



# Patronage, social proximity, and instrumentality in the mining industry in the Democratic Republic of Congo: the union elections explored

Kristien Geenen<sup>1</sup> 

Published online: 12 December 2019

© The Author(s) 2020

## Abstract

This article examines which factors influenced the votes of the workers during union elections in the mining companies in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2018. Although incumbent and challenging candidates resorted to lavish spending during the electoral campaign, this behavior had turned out hardly decisive on election day. Rather, workers voted for those candidates who had managed to become perceived as a patron. Patronage was acquired above all by improving the labor conditions and securing jobs. As such, workers voted following an evaluative rationale, although social proximity turned out an important factor as well. Regardless of these free elections and the secret ballot, however, the grip of the management upon the chosen union delegation remains very tight, both during and after the elections.

**Keywords** Democratic Republic of Congo · Mining industry · Trade unions · Elections · Patronage

The electoral meeting of a union in the grand Manika venue in the city of Kolwezi is finished. Some hundred workers of a major multinational mining company had shown up; the candidates distributed small amounts of money to reimburse their transport costs, added with a little extra. The president of the outgoing union delegation, Marc, firmly hopes to be re-elected. His speech had not been very convincing, though, and during the Q&A, the workers had grilled him about the labor conditions which had remained unchanged during his mandate. He gives me a ride home, in the car that the company grants to the president of the union delegation; it is a leather-seated luxurious and sophisticated four-by-four. “*Président, président!*” the workers shout while we drive by, “some money for a beer please.” Marc reaches into his pockets and hands some cash to ever more reaching hands, until finally, he loses the last 20-dollar note he

---

✉ Kristien Geenen  
kgeenen@ulg.ac.be

<sup>1</sup> Laboratoire d’Anthropologie Sociale et Culturelle (LASC), B31, Faculté des Sciences Sociales, Université de Liège, Agora, Place des Orateurs 3, 4000 Liège, Belgium

has on him. He looks at me and sighs. “What can I do,” he says, “it’s part of the game. If I do not give, I will definitely not be re-elected.” (fieldwork notes 30 June 2018).

This article deals with the way in which patronage interfaces with union practices. To examine this entanglement, it focuses on the union elections that mining companies organized in 2018 in Kolwezi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A union is “a form of collective action to achieve shared goals” (Durrenberger and Reichart 2010: 3); broadly speaking, a pull factor for union membership is the desire for improved labor conditions. The way unionists try to achieve these goals differs substantially in the Global North and Global South. In the low GDP countries, where workers face conditions of precarity on a daily basis, they organize collectively in different ways, such as traditional trade unions, cooperatives, or union-like associations (Lazar and Sanchez 2019). This article focuses on traditional trade unions that represent the rights of employees with a stable job and salary. Although in some African countries, company unions are rife—unions fully dominated by the employer—in others, the unions are powerful and involved in political struggles. African union members generally expect their union representatives to man the barricades, but in reality, the latter often refrain from industrial action and prefer to achieve a change through a slow process of negotiations, even when members perceive these every day bureaucratic activities as a sign that their union representatives are being corrupted by the employer (Kesküla and Sanchez 2019).

In ideal circumstances, workers adhere to a union of their choice, and they consider different arguments to make their decision. The union instrumentality framework theory of joining a union is helpful in this respect. Scholars define union instrumentality in various but similar ways, such as “the power to bring about changes in a workplace that individuals perceive a union to have” (Davy and Schipper 1993: 189), as “the extent to which employees believe the union is effective in acting in their interests” (Newman et al. 2019: 35) or also as “the extent to which the union is seen as responsible for obtaining favorable job conditions including wages, benefits, job security, and promotions for their members” (Tetrick et al. 2007: 821). In all these definitions, *perception* is central. This perception is built upon the achievements of a union in the past and the ensuing imaginable achievements in the future. The union instrumentality theory, in turn, is based on the social exchange theory which puts forward that it is “rational self-interest [that] drives people’s social interactions” (Sinclair and Tetrick 1995: 670). Note that the expected gains for unionizing do not only include tangible benefits such as salary increases or extra bonuses but also moral support and the feeling of being valued in the workplace. In brief, union members pay their union fees to reap benefits of this membership. In similar vein, during elections, workers vote for the union deemed ablest to secure the desired outcomes. But in Kolwezi, there were more triggers than a high union instrumentality that pushed workers to vote for a particular union; networks of patronage turned out influential too. Indeed, to be *perceived* as a highly instrumental union, candidates behave as patrons.

