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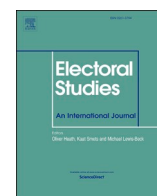
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# Female representation and electoral clientelism: New insights from South African municipal elections

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## ABSTRACT

Do citizens experience less electoral clientelism in polities with more elected female representatives? The current literature is remarkably silent on the role of gender and female political representation for electoral clientelism. Due to gender differences in issue priorities, targeted constituent groups, networks and resources, we argue that voters experience less clientelism in municipalities with a higher proportion of female politicians because either female politicians are likely to engage less in clientelism or women are less likely to be viable candidates in more clientelist settings. Through either mechanism, we expect all voters – and female voters in particular – to experience less exposure to clientelism in municipalities with higher female representation. We examine this idea using survey data from the 2016 municipal elections in South Africa – a country with high levels of female representation in politics but increasing problems of corruption and patronage in the political system. Our findings are consistent with the argument that municipalities with more elected female councilors have considerably lower rates of electoral clientelism and that this mostly affects whether female voters are targeted by clientelist distribution. These findings shed new light on how women's representation in elected political office shapes the incidence and use of clientelist distribution during elections.

## 1. Introduction

Do citizens experience less electoral clientelism in polities with more elected female representatives? Despite its importance for parties and voters, the vast literature on electoral clientelism is remarkably silent on the role of gender and tends to include gender merely as a control variable among targeted individuals (see for example [Blaydes and El Tarouty, 2009](#); [Bratton, 2008](#); [Corstange, 2018](#); [Stokes, 2005](#); [Jensen and Justesen, 2014](#)). The key exceptions focus on brokers ([Daby 2021](#)) and candidate nomination ([Arriola and Johnson, 2014](#); [Ichino and Nathan, 2022](#)) rather than voters or the impact of female politicians on voters. Few studies focus on how political parties and candidates use clientelism to target male or female voters differently and *none* evaluate whether women's political leadership decreases voter exposure to vote buying and other forms of clientelism. In this paper, we contribute to fill this gap.

We argue that due to gender differences in issue priorities, targeted constituent groups, networks and resources, voters are likely to experience less clientelism in municipalities with a higher proportion of

elected female politicians. We develop two theoretical mechanisms to support this expectation. On the one hand, we argue that female politicians are likely to engage less in clientelism and this mostly affects whether female voters are targeted by clientelist distribution. Under this mechanism, voters are likely to experience less clientelism in municipalities with a higher percentage of female politicians, because – compared to men – women are less likely to use clientelist strategies in their campaigns. On the other hand, women are also less likely to be viable candidates in more clientelist settings as they are likely to have less access to the patronage networks and resources needed to compete in these settings. Under this mechanism, voters are likely to experience less clientelism in municipalities with a higher percentage of female politicians because women are more likely to make it into political office where clientelism is lower. Under both perspectives, we assume that all voters are likely to experience less clientelism in municipalities with a higher percentage of female politicians, and we expect the relationship will be stronger for female voters due to shared experiences, networks and issue priorities that generate stronger ties between female politicians and female voters ([Clayton et al., 2019: 83](#); [Gottlieb et al., 2018:](#)

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622; Tripp 2001).

We test our argument by focusing on the relationship between electoral clientelism and women's representation in political office across municipalities in South Africa, which offers an ideal context for our investigation, because it is a country that combines a high degree of variation in female representation across municipalities with varying use of clientelist strategies during (local) election campaigns – particularly by the dominant party, the African National Congress (ANC). To test our argument, we draw on unique data from a nationwide survey conducted following the 2016 municipal elections in South Africa (Justesen and Schulz-Herzenberg 2018), which we merge with data on the proportion of elected female councilors in local councils. Using this data, we test two hypotheses: first, that higher levels of female representation in municipal governments are associated with lower levels of electoral clientelism in local elections, and second, that female voters in particular are less likely to experience vote buying when female representation is higher. While the observational nature of our research design and data does not allow us to establish causal effects in either direction of the two proposed mechanisms, our findings are consistent with the hypotheses. We find a strong and negative relationship between female representation and citizen experience with vote buying. The empirical evidence also shows that the lower rates of electoral clientelism in municipalities with higher female representation is in large part experienced by female voters. In real-world terms, our models elucidate that the probability of a respondent experiencing vote buying decreases by a magnitude of roughly 2.5% for each 1% increase of in female representation in local councils.

The paper is organized as follows. We begin by reviewing of the literature on clientelism that situates the role of gender in current work on clientelist politics. Next, we draw on that literature and literature on women in political offices and corruption to argue for a more elaborate role for gender in our efforts to understand the incidence and use of clientelist distribution during elections. We also discuss how gender differences in issue priorities, networks and resources matter for women's representation in elected political office and how it affects the incidence and use of clientelist distribution during elections in South Africa. We then turn to the description of our data and analysis and the presentation of our results. We conclude with a discussion of our findings.

### 1.1. Gender and clientelist politics

Political clientelism denotes situations where parties or candidates distribute material goods or benefits to voters, conditional on voters reciprocating with votes or political support (Woller and Justesen, 2022; Mares and Young, 2016; Larreguy et al., 2016; Stokes, 2005). The distributive politics that is involved in clientelist transactions is different from programmatic distributive politics, where the distribution of public benefits and welfare services are governed by clear, transparent, and publicly known rules, and where citizens' access to these is typically not conditional on their partisan affiliations (Stokes, 2005). Clientelist politics is therefore also often considered an illicit – and illegal – mode of distributive politics (Mares and Young, 2016) that both “reflects and feeds” corruption more generally (Hicken 2011, 290). Clientelism employed during elections likewise has strong affinities to electoral corruption and malfeasance that contribute to undermine principles of democratic fairness and good governance (Birch 2020; Rothstein and Varraich 2017).

