Party Campaign Strategies:
Rallies, Canvassing and Handouts in a New Democracy

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Abstract

Although multi-party elections are now routine in many low-income countries, our knowledge of political parties’ campaign strategies in new democracies remains limited. We investigate the campaign strategies — rallies, door-to-door canvassing, and electoral handouts — of Ghana’s two major political parties during the country’s 2012 elections. We argue that incumbent and opposition parties are likely to pursue different campaign strategies. Because of the incumbent party’s resource advantage and ability to favor the party’s core areas with state resources before the election begins, they are likely to mount a broader, nationwide campaign strategy and invest more heavily in resource-intensive strategies. Consistent with this argument we show that the incumbent party campaign most intensely in swing and opposition party core districts, while the challenger campaign most heavily in their own core areas. We also show that canvassing and rallies are widespread and far more prevalent than vote buying, and that incumbents engage in relatively more vote buying. These findings contribute to a more holistic understanding of party campaign strategies in new democracies. They demonstrate that programmatic and clientelistic strategies are not mutually exclusive; parties invest in a mix of both. They also advance the literature on distributive politics by demonstrating that parties do not adopt universal “core” or “swing” targeting strategies, but instead target core and swing voters in different time periods and using different strategies.

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Although multi-party elections are now routine in many low-income countries, our knowledge of political parties’ campaign strategies in new democracies remains limited. Much of the literature focuses on strategies such as vote buying, clientelism, electoral violence and voter intimidation, and electoral fraud. However, other strategies, such as campaign rallies and door-to-door canvassing, also appear to be widespread across new democracies, including many in Africa (Conroy-Krutz, 2016; Horowitz, 2016; Nathan, 2018; Paget, 2018). Yet we lack descriptive information about how widespread these other strategies are, as well as evidence on how parties allocate campaign resources during an election. Further, much research — including some of our own — focuses on specific campaign strategies in isolation. We thus lack a holistic picture of how parties allocate resources to different campaign methods — their “portfolio” — and how these portfolios vary by party type and across local political contexts.

In this article, we explore how parties allocate resources across different types of campaign strategies, and how they target different types of voters. We also investigate how these strategies vary between incumbent and opposition parties. We address these questions by studying the campaign strategies of Ghana’s two major political parties during the country’s 2012 election.

A deeper understanding of how parties campaign is important for our understanding of democratic elections in new democracies — including their implications for the quality of democracy and democratic consolidation. For example, if parties rely predominantly on clientelism or voter intimidation, elections may fail to produce accountable government, and citizens may become disillusioned with the democratic process. If scholars focus their attention on only a subset of campaign strategies, we will have an incomplete, and potentially biased, view of the democratic process.

Our theoretical framework centers on the hypothesis that incumbent parties should be able to mount a more national campaign than opposition parties, and campaign more intensely in electorally competitive districts and opposition strongholds. This difference in
campaign strategies is driven by two advantages that ruling parties are likely to enjoy. First, since control of state resources is often concentrated in the executive branch, incumbents can target public resources to favor certain constituencies before the election campaign begins. In particular, incumbents can shore up the support of their core districts by favoring them during their term in office, which frees them to campaign more aggressively in swing and opposition-dominant districts during the campaign period.

Second, the incumbent often has an overall resource advantage (Arriola, 2012; Rakner and Van de Walle, 2009; Levitsky and Way, 2010). Beyond allowing the incumbent to invest more heavily in resource-intensive campaign strategies, this resource imbalance has implications for where the incumbent is able to campaign. Because many campaign strategies are labor intensive (Bob-Milliar, 2012; Osei, 2012), the incumbent party has the advantage of being able to pay a greater number of non-ideologically committed activists to work for their party. This allows the incumbent to campaign more intensely in electorally competitive areas and opposition strongholds, where the pool of ideologically committed activists is smaller than in their own core support districts.

We use original survey data collected immediately following Ghana’s 2012 general elections to examine how parties invested in and allocated the three most prevalent campaign strategies in the country: campaign rallies, canvassing voters in their homes (henceforth “canvassing”), and vote buying (“electoral handouts”). The survey questions distinguished between incumbent and opposition party strategies, which allows us to assess how incumbency shapes campaign strategies. Perhaps surprisingly, our survey is among of the first to make this distinction between parties. In addition, we sampled constituencies to produce variation in the degree of local electoral competition, which we leverage to examine how parties differentially target strategies to their own core districts, swing districts, and their opponent’s core districts.

Our main results are as follows. First, we document widespread door-to-door canvassing and rally attendance in Ghana. Over 40 percent of respondents reported attending a rally or
campaign meeting, and about 30 percent were canvassed during the election. Second, incumbent and challenger parties allocate resources differently across different types of electoral districts. The incumbent adopts a more national campaign strategy, canvassing and distributing handouts most intensely outside its strongholds, while the challenger canvasses the most where the party is already electorally dominant. Third, the incumbent party varies its strategy depending on the local electoral context: it organizes more campaign rallies in its strongholds, and engages in more door-to-door canvassing in competitive districts and opposition strongholds. Consistent with our argument, the opposition party invests most heavily in all campaign strategies in its stronghold areas.