Political and union elections basically follow the same patterns, and many scholars have studied the logics of political elections in Africa. Lindberg and Morrison (2008) provided a frame for distinguishing the reasons why voters—in their case, during the elections in Ghana—pick a particular candidate or party. The authors discern a non-evaluative and an evaluative rationale. The latter comprises an assessment of the (anticipated) accomplishments by the incumbent or challenging candidates. Among the non-evaluative rationales, on the other hand, figure clientelism and proxy voting. Proxy voting refers to the soft pressure that family or ethnic ties put on individuals to vote for a particular candidate or party. But it is particularly clientelism that attracts my attention. Whether clientelism as a whole hampers the development of the African continent is a topic widely discussed. Chabal and Daloz (1999: 15) state that the

“patrimonial and prebendal practices of political elites [...] is most satisfactory” from the viewpoint of the individuals and communities they serve, and that the “legitimacy of African political elites derives from their ability to nourish the clientele on which their power rests.” In similar vein, Nicolas van de Walle (2007) argues that clientelism proves that a country’s democratic system is healthy, since many citizens need to be serviced to keep them satisfied; it involves, thus, a redistribution of the nation’s wealth. In any event, clientelist networks are influential during elections throughout Africa. In Uganda, ever more districts were created to allow a sound network of patronage to be established, new districts inevitably coming with new job offers, which in turn positively influenced the election results of the newly appointed heads of district (Green 2010). In Nigeria too, election results are defined by patron-client networks in which the figure of the “godfather” serves as broker between the political elite and the voters from whom they are alienated (Olarinmoye 2008). Indeed, social proximity is a key issue in these clientelist networks. In the transport sector of Senegal, union candidates especially emphasized their familiarity with the transport hub where they competed, in an attempt to maximize their votes (Cissokho 2015). But how to measure the influence of patron-client relations during elections? There is, obviously, a thin line between an assessment (and the ensuing vote) based upon the accomplishments of the incumbent candidate or an assessment based upon clientelistic provision of services. Although research in Ghana has shown that during the political elections, only one out of ten voters were influenced by clientelist practices and all the others had evaluative rationales to vote, the authors admitted that it is hard to distinguish the achievements of the incumbent candidates from clientelist services. To overcome this blur, they differed public services from “personal favors and gifts exchanged on an individual basis” and defined only the latter as a clientelistic rationale (Lindberg and Morrison 2008: 101).

Clientelist services can be granted either outside or during electoral campaigns, but the latter are perfectly fitted for public displays of distribution. While the unionists wage campaigns, a lot of money circulates. But money is of minor importance in my analysis, as this is—in a figurative way—common currency in the DRC. Indeed, bureaucracies throughout the country are infused with practices that involve financial transactions. It concerns hybrid dynamics that vacillate between the formal and the informal. In the sectors of civil service, justice, and medical care, not much moves without passing an envelope. In this regard, the DRC merely joins many other African countries (Bayart 1989). According to Olivier de Sardan (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 36), “a commodified form of negotiation regulating almost all forms of current exchanges” is “culturally embedded” throughout Africa. In this article, I argue that union instrumentality, a perception of which union candidate best defends the workers’ rights, cannot be “bought” but is immune to corrupt practices. Although workers do take advantage of the financial and material transactions during the electoral campaign, this does not influence their choices. They will either vote for a candidate whose expertise was proven or vote against those who failed, by means of granting their votes to newcomers with untarnished records. But more importantly, it is above all a unionist’s perceived role as patron, externalized as gatekeeper or protector of jobs, which manages to attract votes during the elections. Candidates who succeeded in establishing a sound network of patronage increased their chances of electoral victory, because workers voted following a clientelist logic which comprised the provision of distributive benefits. Some of these benefits were job related: the successful lifting of a disciplinary sanction or the acquisition of a pay raise. Other benefits were granted outside the workplace, such as giving financial assistance during a funeral, lending a hand during construction works at home, assisting with school fees, or praying at the

