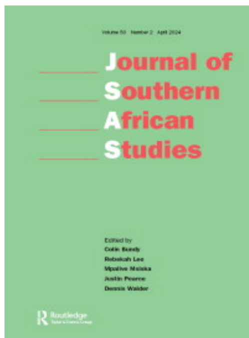

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African Legislators: Unrepresentative Power Elites?

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African legislators both resemble and differ from the societies they claim to represent in important ways. Based on a unique survey of representative samples of parliamentarians in 17 countries, we find that legislatures are representative of national publics in terms of ethnicity and religion. At the same time, compared to ordinary African citizens, African MPs possess far higher levels of education and are far more likely to be older, male and to come from professional or business backgrounds. Besides coming from higher social and economic status backgrounds, many MPs also previously held senior posts in the state and national government, or leadership positions in their political party. Does this mean that African legislators constitute a coherent, self-interested, social, economic and political 'power elite' detached from the interests of the voters? In the legislatures under investigation, we find little evidence of this effect. Markers of social, economic or political privilege and power overlap irregularly and in a non-cumulative way. For example, while MPs are significantly older than the average voter, we find that most African legislators are in their first term of office. Thus, far from comprising a slowly changing, cohesive and self-interested elite, characterised by overlapping and cumulative markers of social and political influence, Africa's legislators come from a plurality of social and political backgrounds, and are relative legislative neophytes.

Keywords: legislators; legislatures; executives; public opinion; constituents

Introduction

Elected legislatures are the *sine qua non* of modern representative democracy. Yet studies of legislatures and legislators in Africa's democracies and hybrid electoral regimes rarely consider the extent to which they actually represent the societies from which they arise. Instead, scholars of African politics have typically viewed African legislators through the

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lens of 'neo-patrimonialism' or 'patron-clientelism'. On one hand, legislators (or MPs) are seen as clients of 'big man' patrons (either presidents or party leaders) who owe their position, status and influence as much to their personal loyalty to the big man as to their formal position.[1] On the other hand, MPs are also seen as 'big men' within their constituencies, sitting atop their own pyramidal matrices of local elites (in the middle) and citizens (on the bottom), winning re-election through the provision of private, or at most club goods, rather than the representation of citizen preferences.[2] A third body of research sees MPs primarily motivated by using the office to secure personal material advantage, often switching parties if it helps to increase the likelihood of (re-)election.[3]

None of these depictions would expect African MPs to devote much effort to listening to citizens and representing their views in the legislative process, or presenting them with a distinct set of policy-oriented solutions to local or national problems that would allow voters to select candidates who conform more closely to their own views. Yet voters may not need to hear detailed debates about competing policy positions in order to decide whether a candidate is likely to represent their substantive needs. Rather, voters might be able to infer important information from legislators' demographic characteristics. They may assume that MPs who *share* key ascriptive traits (such as ethnicity or religion) are 'one of us' and, thus, more likely to act in their interests.[4] As Richard Johnston *et al.* argue, 'the more an agent resembles oneself, the more he or she might be expected reflexively to understand and act on one's own interests'.[5] Thus, if presidents or party leaders are politically attuned to the electoral necessities of winning legislative elections across diverse societies (particularly those that elect MPs from single member districts), they should be expected to nominate MPs who share the religious and/or ethnic identifiers of specific constituencies, and where possible reside in, or at least come from, that district to maximise chances of winning

1 M. Bratton and N. Van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Change in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997).

2 R. Lemarchand and K. Legg, 'Political Clientelism and Development: A Preliminary Analysis', *Comparative Politics*, 4, 2 (1972), pp. 149–78; J. Barkan, 'Comment: Further Reassessment of "Conventional Wisdom": Political Knowledge and Voting Behavior in Rural Kenya', *American Political Science Review*, 70, 2 (1976), pp. 452–5; P. Chabal and J.-P. Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder As Political Instrument* (London, James Currey, 1999); E. Gyimah-Boadi, 'Political Parties, Elections and Patronage: Random Thoughts on Neo-Patrimonialism and African Democratization', in M. Basedau, G. Erdmann and A. Mehler (eds), *Votes, Money and Violence: Political Parties and Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007), pp. 21–33; G. Erdmann and U. Engel, 'Neopatrimonialism Revisited: Beyond a Catch-All Concept', *GIGA Working Paper* (Hamburg, German Institute for Global Affairs, 2006); S.I. Lindberg, '"It's Our Time to 'Chop'": Do Elections in Africa Feed Neo-Patrimonialism Rather than Counter-Act It?' *Democratization*, 10, 2 (2003), pp. 121–40; S.I. Lindberg and M.K.C. Morrison, 'Are African Voters Really Ethnic or Clientelistic? Survey Evidence from Ghana', *Political Science Quarterly*, 123, 1 (2008), pp. 95–122; S.I. Lindberg, 'What Accountability Pressures do MPs in Africa Face and How Do They Respond? Evidence from Ghana', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 48,1 (2010), pp. 117–42; K. Opalo, *Legislative Development in Africa: Politics and Postcolonial Legacies* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019); M. Acheampong, 'Legislators' Pathways to Power in Ghana: Intra-Party Competition, Clientelism, and Legislator–Constituents' Relationship', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 27, 2 (2021), pp. 300–16; and A. Ibn Zackaria and Y. Appiah-Marfo, 'Implications of Political Clientelism on the Effectiveness of Legislators in Ghana', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 28, 1 (2022), pp. 26–46.

3 V. Agboga, 'Waka Waka Politician: What are the Drivers of Party Switching in Nigeria?', *Africa*, 93, 5 (2023), pp. 615–33; L.R. Arriola, D.D. Choi, J.M. Davis, M.L. Phillips and L. Rakner, 'Paying to Party: Candidate Resources and Party Switching in New Democracies', *Party Politics*, 28, 3 (2022), pp. 507–20; L. Demarest, 'Elite Clientelism in Nigeria: The Role of Parties in Weakening Legislator–Voter Ties', *Party Politics*, 28, 5 (2022), pp. 939–53; D. Koter, 'Costly Electoral Campaigns and the Changing Composition and Quality of Parliament: Evidence From Benin', *African Affairs*, 116, 465 (2017), pp. 573–96; M. Wahman and M. Seeberg, 'Paying to Play: How Parliamentary Candidates Fund Ruling Party Campaigns in Malawi', *Comparative Politics*, 55, 1 (2022), pp. 95–118.

4 R. Campbell and O. Heath, 'Do Women Vote for Women Candidates? Attitudes toward Descriptive Representation and Voting Behavior in the 2010 British Election', *Politics & Gender*, 13, 2 (2017), 209–31.

5 R. Johnston, A. Blais, H.E. Brady and J. Crete, *Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of a Canadian Election* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), p. 169.

general election votes.[6] This would be even more likely where political parties have devolved control over legislative nominations to local party organisations.[7] Where parties stand candidates of different groups, voters may use ascriptive identity to decide which candidate is most likely to represent their preferences. Alternatively, voters may intentionally look for candidates who *differ* from them on key socio-economic characteristics such as wealth or education, because they may be better able to secure local public goods or advance desired policy positions in the legislative process.[8]

Thus, because voters may use candidates and MPs demographic characteristics as a heuristic, the traditional distinction between descriptive and substantive representation may be overdrawn.[9] Rather, the former may simply be a mechanism to achieve the latter. Ascriptive markers that are activated during election campaigns may serve as cognitive cues which reduce the uncertainty inherent in the exchange of expected benefits and expected votes between legislators and voters.[10] In this respect, descriptive representation is a cost-effective way to compensate for the significant information deficit of voters regarding both policy issues in election campaigns and their ability to monitor legislators' post-election behaviour.

African voters may be especially likely to exhibit this behaviour in territorially delimited constituencies that tend to encapsulate voters unified by language and ethnicity. But even in ethnically or linguistically diverse constituencies, geographically induced common economic interests may trump the social salience and political relevance of ascriptive diversity. And in constituencies in which no single ethnic or linguistic group possesses the numerical majority to secure outright electoral victories, multi-ethnic electoral coalitions further enhance the political significance of descriptive representation both as an electoral strategy and in policy responsiveness. Thus, in the first half of this paper, we explore the demographic congruence of Africa's societies and legislatures in terms of ethnicity, religion, occupation, education, gender and age.

This type of voter reasoning, however, raises the possibility of a perverse outcome. If African legislatures are representative of their societies' demographic characteristic, but are simultaneously wealthier and better educated than the typical citizen, and dominated by members with backgrounds in business and the professions, it is possible that they will not represent citizen preferences. Rather, a legislature composed of well-connected businessmen (with an emphasis on men), many of whom may have held a senior position in the party,

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6 For evidence to this effect, see K.E. Ferree, 'Choice and Choice Set in African Elections', *Journal of Politics*, 84, 4 (2022), pp. 2261–5.

7 S. Warren, 'Democratizing Candidate Selection: Controlled Turnover in Botswana's Bulela Ditswe Primaries', *Party Politics*, 28, 2 (2022), pp. 248–60; N. Ichino and N.L. Nathan, 'Do Primaries Improve Electoral Performance? Clientelism and Intra-Party Conflict in Ghana', *American Journal of Political Science*, 57, 2 (2013), pp. 428–41.

8 E. Kramon, 'Electoral Handouts as Information: Explaining Unmonitored Vote Buying', *World Politics*, 68, 3 (2016), pp. 454–98.