It is widely accepted that clientelist politics play an important role for parties and voters both during and in-between elections in democracies around the world (Woller and Justesen, 2022; Mares and Young, 2016; Nichter 2018; Kramon, 2017; Stokes, 2005). A large part of the literature on clientelism focuses on parties' targeting strategies and in particular how parties target voters based on poverty and partisanship (Koter, 2017; Jensen and Justesen 2014; Stokes, 2005; Nichter, 2018; Stokes 2005). A related branch of the literature engages with how

clientelist exchanges are enforced and monitored – especially given the presence of the secret ballot – and the role of party brokers for building and sustaining clientelist networks (Brierley and Nathan 2021; Auerbach et al., 2018; Larreguy et al., 2016; Stokes, 2005). The issue of whether clientelist transactions are effective and actually sway voter behavior has also attracted a substantial attention in the current literature – but with mixed findings (Gouws, 2020; Guardado and Wantchekon, 2018; Kramon, 2017; Conroy-Krutz and Logan, 2012; Bratton 2008).

Yet, what is striking about the current literature on clientelism is the almost complete lack of attention to the role of gender and female political representation. A recent paper by Daby on gender and clientelist brokers (2021: 216) clearly identifies the fundamental gap in research on gender and political clientelism: “mainstream research on [political clientelism] has remained blind to gender differences, failing to recognize gender as important, relevant and informative for the study of clientelism in comparative politics”. Indeed, echoing Daby's assessment of the literature, beyond her study, we find that whether and how gender impacts voters' exposure to electoral clientelism remains largely unexplored. In addition to Daby, there is, however, research on gender, candidate selection and clientelism (Arriola and Johnson, 2014; Ichino and Nathan, 2022) and campaign financing in more clientelist settings (Koter 2017; Wahman and Seeberg, 2022; Wilkins 2016) on which we draw. Overall, however, only a few studies evaluate the role of gender for vote buying among voters (Blaydes and El Tarouty, 2009; Bratton 2008), and none evaluate whether women's political leadership or female political representation decreases voter exposure to vote buying.

An obvious weakness of this lacunae is the neglect of analysis of clientelist strategies if voters are operating in a setting where more women compared to men hold elected office. That said, in the following sections we draw on the scant literature on gender and political clientelism and the larger literature on women in political offices and corruption to develop two arguments supporting why voters, and especially female voters, are likely to experience less clientelism in municipalities with a higher percentage of female politicians. The first draws on the literature to argue why female politicians are likely to engage less in clientelism. The second draws on the literature to argue why women are less likely to be viable candidates in more clientelist settings and why this reduces voter exposure to clientelism in contexts with higher percentages of female politicians. Under both perspectives, a higher percentage of female politicians is expected to result in less widespread experiences with clientelism among voters. Yet, while we expect that this applies for voters more generally, we also expect the relationship to be stronger for female voters in particular. Female voters are likely to have stronger ties with female politicians from the perspective of shared experiences, issue priorities and networks, as well as having higher preferences for more programmatic, social welfare policies rather than short term clientelistic ones. Thus, if female politicians engage less in clientelism compared to their male counterparts, this is likely to impact female voters' experiences more given their stronger ties to female politicians. Alternatively, in contexts where women's political candidacy is more viable and supported it is also likely that female voter participation will be more highly valued and mobilized which, in turn, may increase female voters' experiences of lower clientelism.

### 1.2. Why female politicians are likely to engage less in clientelism

From the clientelism literature, we draw on Daby (2021) to build the argument as to why female politicians are likely to engage less in clientelism. Daby (2021) evaluates the gendered aspects of political clientelism through an in-depth, qualitative study of brokers in Argentina and finds that women tend to play different roles than men in brokerage networks. Compared to men, when women are in a position to broker, it tends to be for goods that benefit vulnerable populations reliant on help from social programs for their well-being. For instance, women broker

for votes by providing food to hungry children through soup kitchens. Daby suggests that this likely reflects the differential political goods women are in a position to target as a result of their locations in social structures. Given their experience with discrimination and social expectations that they deliver care work, women are more likely to be in a position to broker votes for welfare-like goods that likely benefit those who are vulnerable and in need of more expansive welfare policies by the state. It is more difficult to punish those that benefit directly from these goods if the expected votes are not delivered in exchange for access to the benefits. For example, it is difficult to punish the children that benefit from soup kitchens if their parents do not participate accordingly in vote buying schemes. Ultimately, the goods women are in a position to target have more of a likeness to public goods, goods that are closer to being non-rival and non-excludable in nature. Thus, in contrast to men who are in a position to broker more particularistic, personalized goods, women have fewer opportunities to use clientelism to build, enlarge, and sustain clientelist political networks by disproportionately working with politically provided goods from which it is more difficult to exclude their beneficiaries if the beneficiaries do not follow through with the expected vote.

Turning to the focus of our study, in addition to limiting female brokers, the gendered aspects of political clientelism evinced by Daby are also likely to limit female politicians' reliance on clientelism compared to male politicians. Moreover, since female politicians are more likely to target female voters as part of their networks, this is likely to more negatively affect whether female voters are targeted by clientelist distribution in particular.

Similar to Daby's theory of why gender matters for clientelist broker strategies, research on gender and corruption<sup>1</sup> suggests that gender differences in politicians' issue priorities, networks and resources likely reduce female politicians' engagement in corruption compared to men. Given that clientelism employed during elections has strong affinities to electoral corruption and malfeasance, this literature offers insights into why female politicians are likely to engage less in clientelism. One line of corruption research argues that women are more likely to value an expansive and effective welfare state and resist or actively combat corruption given the obvious damage corruption inflicts on the state's ability to function in this capacity (Alexander 2021; Bauhr and Charron, 2021; Alexander et al., 2020). Another line of research focuses on women's marginalization from power and their lower share of resources to argue that relative to men, women are less likely to be embedded in the networks that enable engagement in corruption (Alexander 2021; Bjarnegård 2013; Goetz, 2007). Below, we describe these two perspectives and argue for their relevance to female politicians' likelihood of engaging less in clientelism and the differential effect this has on whether female voters are targeted by clientelist distribution.