very same church. Here is where social proximity played a major role. In brief, following these streams of thought, I explore the extent to which both union instrumentality and officious services and (material and financial) transactions by networks of patronage had repercussions on the election results. This article therefore marries instrumentalist approaches to Congolese understandings of patronage, social proximity, and obligation and examines how these affect unionist relationships, in an environment where unions' power has never been great and is diminishing.

This article is based upon ethnographic data that were collected between February 2017 and January 2019. During four periods of fieldwork, I conducted interviews with unionists, managers, and employees; these interviews consisted non-structured in-depth conversations and most informants were interviewed several times. In addition, I attended electoral campaigns and meetings between unionists and observed the ballot procedures. The essay is structured as follows: it first explores how the union elections practically developed, and then focuses upon the electoral campaign. It concludes with an examination of the influences of both union instrumentality and patronage upon the election results. But before we proceed, I briefly outline the mining industry and unionism in the DRC in the following section.

## Mining and unionism in the DRC

Since about the millennium turn, many multinational mining companies settled in what is often called the Congolese copperbelt. Most often, these enterprises operate in partnership with the state-owned mining company Gécamines, which in turn grants its partners mining concessions and the necessary exploration and exploitation permits.<sup>1</sup> The partners in these joint-ventures come from all over the globe, but it is above all the Chinese companies that have attracted attention in media and academia worldwide. Although the latter were often accused of exploitative behavior, scholars refined this image and some put forward that their methods are not that different from those applied by the Western-based companies, but this discussion is ongoing (see, among many others, Marysse and Geenen 2009; Jansson 2012; Landry 2018). Besides copper, cobalt is extracted from the area's mines too; the DRC is even the world's largest producer of cobalt ore. Along with the growth of the electric vehicle market, of whose batteries cobalt is an important component, the demand for this ore will only increase. But the introduction of the multinationals has hardly translated into higher living standards for the local population in general (Trefon 2016; Geenen *forthcoming*). Although the GDP is on the rise, it did not improve the standard of living of the ordinary people. Mining industry did however bring about opportunities for those who acquired a job in the sector, and the unions struggle to obtain the best achievable labor conditions for this workforce.

Congolese labor law stipulates that a company with above ten workers should have union representation in the workplace. In practice, however, some companies operate during years without any unions in sight. It usually takes the union branch leaders themselves to approach the management and point out this legal obligation before union presence is introduced. It is important to bear in mind that—similar to the labor contexts in other sub-Saharan countries—the vast majority of the Congolese are employed in the informal sector, and, as a consequence, are not unionized. Indeed, because there is very little industry in the DRC, there is only limited

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that according to the Mining Code (2002, and revised version 2018), it should be the Mining Registry that is the gatekeeper, not the company Gécamines.

access to stable employment with official salaries. Note that in the informal sector, small-time entrepreneurs—those who run bars or tiny shops, or are paddlers and shoe polishers, for instance—do organize in so-called unions (Segatti 2015), but this kind of organization differs from the unions that defend the rights of officially salaried employees, which we discuss here. The copperbelt, with its mining industry, offers more formal job opportunities as compared to the other areas, and consequently, it has a larger unionized workforce.