9 H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967). Pitkin borrowed the term 'descriptive representation' from A.P. Griffiths and R. Wollheim, 'How Can One Person Represent Another?' *Aristotelian Society*, Suppl., 34, 1 (1960), pp. 187–224. On the problems of measuring substantive representation, see A.C. Weeks and J. Homola, 'How Can we Measure Women's Substantive Representation? Towards a Dynamic Approach', *APSA-Comparative Politics Newsletter*, 32, 2 (2022), pp. 16–21. On the complex relationship of descriptive and substantive representation and the social, political, ideological and electoral contingencies that influence their incidence in political life, see J. Mansbridge, 'Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent "Yes"', *Journal of Politics*, 61, 3 (1999), pp. 628–57; J. Mansbridge, 'Rethinking Representation', *American Political Science Review*, 97, 4 (2003), pp. 515–28; B. Frederick, 'Are Female House Members Still More Liberal in a Polarized Era? The Conditional Nature of the Relationship Between Descriptive and Substantive Representation', *Congress and the Presidency*, 36, 2 (2009), pp. 181–202.

10 This statement is a highly stylised summary of an extensive literature on the strategic rationality of symbolic politics. See, inter alia, M.J. Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1985); J. Johnson, 'Symbolic Action and The Limits of Strategic Rationality', *Political Power and Social Theory*, 7 (1988), pp. 211–48; A. Swidler, 'Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies', *American Sociological Review*, 51, 2 (1986), pp. 273–86.

government or the state before entering the legislature, might develop into a tightly knit, even sclerotic legislative 'power elite' who use their stay in office to extract resources, accumulate wealth and promote their own political and financial interests to the disadvantage of voters.[11] Thus, we investigate this possibility in the second half of the paper by attempting to locate a set of members for whom markers of influence accumulate, transforming them into a legislative power elite.

Data and Method

To explore these questions, we exploit a unique data set on the characteristics, attitudes and behaviours of African legislators collected through random representative surveys conducted in 17 countries between 2009 and 2012 by the African Legislatures Project (ALP).[12] Within each country, ALP interviewed a randomly selected sample of 50 lower-house MPs using face-to-face surveys (a larger sample of 60 was interviewed in Nigeria, while smaller samples of 40 were used in Benin and Botswana owing to the size of the legislative body).[13] Namibia (n = 37) had an exceptionally low response rate due to both the small chamber size (70) and the fact that so many MPs also serve as ministers and deputy ministers and were not available for interviews. Across the 17 cases, the data include survey responses from 823 MPs, representing 24 per cent of the total population of MPs across the 17 countries.

Citizens of the 17 countries studied by ALP between 2008 and 2012 were also surveyed by Afrobarometer Round 4 in 2008 and 2009. Afrobarometer conducts regular surveys of citizens in over 30 countries across Africa, focusing on people's values, preferences and experiences of democratic governance and well-being.[14] Afrobarometer surveys consist of face-to-face interviews of random, representative, cluster samples of 1,200–2,400 respondents, stratified by province and urban/rural differences with the probability of selection proportionate to population size.

To our knowledge, this is the first systematic, cross-national study to compare representative samples of legislatures and mass publics across several socio-demographic characteristics in Africa.[15] Together, these surveys allow us to connect the demographic

11 J.-F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London, Longman, 1993); N. Van de Walle, 'Presidentialism and Clientelism in Africa's Emerging Party Systems', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41, 2 (2003), pp. 297–321.

12 See J. Barkan, R. Mattes, S. Mozaffar and K. Smiddy, 'The African Legislatures Project: First Findings', *CSSR Working Paper no. 277* (Cape Town, Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town, 2010).

13 African Legislatures Project (ALP) researchers made several follow-up requests to increase MP response rates and, if the originally selected MPs did not respond after several attempts, additional MPs with similar characteristics – for example, gender, party, region, seniority – were asked to participate.

14 More information on Afrobarometer is available at www.afrobarometer.org, retrieved 16 October 2024.

15 Three studies have conducted such comparisons along socio-economic lines within single countries: see Koter, 'Costly Electoral Campaigns'; A. Osei, 'Post-Conflict Democratisation in Sierra Leone: The Role of the Parliament', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 27, 1 (2021), pp. 112–35; and O. Àbàtì, 'Beyond #NotTooYoungToRun: Party Candidacy, Political Representation and Legislative Effectiveness of Young Politicians in Nigeria's Fourth Republic' (PhD thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2024). Many more scholars have studied the composition of African legislatures in terms of gender. Several of these studies have been conducted on single countries: see M.Y. Yoon, 'Factors Hindering "Larger" Representation of Women in Parliament: The Case of Seychelles', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 49, 1 (2011), pp. 98–114; M.Y. Yoon and S. Bunwaree, 'Women's Legislative Representation in Mauritius: "A Grave Democratic Deficit"', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 24, 2 (2006), pp. 229–47; S. Nkala and O. Ogunnubi. 'The Impact of the Electoral System on the Level of Women's Legislative Representation in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Africa Review*, 7, 2 (2015), pp. 134–48; and H. 'Nyane and M. Rakolobe, 'Women's Representation in Lesotho's Legislative Bodies: A Politico-Legal Analysis of the Effectiveness of Electoral Quotas', *Journal of African Elections*, 20, 2 (2012), pp. 81–101. However, a far greater proportion of studies have been cross-national in design: see M.Y Yoon, 'Democratization and Women's Legislative Representation in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Democratization*, 8, 2 (2001), pp. 169–90; M.Y. Moon, 'Explaining Women's Legislative Representation in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 29, 3 (2004), pp.

characteristics of citizens and legislators in the same set of countries and test the extent of descriptive representation in African legislatures. Moreover, these 17 countries comprise important geographical distinctions on the subcontinent. We have four cases from francophone West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal) as well as two anglophone countries in the region (Ghana and Nigeria), eight cases from southern Africa (Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe) and three from East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda). The latter two regions consist of both former British and Portuguese colonies, with Namibia offering an interesting case of a country colonised by its neighbour, South Africa.

These cases also provide a rich range of institutional variation, including differing experiences with multi-party elections and differing electoral and party systems, allowing us to test whether and how our findings vary across national context. Nine of the cases elect MPs from single-member districts using plurality rule, three elect MPs from large national or regional party lists using proportional representation, and five either elect members from small multi-member districts or use a hybrid system. The data set also contains both countries with one party dominant (for example, South Africa, Botswana and Namibia) and competitive party systems where incumbents have been turned out of office at the ballot box (for example, Benin, Ghana and Senegal). The cases also vary in legislative strength. For instance, while the Kenyan legislature in particular and, to a lesser extent, the Ugandan legislature have emerged as politically powerful institutions, legislatures in Benin and Ghana remain weak, despite operating in more democratic contexts.[16] On the other hand, our sample tends to score more favourably on indices of democracy and political rights than the average values for sub-Saharan Africa; although it contains important variation, including liberal democracies (Ghana, South Africa and Benin), electoral democracies (Malawi, Lesotho, Zambia), and hybrid and closed regimes (for example, Uganda, Mozambique and Zimbabwe).[17]

The empirical analysis proceeds as follows. In the first section, we ask whether multi-party elections in Africa produce national legislatures that look and sound like the societies they claim to represent. Thus, we examine a set of key MP demographic characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity (identity group and language), and religion (broad confession and denomination), and socio-economic status traits of education and occupation. We then set these results against comparable data about their societies drawn from Afrobarometer to assess the extent of demographic congruence between African legislators and citizens, and determine the extent to which they resemble the societies from which they were produced.

We find that African legislators are representative of the societies from which they are elected in terms of religion, language and ethnicity. However, they are much older, much

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447–68; A.M. Tripp, 'Women's Mobilisation for Legislative Political Representation in Africa', *Review of African Political Economy*, 43, 149 (2016), pp. 382–99; S.I. Lindberg, 'Women's Empowerment and Democratization: The Effects of Electoral Systems, Participation, and Experience in Africa', *Studies of Comparative International Development*, 39 (2004), pp. 28–53; G. Bauer and H.E. Britton (eds), *Women in African Parliaments* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006); D. Stockemer, 'Women's Parliamentary Representation in Africa: The Impact of Democracy and Corruption on the Number of Female Deputies in National Parliaments', *Political Studies*, 59, 3 (2011), pp. 693–712; G. Bauer, '"Let There Be A Balance": Women in African Parliaments', *Political Studies Review*, 10, 3 (2012), pp. 370–84; and T.D. Barnes and S.M. Burchard, '"Engendering" Politics: The Impact of Descriptive Representation on Women's Political Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Comparative Political Studies*, 46, 7 (2013), pp. 767–90.

16 J.D. Barkan (ed.), *Legislative Power in Emerging African Democracies* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009).

17 Some degree of democratic openness is arguably necessary when examining features of the representative process, including the questions we are interested in here, but the sample does suggest that it is likely that our findings apply to emerging democracies or hybrid regimes rather than closed authoritarian states.

more likely to be male and much better educated than the average person in their countries. And they are far more likely to come out of the business or professional sectors than ordinary Africans. We also find that many MPs previously held influential positions in the state and national government, and leadership positions in their political party.

As argued above, this paradox of ascriptive congruence and socio-economic incongruence raises an important concern. Even if African MPs resemble their constituents on some or even all demographic characteristics, they may be less likely to emphasise the representation of citizens' interests if they display the characteristics of a coherent, self-interested network of elites marked by overlapping and cumulating markers of status and influence. Thus, in the second empirical section, we examine the extent to which African legislators who are highly educated also come out of the business or professional world, and whether members who share these characteristics also have prior experience in senior positions in government or their political party. However, while many members are characterised by some of these markers, we find limited overlap or accumulation across these various status indicators. We also find that this set of legislators exhibits low levels of temporal stability, with the average member in her first term. Finally, we examine whether legislators with these background characteristics are any more likely to enjoy higher levels of seniority, or chair legislative committees, two key markers of institutional power and influence. Here we also find mixed results.