These findings make three contributions. The first is descriptive. By examining multiple campaign strategies in a single election, our paper is among the first to present a more holistic picture of the campaign environment in a new democracy. Consistent with Horowitz (2016)’s study of campaigns in Kenya, we document widespread door-to-door canvassing during an election. We also find that while both parties in Ghana distribute electoral handouts, canvassing and rallies are far more prevalent. Although canvassing and rallies can be venues for clientelism, we present evidence that party activists use house-to-house canvassing to, at least in part, disseminate information on the policies and campaign promises of their party. Thus, the findings highlight that parties engage in a mix of clientelistic and more programmatic (policy-based) forms of campaigning, which demonstrates that these strategies are not mutually exclusive. The results add nuance to existing debates about whether elections in Africa are clientelistic or programmatic (Resnick, 2012; Weghorst and Lindberg, 2013; Taylor, 2017).

Second, we demonstrate that parties do not adopt a universal “core” or “swing” voter targeting strategy: they target core and swing voters at different points in time using different types of strategies. For example, our argument and results imply that ruling parties target their core supporters during their term in office, which allows them to focus on swing and opposition supporters during the campaign period. We also show that the incumbent targets
swing and opposition areas with canvassing and handouts, but primarily holds rallies in its core areas. These findings advance a distributive politics literature that has focused on the question of whether parties target core or swing voters, often with mixed results (Franck and Rainer, 2012; Golden and Min, 2013; Kasara, 2007; Kramon and Posner, 2013). Our analysis contributes by showing that the questions of when and with which strategies parties target core versus swing areas should receive more attention in the literature, and by providing some initial answers to these questions.

Third, our results deepen our understanding of the advantages of incumbency in new democracies. While previous work has highlighted that opposition parties struggle for resources (Arriola, 2013; Rakner and Van de Walle, 2009), our results document how these resource imbalances translate into differences in the types of campaigns that incumbents and challengers are able to conduct. Thus, while it is not surprising that there is an incumbency advantage in Ghana, our contribution is to show one important, and under-studied, channel through which this advantage manifests itself. In addition, our results may help to explain why opposition parties in Africa often struggle to generate electoral support outside their strongholds (Wahman, 2015): we argue that they are simply unable to campaign heavily in these areas.

1 Incumbency and Political Party Campaign Strategies in Ghana

Ghana has held competitive multi-party elections every four years since its return to democratic rule in November 1992. Along with a growing number of African countries, it has experienced three successful democratic transitions of power, in 2000, 2008 and 2016. Two parties dominate electoral politics, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). We focus on Ghana’s December 2012 election, during which the NDC was the incumbent party and the NPP was the main challenger. The NDC won the election, securing both the presidency and a parliamentary majority.

Presidential candidates need an absolute majority to win the election which, combined with Ghana’s history of highly competitive races, incentivizes parties to seek
votes from across the country. Accordingly, both major parties have a national character, and
draw support from “all geographic constituencies, encapsulating different groups, socio-
economic backgrounds and perspectives” (Gyimah-Boadi and Debrah, 2008, p.147). Yet both
main parties have areas of historic electoral dominance that coincide with ethnic alliances
(Fridy, 2007). While ex-President J. J. Rawlings popularly referred to the Volta region as the
electoral “World Bank” of the NDC, the constituencies in the populous Ashanti region are
stronghold areas for the NPP.

Citizens can join both parties and serve them in official roles at the local, regional and
national levels. Each party has institutionalized grassroots members into the party
structure by establishing polling-station-level positions.ix Party activists compete in branch
elections to win these local posts. Both parties also organize competitive local primaries to
select presidential and parliamentary candidates, which gives party members a direct
influence on the composition of national party elites (Ichino and Nathan, 2013). During the
campaign period, which intensifies in the three months before elections, the mass party
network comes to life. National and then regional party offices dispatch resources to polling
stations, where party mobilizers draw up local campaign plans.

1.1 Campaign Strategies

We focus on the three most prevalent party campaign strategies in Ghana. First, as in other
countries in Africa (Horowitz, 2016; Paget, 2018) and elsewhere (Szwarcberg, 2012a;
Langston and Rosas, 2018), presidential and parliamentary candidates regularly hold
campaign rallies, which typically involve the presidential candidate and the party’s MPs from
nearby constituencies. Ordinary voters and local notables, including traditional chiefs, attend
these events, at which politicians take to the stage to discuss their campaign promises and
disparage the opposition. At rallies, voters are also given t-shirts, handheld fans and other
branded paraphernalia. Rallies are expensive to organize: stages and PA systems are erected,
and large screens may be mounted. Parties also pay activists to bring voters to the rally, and
provide nourishment to attendees; they also sometimes pay citizens to attend. Rallies provide two main benefits. First, they create a public perception that the party is popular: the larger the rally, the better. Second, rallies can be cost effective: politicians’ messages can reach up to thousands of voters in a single day.

A second major campaign activity in Ghana is *door-to-door canvassing* (Nathan, 2016). Political party activists visit potential voters at home in an effort to *mobilize* them to turn out to vote (when targeting core supporters) or to *persuade* them to vote for their party (when targeting swing voters or supporters of the competing party). Round 5 of the Afrobarometer in 2012 sheds some light on what happens when political party activists canvass potential voters. The survey included the following country-specific question about party activists: *In your opinion, which three main activities would you say grassroots political party activists (or foot soldiers) primarily engage themselves in during election campaigns and elections?* Enumerators coded responses into pre-defined categories.