In some African countries, unions were strongly involved in the struggle for independence, while in others, they have been toothless throughout history. The DRC belongs to the latter category. Indeed, Congolese unions have always been weak and had few members; up until independence, less than 1% of formal wage earners were unionized (Martens 1999). After a lengthy one-union era under Mobutu's rule (from 1965 to 1997) when unionists were muzzled,<sup>2</sup> the union sector was liberalized in the 1990s. Similar to what happened with the simultaneous appearance of a myriad of newly founded political parties (Mangu and Budeli 2008), this triggered the appearance of a myriad of new unions which in turn scattered the field and diminished union power.<sup>3</sup> Civil society organizations stated that the proliferation of unions in the DRC has weakened their power at the national level, especially during the collective bargaining sessions (Organisation Internationale du Travail 2010). The creation of the *intersyndicale* tries to tie the unions together to acquire more vigor. At national, provincial, and local level, the *intersyndicale* consists of the 12 unions with the most votes during the previous elections, and this blanket body represents the totality of the unions. At the level of the workplace, pluralism does not affect the power of the union delegation. Although during the elections, the many unions compete with each other, the unions that obtained enough votes to be granted a seat in the union delegation of a particular company will each send a candidate, and these candidates of the different unions forcibly work together. Indeed, each company has just one union delegation at its workplace, and consequently, once the election results are known and the seats granted, the members of the union delegation will jointly defend the right of the workers of that company, regardless of which union they represent. As a branch leader expressed, "after the elections, the union delegation becomes one and indivisible" (Jean-Luc, 16 February 2017). Rather, as we will discuss anon, it is the employer's firm grip upon the union delegation that diminishes its vigor. And multi-unionism had additional consequences. Some individuals just set up a union and compete during elections merely to try their luck, as a way to create an income. During the 2013 union elections in Kolwezi, as many as 200 unions competed, many of them newly created. Since only 30 unions obtained a seat in a delegation in some company, the remaining 170 unions ceased to exist. Note that the Congolese unions are not tied to political parties, and that ideology is of no account. As such, union members, delegates, and branch leaders alike have no qualms about hopping from one union to another if it has more interesting prospects on offer.

Labor law insists that every worker is free to unionize and to adhere to a union of preference, and even to change this preference each trimester. In practice, however, many companies apply a system of *adhésion générale* or general membership, which means that workers are automatically unionized except if they actively—and in written form—communicate to the management their wish not to do so. From all these automatically unionized workers, the monthly union fee is withdrawn from their salary. This so-called

<sup>2</sup> A notable exception being the *Ordre national de medecins*, the physicians' association, which closely collaborated with SYNAMED, a physicians' union; I thank Stylianos Moshonas for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>3</sup> There are currently 451 unions in the DRC.

check-off system is the common union financing system throughout Africa and usually consists of 2% of the salary. This joint amount is distributed among the unions that succeeded in obtaining a seat in the union delegation after the elections. As such, the (financial) survival of a union strongly depends upon the number of delegates it has in the workplace. On the other hand, since mining companies have up to 4000 workers and membership is often automatically generalized, the added union fees make a considerable sum of money. Indeed, membership fees range between US\$1 to US\$6 a month, depending on the category of workers. A union branch's financial income through a seat in the delegation of one company, thus, varies between US\$200 and US\$3000 a month. Since many unions are present at different companies at once, it means a substantial amount of money. It comes as no surprise then, that the union branch leaders attach much importance to the elections; in the words of one, "campaigning means sleepless months" (Bertin, 22 February 2017).

The obligation to allow union presence at the workplace pushed managers that are not keen on interference to be creative. In several companies, they installed what is commonly called "*des syndicats fantômes*" especially in the mining industry (Confédération Syndicale Internationale (CSI) 2010). Phantom unions are created by the management to abide by Congolese law but exist only on paper and have inactive members. They serve to prevent the introduction of genuine unions in the workplace. Moreover, some managers chose the unions they will allow on the plant themselves, without interference of the workers' votes. The workers themselves seem not too convinced of the value of being unionized either. A couple of years ago, one company went from the usual general membership, to an individual membership, as stipulated by the labor law. From that moment onwards, instead of automatically adhering and paying membership unless communication of their wish not to do so, each individual worker had to express the wish to be unionized, and point out the particular union to which its membership fee should go. Interestingly, this new rule halved the amount of union members. Most workers just did not see the point of being unionized. Nevertheless, during the elections, roughly 60% of the workers commits to voting, whether they are unionized or not. In the following section, we will explore how union branch leaders try to channel the electoral choices of the workers.

