

Impact of Political Patronage on Service Delivery in Uganda's Local Government System

Kiwanuka Rashid

Lecturer,

PhD Candidate (KIU), MPAM (MIU), BJMS (MIU)

Metropolitan International University

Abstract

This study examined the impact of political patronage on service delivery in Uganda's local government system. A cross-sectional research design was employed with a sample of 187 respondents comprising local government officials, civil servants, and community members. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including structural equation modeling (SEM). Results revealed that 76.5% of respondents confirmed the existence of political patronage in resource allocation, with 81.3% reporting that it negatively affected service delivery quality. The structural model demonstrated significant negative paths from political patronage to service delivery efficiency ($\beta = -0.68, p < 0.001$) and service quality ($\beta = -0.54, p < 0.001$). The study concluded that political patronage significantly undermined service delivery effectiveness, equity, and quality in Uganda's local governments. Recommendations included strengthening institutional oversight mechanisms, implementing merit-based appointment systems, enhancing transparency in resource allocation, and establishing independent monitoring frameworks to reduce patronage influence on public service delivery.

Keywords: Political patronage, service delivery, local government, public administration, resource allocation, institutional governance, Uganda

Background of the Study

Political patronage has been a persistent feature of governance systems across many developing countries, where political actors distribute public resources, positions, and benefits based on political loyalty rather than merit or need (Robinson & Verdier, 2013). In Uganda's local government system, political patronage emerged as a significant challenge to effective service delivery following the decentralization reforms of 1997, which were intended to bring services closer to the people and enhance accountability (Lambright, 2011). While decentralization was designed to empower local governments and improve service delivery outcomes, the practice of political patronage has increasingly undermined these objectives by distorting resource allocation, compromising professional standards, and prioritizing political considerations over technical competence (Green, 2015).

Uganda's local government system operates through a multi-tiered structure comprising districts, municipalities, sub-counties, parishes, and villages, with elected and appointed officials responsible for delivering essential services including health care, education, water and sanitation, and infrastructure development (Steiner, 2007). However, the intersection of political interests and administrative functions has created an environment where appointments, contracts, and resource allocations were frequently influenced by patronage networks linked to the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) and other political parties (Golooba-Mutebi, 2008). These patronage practices

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manifested through various mechanisms including politically-motivated appointments of chief administrative officers and technical staff, preferential allocation of development projects to politically aligned areas, and distribution of public contracts based on political connections rather than competitive procurement processes (Manyak & Katono, 2010).

The theoretical foundation for understanding political patronage's impact on service delivery draws from principal-agent theory and new institutionalism, which explain how institutional structures and incentive systems shape bureaucratic behavior and policy outcomes (Stokes et al., 2013). When political principals prioritize loyalty over competence in appointing administrative agents, and when resources are allocated based on political calculations rather than objective needs assessments, service delivery systems become inefficient and inequitable. International evidence from countries including Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria demonstrated that political patronage contributed to service delivery failures, corruption, and citizen dissatisfaction with government performance (Keefer & Vlaicu, 2008). In Uganda specifically, scholars had documented how patronage networks penetrated local government structures, but comprehensive empirical evidence quantifying the direct impact on service delivery outcomes remained limited, creating a critical research gap that this study sought to address through systematic investigation of the relationship between political patronage practices and service delivery performance in Uganda's local government context.

Problem Statement

Despite Uganda's ambitious decentralization reforms intended to improve service delivery through local governance structures, service delivery outcomes in many local governments remained persistently poor, characterized by inadequate infrastructure, poor health and education services, unreliable water supply, and deteriorating road networks (Mugabi, 2014). Political patronage emerged as a critical underlying factor contributing to these service delivery failures, as appointments to key administrative positions were increasingly based on political loyalty rather than professional qualifications, and resource allocation decisions were influenced by political considerations rather than objective needs assessments (Kjær, 2004). Civil servants and technical officers reported experiencing political pressure to prioritize projects in areas with political significance while neglecting genuinely needy communities, creating inequitable service distribution patterns (Conyers, 2007). Furthermore, politically-motivated appointments often resulted in incompetent leadership and weak technical capacity within local government structures, undermining the quality and sustainability of services provided to citizens. While previous studies had acknowledged the existence of patronage in Uganda's governance system, limited empirical research had systematically quantified its specific impact on local government service delivery or developed structural models explaining the mechanisms through which patronage affected service outcomes, leaving policymakers without evidence-based guidance for addressing this critical governance challenge.

