Political Recruitment and Political Participation: Analyzing the Constituency Effect on Councillors’ Performance in Local governments of Uganda

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Abstract

Political participation is widely seen as a desirable practice in good governance at the local levels. It is believed to be an enabler of citizens to have a more meaningful say and more influence on the decisions concerning the nature of services delivered by local governments to their constituencies. Political recruitment is one of the processes intended to support effective political participation in the respective local governments. Theoretical and empirical evidence however, often tends to underestimate the significance of political recruitment on political participation with respect to the eventual performance of councillors. This paper will analyse the framework for political recruitment and political participation, and illustrate the resultant implications to councillors’ performance in Uganda’s local governments. Of the many associated arguments, the paper singles out the issue of constituency and attempts to explain its profound effect on the recruitment process and the subsequent political activity. The paper concludes that political participation of councillors is highly influenced by the recruitment factors of the non-territorial constituencies more than the visibly geographically territories being represented.

Key words: Political recruitment, Political participation, Local governments, Councillors, Representation, and Constituency

Introduction

In many polities, citizens exercise rights of participating in the political decision making process. However, it is widely argued that the citizen’s role replaces neither their roles as subjects nor their parochial roles but rather supplements them (Almond and Verba, 1963). Almond and Verba’s observation suggest that citizens’ political participation is meant to influence the decisions for the common good as well as for personal interests. They hold however that most individuals always put the role of themselves and their parochial interests higher in priority compared to their interests as citizens and that the impact of their
participation may be negligible. While this situation may be attributed to different explanations such as social conditions, education, and the role of gatekeepers (Verba and Nie, 1972; Pippa Norris, 1996); Cornway, 2011), there is a view that the process through which political representatives obtain positions correspond to their subsequent performance in the political activity (Prewitt, 1970a). The political selection as well as political participation is greatly associated with what Urbinati and Warren (2008) recognize as a territorial residence (geographical constituencies) and non-territorial constituencies. These are the linkages that this paper sets to unveil in the subsequent discussion.

**Political Participation in a Decentralized Uganda: A Succinct Background**

Uganda’s local government system can be traced as far back as the colonial period, through the pre-independence era of the 1950s, up to the post-colonial period of 1970’s, and through to today. The country’s post-independence constitution of 1962 provided for a highly decentralized system, mixing federal and semi-federal structures in the different geographical localities, which was later abolished in 1966 when all authority centred in the presidency. The post-independence regimes\(^1\), however, proved unfavourable for active local government operations until the mid-1980s, when the National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power (MOLG, 2006; Uganda, 1995). The present decentralization policy in the country was, therefore, conceived in the late 1980s and implemented in phases through the early 1990s as an administrative-political reform, considered the most suitable mode of governance through which political recruitment would meaningfully support political participation for the benefit of the citizens (Kiwanuka, 2012).

The Uganda local government system has had a long history with the present system of political structures and the widespread political participation backed legal frameworks including the *Resistance Councils and Committees Statute* of 1987, the *Resistance Council Statute* (the decentralisation statute) of 1993 that enabled political, financial and administrative autonomy of local governments (MOLG 2006). Subsequently, the enactment

\(^1\)Uganda attained its independence in 1962, therefore the period referred here relates to those regimes thereafter.
of the 1995 Constitution and the Local governments Act 1997\(^2\), fully entrenched the decentralization policy. Each of these laws has had a profound implication on the recruitment and political participation of local councillors as well as their political positions. This paper blends the relationship between the recruitment process influences and the political activity of the local government councillors.

**Local Governance Structure in Uganda**

Decentralization is Uganda’s central governance system and is enshrined in the country’s constitution (Uganda, 1995). Accordingly, a range of powers, responsibilities and functions have been transferred to local governments throughout the country. These powers and responsibilities include decision-making, raising and allocating resources, determining and providing a range of services in a jurisdiction, planning and budgeting, and making ordinances and by-laws as provided by the local government Act (Uganda, 1997).

The country’s local government system is formed in a five-tier pyramidal structure from local councils 1-5 (Village, Parish, Sub-count/Town council/City division, County/Municipality, and District/City). The district Local Council (LC5) or City Council (CC) depending on whether it rural or urban respectively, is the highest political unit in a jurisdiction, with the District Chairperson/Mayor being its political head, elected through universal adult suffrage [UAS] (Uganda, 1997). The Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) or Town Clerk (TC) is the head of public servants in the district/city council and is also the accounting officer. The CAO/TC is appointed by central government and is responsible for the implementation of lawful council and central government resolutions (Uganda, 1997).