### 1.2.1. Women and welfare

Due to gender role socialization that marginalizes women from access to power and resources and saddles them with predominant responsibility for the burden of care for kin, women make up the most vulnerable populations in the world and tend to rely on a more expansive welfare state for their self-determination. This is linked to women's greater tendency to select occupations in social services when they enter the labor force. It is also linked to a greater tendency to have female dominated networks and to view women and their interests as a group they represent when they hold elected office. Taken together, this

<sup>1</sup> Several studies find a relationship between women's inclusion in elected office and lower levels of corruption (Alexander 2021). Evidence shows that higher inclusion of women in legislatures and as mayors decreases the level of corruption across and within democracies (Bauhr and Charron, 2021; Brollo and Troiano 2016; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2018; Justesen and Schulz-Herzenberg, 2018; Swamy et al., 2001) and individuals' reported experience of corruption, such as bribe paying (Bauhr and Charron, 2021).

increases women's tendency to attribute more importance to policies that improve the state's provision of welfare services and resist or actively combat corruption given the obvious damage corruption inflicts on the state's ability to function in this capacity (Alexander 2021; Bauhr and Charron, 2021; Bauhr et al., 2019).

The greater tendency to prioritize improvement in the state's provision of welfare services likely reduces the level of female candidates' reliance on clientelism as a campaign strategy. Gaining political support through clientelism requires particular, personalized exchanges that contradict the logic of universal, impartial provision of state resources that underlie strategies to improve the state's delivery of social services. These are strategies that female political candidates, their networks, and their female constituent base are more likely to value and support.

### 1.2.2. Women and power marginalization

Women often face overt and systemic discrimination that restricts their access to resources, powerful networks and powerful positions. As a result, women are less likely to be embedded in the networks and acquire the resources that enable engagement in corruption (Alexander 2021; Bjarnegård E. (2013). *Gender, informal institutions and political recruitment: Explaining male dominance in parliamentary representation*. Springer.; Goetz, 2007).

Under restricted access to resources, powerful networks and powerful positions, this likely reduces the resources that female political candidates have at their disposal to engage in clientelist strategies during their campaigns. Thus, where there is a higher percentage of female politicians, voters may be exposed less to clientelism due to female politicians' relative power marginalization. And, given the likelihood for female politicians to have stronger ties to female voters, this will have a particularly strong impact on female voters' exposure to vote buying.

### 1.3. Why women are less likely to Be viable candidates in clientelist settings

While the argument above emphasizes that female political representation affects the use of clientelism – and voters' exposure to clientelist strategies during elections – we also readily acknowledge that the presence of clientelism and the dominance of clientelist networks may affect selection into elected political office in ways that are gendered and biased against women. Indeed, the work on gender, candidate selection and clientelism finds that women are more likely to be nominated or selected as candidates in less clientelist settings. In their study of Ghana, Ichino and Nathan (2022: 1168–1169) found that a reform which increased the size and demographic diversity of the legislative primary electorate in the National Democratic Congress positively impacted the number of female political aspirants and the probability that a political nominee was a woman. They argue that these positive shifts in female political representation are due to a reduction in the feasibility of direct vote buying given the expanded electorate in the reform. Under this change, female aspirants that lacked the support of the male-dominant patronage networks that are needed to buy votes could expect to be more successful.

In their study of cabinet appointments in sub-Saharan Africa, Arriola and Johnson, (2014) find that the share of women's cabinet appointments is lower in countries where leaders must accommodate more politicized ethnic groups and argue that this is because, in these settings, incumbents are more likely to use these appointments to build patronage alliances with these ethnic groups. This reliance on patronage building alliances is exclusionary of women because “they lack the social status or personal resources to become ethnic patrons” (Arriola and Johnson, 2014).

Supporting the above gendered insights on clientelism and women's nomination for political office, additional literature on campaign financing and clientelism describe contexts that likely benefit the candidacy and nomination of men to run for or hold political office in



clientelist settings relative to women. According to Koter's (2017) study of Benin, the increased prevalence of vote buying in clientelist settings leads parties to select more wealthy candidates to run for political office which tend to be men and therefore works to the exclusion of female candidate selection. Wilkins (2016) work on Uganda describes how the rise in peripheral patronage has resulted in an increasing burden placed on rural political elites to fund patronage at election time. This resource burden likely biases the viability of male compared to female aspirants in running for rural political offices. Finally, in a study of Malawi, Wahman and Seeborg (2022) describe a decentralization mechanism through which parties rely heavily on local elites that are most willing to spend their own resources in election campaigns. Similar to the research on Uganda, the resource burden for politicians under this clientelist setting likely biases the viability of male compared to female aspirants in running for rural political offices.

Finally, there is a strand of gender and corruption research that supports the argument that contexts with lower levels of corruption are more conducive to women's inclusion in political office, because corruption tends to rely on and support male-dominant, insider networks. For instance, based on analyses of parliamentary compositions worldwide and extensive fieldwork in Thailand, Bjarnegård (2013) argues that corruption functions to the exclusion of women and to the benefit of men in clientelist systems. Electoral corruption is particularly likely to benefit men because men are considered assets in these networks given their access to those networks and the resources to finance those networks. In addition, based on data covering 167 regions in 18 European countries, Sundström and Wängnerud (2016) find that where levels of corruption are high, the proportion of women elected to local councils is low and, vice versa, where levels of corruption are low, the proportion of women elected to local councils is higher. Moreover, Stockemer (2011) study of the African region suggests that corruption prevents gender equal representation.

Based on the expectations from these sets of related literature, we propose the following hypothesis.

**H1.** Higher levels of female inclusion in elected municipal leadership is negatively related to citizen experiences with vote buying.

