

# Civil servants, solar panels, and patronage: A Ghanaian case study

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Distribution of public goods like solar panels can be influenced by political elements. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Electricity is a hot political issue in Ghana. Ghanaians demand access to the electricity grid as a right of citizenship. And, when not connected, they have [threatened](#) in the past to boycott national elections with slogans such as: "No light, no vote!"

In 2016, then President Mahama became known as "Mr Power Cut" because of widespread [power cuts](#) that plagued his term in office. He was heavily defeated in elections by Nana Addo Dankwa Akuffo-Addo. The next Ghanaian election in 2020 is a rematch between the two.

Politicians are therefore under a lot of pressure to distribute reliable electric power, but concerns about corruption in the power sector persist. The next Ghanaian election in 2020 is a rematch between the two.

In a new [research paper](#) we examine a programme to distribute [solar panels](#) to meet the needs of people without electricity in Ghana. We wanted to find out whether political patronage played a role in decisions about who got the solar panels and who didn't.

Our broader question was whether civil servants in a developing democracy can resist political capture in the distribution of public goods.

## **Resisting the opportunity for corruption**

A great deal of research has been done on how political patronage works from the perspective of [what drives politicians](#). But service decisions are often made by bureaucrats. That is why we chose to conduct our research by tracking decisions taken by civil servants.

Interviews revealed that the goal of the solar panel programme was to provide electricity for educational, medical and community purposes in places where future grid extension was unlikely. The programme was funded by a European government donor and implemented by the Ghanaian Ministry of Energy.

The civil servants who carried out the programme knew that political corruption was common in Ghana. For example, [studies](#) had shown that vote buying was prevalent and that politicians sometimes used the

provision of public goods—even the [electricity grid](#)—to gain votes.

We found that because of this, civil servants had taken extra precautions to avoid the programme being "captured" by politicians. For example, they relied on grid access data—rather than member of parliament recommendations—to identify communities that needed electricity. They also visited communities to confirm their need.

Our paper asked whether the programme was successful in getting solar panels to the neediest communities, rather than rewarding communities that usually voted for the political party in power.

We found that the considerable efforts to thwart corruption paid off for national-level [civil servants](#). They were able to resist political capture. But only up to a point. Even their best efforts were thwarted when politics seeped into the process at a local level.

## **Who got the solar panels?**

We analysed whether solar panels were more likely to go to isolated communities with limited road infrastructure or to places with political ties to the government. Since grid expansion usually follows road infrastructure, communities with few roads are unlikely to be connected to the grid in the medium term. These communities therefore have a greater need for alternative sources of electricity, like solar panels.

We tracked the distribution of solar panels using statistical analysis of data on solar panel locations. We also interviewed people who made decisions or were affected by the programme.

The programme partially worked: panels were indeed distributed to isolated communities and those in need of electricity, rather than to incumbent strongholds.

But we also found that panels went to areas where voter turnout had been inconsistent over time—in other words where it was likely that voter turnout could be swayed.

This pattern was evident across the country, but was particularly marked in the area around Lake Volta. Analysis of interview responses and historical documents showed that this variation reflected the logistics of space and the historical politics of place.

This could mean that distribution was also influenced by the desire to mobilise people who sometimes, but do not always, vote, by bringing them [electricity](#) access.

## Politics at local level

Bureaucratic efforts to avoid political influence did succeed in some ways. The most obvious ways for political capture to influence distribution would be to steer more solar panels to communities with the highest support for the incumbent political party or highest voter turnout. This, however, did not happen.

We found, though, that politics seeped into the decision-making process at a local level.

Because it was hard for bureaucrats in the capital to obtain enough data about where to distribute the solar panels, they consulted local actors in communities to learn more about local need. This may have opened up the process to people who had more explicit political agendas than the national bureaucrats. Panels were subtly steered to places that were both needed and politically useful.

African governments have long dealt with the unfortunate stereotype that they distribute goods solely based on clientelism, nepotism, or

corruption. Our study of Ghana's work to distribute solar panels adds to the growing body of evidence that African governments do respond to need. They can resist political influence. They just may not be able to avoid it completely.

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