The most frequent first responses to this open-ended question were (1) “Explaining their party’s plans, policies and programs during campaign” (22 percent) and (2) “Mobilizing people to support their party during elections” (12 percent). A smaller proportion of people said that activists’ main activity is to distribute gifts to voters (7 percent), and a very small proportion mentioned intimidation or violence (2 percent). The idea that party activists are informed about the policies of the party they represent is also documented in the handbooks that parties in Ghana provide to activists. For example, the NPP’s Polling Station Manual declares that “It is deemed very necessary for Polling Station Executives [party activists] to update themselves on the policies and programmes of the NPP government so as to be able to proactively defend the Party at all times and at whichever level” (New Patriotic Party, 2006).

Thus, while party activists employ a range of canvassing techniques, a large component of these interactions seems to involve mobilizing electoral support by discussing plans and policies rather than vote buying or intimidation.

During the election we study, one of the major policies that both parties discussed was
the challenger’s (NPP’s) commitment to making senior high school (SHS) free (Brierley and Ofosu, 2014).xi NPP billboards displayed the slogan “Free SHS Now! Not in 20 years. Your vote can make it happen.” Taylor (2017) argues that the NPP have used such policy platforms to attract voters from non-core ethnic groups. By committing to universal policies — such as free SHS and a national health insurance program — the party is able to build support from outside its core Akan base.xii

Party activists have the task of convincing voters that the party’s proposed policies will have a positive impact on their lives. They also remind voters of the party’s track record over the years of democratic rule. For example, NDC activists are often eager to remind voters that their party was responsible for the electrification of the North of the country (Briggs, 2012), while NPP mobilizers are keen to remind voters that the party introduced the national health insurance scheme, which reduced the costs of health care.

Money and gifts, electoral handouts, are also commonly distributed during campaigns (Lindberg, 2003; Nugent, 2007). Many voters expect to receive gifts from candidates (Ghana Center for Democratic Development, 2016), and pressure them to distribute private benefits during the campaign (Lindberg, 2013). According to Afrobarometer survey data, about 12 percent of Ghanaians were offered money or a gift during the 2004 elections, and about 7 percent were offered money or a gift during the 2012 elections. Much vote buying in Ghana, and elsewhere in Africa, occurs in public spaces such as campaign rallies (Kramon, 2016), and the Round 5 Afrobarometer data suggests that some vote buying also occurs when activists canvass voters in their homes.

1.2 Incumbency Advantage and Campaign Strategies

How and where do parties invest in these different campaign strategies? We argue that incumbency shapes the answer to this question. We emphasize two incumbency advantages that we expect to deter-mine incumbent versus opposition campaign strategies.

First, opposition parties are at a significant resource disadvantage because they lack
access to state funds. In Ghana, the incumbent party is in a particularly strong position because the constitution requires the president to appoint the head of each local government. This provision ensures that both the national and local bureaucracy — traditional sources of party finance — are in the hands of the ruling party. Recent academic research, and multiple corruption scandals, demonstrate that ruling parties in Ghana build their campaign chests by corrupting public procurement processes and awarding state contracts to party financiers and sympathizers (Brierley, 2017; Luna, 2015; Sigman, 2017). In contrast, opposition parties can only offer firms prospective promises of state contracts. While the NPP is likely to have been better resourced than other opposition parties in Africa, opposition parties in Ghana still struggle to compete with the incumbent party’s resources (Arriola, 2012, 2013).

Second, the incumbent party can direct public resources to fulfill its political goals before the election campaign even begins. There is evidence that presidents in some African countries channel public goods and resources to areas where their ethnic and partisan supporters live in high concentrations (Franck and Rainer, 2012; Jablonski, 2014). Briggs (2012) finds that incumbents in Ghana have disproportionately delivered electrification to their stronghold areas. Similarly, Nathan (2018) argues that parties in urban Ghana distribute club goods and private benefits to core voters between elections, and deliver lower-value benefits to both core and non-core voters during the campaign period. Only the ruling party can target its core supporters during its term in office, which allows it to invest in voters outside its core during the campaign period.

These resource advantages shape campaign strategies in two important ways. First, the incumbent party should be able to invest in more resource-intensive campaign strategies. In particular, the ruling party should be better able to distribute private benefits to voters ahead of elections. Indeed, there is some evidence that the incumbent party in Ghana is able to engage in more vote buying (Ghana Center for Democratic Development, 2016).

Second, we expect that these advantages allow the incumbent to pursue a more national campaign strategy for two reasons. First, since each of the main campaign strategies
described above is labor intensive, each party must deploy a vast network of activists — known locally in Ghana as “foot soldiers” — to engage in campaign-related work. As in other contexts, party activists play a central role in mobilizing voters to attend campaign rallies (Szwarcberg, 2012a,b), door-to-door canvassing (Horowitz, 2016), and distributing electoral handouts (Kramon, 2016; Lindberg, 2003; Stokes et al., 2013).

Party activists are motivated to work on campaigns for two reasons. First, some are encouraged by a partisan attachment to their preferred party (Bob-Milliar, 2012), especially in party stronghold areas. Second, many others work for political parties in return for private benefits (Bob-Milliar, 2012), or because they expect to receive private benefits if their party is elected (Driscoll, 2017). These benefits take the form of state employment, the payment of school fees and health care bills, and contributions to weddings and funerals.

