

Introduction

The Local State in the Twenty-First Century

States remain the most important drivers of poverty and prosperity in modern history. While waves of democratization have made competitive politics a main route to controlling most states, actors beneath the national level—the local state—have been given more responsibility for carrying out the daily functions of state power.¹

In the face of these forces, how does a local state actually work in twenty-first-century poor countries? I offer a descriptive account of a local state as well as a causal explanation for how political competition affects the local state apparatus in one developing country, Ghana. I show how one of the greatest sources of pressure on local state actors is not violent gangs, rent-seeking bureaucrats, landed elites, or boisterous opposition parties but rather the demands for favors coming from their own party supporters. Going deeper, I explain how political party systems mediate this relationship between local state actors and the groups that keep them in power. Moreover, I also explain how the patronage sought by partisans may not automatically weaken state capacity: the drive to provide patronage can compel politicians to build stronger bureaucracies *in order* to deliver patronage. To make sense of this complex picture, let's start with Felicia.

Felicia's Problem

Felicia sells onions at the main market in Oran, a small cocoa town in western Ghana.² She and her fellow market traders told me that George Biyo, the head of local government, was a very fat man. When I visited George at his office, he did not disagree: "You know, these days we don't suffer, and people in this district love me. They respect me. I am their father," he said, leaning back into a deep faux-leather couch, arms extended wide as if embracing his flock. "They know me as a Big Man here. They say I am a fat man," he said with a smile, grabbing his stomach. "But in this town we are practicing good governance!" he added, his smile given way to solemnity. "Everyone in this district eats well" (author's field notes, April 3, 2012).

When Felicia told me Biyo was a fat man, she meant it literally and metaphorically. Fatness in this part of the world is a metaphor for accumulation (Schatzberg 2001). While eating and consumption speak to one's access to resources, overeating speaks to one's greed, selfishness, and corruption. Note how Biyo described himself as eating well but couched the revelation in terms of shared prosperity: "These days we don't suffer. . . . Everyone in this district eats well." There is nothing wrong with an expanding waistline, so long as the meal is shared.

In the weeks before my meeting with Biyo, I had spent time with traders such as Felicia in Oran's marketplace. Like every sizable settlement in West Africa, Oran has a centrally located outdoor market, where about sixty traders (mostly women) sell everything from soybeans to dish soap. Felicia's onion stall is open seven days a week whenever there is daylight, save for Sunday morning, when she attends church. Traders pay rent for the market space to the Oran District Assembly.³ In return for taxes paid, they expect services rendered in the form of a night watchman, trash pickup, and electric lamps to allow selling into the evening.

I had originally come to Ghana to study why some local governments were better able to tax their populations than others. I

cared less about taxes themselves than about what tax collection could tell me about subnational variation in state capacity.⁴ But I also wanted to learn how the local state worked in a broad sense, beyond simply its revenue activities. Local state actors and offices also interested me because they are where citizens meet their state—in schools, at roadblocks, or during visits from tax collectors, or where the state is notable by its absence: potholes, illegality, and vigilantism. I spent most of my time in the local government offices of a few midsize towns, typically of around fifty thousand people, talking to civil servants and politicians about their work. I asked about their ability to collect taxes—a dry topic—because I was interested in how they approached this basic task of authority. In addition to these local state officials, I also spoke to market traders like Felicia, since town markets are a taxation target of Ghanaian local governments, as they are in so much of the developing world. Unlike national governments, local governments in developing countries generally cannot borrow internationally, and they cannot print currency, so they have few easy sources of revenue.

Back to Felicia, who sells onions and didn't mind me hanging around. Though I had first approached her as just one of many of the market traders in Oran District, it emerged that Felicia had an interesting life away from work. She was an active volunteer for the governing political party, the same party that governed Oran District and the whole country during my research. But she did not think things were going her way. I usually avoided asking about politically sensitive things when I first met someone, but Felicia took no prompting to rail against George Biyo, Oran District's chief executive and a fellow party member. English was not Felicia's first language, but she spoke it better than I spoke Twi, so what follows took place in English:

“That man is a crook oo! Those men [from the district] come here and tax money and they make promises. All nice. But we get nothing. Local government does not clean this market.” She pointed angrily to the ground, which to me seemed cleaner than that of most markets.

“Does the local government not do anything in town?” I asked.

“They build maybe schools and boreholes [for water]. But for me they do nothing.”

“And what happens to the money you pay to the district?”

“As for that one, we don’t know. Even if I go to that man [Biyo] and say I am also NDC, he will insult me” (author’s field notes, March 13, 2012).

The NDC is the National Democratic Congress, which was in its second stint in power nationally since Ghana returned to constitutional government and multiparty elections in 1993. During my fieldwork, conducted from 2009 to 2012, the NDC was the party of the president as well as the party of Biyo since the president controls the office of chief executive in every district. Felicia had reminded District Chief Executive Biyo that she had campaigned alongside him for the NDC the previous year:

I went to that man and said, “Honourable, I need small loan for my business, but you don’t see me.” He said, “You go again, and my men will come to the market.” But they never come. So, I went back again, and this time he would not see me. I waited at the district assembly building, and when I saw him, I even shouted that he had forgotten his party. But he insulted me and told me to go. Those Big Men at the assembly, they eat well, but here we are starving, and even we are his party members! (author’s field notes, March 13, 2012)

Metaphors of fatness Felicia used to describe Biyo were consistent with how Ghanaians talked about politicians, but I gradually saw that the metaphor turned out to be misleading in Biyo’s case. I found no evidence that he was any more corrupt than other district chief executives. The source of Felicia’s ire was not Biyo’s corruption. Rather, it was that he was not corrupt *for her*. She wanted *public* services for the taxes she paid, but she also wanted *private* services in the form of special treatment by the local government since she was a longtime volunteer for the governing party. Note, for example, how she acknowledged that the district provided

some public services (“They build maybe schools and boreholes”), but since these were open to all people in the district, they conferred no special reward on individuals who worked hard for the party. This is how one should understand Felicia’s complaint that “for me they do nothing.”

