

PATRONAGE AND CORRUPTION IN POST-DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION: EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS FROM SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

XinMiao Huang

Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing 100089, China.

Corresponding Email: 202220214030@bfsu.edu.cn

Abstract: This study examines the relationship between clientelism and political corruption in Sub-Saharan African countries following democratic transitions. Using data from the V-Dem project, the paper conducts an empirical analysis of the impact of corruption on clientelism and its mechanisms from 1990 to 2020 across countries in this region. The findings reveal that frequent corruption tends to escalate levels of clientelism; Mechanism analysis indicates that corruption undermines the legitimacy of political regimes, prompting politicians to rely on patronage to secure electoral support; In countries with lower levels of development, corruption further hinders economic growth, fostering conditions conducive to the proliferation of nepotism. These conclusions offer policy insights for emerging democracies to effectively address clientelism, enhance governance capacity, and promote democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Clientelism; Corruption; Democratization; Legitimacy

1 INTRODUCTION

Clientelism, also referred to as patron-clientelism or nepotism, involves the exchange of material benefits by politicians to secure political support from voters. It is a common political phenomenon in democratic states. While some studies argue that moderate clientelism can facilitate the development of competitive political systems and mutual commitments between voters and politicians in emerging democracies, it is undoubtedly an erosive force against democratic politics in the long run. This paper focuses on the factors and mechanisms driving clientelism, rather than its outcomes. Existing domestic and international scholarship primarily emphasizes factors such as economic development, democratic consolidation, and ethnic divisions, providing a wealth of research on the subject. The aim of this study is to test the relevance of these perspectives in the political development of Sub-Saharan African countries since the 1990s and further explore the impact of corruption on clientelism and its underlying mechanisms. As key participants in the "third wave" of democratization, African nations' political trajectories differ significantly from those of established democracies. For a long time, due to the lack of competitive electoral and party systems, clientelism primarily existed as an informal relationship without evolving into a stable informal institution. However, the process of political democratization has both normalized and stabilized this relationship, leading to a marked increase in patron-client dynamics, which have severely eroded the democratic quality and governance capacity of African states. Even decades after decolonization, the primary loyalty of most Africans remains directed toward familial networks rather than sovereign states. This study seeks to answer to what extent and through what mechanisms political corruption influences clientelism in African countries following democratic transitions.

This paper is divided into five sections. Section 2 seeks to define clientelism, analyze its formation mechanisms, and review relevant literature on its relationship with corruption. Section 3 provides a brief analysis of the phenomena of corruption and clientelism in Sub-Saharan African countries, exploring their potential connections and presenting the main hypotheses of this study. Sections 4 and 5 form the empirical core of the paper, utilizing data from Sub-Saharan African countries from 1990 to 2020 for statistical analysis and hypothesis testing. The final section concludes the study and discusses future research directions on the relationship between corruption and clientelism.

2 CLIENTELISM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH CORRUPTION

Although the academic community continues to debate the concept of clientelism, it can be succinctly described as an exchange relationship between politicians and the public, where material benefits are provided by politicians in return for political support from the populace [1]. Within nepotism, there are two fundamental political actors: the patron and the client. Their relationship is typically asymmetrical, with patrons holding advantages in terms of status, power, and resources, while clients are generally dependent on material benefits due to limited resource accumulation. Kitschelt describes clientelism as embodying a dual nature of "involving reciprocity and voluntarism but also exploitation and domination" [2]. As research on clientelism has deepened, scholars have begun to focus on the brokers and social networks that often mediate these relationships, as well as the hierarchical structures that this complex network forms from national to local levels [3]. Nevertheless, what remains unchanged is the exchange relationship between patrons and clients, which remains the fundamental framework for studying clientelism. As a pervasive political phenomenon, clientelism exists in "political environments ranging from authoritarian to democratic regimes" [4].

The academic community has conducted extensive research on the factors influencing clientelism and the mechanisms

