

Avenues of Political Access: How Political Institutions Influence Constituency Services on the African Continent

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Abstract

With elections taking place only every 4 or 5 years, voters must contact their elected representative or party officials to exert their political wills and receive constituency services. While personality, demographics, and community standing all influence an individual's propensity to contact leaders, the literature has not addressed how political institutions influence individual actions, and in particular, through which avenues they choose to engage. This study tests which factors shape African voters' propensity to contact their elected officials. We test our hypotheses using a unique dataset that combines local party control and country-level political institutions with geographically matched Afrobarometer data. We develop a theory around two factors, *identification* and *power*, that shape citizens' propensity to contact their MP. We find that identification – i.e. being able to identify a representative with whom you can contact – positively correlates with contacts. Secondly, the amount of power held by a co-partisan MP and partisan control of the national assembly both affect the propensity to contact MP. Lastly, we find that size of the constituency matters – individuals in smaller constituencies are more likely to contact their MPs than those in larger constituencies.

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1 Introduction

Conventional wisdom holds that the main way through which citizens participate in democracy is elections. Yet, elections in most democracies occur once every 4 or 5 years. Thus, it is problematic for the state of democracy if citizens are limited to participation every few years. This paper investigates contacting politicians and elected leaders as a form of civil engagement between elections. Citizens have demands and preferences and it would be inefficient for democracy if they could only signal these preference and demands only through elections. Increasingly, both political scientists and international democracy advocates have embraced and pushed for increased civil engagement and participation in politics. This popular support has emerged on the premise that increased civil involvement in politics increases accountability, and consequently, democratic governance. There are many avenues for political engagement and scholarly work has not been able to tease out which factors influence how and when citizens take active participatory roles.

In this paper, we examine the conditions that shape voters' propensity to contact their elected officials, specifically members of parliament (MPs). We also examine contacts with non-elected leaders and entities like traditional leaders, media organization and government officials. Our central claim is that two phenomena, power and identification, are crucial in determining whether a person would contact their elected official. We use power to denote the extent to which a person's preferred party holds parliamentary and/or presidential power. Identification on the other hand refers to the institutional constraints that affects whether an individual is able to easily identify their representative.

2 Civil Engagement and Contacting Leaders

The majority of scholarly work on democratic participation has centered on elections. Scholars of democratization generally hold the view that democracy is better when citizens take active role to ensure representation and accountability (Powell 1982; Lijphart

1997). An elections-centric conceptualization of democracy thus measures the strength of a democracy largely around the degree of citizen's participation in elections, particularly the turnout rate. On the other hand, literature on civic participation has focused on factors that affect participation including socioeconomic cleavages (Radcliff 1992; Solt 2008), labor organization (Radcliff and Davis 2000), party-group relations (Powell 1986), and institutions (party-systems and laws) (Powell 1986). While the aforementioned literature generally focused on advanced democracies in Europe and the US, a few recent works on Africa have highlighted the importance of civil engagement and participation. Kuenzi and Lambright (2007) have found that participation in the African context is determined by factors such as mobilization, support for democracy, level of education, and a seemingly contradictory finding for socio-economic factors.

Despite the scholarly attention given to the participation of citizens in elections, empirical evidence shows no improvement in civic participation in elections. On the contrary, voter turnout has declined in many democracies (Li and Marsh 2008). Some group of scholars have argued that decreasing turnout rate is perhaps not the strongest evidence of civil disengagement as a growing culture of individualism has translated into other forms of political activism (Norris 2002). Notably, it has become common for individuals to pursue direct contact/engagement with politicians. This dynamic makes it even more important to study other avenues of political engagement used by civilians.

Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley (2004) found that British citizens are more likely to engage in individual activism such as contacting public officials, the media or politicians than participate in 'collective activism' such as demonstration, political meetings, and protests. Similarly, early evidence from 1960s US elections showed that despite decrease in voter turnout, other forms of engagement like donating money to a campaign and contacting elected officials were on the rise Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1995); Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). In Norway, contact with local councillors increased from 9% to 25% in less than 15 years and in the US, from 20% to 34% in 20 years (Aars and Strømsnes 2007).

In essence, the literature generally relies on the assumption that democracy operates on the premise that voters possess the power to hold their leaders accountable by either punishing or rewarding leaders' behavior through elections (Cheibub and Przeworski 1999). The majority of studies have accordingly examined elections as the primary means through which electorates signal their preferences and demands. But per the evident in the literature, there is the need to give more attention to other forms of participation. This paper contributes to the literature on how voters in African countries, where democracy is less consolidated, pursue representation and accountability by focusing on another mechanism—direct contact with elected officials—as an avenue through which voters demand services from politicians. As rational actors, politicians in a well-functioning democracy aim to stay in power and therefore have to respond to these demands made by their constituents.

