only UDF MP's elected in 1994 as the omitted group.

Table 4, which shows both log-odds estimates and changes in predicted probability for Models 1i and 3i, makes clear that removing party affiliation has the expected effect. The estimate for the effect of being an Independent on the probability of switching is positive and highly significant, and amounts to 57% increase in likelihood when compared to party-affiliates. By way of interpretation, I regard Independents mobility as less "disloyal" than politicians who switch from one party to another (for the obvious reason that being an Independent necessarily means having no electoral party ties), however it still constitutes a move away from the status with which one was elected.

⁵⁶I did not discuss the fear of sanctions in Section 2 because I only expect differences in this regard between Independents and party-affiliates, and not between different types of party-affiliates.

Table 4: Independents

	Model 1i	Δ in Pred. Prob.	Model 3i	Δ in Pred. Prob.
Test: Did Incumbent Switch?				
Independent	2.663***	.57		
Test: Did Voters Re-elect?				
Independent			3.339*	.49
N	374		211	
Significant at the .01 level ***				
Significant at the .05 level **				
Significant at the .1 level *				

This finding supports two of my expectations. First, that Independents enjoy a greater degree of freedom to change their status.⁵⁷ Second, it supports my broader expectation about the importance of access to government in Africa. All 33 Independents that switched parties after being elected joined government - either the UDF after the 1994, 1999, or 2004 election, or the DPP after President Bingu wa Mutharika broke from the UDF in 2005 and built his government around this new party.

The result from voters' decision to re-elect Independents is slightly less convincing. The estimate in this test is positive and its statistical significance is suggestive, though it falls just outside the conventional .05 cutoff. That being said, politicians elected as an Independent are almost 50% more likely to be re-elected than those elected on the ticket of a political party. This lends credibility to notion that if Independents can manage to get elected, they have advantages over their party-affiliated colleagues. Knowing that Independents are quite inclined to adopt a label after being elected, this Model 3i particularly supports the idea that voters do not sanction mobile Independents the way they do MPs who switch parties. Finally it is worth noting that the suppressed estimates in Models 1i and 3i were not meaningfully different than in Models 1 and 3.

⁵⁷Since I do not measure the threat of sanction directly I cannot conclude that the absence of this threat contributes to their high level of mobility.

5 A Surprising Outcome in African Politics?

The big-man, small-boy syndrome ... is an aspect of informal African politics whereby everyone in an official capacity, or positioned within a power structure, develops networks of reciprocal reinforcement with subordinates and/or superiors. This is translated, in both modern and traditional contexts, into ‘clientelistic,’ corrupt, and other self-regarding exchanges. –Victor T. LeVine, 1980.

Excepting Independents, the proclivity of politicians to switch parties coupled with the tendency of voters to stay with their incumbent party means that most who switch lose. Among other implications, this has contributed to a re-election rate of barely over 50% (of the 212 politicians who ran for re-election, only 109 won). I contend that this happening, which was clearly undesirable for politicians’ pursuit of electoral security, came about because of a misplaced reliance on the personal vote.

The dilemma facing Malawian politicians who wish to switch parties, be it for access to government and career advancement or electoral security (though we have seen such an idea is false), is that they often lose a key element to their election in the first place, i.e. their party label. To clarify this point, compare the electoral fate of two incumbent politicians that switched between the 1999 and 2004 elections. Khumbo Chirwa won the Nkhata Bay Southeast constituency seat with just under 50% of the vote in a four-way race in 1999. Nkhata Bay is a northern region district that shares its eastern border with the lake and southern border with the central region, and has a fairly diverse population. Importantly, it was not considered to be a stronghold of AFORD in the north either by my coding or in the minds of most analysts. Chirwa was elected in 1999 on the MCP ticket but decided to switch to the newly formed Republican Party, who was making a push to become a major party. The RP ran candidates in 110 constituencies, and its presidential hopeful, Gwanda Chakuamba, was known throughout Malawi and nearly won the 2004 election. The key point is that Chirwa was running in an area where voters had not identified a clear champion party. Also noteworthy is that his switch was to a party who, as a major contender on the national scene, could plausibly deliver to the constituents of Nkhata Bay. After switching to the RP he polled 30% in the 2004 election, but in a ten candidate race this was almost double the second place finisher.

Compare Chirwa and his fairly unique circumstances to the more common setting exemplified

by MP Joe Kawenga. Down in the central region, Kawenga won his way into office in 1999 with a much more comfortable 83% of the vote in Lilongwe's Northeast constituency. It was a two candidate race and the UDF was the only other party who fielded a contender. Kawenga, along with nearly every other successful candidate in the Lilongwe district (which in addition to being the national capital is the capital and geographical center of the central region), won on the MCP ticket - the champion party of the central region. In between the 1999 and 2004 elections, however, he switched to join the UDF. The UDF controlled government at the time, so Kawenga's move could have been viewed as an attempt to secure resources for the constituency. It was not, and he was punished by his Lilongwe Northeast constituents to the tune of polling just 11% in 2004, while his replacement in the MCP won with nearly 63% in an eight candidate race. Joe Kawenga did not act irrationally. His move was to join government, which almost by definition meant career advancement, especially for a junior politician.⁵⁸ Further, he had reason to be confident in his personal reputation given the 1999 results. The miscalculation for Kawenga, along with many others, was to underestimate the importance of ethno-regionally driven Party ID to voters. His central region constituents were skeptical of the southern champion UDF, and opted for party over their familiar incumbent.