through which it operates, producing a rich body of literature. Broadly speaking, analyses of nepotism can be divided into two primary pathways: economic and political. From an economic perspective, scholars have focused on the roles of poverty and inequality. Some studies suggest that individuals living in poverty derive higher marginal utility from receiving material benefits [5], making them more likely to engage in exchange relationships with politicians. Furthermore, the immediate benefits of such exchanges often outweigh the perceived value of long-term public policies or welfare initiatives, making impoverished individuals prime targets for politicians seeking electoral support [6]. Other scholars have focused on how income inequality fosters patron–client relationships. Similar to the effects of reducing poverty, an expanding middle class in a country increases the costs of providing material benefits to clients. Furthermore, as income distribution trends toward a pattern with a high middle and low extremes, political parties find it increasingly challenging to maintain social networks and monitor voter behavior effectively [7]. For example, comparative studies of communities across India have found a strong correlation between inequality and clientelism, while the impact of economic development has not been robustly supported [8]. In the political analysis of clientelism, scholars have explored both macro-level political environments and more specific institutional arrangements. At the macro level, research has examined the effects of authoritarianism and democracy on clientelism. Early scholars often regarded nepotism and patronage as remnants of pre-modern or "non-democratic" political forms, assuming that these phenomena would diminish or even disappear as economic development and democratization progressed [9]. However, as research deepened and the practice of vote buying proliferated in emerging democracies, scholars began to challenge the notion that clientelism was unique to authoritarian regimes. While clientelism is now recognized as existing in both authoritarian and democratic states, most studies agree that it exhibits distinct characteristics and serves different functions in these two political contexts. Hicken posits that "clientelism in democratic settings tends to be more transactional in nature and less hierarchical" [10]. Other studies have observed the strong overlap between nepotism and ethnic boundaries in developing countries, emphasizing the role of ethnic divisions in shaping clientelism. Scholars argue that ethnic groups, with their close-knit language and kinship ties, geographically concentrated populations, and strong identity affiliations, can reduce voter free-riding behavior. This dynamic lowers the monitoring costs for politicians seeking to purchase political support, making ethnic groups reliable networks for clientelism [11]. Furthermore, a vicious cycle may emerge between ethnic politics and clientelism. Allocating resources based on ethnicity can intensify ethnic identity, which in turn grants greater legitimacy to nepotistic relationships within ethnic groups, embedding them deeply into the political system [12]. Factors such as electoral rules that encourage personalized competition [13], inadequate legal restrictions on vote buying [14], and politicians' use of techniques to influence or monitor voter behavior provide fertile ground for nepotism to thrive [15].

Corruption, defined as "the misuse of public office for private gain," is closely intertwined with clientelism. Both involve the exchange of material benefits between two political actors to secure political power or resources. Some scholars even conflate the two, asserting that "from a modern perspective, clientelism is clearly a form of corruption, fundamentally at odds with the essence of democracy" [16]. But by definition, the flow of resources in corruption and clientelism follows opposite directions. In a nepotistic relationship, politicians provide material benefits to the public in exchange for short-term political support or long-term loyalty. In a corrupt political system, individuals or entities lacking political power—such as citizens or businesses—offer bribes to government officials to secure favorable treatment in policymaking or the allocation of public resources. Although conceptually distinct, corruption and clientelism are often highly correlated in practice. Countries or regions with rampant corruption tend to have well-developed nepotism. These regimes typically share common characteristics: widespread poverty, fragile democratic institutions, and an oversized state-controlled economy [17]. While scholars widely agree on the strong correlation between corruption and clientelism, systematic analyses of their causal mechanisms remain relatively scarce. Most existing studies treat clientelism as the independent variable and corruption as the dependent variable. Some research focuses on the institutional incentives that clientelistic networks provide for corruption. For instance, it has been argued that maintaining extensive patron–client networks require substantial financial resources, prompting politicians to establish contract-based systems with brokers and companies. In these arrangements, companies provide campaign funding to politicians in exchange for government positions, policy influence, or public project contracts [18]. The intermediaries—or brokers—within these networks can also facilitate corruption. By reducing uncertainties about whom to bribe and how much to offer, brokers make bribery more predictable and clandestine, increasing the likelihood of monetary transactions for power [19]. Other studies examine the broader impact of clientelism on political systems. In countries dominated by nepotism, politicians and bureaucrats often have significant autonomy in allocating resources and projects, a process deliberately shielded from public scrutiny. Consequently, these regimes resist political reforms aimed at increasing transparency, accountability, or strengthening the rule of law [20]. In other words, clientelism can foster weak political institutions incapable of effectively monitoring or punishing rent-seeking behaviors, thereby creating fertile ground for corruption.

While much of the existing literature explores the relationship between corruption and clientelism, relatively few studies treat corruption as the independent variable to examine its impact on clientelism. As discussed earlier, analyses of the causes of clientelism have primarily focused on external factors such as socio-economic conditions, political institutions, and ethnic relations. Corruption and nepotism are often seen as concurrent outcomes of these broader influences, leaving the question of whether corruption actively promotes nepotism largely unexplored. The prevailing approach assumes that clientelism drives corruption. However, in practical politics, corruption can also exacerbate nepotism. Historically, regimes characterized by high levels of corruption often experience a surge in clientelism following democratization, a pattern commonly observed in countries that modernized politically at a later stage. This

study aims to address the gaps in existing literature by empirically examining the impact of corruption on clientelism in Sub-Saharan African countries. By doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the causal mechanisms connecting these two phenomena.