Citizens typically have various avenues of political expression available to them. As rational actors, they should strategically decide which avenues are most likely to yield the desired outcome. Furthermore, since elections only occur every 4 to 5 years, such non-electoral avenues are crucial for citizens to signal their interests/preferences to their elected officials, and generate a healthy participatory environment. In the African context, unelected institutions like the traditional chiefs and kings have also proven, not only broadly popular among citizens (Logan 2013), but also important for constituents and the fabric of democracy (Baldwin 2016). Hence, voters may choose to contact traditional leaders with their needs instead of politicians. What determines which avenues voters select to express their demands? What factors shape whether voters will contact their MPs, traditional leaders, or both?

3 Theory

Why do some people contact their MPs whereas others do not? Very little theoretical framework has been developed to answer this question in the African context. Previous scholarly work has leveraged Afrobarometer data to study the determinants

of political participation across the continent. The data show that many forms of participation, including contacting elected leaders, are significantly influenced by age, gender, education, and urban/rural residence (Bratton 1999; Kuenzi 2006; Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi 2016). Personality, a strong predictor of political participation worldwide, also demonstrates significant influence in the African context (Friesen, Bleck, and Fridy Forthcoming). In addition to individual-level predictors, countries-level conditions also influence how citizens engage with their leaders between elections, including the strength of parties, previous policies that have weakened or strengthened traditional leaders, and basic democratic conditions (Chaligha 2009; Croke et al. 2016; Young 2009). Elsewhere, Bratton (2012) has argued that that few Africans contact their councillors and local officials as they are ineffective, and as an alternative, Africans opt to engage with traditional leaders.

In this paper, we work to reconcile the arguments in the literature by developing a theory based on the nature of the electoral institutions. The relationship between electoral institutions and political behavior is not new, but has not been carefully tested in the African context (see Lijphart (1990)). The laws governing electoral institutions have significant implications on whether or not people engage politically (Norris 1997). Our theory identifies two key features of electoral systems—identification of political leaders and their share of power—that should impact an individual’s likelihood to contact their MP.

First, *Identification* relates to the institutional constraints that might make it difficult for constituents to identify responsive MP. One could not possibly contact their MP if they are unable to identify who their MP is. By design, some electoral systems make it easy for citizens to identify their MP(s) than others. In electoral systems with Single Member Districts (SMDs), constituents should be able to identify their MPs easily as they often vote directly for them and there is always just one winner. Politicians in these systems often compete in a first past the post or absolute majority system. This process makes the identity of the representative clearer to the constituents as a single winner emerges. As Lockwood and Krönke (2021) argue, “the connection between citizens and

representatives in majoritarian systems is clearer, closer, and more responsive, making contact an effective strategy” (584). This clearer and closer relationship observed in SMDs makes identification easier.

On the other hand, constituents in multi-member districts (MMDs) may experience either high or low identification of their MPs depending on the size of the district and number of seats held by their party. MMDs elected leaders are assigned parliamentary seats based upon the proportion of votes won by each party. In this instance, citizens rarely vote directly for a candidate but instead for a party list which might make it difficult for constituents to identify one clear representative. We theorize that, like in the SMDs, constituents whose party hold a single seat in an MMD will also have high identification since there is clearly only one MP they are likely to reach out to. We anticipate that the MP is unlikely to turn them away since the constituents do not have any other representative. Besides, the MP, motivated to get re-elected should maintain an intimate relationship to the small group of people who voted for them. Additionally, feeling responsible for a smaller number of constituents should make it easier for the MP to respond to their demands in comparison to a party that has several MP represented within a district and a high number of party supporters. Thus, by design, this institutional set up might put constraints on citizens who want to contact their MP, even if they wished to do so.

The second feature of electoral systems, power distribution, should also shape the propensity to contact a representative. We theorize that the amount of power held by an MP incentivizes constituents who want to contact their MP. Voters are rational actors (Downs 1957) and their decision to contact an MP should be informed by whether they expect their representative to yield a desirable outcome. They can ascertain this by looking at the amount of power held by their MP’s party. Our theory accounts for two dimensions of power- constituency level and national levels.

Constituency level power represents the percentage of the seats held by a constituent’s party in their district. In an SMD, constituency level power is simple and direct:

either no power or complete power. For example, a BDP voter in Botswana, an SMD system, whose constituency is controlled by a BDP MP would have 100% constituency power. The “winner takes all” nature of the SMD makes the power relationship either absent or absolute. In an MMD, power is shared as a ratio of party representation. Thus, a party with 60% of seats in an MMD constituency will equally have 60% of the power in that constituency. We argue that as the amount of power held by a voter’s preferred party goes up, the greater the likelihood of contacting their MP. The national dimension of power relates to whether the MP’s party also controls the national legislature and/or executive. Constituents should be more motivated and feel positive about receiving an outcome if their MP’s party is also the ruling party at the national level.