Descriptive Representation in Africa

Religion and Ethnicity

As argued at the outset of this paper, some markers of ascriptive identity provide relatively visible or audible characteristics from which voters may draw inferences about the degree to which a given MP is 'like them', including religion and language. Thus, we begin by examining the congruence of MP and mass religious and ethnic identity. Most of the 17 countries included in this study elect representatives in single-member districts by plurality voting rules, which are seen by many scholars of voting systems to produce disproportionate results and legislatures that over-represent not only the political party with the most votes, but also dominant religions and ethnic groups.[18] On the other hand, Africa's social groups tend to be spatially concentrated, a characteristic that can mitigate this effect and facilitate a more proportionate representation of social groups, regardless of the type of electoral system employed.[19]

Across all 17 countries included in this study, one-quarter (24 per cent) of Afrobarometer respondents identified themselves as Muslim or said that they belonged to a specific branch of Islam (for example, Sunni) or particular brotherhood, while two-thirds (66 per cent) said they belonged to a Christian denomination, and just five per cent reported no religious preference.[20] Within specific countries, the legislatures in Mali and Senegal were composed predominantly of Muslim members (96 and 88 per cent respectively), while the confessional cleavage was more evenly balanced in Tanzania (58 per cent Muslim), Nigeria (47 per cent), Benin (40 per cent) and Burkina Faso (38 per cent). The remainder of the legislatures are overwhelmingly Christian. As can be seen in Figure 1, the proportion of Muslim MPs

18 P. Norris, 'Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems', *International Political Science Review*, 18, 3 (1997), pp. 297–312.

19 S. Mozaffar, J.R. Scarritt and G. Galaich, 'Electoral Institutions, Ethnopolitical Cleavages, and Party Systems in Africa's Emerging Democracies', *American Political Science Review*, 97, 3 (2003), pp. 379–90.

20 By way of contrast, 88 per cent of members of the United States Congress identify as Christian, compared with only 63 per cent of all adults: see P. Smith, 'Survey: Religiously, Congress Doesn't Reflect America', AP News, 4 January 2023, available at https://apnews.com/article/survey-congress-religious-affiliation-b707939002cc7ed43e7f346cd33a66cc, retrieved 16 October 2024.

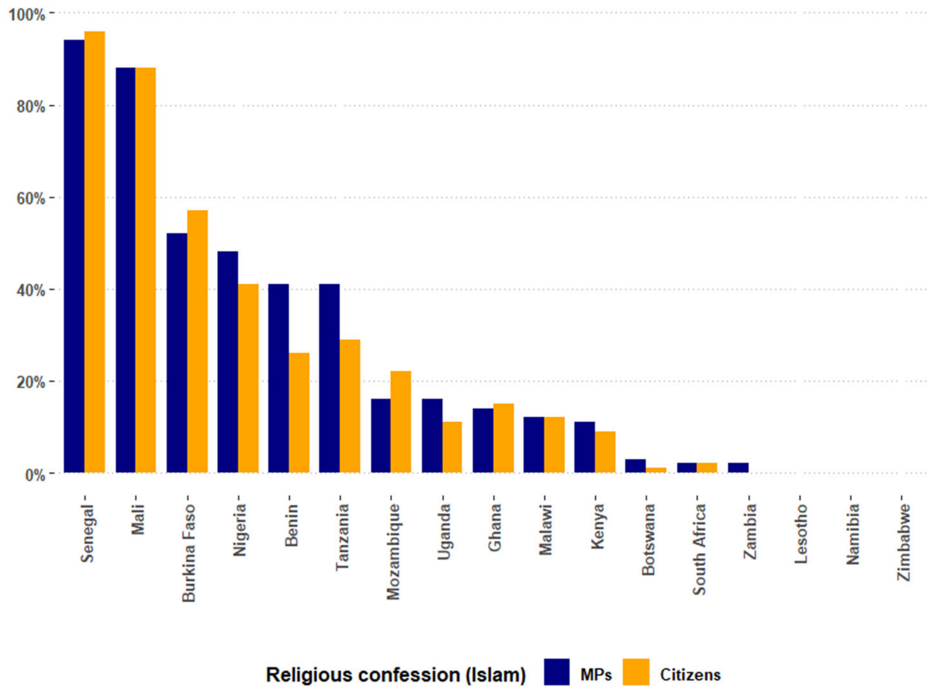

Figure 1. Religious confession: proportion of MPs and citizens that identified themselves as Muslim, 17 countries. (Source: African Legislatures Project [ALP] MP Survey: 'What is your religious denomination, if any? *Do not read out options*'; Afrobarometer Round 4, 'What is your religion, if any? [*Code from answer. Do not read options*]'.)

closely tracks the proportion of Muslim citizens (as measured in Afrobarometer Round 4) across the 17-country sample, The largest differences can be seen in Benin, where Muslim citizens appear to be over-represented in the assembly (by a difference of 15 percentage points).

In order to develop a systematic measure of descriptive representation, we calculate the cumulative overlap of the empirical probability density function (PDF) in each response category for MPs and citizens (see Table 1).[21] Consider the following example: 45 per cent of citizens and 22 per cent of MPs speak language A, while 55 per cent of citizens and 88 per cent of MPs speak Language B. The overlap for Language A = 0.22 and for Language B = 0.55, and the cumulative PDF overlap statistic equals 0.77 (where 0.00 = no overlap, and 1.00 = perfect overlap). In other words, 77 per cent of citizens have someone in the legislature with the same home language as themselves.

The congruence of religious confession between mass and legislator religious confession is quite high, ranging from .98 in Lesotho to a low of .70 in Tanzania, with an average rate of .88 across all 17 countries (Table 1). To develop a finer-grained measure, we also compared responses to a question about specific religious denomination for both citizens and MPs (for example, 'Catholic', 'Methodist', 'Orthodox' and so forth) (not shown) and then calculated the same statistic. Not surprisingly, levels of congruence were lower, running

21 T. Louwerse and R.B. Andeweg, 'Measuring Representation: Policy Congruence', in M. Cotta and F. Russo (eds), *Research Handbook on Political Representation* (Cheltenham, Edgar Elgar, 2020), pp. 276–88; and R.B. Andeweg, 'Approaching Perfect Policy Congruence: Measurement, Development, and Relevance for Political Representation', in M. Rosema, B. Denters and K. Aarts (eds), *How Democracy Works: Political Representation and Policy Congruence in Modern Societies* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 39–52.

Table 1. Public and legislative descriptive overlap, 17 countries

Home language*		Religion*		Religious denomination*		Education*		Occupation*		Age*		Gender**	
Lesotho	99.3	Lesotho	98.1	Senegal	96.7	Lesotho	41.7	Lesotho	41.3	Lesotho	56.0	Mozambique	78.6
Zimbabwe	92.4	Senegal	97.1	Mali	95.0	Mozambique	38.0	South Africa	40.8	Zambia	52.6	Namibia	68.0
Burkina Faso	84.7	Kenya	95.2	Uganda	71.8	South Africa	31.5	Kenya	38.2	South Africa	51.7	Tanzania	63.2
Botswana	84.1	Nigeria	95.1	Kenya	69.4	Senegal	30.4	Botswana	30.3	Senegal	47.1	South Africa	54.6
Mali	82.4	Zimbabwe	94.9	Malawi	68.6	Botswana	28.4	Mozambique	28.8	Botswana	47.1	Uganda	52.5
Ghana	81.2	Mali	93.6	Burkina Faso	67.2	Malawi	26.3	Zambia	25.5	Zimbabwe	46.7	Zambia	51.3
Malawi	80.6	Malawi	93.4	Tanzania	66.1	Zambia	25.1	Namibia	25.1	Mali	45.0	Senegal	43.7
Benin	76.9	Ghana	92.4	Ghana	62.7	Tanzania	23.3	Senegal	24.6	Ghana	44.6	Nigeria	28.9
Senegal	76.8	Namibia	92.0	Zimbabwe	61.9	Kenya	22.9	Uganda	23.7	Malawi	43.3	Zimbabwe	26.5
Uganda	75.0	Uganda	91.3	Nigeria	60.7	Namibia	21.8	Nigeria	20.3	Tanzania	42.7	Lesotho	24.2
Nigeria	71.9	South Africa	90.6	Mozambique	59.4	Burkina Faso	20.8	Ghana	19.7	Namibia	41.8	Malawi	19.9
South Africa	71.4	Zambia	86.6	Zambia	58.9	Nigeria	20.3	Malawi	18.8	Uganda	41.1	Benin	20.0
Kenya	63.8	Benin	82.7	Benin	57.2	Mali	20.3	Zimbabwe	18.0	Mozambique	37.5	Burkina Faso	15.9
Namibia	62.5	Burkina Faso	79.4	South Africa	54.3	Zimbabwe	19.9	Mali	13.7	Benin	36.0	Mali	16.2
Mozambique	53.2	Mozambique	78.2	Lesotho	54.2	Benin	17.4	Tanzania	13.5	Kenya	33.7	Kenya	12.1
Zambia	43.7	Botswana	70.9	Namibia	53.1	Ghana	15.4	Benin	10.2	Burkina Faso	27.2	Ghana	12.0
Tanzania	39.2	Tanzania	69.7	Botswana	44.6	Uganda	12.5			Nigeria	22.7	Botswana	5.1
Average	72.9		88.3		64.8		24.5		24.5		42.2		34.9

*Cells contain the overlap of the probability distribution function (PDF) of the proportion of citizen and legislator respondents falling into each category.
**Cells contain the percentage of female MPs as a percentage of the proportion of women 18 and over.