3 CORRUPTION AND CLIENTELISM IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Sub-Saharan African countries have long struggled under the pervasive influence of corruption. In 1957, during Ghana's independence, Kwame Nkrumah declared that corruption was a fundamental illness causing Africa's decline. Decades later, in 1999, *The Times* remarked: "Some Sub-Saharan African countries have been devastated by the crimes of dictators... transferring the majority of the national wealth into their Swiss bank accounts... In these nations, corruption has left countless children dying of malnutrition." The widespread concern over corruption in developing countries, particularly since the late 20th century, often stems from reflections on the persistently low governance capacities of these nations after democratization. However, corruption in Africa is deeply entrenched and historically longstanding. Some historical scholars trace the roots of corruption back to the pre-colonial era, where political leaders such as kings wielded absolute power, enabling them to squander national wealth with impunity. Conversely, others argue that the concentration of power in such systems limited the scale and scope of corruption, as it was more controlled [21]. More research focuses on the post-colonial period, which saw an expansive growth of corruption closely tied to colonial legacies. After gaining independence, emerging nation-states ostensibly inherited the institutional frameworks left by colonial powers. However, due to a lack of state-building experience and severe poverty, many countries devolved into arenas for political groups vying for power and personal wealth. For example, in post-independence Nigeria, groups that gained political control often monopolized legislative power, ensuring that other groups were excluded from resource allocation processes. For marginalized groups, bribing current bureaucrats became the only means of accessing resources outside the redistribution system [22]. South Africa is among the African nations with the highest levels of corruption. A 1978 exposé revealed that senior officials had misappropriated public funds for personal family vacations, converted them into tax-free allowances, registered them as private properties, or covertly allocated them through intermediaries for commercial investments [23].

As for clientelism in, it is not a phenomenon newly emerging after decolonization and democratization in African countries. Scholars examining clientelism in Africa during the 1970s noted that it existed in nearly all traditional African societies, rooted in patterns of social stratification. These systems relied on vertical networks that linked individuals of different socio-economic and political statuses. Some scholars argue that clientelism contributed to the integration of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, fostering political unification to a certain extent [24]. However, the waves of political modernization and democratization have profoundly transformed the forms, intensity, and impacts of clientelism. On one hand, electoral democracy has created opportunities for previously marginalized groups to gain access to power, providing politicians and political parties with more avenues to construct nepotistic networks and compete for public positions; On the other hand, because clientelism inherently contradicts core democratic values such as equality and freedom, it often reinforces existing social divisions by fostering loyalties between the public and personalized politicians or parties with specific identity markers. Some scholars describe this phenomenon as "neopatrimonialism," referring to the fusion of traditional political patronage with modern state institutions. Neopatrimonialism often adopts the guise of modern territorial sovereignty, particularly within the framework of Western-style democracies [25]. As a result, the relationship between democratization and clientelism has received critical evaluations in some studies. For instance, scholars have noted that democratization and the pressures of mass politics have intensified land disputes in Sub-Saharan African countries. This is attributed to the increase in clientelistic land allocations, particularly during election preparation periods [26]. Scholars have observed a significant surge in clientelism in Sub-Saharan African countries since the 1980s [27], a period coinciding with the third wave of democratization sweeping through the region. Although the relationship between democratization and clientelism remains contentious and is one of the focal points of this study, this paper does not aim to investigate the extent to which democratization has contributed to the rise of nepotism. Instead, democratization is treated as a contextual backdrop. The primary focus of this analysis lies in understanding the divergent trajectories of clientelism and governance among African states following democratization. While multiparty systems and elections have created fertile ground for the expansion of nepotism, there are significant variations in the prevalence of clientelism among countries. Some nations hold relatively free and fair elections, while others are rife with vote buying and other forms of electoral manipulation.

Sub-Saharan Africa offers a quasi-natural experimental setting for studying clientelism. On the one hand, most countries in the region gained independence from colonial rule, established nation-states, and transitioned toward political democratization during the second half of the 20th century. Yet, their trajectories diverged widely in terms of economic development, democratic consolidation, governance, and the control of corruption and clientelism. This divergence enables qualitative and quantitative cross-national comparisons, providing opportunities to explore causal mechanisms linking corruption and clientelism; On the other hand, these countries share geographical proximity, similar historical experiences, and numerous cultural commonalities, which help mitigate potential confounding factors. Such shared characteristics reduce the risks of spurious correlations and the omission of key variables in comparative analyses. Based on a review of the literature and an examination of the political history of these countries, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₀: Political corruption significantly influences the level of clientelism in Sub-Saharan African countries.

As discussed earlier, the positive correlation between corruption and clientelism has been substantiated in prior studies, but most of this research has focused on how clientelism impacts corruption. This paper offers an alternative perspective by hypothesizing that while the 1990s saw a region-wide surge in nepotism, variations in countries' ability to control clientelism can be attributed to differences in the extent of domestic political corruption.

H_{1a}: Political corruption undermines the legitimacy of a regime, increasing politicians' reliance on clientelism.