## Preparing the elections

As we have seen, for the union branch leaders (*permanents*), there is a lot at stake during the elections, including the persistence of their very union. If a union does not succeed in obtaining one or more seats in the union delegation of different companies, its financial resources will drastically decrease. So branch leaders make every effort to present valuable and powerful candidates for the delegation. For the incumbent union delegates too, a loss of a seat implies a loss of benefits, such as access to corporate information, attendance allowances during meetings, and eventually the car that comes with the presidency. The number of workers, in a proportionate way, defines the number of seats in the union delegation. In a company with up to 3000 workers, for instance, the delegation consists of 12 union delegates or *délégués*. However, the four most important delegates form what is called the *bureau*: the president of the union delegation, the vice-president, the treasurer, and the plain member, that is, the unionist without a particular function. These four delegates enjoy more benefits than the others (more call credit, more attendance allowances as they attend more meetings, ... benefits as stipulated in the *règlement d'ordre intérieur*). In addition, they enjoy greater involvement

because they have more frequent (formal and informal) meetings with the management, and easier access to the company's business secrets than the other delegates. Often, they are the only ones that are invited to set up the first draft of the collective agreement, and they do so as they see fit. In short, they have more power. The icing on the cake is the fancy car that managers of some of the companies grant to the president of the delegation, free fuel included. These assets facilitate the delegates of the *bureau* to behave as a patron. For the branch leaders too, having a delegate at the *bureau* is an asset; as expressed by one, "it allows to keep our eyes wide open inside the company" (Willy, 25 January 2019).

Every few years—legally it should be every 3 years, but the frequency depends on a ministerial order coming from the Ministry of Labor in Kinshasa—the HR departments organize union elections at their companies. Each union that wants to compete needs to present a list with the amount of required candidates. In the case above, a company with 3000 workers, this means that the union branch leaders need to gather 24 candidates: 12 *délégués effectifs*, and 12 substitutes or *suppléants*. Considering the large amount of unions that compete during the elections and consequently the large amount of candidates needed, the branch leaders do not have that much choice among the workers. In some companies, about two thirds of the employees figured on some union's list. According to one branch leader, the inevitable inexperience of (most of) these candidates is not problematic, since "one is not born a unionist, one becomes one" (Jean-Luc, 16 February 2017), suffice to study the labor law (*Code du Travail*). It is the duty of the *permanents* to train the delegates. The ballot does not show the name of the candidates, though, just the numbers that have been accorded to the unions that compete, in alphabetical order. Branch leaders try to lure the popular and charismatic workers of the plant to join their list of candidates and figure as electoral boon. Some even offer them money to appear on their list. Nevertheless, to find the required amount of possible candidates can turn an arduous task. Dieumerci is such a popular guy; he works at the supply chain department of one of the major companies. He was approached by a union that faced difficulties at getting enough candidates:

my foreman was number 1 on the list, and he asked me to join his union. I was put in the sixth position. Because it concerned a newly created union, the branch leader faced problems getting the required thirteen candidates plus thirteen substitutes candidates; the day before the deadline of submitting the lists, he had just gathered eight. On my superior's request, I started phoning colleagues and colleagues, and succeeded in convincing enough of them to join us. We made the deadline and were allowed to compete. By means of gratitude, my foreman placed me first on the list, while he himself took the fourth position. This is how I finally made it to be a *délégué*, as our union obtained one seat (Dieumerci, 13 April 2017).

Dieumerci's story shows how haphazardly the lists are put together. Once the list of candidates is established, the employees of the HR department check the validity of the application to compete, and whether all required documents are added and the legal conditions met. But even if all legal procedures are strictly followed, the management sometimes decides to exclude a union from the elections. As one former branch leader and now manager outlined, managers' phone one another to enquire about the previous behaviors of individual unionists; a branch leader who has caused trouble in the past might have his union banned. On top of this, the management interferes *after* the elections too. Whenever the candidate who is to be granted the presidency of the *bureau* does not suit the employer, he will ask the branch leader for a

replacement; as expressed by a branch leader, “the presidency is a negotiable position” (Bertin, 18 June 2018). As such, interference of the employer in the electoral process is a common practice and illustrates the firm grip the employer has upon the union delegation.