What surprised Felicia—what offended her—was that the man and the party for whom she had toiled had reneged on an election promise to “take care” of her after winning the election. “Taking care” could mean any number of things, including a public sector job, such as cleaning the district building or driving the district tractor; access to the fruits of the state, such as small business loans of \$100 or expedited access to state-subsidized fertilizers; or protection *from* the state, such as insulation from officials (Nathan 2019; Sigman 2022; Bob-Milliar 2012; Paller 2019). These are textbook cases of clientelism, in which a person (the client) supports a person in power (the patron) in return for favors and rewards.⁵ Generally, when the client is a worker or volunteer for a political party, rewards to that person are called “patronage.” When the client is a voter, rewards to that person are usually referred to as “vote buying” or “turnout buying.” The version examined in this book is patronage, since my data are not on voters but on local officials and activists like Felicia who work to keep them in power.⁶ Moreover, patronage rather than vote/turnout buying is the dominant form of clientelism in Ghana, which I explore in greater detail in the final chapter.

The electoral strategy of Ghana’s two main parties is to rely on grassroots volunteers to mobilize their neighbors, families, and friends (Brass et al. 2020; also Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, and Nichter 2014; Cox 2010). This places volunteers like Felicia in a position to demand patronage for her work. But if parties are dependent on party volunteers to mobilize voters, why was Felicia so unhappy? Much to Felicia’s chagrin, merely being a member of the governing party was not enough for her to receive patronage. Felicia expected such privileges because of the experience of her nephew, Isaac, in neighboring Aman District. Like Felicia, Isaac

is known locally as a party activist, meaning a volunteer who is active for their party even outside of elections.⁷ In the months before the recent election, Isaac had attended NDC rallies in the main town's square. He had jogged behind the party minivan waving party colors as NDC messages were broadcast through town. He had torn down posters of the major opposition party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), from electricity poles and taped NDC posters in their place. He was always prepared to engage in hostile confrontation with NPP volunteers when word spread that they were planning a march. His rewards came in the months following the election: a job as a night watchman on the district premises, timely delivery of a birth certificate for his brother's boy, and priority access to state-provided fertilizer for his uncle (author's field notes, May 19, 2012).

As I tried to figure out how the local state worked, Isaac's experience made sense to me. The job he received and the benefits he made available to his family were precisely the patronage rewards I expected to find. It was Felicia's treatment that was more puzzling. Like Isaac, she was a well-connected activist, and she used these connections to demand privileges from local government. Yet local government was not responsive to her. But why? Why did NDC-controlled Aman District provide more patronage to NDC party activists than NDC-controlled Oran District? The explanation developed throughout the book is that political competition shaped how exposed a politician was to their own supporters. In Felicia's Oran District, the district chief executive was relatively insulated from demands for patronage from *his own* NDC party activists because his party's electoral strength was not precariously balanced. Much to Felicia's chagrin, merely being a member of the governing party was not enough for her to receive patronage.

Rather than be attentive to the demands of party activists, Biyo was freer to pursue the agenda of the national government. National governments set targets for each district, such as the percentage of residents enjoying clean water, and the performance of chief executives is measured against them (Asunka 2016). Hitting

these targets can mean directing local government services to the poorest settlements in the district, which may even be opposition areas. I learned over time, and I explain in this book, how and why the major obstacle to a local government carrying out such public services is not opposition politicians, incompetent or intransigent civil servants, or entrenched landowners or chiefs. Instead, the major obstacle faced by district chief executives is *their own active party supporters*. Political competition shapes the insulation of officials from their own activists: in less competitive Oran District, Biyo had relatively more freedom to sink boreholes without bowing to pressure from NDC activists to have a borehole sunk in their neighborhoods. Much to Felicia's displeasure, Biyo was largely able to ignore her demands.

The relative insulation of local politicians from their own party activists was thus the proximate factor explaining variation in local state patronage. This finding runs counter to the theory that local governments in developing countries are prone to "elite capture" by corrupt politicians (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2002; World Bank 2012a; UNDP 2016). In that view, the insulation of bureaucrats from politicians is what set effective Southeast Asian developmental states apart from states that were capricious, predatory, and patrimonial.⁸ By contrast, patronage in the Ghanaian local state is shaped by the insulation of politicians from their own activists rather than the insulation of the bureaucrats from these same politicians. In fact, as I show in chapters 5 and 6, Ghana's local civil servants are largely skilled and politically neutral. My point is not that these other scholars are "wrong" but that their findings may have limited scope.

How Strong Parties Can Structure Politics

Whereas the insulation of politicians is a proximate source of variation in local state patronage, I argue in this book that the party system is the deeper determinant.