Table 1 is a two-way table illustrating the two factors highlighted in our theory. The highest level of contact occurs when both identification and power levels are high as indicated in the table. This is the case where voters have both the incentive (power) to contact their MPs and they know whom their MP is (identification). In the boxes labeled 2 and 3, we expect some contacts but not as high at 1. In box 2, constituents have no identification problem but have less incentive since their MP has little or no power. In box 3, while their MPs may have some power, institutional constraints make it difficult for people to identify a responsive MP. The bottom right box represents constituents who have little incentive (little power) and are unable to identify whom their representative is. Consequently, the lowest amount of contact should occur in this section.

Table 1: Two way table of Identification and Power

		Identification	
		High	Low
Power	High	High contact (1)	Some contact (3)
	Low	Some contact (2)	Low contact(4)

4 Data and Methodology

4.1 Data Collection

Our data come from the Afrobarometer round 6 geocoded surveys dataset. To date, geographic matching has been complete for 15 countries that encompasses nearly 20,000 individual survey respondents. Our elections data are accessed from the Constituency-Level Elections Archive (CLEA), which records candidate-level information by constituencies. We focus on lower house elections, as our primary outcome of interest is the rate of contacting one's Minister of Parliament (MP).

In order to test our hypotheses, we construct a dataset that matches the geographic location of Afrobarometer survey respondents to information about the constituency(s) they reside in using ArcGIS. The critical information is the number and political party of relevant elected representatives across constituencies. First, we locate or create constituency maps for the national election immediately preceding the round 6 Afrobarometer survey in each country. Next, we assign each respondents to the constituency(s) they are legally assigned to. Lastly, we matched CLEA elections results for each constituency to record how many and which party each representative belongs to.

Out of the fifteen countries in our sample, five only have single-member constituencies for the lower house, while the remaining have either mixed or proportional representation rules, with districts varying in size. Due to the Afrobarometer cluster sampling technique, not all constituencies for each country are captured. In table 2, the number of constituencies per country are shown along with their range in constituency magnitude from the smallest to the largest. Thus, countries with single-member districts all have a magnitude of one representative. On the other hand, Namibia is composed of a single constituency with 72 members. Countries in our dataset also vary in the proportion of ruling partisans (those that feel close to the political party in power) from a low of 6.6% in Burkina Faso to a high of 53% in Namibia. Also shown in table 2 are the the mean partisan power scores that measure the average degree of constituency

representation based on an individual’s party attachment and the median constituency size as measured by the number of voters in the previous election.

Table 2: Key Descriptive Measures

Country	Number of Constituencies	Constituencies Mag Range	Ruling Partisans	Mean Partisan Power	Median Voters Constituency
Benin	24	2-5	23.5%	0.17	83,878
Botswana	45	1-1	43.8%	0.38	9,050
Burkina Faso	35	2-9	6.6%	0.06	69,110
Liberia	51	1-1	13.8%	0.14	17,893
Mauritius	21	2-3	9.8%	-	101,841
Mozambique	11	14-47	40.0%	0.28	413,718
Namibia	1	72-72	53.1%	0.41	800,567
Niger	7	5-21	41.3%	0.22	538,119
Nigeria	170	1-1	29.3%	0.22	76,745
Senegal	40	1-7	30.0%	-	55,649
Sierra Leone	53	1-1	32.0%	0.50	18,673
South Africa	9	5-48	40.4%	0.33	2,243,497
Togo	30	2-10	24.6%	0.17	57,390
Tunisia	27	4-10	16.7%	0.09	136,987
Zambia	72	1-1	25.4%	0.23	18,012

4.2 Model Design and Variables

Our hypotheses are primarily concerned with testing the effects of Identifiability and Power based on constituency features. To operationalize these concepts, we must also take into account the partisan status of each respondent.

The main outcomes of interest is the frequency of reaching out to one’s elected representative, or *Contact MP*. This is an ordinal variable as measured over the past year, with 0 meaning never in the past year (89%), 0.33 corresponding to Once (4.7%), 0.67 corresponding to A Few Times (4.5%) and 1 corresponding to Often (1.7%). Thus, contacting is a relatively infrequent occurrence that the majority of survey respondents do not engage in yearly.

Our first main variable of interest – *Representative Identification (RI)* – measures the ability of citizens to find an MP with who they wish to express an opinion or make a request. All citizens residing within a SMD are coded as 1, as there is one clear

representative for their constituency. For MMDs, the variable is calculated as one divided by the number of party representatives for the party supported by the citizen. Thus, if a partisan supporting party A has just one representative from their party in their constituency, they receive a score of 1, if they have two representatives they receive a score of 0.5 (1/2), and so on. For political independents in MMDs, their score is calculated as one divided by the total number of representatives in their district, since they presumably do not have a preferred party to contact.