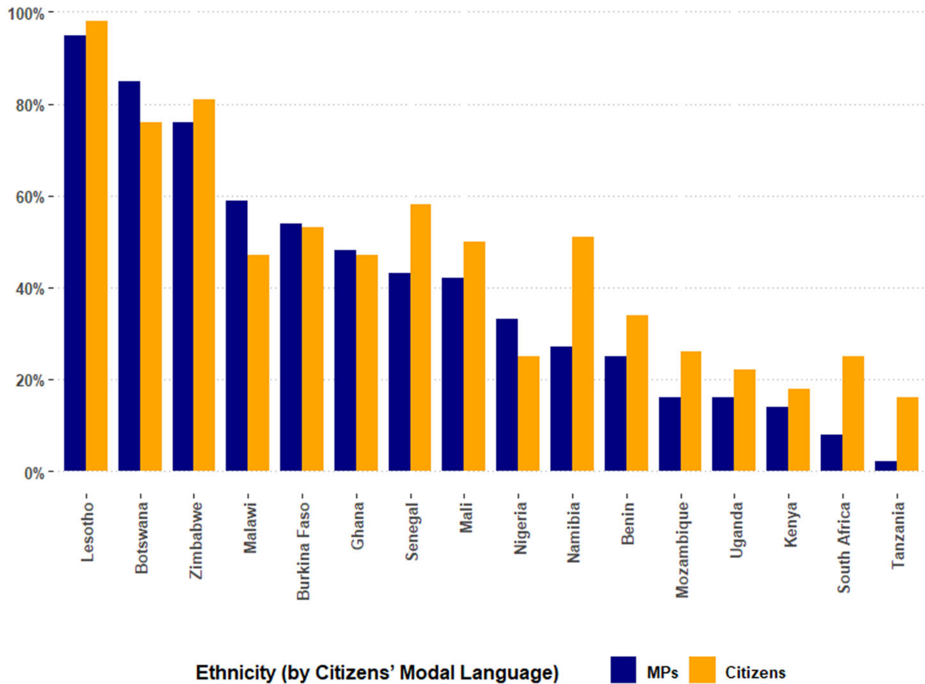

Figure 2. Ethnicity (by citizens' modal language, 17 countries). (Source: ALP MP Survey: 'What is your home language?' Afrobarometer Round 4, 'Which Kenyan language is your home language?' [*Interviewer: Prompt if necessary: That is, the language of your group of origin*].)

from very high levels in Islamic societies such as Senegal (.97) and Mali (.95) to just .45 in Botswana, with an average level of .65 (Table 1).[22]

To examine the ethnic dimensions of descriptive representation, we turn to ALP and Afrobarometer questions that asked MPs and citizens to identify their 'home language'. Figure 2 displays the modal home language in each society (as measured in Afrobarometer Round 4) and compares that to the proportion of MPs who claim it as their 'home language'. In general, as the frequency of citizens' modal language increases, so does the proportion of MPs who also claim it as their home language. MPs are very slightly more likely to speak the modal home language in Nigeria (Hausa) and Malawi (Chichewa). In contrast, MPs are less likely to speak the modal language in Tanzania (where many more MPs point to Swahili as their home language rather than Kisukuma) and Namibia and South Africa (where most MPs claim English rather than Oshivambo or Zulu). Not coincidentally, the national-level party plays a strong role in nominating candidates to the list in South Africa and Namibia; and Tanzania's one-party dominant system combines significant top-down pressure with its system of primary elections.[23] Consistent with the visual message of Figure 2, the overlap of the probability distribution function also registers a high degree of linguistic congruence, running from .99 in Lesotho (where virtually everyone speaks seSotho), but also very high levels in Zimbabwe (.92), to relatively low levels in Zambia (.44) and Tanzania (.39), which

22 Because of disparities in the extent to which Muslim MPs and Muslim citizens referred to specific branches or brotherhoods of Islam between the two surveys, we collapsed all Islamic-related responses to 'Muslim'. Thus, the overlap is likely to be an overestimation of congruence between MPs and citizens for this group.

23 C.R. Sulley, 'Democracy Within Parties: Electoral Consequences of Candidate Selection Methods in Tanzania', *Party Politics*, 28, 2 (2022), pp. 261–71.

are both characterised by more substantial linguistic fractionalisation. The average level of overlap in home language is .73 across all 17 countries (Table 1).[24]

Again, our interpretation of these results falls along two lines. First, electorally minded political parties will, wherever possible, stand candidates who match the religious and ethnic characteristics of voters.[25] Second, where voters are presented with a choice between candidates of differing religious or ethnic backgrounds, all other things being equal, they will tend to prefer the one similar to them, not necessarily because of a sense of chauvinism, but because ascriptive identity serves as a reasonable heuristic of whether a candidate is likely to understand their needs and preferences.[26]

Social and Economic Status – Education and Occupation

As argued at the outset, there are other dimensions on which voters may prefer candidates who are *dissimilar* to themselves, particularly in terms of social and economic status. One way that voters may assess the social or economic status of a candidate is to learn about their level of education, particularly whether a candidate has attended university. Some scholars argue that African voters prefer to be represented by highly educated individuals, possibly because they may be more likely to secure local public goods for the larger constituency.[27] We have some direct evidence of this preference in the Round 7 (2016/2017) Afrobarometer survey in Malawi, where eight in ten respondents 'agreed' (26 per cent) or 'strongly agreed' (57 per cent) that 'MP candidates should be required to have a minimum education qualification of an MSCE certificate' (the leaver's examination for the final year of secondary school) – a qualification held by just 14 per cent of Malawians in that survey.[28]

Our results also appear to confirm this argument. Incumbent African MPs are significantly more educated than the societies that elected them. According to Afrobarometer surveys in the 17 ALP countries, the median citizen had only completed primary school, and only 9 per cent had some sort of college or university-level qualification (Figure 3). In contrast, six out of ten (58 per cent) MPs from the same 17 countries possessed an undergraduate education degree. At least seven in ten MPs had a university degree in Uganda (90 per cent), Nigeria (86 per cent), Ghana (84 per cent), Benin (80 per cent) and South Africa (69 per cent). In contrast, university education is relatively rare in Malawi (30 per cent), Mozambique (29 per cent) and Lesotho (22 per cent). Examining the overlap between MPs and citizens for educational outcomes within each country confirms these initial observations. At the country level, educational congruence is quite low. The PDF statistic is highest in Lesotho (.42) and lowest in Uganda (.13), with an average value of .25 for all 17 countries (Table 1).

Voters may also draw inferences about a candidate's social status from information about their occupational backgrounds. Like political parties, ordinary Africans might prefer

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24 We also examined the congruence in mass responses to an Afrobarometer Round 4 question that asked people about their 'tribe', or 'ethnic or cultural group', and MP responses to an ALP survey question that asked MPs about their 'ethnic group'. In almost every case, MPs are less likely to cite the modal group as selected by citizens. But we also see strong similarities with the question on home language, in that the largest discrepancies occur in Namibia, South Africa and Tanzania (with citizens far more likely to cite Wambo, Zulu or Msukuma as their ethnicity than MPs), but also Zimbabwe (Shona); and Nigerian MPs are also more likely to report a Hausa ethnicity than citizens. Finally, Botswana and Lesotho have very different patterns, as citizens answered in terms of clan differences that exist within the largely linguistically homogenous societies, but MPs responded by describing their ethnic groups as 'Sotho', or 'Tswana'.

25 See Ferree, 'Choice and Choice Set'.

26 J. Conroy-Krutz, 'Information and Ethnic Politics in Africa', *British Journal of Political Science*, 43, 2 (2012), pp. 345–73.

27 Kramon, 'Electoral Handouts'.

28 Afrobarometer, 'Malawi Round 7: Summary of Results', 17 May 2017, available at https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/malawi-round-7-summary-results-2017/, retrieved 28 September 2024).

