

Fault Lines: The Effects of Bureaucratic Power on Electoral Accountability

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Abstract: *This article introduces a new explanation for why citizens may fail to vote based on government performance. We argue that when politicians have limited capacity to control bureaucrats, citizens will not know whether government performance is a good signal of the incumbent's quality. We develop a selection model of elections in which policy is jointly determined by a politician and a bureaucrat. When politicians have incomplete power over policy, elections perform worse at separating good and bad types of incumbents. We test the theory's predictions using survey experiments conducted with nearly 9,000 citizens and local officials in Uganda. We find that citizens and officials allocate more responsibility to politicians when they are perceived as having more power relative to bureaucrats. The allocation of responsibility has electoral consequences: When respondents believe that bureaucrats are responsible for performance, they are less likely to expect that government performance will affect incumbent vote share.*

Verification Materials: The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BQ9M2U>.

An enduring puzzle in political economy is when elections will help citizens hold governments accountable. Existing theory and evidence suggest that when it is clear which political actors are responsible for observed policy outcomes, citizens can use these signals to infer politicians' quality and, on this basis, decide whether to reelect the incumbent (Fiorina 1981; Harding 2015; Powell and Whitten 1993; Tavits 2007). When this works well, there will be a strong relationship between government performance and citizens' vote choice. However, citizens often face significant challenges in evaluating the information they receive about government performance; indeed, giving citizens information on such performance often fails to change voting behavior (Dunning et al. 2019). One reason citizens may fail to vote based on

performance is that when multiple officials are responsible for policy outcomes, it may not be clear whether observed performance represents the politician's intended policy choices, and thus whether that politician should be reelected.¹ Thus, electoral accountability—defined as the link between politicians' actions in office and electoral outcomes—will be weaker if citizens cannot clearly infer incumbent quality from observing performance. Previous work has focused on clarity of attribution across different *politicians* or parties, arguing that electoral accountability will be weaker when power is shared across different levels of government (Berry 2008; Fan, Lin, and Treisman 2009); between political actors like parties, legislatures, and presidents within a government (Lago-Peñas and Lago-Peñas 2010; Powell and Whitten 1993);

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¹Existing evidence suggests that citizens only reward politicians for performance-related outcomes like service delivery when they can clearly attribute them to individual politicians (Harding 2015).

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or when performance is heavily influenced by exogenous shocks (Hellwig and Samuels 2007).

This article introduces a new mechanism that explains why attribution may not be clear even in cases where a *single* politician within a *single* level of government is in charge of a certain policy, and where outcomes are insulated from outside shocks: the balance of power between politicians and bureaucrats. Bureaucrats play a key role in implementing policies. In standard electoral accountability theories, voters implicitly hold politicians accountable both for their own actions and those of the bureaucrats they supervise. This is often borne out in reality. For example, American presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama were held responsible for scandals in the Veterans Health Administration: Citizens believed that each president failed to properly supervise the department (YouGov 2014).

Yet, there are many settings where politicians have limited power over bureaucrats, either because formal institutions insulate the bureaucracy or because politicians lack the capacity to monitor bureaucrats effectively. Weber (1922) described the relationship as one of the “dilettante” attempting to monitor the “expert.” This tension is at the core of delegation theory: politicians have an incentive to delegate to highly qualified bureaucrats in order to achieve better outcomes, but this creates an expertise gap that makes oversight more difficult (Epstein and O’Halloran 1994; Niskanen 1971). When political oversight is incomplete, government performance is a less informative signal of the quality of the incumbent. Poor service delivery may be due to the actions taken by the bureaucrat rather than the politician, making it difficult for citizens to decide whether a challenger might improve performance relative to the incumbent. If citizens recognize these limitations, they may be less willing to electorally punish politicians for poor outcomes or reward them when conditions improve, weakening the link between performance and electoral outcomes.

These problems can be exacerbated at the subnational level, where politicians are often of lower capacity. While systematic data are hard to come by, the available evidence paints a consistent picture of comparatively low education among local politicians. In Ghana, less than 2% of the population holds a university degree, compared to 60% of local professional bureaucrats hired in 2012 (Brierley forthcoming). In an author-conducted survey of politicians and bureaucrats in Malawi, 3% of district politicians had college degrees, compared to 50% of district bureaucrats. In India, local politicians find themselves working with highly qualified officers of the Indian Administrative Service (Iyer and Mani 2012). In Peru, mayors with low education levels oversee well-educated municipal man-

agers.² In many contexts, local politicians are also unable to hire and fire centrally appointed bureaucrats.³ For the remainder of this article, we focus our discussion on *local* politicians.

In this article, we develop a theory of elections in which policy outcomes are jointly determined by a bureaucrat and a politician; citizens are unsure about the true policy preferences of each, and they must decide based on observing government performance whether to reelect the incumbent. We show that when bureaucrats have even *some* power over what policy is enacted, citizens become less likely to reelect politicians who share their preferences, and more likely to keep politicians with incongruent preferences. An observable implication of this is that the connection between government performance and citizens’ vote choice will be weaker. This becomes more severe as the power of politicians decreases relative to that of bureaucrats.

Although our theory could apply in many settings, we expect bureaucratic oversight to be weakest in developing countries where overall government capacity and human capital are lower and independent oversight institutions weaker, and in local governments where politicians are often lower-capacity and accountability is weak (Chiweza 2016; Grossman and Michelitch 2018). To test the theory in a developing-country context, we use survey experiments on nearly 9,000 citizens and local government officials in Uganda. In the experiments, respondents were told about a hypothetical local government in which the quality of roads was either good or bad and then were asked who they believed was most responsible for the quality of the roads. In both cases, a significant percentage of respondents allocated responsibility to the local bureaucrat, rather than the local politician, suggesting that Ugandan citizens are cognizant of politicians’ limited control over the bureaucracy.

We then use a randomized treatment to show that increasing the power of the bureaucrat reduces the percentage of respondents who perceive the politician as responsible for policy outcomes. Both respondents’ initial beliefs about responsibility, and a randomized information treatment about responsibility, have significant downstream effects on perceived electoral outcomes: There is a strong link between whether a politician receives blame or credit, and whether respondents believe that he or she will lose or

²This information was collected in interviews with two country experts.

