Political Reform, Electoral Governance, and Institutional Accountability in Uganda

Patrick O. Mugerwa, Sarah A. Namanya, Isaac K. Tumwine

Department of Engineering, Kyambogo University, Kampala, Uganda

ABSTRACT

Electoral reforms intended to sharpen the political focus of representatives are often justified by the claim that they will strengthen institutional accountability. Rather than presenting empirical estimates, the analysis develops a rigorous difference-in-differences design suited to the institutional features of the Ugandan case. It argues that the principal identification challenge is not the timing of the reform but the simultaneous operation of other institutional changes, particularly the movement of the presidency towards a two-term limit and the creation of new districts. The article formalises a design that exploits variation in the intensity of political competition across constituencies and over time, and it specifies the assumptions under which a causal interpretation is warranted. The central contribution is to show that credible causal inference about electoral reform in Uganda requires a design that treats political focus as a continuous treatment rather than a binary event, and that measures accountability through observable legislative behaviours such as oversight activity and responsiveness to constituency preferences.

Keywords: *electoral reform, institutional accountability, difference-in-differences, Uganda, legislative behaviour, causal inference*

The Problem of Electoral Reform and Accountability

The Relationship Between Electoral Rules And The Quality Of Governance

The relationship between electoral rules and the quality of governance has long occupied a central place in comparative political science. A recurrent claim is that reforms which sharpen the electoral incentives of politicians will, by making them more attentive to constituents, strengthen the accountability of public institutions. Uganda presents a particularly instructive case for examining this claim.

The country's political trajectory since 1986 has been marked by successive attempts to redesign the electoral connection between citizens and their representatives, most notably through the reintroduction of multiparty competition in 2005 and the subsequent adjustments to constituency boundaries and parliamentary procedures. Yet the institutional consequences of these reforms remain poorly understood, in part because the reforms were bundled with other political changes and in part because the empirical literature has struggled to move beyond descriptive accounts. It does not ask whether Ugandan democracy has deepened or whether the quality of representation has improved in some global sense.

Yet The Institutional Consequences Of These Reforms Remain Poorly Understood

It asks instead whether a measurable change in the electoral incentives facing legislators produces a measurable change in their oversight behaviour and their responsiveness to constituents. Answering this question requires a research design that can isolate the effect of the reform from the many other factors that shape legislative behaviour. The argument developed here is that a difference-in-differences design, properly adapted to the Ugandan context, offers the most credible route to causal inference, but only if the reform is conceptualised as a continuous treatment whose intensity varies across constituencies.

Conceptualising Political Focus and Institutional Accountability

The Terms Political Focus' And Institutional Accountability' Require Careful Definition

The terms 'political focus' and 'institutional accountability' require careful definition before any causal claim can be assessed. Political focus refers to the degree to which an electoral system directs the attention of legislators towards their constituents rather than towards party leaders, executive patrons or other principals. Electoral systems that encourage personal vote-seeking, such as single-member districts with candidate-centred ballots, are typically said to produce high political focus, whereas closed-list proportional systems that concentrate power in party leadership produce lower focus.

This distinction draws on a substantial literature that contrasts personal and partisan vote-seeking incentives (Carey & Shugart, 1995). The concept is not binary. Electoral systems vary in the strength of the incentives they create, and the same formal rules can generate different incentives depending on the broader political context.

Institutional accountability, as the term is used here, refers to the capacity of citizens to hold public officials responsible for their performance in office. This is a broader concept than electoral accountability, which concerns only the sanctioning of incumbents at the ballot box. Institutional accountability encompasses the ongoing oversight of the executive by the legislature, the responsiveness of legislators to constituency demands between elections, and the transparency of public decision-making.

The Concept Is Not Binary

The concept has been developed in work on democratic governance and legislative studies, where scholars distinguish between vertical accountability, exercised by citizens through elections, and horizontal accountability, exercised by state institutions over one another (O'Donnell, 1998). The present analysis is concerned primarily with the legislative dimension of horizontal accountability: the willingness and ability of members of parliament to scrutinise executive action and to represent constituency interests in national policy-making. The hypothesised link between the two concepts is straightforward.

When electoral rules sharpen the political focus of legislators, those legislators face stronger incentives to cultivate a personal reputation among constituents. One way to cultivate such a reputation is to engage in visible oversight of the executive, challenging government policy and demanding explanations for poor performance. Another is to respond attentively to constituency demands, channelling resources and legislative effort towards local concerns.