## Campaigning

How then do candidates try to reap the highest number of votes? Many unionists stressed that campaigning is not done during the officially allotted time but rather throughout the whole mandate. Branch leaders advise delegates to defend as much disciplinary cases as possible, because this creates exposure and name recognition and allows not only to establish a sound reputation, but also to acquire powers of patronage. Usually, disciplinary cases concerned workers that were bound to be dismissed because of theft, very trivial thefts for that matter—at times concerning only a half-empty bottle of water—but possibly leading to dismissal nevertheless. Without aggravating circumstances at play, Dieumerci always succeeded at having the sanction lifted. As such, he was perceived as a patron and a guardian of jobs, and eventually profited from this strategy. We have seen that he was appointed delegate in the 2013 elections, after his union—thanks to his popularity—had obtained a seat in the delegation. During his mandate, he defended an average of 20 disciplinary cases a week. Last elections, in June 2018, his union quadrupled the number of votes and Dieumerci was allotted the vice-presidency of the delegation. Money or gifts, he said, had nothing to do with his victory. Because his union was newly founded, it was only present in a few companies and thus had limited opportunity to generate financial means. Instead, they went on tour around town during campaigning and presented their program—with a special focus on the numerous cases that Dieumerci had defended during his mandate—in school buildings and churches, allowing them to save transport costs and beers for the attendees. Moreover, alcohol-free meetings in sacred venues created an image of sincerity and competence. Nevertheless, not spending was a long shot, as a potlatch kind of spending is yet another way to establish a perception of being a patron, and it is usually highly appreciated.

This brings us to the topic of lavish spending in public. That funding is needed during the electoral campaign is quite evident. To gather an amount of possible voters at electoral meetings, encouragements such as transport money and a couple of drinks are inevitable. T-shirts and other gadgets need to be handed out too, and all this adds up to a considerable sum of money. One union branch leader admitted having spent US\$50,000 during the 2018 elections. It is the union head office that finances the campaigning through the local branch leaders, but individual candidates put in extra money too, and distribute leaflets or posters with their pictures and names linked to the number of their union. These considerable sums offer the employer an opening to intervene; although no union branch leader admitted having received money for campaigning, rumors abound that managers financed the campaigns of their favorite ones.

Electoral meetings took place either inside the company, at a schedule that was planned in advance, or outside, in bars and other venues. In the former case, unionists are impeded not only by the strict time limits (usually 30 min) but above all by the presence of the HR employees that hindered the presenters to speak frankly and urged them to refrain from slandering the competing unions. So, although these inside meetings were virtually costless, campaigning unionists preferred to gather the workers outside the company. At the outdoors meetings, between 20 and 200 people showed up. When the meeting was held in a bar, this



involved spending money on drinks, but also on transport costs, which always exceeded the real transport costs. As explained by one union branch leader, “if we do not give any money by means of compensation, people will just not show up. Everyone corrupts, it’s just logical” (George, 26 June 2018). In all the meetings I attended, those present did indeed claim their transport money in case the unionists did not spontaneously offer it. But the fact that he handed the laden term corruption reveals that his intention was to “buy” votes.

The presenters’ aim of the meetings was, obviously, to convince the workers to vote for their union. The discourse handed during the meetings touched upon different topics. Some issues were used by the campaigners in both ways, either as an advantage or as a disadvantage. Ethnic background was one such topic. One branch leader stated he had carefully chosen his candidate for the company at Mwandishingusha, a candidate with the same ethnic provenance as the majority of workers at the company. Other candidates, on the other hand, put forward during meetings that they were “*nationalistes*” (Pascal, 24 January 2019) or against “*tribalisme*” (Jasmine, 5 January 2018) in an attempt to attract more votes. A second double-sided item is a union’s track record. Some candidates put forward the longstanding existence of their union, which guarantees a professionalism that others cannot offer, “just google our union’s name” one branch leader said to the crowd to underline its seriousness. Newly founded unions, on the other hand, stressed their clean and uncorrupted status and profiled themselves, as one branch leader expressed, as “a breath of fresh air” (Dany, 18 April 2017). One worker stated that he would never vote a union that was present at Gécamines, “just look at what happened to the company!” he exclaimed, in reference to the deep water in which it landed (Olivier, 16 April 2017).