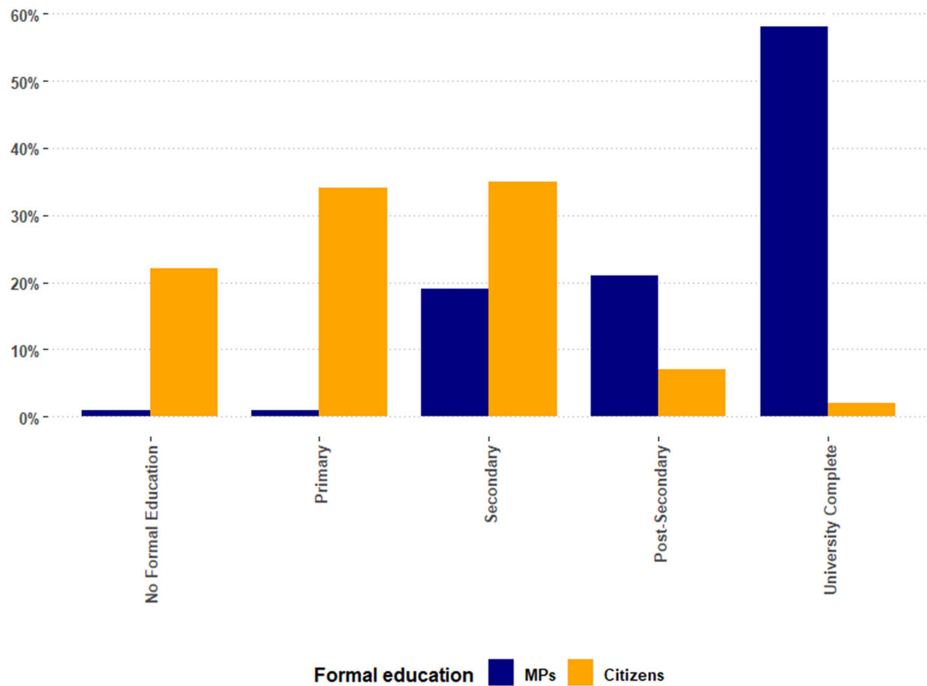

Figure 3. Formal education (MPs and citizens compared, 17 countries). (Source: ALP MP Survey: 'What is your highest level of education?' Afrobarometer Round 4, 'What is the highest level of education you have completed?'.)

wealthy businessmen because of their ability to distribute private or club goods to constituents.[29] There is some support for this intuition. Across 16 countries surveyed in Afrobarometer Round 2 surveys (2002–04), 51 per cent of respondents approved or strongly approved of the statement '[w]ealthy [Malawians] provide for the needs of their own communities' as an alternative way of managing the national economy.[30] There was considerable variance in this sentiment, with support ranging from more than seven in ten in Malawi (77 per cent) and Senegal (70 per cent) downward to as few as one in three in Mozambique (35 per cent) and Botswana (32 per cent). However, in response to a differently framed question which asked respondents whether it is better to have wealthy people as leaders because they can help provide for the community or to select ordinary people as leaders because they understand citizens' needs, only one in four (26 per cent) were in favour of selecting wealthy people as leaders, ranging from 37 per cent in Namibia and Zambia to 11 per cent in Cabo Verde.

Although we are unable to measure MP wealth upon entering parliament, the ALP surveys asked MPs about the occupation they held immediately before entering parliament. The responses demonstrate that while a large number of MPs held party or government positions, most African legislators are directly recruited from the private sector and are far more likely to be business people or professionals than are ordinary Africans. Over one-quarter (27 per cent) of MPs reported that they worked as a professional (for example, 'doctor', 'lawyer', 'accountant', 'academic', 'journalist' or 'professor') before entering

29 Arriola *et al.*, 'Paying to Party'; Kramon, 'Electoral Handouts'.
30 Afrobarometer, 'Merged Round 2 Codebook (16 countries) (2004)', 15 March 2015.

parliament, and another quarter (24 per cent) came from business (for example, 'businessperson', 'general manager', 'banker' or 'commercial farmer'). Approximately one in three MPs came directly out of the public sector, including positions in the state, or national government (16 per cent), as a teacher or school administrator (12 per cent), in regional/local government (4 per cent), or the security sector (army and police) (3 per cent). Perhaps surprisingly, very few MPs came directly from a position in a civil society organisation (1 per cent), or a political party (3 per cent), though many more had held a position in a party at some previous point. For the rest, 5 per cent were employed in a supervisory or blue-collar position (for example, subsistence farmer, supervisor or foreman) and 4 per cent fell in a range of other categories such as housewife, student or unemployed (and one former 'first lady'!).

While professionals (for example, lawyers, doctors, accountants and professors) are particularly likely to be found in single-member district systems such as Zambia and Uganda (43 and 42 per cent), and Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe (39, 39 and 38 per cent), they are scarce in Botswana (8 per cent). The proportion of businesspersons also ranges from around one-third (37 per cent in Malawi) to one-tenth (8 per cent in Mozambique). The only legislatures with significant shares of former party officials are the list proportional representation systems of Namibia (19 per cent), Mozambique (16 per cent) and South Africa (12 per cent). To add to the Mozambican National Assembly's unusual profile, another 16 per cent of MPs say their previous occupation was as a soldier or guerrilla fighter. Finally, Lesotho stands out for the fact that almost one-third of all MPs say they come from a blue-collar (30 per cent) background (including supervisor, clerk or farmworker).[31] Treating those who came out of a state, party or government position as 'professionals', the sharp discrepancy in the occupational backgrounds of citizens and legislators is apparent (see Figure 4). The country-specific overlap of probability distribution function statistics reveals weak levels of occupational congruence, similar to the findings on education. The highest levels of occupational congruence were found in Lesotho and South Africa (both .41), but running as low as .10 in Benin, with an average of .25). In short, MPs were far more likely to come from the economic elite than the citizens they represented. This conclusion echoes that of a recent summary of studies from around the world.[32]

We close our examination of descriptive representation in African legislatures with an assessment of the demographic markers of gender and age. Either as a direct consequence of citizen assumptions about the likely legislative effectiveness of male or older MPs, and/or as an indirect consequence of the gender and age effects of the opportunity structures in educational and professional advancement, or party nomination processes in Africa, the gender and age profiles of African legislatures are also likely to be incongruent with African society.[33]

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31 Of course, one important reason for this finding, beyond voter preferences, is simply the cost of election campaigns, which are usually born by candidates rather than political parties in Africa. See, for instance, Koter, 'Costly Electoral Campaigns'; L. Arriola, M. Johnson and M. Phillips (eds), *Women and Power in Africa: Aspiring, Campaigning, and Governing* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021); and Wahman and Seeberg, 'Paying to Play'.

32 N. Carnes and N. Lupu, 'The Economic Background of Politicians', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 26 (2023), pp. 253–70.

33 This is not unique to Africa. Indeed, young people are under-represented in many parliaments around the world: K.R Kurz and F. Ettensperger, 'Introducing a New Dataset: Age Representation in Parliaments on the Party-Level', *Statistics, Politics and Policy*, 14, 3 (2023), pp. 357–74.

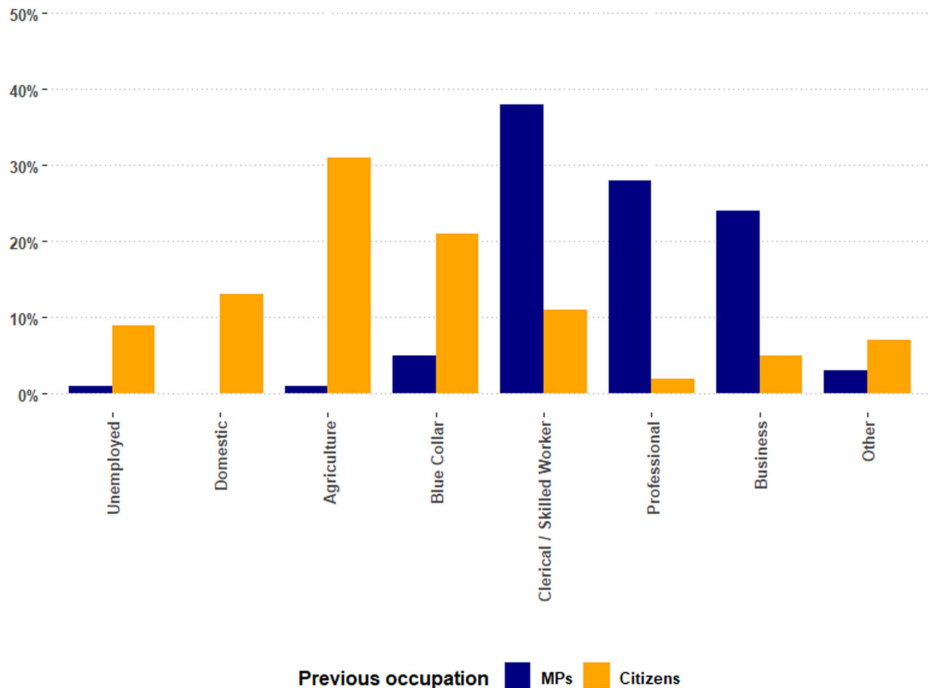

Figure 4. Occupation (MPs and citizens compared, 17 countries). (Source: ALP MP Survey: 'What was your main occupation before entering [parliament]? *Do not read out options*'; Afrobarometer Round 3, 'What is your main occupation? (If unemployed, retired or disabled, what was your last main occupation? [*Do not read options. Code from responses.*]'. ALP response categories have been collapsed to enable a direct comparison with Afrobarometer responses: public sector responses have been recoded to 'professional', and civil society responses recoded to 'other'.)

Gender

Women tend to be under-represented in most legislatures around the world.[34] Compared to the typical African society where women comprise approximately 50 per cent of society, the size of the female delegation to parliament is always smaller. But the proportion of women MPs rises substantially in countries that use large list proportional representation (Mozambique (40 per cent), Namibia (35 per cent), South Africa 28 per cent)), reserved seats (Uganda, 27 per cent), or where a former liberation movement imposes gender quotas in the nomination process (Tanzania, 32 per cent). The lower proportions in countries that elect members from single-member districts with financially weak political parties reflect the disadvantages women face in accumulating the wealth and networks necessary to mount their own election campaigns (though in Zambia, female candidates managed to win around a quarter (26 per cent) of the country's single-member districts).[35] Since the usual PDF statistic will demonstrate a relatively large level of gender congruence (all male citizens are represented), Table 1 presents only the number of female MPs as a proportion of women citizens aged 18 and over. Using this statistic, the results mirror those in Figure 5. The lower rate of female incumbency surely reflects sexist sentiments among at least some of the electorate. According to Round 3 Afrobarometer surveys conducted in 18 countries in 2005 and 2006, one in five (23 per cent) respondents agreed with the statement '[m]en make

34 A. Reynolds, 'Women in the Legislatures and Executives of the World: Knocking at the Highest Glass Ceiling', *World Politics*, 51, 4 (1999), pp. 547–72; and L. Wängnerud, 'Women in Parliaments: Descriptive and Substantive Representation', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12, 1 (2009), pp. 51–69.