#### 1.4. Politician and voter gender, issue priorities, networks and resources in South Africa

In addition to our main expectation in H1, the literature suggests both supply and demand side gender gaps in electoral clientelism. On the supply side, recent research on the African region, including the case of South Africa, corroborates that there are significant gender differences in politicians' issue priorities with some of the largest and most robust in the areas of women's rights (Clayton et al. 2019: 83) and poverty alleviation (Clayton et al., 2019: 83; Gottlieb et al., 2018: 622). In addition to variation in issue priorities, female candidates tend to have a higher proportion of female voters in their networks (Mahsun et al., 2021) and female candidates have a strong reliance on support from vast networks of women's associations (Tripp 2001). Tripp (2001: 417) notes that the role of female networks was especially important in understanding progress in South Africa where women's organizations "trained women leaders, carried out civic-education programs, lobbied parties to endorse more women candidates, and developed elaborate strategies to propel more women into positions of leadership". Conversely, male politicians are perceived as more likely to use electoral clientelism as an electoral strategy (Yoon 2020) and male-led political machines more often target male voters for vote buying (Jensen and Justesen 2014; Canare and Mendoza 2022). On the demand side, several analyses point out that the appeal of electoral clientelism in exchange for a vote is less effective among female voters, who are on average more likely to be persuaded by programmatic promises of social welfare (Vicente and Wantchekon 2009; Wantchekon 2003), and more protective of the welfare state in the face of political corruption (Alexander

et al., 2020).

Overall, these studies demonstrate that compared to male politicians in South Africa, female politicians in South Africa are more likely to support issues that are important to women and welfare, such as poverty alleviation, and female politicians are more likely to be embedded in and supported by women's networks. In turn, female voters are less swayed by electoral clientelism, such as vote buying in elections. While there is little work on gender and clientelism in South Africa, we expect these gender differences in issue priorities and networks among South African politicians to lead to a tendency for female politicians to engage less in clientelism in ways that shape voters' exposure to vote buying, whereby female voters in particular will experience lower rates of electoral clientelism in areas with higher proportions of female elected officials. We therefore arrive at the following hypotheses.

**H2.** Female voters in particular are less likely to experience vote buying in municipalities with higher female representation in elected office.

#### 1.5. Context and case selection

Like many countries, South Africa has numerous gender related problems, not least in terms of gender-based violence and crime directed at women (Gouws 2016). However, compared to other countries in the African region, South Africa performs relatively well in terms of female representation in politics. Indeed, recent reports by the World Economic Forum (2019) and McKinsey Global Institute (2019) place South Africa in the top among African countries on gender equality and female involvement in politics.

The representation of women in politics occupies an important place in contemporary South African politics. This is also the case within the dominant party – the African National Congress (ANC) – which has governed South Africa since the first post-apartheid election in 1994.<sup>2</sup> The ANC constitution explicitly aims to ensure 50 percent female representation across all elected structures within the party.<sup>3</sup> As part of the party structure, the ANC Women's League is an important component of the ANC and was an integral part of the struggle against the apartheid regime (Du Plessis and Plaut, 2014) – which was extremely oppressive towards black women in particular (Gouws 2016, 403).<sup>4</sup>

Given the ANC's influence on South African politics, the party's gender policies matter for female representation in both national and provincial legislatures. Nearly half of seats (46%) in the current South African National Parliament are held by women and 50% of the ANC government's ministers are women as well.<sup>5</sup> The legislation regulating municipal elections contains elements designed to increase the role of women in politics. In municipal elections, the Municipal Structures Act stipulates that for party lists: "Every party must seek to ensure that fifty per cent of the candidates on the party list are women and that women and men candidates are evenly distributed through the list."<sup>6</sup> The same

<sup>2</sup> While the ANC is still dominant at the national level, at the municipal level, its support has waned in recent years. In 2011 the ANC received 62% of the local electoral vote, while in 2016 it fell to 53% and in 2021 it received just 46%. This suggests that, at least at the local level, elections are indeed competitive and that elections offer voters meaningful choices between political parties (de Kadt and Lieberman 2020).

<sup>3</sup> See the ANC Constitution, Rule 6.1. <https://www.anc1912.org.za/constitution-anc>.

<sup>4</sup> The ANC Women's League has, however, been criticized for being closely affiliated with the party's patronage system that flourished under former president Jacob Zuma (Gouws 2019, 2016; Southall 2016: 313–316; Booyesen 2015).

<sup>5</sup> <https://genderlinks.org.za/what-we-do/sadc-gender-protocol/advocacy-50-50/south-africa-gender-and-elections/>.

<sup>6</sup> Local Government Municipal Structures Act, Schedule 2, 5.1.a. Available at <https://bit.ly/3qC1oKt>.

is the case for candidate lists used to elect ward councilors in municipal elections.<sup>7</sup> While the wording in the legislation governing municipal elections is soft and only encourages parties to ensure gender parity on party and candidate lists, it does elevate gender equality and female representation to the center stage in the design of party and candidate lists for local government elections.

In the context of discussion of gender representation in South Africa, an important aspect is the centralized and party-led candidate selection process that the ANC uses. The ANC party leadership maintains firm control of lists of candidates running for election, not only at the national level but also at the regional and local levels (Lieberman et al., 2021). Similarly, the ANC leadership selects and ‘deploys’ mayoral candidates for municipal elections. The centralized and party-led candidate selection processes have given rise to concerns that candidate approval and deployment to positions of power – including regional and local government – is based mainly on the loyalty of party cadres towards the leadership and less on competence (Beresford 2015).<sup>8</sup> Concerns have also been raised that the power of the national party leadership reinforces the importance of male-dominated patronage networks within the ANC and works to systematically disadvantage women (Gouws 2019). If so, a concern for our analysis might be that the ANC disproportionately deploys and finances male candidates to municipalities where election campaigns rely more on clientelism and patronage. Unfortunately, there is little research on gender and candidate selection processes in South Africa, and we cannot rule out that the ANC’s candidate selection mechanisms and their candidate deployment strategies are gendered and may favor male over female candidates. However, most research on the ANC, its internal organization, and processes of candidate nomination and selection tends to emphasize that loyalty of candidates and party cadres towards the party leadership is the dominant mechanism of ANC deployment of candidates to positions of power – including the selection of candidates running for election at the regional and local level (Beresford 2015; Booysen 2015; Southall 2016; Gouws 2019). So, while gender may certainly matter for the ANC’s (and other parties’) nomination and selection of candidates, loyalty and compliance towards the party leadership appear to be the dominant concern for the ANC.