Given their resource advantage, incumbent parties can more easily attract the type of activists who are motivated by private benefits. Because they are richer, incumbent parties can offer upfront benefits to these activists and, because they are already in office, their promises of post-election benefits may appear more credible (Wantchekon, 2003). Thus, in addition to having more money to spend on campaigns, the incumbent has a comparative advantage in the recruitment of non-ideologically committed activists.

This advantage is important because each party’s pool of ideologically committed activists is likely to be concentrated in its stronghold areas (Fridy, 2007). Thus, while both parties should be able to campaign intensely in their own strongholds, the opposition is less able than the incumbent to pay activists to work outside its strongholds. This implies that the incumbent will be able to invest more effort in campaigning in competitive and opposition electoral districts, while the challenger may be confined to its strongholds.

A second reason that the incumbent should be able to pursue a more national campaign strategy is that he or she can strategically allocate state resources towards fulfilling the party’s electoral goals well before the electoral period. Discretion over state resources allows the incumbent to solidify electoral support in stronghold areas through targeted redistribution of
state resources. We expect that this frees up the incumbent to campaign more intensely in competitive and opposition-stronghold areas during the campaign.

In summary, political parties in new democracies such as Ghana pursue a range of campaign strategies that vary in costs; all strategies are somewhat labor intensive. Because incumbents enjoy substantial resource advantages and the executive enjoys significant discretion in the allocation of state resources before the campaign period, we argue that incumbent and challenger campaign strategies will differ in two important ways. First, incumbents and challengers will invest in a different mix, or portfolio, of campaign strategies, and the incumbent will be able to invest more heavily in resource-intensive strategies such as vote buying. Second, because the incumbent can use its resource advantage to pay non-ideologically committed activists and use its discretion over the allocation of state resources to shore up support in its strongholds before the campaign period, the incumbent party should be able to pursue a more national campaign strategy.

2 Data and Measurement

2.1 Post-election Survey

To investigate party campaign strategies, we conducted a large-scale citizen survey during the two days that followed Ghana’s 2012 general elections. Citizens from four of Ghana’s ten administrative regions — Ashanti, Central, Volta, and Western — were included in our sample. The timing of the survey immediately after the election facilitates reliable reporting on campaign activities. We selected the study regions because of the variation they offer in their levels of electoral competition. As we discuss above, the Ashanti and Volta regions are not electorally competitive. In contrast, the Central and Western regions are home to some of Ghana’s most competitive constituencies: these districts contain many voters who are “up for grabs” in each election (Weghorst and Lindberg, 2013). We leverage this variation across constituencies to investigate party campaign strategies across different electoral environments.

To select respondents, we first drew a random sample of polling stations from the four
regions. To do so, we first selected 60 electoral constituencies, ensuring variation in constituencies that are electorally competitive, NPP strongholds, and NDC strongholds. Because of challenges in data collection in the days after the election, we were able to collect data from 56 of the sampled constituencies. Incumbent strongholds are constituencies where the incumbent party (NDC) received over 65 percent of the vote in the prior (2008) election. All constituencies in which the incumbent party received less than 35 percent of the vote we code as an opposition stronghold. The remaining constituencies are coded as competitive.

After selecting constituencies, we randomly sampled 30 percent of polling stations in each constituency to serve as sampling points. Survey enumerators found a central location near the polling station and used a random-walk technique to select households. To select respondents, enumerators created a list of all voting-age adults living in the household. They then selected one individual at random, alternating between males and females.

We surveyed nearly 6,000 citizens. The surveys were conducted in English (the country’s national language), as well as Akan and Ewe, the two major local languages in the study regions.

2.2 Dependent Variables

To analyze different modes of campaigning, we asked respondents a battery of questions on their contact with parties prior to the election. To analyze variation in strategies between different types of parties, we asked these questions separately for each of the two major parties. This approach makes our data unusually rich and distinguishes it from many prior surveys, which often ask voters about their experiences with different campaign strategies without asking them which parties targeted them. Our more fine-grained data better enable us to analyze party strategies and how they vary by party type.

To document the prevalence of rallies, we asked voters Have you seen the candidate for MP of this constituency from the following parties at a rally or any other event during the current elections? We coded responses separately for each party to construct two dummy
variables, with positive responses taking a value of 1. Our second two outcomes measure rates of canvassing. We used responses to the following question: *Did any political party agents come to your place of residence to encourage you to vote for their party?* Again, the outcomes are dummy variables that take a value of 1 if the party canvassed the respondent, and 0 otherwise.

Our final set of outcome variables assesses the frequency of handouts. We used responses to the following question: *Did you witness any of these parties distributing items such as money, food, fertilizer, or cell phones to voters in your area during the election?* Although we wanted to know which individuals received gifts from parties, we framed this question with reference to the respondent’s local area in order to guard against response bias. Previous research shows that vote buying is a sensitive topic and that citizens under-report this practice when asked directly if they received gifts (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2012). To minimize bias, we therefore follow previous researchers and asked voters whether they had observed vote buying in their area (e.g. Stokes, 2005).xxii

### 2.3 Control Variables

In the regression analyses we present below, we also control for a range of constituency- and individual- level predictors. Research shows that when parties distribute campaign gifts they tend to target poorer voters (Bratton, 2008; Jensen and Justesen, 2014). We therefore created a poverty index as a composite indicator of respondents’ approximate wealth by summing responses to a set of questions about how often they go without cash income, food, medicine and electricity. Since political parties may also target younger voters in an attempt to generate future party support, we also control for age and gender.