In many developing countries, political parties are often more organizationally capable than the administrative bodies of the

state.⁹ Political scientists dating back to Huntington (1968) and Zolberg (1966) have identified the importance of parties in structuring power. Comparative politics scholars have turned to parties once again to explain the endurance of authoritarian regimes in an era of democratization (Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008). Parties are what De Leon, Desai, and Tugal (2015, 4) call “partisan sources of social organization” because they “integrate collective identities, coalitions, and institutions.” In places like Ghana, weak state institutions create dependence on party actors such as Isaac and Felicia to carry out the work of government (Remick 2002; 2004; Boone 2003; Ziblatt 2006). Ghana’s parties are organizationally strong. Chapter 3 contrasts local state institutions that often exist only on paper with a local-level political party organization that is a genuine force. One indication of this was given by a party organizer who said that his party’s informational strength was so significant that “in every house when I enter the house, I already know that in this house we have 10 NPP, 5 NDC.”¹⁰ The organizational strength of the two main parties actually enhances state power by providing officeholders with an apparatus through which they can discipline, communicate to, or incentivize local actors.

Ghana’s democracy is widely lauded for its stability, in particular its party system centered around two dominant parties. But the stability of Ghana’s party system has a curious effect: since the two parties have quasi-ethnic identities, voters are effectively “stuck” with one party. Because voters have little meaningful choice between parties, elections are won by mobilizing likely supporters rather than by persuading nonsupporters (Daddieh and Bob-Milliar 2014; Nathan 2019, 181).¹¹ For example, it would be strange for Felicia as an ethnic Brong to cast her lot with the NPP since they are not seen as the party of the Brong. Such partisan and ethnic allegiances are not a given, of course. They have changed slowly in historical shifts I explain in the next chapter. But for most of her life, Felicia’s political socialization has reinforced knowledge of the “social fact” that the NDC is the party for Brongs. Whether or not Felicia likes the NDC candidate, she will

assume that the NPP candidate will divert resources to an NPP neighborhood.

Felicia's political socialization has also involved learning about the role of activists within this quasi-ethnic political system. She told me that about fifteen years ago, before she became politically active, she saw how NDC volunteers in her neighborhood prospered while the NDC was in power. Their families and farms seemed to recover from calamities more quickly than others, and their children were well fed long after cocoa harvests. When Felicia began to volunteer, most of her energies were directed in her own neighborhood rather than in the NPP-supporting Asante neighborhoods. This focus made sense: part of her value to the NDC was that she knew people in her community.¹² She was much less familiar with people in the Asante community across town (author's field notes, February 18, 2012).

Felicia's experience illustrates why strong parties may limit choice for voters in contexts in which identity politics is salient. Leaving one's party is made even more difficult given the logic of clientelism, in which allying with the opposition guarantees a defector's exclusion from patronage networks should they gamble on the wrong party. Felicia is free to wear an NPP shirt, put an NPP sticker on her front door, or attend NPP organizing events. But doing so would guarantee her exclusion from any benefits should the NDC get into power. Voters have agency in clientelistic systems, as Nichter (2018) and Auerbach and Thachil (2018) remind us, but a voter with agency is not necessarily a voter with meaningful choice. Clientelism thus compounds the immobility of voters facing already limited choices.

The challenge the disaffected voter poses to a party, therefore, is less the threat of voting for the opposition and more so the threat to not vote at all. This approach to electoral strategy has historical resonance in Ghana. Observers of the 1969 election noted that "the Progress Party assumed throughout (quite correctly as the results demonstrated) that their problem was simply one of getting electors to the polls with an understanding of the

mechanism of casting a ballot, not one of persuading them to vote for the PP rather than for their opponent” (D. Austin and Luckham 1975, 183).

Were elections won by identifying dissatisfied opposition or swing voters in other neighborhoods, activists like Felicia and Isaac would be less useful. Instead, parties would need brokers. More than mere muscle, brokers are skilled political intelligence officers who can help parties tap into blocs of persuadable voters in unfamiliar neighborhoods (Koter 2016; Nathan 2019; Stokes et al. 2013; Auerbach and Thachil 2018). But when elections are won by mobilizing likely voters, political intelligence is of reduced value. What parties need is numerically strong party operations. This is why activists such as Isaac and Felicia are key.

So, the nature of the party system—its institutional strength, social embeddedness, legitimacy, and so on—can determine the balance of power between state officials and the nonstate actors upon whom they depend. This dependence gives patronage-seeking activists (like Isaac) leverage over their own parties. Thus, the effect that political competition has on behavior of local state actors is mediated by the party system. In the Ghanaian local state, electoral vulnerability lessens the insulation of politicians from their own patronage seekers.

Thinking about State Responsiveness in Developing Countries

I had set out to learn how states in developing countries worked at the local level. A few core concepts and theories formed my mental model, and I share them here. They shaped the questions I asked, the assumptions I made, and the hypotheses I considered worth testing.

Clientelism and Patrimonialism

An informal rule in Ghanaian politics holds that those who campaign and vote for a politician, in that order, deserve priority access to state resources. In the study of African politics and society, this relates to the long-standing theme of the so-called Big Man in

everyday life (Vansina 1990, 2004; A. Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009; Driscoll 2021). The Big Man is a patron sitting atop a pyramid of power. Beneath him are his followers, to whom he must supply rewards for their ongoing support. This relationship is clientelistic: it involves a reciprocal relationship between unequals, one of whom provides rewards to a less powerful person in return for political allegiance. Thus, clientelism has a political use and is not “mere” theft or corruption. Clientelism is typically how order is achieved in societies without strong bureaucratic institutions (Khan 2005a, 2006; also North et al. 2013). Recent studies suggest clientelism is not necessarily the death knell for either effective states or development in general (Kiser and Sacks 2011; Grindle 2007; Whitfield et al. 2015; Vom Hau 2012; Gray 2018). Indeed, in Isaac’s district, where patronage was rife, local bureaucrats were on average *better* educated than comparable districts with less patronage. Chapter 5 explores this finding in greater detail. Last, one can easily overemphasize the extent to which Big Men—figures of disproportionate power—are centers of unchecked authority. As I show in chapter 3, some Big Men were constantly harangued by party activists and feared for their political lives.