The fact that women are being nominated and selected to run for election at the municipal level is also quite clear from the evidence on (the lack of) gender balance in municipal councils. During the mandate period in question in our study, females made up 38.3% of all local councilors at the municipal level and nearly 30% of all mayors were female. Moreover, there is stark variation in female representation among municipalities that is not present in most other countries. For example, roughly 12% of the cases have fewer than 25% of female representatives, while 10% of the municipalities have majority-female councils.

These features of the South African context make the country ideally suited to test the relationship between female representation and electoral clientelism. Even though South Africa is a case of a dominant party system where the ANC has a strong and centralized national party leadership – with powers to approve and appoint candidates for

councilor and mayors at municipal elections – municipal councils are not altogether male-dominated. Indeed, across South African municipalities there is significant variation on both the key independent variable (female representation) and on the main dependent variable, electoral clientelism. This means that if the relationship we posit between female representation and electoral clientelism is valid, we should be able to uncover evidence in its favor using data from the case of South Africa. Using evidence from South Africa, we are therefore able to evaluate whether female representation is related to electoral clientelism in institutional contexts where patronage plays an important part of politics, including at the level of local government. We do so by exploiting within-country variation at the individual level (experiences of electoral clientelism among voters) and local government level (female political representation) to examine whether variation in female political representation across municipalities matters for parties’ use of electoral clientelism as a strategy for mobilizing voters in local elections.

### 1.5.1. Electoral clientelism in South Africa

We study the relationship between female political representation and electoral clientelism in the context of a country – South Africa – that is typically associated with lower levels of clientelism and vote buying than other countries in Africa (Mares and Young 2016; Jensen and Justesen 2014). While the ANC’s party policies seek to increase female representation across its elected structures, the use of electoral clientelism and patronage also form part of the arsenal of political strategies employed by the ANC during elections (Woller and Justesen, 2022; Paret 2016; Dawson 2014; Dawson and Mogens, 2023). Indeed, the dominant role of the governing party in clientelist distribution makes South Africa a case of “monopolistic clientelism” (Nichter and Peress 2017). The strong affiliation between the South African state and the ANC party – what Southall (2016) calls the “party-state” – means that the ANC party is in a position to employ government agencies in the distribution of resources in the run-up to elections (Booyesen 2015). Resources flowing from the ANC (and, possibly, ANC-controlled government agencies) therefore matters for candidates in local elections too. However, for the ANC, the local party branches form an important component of the logistics of clientelist strategies – and election campaigns more generally. The local branches form part of the strong party hierarchy within the ANC, and play an important role as agents for grassroots mobilization of voters during election campaigns (Brierley and Nathan, 2021; Booysen 2015; Darracq 2008). In relation to the ANC’s use of clientelist distribution, party activists – men and women – operate as brokers on behalf of politicians who connect the party and its (national and local) leadership to ordinary people, particularly in poor areas and townships (Paret 2016; Dawson 2014; Darracq 2008). Even though the party is heavily centralized and local candidates may mainly rely on party resources flowing from the center (rather than their own), the centralized party leadership heavily rely on its local candidates and their party cadres to distribute resources and mobilize electoral support locally in order to maintain the ANC’s dominance throughout the country.

### 1.6. Data and design

Against this background, the survey data we employ are from a nationwide survey conducted in August and September 2016, following the 2016 municipal elections on August 3rd in South Africa (Justesen and Schulz-Herzenberg 2018), and has been used in several recent published studies (see for example, Bøttkjaer and Justesen, 2021; Dawson and Mogens, 2023). The survey was fielded in all nine provinces of South Africa and implemented in collaboration with *Citizen Surveys* – a South African survey and research consultancy. To obtain a random sample that is nationally representative, the sample was first stratified based on province, racial classification, and urban/rural area, ensuring that we have sufficient coverage of subgroups in the data. Census data from Statistics South Africa was used to draw a sample of enumeration areas (EA) – the smallest geographical unit for which demographic data

<sup>7</sup> In South Africa’s municipal elections, voters in Metros – South Africa’s eight biggest cities – are given two ballots. One to vote for a candidate in a local ward, and one to vote for party on a party list, which serves to ensure proportionality in the translation of votes to seat within the municipality (Justesen and Schulz-Herzenberg 2018). Outside of Metros, voters have an additional ballot to vote for a party in so-called district municipalities, which are amalgamations of municipalities cooperating on broader issues of local development.

<sup>8</sup> However, Lieberman et al. (2021) find that candidate popularity among the voters also matters for candidate (re)nominations in South African municipalities, while Wegner (2016) finds that the policy performance of local governments also matter for the ANC’s renomination of candidates at the municipal levels.

are available. In the third step, enumerators performed random walks within the EAs in order to select households for the sample. Finally, within the randomly selected household a randomization algorithm pre-coded onto the tablet was used to select the respondents for interviews. All interviews were performed by trained enumerators in face-to-face interviews using a standardized, tablet-based questionnaire available to respondents in one of six languages. The sample size is 3210 and is representative of voting-age citizens in South Africa. For more information on the survey and variables, see appendix sections 1 and 2.

Our dependent variable is a measure of voter experiences with electoral clientelism in the run-up to the 2016 municipal elections in South Africa. Specifically, we create a measure of electoral clientelism that combines questions on vote buying and turnout buying, which are distinct from other forms of clientelism, such as abstention buying (Gans-Morse et al., 2014). This measure equals '1' if a respondent answered 'once or twice' or 'often' to any of the following questions.

- a. *Vote buying*: How often (if ever) did a candidate or someone from a political party offer you something, like food, or a gift or money if you would vote for them in the elections?
- b. *Turnout buying*: How often (if ever) did a candidate or someone from a political party offer you something, like food, or a gift or money if you would show up to vote in the elections?