The lower local governments (LLGs) are below the district in both urban and rural areas and include the municipalities (LC4 level) and the city divisions/town councils and sub-counties (LC3 level), including all political representatives elected under UAS and all appointed administrative personnel. The county, parish, and village councils are the administrative units which perform such duties as are assigned to them by their respective LGs. LGs in Uganda are body corporate with powers enshrined in the Act (Uganda, 1997).

\(^2\) The Local Government Act 1997 has been incorporated in a comprehensive Uganda Law Book and currently is cited as “The Local Governments Act Cap 243”
With regard to personnel management, all persons in the service of LGs (except CAOs, Municipal and City TCs) are employed by their respective higher local governments.

Figure 1: Local Council in Uganda

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<th>Rural LCs</th>
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** Represent Local government councils (LG) * indicates an administrative Units (AU)

The decentralization framework in the country provides for affirmative action and special representation of the most vulnerable groups, which include: women, youth, and the people living with disabilities at all levels (Uganda, 1995; Uganda, 1997). This is accomplished by reserving seats and quota systems for those groups of people (Devas, 2005). Local councils are accordingly mandated to select amongst themselves a speaker, a deputy speaker, and executive committee to steer the leadership of the local governments. The system of election of all councillors is first-past-the-post by secret ballot under the universal adult suffrage with exceptions for the youth and disability councillors who are elected by their corresponding electoral colleges (LGA 1997: Section 10 and 23). The Administrative Units (AU), on the other hand, consist of the executive committees from lower level administrative units. At the village level - the lowest unit - the executive committee is selected from the entire population of the designated area.

Recruitment Process for Councillors in the Local Governments

Current Ugandan law provides standard guidelines for structures and requirements for council members and leaders. An eligible council member (to be selected by adult voters)
must be a citizen of Uganda and a registered voter of a sound mind who is not a cultural or
traditional leader as defined in the constitution. The law governing the electoral process
under Sec 116 of the LGA additionally states:

Under the multiparty political system, a public officer, a person employed
in any Government department or agency of the Government, an
employee of a local government or an employee of a body in which the
government has a controlling interest, who wishes to stand for election to
a local government office shall resign his or her office at least thirty days
before nomination day in accordance with procedure of the service or
employment to which he or she belongs (LGA 1997)

To underscore this regulation, the law under section 116 (6) of the LGA prohibits a
public officer employed by a particular local government from being a councillor for any
other higher or lower local government. The law permits only public officers to be elected for
political offices of the village and parish level.

Candidates for posts of chairpersons of local councils, in addition to these procedural
nomination demands, are required to be registered voters and residents of their respective
electoral areas. They should be at least thirty years old and not more than seventy five years
old. Further, for a district or city council, the candidate for the post of the chairperson should
possess at least a Ugandan Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) or equivalent
qualification and under Sec 112 of the LGA they are subjected to payment of a non-
refundable fee of ten currency points3 for a district or city, five currency points for a
municipality and two-and-a-half currency points for a city division, town or subcounty. Under
Section 119 of the LGA, all other councillors for a district, city or municipality must pay two-
and-a-half currency points while councillors for other lower local councils (town, city division
and subcounty) require paying one currency point.

These provisions, of course, have a big implication on the nature of the candidates
competing for available political positions in the local councils. It is obvious that a few

3 A legally stipulated currency point is equivalent to twenty thousand Uganda Shillings
(about $12) according to the LGA Sixth Schedule
candidates will find much interest in vying for positions that will deprive them of their prime means of earnings. A councillor in the first instance is a part-time politician and unless the selected councillor of a higher local council obtains a position of council chair, executive member or speaker, he or she earns no salary except a meagre allowance for council sessions. Other salaried local council leaders are the chairpersons for sub counties, municipal division, and town councils – positions which only a few women access. Choosing to be a local council politician therefore requires a well calculated comparative advantage of candidates as the positions require bravery and opportunity costs for employment. A few educated and formally employed individuals therefore may reluctantly rush for politics in the face of uncertain future careers. Resigning a salaried job for a temporary non-paying political position of four years that may or may not be regained (after that term of office) is not only short-sightedness but rather a huge blunder for the economically constrained local citizens. Again, the financial requirement for candidature registration is a big disincentive for many of the would-be some interested candidates whose meagre incomes cannot sustain the electoral activities. The next section of the paper presents the theoretical foundations in turn, for political recruitment and political participation.