Theories of “neopatrimonialism,” “prebendalism,” or “clientelism” such as the one articulated above have led to a misconception that cultivating a personal vote is the way by which politicians become elected, and re-elected. If an incumbent delivers goods or a favor to citizens in his constituency he may very well gain an advantage over his opponents in the upcoming election, but for private goods this advantage only applies to the recipients of the favor, and perhaps others who are impressed by hearing news of the act. Several politicians in Malawi that I spoke with refer to personalistic acts like paying school fees for struggling families or, sadly, buying coffins as part of their constituency service. But with more than 60,000 people living in an average constituency, even the richest and most active politician can reach only a fraction of his constituents with personal service. This makes defections to the government quite understandable for politicians whose aim is to provide benefits to his entire constituency. Citizens understand that it is access to the national pool of resources which leads to boreholes, tarmaced roads, schools, and medical facilities, and that it takes power in numbers to compete for nationally-controlled resources. But the particular

⁵⁸ 1999 - 2004 was his first term, and he did not hold a leadership position in MCP.

difficulty for voters, which I have referred to throughout, is that forecasting next election's winner is difficult where party politics are competitive. And absent a truly national party, voters will be inclined to revert back to party label as their guide.

It is also understandable that incumbent politicians would miscalculate in thinking their personal reputation would give them sufficient leverage for re-election. After all, they won the last contest, and have undoubtedly tried to promote themselves as a good leader since that time. However what I have found here suggests that personalistic appeals, which are part and parcel to theories of clientelism, have a low ceiling towards fueling sustained political advancement. I have argued and shown some evidence for the idea that voters rely on the regionally-based reputation of parties as a cue when voting. And their consistent choice to sanction disloyal incumbents is the other side of the same coin that challenges characterizations of electoral competition in terms of "networks of reciprocal reinforcement."⁵⁹

In a country where voters and politicians are not positionally divided, I have found an interesting mix of voting behaviors. On the one hand, I found that Party ID is quite useful to voters. Just as Campbell et. al. argued for voters in the American setting, voters in Malawi have "psychological attachments" to parties as reflected by regional voting patterns and sanctioning of disloyal incumbents. However the reasoning is different in here. In Africa these attachments are formed as a strategy to cope with a competition over scarce resources and uncertain electoral outcomes. On the other hand I found some evidence that supports a rival theory about voting - i.e. that voters look retrospectively at the performance of government and punish or reward accordingly.⁶⁰ In particular, the lower re-election rates for AFORD MPs (who by 2007 numbered only 1 in Parliament) suggests that if a party declines in strength because of internal splits and financial mismanagement, voters will not stay with that party out of blind loyalty because it jeopardizes their ability to secure resources from government. Similarly, the poor performance of the 1999 UDF incumbents in the 2004 election suggests that voters blamed the government for poor performance.

There are several interesting comparisons to be made between my findings in Malawi and those highlighted in the literature on party switching. Reed and Scheiner found that support for reform outperformed electoral motives in accounting for defections from the LDP, which notably was a

⁵⁹See the LeVine claim above, which is hardly out of the ordinary.

⁶⁰cf. Fiorina 1981

longtime dominant party in Japan. However in isolating the proclivity of particular sub-groups they found that junior MPs were more likely than senior MPs to switch, which they attributed to greater ambition for junior politicians. I had little variation to analyze by way of terms in the Malawian parliament (and therefore junior vs. senior status), but I too found support for political ambition driving party switching. My finding that being in government significantly increases loyalty parallels Desposato's findings in Brazil and Heller and Mershon's findings in Italy. In an interesting demonstration of retrospective voting behavior, Zielinski et. al. showed that Polish MPs were more likely switch from the government when recent economic performance was poor, and that those who do have better re-electoral fortunes than MPs who stay with the government. While I found some evidence of retrospective voting, Malawian politicians virtually never leave the government, demonstrating the importance of gaining access to scarce resources in African politics. Finally, Heller and Mershon found that Italian MPs were much more inclined to switch if their current party label was 'blurry' as opposed to 'clear' (in terms of the party reputation or party message) in the minds of voters. Their idea and finding underscores a fundamental point that I have made with respect to non-positional politics in Africa, i.e. that career ambitions take over when politicians do not feel tied to their party.