If this reasoning is correct, a reform that increases political focus should produce measurable increases in legislative oversight activity and constituency responsiveness. The mechanism is one of incentive alignment: the reform changes what it takes for a legislator to be re-elected, and legislators adjust their behaviour accordingly (Mayhew, 1974).

The Ugandan Reform in Comparative Perspective

Uganda'S Electoral History Provides A Distinctive Setting For Examining These

Uganda's electoral history provides a distinctive setting for examining these theoretical claims. The National Resistance Movement government, led by Yoweri Museveni, initially governed under a system of 'no-party' or 'movement' democracy, in which candidates stood for election on personal merit rather than party affiliation. This system was defended by its architects as a way of transcending the ethnic and religious divisions that had plagued Ugandan politics after independence.

Critics argued, however, that the no-party system concentrated power in the executive and weakened the legislature's capacity for independent oversight (Kasfir, 2000). The reintroduction of multiparty competition in 2005, following a national referendum, was therefore widely expected to transform the relationship between legislators and the executive. The reform, however, was not a clean natural experiment.

Multiparty competition was reintroduced alongside a constitutional amendment that removed presidential term limits, allowing Museveni to stand for a third term. The same period saw a dramatic expansion in the number of districts, from 56 in 2000 to over 100 by 2010, a process widely interpreted as a strategy for building legislative support through the creation of new patronage positions (Green, 2010). These simultaneous changes create serious difficulties for any attempt to attribute subsequent changes in legislative behaviour to the electoral reform alone.

The Reform However Was Not A Clean Natural Experiment

A naive comparison of legislative behaviour before and after 2005 would conflate the effect of multiparty competition with the effects of term-limit removal and district creation. This is the central identification problem that a credible research design must confront. The Ugandan case also offers analytical opportunities that are absent in many other settings.

Because the reintroduction of multiparty competition did not change the fundamental electoral system, which remained based on single-member constituencies with first-past-the-post rules, the reform altered the partisan environment rather than the formal electoral rules. This means that the intensity of political focus generated by the reform varied across constituencies in ways that can be measured. In constituencies where opposition parties fielded credible candidates, incumbents faced a genuine electoral threat and had strong incentives to cultivate personal reputations.

In constituencies where the ruling party faced no serious challenge, the reform changed the formal environment but not the practical incentives facing the incumbent. This variation provides the basis for a difference-in-differences design that compares changes in legislative behaviour between high-threat and low-threat constituencies.

A Difference-in-Differences Design for the Ugandan Case

The Core Logic Of Difference-In-Differences Estimation Is To Compare The

The core logic of difference-in-differences estimation is to compare the change in an outcome for a treated group with the change in the same outcome for an untreated comparison group over the same period. The identifying assumption is that, in the absence of treatment, the outcome would have followed the same trend in both groups. This parallel trends assumption cannot be tested directly, but it can be rendered more plausible through careful design choices.

In the Ugandan context, the treatment is not the 2005 reform itself, which affected all constituencies simultaneously, but rather the intensity of the electoral threat that the reform generated in different constituencies. This conceptualisation transforms the design from a simple before-and-after comparison into a continuous difference-in-differences analysis. Formally, let i index constituencies and t index electoral terms.

The outcome of interest, Yit, is a measure of legislative behaviour in constituency i during term t, such as the number of parliamentary questions asked by the constituency's representative or the proportion of constituency development fund allocations that are publicly reported. The treatment intensity, Di, is a measure of the electoral threat facing the incumbent in constituency i after the reintroduction of multiparty competition, for example the margin of victory in the first multiparty election or the presence of a credible opposition candidate. The difference-in-differences estimator compares the change in Y between the pre-reform and post-reform periods for constituencies with high values of Di against the change for constituencies with low values of Di.

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \lambda_t + \beta(D_i \times Post_t) + \gamma X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

Formally Let I Index Constituencies And T Index Electoral Terms

In this specification, αi represents constituency fixed effects that absorb time-invariant differences between constituencies, λt represents term fixed effects that absorb common shocks affecting all constituencies, and X_it is a vector of time-varying covariates that might confound the relationship, such as the socioeconomic characteristics of the constituency or the incumbent's margin of victory in the previous election. The coefficient of interest, β, captures the differential change in legislative behaviour associated with higher treatment intensity. The specification is a standard continuous difference-in-differences model, and it can be estimated using ordinary least squares with appropriate standard errors clustered at the constituency level (Angrist & Pischke, 2009).

The credibility of this design depends on the plausibility of the parallel trends assumption in this specific setting. The assumption requires that, in the absence of the reform, legislative behaviour in high-threat and low-threat constituencies would have followed the same trajectory. This assumption could be violated if constituencies with different levels of electoral threat were already on different trajectories before the reform, for example because opposition strength was correlated with urbanisation or education levels, which might independently affect demands for legislative oversight.