Previous research on turnout in Africa shows that citizens who live in rural areas are more likely to vote than their urban counterparts (Kuenzi and Lambright, 2010). We therefore control for whether citizens live in predominantly rural constituencies using data from Ghana’s 2010 census. We also use the census data to control for the share of houses with electricity, which
we use as a proxy for how accessible the constituency is, which may make canvassing relatively cheaper to conduct. Finally, we control for overall constituency-level wealth using the share of houses made of natural materials (as opposed to concrete).

3 Results

3.1 How Do Parties Campaign?

We first present results that investigate different modes of campaigning. Figure 1 disaggregates responses for both major parties and presents mean levels of rally attendance, canvassing and the distribution of handouts. First, we consider rallies. Over 45 percent of respondents in the sample reported seeing politicians from the ruling party at a rally or other public event. The figures are similar for opposition party candidates. Interestingly, a large number of voters (35 percent) reported attending public events organized by MP candidates from both major parties. Overall, these results demonstrate that politicians in Ghana frequently organize rallies, and that politicians interact with a large number of voters using this mode of campaigning.

This pattern is consistent with prior research from other African countries showing that a significant share of voters interacts with parties at rallies. In Tanzania, close to three-quarters of the population attended a rally during the 2015 election campaign (Paget, 2017). In Uganda, over 60 percent of the population attended at least one party rally during the 2011 election (Conroy-Krutz, 2016). Likewise, Horowitz (2016) found that Kenyan President Kibaki held at least one rally in every two constituencies in the country in 2007.xxiii In contrast, our findings can be compared to an older democracy, such as the United States, where a recent survey found that only 10 percent of Americans reported having attended a political rally or speech.xxiv

We note that our results are higher than those reported by the Afrobarometer, which shows that roughly 33 percent of Ghanaians attended a rally during the 2012 election (see
Appendix Section A). Our results are likely to be slightly different for two reasons. First, the Afrobarometer survey was conducted two years after the campaign, and respondents may have forgotten if they attended a rally. Our survey was conducted in the two days after the election, which should ensure an accurate recall of events. Second, our question was phrased to also include “meetings” held by the parliamentary candidate. Thus, our estimate likely also includes attendance at smaller events that were organized by the party and by individual politicians.

Figure 1: Incumbent and opposition party campaign strategies

With respect to canvassing, our data shows that both the incumbent and opposition parties visited about one in every three (30 percent) citizens in our study regions at home. Again, many voters (23 percent) interacted with party activists from both main parties. These
high rates of canvassing do not appear to be unique to Ghana: in Uganda and Kenya, 60 percent and 40 percent of the population, respectively, reported being visited by party agents in their homes (Conroy-Krutz, 2016; Horowitz, 2016).

Finally, we report the mean levels of handouts that parties distributed during the campaign. The data shows that the incumbent party has a clear advantage in harnessing resources to distribute gifts to voters. Overall, about 13 percent of respondents indicated that the incumbent party distributed handouts to people in their community, compared to 8 percent for the opposition party. This difference is equivalent to a 62 percent increase in gifts distributed by the incumbent relative to the opposition. This difference is consistent with our argument that differential access to financial resources shapes how parties mobilize support. It is also clear that the prevalence of handouts is significantly lower than rates of either canvassing or rallies.

3.2 Where Do Parties Campaign?

Figure 2 disaggregates the raw data by the three different types of constituencies — incumbent strongholds, competitive constituencies, and opposition strongholds. The plot demonstrates that although both parties have similar rates of canvassing and appear to hold a similar number of rallies, they pursue quite different strategies in terms of where they campaign.

We first examine canvassing. The left plot in Figure 2 displays patterns of campaigning for the incumbent party. The incumbent canvasses 36 percent of citizens in opposition strongholds and roughly 33 percent in competitive constituencies (the middle category), compared to 23 percent in their strongholds (solid line). The plot on the right displays canvassing rates for the opposition, which canvasses the most voters in the party’s own stronghold constituencies — about 40 percent of citizens. These figures drop dramatically in competitive constituencies (about 30 percent) and incumbent strongholds (only 17 percent). In sum, consistent with the argument, the parties pursue different targeting strategies with canvassing: the incumbent mounts a more national campaign and
disproportionately targets competitive and opposition strongholds, while the opposition disproportionately targets its own strongholds.

Figure 2: Incumbent and opposition campaign strategies by constituency type

Notes: Figure 2 displays survey data from 56 constituencies, of which 9 we classify as incumbent (NDC) strongholds, 27 as competitive, and 20 as opposition (NPP) strongholds. The number of respondents in each type of constituency is 1076, 3006, and 1886, respectively. The categories “Opposition stronghold” and “Own stronghold” are from the point of view of each party. For example, “Own stronghold” in the left plot refers to the Incumbent stronghold, whereas in the right plot it refers to the Opposition stronghold.

The patterns are different when we examine rallies. While the ruling party invests its resources in canvassing voters outside its strongholds, it holds relatively more rallies in constituencies that are home to its core supporters (the dashed line). In stronghold constituencies, over half of respondents reported attending an NDC rally, compared to just over 40 percent in NPP strongholds. The opposition party also reaches the highest share of voters at rallies in its stronghold constituencies. Thus, for the incumbent, the targeting strategy for
rallies appears to be different than the targeting strategy for canvassing. As we discuss below, these differential targeting strategies may be explained by the behavior of incumbent-party MPs, who are likely to organize rallies in stronghold constituencies.