³Examples include walis in Algeria, intendentes in Chile, governors in the Democratic Republic of Congo, préfets de region in Djibouti, municipal bureaucrats in Italy, chief administrative officers in Uganda, and heads of oblast state administrations in Ukraine.

gain votes in the next election. Our results are consistent across our citizen and elite samples, alleviating concerns that results are driven by citizens who are unaware of local political dynamics.

This article contributes to the literatures on clarity of attribution, electoral accountability, and bureaucratic insulation. Our findings support previous work arguing that vote choice will only be closely linked to government performance when there is *clarity of attribution*. However, whereas existing research suggests that lack of clarity occurs when multiple politicians are responsible for policy outcomes (Berry 2008; Fan, Lin, and Treisman 2009), or when exogenous shocks influence government performance (Hellwig and Samuels 2007), this article highlights the importance of the balance of power between bureaucrats and politicians. When politicians cannot control bureaucrats, citizens may struggle to use elections to hold politicians accountable. Yet, our study does not imply that electoral accountability is meaningless in these settings. In all but the most extreme cases, politicians do have some influence over policy, and citizens do still attempt to use elections to select politicians who share their preferences. The core issue is that when responsibility is split between politicians and bureaucrats, this process simply works less well.

Existing theories often posit that when *electoral accountability* is weak, it is either because government institutions are flawed (perhaps because they limit electoral competition or citizens' access to information; Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999) or because citizens fail to use these institutions effectively (Achen and Bartels 2017). This article shows that government institutions can also affect electoral accountability through the balance of power between politicians and bureaucrats. When political oversight is weak, even rational voters who wish to select good politicians using government performance as a signal may not be able to do so. We thus suggest a novel explanation for why government accountability is often weak (Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999), and why citizens may fail to change their voting behavior in response to information about the quality of services (Dunning et al. 2019). Our findings can also help to explain why clientelism is so prevalent in developing countries. Existing research shows that citizens' beliefs about government capacity are inversely linked to their willingness to vote based on clientelism (Gottlieb 2016). While we do not directly test a link between politicians' capacity and clientelism, our findings suggest that if politicians have limited capacity to affect policy, citizens may have few incentives to vote based on programmatic policy platforms. This may make it more likely that citizens vote along alternate dimensions such as clientelistic transfers.

Finally, our article contributes to debates on whether *bureaucratic insulation* will help or hinder government performance (Epstein and O'Halloran 1994; Stephenson 2007). Although in some cases insulation helps bureaucratic performance (Gratton et al. 2019), we highlight a channel through which it may have unintended consequences. If voters are less likely to hold their politicians to account for poor service delivery when they perceive bureaucrats as particularly influential, then—all else equal—initiatives aimed at strengthening or insulating bureaucracies may also undermine electoral accountability.

Accountability and Split Responsibility

In a basic theory of electoral accountability, citizens observe government performance or policy and on this basis decide whether to reelect an incumbent or vote for a challenger.⁴ Citizens use elections to increase the likelihood that the incumbent politician implements their preferred policy (Fearon 1999). We posit this occurs through a retrospective voting process of *selection*, in which citizens use observed policy to infer the politician's true preferences and vote for the incumbent when they believe she is more likely than the challenger to be a "good type" who shares citizens' preferences. This section develops a theory of how split responsibility between politicians and bureaucrats affects this process; Appendix A in the supporting information (SI) formalizes our logic using a two-stage selection model. In this setup, electoral accountability can be defined as the extent to which elections do a good job of reelecting politicians who share citizens' preferences and kicking out those who do not (referred to below as "bad types"). If electoral accountability is low, there will be a weaker connection between an incumbent's policy preferences and her chance of reelection. Our empirics focus on a critical observable implication of electoral accountability, namely, the link between government performance and citizen vote choice.

Any factor that weakens the connection between incumbent behavior and vote share therefore undermines electoral accountability. There is evidence that performance does in fact affect reelection in many settings (Aytaç 2018; Powell and Whitten 1993). However, this link requires citizens to draw a clear connection between performance and the relevant politician; Harding (2015)

⁴This could be any unidimensional policy, including public goods provision, corruption, or the tax rate.

and Harding and Stasavage (2013) show that voters only reward African presidents for service delivery when they can clearly attribute improvements to their actions. When performance-based voting does not take place, one explanation is therefore lack of clarity of attribution. In practice, policy is typically jointly determined by multiple actors, and electoral accountability will only function properly when citizens can attribute responsibility for observed outcomes to the correct officials, and when outcomes are more insulated from random shocks (Fiorina 1981; Powell and Whitten 1993; Tavits 2007). In contrast to this article, previous work has focused on attribution across different types of politicians, parties, or levels of government. Within a single level of government, attribution is easier when one party has a clear majority or when institutions indicate which party is responsible (Powell and Whitten 1993). When decentralization splits responsibility across different levels of government, electoral accountability may worsen unless institutions or budgets clearly signal which levels of government are responsible for which outcomes (Berry 2008; Fan, Lin, and Treisman 2009; Harding 2015; Lago-Peñas and Lago-Peñas 2010; Rodden 2006; Tavits 2007). Individual characteristics also matter; partisanship affects both how citizens evaluate performance and to whom they attribute responsibility (Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Marsh and Tilley 2010), and “sophisticated” voters may be better able to evaluate government performance (Gomez and Wilson 2001; Tilley and Hobolt 2011).

However, uncertainty over responsibility may remain even if it is clear which level of government and which politician are responsible for policy. Whereas politicians are typically responsible for initial policy decisions, bureaucrats play a key role in actually implementing those decisions and producing observed policy.⁵ Bureaucrats who are dishonest, are incompetent, or simply do not share politicians’ preferences can significantly impact the outcomes citizens observe. Yet, most work on accountability in general, and clarity of attribution more specifically, implicitly assumes that politicians, whose responsibilities often include monitoring bureaucrats, should be held accountable for not only their own failures and successes but also those of bureaucrats.⁶ While in many contexts politicians have enough control over the bureaucracy that citizens can effectively ignore bureaucrats as independent political actors, there are also many con-

texts where politicians have less control over bureaucrats (Kathyola 2010).