Scholarship on (neo)patrimonialism and clientelism had a profound effect on the questions I thought were worth asking. Where my book differs from present studies of clientelism is in my primary interest in the state rather than brokers or voters. I am interested in nonstate actors, of course, but my main interest is in how states are shaped by clientelism. This distinguishes my book from major new works on clientelism’s persistence (Weitz-Shapiro 2014; Szwarcberg 2015; Nathan 2019; Diaz-Cayeros, Estévez, and Magaloni 2016), the role of voters (Nichter 2018; Kramon 2017), the role of brokers (Corstange 2017a; Stokes et al. 2013), and how clientelism affects public goods (Auerbach 2019; Diaz-Cayeros, Estévez, and Magaloni 2016). Because I conceived of my outcome of interest as different from those studies, I hope my book will be read alongside rather than against them.

State Capacity

The second area of study that influenced me was research on states. The weak state capacity argument suggests that bureaucracies in developing countries are inept or rife with corruption (often both) and that this is especially so at the local level since central government has difficulty broadcasting its power throughout its territory. The bureaucratic quality aspect of this argument is most closely associated with Weber (1978) and Carpenter (2001) and the spatial aspect with Herbst (2000) and Boone (2003). State capacity in these traditions implies that government responsiveness will be weak as a function of meager governing resources or weak social embeddedness (Evans 1995).

State capacity can also matter in a way suggested by the literature on clientelism. An important characteristic of political systems dominated by clientelism is the general absence of programmatic parties (Nathan 2019; Shefter 1977; Cruz and Keefer 2013; Stokes et al. 2013). Parties know that many desirable policies, such as nationwide vaccinations or seat belt checkpoints, are not feasible because the state apparatus is too weak to make such ambitious programs happen.

Weak state capacity in the context of clientelism, therefore, has implications for government responsiveness: politicians running the government may wish to be responsive to a broad cross section of the population, but the bureaucracy may not enable them to do so. Government responsiveness is endogenous to state capacity: without a strong bureaucratic machine, governments attempt to respond to voters through personal networks—clientelism—rather than through public programs.

I spent most of my time in buildings of the local state and gradually found state capacity less useful than I initially expected. As I show in chapter 5, I found that districts with the best-qualified civil servants were the *most* likely to provide patronage. Isaac's political access secured for him precisely the kind of patronage Felicia wanted, yet it was Isaac's district that had the better-educated civil

servants. For example, Aman's district finance officer had a master's degree in accounting from the Accra-based Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration, a well-respected institute of higher learning for professionals. He had participated in numerous workshops in Ghana, elsewhere in West Africa, and in Europe on themes related to accounting and public management. Moreover, however bitterly NDC or NPP politicians complained about one another, they spoke of the finance officer as capable and politically neutral (author's field notes, June 2, 2012).

If we are surprised by the image of a local government official in Africa with a master's degree, it is because we have not been paying attention to a changing Africa. My book is therefore a response to calls, made by anthropologists rather than political scientists, to produce studies of "the 'real' state in developing countries which is based on detailed empirical analysis and grounded theory" (Lentz 2014, 30). The simple finding that many local bureaucrats were skilled challenges the assumption—asserted more than tested—that local governments in Africa, and local bureaucrats especially, are ineffective (Bierschenk and Sardan 2014). These assumptions persist because research on states in developing countries since the Cold War has been dominated by a concern with failed states, despite their empirical rarity: most states, most of the time, are weak but not failed.¹³ As a result, we know surprisingly little about "quotidian governance" in contemporary states, which is the engagement of a state in a multitude of otherwise mundane activities, such as taxing, licensing, schooling, immunizing, or jailing its people. States engaging in quotidian governance grab neither popular nor academic headlines. They are neither the strongest nor the weakest—neither Denmark nor Somalia—but they constitute the majority of contemporary developing states.

Indeed, in later chapters I provide suggestive evidence that local governments that provided the most patronage may also have *better* administrative quality. Some officeholders facing intense pressure to provide patronage often do the most to build

administrative capacity. This finding pushes back on ideas that dominate thinking about effective states in international development, in which administrative capacity is built by an accountable government seeking to deliver public services. By contrast, I argue that administrative capacity may be built by a government seeking to deliver nonpublic services in the form of patronage. But this finding may not be all that novel. Scholars of the state have understood for several decades that state capacity is often the unintended consequence of a state's pursuit of some political end, rather than as an attempt to raise aggregate welfare for society as a whole. This is a core finding of the studies on the role of war in building effective states, in which the primary goal of states was self-preservation but the intended consequence was often better roads, greater command of the economy, more efficient taxation systems, and so on.¹⁴