Legitimacy can be defined in both normative and empirical terms. From a normative perspective, legitimacy refers to whether a state's governing principles and performance align with universal standards, such as economic growth, political democratization, and humanitarian values. In this sense, legitimacy explains why citizens recognize and, to some extent, obey the ruling class. From an empirical perspective, legitimacy refers to the extent to which citizens acknowledge and comply with the authority of the regime [28]. This paper adopts the empirical definition and posits that persistent attempts by politicians and bureaucrats to enrich themselves at the public's expense erode the legitimacy of the regime, thereby increasing levels of public disobedience. Consequently, when democratic elections become the primary means of determining governance, political parties and politicians face challenges in securing broad-based public support through programmatic distribution promises or competitive ideologies. This difficulty compels them to rely on clientelistic practices, such as offering material benefits to secure votes.

H_{1b}: Political corruption erodes the state's capacity to provide public goods, increasing public dependence on clientelism.

The prevalence of nepotism and its resistance to eradication can largely be attributed to the state's inability to effectively supply public goods and services. In corrupt regimes, this capacity is often significantly constrained. Citizens in such states resort to bribing powerful individuals to access specific public resources, as politicians and bureaucrats wield substantial control over policymaking and the distribution of public goods. However, if a state can broadly and indiscriminately supply essential goods and services to society, citizens would no longer need to bribe officials to secure prioritized resource allocation. This shift would diminish a key source of income for politicians and bureaucrats. In corrupt states, however, politicians may obstruct reforms aimed at strengthening state capacity and expanding the provision of public goods, even at the cost of incurring higher vote-buying expenses in future elections, to preserve their entrenched interests. It is also worth noting that a rational cost-benefit calculation and strategic bargaining may occur between politicians and citizens regarding bribery, maintaining nepotistic relationships, and offering small favors. When the cost of sustaining nepotism outweighs the benefits of extracting bribes, politicians may instead opt to expand the supply of public goods. Due to the limitations of this paper, the model does not incorporate this potential complexity. Instead, this study makes a simplified assumption that corruption undermines the provision of public goods, incentivizing citizens to become recipients of clientelistic benefits.

4 DATA AND METHODS

This study uses multivariate regression analysis to statistically test the 4 hypotheses outlined earlier. The unit of analysis is country/year. After excluding unrecognized regimes and countries with missing core data, the dataset includes 47 countries. The time frame spans from 1990 to 2020, with a five-year interval between each observation for each analysis unit.

4.1 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is clientelism. As previously discussed, clientelism exists in both traditional and modern societies, albeit with differences in form and intensity. This paper primarily focuses on clientelism in modern democratic states, specifically behaviors revolving around elections and the acquisition of political power, where politicians and parties provide material benefits to citizens in exchange for their support. The V-Dem database offers a dedicated metric to measure the level of clientelism, constructed from two sub-indicators: "Vote Buying" and "Party Linkages". Vote Buying measures the prevalence of politicians directly purchasing votes during election years; Party Linkages assesses the extent to which political parties provide public resources to gain voter support. These activities strictly align with the definition of clientelism and are distinct from corruption. Higher scores indicate stronger levels of clientelism.

4.2 Independent Variable

The independent variable in this study is political corruption. The V-Dem database also provides a composite measure for corruption, which evaluates the levels of corruption across four domains: the public sector, executive branch, legislature, and judiciary. The measure assigns higher values to countries with more severe corruption levels. This metric specifically gauges the extent to which public officials misuse their positions and resources for personal gain, thereby avoiding conceptual overlap with clientelism. Higher scores indicate more pervasive corruption.

4.3 Mediating Variables

Hypotheses H_{1a}–H_{1c} focus on the intermediate mechanisms through which political corruption influences clientelism. To test these hypotheses, relevant variables must be included to examine the existence of mediating effects. To validate

H1a, the analysis considers the extent to which national regimes possess legitimacy. Since legitimacy is an abstract concept and lacks direct, cross-nationally comparable statistical indicators, this paper uses the level of political violence within a country as a proxy to estimate regime legitimacy. This data is sourced from the V-Dem database, which defines political violence as the frequency of non-state actors using force to achieve political goals, excluding violence for profit-driven purposes. This proxy is used to reflect the degree of "civil disobedience" within a country, indirectly measuring the legitimacy of the state. Higher scores indicate a higher frequency of citizens using violence to challenge the regime, signifying weaker state legitimacy. To validate H1b, the study assesses the capacity of governments to provide public goods and services. Although numerous indicators can reflect this capacity, considering data validity and availability, this paper uses electrification rates—the percentage of the population with access to electricity—as a proxy variable for public goods provision.