The second primary variable of interest is *Constituency Party Power (CPP)*, representing the degree of control of different parties in one's constituency. In order to receive a score of 1, the citizen's preferred party must have complete control of their constituency. This is the cases when a citizen's preferred party wins a SMD or when one party controls all of the seats within a given MMD. Those who do not support a political party (independents) or those who support a party that has no representation in their constituency, receive 0 scores. For MMDs, the CPP score is calculated by the proportion of party representatives aligned with the partisanship of the respondent.

Two other political administration variables are included that should also influence an individual's motives and constraints around contacting their MP. First, we include a variable accounting for whether a citizen supports the party with the most seats in the lower house *National Ruling Partisan (NRP)*, and another for the population size of the constituency, represented by *Constituency Population (CP)*. This variables is calculated by taking the total number of votes in each constituency, logging this value, and then standardized all values between zero (small constituency) and one (largest constituency). We preform this transformation because the number of voters per constituency varies dramatically in size across our sample, and standardize for each of interpretation.

Taken together, we expect RI and CP to influence the ability of a citizen to find and make contact with a sympathetic MP. Specifically, RI should demonstrate a positive relationship to Contact MP, while CP (larger populations size of the constituency) should demonstrate a negative relationship.

On the other hand, we hypothesized that the degree of influence that a party has makes it more attractive to the citizen, because they anticipate the MP will be more effective in their response. This is measured at the constituency level through CPP, representing the degree of control of a citizen's preferred party at the local/regional level, and national through ruling party alignment, as measured by NRP. Thus, we expect both variables to demonstrate positive relationships to Contacting MP frequency.

Our individual-level controls include a range of demographic, experiential, and attitudinal variables that should help account for unique individual circumstances. These variables include a standardized (0 to 1) measure for *Age*, a dichotomous variable capturing whether the respondent lives in an *Urban* setting, a dichotomous variable measuring *Male* gender identification, a nine-level ordinal measure of *Education*, and a five level-ordinal variable capturing *Socio-economic Status* that is calculated by taking into account personal ownership of a radio, television, motor vehicle, and mobile phone. We expect those with more influential and advantaged demographic characteristics (older, male, urban, educated, wealth) to have an easier time accessing their elected representatives.

Next, we include three attitudinal motivations for reaching out to an elected representative. We presume that those who express high *Political Interest* are more likely to be informed and politically engaged. We also expect those with significant grievances to be more likely to contact a leader for help, including a greater perceived ethnic discrimination against them, and higher *Lived Poverty*. Finally, we include a measure for potential self-censorship bias as measured through *Perceived Government Sponsor*, where respondents indicated that they believe the Afrobarometer enumerator to be a representative of the government.

Our data are spread across three distinct levels - individual, constituency, and country. Thus, the model is constructed using linear mixed-effect specifications with constituency-level random effects. Because we have relatively few countries with diverse political, economic, social, and historical backgrounds, we including country-level fixed effects in place of random effects. This approach acknowledges that the countries in our

dataset vary in significant ways that we can not fully account for.

5 Findings

5.1 Contacting an MP

Our main findings of interests are shown in Table 3. These are linear regression coefficients calculated using constituency level random effects, and country level fixed effects in all models. In model 1, we only include our individual level variables to provide a baseline. These outcomes are all statistically significant except for Perceived Government Sponsor, and all in the expected directions except for Urban. Individuals who contact their MP are much more likely to be older, more educated and wealthier. To a smaller degree they are also more likely to be Male and live in a rural area. We find strong evidence for attitudinal motivations. MP contact frequency is also positively correlated with Political Interest, Ethnic Discrimination, and Lived Poverty.

In model 2, we introduce our four political-administrative variables of interest. Because our our limited number of different constituencies, the standard errors for RI and CP in particular are larger relative to other variables. In model 2, all of our coefficients bears signs in the expected directions, but they are moderate in size and only two are statistically significant. Figure 1 shows the coefficients of model 2 plotted for ease of interpretation. The first four plot points show that the effects of the political variables are relatively small, and vary significantly in their margins of error, as shown by the 95% confidence intervals. CP actually demonstrates the largest negative effect within the model, but is still not statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Figure 1: Predictors of Contacting MP (Model 2)