We argue that where political control of bureaucrats is incomplete, it can negatively impact how well electoral accountability functions *within* a single level of government. The case of Uganda, described further below, provides an intuition for why this is. In Uganda, subcounty-level elected officials often lack the formal education and skills to monitor and supervise the work of government. Subcounty bureaucrats, in contrast, are all college educated and have often held office for a number of years. This mismatch in capacity frequently allows bureaucrats to circumvent even well-meaning politicians, for example, by withholding key financial documents and monitoring funds.⁷ Ugandan citizens are well aware of politicians’ shortcomings and of bureaucrats’ power. In this setting, citizens may struggle to tell whether good (or bad) government performance is due to the politician’s choices or the bureaucrat’s. This lack of clarity can weaken electoral accountability: If the bureaucrat holds significant power, citizens cannot reliably use government performance to infer whether politicians share their preferences.⁸

This case suggests a more general theory of how an imbalance of power between politicians and bureaucrats can affect electoral accountability. SI Appendix A formalizes this theory, developing a retrospective voting model with incomplete information based on the two-period selection model in Fearon (1999). Consider a simple government composed of a politician and a bureaucrat. Although this could represent any level of government, we focus on local governments, as this theory is most likely to hold at that level.⁹ We assume that politicians and bureaucrats each vary in whether they are “good” types who will always (attempt to) implement citizens’ ideal policy or “bad” types who prefer another policy. These preferences could be innate or could result from pressures from party officials (for politicians) or higher-level bureaucrats (for bureaucrats).¹⁰ In our empirics, we focus on a common policy of concern in low-income countries: the provision of public goods. In this setting, good types wish to provide citizens’ preferred public goods, whereas bad

⁷For qualitative evidence on local Ugandan politicians’ limited capacity and a discussion of the context of the qualitative interviews, see SI Appendix C.

⁸Below, we discuss the possibility that citizens attempt to elect higher-capacity politicians.

⁹While many local governments include additional actors, considering a simpler polity allows us to focus on clarity of attribution between the political and bureaucratic wings of a government.

¹⁰For example, a higher-level bureaucrat could encourage a subcounty bureaucrat to improve public services or to embezzle on her behalf.

⁵Malhotra and Kuo (2008) examine blame allocation across politicians and bureaucrats following Hurricane Katrina, but not how blaming bureaucrats affects electoral outcomes.

⁶This is consistent with the two-stage principal–agent structure in Pande et al. (2011).

types instead provide less-valued goods, embezzle funds, or shirk.

Electoral accountability functions best when politicians have the ability to effectively monitor and control bureaucrats, ensuring that their preferred policy is implemented. When citizens observe good (bad) performance, they will then attribute credit (blame) to the politician. In this setting, if poor performance is the result of bureaucratic failures, voters assume that the politician could have achieved a better outcome if she desired. In such a system, we should expect that when politicians share citizens' preferences, they work to ensure good performance and are rewarded accordingly; in contrast, bad types will be likely to perform poorly, resulting in electoral sanctions. Thus, there is a strong link between a politician's type and the probability she is reelected.

Consider, however, a situation in which the politician and bureaucrat may disagree over which policy to implement, and the politician has only imperfect control over the bureaucrat. In this case, the policy actually enacted could be that favored by the politician or by the bureaucrat. Note that this does not imply that that politician has no control at all over the bureaucrat, only that this control is imperfect. We can think of a more powerful politician as one who is more likely to win the fight to implement her preferred policy.

When power is divided in this way, citizens can no longer be sure whether government performance is the result of the politician's actions or the bureaucrat's. This creates uncertainty about whether replacing the incumbent in the next election could improve future performance, and it may lead citizens to be less likely to punish or reward politicians based on performance. This uncertainty lowers electoral accountability by weakening the relationship between politicians' policy choices, government performance, and incumbent support.

In this setting, how well electoral accountability functions will depend on the precise balance of power between the politician and the bureaucrat. When the politician has very limited power over the bureaucrat, the policy outcome is a poor indication of the politician's type. As the politician becomes more powerful, observed policy is a better indication of the politician's true preferences, allowing citizens to better condition electoral support on performance. In SI Appendix A, we formally show that this has a direct impact on electoral accountability. When politicians have incomplete control, citizens are less likely to punish poor performance and may mistakenly keep bad types in office. Likewise, good performance is less likely to be rewarded, and good types may be mistakenly voted out of office. As the politician's power over the bureaucrat increases, the probabil-

ity that good types are reelected, and bad types removed, increases.

Hypotheses

When citizens know the degree to which politicians control bureaucrats, but are uncertain about the true policy preferences (type) of each, we posit that this balance of power directly affects electoral accountability. When an incumbent is strong, she can either directly set policy or ensure that the bureaucrat enacts her preference. In this setting, citizens will be likely to vote based on observed government performance; they will reelect politicians who share their preferences, and those who do not will lose office. As power shifts away from politicians and toward bureaucrats—either because politicians lack necessary skills or because formal institutions grant politicians limited oversight—the signal becomes weaker and this process breaks down. Citizens become more likely to mistakenly remove “good types” of politicians from office or keep bad types. Low electoral accountability does not mean that incumbents are always reelected: In the extreme case where politicians have no control over bureaucrats, our formal model predicts that both good and bad types will lose office 50% of the time, which is consistent with the high electoral turnover in many developing countries. In this case, electoral accountability is low because the probability of reelection is not correlated with politicians' actual policy decisions.

We use data from Uganda to test the theory's assumptions and implications. Our key assumption is that when politicians are weak relative to bureaucrats, citizens will take this into consideration when allocating responsibility:

Assumption: When politicians have limited control over the bureaucracy, citizens will split blame and credit between the bureaucrat and the politician.

First, we argue that the degree to which citizens blame (credit) the politician will be driven by the balance of power between the politician and bureaucrat. As politicians' control over bureaucrats decreases, bureaucrats will receive a larger share of responsibility for policy outcomes.

H1: The degree of credit (blame) that bureaucrats receive will increase as the balance of power shifts away from the politician and toward the bureaucrat.

We test Hypothesis 1 using a randomized treatment that induces exogenous variation in the balance of power between the politician and bureaucrat.

Second, we expect that electoral accountability will be conditioned on the distribution of responsibility between politicians and bureaucrats. Our experiments test this using both citizens' priors on attribution and an informational treatment.

H2a: When citizens blame the politician for poor service provision, she will lose more votes than when the bureaucrat receives blame.

H2b: When citizens credit the politician for good service provision, she will gain more votes than when the bureaucrat receives credit.