The design can be strengthened by examining pre-reform trends in the outcome variables and by controlling for constituency characteristics that predict both treatment intensity and outcome levels. A further strengthening would be to use the timing of district creation as a placebo treatment, testing whether legislative behaviour changed in response to an institutional change that should not have affected political focus.

Measurement Strategy and Data Requirements

The Empirical Implementation Of This Design Requires Careful Attention To

The empirical implementation of this design requires careful attention to the measurement of both the outcome and the treatment. Legislative oversight activity can be measured through the official records of the Ugandan Parliament, which document parliamentary questions, motions, and committee participation. These records are public and have been used in previous studies of legislative behaviour in Africa (Barkan, 2009).

Constituency responsiveness is more difficult to measure, but proxy indicators include the allocation of the Constituency Development Fund, which members of parliament control, and the frequency of constituency visits reported in parliamentary records. The validity of these measures depends on their consistency over time and their sensitivity to the incentives that the reform was intended to strengthen. Treatment intensity can be measured using electoral data from the 2006 and 2011 parliamentary elections, the first two multiparty contests.

The margin of victory in the 2006 election provides a natural measure of the electoral threat facing the incumbent. Constituencies where the winning candidate secured a narrow victory faced ongoing electoral competition, whereas constituencies where the winner secured a large majority were effectively safe seats. An alternative measure is the vote share of the strongest opposition party, which captures the structural competitiveness of the constituency rather than the performance of a particular candidate.

Treatment Intensity Can Be Measured Using Electoral Data From The

Both measures have limitations, and the analysis should ideally use multiple operationalisations to ensure that the results are not sensitive to the choice of measure. The data requirements for this design are substantial but not prohibitive. The analysis requires a panel dataset of constituencies spanning at least two electoral terms before the reform and two terms after, with consistent measurement of legislative behaviour and electoral outcomes.

Constructing such a dataset requires reconciling constituency boundaries across time, which is complicated by the creation of new districts during the study period. This is a genuine methodological challenge, but it is not insurmountable. Previous research on Ugandan politics has successfully constructed longitudinal datasets by mapping new constituencies onto their parent constituencies (Conroy-Krutz & Logan, 2012).

The key point is that the data requirements are demanding but realistic, and the analytical payoff of a credible causal design justifies the investment.

Threats to Identification and Their Remedies

Several Specific Threats To Identification Must Be Addressed For The

Several specific threats to identification must be addressed for the proposed design to support a causal interpretation. The first is the simultaneous operation of other institutional changes, particularly the removal of presidential term limits and the creation of new districts. The removal of term limits might have affected legislative behaviour independently of the reintroduction of multiparty competition, for example by signalling that the executive expected to remain in power indefinitely and that legislators should align themselves with the president rather than with constituents.

The district creation process might have affected behaviour by creating new opportunities for patronage and by changing the constituency boundaries that legislators represented. The difference-in-differences design offers partial protection against these threats. If the effects of term-limit removal and district creation were common across all constituencies, they would be absorbed by the term fixed effects.

The design would be threatened only if these other reforms had differential effects across constituencies with different levels of treatment intensity. This is possible. The creation of new districts, for example, may have disproportionately affected constituencies that were already politically competitive, because the ruling party had an incentive to create new districts in areas where it faced electoral challenges.

If this were the case, the estimated effect of political focus would be confounded with the effect of district creation. A second threat is non-random selection into treatment. The intensity of electoral competition in a constituency is not randomly assigned.

The Difference-In-Differences Design Offers Partial Protection Against These Threats

Opposition parties are more likely to field credible candidates in constituencies where they have existing support, and this support may be correlated with constituency characteristics that independently affect legislative behaviour. The inclusion of constituency fixed effects addresses time-invariant confounders, but it does not address time-varying confounders. If a constituency becomes more competitive over time for reasons unrelated to the reform, and if these reasons also affect legislative behaviour, the design will produce biased estimates.

The standard remedy is to control for time-varying constituency characteristics and to test the sensitivity of the results to the inclusion of different covariate sets (Imbens & Wooldridge, 2009). A third threat concerns the stability of the treatment over time. The intensity of electoral competition in a constituency is not fixed after the 2006 election.

A constituency that was highly competitive in 2006 might become a safe seat by 2011 if the incumbent builds a strong personal following, or a safe seat might become competitive if the incumbent becomes unpopular. If treatment intensity changes over time, the simple difference-in-differences specification becomes difficult to interpret. One remedy is to use the 2006 election results as a measure of the initial treatment and to examine whether the effects of the reform persist or decay over subsequent terms.

