What Accountability Pressures do MPs in Africa Face and How Do They Respond? Evidence from Ghana

Description

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Source: Lindberg, S., 2010, Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 117-142 VIA Governance and Social Development Resource Centre]

Summary: What is the role of clientelism in African politics? How are MPs held accountable in Ghana? This article examines the daily accountability pressures and responses of Ghanaian Members of Parliament, the strength of the institution, and the formal and informal aspects of their role. It finds that these MPs devote a significant proportion of their time to producing and distributing private goods to constituents, and to constituent service. Marginal attention is devoted to legislating and executive oversight. Some MPs have been able to counter political clientelism, however, through civic education and by reformulating constituent expectations toward the production of collective, public goods.

Despite the rapid expansion in research on African politics, little is known about the daily behaviour of legislators, their accountability pressures and responses. This case study on Ghana finds that groups that hold MPs accountable include constituents, the local party, extended family, chiefs, religious leaders, civil society organisations (CSOs) and businesses (although these last two appear to exert little pressure). They require MPs to perform five core duties â?? the provision of private goods, constituency service, constituency representation, legislation and executive oversight:

- *Personal benefits and clientelistic goods*: This type of accountability is the most common in MPsâ?? relationships with their constituents and is the one that puts the most pressure on MPs. Different groups have varied expectations of the form that such benefits should take. They range from monetary assistance (such as school fees or small business start-up costs) to the provision of jobs. There is a clear division between rural and urban constituencies; urban MPs have much greater resistance to constituent demands.
- *Constituency service as community development*: This is an area of heavy emphasis for constituents and chiefs, causing MPs to spend a lot of their time lobbying ministers for development projects for their area.
- *Constituency representation*: There is a strong expectation of MPs to be heard in debates and to have a media presence. This is anchored in the traditional notion of family heads â??speaking upâ?? for their people.
- *Legislation and executive oversight*: It is primarily the executive which exerts pressure on MPs regarding legislation, particularly regarding voting conformity (by withholding of seats on lucrative tender boards). Active public debate and scrutiny are compromised due to the strength of the executive over the legislature.

The clientelistic relationship between the MP and constituents stems from traditional notions of â??head of the familyâ??, one who has a moral obligation to solve problems for followers in need. The hybrid role of MP as family head places enormous pressures on officeholders to be responsive to constituentsâ?? needs and priorities. MPs face the dual sanctions of losing office at election time and

the informal shame, harassment and loss of status within the context of family and community. However, some MPs have been successful in translating the informal family head role into pressure for the production of collective goods by engaging in civic education and raising political awareness:

- MPs that have held regular community meetings to explain legislative business and policy have been successful in developing a strong voice for collective goods.
- Focusing expectations on collective, public, and national-level goods has significantly reduced pressure on MPs to personally provide private goods.
- It has also increased constituent perception of the importance of legislative behaviour for chances of re-election. This in turn has reduced clientelistic behaviour and promoted democratic responsiveness.

Access full text: available online

Category

1. Uncategorized

Tags

1. accountability
2. clientelism
3. constituency
4. Ghana
5. Parliament

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