35 See Arriola *et al.*, *Women and Power in Africa*.

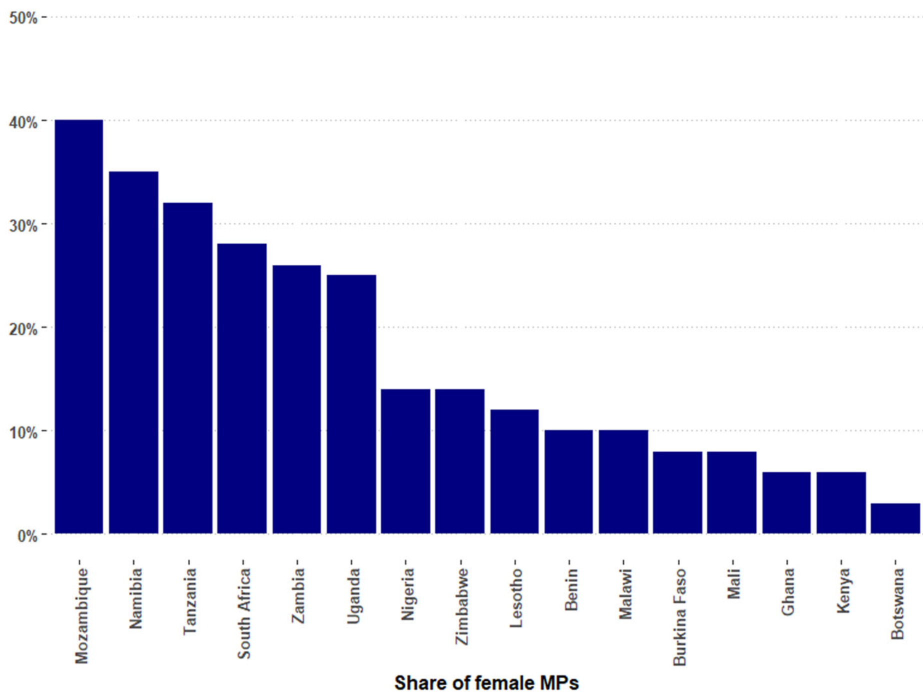

Figure 5. Gender (MPs and citizens compared, 17 countries). (Source: ALP MP Survey: 'What is respondent's gender? Afrobarometer Round 4: Respondent's gender.)

better political leaders than women, and should be elected rather than women', rising to as many as almost one-half of all people in Lesotho (47 per cent).[36]

Age

Elected legislatures are also almost always older than their electorate.[37] Many countries impose minimum age requirements higher than the age of legal adulthood (in Nigeria for example, candidates to the State House of Assembly must be 30 years or older). More importantly, in most party systems it may take many years to build a political career that culminates in parliament. But, given the political changes Africa has experienced since 1989, one might expect that the types of people elected to the legislature during our period of investigation (2008 to 2012) would tend to be relatively young, with their formative political experiences rooted very much in the multi-party era.

Across the 17 Afrobarometer surveys used in the analysis, the average (median) age of the 18+ population across 17 countries is 33 (with a much higher mean age (50.1) reflecting the skewed shape of the typical African age distribution. In comparison, the average (median) age of the sample of MPs we interviewed was 53 years old (with an almost identical mean age of 52.0), though this figure varies widely from Malawi at the low end, where the average MP was only 46, to Tanzania, at the other extreme, where the typical MP was 57 years old. The most age-congruent legislature is Malawi (with a 13-year difference

36 Afrobarometer, 'Merged Round 3 Codebook (18 countries) (2005)', 31 March 2015.

37 D. Stockemer and A. Sundström, *Youth Without Representation: The Absence of Young Adults in Parliaments, Cabinets, and Candidacies* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2022).

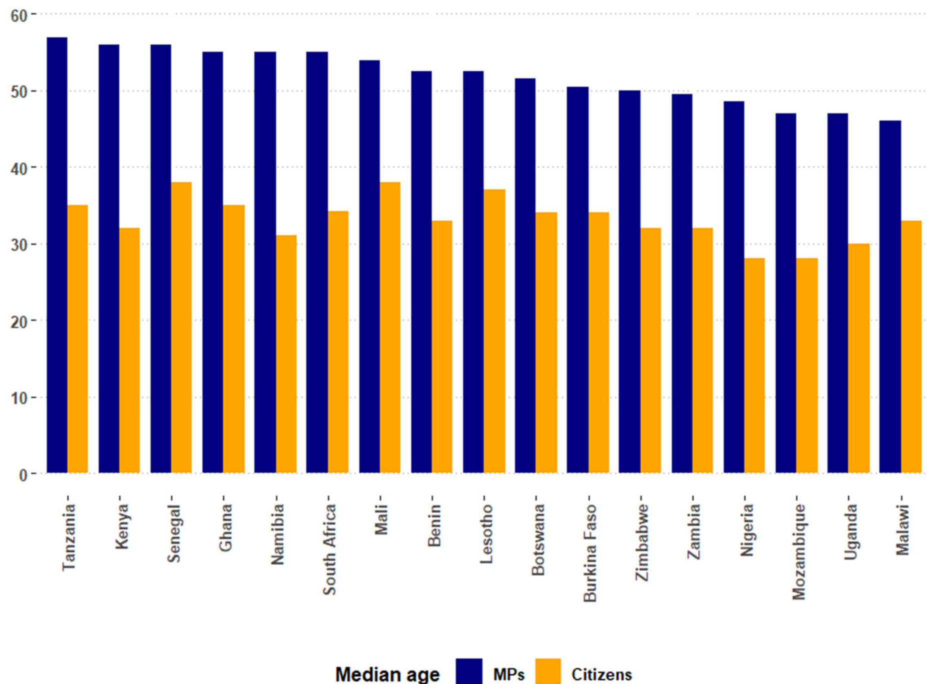

Figure 6. Median age (MPs and citizens compared, 17 countries). (Source: ALP MP Survey and Afrobarometer Round 4: 'How old are you?'.)

in the median age of citizens and MPs), while the largest gaps are in Kenya and Namibia (each with a 24-year difference).[38] Breaking these age distributions into standard analytic categories, the legislature is most representative of societal age distributions in Lesotho (.56) and least in Nigeria (.23), with an overall average level of congruence of .42 (Table 1).

Either because of specific choices made by voters when political parties present them with candidates (or slates of candidates) who differ on key characteristics, or because strategically minded parties present voters with candidates who are *similar* to the voters of a given demarcated constituency, African legislatures are most representative of the societies from which they are elected in terms of religion (for example, Christian or Muslim (.88)), language (.73), and specific religious denomination (.65). This may be a consequence, first, of the fact that African ethnic groups tend to be concentrated rather than dispersed, and often align with political and electoral boundaries rather than cut across them;[39] and, second, that single-member districts and even small multi-member districts provide strong incentives for political parties to ensure that legislative candidates are co-ethnics of voters in their constituency.

In contrast, African legislatures are much less descriptively representative in terms of age (.42), education (.25) or occupation (.25). And while they appear relatively gender congruent (.68) overall, the average rate of female representation stands at just .35 (Table 1). As suggested throughout our discussion, these patterns may reflect African voters' preferences for candidates who are *dissimilar* to them (older, more educated and more wealthy men)

38 In Botswana, Ghana, Lesotho, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Uganda, any citizen (that is 18 and older) may stand as a legislative candidate. But the age limit is set slightly higher at 21 in Burkina Faso, Malawi, Mali, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and at 25 in Benin and Senegal. At the time of this study, the age limit in Nigeria was 30, though later reduced to 25 in 2018.

39 Mozaffar *et al*., 'Electoral Institutions, Ethnopolitical Cleavages, and Party Systems'.

when presented with candidates of differing levels of social status. Alternatively, it might be that these are the types of people who are advantaged by the biases of the recruitment and nomination processes because they are most likely to have the contacts, networks and resources to organise and mobilise.

A Legislative Power Elite?

As suggested at the outset of the paper, even if African MPs closely reflect the demographic profile of their constituents in terms of characteristics such as ethnicity or religion, the social and economic status provided by higher education may enable privileged access to business opportunities, the professions, important political positions, or employment in government, which then paves the way for them to enter the legislature. In turn, the networks formed in university, the business and professional world, or senior government or party jobs, may overlap and intertwine to accumulate influence and create a self-interested legislative elite that, in John Higley's words, is a 'relatively cohesive, stable, group[s] with majority decisional power'.[40] Such a subset of legislators could then use these positions to advance their own interests rather than representing the interests or preferences of their constituents. Indeed, various scholars of African politics have made similar arguments about an interlocking *power elite* that spans *across* the legislature, cabinet, military and private sector, due to patronage and family ties.[41] In order to test for the existence of such structures within Africa's legislatures, we examine three specific dimensions. First, to what extent do the experiences which MPs bring with them into the legislature suggest an inter-connected elite with a common, self-interested worldview? Second, do these markers of influence overlap and cumulate?[42] And, third, is this a stable, slowly changing group of MPs?[43]

Common Background?