Finally, Figure 2 displays the rates of electoral handouts (dotted line). The plot on the left displays levels of handouts from the ruling party. In opposition strongholds and competitive constituencies, 14 percent of respondents reported that the incumbent party distributed gifts in their community. In its strongholds, the incumbent party distributes gifts to fewer citizens—roughly 10 percent of respondents in these areas reported that gifts are distributed. The plot on the right shows levels of handouts from the opposition party: in every type of constituency, the opposition distributed fewer gifts than the incumbent. In their strongholds and in competitive constituencies, the opposition party distributed gifts to 9 percent of citizens, while in the incumbent party’s stronghold only about 7 percent of citizens received gifts from the opposition.

3.3 Regression Analysis

The results of our regression analyses, which allow us to control for individual- and constituency-level factors that might shape party campaign strategies, are consistent with the descriptive patterns described above. The results in Tables 1 and 2 are from a logistic regression where the dependent variables take a value of 1 if the respondent was canvassed or attended a rally held by the party in question. The results in Columns 1 and 2 of Table 1 show that there is a negative and statistically significant relationship between the incumbent party’s vote share in the constituency (in 2008) and the probability of a respondent being were canvassed by the incumbent party (in 2012). The results in Column 1 control for constituency-level characteristics that may influence rates of campaign contact. In Column 2, we add controls for a host of individual-level factors.\textsuperscript{xxv} The negative relationship remains unchanged.

The top panel in Figure 3 displays the marginal effect of changes in prior NDC vote share in a constituency on the probability of a respondent being canvassed (left plot). The
rug at the bottom of the plot displays the distribution of the independent variable of focus. Overall, there is a clear and substantively significant decrease in the probability that a voter will be canvassed by the ruling party as the vote share of the incumbent party increases. In constituencies where the incumbent party received less than 20 percent of the vote in 2008, the probability of a citizen being canvassed before the 2012 election is over 0.4, and this drops by roughly 50 percent in constituencies where over 80 percent of the population voted for the incumbent in the prior election. In short, the incumbent party canvassed the most in opposition strongholds.

Table 1: Logistic regressions predicting incumbent party campaign contact

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<th>Inc. canvass</th>
<th>Inc. rally</th>
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<td>(0.053)</td>
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<td>NDC voter</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.012)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty index</td>
<td>0.008*</td>
<td>0.017***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.281***</td>
<td>0.597***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.101)</td>
<td>(0.113)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual controls</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>5,376</td>
<td>5,355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Constituency-level controls are: degree of urbanization, share of houses with electricity, and share of houses made of natural materials (earth or wood). Clustered standard errors (polling station level) are in parentheses.

Columns 3 and 4 in Table 1 present the same analyses with rally attendance as the dependent variable. In contrast to the first two columns, the results display a positive relationship between incumbent party vote share and rally attendance. After controlling for individual-level characteristics, this relationship is statistically significant at conventional levels (Column 4). The top panel in Figure 3 displays the marginal effect of changes in NDC vote share in a constituency on the probability of a respondent attending a rally (right plot).
Again, the relationship is substantively significant. The probability of seeing a candidate at a rally increases by about 10 percentage points when we move from constituencies where only 20 percent of the electorate voted for the incumbent party in the previous election to those in which over 80 percent did so.

We further investigate which of the individual-level variables correlate with party campaign contact. The results in Table 1 suggest that, on average, the incumbent party was more likely to canvass its core supporters than to canvass opposition supporters. Core supporters are also more likely to report attending a rally held by the incumbent party. Female respondents are no more likely to be canvassed than males, but do appear less likely to attend rallies. Additionally, individual poverty levels are positively correlated with both being canvassed and attending a rally.

Table 2 displays the results for the opposition party. Columns 1 and 3 control for constituency-level factors, while Columns 2 and 4 add individual-level controls. Across all columns there is a strong and negative relationship between incumbent party vote share and the probability of a respondent being canvassed (Columns 1 and 2) or attending a rally (Columns 3 and 4). The bottom panel in Figure 3 displays the marginal effect of incumbent party vote share on rates of canvassing (left) and rallies (right). The predicted probabilities demonstrate a large decrease in the opposition party’s propensity to contact voters in incumbent strongholds. In short, the opposition is much more likely to engage in campaign activities within its own strongholds than outside these areas. Overall, the regression results complement the descriptive data in Figure 2 and shows that these results are unlikely to be explained by alternative constituency- or individual-level predictors.
Table 2: Logistic regressions predicting opposition party campaign contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Opposition canvass</th>
<th>Opposition rally</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inc. vote share (08)</td>
<td>-0.320***</td>
<td>-0.335***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
<td>(0.052)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDC voter</td>
<td>0.032*</td>
<td>-0.037**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.021**</td>
<td>0.036***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.010)</td>
<td>(0.010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
<td>-0.035***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty index</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.010**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.385***</td>
<td>0.388***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.095)</td>
<td>(0.108)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituency controls</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual controls</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>5,697</td>
<td>4,102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.042</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Constituency-level controls are: degree of urbanization, share of houses with electricity, and share of houses made of natural materials (earth or wood). Individual-level controls are: education, gender, poverty index, and NDC voter in 2008. Clustered standard errors (polling station level) are in parentheses.