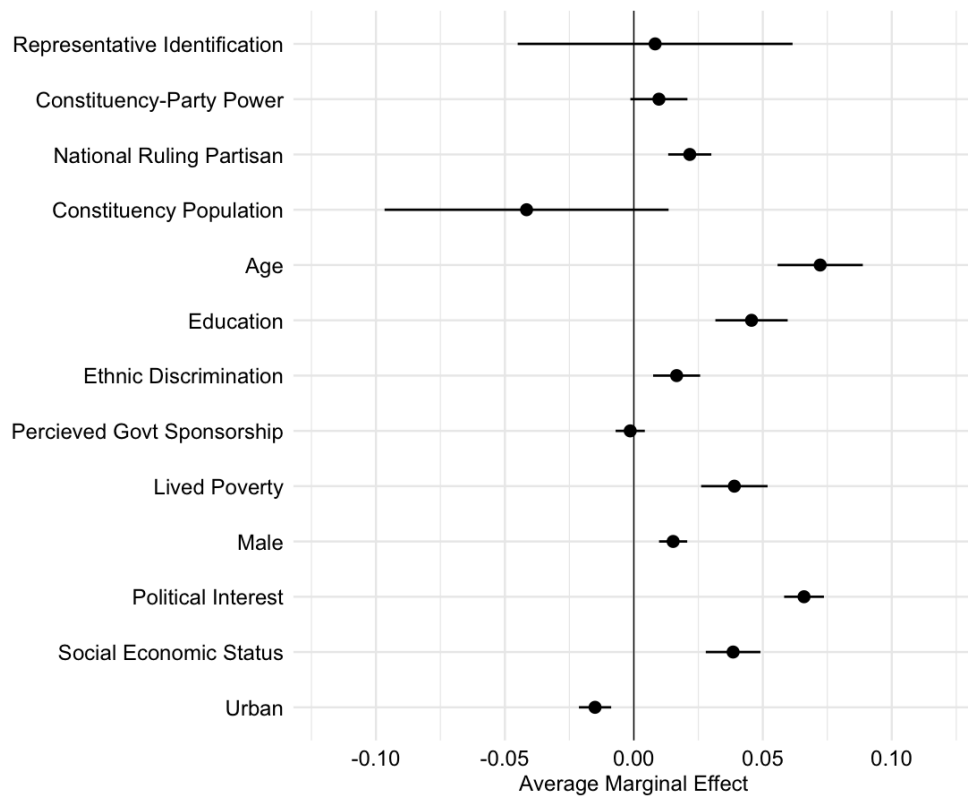


Table 3

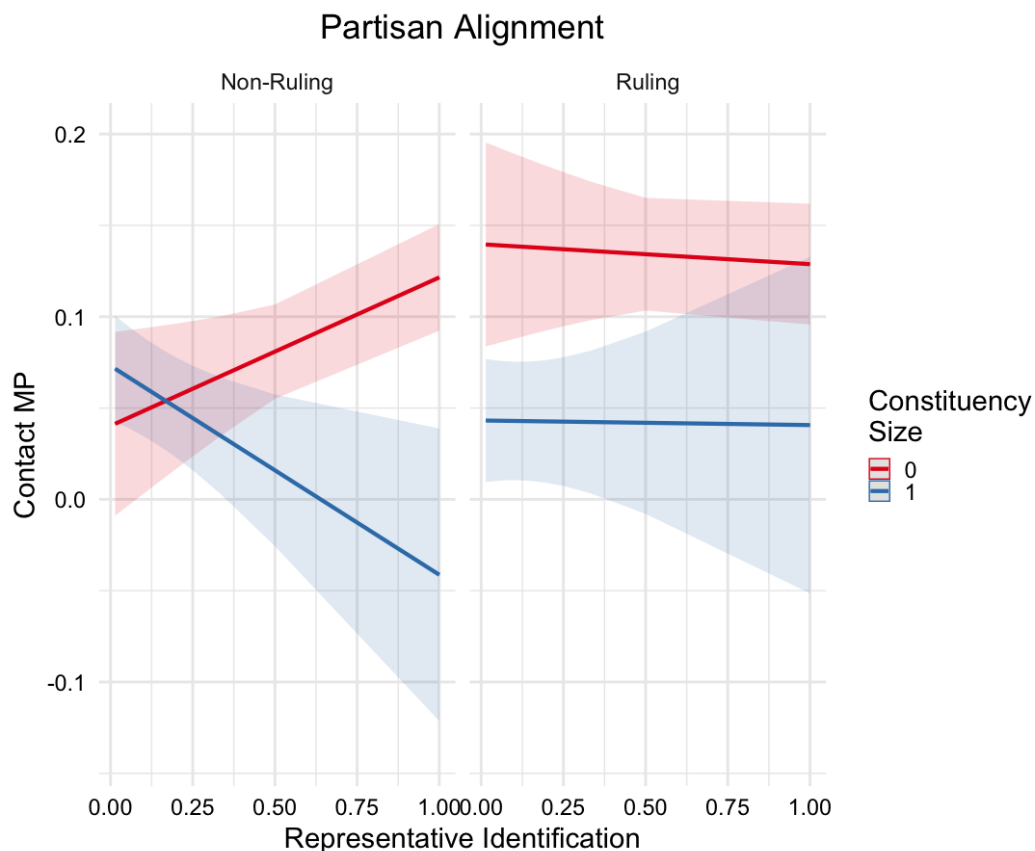
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Contact MP			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age (standardized)	0.075*** (0.008)	0.072*** (0.008)	0.072*** (0.008)	0.072*** (0.008)
Urban	-0.019*** (0.003)	-0.015*** (0.003)	-0.015*** (0.003)	-0.016*** (0.003)
Male	0.016*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)
Education	0.043*** (0.007)	0.046*** (0.007)	0.044*** (0.007)	0.045*** (0.007)
Socio-economic Status	0.038*** (0.005)	0.038*** (0.005)	0.038*** (0.005)	0.038*** (0.005)
Political Interest	0.070*** (0.004)	0.066*** (0.004)	0.066*** (0.004)	0.066*** (0.004)
Ethnic Discrimination	0.013*** (0.005)	0.017*** (0.005)	0.015*** (0.005)	0.016*** (0.005)
Lived Poverty	0.039*** (0.007)	0.039*** (0.007)	0.039*** (0.007)	0.039*** (0.007)
Perceived Govt Sponsor	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)
Representative Identification (RI)		0.008 (0.027)	0.086*** (0.033)	0.006 (0.027)
Constituency Party Power (CPP)		0.010* (0.006)	0.012** (0.006)	0.028** (0.014)
Constituency Population (CP)		-0.042 (0.028)	0.038 (0.033)	-0.031 (0.028)
National Ruling Partisan (NRP)		0.022*** (0.004)	0.100*** (0.017)	0.055*** (0.011)
RI*CP			-0.201*** (0.054)	
RI*NRP			-0.098*** (0.019)	
CP*NRP			-0.129*** (0.024)	-0.053** (0.026)
RI*NRP*CP			0.214*** (0.043)	
CPP*CP				-0.004 (0.034)
CPP*NRP				-0.038* (0.020)
CPP*CP*NRP				0.023 (0.051)
Constant	-0.013 (0.008)	-0.006 (0.020)	-0.042** (0.021)	-0.010 (0.020)
Observations	19,255	19,255	19,255	19,255
Log Likelihood	4,852.4	4,879.2	4,892.0	4,877.1
AIC	-9,654.8	-9,700.4	-9,718.0	-9,688.2
BIC	-9,458.2	-9,472.3	-9,458.4	-9,428.6