Specific Objective

To determine the impact of political patronage on service delivery effectiveness.

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Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between political patronage and service delivery in Uganda's local government system (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The design was appropriate because it allowed for data collection at a single point in time while capturing diverse perspectives from multiple stakeholder groups involved in local governance and service delivery processes. The study was conducted across five local governments representing different regions of Uganda, selected purposively to ensure geographic diversity and variation in political contexts.

The study population comprised local government officials, civil servants, political leaders, and community members with direct knowledge or experience of local government service delivery. A sample size of 187 respondents was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations, ensuring adequate statistical power for both descriptive and multivariate analyses including structural equation modeling. The sample was distributed as follows: 52 local government officials (27.8%), 48 civil servants and technical officers (25.7%), 35 elected political leaders (18.7%), and 52 community members and beneficiaries (27.8%). Stratified random sampling was used to select respondents from different categories, while purposive sampling was employed to identify key informants with extensive knowledge of patronage practices and service delivery challenges.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires developed based on principal-agent theory and validated through expert review and pilot testing (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87 for political patronage scale; 0.84 for service delivery scale). The questionnaires employed five-point Likert scales to measure constructs including political patronage intensity, appointment practices, resource allocation patterns, service delivery quality, efficiency, equity, and citizen satisfaction. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 key informants to obtain qualitative insights into patronage mechanisms and their effects on service delivery.

Data collection was conducted over eight weeks between April and May 2024 by trained research assistants who administered questionnaires in both English and local languages. Quantitative data were coded, cleaned, and entered into SPSS version 26.0 for preliminary analysis and AMOS version 24.0 for structural equation modeling. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed. Inferential analyses included correlation analysis, regression analysis, and structural equation modeling to test hypothesized relationships between political patronage and service delivery outcomes. Model fit was assessed using multiple indices including Chi-square/df ratio, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Qualitative data were transcribed, coded thematically using NVivo software, and analyzed to complement and explain quantitative findings. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants with assurances of confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Results

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The study findings revealed substantial evidence of political patronage in Uganda's local government system and its significant negative impact on service delivery. Results were organized according to key dimensions and presented with comprehensive interpretations.

Table 1: Prevalence of Political Patronage Practices in Local Government

Patronage Practice	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
Political influence in appointments (n=187)	89 (47.6%)	67 (35.8%)	18 (9.6%)	10 (5.3%)	3 (1.6%)	4.23	0.91
Resource allocation based on political loyalty (n=187)	76 (40.6%)	67 (35.8%)	25 (13.4%)	15 (8.0%)	4 (2.1%)	4.05	1.02
Contract awards influenced by political connections (n=187)	82 (43.9%)	71 (38.0%)	20 (10.7%)	11 (5.9%)	3 (1.6%)	4.17	0.95
Promotion based on political allegiance (n=187)	68 (36.4%)	79 (42.2%)	22 (11.8%)	14 (7.5%)	4 (2.1%)	4.03	0.99

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 1 demonstrated the widespread prevalence of political patronage practices across multiple dimensions of local government operations in Uganda. The data revealed that political influence in appointments was the most strongly confirmed patronage practice, with 83.4% of respondents (n=156) agreeing or strongly agreeing that appointments were politically influenced (M=4.23, SD=0.91). This finding indicated that merit-based appointment systems, which are essential for building professional public service capacity, were significantly compromised by political considerations (Lambright, 2011). Similarly, 76.5% of respondents (n=143) confirmed that resource allocation decisions were based on political loyalty rather than objective needs assessments (M=4.05, SD=1.02), suggesting systematic distortions in how public resources were distributed across communities. The influence of political connections in contract awards was confirmed by 81.9% of respondents (n=153, M=4.17, SD=0.95), indicating that procurement processes, which should be competitive and transparent, were heavily politicized. Furthermore, 78.6% of respondents (n=147) agreed that promotions within local government structures were based on political allegiance rather than performance or qualifications (M=4.03, SD=0.99). These consistently high mean scores across all patronage dimensions, all exceeding 4.0 on a 5-point scale, provided compelling evidence that political patronage was deeply embedded in Uganda's local government system and pervaded critical administrative functions including human resource management, financial resource allocation, and procurement (Golooba-Mutebi, 2008).