Decentralized Local Governance

The third area of scholarship that informed my study was decentralized local governance. The local governance argument holds that highly centralized states are distant from the problems they are supposed to manage (Murtazashvili 2019). The result is states that have poor knowledge about, and are unresponsive to, the daily lives of ordinary people. The trend toward decentralized governance in developing countries is motivated by this logic. After two decades of decentralization, the very shape of states has changed in large parts of the developing world, such that most are now decentralized to some extent (Ndegwa 2002; Weingast 2014; Faguet 2014; Riedl and Dickovick 2013; Dickovick 2011; Lambright 2011). Substantial power has been transferred to subnational units for the delivery of basic public services in the areas of health, education, sanitation, and security. As Rodden (2006, 2) notes, "Other than transitions to democracy, decentralization and the spread of federalism are perhaps the most important trends in governance around the world over the last 50 years." International development expenditure on local government capacity building is in the

billions of dollars, and the academic literature on local governance and decentralized goods provision is enormous.¹⁵

I had come to Ghana precisely because it was two decades into a decentralization process that began under the slogan “power to the people.” Recent scholarship, however, had identified so many ways in which the promise of decentralization might fail that today one must justify a belief in the benefits of decentralization rather than merely assert them (Dickovick 2011; Ziblatt and O’Dwyer 2006). On the other hand, social scientists must study states as they are. Studying government responsiveness in contexts of (imperfect) decentralization remains important because it is the reality for most developing countries today. Doing so reveals an overemphasis on central government in studies of state effectiveness. Even scholars who have studied how contemporary forces of globalization affect states, such as Evans (1997), Weiss (2000), and Wade (2003), have nonetheless analyzed problems from the perspective of central government. This centrist perspective is also true with the spatial turn in statist literature, such as Herbst (2000) and Boone (2003), which is concerned with the ability of states to project authority over their territory. These “center-centric” approaches have not fully theorized the changing shape of contemporary decentralized states, and to the extent that they are interested in the “periphery,” it is often from the center’s perspective. But the story of a state—its capacity, its constraints, its interests—can no longer be told strictly from the center (Schouten 2022).

Democracy and Accountability

The fourth area of study that shaped this book suggests a government will remain unresponsive so long as officeholders do not have to appeal to citizens to stay in power.¹⁶ Alongside its experiment with decentralization, Ghana has for the past two decades been one of Africa’s most stable electoral democracies. There have been regular and competitive elections for president, parliament, and local government since the early 1990s. I expected poor-quality

government to thrive in the absence of electoral competition, but I found the opposite: in the most electorally competitive local governments, district governments tended to provide relatively *more* patronage to their own party volunteers.

This finding has implications for our ideas about how government responsiveness is affected by competitive electoral politics. Social scientific interest in states boomed before the end of the Cold War, with many foundational works published in the 1980s.¹⁷ This was a period of political and economic crisis for developing countries, most of which were politically closed. Today, however, people in most developing countries are governed by states in which electoral competition shapes political behavior. Just as decentralization matters because it changed the *administrative shape* of states, democratization matters because it changed the *political rules* of states. But social scientists have rarely considered the *joint* effect of decentralization and democracy on states.

This gap in our knowledge is surprising since there are enormous social scientific literatures in which democracy and elections are used to understand political order, violence, growth, and prosperity. In one field of inquiry, scholars have shown how intense electoral competition can worsen the problems of developing countries by stoking social tensions and shortening politicians' time horizons.¹⁸ A second field of inquiry focused on the relationship between elections and pro-poor or pro-growth government, as reflected in the huge democracy and growth literature (Acemoglu et al. 2008; Dincecco 2017). Yet, despite rich stand-alone literatures on decentralization and democratization, remarkably little attention had been paid to their point of intersection: how electoral competition affects the responsiveness of local governments.¹⁹

Some studies that appear interested in political competition may actually use "competitive" as a stand-in for the word "democratic" (Stasavage 2005) or equate "competitive" with having more political parties (Chhibber and Nooruddin 2004). By contrast, I am interested in political competition in a narrow understanding

of the term—as proximity between contesting groups—rather than as a synonym for democracy more broadly.²⁰

Social Capital

The theories and approaches just described concern political institutions in some form. By contrast, the fifth area of scholarship that shaped my thinking—the theory of social capital—relates to social institutions. The social capital argument holds that communities in which people are interconnected through things like intermarriage will be more trusting of one another and take greater interest in a responsive and effective government. Such citizens will be actively engaged in public affairs because they feel a responsibility to do so as well as sense that being active will lead to (or sustain) quality government. According to the social capital model, the quality of government is likely improved when citizens are actively engaged in public affairs.²¹ Theories of social capital and trust probably had their heyday in the 1990s and 2000s but have regained support to explain why some societies responded so differently to the COVID-19 pandemic.²²

Perhaps Felicia's problem had less to do with her party and more to do with community relations around her. Indeed, I found that in these highly competitive districts, in which public services were underprovided while patronage was overprovided, survey respondents reported more political conflict. Of course, that should be expected since in these places, elections are closely fought. But contrary to the social capital model, respondents in these highly competitive districts reported no more or less trust of strangers, yet they reported more civic engagement in the form of things like radio listenership. This is surprising since the social capital argument would predict that politically active citizens are more engaged in public affairs and more trusting of community members. Thus, I found the concept of social capital to be of limited use. It could not help me make sense of communities in which residents received poor public services yet had relatively more civic engagement.

Implications

The findings in this book have implications for two major strands of research on states and the political economy of development.