Political Context in Uganda

We test our theory using survey experiments about subcounty governments in Uganda. Governance in Uganda is decentralized, with elected and appointed officials at the national, district, and subcounty levels. We focus on the subcounty level (also called the Local Council 3 [LC3]), the lowest level of institutionalized government in Uganda.¹¹ Uganda has 1,403 subcounties, with a median population of 20,000.¹² Their primary task is the delivery of basic services by contracting private firms to construct and maintain feeder roads, bore holes, and latrines (Golooba-Mutebi 2003). While Uganda's national political space is relatively closed, there is more opportunity for political competition at the local level, and voters tend to speak openly. This allows us to gain insights into voter and official perceptions of subcounty-level accountability processes.

Ugandan subcounty governments are neatly divided into political and bureaucratic wings. The political wing is headed by the LC3 chairperson, who presides over a 13–30 person council consisting of councilors from each parish, plus special councilors for women, youth, and people with disabilities. Council members are directly elected for 5-year terms in partisan first-past-the-post elections with no term limits. The council makes policy and approves budget allocations, which are then implemented by bureaucrats. For example, politicians would allocate funds to their desired local feeder road projects and then task bureaucrats with the procurement process. The LC3 chairperson wields substantial power over the council.

¹¹Village governments receive no budget or bureaucratic support.

¹²See SI Table B1.

The head bureaucrat, called the subcounty chief, is responsible for administering funds, implementing council policies, and providing technical advice.¹³ The subcounty chief oversees a technical staff of two to four members. Only bureaucrats are signatories to the subcounty bank account, and only they can procure goods and services. Once the subcounty chief is tasked with the maintenance of a certain road, he initiates the process of procuring contractors and materials. Local procurement processes are fraught with corruption (Mwenda and Tangri 2005), most commonly in the form of kickbacks. Even though all transactions are supposed to be transparent to council members, they are typically not, a point we return to below.

The subcounty chief is directly appointed by the chief administrative officer (CAO) of the next higher level of government, the district. The CAO, in turn, is appointed by the central government. Thus, while local bureaucrats are officially agents of their elected counterparts, local politicians have limited power to enforce their wishes. They cannot directly fire recalcitrant officials, but must place a formal request with the CAO to transfer a bureaucrat to another subcounty in the district. In extreme cases, they can also refer issues to the police or other investigative bodies. Bureaucrats thus have effectively two principals: the elected council and the CAO. Voters typically have no power over bureaucrats, who rarely live where they are posted. Further details on Ugandan local government are included in SI Appendix B.

Even when subcounty politicians do have formal power over bureaucrats, differences in education and socioeconomic status make controlling bureaucrats difficult. On average, subcounty councilors have 10 years of formal education compared to 17 years among subcounty bureaucrats. Higher-quality candidates rarely run for office, due to limited incentives. The only council member receiving a (low) salary is the chairperson; councilors only receive a small allowance. Local politicians' average monthly household income is about US\$230, compared to US\$640 for bureaucrats. Furthermore, bureaucrats often spend many years in the administrative system, whereas there is substantial turnover among politicians. Politicians receive little training, leaving them reliant on their bureaucratic counterparts to clarify local government rules and procedures.¹⁴

These imbalances limit politicians' oversight capacity; 72% of council members say it is difficult to access

¹³This appointed position is distinct from traditional chiefs.

¹⁴This situation can be taken advantage of: In our survey, 15% of bureaucrats falsely stated that a law prevents council members from seeing financial documents.

subcounty financial documents and bank statements.¹⁵ As one councilor said, “it’s hard to get [budget and expenditure] documents from the technical personnel, they keep telling us it’s above us.” Another councilor complained that although the council sent bureaucrats their budget priorities, “they often don’t follow them and don’t even inform us.” SI Appendix C includes further quotes from councilors on their perceived lack of power.¹⁶

Methodology

Testing how the balance of power between politicians and bureaucrats affects electoral accountability is not straightforward. First, it is difficult to find exogenous variation in the balance of power. To overcome this issue, we developed a vignette survey experiment that measures how the *perceived* balance of power between politicians and bureaucrats affects the allocation of blame and credit (Hypothesis 1), and how responsibility affects anticipated electoral outcomes for politicians (Hypotheses 2a and 2b). This approach follows a large literature arguing that perceptions are a key determinant of behavior.¹⁷

Second, to alleviate concerns over social desirability bias, our vignettes use an example of public goods provision (feeder roads) in a hypothetical nearby subcounty. The vignette’s hypothetical nature should allow respondents to draw on their own perceptions and experiences without fear of reprisal. Using a hypothetical also lets us abstract from local factors that may affect how respondents interpret the treatments. For example, if respondents have very strong priors about the local balance of power, our treatments might not be able to move respondents; asking about a hypothetical subcounty reduces this concern. This structure also allows us to interpret our results purely in terms of the vignette, rather than local factors such as incumbent partisanship or local public goods provision.

Survey Experiments

Our vignette experiment centers around the provision of feeder roads in a hypothetical subcounty. Feeder road

maintenance is the responsibility of subcounties, and formal allocation of maintenance responsibilities is typical of other local public goods in Uganda: Politicians allocate and monitor maintenance funds. Bureaucrats oversee project implementation but may also influence allocation decisions. Road quality is highly salient for rural citizens, who rely on these roads to reach markets, hospitals, and schools. SI Appendix D.1 reports the full text of the vignette.

The vignette had two parts. In the first part, respondents were given information about the quality of roads in a hypothetical nearby subcounty. To test our hypotheses under different levels of service provision, we randomly varied whether respondents received a vignette in which roads were good (“credit” condition) or bad (“blame” condition). Within each condition, we randomly varied the *relative* power of the politician and bureaucrat, allowing us to test how the balance of power affects responsibility attribution (Hypothesis 1). Thus, respondents could receive a vignette about good or bad roads in which the bureaucrat is relatively more or less powerful.

To create exogenous variation in relative power, we sought to alter the perceived balance of power without priming respondents on it directly. We do so by taking advantage of an empirical fact: Ugandan bureaucrats are sometimes assigned to subcounties in their home district, and sometimes assigned to subcounties in other districts; politicians typically serve in their home district. Our fieldwork suggests that bureaucrats hailing from other districts are perceived as having poor information about local conditions and as less embedded in local networks, creating perceptions that they are less influential. Bureaucrats’ outsider status is easily observable, making it a good choice for a survey context. Leveraging this difference in perceived influence, we randomly assigned respondents to receive a vignette in which the bureaucrat is “from the same district” (insider) or “from another district” (outsider). Since we are not providing cues to manipulate the expected leverage of the politician, manipulating the bureaucrat’s type should change the perceived *relative* leverage of bureaucrats and politicians in the hypothetical local government, helping us tease out how perceptions of relative power affect attribution.