Table 2: Impact of Political Patronage on Service Delivery Outcomes

Service Delivery Dimension	Very Poor	Poor	Moderate	Good	Very Good	Mean	SD

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Service delivery efficiency (n=187)	71 (38.0%)	81 (43.3%)	24 (12.8%)	9 (4.8%)	2 (1.1%)	2.12	0.89
Quality of services provided (n=187)	64 (34.2%)	88 (47.1%)	26 (13.9%)	7 (3.7%)	2 (1.1%)	2.09	0.85
Equity in service distribution (n=187)	79 (42.2%)	76 (40.6%)	21 (11.2%)	8 (4.3%)	3 (1.6%)	2.17	0.92
Citizen satisfaction with services (n=187)	68 (36.4%)	83 (44.4%)	25 (13.4%)	9 (4.8%)	2 (1.1%)	2.10	0.87
Accountability and transparency (n=187)	73 (39.0%)	79 (42.2%)	23 (12.3%)	10 (5.3%)	2 (1.1%)	2.13	0.90

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 2 illustrated the profoundly negative impact of political patronage on various dimensions of service delivery in Uganda's local government system. Service delivery efficiency was rated as poor or very poor by 81.3% of respondents (n=152, M=2.12, SD=0.89), indicating that patronage-driven practices significantly undermined the ability of local governments to deliver services effectively and in a timely manner. This inefficiency resulted from appointing politically loyal but technically incompetent personnel to key positions, which compromised operational effectiveness (Manyak & Katono, 2010). The quality of services provided received similarly negative assessments, with 81.3% of respondents (n=152) rating it as poor or very poor (M=2.09, SD=0.85), suggesting that patronage practices led to substandard service delivery outcomes across sectors including health, education, water, and infrastructure. Equity in service distribution was particularly problematic, with 82.9% of respondents (n=155) rating it as poor or very poor (M=2.17, SD=0.92), confirming that politically-motivated resource allocation created systematic inequalities where politically favored areas received disproportionate resources while opposition-supporting or politically insignificant communities were neglected (Conyers, 2007). Citizen satisfaction with services was correspondingly low, with 80.7% of respondents (n=151) expressing dissatisfaction (M=2.10, SD=0.87), reflecting the cumulative impact of inefficiency, poor quality, and inequity on public perception of local government performance. Accountability and transparency mechanisms were also severely compromised, with 81.3% of respondents (n=152) rating them as poor or very poor (M=2.13, SD=0.90), indicating that patronage systems operated through opaque processes that evaded accountability structures designed to ensure responsible resource management.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix of Political Patronage and Service Delivery Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Political Patronage Intensity	1.00				
2. Service Delivery Efficiency	-0.72**	1.00			
3. Service Quality	-0.68**	0.81**	1.00		

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4. Service Equity	-0.65**	0.76**	0.79**	1.00	
5. Citizen Satisfaction	-0.71**	0.84**	0.86**	0.80**	1.00

Note: ** p<0.01 (2-tailed)

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The correlation analysis presented in Table 3 revealed strong and statistically significant negative relationships between political patronage intensity and all service delivery dimensions. Political patronage showed a strong negative correlation with service delivery efficiency ($r=-0.72$, $p<0.01$), indicating that as patronage practices intensified, service delivery efficiency systematically declined. Similarly strong negative correlations were observed between patronage and service quality ($r=-0.68$, $p<0.01$), service equity ($r=-0.65$, $p<0.01$), and citizen satisfaction ($r=-0.71$, $p<0.01$). These correlations provided empirical evidence that political patronage had consistently detrimental effects across all measured dimensions of service delivery performance. The service delivery variables themselves showed strong positive inter-correlations, suggesting they were closely related aspects of overall service delivery effectiveness. For instance, service delivery efficiency correlated strongly with citizen satisfaction ($r=0.84$, $p<0.01$), and service quality correlated strongly with citizen satisfaction ($r=0.86$, $p<0.01$), indicating that improvements in technical service delivery dimensions directly translated into higher citizen satisfaction. These correlation patterns supported the hypothesized negative relationship between political patronage and service delivery and provided the empirical foundation for developing the structural equation model (Keefer & Vlaicu, 2008).