First, there are implications for how we think political competition works in developing countries. In the literature on local governance and service delivery, many scholars have identified clientelism as a reason why decentralization has often led to corruption and rent seeking. As Khemani (2010) explains, “Decentralization is subject to political capture, with local spending targeted to vote-buying, patronage, or pork barrel projects,” and “funds devolved to local governments are more likely to go towards clientelist transfers rather than improvement of public goods” (2, 25; also Khemani 2013). It is in this spirit that Eaton, Kaiser, and Smoke (2010, 25) warned of the threat posed to decentralized governance when “electoral outcomes turn largely on the ability of political machines to exchange votes for material benefits.”

In the search for remedies for such ills, scholars have been buoyed by researching linking better local governance to elections (Janvry, Finan, and Sadoulet 2010; Ferraz and Finan 2008; Skoufias et al. 2011). As Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni (2003, 31–32) explain, “Political monopoly, or at least reduced political contestation at the local level, seems to be an important element that leads to clientelism.” The logic is intuitive and broadly consistent with ideas about accountability and democracy in the study of development. The solution they advance is also logical: “On the other hand, vigorous political competition can undermine, although not necessarily eliminate clientelism” (also Rose-Ackerman 1978; García-Guadilla, Pilar, and Pérez 2002). Here, chronic failures in local government should become less likely as political competition becomes more robust. But my book explains how a party system may instead intensify patronage rather than decrease it. Ghana’s stable ethnoregional parties make switching parties very unattractive for voters. Rather than invest in persuading opposition voters, Ghana’s parties use volunteers—party activists—to

maximize turnout within their community. This increases the leverage that activists have over their own party and even more so when elections are closely fought. I develop this argument in the concluding chapter, in which I show how varieties of clientelism across Africa correspond to the strength of party systems.

The second implication concerns states and state capacity. At the beginning of my research, I expected that the districts that were underproviding public services would be those with weak administrative capacity. My original research question tried to explain subnational variation in state capacity. I soon realized, however, that this was not a fruitful line of inquiry. So *unimportant* did state capacity appear to be as an explanatory device that informants found it strange when I persisted in asking about it. State capacity as a conceptual variable *did* matter, but it never approached levels of significance that would allow me to explain variation in the behavior of local state actors across the country. A focus on state capacity simply obscured deeper phenomena.

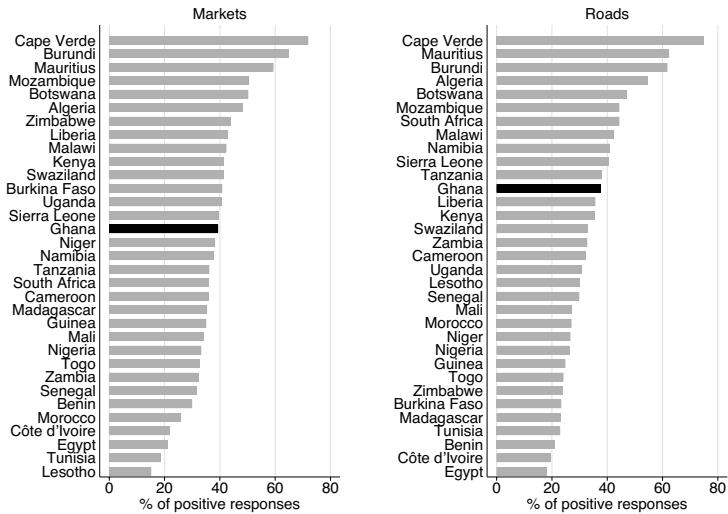
Students of development attribute significant explanatory power to state capacity, and I include myself in that community. But the language of state capacity was not helpful at the local level, where officials did not fit the image of the local government official as incompetent or corrupt. Defects in local governance were not to be found in bureaucratic quality but rather in the very real political constraints that shape incumbent behavior. In chapter 5, for example, I tell the story of an ambitious revenue-generation scheme developed by a budget officer who was disappointed to learn that his political superiors had no interest in making tax collection more efficient. This leads me to end the book with a call for greater attention from political scientists to an inductive, empirical study of the African local state.

Why Ghana?

Ghana was a useful place to study how competitive politics affect local states, for two main reasons. First, Ghana's history is representative of many developing countries in recent decades. It has

gone through periods of structural adjustment and a transition from authoritarianism. State retreat from the economy enabled the growth of a new class of politico-economic entrepreneurs for whom the state is a dispenser of contracts (Opoku 2010). The state has decentralized, yet the central government retains important sources of control over local government finance and personnel. These are familiar headlines for observers of developing countries (Dickovick and Wunsch 2014).

Second, there is a troubling disconnect between outsiders' image of Ghana and the way Ghanaians view their state. The country remains one of Africa's star performers for its political stability and economic growth. Yet the nation that is held up by outsiders as a model for its neighbors is seen in many towns and villages as a model of corruption, rentierism, and inequity. For example, in a Gallup survey of one thousand adults in 129 countries, Ghanaians' views on government corruption were similar to those of residents of Nigeria, Indonesia, Thailand, and Russia (Gallup 2013).²³ And in the Afrobarometer, which conducts nationally representative surveys across thirty-four sub-Saharan countries, Ghanaian perceptions of corruption were above the median.²⁴ These popular views are also reflected in indexes of state capacity, in which the Ghanaian state emerges as quite an "average" developing country. In the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, Ghana ranks sixteenth in Africa on indicators that relate to state capacity, such as statistical capacity and revenue collection, and twentieth for infrastructure. Lee and Zhang (2017) use an index developed by demographers to measure the quality of censuses.²⁵ Their data show that the quality of Ghanaian censuses is now, and has been for decades, below the median for the subcontinent. Last, perceptions of the quality of local government in Ghana put the country in the middle of the pack in Africa (see figures I.1 and I.2). Taken together, proxies for the power of the Ghanaian state suggest it is not an outlier in terms of the quality of its institutions. This disconnect between external image and local perception is worthy of close analysis precisely because of Ghana's reputation.