We find that in total, 7.5% of the sample reported personal experience with electoral clientelism on these measures (5.8% and 5.1%, respectively, to questions a. and b.). We address respondents who refused to answer, which were roughly 1% in each of the questions, in two ways. First, we include the refusals in the '0' category to maximize observations, as they did not report any vote buying per se. Second, we create an additional measure used in our robustness checks whereby the refusals are dropped, thus only comparing the respondents who answered affirmatively or 'never'.

Asking respondents in surveys about electoral clientelism or corruption in general is potentially a sensitive subject and inevitably raises issues of social desirability bias (Oliveros and Gingerich 2020). Recent studies have tested the extent of this bias using list experiments, and found significant disparities between self-reported experiences and estimates that were derived from the list experiment (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2012; Corstange 2018). This bias is especially problematic at the individual level, where certain characteristics, such as income, education or gender might be highly correlated with under-reporting. However, our main explanatory variable – female representation – is measured at the municipal level. And as we are more interested in assessing the relationship between electoral gender balance in municipalities and the occurrences of – rather than the total estimated amount of – clientelism, the problems associated with social desirability bias would only bias our estimates to the degree that such under-reporting is a direct function of the level of female representation. However, to assess the validity of the direct measures of electoral clientelism used here, the survey also embedded a list experiment to capture the potentially sensitive question (Bøttkjer 2019). This shows that the estimates from the direct and list questions yield only minor differences (see Appendix, Table A5 for comparison), suggesting social desirability bias is not a major concern in surveys of electoral clientelism in the South African context.

At the municipal level, our main measure is the proportion of municipal council seats held by women. In addition to this measure of municipal gender equality, we gathered data on the proportion of female municipal managers. Controlling for this factor creates a key robustness check. With this data, we can estimate how politicians' gender shapes electoral clientelism controlling for a measure that captures a broader

climate of inclusion of women in municipal leadership that lacks the electoral connection. Both measures are from official sources published by Statistics South Africa (2017) for the year prior to the election.<sup>9</sup>

As we do not have the ability to randomize the proportion of female representatives or respondent gender, our study is obviously observational with the well-known challenges to establishing causal identification. We therefore attempt to mitigate issues of endogeneity via controlling for several factors at the municipal level that could confound our focal relationship. In addition to the proportion of female managers, this includes the level of municipal poverty, the population of the municipality, and whether the ANC won the municipality in 2011 (0/1). At the micro level, the main explanatory variable is the gender of the respondent, which we code as binary (1 = female, 0 = male). We also control for potential confounders such as education, racial group, age, place of residence, and poverty, many of which have significant gender gaps in South Africa (Posel and Rogan, 2009; Rogan, 2016). Moreover, we include a measure of political interest, which could both send a stronger signal of greater reliability in voting or being part of a social network (Cruz, 2019), and be correlated with gender in the South African context (women make up over 55% of voting electorate while just over 50% of the possible electorate population).

Our dependent variable is binary, and we therefore estimate all models using standard logistic regression. We investigated the spatial variation in vote buying and found clear disparities in the frequency of vote buying among South African provinces, along with proportion of female representation. All models therefore include provincial fixed effects along with clustered standard errors at the municipal level to account for the hierarchical structure of the data in our analyses. We employ survey design and population weights to adjust for representativeness of the sample in relation to the population.

Despite these adjustments, attempts to interpret the results as causal should be treated with caution, and our proposed mechanisms suggest that the relationship works in both directions. However, in our estimation strategy, our main independent variables are measured temporally prior to the outcome, and in the case of female representation, is at a higher level of analysis than the outcome – vote buying – which is measured at the individual level.

To test H2, we include a cross-level interaction term between a respondent's gender (FEM) and the level of a municipality's proportion of female councilors. According to our hypothesis, we expect to see a negative and statistically significant coefficient for the interaction variable. To check for robustness of these results, we also report models using hierarchical estimation whereby we account for random municipal intercepts and a random slope for the gender of the respondent at the individual level (Heisig and Schaeffer 2019).

## 2. Results

Table 1 reports tests for H1, the relationship between female representation and the rate of vote buying in South African municipalities. We estimate the bivariate relationship (including provincial fixed effects) in model 1, and add individual and municipal level controls, respectively, in models 2 and 3, and end with a final model 4.

The results elucidate several interesting findings. First, the estimates provide clear evidence in favor of H1: we find that a higher proportion of women in municipal councils is associated with significantly lower rates of electoral clientelism across municipalities. This result is consistent across all models and robust to the addition of potential confounding variables at the individual (model 2) and municipal (model 3) levels, including controlling for the proportion of female managers. Model 4 shows that the probability of a respondent experiencing vote buying decrease by roughly 2.5% with each 1% increase of in female

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page\\_id=1854&PPN=P9115&SCH=6677](http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1854&PPN=P9115&SCH=6677). The pairwise correlation between the two measures is 0.12.



**Table 1**  
Test of *H1* – logistic estimates.

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
% female councilors	−0.039** (0.018)	−0.035* (0.018)	−0.041*** (0.018)	−0.037** (0.018)
<b>Individual level</b>				
Female		−0.328* (0.192)		−0.318 (0.195)
Political interest		0.534*** (0.186)		0.542*** (0.186)
Swing voter		−0.406** (0.192)		−0.408** (0.193)
Poverty		1.416*** (0.401)		1.372*** (0.403)
Racial group: Coloured		−0.148 (0.525)		−0.283 (0.567)
Racial group: white		−0.633* (0.330)		−0.654* (0.345)
Age		0.108 (0.084)		0.110 (0.082)
Ed: some secondary		0.389 (0.271)		0.393 (0.266)
Ed: finished secondary		0.791** (0.318)		0.775** (0.314)
Ed: post secondary		0.846** (0.373)		0.804** (0.381)
Rural resident		−0.310 (0.239)		−0.374 (0.239)
<b>Municipal level</b>				
Poverty intensity			−0.039 (0.085)	−0.021 (0.085)
ANC controlled			1.407** (0.598)	1.252** (0.564)
Population (logged)			0.072 (0.107)	0.059 (0.106)
% female managers			0.215 (0.881)	0.418 (0.936)
Constant	−1.359 (0.920)	−2.039** (0.981)	−2.030 (3.776)	−3.040 (3.968)
Individuals	3000	2898	2952	2851
Municipalities	154	154	154	154
Pseudo R-squared	0.024	0.059	0.027	0.062

Note: logged odds reported from logit estimation where the dependent variable is reported experience with vote buying ‘1’, or not ‘0’. Reference category to education is ‘no secondary’, and reference category to racial group is ‘black’. Standard errors are in parenthesis, clustered by municipality. All models include province-level fixed effects and survey design weights. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

representation in local councils. Fig. 1 illustrates the main relationship between political gender equality and vote buying across the sample.