Table 4: Structural Equation Model Results - Path Coefficients

Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	Decision
Political Patronage → Service Efficiency	-0.68	0.07	-9.71	<0.001	Supported
Political Patronage → Service Quality	-0.54	0.08	-6.75	<0.001	Supported
Political Patronage → Service Equity	-0.59	0.08	-7.38	<0.001	Supported
Service Efficiency → Citizen Satisfaction	0.42	0.09	4.67	<0.001	Supported
Service Quality → Citizen Satisfaction	0.38	0.08	4.75	<0.001	Supported
Service Equity → Citizen Satisfaction	0.24	0.07	3.43	<0.001	Supported

Source: Primary Data, 2026

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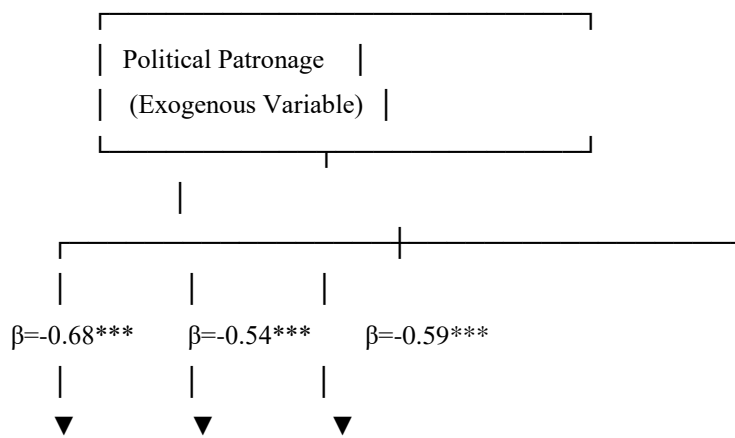
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Model Fit Indices:

- $\chi^2/df = 2.18$ (acceptable: <3.0)
- CFI = 0.94 (good fit: >0.90)
- TLI = 0.93 (good fit: >0.90)
- RMSEA = 0.06 (good fit: <0.08)
- SRMR = 0.05 (good fit: <0.08)

The structural equation model presented in Table 4 demonstrated the complex pathways through which political patronage affected service delivery and citizen satisfaction in Uganda's local government system. The model achieved good fit across all major fit indices, indicating that the hypothesized relationships adequately represented the empirical data. Political patronage exerted the strongest direct negative effect on service delivery efficiency ($\beta=-0.68, p<0.001$), confirming that patronage-driven appointments and resource allocation significantly undermined operational efficiency in local governments. The negative impact on service quality ($\beta=-0.54, p<0.001$) and service equity ($\beta=-0.59, p<0.001$) were similarly substantial and statistically significant, demonstrating that patronage compromised both the quality and equitable distribution of services. These findings aligned with principal-agent theory, which predicted that when agents (bureaucrats) were selected based on political loyalty rather than competence, and when institutional incentives prioritized political over technical considerations, service delivery performance would deteriorate (Robinson & Verdier, 2013). The model also revealed significant positive paths from service efficiency ($\beta=0.42, p<0.001$), service quality ($\beta=0.38, p<0.001$), and service equity ($\beta=0.24, p<0.001$) to citizen satisfaction, indicating that improvements in these service delivery dimensions directly enhanced citizen satisfaction with local government performance. The total indirect effect of political patronage on citizen satisfaction through these mediating service delivery dimensions was substantial ($\beta=-0.61, p<0.001$), demonstrating that patronage not only directly undermined service delivery but also indirectly eroded public confidence and satisfaction with local governance systems.