FIGURES I.1 AND I.2. Satisfaction with local government in Africa. *Note:* Data from Afrobarometer Round 5 (2011–13). Respondents were asked, “What about local government? I do not mean the national government. I mean your metropolitan, municipal, or district assembly. How well or badly would you say your local government is handling the following matters, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say, ‘Maintaining local marketplaces/roads?’” The graph shows positive responses, which combines “fairly well” and “very well” responses. $N = 50,405$.

Research Design, Methodology, and Data

I conducted a total of fourteen months of fieldwork in Ghana across three trips from 2009 to 2012, including nine months spent living in a small town equidistant from my six local government case studies. The first two-thirds of 2012 were spent conducting qualitative research. I situated my case study research in the study of “normal politics,” a term for the study of the everyday practice of government. It is a mode of inquiry that begins with the knowledge that what happens most of the time, in most of the world, is neither hotly contested elections nor boisterous riots. Instead, everyday governance comprises hundreds of small interactions between authorities and those they purport to govern. These

interactions may involve the paying of licenses, petitions for patronage, the collection of ID cards, or requests for the waiving of school fees. They are a key site of intersection in which bureaucrats, politicians, and ordinary people either change or renew their beliefs about one another (Adebanwi 2022; Blundo et al. 2013; Blundo and Le Meur 2009).

I was motivated by the field of fiscal sociology, which is concerned with how a ruler's imperative to raise revenue obliges them to interact with their citizens and shapes how they do so. "The budget," Rudolf Goldscheid argued, "is the skeleton of the state stripped of all misleading ideologies" (cited in Schumpeter 1954).²⁶ Taking a "street-level bureaucrats" approach, I began by spending time with tax collectors and the object of their activity, which is predominantly market traders (Lipsky 1979; Blundo 2006; Crook and Aye 2006). But my approach went beyond the street-level bureaucrats, as I also spent time with managerial civil servants in each district assembly, actors whose job was not purely engaging the public. After several months, I pivoted from a narrow interest in the process of tax collection to a broader interest in the forces shaping local state behavior. Once my research was reframed, it quickly became clear what it had been missing: a concern with political parties and how they infused local governance. Party activists fill the hallways, waiting rooms, and offices of local state buildings.

The data in this book are the product of mixed methods research, as I triangulate data emerging through semistructured ethnographic interview and survey methods. The research design used a nested analysis approach as described by Lieberman (2005), in which small-*N* qualitative case study research is nested within large-*N* subnational survey research. The value of a nested analysis is that a researcher can first use large-*N* data to guide case selection, statistical analysis can then test emergent hypotheses from case studies, and small-*N* data ultimately allow the researcher to validate or amend the causal logic (Seawright 2016; Thachil 2018).

The research design is explicitly subnational. The value of a subnational approach is to allow the researcher to hold constant important macro variables such as electoral systems and to deal with problems of reverse causality within one case (Pepinsky 2019; Snyder 2001). But studies of local governments should not be treated in isolation from their supralocal contexts, so I point out how Ghana's central government is constrained by its dependence on party activists in neighborhoods and villages throughout the country (Riker 1964; Rodden 2006; Wibbels 2006; Sinha 2012).

I used five criteria to select six districts from the existing 170, using a "most similar" case selection approach (Gerring 2017; Seawright and Gerring 2008). First, cases needed to vary along my explanatory variable of political competition.²⁷ Second, I narrowed my sample to Akan districts to take advantage of my training in the Akan/Twi language and to control for potential effects of differences in ethnic social structure and the nature of traditional authority. Third, I excluded districts with very large populations since I could not adequately get to know key actors in huge districts with my limited resources. Since two-thirds of Ghanaians live in districts with populations under 125,000, this criterion did not severely restrict the sample. Fourth, I chose districts that varied in age because the number of districts has increased over time, and institutional continuity and learning should affect the quality of government. From all 170 districts, these criteria gave me eight possible districts.

Finally, to choose from among these eight candidate districts, I used performance in tax collection to establish variance among them (see appendix table A.1). It was reasonable to assume that a district performing poorly in tax collection reflected an inability to collect revenue—a basic and essential governing behavior—rather than a policy choice (Levi 1988; Joshi et al. 2008; Slater and Simmons 2010; Stotsky and WoldeMariam 1997; Bird, Martinez-Vazquez, and Torgler 2005). That assumption may not prove correct, of course, but that is the purpose of the case study research. I arrived at six districts, lived roughly in the middle of

them all, and drove to a different one each day. Table I.1 provides a snapshot of the district cases.