Considering the individual variables that predict opposition canvass rates, we find that the opposition party primarily canvassed its non-core supporters. This result could be explained by the fact that the incumbent canvassed extensively in the opposition’s stronghold. The opposition party may have retaliated by also canvassing incumbent party supporters living in its stronghold constituencies. However, the negative coefficient on the variable NDC voter in Column 2 suggests that NDC voters were less likely to attend rallies held by NPP candidates, as might be expected. Finally, as above, females appear less likely than men to attend rallies, and individual poverty rates are positively associated with both types of campaign contact.

Finally, an alternative approach to analyzing our survey data is to aggregate the data up to the polling station level. In such an analysis, the dependent variable takes a value of 1 when any of the respondents from the station report attending in a rally, being canvassed, or seeing handouts being distributed. Our results remain identical if we adopt this approach. We present these results in Appendix Section B.
Figure 3: Incumbent and opposition party campaign strategies — canvassing versus rallies
4 Discussion and Conclusion

This study has investigated party campaign strategies in Ghana. One important nuance of our data is that we disaggregated between each of Ghana’s two major parties – the incumbent and the opposition – when we ask respondents about their contact with parties during the campaign. We present two main results.

First, our analysis produces an important descriptive finding: door-to-door canvassing is extremely widespread. About 30 percent of our sample of Ghanaians reported that at least one of the two major political parties visited their home in an attempt to win their vote. A significant number of voters are targeted by both parties. Ghanaians also attend campaign rallies and meetings at very high rates -- over 40 percent. Importantly, our data also suggests that canvassing and rallies are substantially more prevalent than electoral handouts. Thus, while the literature on African politics has typically emphasized the importance of exchange-based or otherwise manipulative campaign strategies, our results imply that parties also generate support by discussing their policies and programs with citizens. More generally, this highlights that campaigns in new democracies are not simply clientelistic or programmatic, but contain elements of both approaches.

Second, our analysis shows that the incumbent party campaigns outside its traditional strongholds, while the opposition is confined to areas where they are already electorally strong. These results, we argue, are driven by differential access to campaign resources. The incumbent also has the advantage of being able to direct public resources to core supporters to shore up the support of voters in its stronghold areas — and to prevent elite defections from the party — before and perhaps even during the campaign. This allows the incumbent to focus canvassing efforts in opposition and competitive constituencies. The challenger, however, does not have discretionary control over public resources and must invest resources in mobilizing its core supporters during the campaign. In addition, facing tighter budget constraints, the opposition is more reliant on party activists to generate support. This reliance leads the opposition to focus its campaign efforts on its strongholds, where there is a ready supply of
activists who are willing to canvass voters.

Our argument and results thus contribute to the literature on distributive politics, which has addressed the question of whether parties target core or swing voters (Franck and Rainer, 2012; Kasara, 2007; Kramon and Posner, 2013). We suggest that the incumbent party does both, distributing benefits to different groups of voters in different time periods. Specifically, the ruling party uses public resources to distribute club goods and private benefits to core voters during their tenure in office in order to suppress the risk of defection by core voters (Diaz-Cayeros, Estévez and Magaloni, 2016). Shoring up core voters during its term in office then allows the incumbent party to dedicate resources to a broader group of voters during the campaign. Future research could further investigate the timing of distributive exchanges, and consider other instances of politicians substituting core and swing voter targeting during different periods of the electoral cycle.

We also find that the incumbent party targets rallies differently than canvassing and handouts: specifically, the incumbent targets its own strongholds more heavily with rallies while it targets opposition and competitive constituencies more heavily with canvassing. This may result from the actions of individual candidates for parliament in incumbent stronghold areas. While the party may not dedicate as many resources to house-to-house canvassing in stronghold areas, it remains crucial for parliamentary candidates to demonstrate that they are active in their constituencies and to mobilize high rates of voter turnout in the party strongholds. Because rallies are a more cost-effective way to mobilize voters, parliamentary candidates may be more likely to hold them in their stronghold constituencies, where most voters are likely to vote for the party if they turn out to vote. This result thus has two related implications that should be further investigated in future research. First, it shows that the incumbent targets core, swing, and opposition supporters with different types of strategies. Second, it suggests that the structure of party organization, and the individual decisions of different actors within a party — in this case, parliamentary candidates and national party campaign managers — may help to explain these differential targeting strategies.
Finally, we note that while our argument highlights important differences in campaign strategies between the incumbent and challenger, one limitation of our analysis is that we collected it during a single election. This makes it difficult for us to rule out the possibility that the differences in party strategies that we document are due to other differences between the two parties, rather than the NDC’s status as the incumbent. Qualitative evidence, however, supports the idea that our results are driven by incumbency. For example, during the 2008 campaign, when the NPP was the incumbent party, there is evidence that it allocated significant resources to opposition strongholds such as the Volta region. As Jockers, Kohnert and Nugent (2010) observe, "The NPP exploited the advantage of incumbency in the Volta Region. For example, apart from the usual distribution of large numbers of T-shirts, they provided school books in the villages, traditional presents to the chiefs and... also cash as an incentive to vote for the right candidate" (p. 108). Thus, while the incumbent NDC party campaigned heavily in the Ashanti region in 2012, the NPP campaigning heavily in the Volta region in 2008 when it was the incumbent party. An implication of our findings is that the NDC — now out of office — will campaign more heavily in its stronghold constituencies during the upcoming 2020 election campaign than it did in 2012. In addition, our finding that the opposition party struggles to campaign outside its stronghold regions is consistent with data from a number of African countries that shows that electoral support for opposition parties is more geographically confined than for incumbents (Wahman, 2015). In short, our research complements prior work that suggests that access to financial resources — and disparities in resources between parties — has widespread implications for the campaign footprints and strategies of parties in new democracies.
References