4.4 Control Variables

Incorporating insights from existing literature on the theoretical relationship between corruption and clientelism, the following control variables are included: 1. Level of Economic Development. As discussed earlier, there is a consensus in the literature regarding the relationship between poverty and clientelism. However, the impact of economic development on clientelism remains a topic for further investigation. Research on the relationship between corruption and economic development has identified an inverted U-shaped "Kuznets Curve," which has been empirically verified [29]. This paper hypothesizes that the relationship between clientelism and economic development may exhibit similar characteristics. To capture this relationship, this study includes per capita GDP (adjusted to USD) as a control variable. Additionally, a squared term of this variable is generated and included as another control variable; 2. Population Size. Classic literature identifies population size as a critical factor influencing democracy, social order, and governance performance. This paper posits that, under conditions of equivalent total resources, a larger population scale increases the complexity of policymaking and public resource allocation, which may drive more actors to rely on nepotism. Thus, population size is controlled for in the analysis; 3. Level of Democracy. While most African countries have undergone democratization, significant disparities remain in the extent and consolidation of democracy. Although this paper does not delve into the specific institutional details influencing clientelism, it considers differences in the macro-political environment. To measure the level of democratization, this study employs the Polity V Democracy Index. Since the database does not include data for 2020, the 2018 data is used as a proxy to represent countries' democratic status in 2020; 4. Ethnic Divisions. As noted in many studies, the initial establishment of nepotistic networks often requires mechanisms to prevent default or betrayal. Building such networks within ethnic groups is typically more reliable for both patrons and clients. This suggests that higher levels of ethnic fragmentation may lead to greater prevalence of nepotism. Currently, there are two commonly used databases to measure ethnic fragmentation: Linguistic fragmentation and ethnic power relations database. Linguistic Fragmentation reflects the probability that two randomly selected individuals in a country speak different languages; Ethnic Power Relations Database focuses on the number of ethnic groups associated with political power. This paper adopts linguistic fragmentation as a measure, as it better captures the "natural" degree of ethnic fragmentation, whereas the Ethnic Power Relations database may already incorporate the outcomes of clientelism. Since the linguistic fragmentation database only covers results up to 2013, the 2013 data is used to represent ethnic fragmentation levels in 2015, and the 2020 value for this variable is marked as missing.

4.5 Model Specification

This study employs panel data for statistical analysis. To ensure comparisons are conducted not only between different analysis units but also within the same country as a group of variables with shared characteristics, the official fixed-effects model provided by Stata software is used for baseline regression. The analysis applies two-way fixed effects for time and country. Given that both the dependent variable and the independent variable are continuous, the analysis employs an OLS linear model. When analyzing the intermediate mechanisms, since hypotheses H1a and H1b involve two mediating variables, the study constructs a multiple mediation effect model using the KHB method to explore possible parallel mediation effects. Additionally, the paper examines the potential interaction effect between political corruption and democratization on clientelism.

5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Using the selected data, the study begins with a brief analysis of the trends in nepotism and corruption in Sub-Saharan African countries since the 1990s. The temporal trends of these two variables are shown in Figure 1:

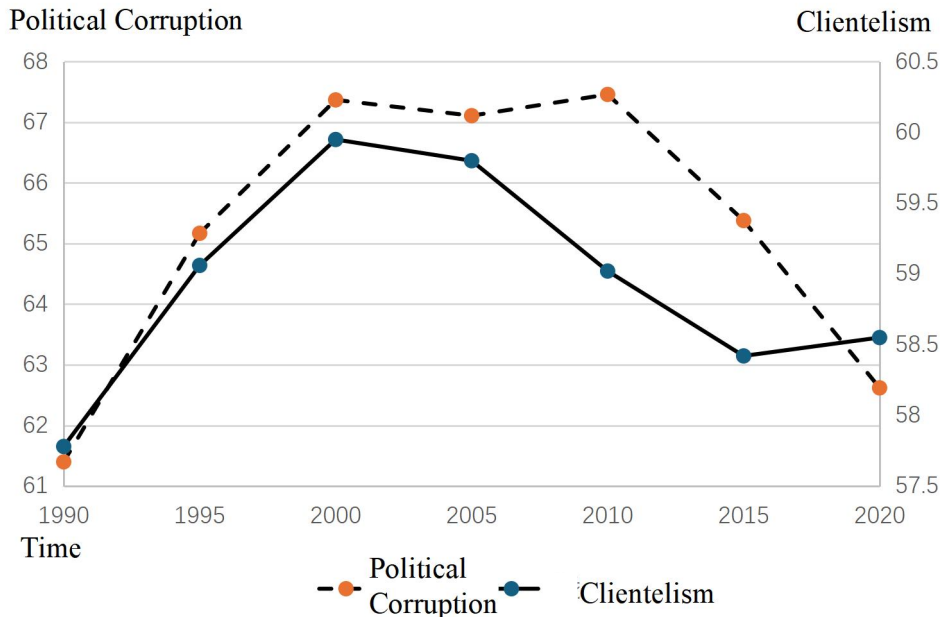


Figure 1 Trends of Corruption and Clientelism in Sub-Saharan African Countries, 1990–2020