Another is to model treatment intensity as a time-varying covariate, although this introduces additional endogeneity concerns.

Theoretical Expectations and Observable Implications

If The Theoretical Reasoning Developed Earlier Is Correct The Proposed

If the theoretical reasoning developed earlier is correct, the proposed design should reveal specific patterns in the data. The first expectation is that legislative oversight activity increased more in constituencies where the reintroduction of multiparty competition generated a genuine electoral threat. This expectation follows from the incentive-based mechanism: legislators who face electoral competition have stronger incentives to engage in visible oversight of the executive.

The second expectation is that constituency responsiveness, measured through the allocation of constituency development funds and other local benefits, also increased more in competitive constituencies. This expectation follows from the same mechanism, as legislators seek to build personal reputations through the delivery of tangible benefits to constituents. The design also generates expectations about the timing of effects.

The Design Also Generates Expectations About The Timing Of Effects

If the mechanism operates through electoral incentives, the effects should appear immediately after the first multiparty election in 2006, when legislators first faced the new competitive environment. The effects might be expected to grow over time as legislators learn about the new incentives and as the opposition establishes a credible presence in more constituencies. Alternatively, the effects might decay if the ruling party finds ways to insulate its legislators from electoral competition, for example through the manipulation of constituency boundaries or the co-optation of opposition figures.

The pattern of effects over time is itself informative about the strength and durability of the electoral connection. A further set of expectations concerns heterogeneity across types of legislators and constituencies. The theory predicts that the effects of increased political focus should be stronger for legislators who face binding term limits or who have ambitions for higher office, because these legislators have weaker incentives to cultivate a personal vote.

The effects might also be stronger in constituencies with higher levels of education or media access, where constituents are better able to monitor the behaviour of their representatives. These heterogeneous effects are not merely of descriptive interest. They provide additional tests of the underlying mechanism, because they identify the specific conditions under which electoral incentives translate into accountable behaviour.

Alternative Designs and Their Limitations

The Difference-In-Differences Design Proposed Here Is Not The Only Possible

The difference-in-differences design proposed here is not the only possible approach to estimating the causal effect of electoral reform on accountability. A regression discontinuity design could exploit the fact that electoral competition is a continuous variable, comparing constituencies where the incumbent faced a narrow challenge with constituencies where the incumbent was clearly safe. This design has attractive internal validity properties, but it requires a large number of constituencies near the threshold and it estimates a local effect that may not generalise to the full range of treatment intensity (Lee & Lemieux, 2010).

In the Ugandan context, where the number of constituencies is relatively small, a regression discontinuity design would likely lack statistical power. An instrumental variables approach could use the presence of a strong opposition party organisation as an instrument for electoral competition. This approach requires that opposition party strength affects legislative behaviour only through its effect on electoral competition, an assumption that is difficult to defend because opposition parties may directly influence legislative behaviour through their own representatives and through public pressure.

An Instrumental Variables Approach Could Use The Presence Of A

A synthetic control method could compare Uganda with a similar country that did not experience electoral reform, but the choice of a credible comparison country is difficult given the distinctive features of Uganda's political trajectory (Abadie, Diamond, & Hainmueller, 2010). The difference-in-differences design is therefore best understood as the most credible option given the institutional features of the Ugandan case, not as a perfect solution to the identification problem. Its principal advantage is that it uses within-country variation over time, thereby controlling for all time-invariant country-specific factors that might confound a cross-national comparison.

Its principal limitation is that it cannot fully rule out the possibility that time-varying factors correlated with treatment intensity are responsible for any observed effects. The design should therefore be complemented by robustness checks, placebo tests, and qualitative evidence that can shed light on the mechanisms underlying any estimated effects.

Implications for the Study of Electoral Reform in Africa

The Argument Developed In The Present Analysis Has Implications That

The argument developed in the present analysis has implications that extend beyond the Ugandan case. Electoral reforms have been a recurring feature of African politics since the wave of democratisation in the early 1990s, yet the consequences of these reforms for governance quality remain poorly understood. A major reason is that many studies have relied on cross-national comparisons that cannot easily isolate the effect of electoral rules from the broader political context.

The difference-in-differences approach offers a way forward by exploiting within-country variation in the intensity of electoral competition, which is often more plausibly exogenous than the adoption of the reform itself. The Ugandan case also illustrates the importance of conceptualising electoral reform as a continuous rather than binary treatment. The reintroduction of multiparty competition in 2005 did not affect all constituencies equally.