6 Gaining Leverage on Political Parties in Africa

The analysis of post-colonial political systems in Africa is all too often conducted at an excessively abstract level ... A more concrete approach centered on the actual behavior of leaders and other political actors in relation to the rest of the population is in our view far more convincing and far more likely to make sense of what is occurring on the continent. –Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, 1999.

Since the time that Chabal and Daloz offered that statement very few researchers have followed their advice, at least with respect to studies of political competition. Perhaps the most substantial research agenda that has developed during this time is the study of political parties in Africa. The bulk of this agenda attempts to explain the nature of *party systems*, conceptualized in various ways.⁶¹ In some ways this marks a revitalization of the issue of political parties in Africa after

⁶¹cf. Kuenzi and Lambright 2001, Randall and Svasand 2002, Mozaffar, Scarratt, and Galaich 2003, Bogaards 2004,

its initial emergence in the immediate post-independence era. The timing of this new agenda was straightforward - since most countries in the region transitioned to multiparty competition in the early 1990s after several decades of military, personalist, or single-party authoritarian rule - however the approach is flawed. The flaw is being *system*-focused in a region where we do not yet understand the behavior of the units that make up that system (politicians, who make up the parties who in turn make up the party system, and voters, who affect the success of politicians and parties). All of the variations in this agenda - be it studies of the “Effective Number of Parties” or “Party System Institutionalization” - rely on aggregate national-level measures or categorization schemes that tell us very little about actual political parties. In this sense, it is quite different from the older research agenda, and therefore marks not a revitalization, but a premature jump to join studies of established democracies. Instead of being system-focused we ought to first try and understand the motivations of the individual actors. We as a subfield (Comparative Politics/Africa) need to understand the incentive environment for contemporary African politics, and how politicians, voters, and parties behave in that environment.⁶²

By narrowing our lens we can still ask and answer questions of broader relevance about political parties. Indeed, individualizing the level of analysis allows for more useful comparisons. For instance, knowing that South Africa and the United States have nearly identical ENEP ratings⁶³ (even though the ANC has a strong grip on South Africa’s parliament, presidency and policy-making agenda while American politics are characterized by fairly balanced two-party competition) hardly adds to our understanding of how parties operate. On the other hand, understanding George Saitoti’s motives in moving rather seamlessly across parties in 2002 to the newly-united opposition Rainbow Coalition after being passed over for the presidential nomination in Kenya’s longtime dominant Kenya African National Union (KANU) provides a valuable point for comparison. The insight that when KANU began to look vulnerable (“Label Strength” in my terminology), some of its MPs defected and contributed to its decline is valuable for understanding Kenyan politics. But it can also be used to generate important comparative questions. Why in some countries politicians

Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2007.

⁶²Some have done this. For example, see Ichino (unpublished manuscript), Posner 2005, and van de Walle 2006.

⁶³“ENEP” is the effective number of electoral parties (alternatively scholars use the effective number of legislative parties). The rating for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2000 was 2.25, and the rating was 2.2 for the South African parliament in 1999.

are united to party regardless of career frustration or trends in popularity (and the resulting short-term electoral security) while in other places politicians use parties as a temporary label? And what does this tell us about the basic function of political parties? Unlike Saitoti, Howard Dean probably never considered leaving the Democratic party when, despite being the frontrunner, he lost out for the party's presidential nomination to John Kerry in 2004.

In this article I explored two empirical questions of direct political impact, and I have done so with a focus on the incentives of individual actors. I offered an intuitive theory, but I remind the reader that while the incentives I used here are not peculiar to Malawian politicians, the political phenomenon I try to explain (e.g. switching parties in the context of non-positional politics) is quite uncommon in most of the world. I found that office-related goals are paramount in determining politician loyalty, and that voters react with skepticism when politicians switch parties. As a result, politicians *shorter*-term goals (career advancement/access to government) jeopardize their short-term goals (electoral security). While office-related goals trump regional constraints for politicians, voters punish decisively those who move across ethno-regionally defined party boundaries. And amidst these otherwise clear rules, Independents are both more likely to switch and more likely to be re-elected than their party-affiliated colleagues.

I end with a caution that I have not captured all of the action with respect to my two questions, even just in the case of Malawi. In particular I have limited my study to incumbents, and incumbents are not the only politicians who impact parties or who switch between them. A fully comprehensive investigation of political behavior would include politicians who lose out on nominations as well as those who lose in the general election. I have also left the question of how politicians make their original choice of party unanswered.⁶⁴ An additional topic I did not address here, but which could help advance our understanding of incentives in multiparty Africa, is the issue of coalitions between parties. Similar to research on political and voting behavior, the scholarly precedent for analyzing coalition formation relies heavily on spatial positioning. This adds the question of what governs coalition formation to the many that arise, and ought to be answered, in the context of non-positional politics.⁶⁵

⁶⁴In an omitted section of the second chapter of my dissertation I investigate this issue.

⁶⁵In the fourth chapter of my dissertation I formally model the strategic interaction of party leaders in forming coalitions - first between the president and an opposition party leader, and then between two opposition party leaders.

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