From Figure 1, it is evident that both corruption and clientelism in Sub-Saharan African countries experienced an initial increase followed by a decline since the 1990s. While it is not meaningful to compare the numerical values of these two variables due to differing measurement methods, the fluctuations in political corruption appear to be more pronounced than those in clientelism. The changes in clientelism during the 1990s align with earlier studies of the region, supporting the theory that democratization leads to a temporary increase in nepotism. However, the rising trend of corruption during the democratization wave warrants further exploration. Some scholars argue that the introduction of electoral competition reduces politicians' ability to retain power for extended periods, prompting them to exploit state resources more aggressively during their terms [30]. This theory provides a plausible explanation for the observed phenomenon. However, examining longer-term data, this study finds that the loss of control over corruption in African countries is a prolonged process, with political corruption indices consistently rising since the 1960s. This suggests that democratization itself may not be the root cause of increased corruption but rather that its effects in curbing corruption may have a delayed impact. Since the early 21st century, both corruption and clientelism have shown significant declines [31]. This could tentatively be interpreted as a result of improved governance capacity and enhanced democratic quality across these nations.

The averages of some control and mediating variables for the initial and final years of the study period are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1 Summary Statistics of Key Variables (1990–2020)

| Variable | Description | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | 2015 | 2020 |
|----------------------|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Per Capita GDP | Unit: 1,000 USD | 1.44 | 1.43 | 1.60 | 1.86 | 2.07 | 2.25 | 2.20 |
| Population | Unit: 100,000 | 10.62 | 12.19 | 13.88 | 15.86 | 18.11 | 20.47 | 22.68 |
| Political Democracy | Autocracy–Democracy (-10 to 10) | -4.29 | 0.24 | 0.98 | 2.11 | 2.49 | 3.11 | 3.06 |
| Ethnic Divisions | Homogeneous–Diverse (0 to 1) | 0.50 | 0.51 | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.49 | 0.48 | . |
| Political Violence | Never–Frequent (-5 to 5) | 1.35 | 1.45 | 1.48 | 1.34 | 1.38 | 1.45 | 1.39 |
| Electrification Rate | Percentage of population with access to power | . | 26.64 | 28.31 | 32.22 | 37.72 | 43.09 | 51.47 |

5.2 Regression Analysis

The dataset used for empirical analysis includes observations from 47 countries spanning from 1990 to 2020. Table 2 presents the preliminary regression results using an OLS model. Model 1 regresses the independent variable (corruption) on the dependent variable (clientelism); Model 2 adds basic control variables, including economic development, population size, and democracy levels; Model 3 incorporates all control variables, including ethnic divisions, but this reduces the number of observations due to data limitations on ethnic fragmentation, making it challenging to capture recent governance performance in African countries [32]. Therefore, Model 3 was established separately to observe the model's performance after incorporating all control variables, including Ethnic Divisions. The regression results are shown in the table below:

Table 2 Effect of Corruption on Clientelism in Sub-Saharan African Countries

| Variable | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Corruption | 0.42*** (0.05) | 0.40*** (0.05) | 0.43*** (0.06) |
| Per Capita GDP | | -1.11 (1.88) | -0.70 (2.86) |
| GDP Squared | | 0.12 (0.15) | 0.13 (0.25) |
| Population | | -0.04 (0.06) | -0.06 (0.08) |
| Democracy | | -0.03 (0.16) | 0.02 (0.17) |
| Ethnic Divisions | | | -7.95 (2.47) |
| Constant | 31.95*** (3.59) | 34.25*** (4.37) | 34.95*** (6.27) |
| Fixed Effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 324 | 314 | 250 |
| R ² | 0.47 | 0.44 | 0.43 |

Note: ***p<.001 **p<.05 *p<0.1

The regression analysis reveals that the independent variable, political corruption, consistently exhibits a high level of statistical significance across all three models, with a positive regression coefficient. This indicates a strong positive correlation between corruption and clientelism, confirming the hypothesis outlined in H₀. Specifically, in Model 3, for every unit increase in political corruption, the intensity of nepotism in Sub-Saharan African countries increases by approximately 0.5 units. Regarding the control variables, none display significant correlations with clientelism in the main analysis. However, further examination suggests that the mechanisms of certain variables may be more complex and require refined modeling to uncover their potentially masked effects. Focusing on economic variables, additional regression analyses were conducted for countries with a per capita GDP below \$2,000. In this subset analysis, both per capita GDP and its squared term exhibit statistical significance at certain levels. The regression coefficient for per capita GDP is positive, while that for the squared term is negative. The results are summarized in Table 3, which compares Model 4 (excluding ethnic divisions) and Model 5 (including ethnic divisions). Apart from the robust correlation between Corruption and Clientelism, the findings also reflect that the impact of economic development on Clientelism is similar to its impact on Corruption—both exhibiting non-linear characteristics and following a “first promoting, then suppressing” pattern. This may be because, in relatively poor countries, the various political opportunities brought by early economic construction can trigger a rapid expansion of nepotism [33]. However, as the economy becomes more developed, the state's ability to control Clientelism may improve and the cost of Vote Buying itself will increase, turning their relationship into a negative correlation. Moreover, both models involve over 200 selected samples from more than 35 countries, indicating that this explanation is highly applicable to most African countries. In a few samples with relatively stronger economic foundations, the effect of development level on Clientelism is relatively weak, which makes the relationship between the two ambiguous in the full-sample analysis. This may explain why the economic variables did not show significance in Models 2 and 3.