In order to examine the first question, we introduce additional evidence from the ALP surveys about MPs' previous government and political experience. To recall, almost six in ten MPs possess a university degree (58 per cent) and one-half came to the legislature from the business or professional world (52 per cent). The ALP survey also asked parliamentarians to indicate whether they had *ever* held any previous government positions at local or regional level[44] or a senior position in national government,[45] or ever held a leadership position in a political party.[46] We found that more than one-half of all MPs indicated that they had held a leadership position in their political party (56 per cent) at some point before entering parliament, with about one-third of these coming from the national party organisation and the rest coming from regional or local party structures (see

40 J. Higley, 'Continuities and Discontinuities in Elite Theory', in H. Best and J. Higley (eds), *Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 27.

41 J.-F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: Politics of the Belly* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009, 2nd edition); A. Osei and T. Malang, 'Party, Ethnicity, or Region? Determinants of Informal Political Exchange in the Parliament of Ghana'. *Party Politics*, 24, 4 (2018), pp. 410–20; A. Osei, 'Like Father, like Son? Power and Influence across two Gnassingbé Presidencies in Togo', *Democratization*, 25, 8 (2018), pp. 1460–80.

42 Certainly, MPs could evolve into a cohesive power elite once they are in office and, thus, would not need to have a large number of connections prior to entering the legislature. However, given the high turnover in most legislatures (see below), pre-existing connections almost become a prerequisite to build a power elite in the legislature.

43 H.R. Kerbo and L.R. Della Fave, 'The Empirical Side of the Power Elite Debate: An Assessment and Critique of Recent Research', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 20, 1 (1979), pp. 5–22.

44 'We would like to know what government or party positions people might have held before they became an MP. Before you became an MP, did you ever work or serve in local or district government?'

45 'Before you became an MP, did you ever work or serve in any senior position in national government?'

46 'Did you ever hold a senior position in a political party (for example, leader at the national, district or local level?'

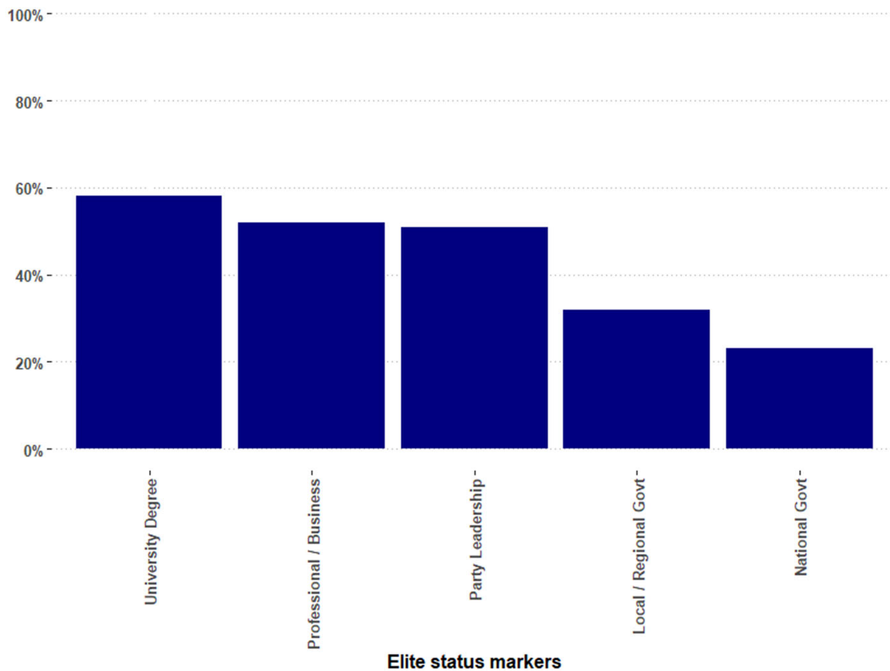

Figure 7. Potential status markers of influence, 17 countries. (Source: ALP MP Survey.)

Figure 7). One-third of all respondents said they had previously worked in regional or local government (32 per cent). Of these, roughly four in ten were also legislators in local or district councils or regional or provincial assemblies, and the rest held an executive position, or simply held a government job at these lower levels. Finally, one quarter (23 per cent) of MPs reported previous government experience at the national level, including senior civil service positions in a government ministry or a senior position in a parastatal. A few had previously served as a cabinet minister. Indeed, only one-quarter (24 per cent) of our sample possessed absolutely no prior political or government experience at any level. Thus, it appears that not only are African MPs relatively well-educated, with backgrounds in high-status occupations, their résumés also include significant amounts of political experience, creating the potential for a seasoned, well-connected, cohesive and powerful elite.

At the same time, we also analysed the responses of MPs to a question asked in ten of the 17 countries about the university from which they obtained their degree. Characteristic of a highly interconnected elite, 60 per cent of all Ugandan MPs obtained their degree from the same university (Makerere University), as did four in ten Kenyan MPs who studied at the University of Nairobi (41 per cent). But the same was true for fewer than three in ten Ghanaian MPs (28 per cent, University of Ghana; and 22 per cent, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology); and for one in five Tanzanian and Malawian MPs (respectively, 20 per cent, University of Dar es Salaam, and 20 per cent, University of Malawi). And the proportions fell to even lower levels in Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria and South Africa. Further, these data merely confirm that MPs went to the same institutions, but not necessarily at the same time (or even in the same decade). While certainly not conclusive, these results caution against simply assuming that similarities in education or occupational experiences indicate a high degree of interconnectedness in terms of either familiarity or common outlook among those people.

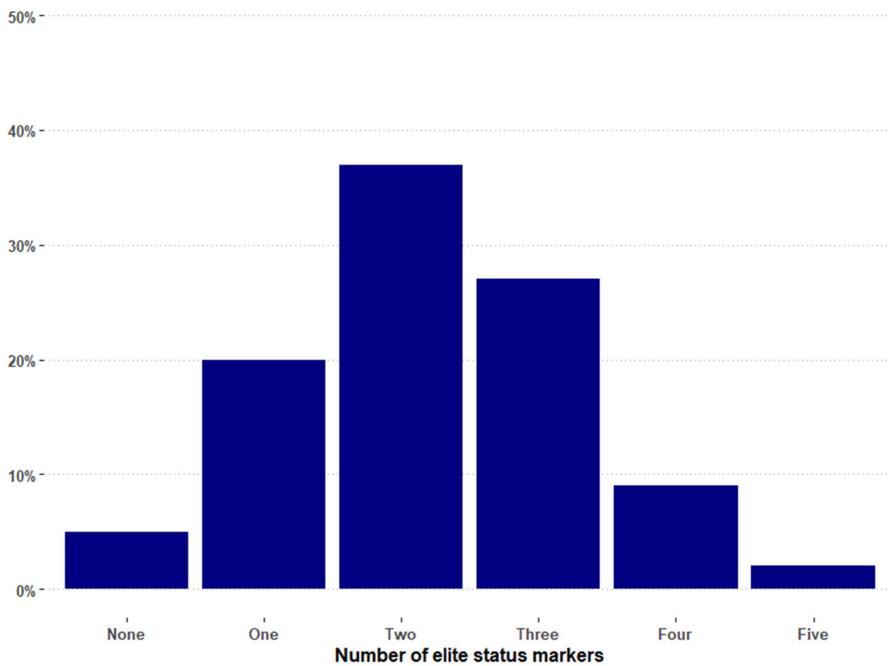

Figure 8. A legislative elite? (17 countries). (Source: ALP MP Survey.)

Do Markers of Status Accumulate?

While a high level of commonality in educational and occupational backgrounds is a prerequisite for a cohesive elite, it is not sufficient. The next question, thus, is the extent to which these experiences overlap and accumulate, concentrating power and influence among an identifiable set of MPs To test this, we created an additive scale that measures whether or not an MP (1) possessed a university degree, (2) held previous employment in the business or professional occupations, or (3) held a position in local or regional government, (4) a senior position in national government, or (5) a leadership position in their political party. The results indicate that the average (both modal and median) MP is characterised by only two of these five potential markers, and just two per cent of all MPs held all of these markers (Figure 8). Moreover, both exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis demonstrate that these markers do not tap a common underlying latent construct on which less influential MPs might hold fewer educational or occupational background resources and more influential MPs hold more, possibly reflecting a power elite. Thus, while substantial proportions of MPs bring with them various high-status characteristics, these traits are fairly dispersed and relatively independent of one another.

But regardless of whether or not these experiences tap an underlying dimension of power, we also ask whether the accumulation of these qualifications and experiences results in greater legislative influence. For instance, does the combination of university education, wealth (that comes from a high-status occupation) and government or party positions make individuals more likely to win (re-)election or enable them to amass more influence within the chamber, indicated, for example, by appointment to a committee chair? There is little support for either concern: across the 17 ALP surveys, MPs with a greater stock of degree, elite occupations and political positions are, on average, only very slightly more likely to lead a legislative committee,[47] and actually slightly less likely to win sustained re-election

47 Kendall's Tau b = .109, p = .001, n = 728.

(defined here as MPs who have been in a legislature for at least three terms).[48] Echoing Robert Dahl's response to Charles Wright Mills's power elite thesis, the results suggest that MPs' sources of status and influence are dispersed in nature and do not simply cumulate into increased political power.[49]

Seniority

A final indicator of a potential power elite is simply its temporal stability. As we saw earlier, the average MP in our sample is 53, which suggests the existence of a large proportion of MPs who have maintained their seats as a result of low levels of electorally induced turnover and/or single-party dominance. Yet the ALP survey also finds that the typical MP has not been in office very long. Consistent with recent studies of party nomination process-induced turnover,[50] the average (median) MP interviewed in the 17 ALP surveys was first elected in 2004 and had – at the time of the study – served just five years in the job. The longest-serving MPs were found in both competitive Kenya (an average of 10.4 years) and uncompetitive South Africa (10 years), while the shortest tenures were in Nigeria (3.6), Mali (4.7) and Zambia (4.8). When combined with the limited overlap of markers of influence and the relatively short period of time MPs have spent in parliament, this suggests that African MPs might not form as stable and thus cohesive elites as might initially appear.