The first part of the vignette reads:

Let me give you an imaginary example about a subcounty in a nearby district. In that subcounty, the feeder roads are **[not being/well] maintained and [are in very bad condition - people cannot pass, and the sick cannot get to the health centre in time/people can get to town and the health centre easily]**. Both the LC3

¹⁵All figures are based on the subcounty officials’ survey, discussed in the Methodology section.

¹⁶For further discussion of Ugandan politicians’ limited capacity, see Raffler (2018).

¹⁷For example, Gottlieb (2016) shows that changing citizens’ perceptions of state capacity changes political behavior.

chairperson and the subcounty chief have some power over roads. Both have been in office all term. [The subcounty chief comes from another district, the LC3 chairperson is from that same district/Both are from that same district].¹⁸

Respondents were then asked, “In your opinion, who is more at fault that the roads are not maintained—the subcounty chief, who is from [that same/another] district, or the LC3 chairperson, who is from that same district?” This binary variable, *Prior*, measures respondents’ initial allocation of *primary* responsibility. Our main assumption is that at least some respondents will assign primary responsibility to the bureaucrat, not the politician. Following Hypothesis 1, we also expect more respondents to allocate responsibility to the politician when the bureaucrat is less powerful (i.e., in the outsider condition).

The vignette’s second stage tests how blame and credit affect electoral outcomes (Hypotheses 2a and 2b). After collecting respondents’ priors on responsibility, we randomly assigned respondents to receive information that either the politician or bureaucrat was *in fact* responsible for the state of the roads; randomization was blocked on initial treatment assignment.¹⁹

Following the randomized information treatment, we asked respondents how they thought road quality would affect the next election. We expect the politician to lose more votes when she is to blame for poor roads, and to gain more votes when she deserves credit for good roads (Hypotheses 2a and 2b). Using a randomized information treatment, rather than relying on the insider/outsider treatment from the first part of the vignette, allowed us to test how attribution affects electoral accountability even if the insider/outsider treatment had no effect on attribution. Our preanalysis plan specifies that we did not expect the insider/outsider treatment to affect perceived electoral outcomes, in part because we expect the information treatment to swamp the insider/outsider treatment. Figure 1 depicts the eight possible treatment arms for the experiment.

Because we ask respondents about outcomes in a hypothetical subcounty, our results are best interpreted as measuring respondents’ perceptions of how they think citizens *in general* will behave. We assume that responses are driven by respondents’ own priors and beliefs about the balance of power among politicians and bureaucrats in Uganda generally, as well as their beliefs about how they, and voters in general, make electoral decisions. For

¹⁸Piloting ensured that this wording was clear to respondents and conveyed the desired insider and outsider connotations.

¹⁹The vignette also reiterated the road quality and insider/outsider treatments.

our results to differ from those actually driving citizen behavior in Uganda, it would have to be the case that no one thinks the balance of power is actually important, but all respondents believe that others think it matters.

Sampling

The experiments were conducted on citizens and subcounty government officials in Uganda in 2014. The officials survey was run first. Hypotheses were developed prior to the officials survey, and the preanalysis plan was registered prior to the authors obtaining access to citizen survey data.²⁰ We therefore use the citizen survey as the main test of our theory. Having both citizen and officials surveys helps us overcome common limitations of survey research: The officials survey shows that our results replicate in a different sample and reduces concerns that results are driven by poor information among citizens or other peculiarities of the citizen sample.

Citizen Survey. The citizen survey sampled 6,474 predominantly female Ugandan heads of households in rural and peri-urban areas. The survey was embedded in the baseline survey of an unrelated field experiment conducted in the catchment area of 159 public health centers across six districts.²¹ For each health center, the closest three villages within the same parish were selected. Enumerators listed all households in the three villages, randomly selected 40 households with children under 5, and interviewed the female head of household. In households without a female head, the male head of household was interviewed.

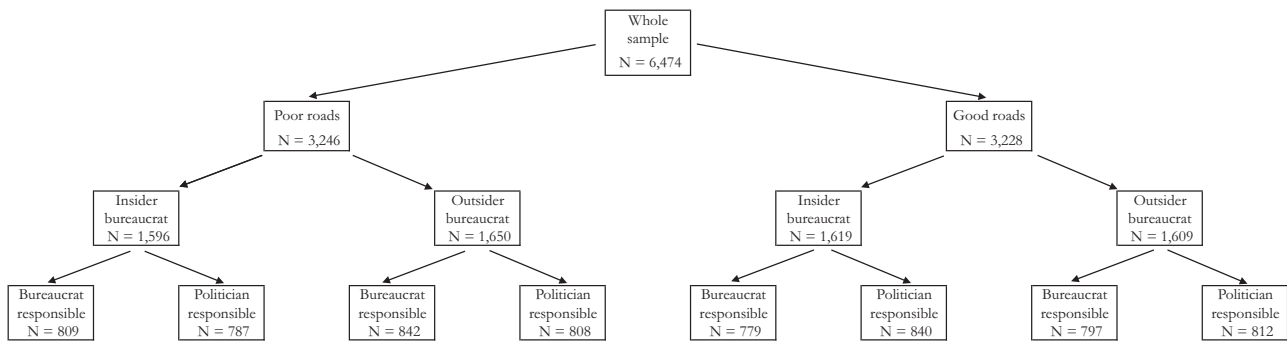
Government Officials Survey. The officials survey was conducted with 2,497 local government officials in 219 subcounties (representing 25 districts) from across Uganda. Approximately 11 officials per subcounty were interviewed, including appointed bureaucrats (the subcounty chief and the sub-accountant) and elected politicians (the chairperson and councilors).²² The experiment

²⁰The registration ID is AEARCTR-0000767.

²¹See SI Appendix D.2 for more details. The field experiment assessed the impact of a community monitoring intervention in the health sector. The study protocol has been approved by the IRB of Innovations for Poverty Action (Protocol #497), by the IRB of the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) (Protocol #ARC157), and by the UNCST itself (Protocol #SS3559).

²²Councilors were randomly sampled, giving priority to parish councilors over councilors representing special groups such as women or youth.