**Political Recruitment Theory**

Political recruitment is a generic process by which institutions fill political offices through mechanisms that narrow the entire population to a few who hold office (Prewitt, 1970a). It is a selection process that enables the narrowing down to a few political leaders from a wider population as illustrated below:

**Figure 2: The Chinese Box Puzzle**
In the above model, Prewitt theorizes a political leadership recruitment process that begins with the entire population in the outer box. The population is presumed to contain a large number of citizens who meet minimum legal requirements for political eligibility such as age and residence.

This outer box consists of a number of social groups based on their ascribed statuses like gender, race, religion, and place of birth or achievement traits like income, occupation and education. Prewitt holds that persons in some certain social groups are highly favoured over those belonging to other social groups (Prewitt 1970a:23).

From the entire population there is a comparatively smaller set of the politically attentive public that fits in the second box. This box consists of citizens of such social statuses as wealth, occupation, education, and dominant race or religion, and are therefore the ones presumed to form the dominant social stratum in this, the second largest box of the model. This stratum results from the social basis of leadership theories which presuppose that persons with high status will have greater political life-chances than those of average or low prestige. This assumption therefore suggests that class distinctions are of great relevance in the political leadership recruitment process. Prewitt acknowledges this fact when he argues...
that political leaders are never random samples of the population but rather are drawn disproportionately from more favoured social groups and from the upper end of status hierarchy than from socially or economically disadvantaged groups (p.25).

From the dominant social stratum, Prewitt hypothesizes an inner box of the politically active stratum comprised of citizens who run the political parties, serve on local commissions, dominate community activities, are conversant with the political game, and who exhibit the desire to nominate themselves or be nominated by others for numerous public tasks. The politically active presumably are more likely to select them or be selected for public office. Their recruitment is influenced by the political socialization theories for individuals involved in public affairs over a lifespan from their families, school politics, early adulthood that finally to elected politics; and mobilization theories explaining those individuals who have made sudden decisions to be concerned with the public affairs and who become politically active at the same time as they join politics.

The inner box consists of Recruits and apprentices and contains individuals who undergo processes of channelling political aspirations and of mobilizing their talents and resources to public office. This is considered as a crucial stage in the recruitment process because it drives political careers and ambitions. The recruitment to a political career of recruits and apprentices, according to Prewitt, may be nurtured in the small, informal and intimate groups of friends, family, community actives, councillors, or work associates. These groups influence political choices and activities of individuals through advice, suggestions and social pressures.

The next-to-last inner box of the Puzzle contains the political candidates who are, according to electoral theories, subjected to a selection process that channels them into the few political leaders contained in the inner-most box. Elections and the related activities like candidacy and campaigns provide a final screening and sorting tool for obtaining the necessary citizens to hold public office - the governors.

The critics of this theory consider the Prewitt model as being quite simplistic with an assumption that political leaders systematically pass through all the stages (intermediate boxes) of recruitment from outer boxes before reaching in the inner-most box. This mode of thinking fails to recognize that elections apply at all levels of the recruitment process and
within each of the strata presented in the model. There is a further presumption that the process of recruitment is always through many stages and that it is largely done on the basis of natural and acquired social categories. Studies elsewhere, and particularly in Uganda, however, show occurrences of competitive selection irrespective of these predetermined social statuses of those individuals running for political offices (Kyohairwe, 2009).

**Theoretical Framework for Political Participation**

While a common definition for political participation still remains controversial, it is widely considered to be “activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and/or the actions they take” (Verba & Nie 1972:2). Accordingly, political participation can also be conceived as “those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or support government and politics” (Milbrath, 1977:2). Parry Geraint et al., on the other hand, use a broad definition of political participation to signify “taking part in the process of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies” (Geraint, 1992:16). In all three perspectives, political participation suggest an active role citizens’ in influencing political outcomes, which according to Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba does not only depend on the government system but also on social attitudinal characteristics of individuals (Almond, 1989).