Which Resources Do Matter?

We have now demonstrated that the various positional resources that MPs bring with them into the legislature are not shared by an identifiable group of 'super MPs', and that they do not necessarily accumulate in a way that provides members with a greater chance at internal influence or re-election. But do any of the specific characteristics influence the way that legislators carry out their jobs – a job which involves skills and functions that are often in tension with one another? Certainly, political scientists have advanced various claims to this effect. Some have argued that businesspersons, for instance, have important electoral advantages because of their ability to finance their own campaigns, including distributing cash and gifts to voters,[51] and are less likely to meet their responsibilities within the legislature.[52] Alternatively, others have argued that MPs from professional backgrounds are more likely to form the core of 'coalitions for change' and to contribute to the institutionalisation of the legislature.[53]

Thus, we conclude by asking whether these various indicators of influence might have different implications in terms of how, and how well, MPs carry out their job. To do this, we examine a range of bivariate relationships of the aforementioned markers of status and MP responses to selected questions in the ALP surveys about various facets of their job (Table 2). The first set of questions simply repeats the issues examined above regarding internal status and influence, that is, whether a respondent was a committee chair and how long they had been in the legislature. We also use a second set of questions that ask members how they raised the finance for their most recent election campaign. A third set of questions then probes three crucial dimensions of how MPs carry out their jobs. First, how do members

48 Kendall's Tau b = –. 075, p = .027, n = 756.

49 R.A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961).

50 S. Warren, 'Democratizing Candidate Selection'; Demarest, 'Elite Clientelism in Nigeria'; N. Ichino and N.L. Nathan, 'Democratizing the Party: The Effects of Primary Election Reforms in Ghana', *British Journal of Political Science*, 52, 3 (2022), pp. 1168–85.

51 Arriola *et al.*, *Women and Power in Africa*.

52 Koter, 'Costly Electoral Campaigns'.

53 Barkan, *Legislative Power in Emerging African Democracies*.

Table 2. Covariates of MP status (displayed as Kendall's Tau b correlation coefficients)

	University	Business	Professional	Government	Party	N
Institutional influence						
Committee chairperson	**.206*****	NS	**.078***	NS	–**.080***	702
Third term or greater	NS	–**.126*****	NS	NS	**.121*****	702
Campaign finance						
Personal contributions, last campaign	**.216*****	**.079***	**.099****	NS	**–.190*****	610
Depends on donations from business	NS	NS	NS	NS	**–.103****	610
Depends on funds from party	.NS	NS	NS	NS	**.090***	610
Depends on personal funds	**.085***	**.085***	NS	NS	**–.194*****	610
Legislative role orientations						
Institutionalist role orientation	**.236*****	NS	NS	**.069***	. NS	728
Constituent service role orientation	**–.117*****	NS	NS	NS	–**.069***	728
Partisan role orientation	**–.110*****	NS	NS	NS	NS	728
Law–making and oversight						
Uses NGOs and universities to gather information	**.177*****	NS	NS	NS	NS	687
Uses parliamentary resources to gather information	**.080***	–**.085***	NS	NS	NS	687
Percentage of time devoted to plenary work	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	687
Percentage of time devoted to committee work	**.106*****	NS	NS	NS	NS	687
Spends most of constituency time visiting development projects	NS	**.116****	NS	NS	NS	687
Representation and constituency service						
Percentage of time devoted to constituency affairs	NS	NS	NS	NS	**–.091****	497
Average stay in constituency (during session)	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	497
Average stay in constituency (out of session)	–**.182*****	NS	NS	NS	**.136*****	497
Spends most of constituency time listening to people	**.094***	NS	NS	NS	NS	497
Average personal donations to local projects	**.170*****	NS	**.118*****	NS	**–.163*****	497
Average personal donations to constituents	**.093****	**.097****	**.071***	NS	**–.110*****	497

understand their job as members of parliament (what the literature refers to as 'role orientation')? Second, how do they go about carrying out the functions of law-making and oversight? Finally, how do they go about carrying out the functions of representation and constituency service.

By far the strongest and most consistent finding in Table 2 is the role of a university education. University-educated MPs are more likely to find their way to positions as committee chairs. And, perhaps surprisingly, they are more likely than members from business and professional backgrounds to report spending higher sums of their own funds in their most recent election campaign. MPs with university degrees are also far more likely to see themselves as 'institutionalists' (meaning, among other things, that they see law-making, debating and oversight as the most important part of their job), but somewhat less likely to see themselves as 'constituency servants' (defined as listening to and representing citizens as the most important and desirable part of the job). Highly educated MPs are also less likely to see themselves as 'partisans' (meaning that they see themselves primarily as representatives of their party, rather than their constituents).

In terms of acquiring information to carry out their job, educated MPs are more likely to report using external resources such as local think tanks or university-based experts, to learn about the consequences of proposed bills, and slightly more likely to use internal parliamentary resources such as the library or research staff. In line with the results on role orientation, highly educated MPs are modestly more likely to report allocating their time to committee work. Furthermore, and perhaps reflecting the competing demands of legislative activity, they report spending fewer days in the constituency (when parliament is not in session). However, when they are in the constituency, they are more likely than other MPs to spend their time listening to constituents. And in perhaps the most surprising finding, while MPs from business backgrounds are seen to be more likely to secure local support by spreading their money around the constituency, it is highly educated MPs who report higher levels of donations to local development projects. Both educated and former business MPs are more likely to report spending more funds in personal donations to constituents than MPs with business or professional backgrounds.

In contrast, the typical MP from a business or professional background only differs from other MPs in a few instances (for example, depending on personal wealth as a source of campaign funds, visiting local development projects and giving higher levels of donations to individual constituents), and the differences are usually not very large. Meanwhile, members with backgrounds in government effectively do not display behavioural or attitudinal patterns that systematically differ from other MPs.

Those MPs with backgrounds in party organisations, however, are appreciably different. They are more likely to be serving a third term or more, possibly because they tend to be found in countries with stronger political parties. Indeed, they are less likely to report spending their own funds on their most recent election campaign and less likely to say they depended on funds from local businesses or their own wealth, but more likely to depend on party funds. While they spend longer periods of time in the constituency (out of session), they are less likely to report spending time on constituency affairs or making personal donations, either to local projects or to individual constituents. In sum, we conclude that the cognitive resources that MPs bring with them into the chamber are more important determinants of how they carry out their job than the possible material resources that are associated with a career in business or the professions.

Conclusion

Simply by being recruited or nominated by a political party, and ultimately elected to serve in a national legislature, Africa's parliamentarians are or have become elites who serve in a 'pivotal organization' of their societies.[54] At the national level, these elites are highly representative of the electorates from which they were elected along two important ascriptive dimensions, religion and ethnicity. However, they differ from their societies in important ways on two key indicators of socio-economic status: education and occupation. They are also less likely to reflect the age and gender profiles of their societies. These findings are in line with research in other world regions.[55] Additionally, substantial proportions of incumbent MPs also held previous positions in their party organisations, government and the state.

54 Higley, 'Continuities and Discontinuities in Elite Theory', p. 27.

55 Carnes and Lupu, 'The Economic Background of Politicians'; E. Simison, 'Legislatures and Representation in Latin American Politics', in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics* (2019), available at https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1686, retrieved 16 October 2024.

Yet there is little to suggest that these representatives form an ‘elite’, if by that we mean a ‘relatively cohesive and stable group’.[56] First of all, most of Africa’s MPs are relative newcomers to this position. Second, while Africa’s legislatures do come from higher social strata, there is little evidence that these markers of qualification, occupation or position accumulate in any systematic or coherent way that might produce a class of ‘super MPs’. And third, there are few systematic linkages between the total number of previous positions or qualification and electoral success (as indicated by serving a third legislative term or more) or internal legislative influence (as indicated by committee leadership). Thus, while substantial proportions have high-status qualifications or occupational or positional backgrounds, these characteristics are fairly independent of one another. Echoing Dahl’s response to Wright Mills’s power elite thesis, the results suggest that MPs’ sources of status and influence are dispersed in nature and do not simply cumulate into increased political power.[57]

We have also seen evidence that personal background matters. But rather than overlapping and accumulating influence to create a coherent power elite, different potential indicators of status matter in different ways. Highly educated MPs, in particular, think and act quite differently from other legislators. But rather than acting as a marker of status, networks or influence, our results suggest that higher levels of education convey crucial information about the acquisition of skills and outlook that make these MPs qualitatively different from those who have not been to university. Overall, one might conclude that in terms of legislative politics, diplomas are more important than résumés.

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56 Higley, ‘Continuities and Discontinuities in Elite Theory’, p. 27.

57 Dahl, *Who Governs?*

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