FIGURE 1 Treatment Arms for Citizen Survey



was embedded in the baseline survey for a separate field experiment.²³

Results

We predict that as the perceived balance of power shifts toward the bureaucrat, voters will assign less responsibility to the politician, weakening the link between government performance and electoral outcomes. This section first shows that respondents do believe responsibility is split between politicians and bureaucrats, and that the politician’s perceived power affects the degree to which he is held responsible for road quality. We then show that lower perceived responsibility results in weaker anticipated electoral punishments (rewards) for poor (good) service delivery.

All specifications except t-tests include district fixed effects and a prespecified set of demeaned control variables.²⁴ Since the unit of randomization is the individual, we do not cluster standard errors. For ease of interpretation and following our preanalysis plan, our primary specification is ordinary least squares (OLS). Findings for the bureaucrats’ sample should be taken as suggestive due to the small sample size.

Responsibility Is Split

Our key assumption is that citizens recognize politicians’ limited capacity and, in response, will assign responsibility to the bureaucrat at least some of the time. To test

this, we asked respondents who they thought was more responsible for the condition of the roads in the vignette. We turned this into an indicator variable, *Prior*, that takes a value of 1 if a respondent said the politician was primarily responsible, and 0 otherwise.²⁵

Table 1 provides strong evidence that responsibility is split: 26% of citizens, 16% of politicians, and 42% of bureaucrats consider bureaucrats to be primarily responsible for road quality.²⁶ This supports the idea that citizens and officials both recognize the limited oversight capacity of local politicians in Uganda: If politicians had complete oversight, we would expect (nearly) all respondents to state that the politician is *primarily* responsible for the quality of services. Our results could occur if the average citizen respondent thinks there is a three-quarters probability that the politician is responsible (and provides a probability-weighted answer), or if three-quarters of citizens believe the bulk of power rests with the politician and one-quarter think it rests with the bureaucrat. Either is consistent with our theoretical framework. SI Table G2 uses pilot survey data to show that citizens who blamed the bureaucrat did so because he was perceived as more powerful.

Perceived Balance of Power Affects Attribution

Table 2 demonstrates that the insider/outsider treatment significantly affects attribution. Citizens are 7.2 percentage points more likely to think the politician is *primarily* responsible for road quality when the hypothetical

²³District selection is discussed in SI Appendix D.2.

²⁴Control variables include education, gender, and a wealth index. Following Lin and Green (2016), missing values are set equal to the sample mean.

²⁵Indifferent respondents are coded as 0. SI Table F1 shows robustness to alternative codings.

²⁶Bureaucrat and politician responses could differ if each type of official believes he or she is responsible for performance.

TABLE 1 Distribution of Perceived Responsibility by Respondents

Sample	% Politician Responsible	% Bureaucrat Responsible	% Indifferent or Missing	N
Citizens	67.21	26.49	6.30	6,474
Local Politicians	82.25	15.77	1.98	2,073
Local Bureaucrats	47.17	41.98	10.85	424

Note: *Indifferent* includes respondents who were not leaning one way. *Missing* includes those who replied “Don’t know” or refused to answer.

bureaucrat is from another district and thus perceived as relatively less powerful. While the small bureaucrat sample means that results should be taken as suggestive, the share of bureaucrats who think the politician is primarily to blame is 15.3 percentage points higher when the hypothetical bureaucrat is an outsider. The direction of effects in the politician sample is consistent but smaller (1.6 percentage points) and insignificant, which may be due to ceiling effects. Additionally, the binary outcome variable only reflects changes around the 50% threshold and is therefore hard to move.

Additional survey data show that outsider bureaucrats are indeed perceived as having less power than insider bureaucrats. We asked a random subset of the citizen sample ($n = 3,031$) whether they agreed that the insider or outsider bureaucrat in their vignette had “a lot of power.” Those asked about an insider bureaucrat were more likely to agree with the statement (78.6%) than those asked about an outsider bureaucrat (72.9%); the difference is significant at the 1% level (two-sided t-test). SI Appendix E presents further descriptive results. We conclude that the insider/outsider treatment successfully altered the perceived power balance between bureaucrats and politicians.

Electoral Implications of Blame and Credit Attribution

Having demonstrated that politicians are perceived as less responsible when bureaucrats are more powerful, we now show that this undermines electoral accountability. We hypothesized that poor service provision will be less likely to lead to electoral losses when the politician is *not* directly blamed for poor service delivery, and vice versa for good service provision. This connection is not automatic; it is possible that voters will punish politicians for poor performance regardless of who is “at fault,” as a politician’s responsibilities include monitoring bureaucrats.

To test the effects of attribution on vote share, after respondents reported their priors on responsibility, they were randomly assigned to receive information either that the local politician or the local bureaucrat held responsibility in this particular instance, stressing that the community was aware of this. We code this treatment as a binary variable, *Info*, that takes a value of 1 if a respondent was told that the politician was actually responsible.

We then asked a random subset of respondents, “How do you think this situation will affect the next election,

TABLE 2 Attribution and Bureaucrat’s Identity

Dependent Variable: Sample:	Perceive Politician as Primarily Responsible			
	Citizens (1)	All Officials (2)	Politicians (3)	Bureaucrats (4)
Outsider Bureaucrat	0.072** (0.012)	0.039* (0.017)	0.016 (0.016)	0.153** (0.052)
Assigned to Bad Roads	0.019 (0.012)	−0.083** (0.017)	−0.073** (0.016)	−0.106* (0.052)
Constant	0.650** (0.010)	0.803** (0.014)	0.868** (0.014)	0.450** (0.045)
Observations	6,251	2,410	2,032	378
R-squared	0.011	0.036	0.044	0.116

Note: The dependent variable is an indicator for whether the respondent believes the politician is primarily responsible for road quality. *Outsider Bureaucrat* indicates whether the local bureaucrat was described as from another district. Standard errors are in parentheses.

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

if at all? The LC3 Chair loses a lot of votes, the LC3 Chair loses some votes, there is no effect on voting, the LC3 Chair gains some votes, or the LC3 Chair gains a lot of votes.” For analysis, we transform this into a 3-point variable (*VoteChg*) that takes a value of -1 if a respondent expects a politician to lose votes, 0 if no change in votes is expected, and 1 if a vote gain is expected.