These definitions suggest citizens have an active role in influencing political outcomes, which according to Almond and Verba not only depends on the government system but also on social attitudinal characteristics of individuals. Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) hold that political participation largely concerns activities that are participatory. Their context of participation is limited to the government and to a system with regular and legal ways of influencing politics (Verba, Nie, et al 1978:49-50). In spite of the complex definition of political participation, there seems to be common literature on the inherent modes of the concept, which are the subject of discussion in the next section.

**Modes of Political Participation**

Political participation is theorized to appear in a number of activities which Verba and Nie (1972) classify into: electoral modes of activity which influence leaders by applying
diffuse pressure; and, the non-electoral modes of activity that influence leaders through communication of information. The electoral modes, according to Verba and Nie, include voting and campaign activity and are considered to be the major ways in which individuals participate in politics. The non-electoral modes include the citizen-initiated contacts and group organization activity. These propositions have been perceived by a host of other political theorists to encompass a wide range of actions such as: joining pressure groups, participating in public inquiries and demonstrations, holding meetings with representatives, lobbying, petitioning and problem presentation to those in public offices. The actions also extend to writing letters, making monitory contributions, and seeking public office (Geraint, 1992; Milbrath, 1977; Prewitt, 1975; Verba, 1978). Voting, for instance, is seen as a tool for selecting the political leaders. With minimal communication, this activity is intended to exert influence over leaders through generalized pressure. Its scope and outcome are considered to be broad, covering all citizens. Political campaigns are also seen as an activity for exerting pressure and influence on the political leaders. It is credited for its ability to convey more information to the government and the public in comparison to the vote. Group activities convey much information to leaders and but they also exert pressure through a number of political actions such as lobbying and demonstrations. They focus on influencing decisions on community problems, as compared to citizen-initiated contacts that offer information regarding particular problems.

Sherry Arnstein (1969) similarly theorizes participation into a form of an eight-rung ladder that is broadly classifiable into “non-participation”, tokenism, and citizens’ power, as illustrated below:
Figure 3: The ladder of Citizens’ Participation (adopted from Sherry Arnstein, 1969)

According to Arnstein, the elementary purpose of inclusion of citizens into political activity or government programs is for purposes of educating them or psychologically making them feel appreciated or “cured”. At this level political participation is much manipulation and therapy, which Arnstein regards as “Non-participation”. When political participation is used as a relatively more useful tool, it is in the form of tokenism, in which citizens are involved for purposes of being more informed, consulted, and placated. They can also consult, voice their concerns, and advise, however much these may have limited impact on the power holders. Some levels of participation that may be more yielding, with those involved in the political activity being more influential partners to collaborate in making and effecting decisions, are delegated power or wielded power by obtaining political seats and managerial positions.

From the above it becomes clear that political participation is contextual and can only be understood by looking at different perspectives in which it appears in comparison to the intent of the participation by those who are directly involved in the participatory activities, those they represent and the people who the participation is intended to influence.
The constituency effect on councillors’ performance

The interest in this discussion is to assess the reality between theories and practice of political recruitment and political participation on the performance of councillors. The nature of local councils in Uganda make a recruitment process quite distinctive compared to the national parliamentary and presidential elections in other countries where political parties engage in intensive primary elections that gradually narrow down the many contending. The national elections in Uganda are conducted in broader and well defined constituencies, structured as counties (and districts, in the case of some women parliamentarians that are elected under affirmative action). The local government councils, on the contrary, apply a direct meritocracy of candidature in an ambiguous multiparty-system electoral process. Given that at the lower levels of local governance, councils are fused with the ruling political party structures, the recruitment process of different party candidates becomes problematic. Although the Local Government Act provides for multi-party governance in local governments, there is still a lot of disharmony in the procedures, roles, representation, and operations of local councils under the multiparty dispensation. The legal framework of the decentralization policy and the political parties is inconsistent with the intention of the country’s decentralization policy (Kiwanuka, 2013; Wasswa & Terrell, 2011). More complexity further emerges in the fact that ascribed statuses of sex, age and disability are merged with meritocracy recruitment. The local council composition requires a quota of 1/3 of the seats for women, one male and female youth, and one disabled male and female as mandatory representatives of those respective social groups.