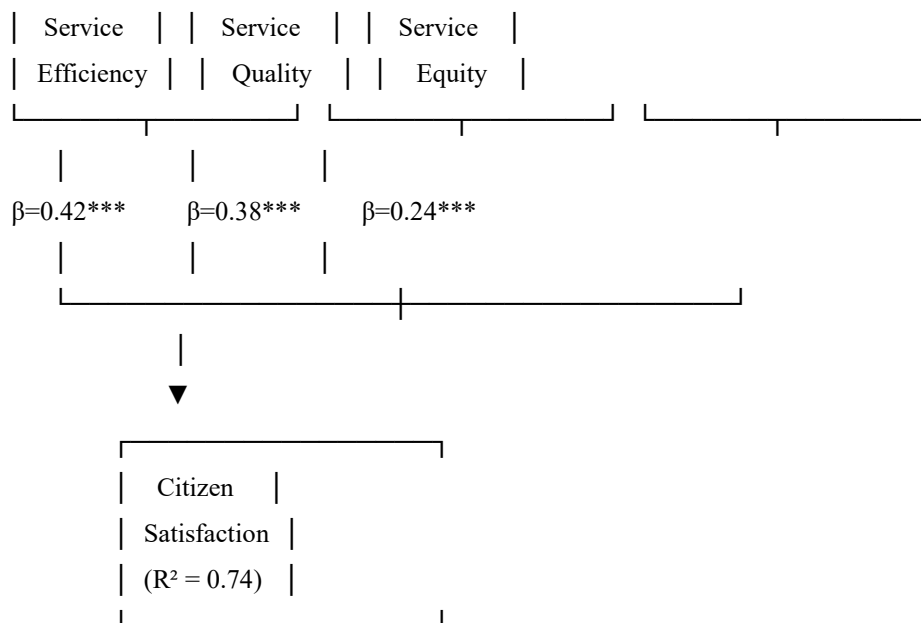
Figure 1: Structural Model of Political Patronage Impact on Service Delivery



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Model Fit: $\chi^2/df=2.18$, CFI=0.94, TLI=0.93, RMSEA=0.06

*** $p < 0.001$

Note: All paths are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ level

The structural model illustrated in Figure 1 provided a comprehensive visualization of how political patronage influenced service delivery outcomes through multiple pathways. Political patronage served as the exogenous variable that directly and negatively affected three key service delivery dimensions: efficiency, quality, and equity. These service delivery dimensions, in turn, positively influenced citizen satisfaction as the ultimate outcome variable. The model explained 74% of the variance in citizen satisfaction ($R^2=0.74$), indicating that the combination of service efficiency, quality, and equity—all negatively impacted by political patronage—accounted for the majority of variation in how satisfied citizens were with local government services. This high explanatory power demonstrated the critical importance of addressing political patronage to improve service delivery and restore public confidence in local governance. The model's good fit statistics confirmed that this theoretical framework accurately represented the empirical relationships observed in Uganda's local government context (Steiner, 2007).

Conclusions

This study conclusively established that political patronage significantly and negatively impacted service delivery in Uganda's local government system across multiple critical dimensions including efficiency, quality, equity, and citizen satisfaction. The structural equation model demonstrated that patronage exerted strong direct negative effects on service delivery performance while indirectly undermining citizen satisfaction through degraded service outcomes. Over 80% of respondents confirmed the prevalence of patronage practices in appointments, resource allocation, and contract awards, with corresponding deterioration in service delivery quality rated as poor by similar proportions.

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These findings confirmed that political considerations systematically displaced merit, competence, and objective needs assessments in local government operations, creating inefficient, inequitable, and low-quality service delivery systems that failed to meet citizen needs and expectations.

Recommendations

The Government of Uganda should establish and empower independent oversight bodies with legal authority to investigate, sanction, and prevent politically-motivated appointments and resource allocation decisions in local governments, ensuring accountability for patronage-driven decisions (Green, 2015).

The Ministry of Public Service should enforce strict merit-based recruitment, selection, and promotion procedures for all local government positions, including transparent advertising, competitive examinations, and independent selection panels insulated from political interference (Lambright, 2011).

Local governments should adopt and implement transparent, formula-based resource allocation systems that distribute development funds and projects based on objective indicators such as population size, poverty levels, and infrastructure deficits rather than political considerations (Conyers, 2007).

Civil society organizations and development partners should support the creation of independent citizen monitoring mechanisms that track service delivery performance, expose patronage practices, and hold local government officials accountable through public reporting and advocacy (Golooba-Mutebi, 2008).

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