Note:

Because of the complex nature of our political-administrative variables, we suspect that they may be influencing individual behavior in ways not fully captured in model 2. We therefore, test two additional models with interaction terms. Specifically, model 3 includes interaction terms between RI as well as CP and NRM, resulting in a triple interaction term. Model 4 tests whether CPP is significantly influenced by CP and NRM by also testing a triple interaction term.

Regression coefficient interaction terms are difficult to interpret, so we plot the main effects across CP and NRM below using the *ggemmeans* function that calculates model results after taking the non-plotted variables' mean values. The model 3 interaction coefficients suggest that the effects of RI are significantly dependent on the specific values of both NRM and CP, with all four interaction terms being strong and statistically significant.

Figure 2: Representative Identification Interaction Effects (Model 3)

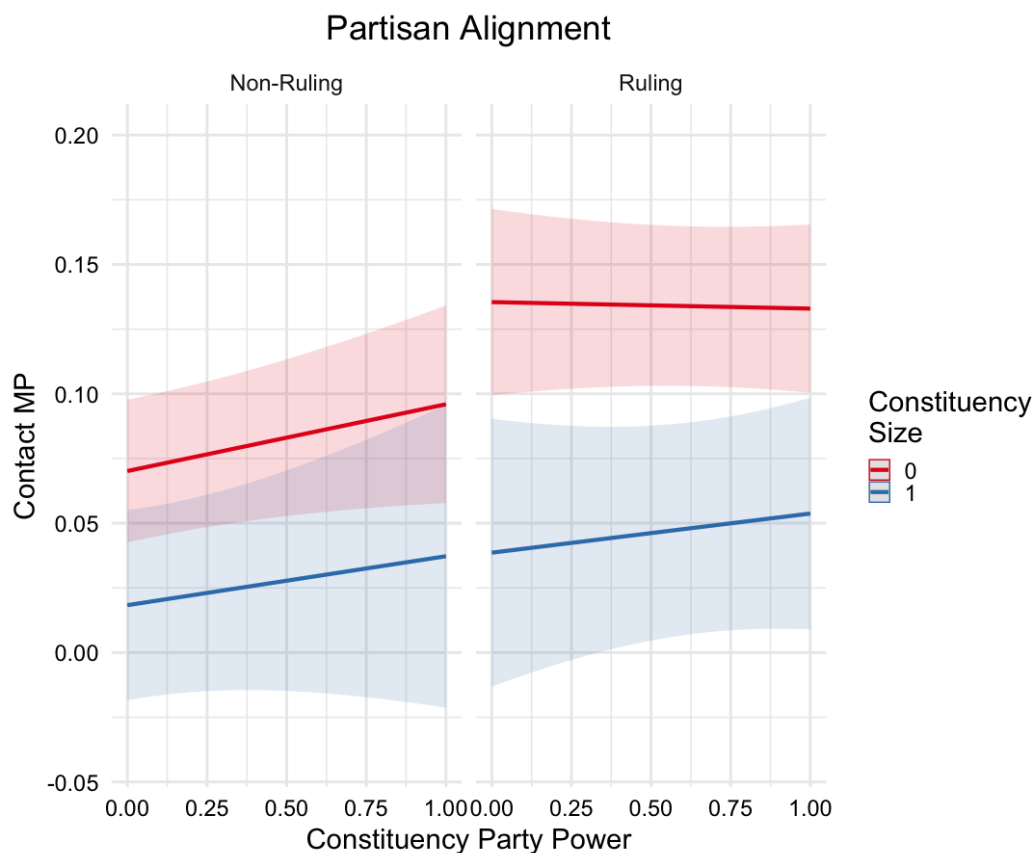


The interaction effects for RI, based upon model 3, are displayed in Figure 2. The

results show that both NRM and CP are extremely important to how RI relates to Contact MP. The two graphics compared the effects experienced by a politically independent or opposition partisan on the left, compared to an individual that supports the country's national ruling party on the right. The two plot lines represent the estimated effects for citizens living in a very small (low population) constituency in red, and a very larger (high population) constituency in blue.

First, the results show that national ruling partisans residing in small constituencies are the most likely to Contact their MP, and are not meaningfully influenced by RI. Very close to the same high rate of contact are non-ruling partisans who experience high RI and low CP, meaning they can easily identify one representative to contact and live in a small constituency. Citizens living in very large constituencies, have significantly lower rates of contact.

Figure 3: Representative Identification Interaction Effects (Model 4)



Among ruling parties, again, RI does not seem to have a meaningful influence.

Among non-ruling partisans we observe a negative relationship that reaches into the negative values (impossible) with large confidence intervals. Our main conclusion from these plots are that RI does not meaningfully influence ruling partisans, but CP does. Among non-ruling partisans, experiencing high RI and low CP is essential to achieving a high rate of contact.

Next, we plot the estimated effects for CPP across NRM and CP. The coefficients from model 4 suggest that there is a much milder interaction effect occurring around CPP. Figure 3 shows these effects plotted again, by non-ruling partisans and ruling partisans, as well as by the smallest and largest constituency sizes. Like the previous finding, ruling partisans in small constituencies are the most likely to contact their MP, and they are not significantly influenced by the CPP score. However, across all other plotted effects, CPP is seen to increase the rate of contacting one's MP, and non-ruling partisans in smaller constituencies are advantaged over their counterparts living in larger constituencies. The citizens least likely to contact their MP are those with no constituency level representation who do not support the ruling party and who live in large constituencies. The estimated rate of contact for this population is just 0.02, compared to those in the most advantaged positions at 0.13.