Urbinati and Warren (2008) assess ways in which the modern state introduces a territorial residence (geographical constituencies) as a fundamental condition for political representation vis-à-vis the status and corporate-based representation which existed in pre-contemporary democracies. They note that territorial constituency has indeed demonstrated a historical significance of political equality by progressively including a larger representation of individuals in the power sharing (Urbinati and Warren 2008:389). Whereas the argument for political equality of geographical constituencies is seemingly convincing, Urbinati and Warren contend that territoriality identifies only one set of ways in which individuals are involved or affected by collective structures and decisions. They appreciate the existence of many non-territorial issues such as religion, ethnicity, nationalism, social and gender
movements, and professional or individual identities. They also note the prevalence of extra territorial issues like migration, global trade, environment, NGOs, associations, and social networks, each of which make representative claims and serve representative functions (p.390).

The argument raised, therefore, is that whereas councillors are meant to fully participate in local politics in the form of the interests of those being represented in their constituencies, the ambiguity surrounding territorial and non-territorial constituency structures complicates both the political recruitment process as well as political participation. From the Uganda local council recruitment processes explained earlier, it is clear that local councillors derive their representative authority from diverse groups with various interests. This generates multiple legitimacies and insurmountable electoral accountability demands. Councillors are entangled in performing political activities that not only involve controversies between local versus national interests, but also the political parties versus the sitting government priorities, and personal versus communal interests. What does this mean in terms of political activity? The likely implication is that the principal-agency effect applies and a situation arises where government, political parties, interests groups, and corporatist organizations set political agendas that determine how the political activity of councillors is conducted. The lower and middle level rungs of Sherry Arnstein’s theory come to manifestation at this point, where some councillors are largely manipulated and moderately consulted or informed of the political actions. While they have a platform for speaking, the impact of their voices, as well as the approaches used in demanding their constituency interests, may be highly compromised by the multiplicity of the territorial and non-territorial constituencies being represented.

An example of such a controversy regards women councillors who have been accused of not representing their fellow women and not having a lot of impact on the constituencies which they represent. Women representatives in the Ugandan local governments are elected by adult voters and they represent two sub-counties in the district or municipal divisions in the municipality. They are elected by female as well as male voters. They are further nominated and sponsored by their individual political parties, massively supported by their relatives, friends, and colleagues in their informal networks as well as by national politicians. These women councillors (similar to other special groups like the youth and the disabled)
derive their political participation mandate from multiple principals but they are expected to distinctively cater to the interests of women. Keeping in mind that women are not a single social category, they are expected to conduct a number of activities including joining pressure groups, attending public inquiries and demonstrations, holding meetings with representatives, lobbying, and petitioning and problem presentation to public offices. The critics of women councillors tend to forget that all these activities are for and against one interest group or another and may antagonize those constituencies that authorize women to act politically.

These arguments notwithstanding, we note that on many occasions, councillors (including women councillors) do have an impact as a result of their delegated political mandate being derived from the existing legal frameworks such as the Local Government Act and the Constitution of Uganda. They make relevant policies, laws, and exercise legislative control over government bureaucrats in their areas of jurisdiction. They also vote for fellow local and national politicians, a mechanism that enhances the political and social accountability to the citizens of those holding political power. These arguments, therefore, are reflective of the fact that political participation of councillors is not a totally isolated activity and that sizeable “political dividends” are often realized in local governance systems. However, looking at the recruitment processes that involve a mixture of electoral colleges and the entire geographical constituencies and taking into account ascribed statuses like sex, age, and physical abilities, as well as achievement traits like education and financial abilities, we recognize the impact of these factors on the intended political activity.

**Conclusion**

The paper has highlighted the penchant for decentralization and presented the background to Uganda’s current decentralized institutional structures. It also offered an overview of the recruitment process in the Ugandan local council structures. The theories of political recruitment and political participation were meant to enable contextualization on how the roles of the councillors are influenced. Citing an example of women councillors, the paper illustrated that the threat of territorial and non-territorial constituencies to councillors’ political participation. The diversity of the constituencies was seen not only as influencing the loyalty of councillors that are respectively authorized but also the mode of participation that
these councillors are likely exercise. We finally note, however, that even when constituencies may be seen as constraining the political participation of councillors, there is a recognizable gain that councillors have in influencing political action based on the mandate derived from legal frameworks pertaining local governance.

References