The Ugandan Case Also Illustrates The Importance Of Conceptualising Electoral

In some constituencies, the reform transformed the electoral environment by introducing genuine competition; in others, it changed the formal rules but left the practical incentives facing incumbents largely unchanged. Studies that treat the reform as a single national event will miss this variation and will therefore underestimate the effects of the reform where they occurred while overestimating them where they did not. The continuous treatment approach developed here provides a more accurate picture of how electoral incentives shape legislative behaviour.

The analysis also speaks to the broader literature on accountability in Africa. A persistent finding in this literature is that African legislatures are often weak and dominated by the executive, leading to what some scholars have called 'electoral authoritarianism' (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The present analysis suggests that even within such systems, variation in electoral incentives can produce meaningful differences in legislative behaviour.

Legislators who face genuine electoral competition may engage in more oversight and more constituency service, even when the overall political system remains heavily skewed towards the executive. This finding, if confirmed by empirical analysis, would qualify the pessimistic conclusion that electoral politics in Africa is purely a matter of patronage and ethnic mobilisation.

Conclusion: From Design to Inference

The Present Analysis Has Argued That The Causal Effect Of

The present analysis has argued that the causal effect of electoral political focus reform on institutional accountability in Uganda can be estimated using a difference-in-differences design that exploits variation in the intensity of electoral competition across constituencies. The design is grounded in a theoretical account of how electoral incentives shape legislative behaviour, and it confronts the specific identification challenges posed by the Ugandan case, including the simultaneous operation of other institutional changes and the non-random selection of constituencies into treatment. The analysis has specified the measurement strategy, the data requirements, and the threats to identification that any empirical implementation must address.

The central contribution is to show that credible causal inference about electoral reform in Uganda is possible, but only if the reform is conceptualised as a continuous treatment whose intensity varies across constituencies and over time. This conceptualisation moves beyond the common practice of treating national reforms as uniform events and allows the analysis to exploit the substantial variation in electoral competition that exists within the country. The proposed design does not guarantee unbiased estimates, but it makes the assumptions underlying causal inference explicit and testable, and it provides a framework for assessing the sensitivity of conclusions to violations of those assumptions.

The Central Contribution Is To Show That Credible Causal Inference

The argument also has implications for how scholars study electoral reform more broadly. Reforms are rarely adopted in isolation, and their effects are rarely uniform across the political landscape. Research designs that exploit within-country variation in treatment intensity offer a promising strategy for identifying causal effects in settings where clean natural experiments are unavailable.

The Ugandan case demonstrates both the potential and the challenges of this approach. The potential lies in the substantial variation in electoral competition that the reintroduction of multiparty politics generated. The challenges lie in the simultaneous institutional changes and the difficulty of measuring legislative behaviour consistently over time.

Neither the potential nor the challenges are unique to Uganda, and the design developed here may therefore serve as a model for studying electoral reform elsewhere in Africa.

References

Abadie, A., Diamond, A., & Hainmueller, J. (2010). Synthetic control methods for comparative case studies: Estimating the effect of California's tobacco control program. Journal of the American Statistical Association, 105(490), 493–505.

Angrist, J. D., & Pischke, J.-S. (2009). Mostly harmless econometrics: An empiricist's companion. Princeton University Press.

Barkan, J. D. (2009). Legislative power in emerging African democracies. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Carey, J. M., & Shugart, M. S. (1995). Incentives to cultivate a personal vote: A rank ordering of electoral formulas. Electoral Studies, 14(4), 417–439.

Conroy-Krutz, J., & Logan, C. (2012). Museveni and the 2011 Ugandan election: Did the money matter? Journal of Modern African Studies, 50(4), 625–655.

Green, E. (2010). Patronage, district creation, and reform in Uganda. Studies in Comparative International Development, 45(1), 83–103.

Imbens, G. W., & Wooldridge, J. M. (2009). Recent developments in the econometrics of program evaluation. Journal of Economic Literature, 47(1), 5–86.

Kasfir, N. (2000). Movement democracy, legitimacy and power in Uganda. In J. Mugaju & J. Oloka-Onyango (Eds.), No-party democracy in Uganda: Myths and realities (pp. 60–78). Fountain Publishers.

Lee, D. S., & Lemieux, T. (2010). Regression discontinuity designs in economics. Journal of Economic Literature, 48(2), 281–355.

Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War. Cambridge University Press.

Mayhew, D. R. (1974). Congress: The electoral connection. Yale University Press.

O'Donnell, G. (1998). Horizontal accountability in new democracies. Journal of Democracy, 9(3), 112–126.