5.2 Contacting other Leaders

In Table 4, we test how political administrative dynamics influence other forms of contacting. We included three that are complementary to Contacting MP as they are all within the realm of formal political participation – Contacting a political party official, a central government official, and a local council official. We anticipate that some of the same dynamics that influenced MP contacting hold true for these leaders as well, particularly whether an individual's preferred party has power at the local and national levels. We also test two forms of contacting outside of formal politics – contacting a media organization and contacting a traditional leader. We anticipate that these effects, especially contacting media may actually have the opposite directional effects as contacting one's MP, being that they may represent citizens looking for other avenues to have

their voices heard.

In models 1-3, RI is positive and statistically significant for two of the outcomes. [We do not presently have an interpretation for these results]. More intuitively, CPP is positive and statistically significant for political party and local council contacting, suggesting that belonging to the regionally dominant party increases all forms of political contacting. Larger constituency also have a deterring effect on contacting other political actors, especially local councilors, which may be due to the size and structure of local governments across countries. Perhaps the most intuitive finding is the consistent positive relationship between NRP and all three forms of contacting, all of which are robust. Overall, these results broadly mirror the Contact MP findings.

Contacting a media outlet is only statistically significantly correlated with RI, as shown in model 4. Aside from this finding, the other null effects are what we anticipated. Traditional leaders provide both a complementary governing institution as well as a mediating institution to formal politics, and thus we had few expectations for this particular form of contacting across the political administrative variables. The relationship between RI and Contact Traditional Leader is extremely large and positive. We note the historical correlations between former British colonies that instituted indirect rule and the adoption of single-member constituency systems. While part of this finding may be driven by historically-based endogeneity, there are other significant political findings that suggest contacting traditional leaders is more a mediating than competing avenue of expression to formal politics. For example, ruling partisans are much more likely to contact their traditional leader, suggesting that they anticipate them to serve as a conduit for their opinions. We also find a positive, though not quite statistically significant relationship with CP. It's noteworthy that across all five outcomes, the three that are directly tied to formal politics are negatively correlated with CP, while the two contacting forms that are outside of formal politics are positively correlated with CP.