Note: black line represents the predicted rate of vote buying according to the level of female representation in municipal councils, with 95% confidence interval. The histogram shows the distribution of gender quality across the sample. The results shown are from model 4, Table 1.

Results for the control variables are generally in line with previous research. We find that the poverty coefficient is large and significant, with poorer individuals being far more likely to experience electoral clientelism than wealthier voters, which is consistent with most other empirical studies on vote buying (Stokes, 2005; Bratton, 2008; Jensen and Justesen, 2014). Political interest is positively associated with electoral clientelism, which we interpret as a factor that increases the likelihood of contact with party brokers, thus increasing opportunities for vote buying (Jensen and Justesen, 2014; Cruz, 2019). Moreover, swing voters experience electoral clientelism at lower rates, implying that partisans are targeted more frequently. The results show in models 2 and 4 that self-identified white voters experience systematically less electoral clientelism than do black respondents – the reference group in the model and the primary voting constituency of the ANC. Our models also show a gender gap in electoral clientelism at the individual level – women tend to report being targets of electoral clientelism at lower rates

than do men on average, which previous studies have also found in other contexts (Corstange, 2018). The model also demonstrates some evidence that challenges expectations from the literature (Sisson, 1971) that higher levels of education is positively associated with clientelism, all things being equal. With respect to municipal level controls, we find that the variables are generally in the expected direction, yet only the binary variable for ‘ANC control’ reaches conventional levels of statistical significance to warrant interpretation with any degree of confidence; namely, that ANC-held municipalities have higher rates of electoral clientelism compared with other parties. Importantly, we find a null result for gender equality in municipal management positions. This suggests that it is the proportion of women in *elected* office in particular that affects levels of electoral clientelism, rather than women in appointed managerial positions.

Table 2 reports the results of our test of *H2*, where we examine whether a higher proportion of female councilors at the municipal level conditions the rate at which female voters experience electoral clientelism. To test this, we run cross-level interaction terms between the respondent’s gender and the proportion of female councilors at the municipal level. For space purposes, we report only the estimates of the main variables used to test *H2*, although both models reported include all control variables from model 4 in Table 1. In line with *H2*, we see significant evidence that women in particular experience electoral clientelism at lower rates than do men as the proportion of female councilors increases across municipalities. In this case, we observe that the negative association between women’s council representation and electoral clientelism from *H1* is entirely driven by female voters<sup>10</sup>

Fig. 2 elucidates the finding, showing a separate predicted rate of electoral clientelism for male and female individuals as a function of gender equality in municipal councils. The figure shows that there is a steep and significant decline in the rate that parties target female voters using electoral clientelism as women’s council representation increases. The differences are stark – for example, comparing a female voter at the 5th (25% elected females) and 95th (50% elected females) percentiles of female representation across the sample, those living in the former group are nearly 5.5 times more likely to be targets of electoral clientelism than those in the latter group, all things being equal. On the other hand, there is no observable change in the rate in which male voters experience vote buying as a function of women’s representation in municipal councils.

Note: Blue (black) line represents the predicted rate of electoral clientelism among females (males) according to the level of gender equality in municipal councils, with 95% confidence interval. The histogram shows the distribution of gender quality across the sample. The results shown are from model 2, Table 2.

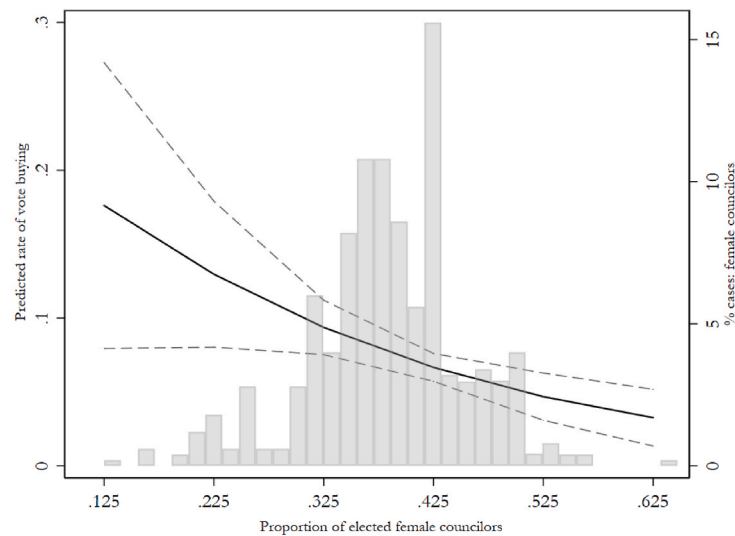
### 2.1. Further robustness checks

In addition to the various specifications presented in Tables 1 and 2, we conduct a series of robustness tests. First, we check to see if the findings are sensitive to ‘non-response’ respondents in our dependent variable. We re-run all models with the measure of electoral clientelism, dropping all ‘refused/don’t know’ respondents in lieu of coding them as ‘no’. We find that the results of our models are not sensitive to this alteration (appendix, table A2).

Second, we gathered data on the gender of each municipality’s mayor in 2015, just prior to the election. As mayors in South African municipalities are not directly elected by voters, but by the council itself (Berliner and Wehner 2022), this tests whether the relationship we find with the female councilor measure is indeed about direct, gendered electoral accountability, or simply executive control over municipal

<sup>10</sup> Moreover, we tested an additional triple interaction with race, and found that while the slope decreases for all women as a function of higher local female representation, the effect is strongest among black female respondents.