Table 3 Regression Results for Countries with Per Capita GDP Below \$2,000

| Variable | Model 4 | Model 5 |
|------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Corruption | 0.43*** (0.06) | 0.44*** (0.07) |
| Per Capita GDP | 30.26*** (9.90) | 43.74*** (1.69) |
| GDP Squared | -9.67*** (4.25) | -15.08*** (5.20) |
| Population | -0.07 (0.10) | -0.08 (0.12) |
| Democracy | -0.01 (0.17) | 0.02 (0.18) |
| Ethnic Divisions | | -11.02 |

| | | |
|----------------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| Constant | 17.82*** (6.86) | (7.00) 15.43*** (8.27) |
| Fixed Effects | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 252 | 204 |
| R ² | 0.32 | 0.27 |

Note: ***p<.001 **p<.05 *p<0.1

5.3 Mechanism Testing

To further examine the mechanisms by which political corruption influences clientelism, a KHB mediation effect model is employed to test the parallel mediating effects of regime legitimacy and public goods provision. Theoretically, a two-way fixed-effects approach, accounting for both time and country, should be applied. However, the standard fixed-effects model cannot be directly implemented within the KHB framework. Instead, dummy variables are generated for both time and country to control these effects. Given the large number of countries in the sample, converting each country into dummy variables results in a substantial loss of degrees of freedom, which could affect the significance of the primary effects. Additionally, due to the geographical proximity, history, and cultural similarities among the selected countries in this study, they inherently share certain commonalities. The main factors related to the dependent variable have already been incorporated into the model as control variables. Considering the above and aiming to preserve both the model's degrees of freedom and its goodness of fit as much as possible, this study opts to control only for time fixed effects when analyzing the mediating effects. The analysis results are shown in Table 4:

Table 4 Mediation Effect Analysis

| Effect | Regression Coefficient | Standard Error | Proportion of Total Effect |
|------------------------|------------------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| Total Effect | 0.62*** | 0.05 | 1 |
| Direct Effect | 0.51*** | 0.06 | 82.73% |
| Mediation Effect | | | |
| Total Mediation Effect | 0.11*** | 0.03 | 17.27% |
| Political Violence | 0.11*** | 0.03 | 18.27% |
| Electrification Rate | -0.01*** | 0.01 | -1% |

Note: ***p<.001 **p<.05 *p<0.1

Firstly, the direct effect between corruption and clientelism, as well as the mediating effects through the two proxy variables—Political Violence and Electrification Rate—both show strong significance, indicating that both variables play a partial mediating role in the relationship between corruption and clientelism. Secondly, the regression coefficient for Political Violence is positive, while that for Electrification Rate is negative, meaning their mediating effects are in opposite directions. This suggests that more frequent corruption leads political actors in a country to be more inclined to use violent means to challenge the government, thereby forcing politicians to maintain their ruling base through nepotism. In contrast, a higher Electrification Rate suppresses the impact of corruption on clientelism. Conversely, corruption may impair the state's ability to provide public goods such as electricity, which in turn makes people more reliant on nepotism to compete for preferential allocation of public resources. H1b and H1c are both supported. Finally, based on the decomposition of mediating effects, the mediating effect of Political Violence accounts for a higher proportion, explaining 18.27% of the effect of clientelism on corruption. In contrast, the mediating effect of Electrification Rate is much lower, explaining only 1% of the effect. Therefore, compared to the weakening of public goods provision capacity caused by corruption, the resulting legitimacy deficit is more likely to reinforce clientelism. This may also suggest that, compared to the public's need for public goods, politicians' need for legitimacy is a more explanatory mechanism when corruption leads to clientelism.

5.4 Moderating Effects

Given that the above models include variables spanning economic, political, and other domains, it is necessary to explore potential moderating effects among these variables. Accordingly, interaction terms between various variables were introduced into the regression model. Due to space limitations, this section focuses on the moderating effect of political democracy on the relationship between corruption and clientelism.