We use the following equation to estimate the effect of the information treatment on expected vote change, controlling for respondents’ pretreatment beliefs about responsibility:

$$VoteChg_i = \alpha + \beta_1 * Prior_i + \beta_2 * Info_i + \gamma * X_i + \epsilon_i,$$

where i indicates each respondent; $Prior_i = 1$ if a respondent’s prior was that the politician was primarily responsible; $Info_i = 1$ if a respondent received information that the politician was actually responsible; X_i is a vector of demeaned control variables; and ϵ_i is the error term. We estimate this equation separately for the blame and credit conditions. In the blame (credit) condition, we expect that the politician will lose (gain) more votes when she is responsible; *Prior* and *Info* should have negative (positive) coefficients.

Overall, 74% of citizens and 92% of officials thought that the politician would lose at least some votes in the case of poor roads, whereas 65% of citizens and 70% of officials thought that the politician would gain votes in the case of good roads. As expected, these numbers vary dramatically based on information about actual responsibility.

Columns 1–3 of Table 3 show the results for the blame condition, and columns 4–6 show the results for the credit condition; positive coefficients indicate an expected gain in votes. As expected, the information treatment has significant effects on perceived electoral consequences in all three samples. When roads are poor, the politician is perceived as significantly more likely to lose votes when the information treatment says she is responsible for performance; in the credit condition, attribution increases the electoral gains from good performance.

Among citizens, *Prior* also significantly predicts the anticipated electoral consequences. When the bureaucrat is a priori seen as the one responsible, citizens expect electoral repercussions to be less likely. This suggests that not only do citizens’ personal beliefs about the proper allocation of responsibility matter for electoral accountability, but also that providing additional information about responsibility may have an important impact on (anticipated) electoral accountability.

Together, the effects are substantively large: Citizens in the blame condition whose prior and information treatment agreed that the politician was responsible were 22.7 percentage points more likely to believe that the

politician would lose at least some votes, compared to those for whom both prior and information agreed that the bureaucrat was responsible; the corresponding gap in the credit condition is 29.4 percentage points (see SI Table F7).

Discussion

All results are robust to alternative specifications (SI Appendix F). These include replicating Tables 2 and 3 using probit and ordered probit, respectively; dropping covariates and district fixed effects; and dropping the 0.5% of observations with missing covariates. Results are also robust to alternative codings of respondents who are indifferent between blaming bureaucrats and politicians (SI Table F1); using the 5-point Likert scale (SI Tables F9 and F10); and using subcounty, rather than district, fixed effects (Tables F5 and F14). Our results do not vary by gender (SI Tables F6 and F15).

Our results are remarkably consistent across conditions and samples. While our theory does not predict whether blame and credit will operate differently, one possibility is that the balance of power affects blame more than credit, perhaps because citizens suffer more utility loss from poor performance than they experience utility gain from good performance. We find very similar patterns in the blame and credit conditions, suggesting that they operate in comparable ways (see SI Tables H9 and H10). Our findings are also similar across citizens and government officials; this increases confidence in the results and allows us to overcome the limitations of each sample. In particular, it alleviates concern that our results are driven by a peculiarity of our citizen sample, such as poor information or incomplete understanding of formal governance structures.

The rest of this section considers potential alternative mechanisms and confounding factors. First, one concern might be that our insider/outsider treatment results are driven by dimensions other than power. For example, outsiders could be seen as more likely to be “bad types” (i.e., more likely to shirk or not implement citizens’ preferred policies). SI Appendix E uses additional survey questions to show that, on average, outsiders are perceived to be lower quality along some measures but not others. To confirm that perceived differences in power rather than type are driving our results, SI Appendix G shows that respondents who perceived the bureaucrat as more powerful are less likely to assign responsibility to the politician. As outsiders are perceived as less powerful, this suggests that perceptions of power are playing a key role in our results. This result holds even when

TABLE 3 Expected Change in Future Votes

Dependent Variable: Sample:	Net Expected Change in Votes					
	Bad Roads			Good Roads		
	Citizens (1)	Politicians (2)	Bureaucrats (3)	Citizens (4)	Politicians (5)	Bureaucrats (6)
Info: Politician Responsible	-0.238** (0.047)	-0.106** (0.026)	-0.171 (0.088)	0.361** (0.052)	0.625** (0.046)	0.402** (0.096)
Prior: Politician Responsible	-0.120* (0.052)	-0.018 (0.033)	-0.108 (0.088)	0.138* (0.056)	-0.011 (0.064)	0.048 (0.101)
Constant	-0.376** (0.050)	-0.825** (0.033)	-0.657** (0.067)	0.132* (0.054)	0.169** (0.063)	0.395** (0.078)
Observations	982	1,013	193	999	1,057	224
R-squared	0.037	0.033	0.157	0.063	0.217	0.255

Note: Positive coefficients indicate an expected gain in votes. *Prior* indicates whether the respondent initially believed that the politician was responsible. *Info* is an indicator for whether the respondent was subsequently told that the politician was actually responsible. Standard errors are in parentheses.

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

controlling for perceptions of quality, increasing confidence that our proposed power mechanism has the largest impact on the allocation of responsibility.

Second, our theory assumes that politicians' and bureaucrats' types are not correlated. A negative correlation is unlikely; it would imply that those appointing bureaucrats systematically undermine "good" politicians by pairing them with "bad" bureaucrats, but pair "bad" politicians with "good" bureaucrats. A positive correlation implies that observed policy signals the politician's type regardless of the politician's power. This would bias us against finding an effect of our treatments on electoral accountability: It implies that citizens should reward politicians for good performance and punish them for bad performance even when the bureaucrat has most of the formal power. Doing so still increases the probability of good performance in the future, especially if replacing the politician could also improve the quality of the bureaucrat.

Third, in many low-income countries, ethnic politics might interact with credit and blame attribution. Although the majority of Ugandan subcounties are ethnically homogeneous,²⁷ this is not universal. Carlson (2015) shows that politicians benefit most when they are coethnics *and* have a proven track record of good performance. We therefore should expect that even when ethnicity is a factor in elections, performance in general, and blame and credit attribution in particular, should still be important.

²⁷In homogeneous subcounties, all candidates are typically coethnics, reducing the scope for ethnic politics.