Note: black line represents the predicted rate of vote buying according to the level of female representation in municipal councils, with 95% confidence interval. The histogram shows the distribution of gender quality across the sample. The results shown are from model 4, Table 1.

Fig. 1. Relationship between political gender equality and vote buying.

Table 2

Test of H2 - Cross-level interactions.

Variable	1. Councilors
Constituent variables	2.531***
Female respondent	(0.952)
% female councilors	−0.004**
	(0.018)
% female managers	0.001
	(0.016)
Interaction terms	
Female x %fem. Councilors	−0.075***
	(0.024)
Constant	−3.055
	(4.095)
Individuals	2851
Municipalities	154
Pseudo R-squared	0.069

Note: logged odds reported from logit estimation where the dependent variable is reported experience with vote buying '1', or not '0'. All control variables from Table 1 are included (not shown to save space). Standard errors are in parenthesis, clustered by municipality. All models include province-level fixed effects and survey design weights. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

affairs. We find that the result for female councilors remains robust to the inclusion of this variable, and that gender of mayors plays no role in explaining vote or turnout buying in South African municipalities (appendix Table A3), providing further evidence of the channels of direct electoral accountability argued in this study.

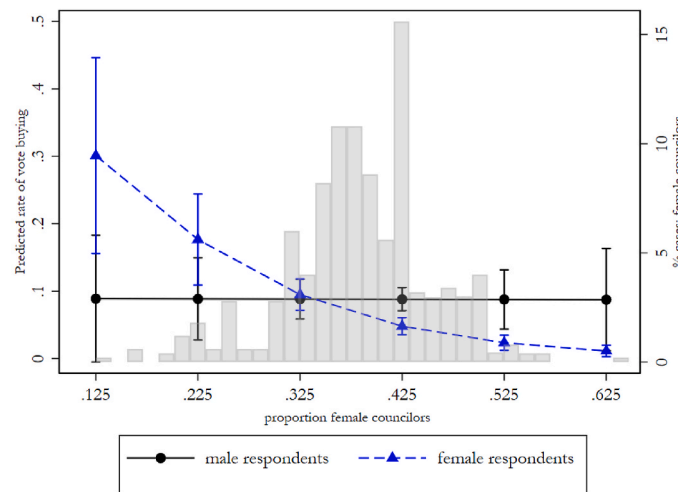
Third, we re-run the tests of H2 using random intercept hierarchical estimation, specifying a random slope for 'female' to check whether our main models underestimate the standard errors for the cross-level interaction terms (Heisig and Schaeffer 2019). We find the results consistent with our standard logit models in Table 2 (see appendix, Table A4). In addition, we check whether the interaction is driven by gender equality more broadly in municipalities via an interaction of female respondents with the proportion of female managers. We find the results are insignificant, suggesting the relationships are driven by elected officials as expected.

### 3. Discussion and conclusions

While exchanges involving electoral clientelism can offer immediate benefits to voters, it may also hinder or even undermine the development of broad, programmatic services such as education and health care (Khamani, 2015; Keefer 2007). This makes it key for researchers and policy-makers alike to have a clearer understanding of the factors associated with its presence or absence, in particular in newer democracies. As is the case in many other younger democracies, we find that electoral clientelism in the form of vote buying is prevalent in South African municipal elections, yet varies considerably across municipalities. While the research field on electoral clientelism contains several explanations for variation in experiences with electoral clientelism, such as poverty or partisanship, the literature largely ignores the role of gender, with few recent exceptions (e.g., Daby 2021).

In this study, we address this lacuna by investigating two primary questions. First, we ask whether higher rates of elected female representation in municipalities are associated with less electoral clientelism during municipal elections. Second, we test whether female voters experience electoral clientelism at lower rates in municipalities with higher female representation. Based on survey data collected in the aftermath of the 2016 municipal elections in South Africa, we find evidence that gender matters in both cases. The evidence provided here elucidates that municipalities with more females elected to local councils experience less use of electoral clientelism by political parties and candidates (H1). We also show that when women's presence on local councils is greater, it is primarily female voters who are targeted less by electoral clientelism (H2).

The findings of this study offer several contributions to various ongoing research agendas. First, we provide an additional explanation for patterns of electoral clientelism within countries, namely the level of female representation. Future studies should therefore try to incorporate gender as an integral factor in the operation of clientelism – whether from the side of politicians, voters, or both. Second, our theoretical framework suggests that gender differences in issue priorities, targeted constituent groups, networks and resources likely work as mechanisms that explain these results. On the one hand, these gender differences may lead to a higher priority of programmatic welfare among women, which both reduces their engagement in clientelism as politicians and their propensity to target female voters using clientelist distribution. On the



Note: Blue (black) line represents the predicted rate of electoral clientelism among females (males) according to the level of gender equality in municipal councils, with 95% confidence interval. The histogram shows the distribution of gender quality across the sample. The results shown are from model 2, Table 2.

Fig. 2. Summary of H2: Interaction effects.

other hand, these gender differences may decrease women's viability as candidates in more clientelist settings as they are likely to have less access to the patronage networks and resources needed to compete in these settings. Future research should work on analyses that can evaluate these possible mechanisms and further unpack the relationships between male and female politicians with voters during campaigns in this context.

In addition to work on mechanisms, there are several caveats and remaining gaps for future research. First, the paper relies on cross-sectional, observational data. While our primary independent variables are measured temporally prior to the outcome of experienced electoral clientelism, we cannot make causal claims about this relationship based on our data and design. Moreover, as we cannot randomize our key independent variables, we cannot rule out that the relationship observed could look different with the inclusion of other unobserved factors in our models. Finally, we also acknowledge that South Africa may indeed be a unique case for the same reasons that render it an ideal type of case to test our ideas - that it is a relatively newer democracy with the presence of electoral clientelism in elections, yet has a relatively high degree female representation. How far our findings travel beyond this context is a question for future research, yet, given the prominence of this country in the African context, the findings are noteworthy nonetheless.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102580>.

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