Bob-Milliar, George M. 2012. “Political party activism in Ghana: Factors influencing the decision of the politically active to join a political party.” Democratization 19(4):668–89.


Luna, Joseph. 2015. “Linking Political Finance and Poor Service Provision in a Developing State.”


Researchers have studied vote buying and clientelism in many regions, including the Middle East (Corstange, 2012), South and Central America (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2012; Nichter, 2008; Stokes, 2005), South East Asia (Wang and Kurzman, 2007), and sub-Saharan Africa (Bratton, 2008; Nugent, 2007; Kramon, 2017; Wantchekon, 2003).

See, for example, Asunka et al. (2017); Collier and Vicente (2014); Robinson and Torvik (2009); Straus and Taylor (2012).

See, for example, (e.g. Asunka et al., 2017; Collier and Vicente, 2012).

See, for example, Briggs (2012); Franck and Rainer (2012); Jablonski (2014); Kramon and Posner (2016); Nathan (2018).


Some rounds of the Afrobarometer survey ask citizens about campaigns contact with parties, but do not ask which party contacted them.

We describe the variables we use to classify constituencies in Section 2.

Nathan (2018) (chapter 6) also argues that in urban Ghana the ruling party distributes relatively more expensive goods to core voters during their term in office, and distributes gifts more broadly in the immediate pre-election period.

The NDC has party positions in each electoral ward, while the NPP has positions for each polling station.

The second responses were discussing policies (9 percent), mobilizing support (14 percent), giving gifts (6 percent), and intimidating voters on election day (2 percent). The third responses were discussing policies (7 percent), mobilizing support (12 percent), giving gifts (6 percent), and intimidating on election day (2 percent).
Primary and junior high school are already free in Ghana.

The Akan are the largest ethnic group in Ghana.

Article 243 of Ghana’s 1992 constitution. The head of a local government is called the District Chief Executive.


It also allows the incumbent to deter insurgencies from within the party (Cox, 2010); that is, to prevent elites from defecting from the party and running against it as independents.

According to the last census, about half of Ghana’s population lives in these regions.

Given the two-party system, this is roughly equivalent to the NPP receiving 65 percent or more of the vote.

We sampled these polling stations for a concurrent project on election observers in which the polling station was our unit of analysis. Just over 2,000 polling stations were in our original sample. Due to logistical challenges, we were unable to collect survey data from voters living close to each of these polling stations. In our survey sample, we have responses from citizens from 1,571 polling stations, contained within 56 constituencies in our four regions.

The Afrobarometer, Africa’s leading public opinion organization, uses this technique to select respondents, as do many other survey researchers on the continent. We provided enumerators with the same instructions that the Afrobarometer provides to its enumerators. Ideally, we would have selected respondents directly from the official voter registration list. As Ghana’s Electoral
Commission was unwilling to release this information to us prior to the elections, we sampled households.

xx The survey involved roughly 300 survey enumerators. These enumerators were recruited as part of a larger project that analyzed the impact on election observers of election-day fraud and violence. We present those results elsewhere. We trained the enumerators at multiple training sessions held in each of the four regions in our sample.

xvi For example, the Afrobarometer surveys generally ask respondents whether they were offered a bribe or a gift during an election, but do not ask which party made the offer.

xxii We also asked respondents whether they personally received gifts. Because the survey was conducted in such close proximity to the election, respondents perceived this question as being highly sensitive. As a result, there were extremely high non-response rates on this item, which makes it impossible to use in the analysis.

xxiii Horowitz (2016) reports that the mean number of rallies for Kibaki per constituency was 0.57 (footnote 8).


xxv We discuss the control variables in Section 2.4.

xxvi There is not sufficient within-constituency variation in the party strongholds to test whether individual targeting strategies vary by constituency type.

xxvii In Appendix Section A we use data from Afrobarometer Round 6 from 2014 (which asked about general rally attendance during the
2012 election, but not broken down by party) to investigate whether our results are robust to this alternative data set. While we cannot fully replicate our analysis, the patterns we find using this alternative data source are broadly consistent with our findings. Disaggregating the Afrobarometer data by region, we find that in opposition strongholds, incumbent party supporters are less likely to report attending a rally. Our data suggests that this is because the incumbent party held fewer rallies in these constituencies. Similarly, opposition supporters are less likely to report attending a rally in incumbent party strongholds. Again, our data suggests that this is because the opposition party held fewer rallies in incumbent strongholds. The Afrobarometer data also corroborates our finding that females are less likely to attend rallies, and continue to show a positive association between individual poverty levels and rally attendance. This finding may be explained by poorer citizens having an incentive to attend rallies to obtain private benefits or handouts from parties.