Table I.1. Summary statistics for case study districts

Comp.	District	Pop.	Ethnic Fract.	Illiterate	Urban	Area (km ²)	Age	Tax p/cap.	Vote NDC
Yes	Koko	100,000	0.6	30	30	800	6	0.98	49
Yes	Aman	90,000	0.8	40	50	1,400	22	1.69	53
No	Oran	140,000	0.3	20	30	700	22	1.17	18
No	Guba	140,000	0.4	20	60	1,600	22	1.09	24
No	Braka	120,000	0.6	30	10	1,900	6	1.23	35
No	Lamda	150,000	0.4	10	32	800	6	1.98	21
	<i>Country average</i>	<i>145,052</i>	<i>0.4</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>1,471</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>1.77</i>	<i>49</i>

Note: All numbers have been rounded to protect district identities. “Comp.” indicates if the district is classified as highly competitive using the share of valid votes for the NDC candidate in 2008, the most recent national election at the time of my fieldwork. The NPP vote share and the competitiveness of the election can be inferred from the NDC vote. “Ethnic Fract.” is an index of ethnic fractionalization where higher numbers indicate greater fractionalization. Data for “Ethnic Fract.,” “Population,” “Illiterate,” and “Urban” come from the 2010 census (Government of Ghana 2012). “Tax p/cap.” is total locally collected revenue in cedis (the Ghanaian unit of currency), per capita, averaged over all available years. “Age” is the number of years since the district’s creation.

In the final third of my fieldwork, I developed a network of over two hundred research assistants to implement a survey of district assembly bureaucrats and politicians. These survey data form the centerpiece of my dataset on district assemblies, which is analyzed throughout the book. The survey methodology is fully explained in an online appendix found on my website.

Organization of the Book

This chapter has introduced the research question: how does a local state actually work in twenty-first-century poor countries? Remaining chapters offer a descriptive account of a local state as well as a causal explanation for how political competition affects the local state apparatus. I argue that local state actors are affected

by their relative insulation from the daily demands of their own partisans and that political competition shapes this insulation. Going deeper, I argue that the party system mediates the effect of competitiveness because party systems shape the locally salient varieties of clientelism.

Chapter 1 provides historical context for the book by asking a simple question: Why are some districts more competitive than others? It is possible that district competitiveness is the result, rather than the cause, of the patronage behavior of local states. If so, my argument that competition causally affects patronage would be backwards. Chapter 1 addresses this concern with a historical-institutionalist account of party and state formation. The key finding is that the behavior of patronage-providing districts does not drive their level of competitiveness. Rather, party competitiveness within districts is rooted in patterns of migration and party formation that came before the present local government system. Using historic census data, I show that migration into cocoa areas had by 1970 established patterns of ethnic geography that would predict district-level electoral competitiveness over thirty years later. This means important determinants of district-level competitiveness *predate* the contemporary system of local government.

Chapters 2 and 3 offer descriptive accounts of the key political actors linking the party and the local state: district chief executives and their party activists. I draw on months spent in local state offices to illuminate the lives of these district chief executives (chapter 2) and party activists (chapter 3), including how they view their political world and how they affect one another. What emerges is a picture in which chief executives are subject to considerable pressure from fellow partisans once in office. Chief executives who fulfill electoral pledges to reward activists remain in office. I then describe the political downfall of chief executives who *failed* to discriminate in favor of their activists as well as chief executives who were able to ignore their activists. Chapter 3 introduces party activists through four questions: Who and where are

they, and what do they want and how do they get it? I show how activists make themselves heard and what happens when politicians violate the rules of the relationship.

Chapter 4 uses quantitative data to show that political competition is causally related to patronage across the country. The key outcome of interest is patronage operationalized as local government employment. The data come from an original survey I conducted of district officials and subjective data from a nationally representative survey of three thousand individuals. Results show that highly competitive districts overprovide patronage relative to districts that are less competitive. The analysis includes an identification strategy that exploits plausibly exogenous variation in political competition arising from historical migration of ethnic blocs.

Chapter 5 is motivated by political economy scholarship on the role that civil servants play in government behavior. Again, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, I report the strikingly consistent finding that district politicians hold the skill and political neutrality of senior district civil servants in high regard. Moreover, I present the counterintuitive finding that high-patronage districts are not only *no* worse in their internal administration than other districts but may also be *more* internally efficient and meritocratic than relatively low-patronage districts. In other words, there are highly competitive districts that dole out patronage in the form of low-skill public jobs *and* have skilled senior civil servants. I introduce the logic of capacity for patronage to make sense of this, in which the governing strategies of some incumbents involve developing bureaucratic capacity to better help the incumbent deliver patronage. I then use the experience of staff in tax collection to describe how the political world of bureaucrats is structured and show how politicians retard improvements in tax collection in highly competitive districts. These findings suggest that patronage may not be an obstacle to building effective local state institutions.

Chapter 6 concludes the book by setting major themes in comparative context. First, the book argues that party systems

matter in developing countries because they affect the ability of voters to switch parties. This implies that clientelism should work differently where voters can threaten to leave their party. Using data from nationally representative surveys across Africa, I show vote buying is more common in less stable party systems, while turnout buying is more common in more stable party systems. Thus, political systems can be “differently clientelistic,” and party systems are contributors to this variation. Second, drawing on my finding that many district politicians are often embattled figures weighed down by their own followers, I speak to the Africanist literature on Big Men. I argue that district Big Men are powerful but not despotic—that is, they are actors with constraints. I argue that much contemporary usage of the Big Man concept confuses the Big Man with dictatorship. Third, motivated by my finding that local states’ bureaucrats are surprisingly skilled, I argue that the Ghanaian state is not fundamentally “weak” in terms of its internal administrative capacity. Rather, its weakness is outward facing. Its present political equilibrium encourages citizens to evade the state’s intrusions into their homes, farms, stores, and savings.