SI Appendix H considers three ways in which ethnicity could affect our results. First, if ethnicity interacts with blame and credit attribution, our results might be driven by citizens who are more or less exposed to local ethnic politics. To test this, in SI Tables H1 and H2 we report subgroup analyses by whether a respondent is part of the local majority or minority ethnic group, as minority groups may be less able to rely on ethnic favoritism. We find no evidence of heterogeneity. Second, we consider that ethnic politics might interact with our insider/outsider treatment, causing respondents to perceive outsider bureaucrats as more likely to be non-coethnics. If respondents perceive non-coethnic bureaucrats as less powerful, this simply strengthens our desired treatment. An alternative is that non-coethnic outsiders are perceived as more likely to be "bad types." As discussed above, our evidence suggests that perceptions of power are a significant driver of our results, alleviating concerns that variation in type drives our results. Finally, if citizens have low expectations of non-coethnic bureaucrats, they could respond by seeking more powerful politicians. Below, we show that this produces testable implications that are not supported by our results. We also find no evidence that respondents' priors or the information treatment has stronger effects on electoral losses in the outsider condition (SI Tables H6 and H7), alleviating concerns that citizens seek stronger politicians when the bureaucrat is a non-coethnic.

Fourth, our theory assumes that voters believe politicians vary only in their type, not their power. But if citizens believe the politician is weak, they may seek to replace the incumbent with a challenger who is better able to control

the bureaucrat. Practically, in Uganda, such high-quality candidates do not always exist. Overall levels of education are low, especially in rural areas, and the college-educated typically prefer the private sector or bureaucracy over local politics. Our theory also produces different testable implications from one in which citizens attempt to replace weak politicians with strong ones. Consider a case where performance is bad and citizens receive information telling them the bureaucrat is to blame. Citizens should benefit from a higher-capacity politician in this case, leading to lower votes for the politician. Yet, as predicted by our theory, we find the opposite: When citizens receive information that the bureaucrat is to blame, the politician loses fewer votes, not more.

Fifth, social desirability bias is a concern in any survey experiment. We focus on Table 3, as here the “desired” answer is most clear. Our vignette deliberately asked about voters in a hypothetical subcounty to minimize experimenter demand. We also test for experimenter demand through subgroup analysis. Social desirability bias is likely to be lower in higher-status respondents, as measured by wealth and education. SI Table H11 shows that our information treatment is significant in both high- and low-status groups. We also find consistent results across our citizen and officials samples, which is reassuring as government officials may be less susceptible to experimenter demand.

Sixth, if respondents infer that the politician in our vignette is a copartisan, they may judge him more favorably or be unwilling to accept a treatment suggesting he is to blame. Three observations render such motivated reasoning unlikely. First, our findings are robust to the inclusion of subcounty fixed effects (SI Tables F5 and F14). Second, Table 2 provides suggestive evidence counter to motivated reasoning: Citizens are, if anything, *more* likely to attribute blame to the politician when the roads are bad. Third, if confirmation bias were an issue among citizens, we would expect an interaction between respondents’ priors and the information treatment to be positive. SI Table H3 shows that the coefficient on the interaction term is small, negative, and insignificant. Similarly, SI Table H4 finds no evidence of disconfirmation bias.

Finally, our theory and experiment do not directly examine the possibility that officials use credit claiming or blame shifting to manipulate citizens’ beliefs about the balance of power in the government. Both behaviors are well documented (Bueno 2018; Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood 2012). Say a weak politician claims responsibility for good outcomes, leading citizens to believe that the politician is more powerful. Although in the short term this could be electorally beneficial, if performance subsequently deteriorates it may be harder for the politician to

avoid blame. Thus, it is not clear theoretically when credit claiming and blame shifting will be in the politician’s best interest. While we do not directly measure blame shifting or credit claiming, our information treatment could be viewed as similar to such attempts. We consistently find that priors remain a predictor of citizen behavior even when contradictory information is given.²⁸ This suggests that blame shifting and credit claiming cannot completely erase citizens’ initial beliefs about responsibility.

Conclusion

Electoral accountability requires a clear relationship between politicians’ policy choices, government performance, and vote share. When government performance is a meaningful signal of politicians’ preferences, citizens can select politicians who share their preferences by rewarding incumbents who perform well and penalizing those who do poorly. When policy is decided by multiple actors, citizens may struggle to correctly attribute responsibility for performance to the correct official, hurting electoral accountability. This article introduces and tests a new mechanism affecting clarity of attribution: the degree to which politicians can effectively monitor and control their bureaucratic counterparts. If politicians lack skills and power relative to bureaucrats, citizens may be unable to effectively determine a politician’s type, undermining electoral accountability. Using data from Uganda, we find that citizens and government officials alike are less likely to attribute responsibility to local politicians when local bureaucrats are more powerful, and they are less likely to punish or reward politicians for the quality of roads when they believe that the bureaucrat holds more responsibility.

Our results are likely to hold in a wide range of settings, especially at the local level. Many countries have decentralized in the past two decades, placing substantial administrative responsibility with relatively new local governments. In areas where public office is not financially attractive, and where overall levels of education are low, it may not be realistic to expect a pool of high-quality candidates to emerge, especially when the private sector and bureaucracy are associated with higher wages and more prestige. In these cases, governments may need to invest in training and education for newly elected

²⁸Such imperfect updating is common in information experiments (Kendall, Nannicini, and Trebbi 2015). It could occur if citizens are Bayesian updaters, or if while some respondents updated completely, others’ posteriors did not shift at all. Imperfect updating will lead us to underestimate treatment effects.

incumbents in order to empower politicians and give them the skills they need to be effective.

A critical implication of our results is that when politicians are weak and bureaucrats are strong, citizens have few incentives to vote based on government performance. This suggests two alternatives. First, citizens could simply be less likely to vote at all. Second, citizens could vote on a basis other than policy. For example, in many low- and medium-income countries, clientelism is prevalent. Our results suggest that if citizens believe that the politician in power has little impact on government performance, it may be rational to accept clientelist transfers. While we do not claim this to be the single driving force behind clientelism, we believe it to merit further theoretical and empirical exploration. From a policy perspective, our findings suggest that initiatives aimed at strengthening or insulating local bureaucrats may have the unintended consequence of weakening electoral accountability.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix A: Formal Model

Appendix B: Local Government Institutions in Uganda

Appendix C: Qualitative Data

Appendix D: District Selection and Survey Details

Appendix E: Perception of Outsider Bureaucrats

Appendix F: Robustness Checks

Appendix G: Reasoning for Allocation of Responsibility

Appendix H: Additional Analyses