Table 4

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Political Party	Government Official	Local Councilor	Media Organization	Traditional Leader
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Age (standardized)	0.074*** (0.010)	0.067*** (0.009)	0.147*** (0.012)	0.002 (0.009)	0.219*** (0.015)
Urban	-0.014*** (0.004)	-0.008** (0.003)	-0.037*** (0.005)	-0.005 (0.003)	-0.107*** (0.006)
Male	0.027*** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.003)	0.043*** (0.004)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.059*** (0.005)
Education	0.064*** (0.009)	0.050*** (0.008)	0.028*** (0.010)	0.079*** (0.007)	-0.026** (0.013)
Socio-economic Status	0.059*** (0.007)	0.050*** (0.006)	0.080*** (0.008)	0.049*** (0.006)	0.050*** (0.009)
Political Interest	0.102*** (0.005)	0.068*** (0.004)	0.116*** (0.006)	0.048*** (0.004)	0.106*** (0.007)
Ethnic Discrimination	0.023*** (0.006)	-0.002 (0.005)	0.017** (0.007)	0.029*** (0.005)	0.016* (0.008)
Lived Poverty	0.054*** (0.008)	0.043*** (0.007)	0.092*** (0.009)	0.045*** (0.007)	0.101*** (0.011)
Perceived Government Sponsor	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.008*** (0.003)	0.001 (0.004)	-0.008*** (0.003)	0.004 (0.005)
Representative Identification (RI)	0.027 (0.034)	0.068** (0.030)	0.085** (0.038)	0.078*** (0.029)	0.233*** (0.048)
Constituency Party Power (CPP)	0.017** (0.007)	-0.001 (0.006)	0.024*** (0.008)	0.011* (0.006)	0.011 (0.010)
Constituency Population (CP)	-0.041 (0.035)	-0.042 (0.031)	-0.125*** (0.040)	0.047 (0.030)	0.090* (0.051)
National Ruling Partisan (NRP)	0.031*** (0.005)	0.026*** (0.005)	0.034*** (0.006)	0.006 (0.004)	0.040*** (0.008)
Constant	-0.038 (0.025)	-0.054** (0.022)	-0.0001 (0.028)	-0.063*** (0.021)	-0.007 (0.036)
Observations	19,261	19,257	19,225	19,140	17,997
Log Likelihood	842.5	3,382.4	-1,909.9	4,016.4	-5,042.2
AIC	-1,627.0	-6,706.7	3,877.9	-7,974.9	10,140.3
BIC	-1,398.9	-6,478.6	4,105.9	-7,746.9	10,358.7

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6 Discussion and Conclusion

The question “who participates?” is neither new or unstudied (Verba 1967). As early as the 1960s, Verba in an endeavour to draw scholarly attention to other forms of participation wrote, “the question is left open as to whether the standard modes of participation, such as voting, represent the most effective modes” (Verba 1967, 56). That notwithstanding, the participation literature has been highly skewed towards elections as the central form of participation at the expense of actions.

Now more than ever, it has become crucial to study other forms of political participation due to the decreasing trend of voter turnout. This paper seeks to contribute to the literature by testing and bringing to the forefront some of the factors that affect contacting MPs as a form of political participation in the African context. Several factors – individual and institutional level – affect whether an individual will contact their MP.

In this study, we have shown that identification and power matters for participation. Our evidence shows that institutional designs that facilitate identification of elected representatives witness more participation. This essentially underscores the fact that institutional constraints have significant implications for democracy. Citizens are unable to exercise their participatory rights if they are unable to easily identify their representative, especially if they do not support the country’s ruling party.

In addition, citizens’ propensity to contact their MP appear to be associated with the amount of power held by their representative at the constituency level and their party of support at the national level. This factor shapes the motives of the individual. The motivation to contact an MP is lower if the MP’s power at the national assembly and at the constituency is limited. We also find that the impacts of both identification and power are contingent on constituency size. Citizens living in smaller constituencies have higher frequency of contacts. This can be explained by the fact that MPs in charge of few people are more able to attend and respond to contacts made by their constituents than MPs who represent a large amount of people.

At the individual level, factors relating to demography, attitudes, and experience, unsurprisingly, remain very important. Just as education level and socioeconomic background have been found to be relevant for electoral participation (Almond and Verba 1963; Radcliff 1992), we find them to be important for contacting MPs also. Other demographic factors such as age, urban, and male, are also important determinants of contacting MP.

These findings have implications for democracy and policy-making. These results highlight structural biases in favor of males, educated people, and economically well-to-do citizens. Though this paper is not meant to make policy recommendations, the findings show that avenues of political communication are not equally available to all citizens and thus could be addressed to improve democracy. Just as unequal electoral participation can be problematic for democracy, unequal access to other avenues of participation could be viewed in similar light.

Our current analysis relies on survey data of roughly 20,000 respondents in 15 countries in the Afrobarometer. The question of whether these findings are exportable to other cases remains to be seen. Moving forward, we plan to expand our data to include more countries in the Afrobarometer data which should increase our external validity and statistical power.

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