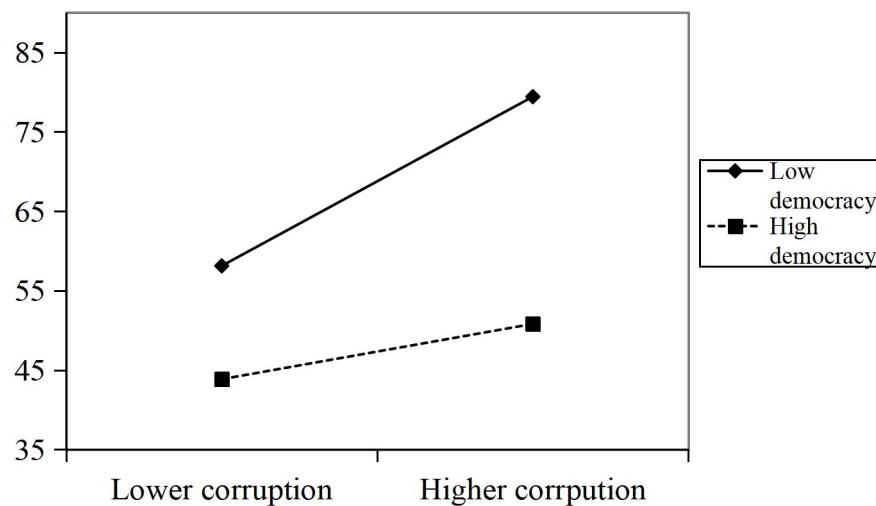


Figure 2 Interaction Effect of Democracy on the Relationship Between Corruption and Clientelism

As shown in Figure 2, political democracy exhibits a significant negative interaction effect. Compared to countries with higher levels of democracy, countries with lower degrees of democratization have significantly higher regression coefficients between corruption and clientelism. In other words, in more democratic countries, the nepotism induced by the same level of corruption is relatively less. Therefore, although some studies have found that when democratization is in its early stages, African countries' control over clientelism deteriorates, the insights from this study's moderation effect analysis suggest that this phenomenon may be a growing pain accompanying the democratic transition in countries with long-standing traditions of corruption. As democratic politics consolidate, nepotism is also expected to be effectively controlled. One possible explanation is that, as the level of democratization increases, clear principles of separation and checks and balances gradually form between the political and administrative spheres. Although nepotism and corrupt practices are closely linked and their boundaries partially overlap, the main sources of clientelism are elections and political parties, while corruption arises more from administration and bureaucracy. When democracy becomes consolidated, legislative bodies are entirely elected through competitive elections, and administrative agencies are composed of bureaucratic teams selected through specialized procedures, making them more inclined to maintain political neutrality. Therefore, in mature democratic politics, the correlation between corruption and clientelism is expected to decrease.

6 CONCLUSION

Clientelism is a major political phenomenon plaguing emerging democracies. On one hand, clientelism corrodes the efficacy of electoral democracy by transforming free, one-person-one-vote elections into vote-*quid* exchange relationships between politicians and voters, and between political parties and interest groups. This process reduces democratic procedures to tools for colluding political-economic elites to manipulate voters and capture the state. Moreover, in countries where ethnic, religious, or class divisions are more pronounced, clientelism can have even more disastrous consequences. Since nepotism often unfolds along established boundaries such as ethnicity and religion—and in turn reinforces divisions between different groups—it can spark intense political struggles, even leading to outbreaks of armed conflict. In sub-Saharan Africa, most countries are constrained by a long colonial history and weak state capacity, making it difficult to build an institutional system capable of integrating diverse interest groups and uniting them under a common oath of allegiance. However, with the introduction of electoral democracy in the late 1980s, previously repressed pluralistic interests were liberated and allowed to participate in politics legally. Political parties claiming to represent various groups emerged one after another. In order to gain certain power in political arenas such as parliament, some parties chose to purchase votes from voters with material goods. This phenomenon led to a significant increase in the level of nepotism in African countries during the early stages of democratization. This paper, therefore, focuses on the reasons for the differences among countries in their responses to clientelism within the thirty years following democratization.

Through empirical analysis of sub-Saharan African countries, this paper explores how a country's political corruption leads to clientelism, distinguishing itself from many existing studies that focus solely on the correlation between the two. On the one hand, this paper concentrates on clientelism as the dependent variable rather than the independent variable; on the other hand, it examines the causal mechanism through which political corruption may trigger nepotism, drawing on political practices in post-democratization sub-Saharan African countries. Overall, regardless of a country's level of economic development, political democracy, ethnic divisions, or other conditions, corruption always exerts a powerful promoting effect on clientelism. Therefore, for developing countries, although clientelism may be a complex issue, effectively governing internal government corruption could help alleviate problems related to nepotism. In addition, this paper further explores the role democracy plays between corruption and clientelism. Although the early introduction of

multi-party competition and electoral democracy may have spurred a surge in nepotism in African countries, the establishment of a high-level democratic system could effectively curb the promoting effect of corruption on nepotism. Of course, many issues remain worthy of discussion based on this paper. Most importantly, as numerous studies have shown, there is clearly a reciprocal, mutually influential causal relationship between corruption and clientelism. Thus, more precise analyses are needed to address endogeneity issues. On the other hand, although this paper briefly examined the intermediary mechanisms by which corruption affects clientelism and verified the relevant hypotheses, the analysis indicates that the effects mediated by these mechanisms are relatively small. In fact, corruption may influence various elements within economic development and democratic governance, thereby linking to clientelism in more complex ways. These mechanisms still require further exploration and testing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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