Most often, the discourse focused on the accomplishments of the outgoing union delegation. There were two groups of campaigners to discern: the incumbent unionists at the one hand and their challengers at the other. In the first group, the once united delegation will now become divided: delegates passed the buck for the unchanged labor conditions to the fellow delegates of another union. In the words of one branch leader, “we failed because the other unions obstructed us” (Kapeta, 20 June 2018). The workers will judge the achievements of the delegation, and this will guide their voting behavior. In the opposite case, success and even re-election is guaranteed. This is what happened to Didier, the president of the delegation of a major company that some years ago went through harsh times. Mass lay-offs lured while production was on hold for 2 years, but Didier could convince the employer to limit dismissals to one fifth of the workforce, making the others work for 1 month, and have (paid) leave the other. Didier’s union had no problems being re-elected, and he was re-installed as president of the union delegation. As for the second group (those unions who were not part of the outgoing delegation), they got a free run at these meetings; they could allow to attack the delegation and cultivate an image as change agents. However, they faced a major shortcoming. Not having been part of the outgoing union delegation, they did not have an opportunity to establish a clientelistic system at the workspace. Scholars have shown that during elections in West-Africa, clientelism only works for the incumbents—having access to services—whereas the challengers are bound to resort to vote buying (Vicente and Wantchekon 2009). In Kolwezi, although some of the challenging candidates did try to buy votes, most of them tried their luck by allocating patronage outside the company. It all concerns image building. The main importance was to show that one *can* spend lavishly; this provided an indestructible aura of power. Joe Trapido (2016a, b, 2017) has unraveled the potlach behavior by Congolese politicians and musicians alike, performances that are inextricably bound up with Kinshasa’s public space. As such, “dispensing cash and goods with wild abandon” (Trapido 2016b: 66) is

about showing that you are *able to* dispense and in doing so establish a sound reputation as a patron. Although the distribution was far less spectacular in Kolwezi, it was similarly functional. But it turned out useless nevertheless.

Much time was spent on metadiscourse, and many campaigners brought up the money and goods that were handed during the electoral meetings of competing unions. “Don’t sell three years of your lives for a couple of banknotes!”, a branch leader warned the attendees; “do not accept any gifts,” another one said, “these are just one-time-only events, but you’ll be stuck with these unionists for years.” Many campaigners contradicted the temporary pleasure of the gift with the longstanding but adverse consequences. One branch leader tried to convince workers to adhere by stressing the union’s capacity and sincerity, “even if corruption is deeply rooted in our culture” (Faustin, 29 June 2018). One attendee even warned the presenting unionists about the practices of handing money at the meetings of competing unions, powerful tools in his eyes: “how do you plan to win the elections?” he asked, “some unions hand machine guns, others have bayonets, and still others have heavy artillery, how are you going to compete with that?” (fieldwork notes, 20 June 2018). Workers are fully aware that the election period is a fruitful one. Realizing that competing candidates will do anything to get support, they continuously ask them for some cash or call credit. As one candidate outlined, “it is best to deploy a strategy, you have to target the more popular workers, and take good care of them, and they in turn will convince their colleagues to vote for you” (Vula, 29 June 2018). As such, he lays bare how he set up electoral clientelism with the purpose of vote maximization. One branch leader complained about the enormous sums that needed to be spent:

The elections resembled political elections, as so much money was spent during campaigning: the beers, the gifts and so forth.... the workers always wanted more and more. For an “*assemblée*” (meeting), the usual gift was 100USD for each four persons present. When this attracted more and more people through mouth-to-mouth publicity, it was gradually reduced and ended up being 100USD per ten persons. But still, it is a lot of money. Nevertheless, most often it works, as the workers find it their moral duty to vote for those whose money they had accepted (Bertin, 22 January 2019).

It was not so much the amount of money distributed but the powerful image attached to lavishly spending that enabled to exert an image of power. Nevertheless, as we will discuss in a minute, my data proved that the moral duty argument was not always convincing. The distribution of money and gifts did not impress the workers; the improvement of labor conditions and the securing of jobs did. Indeed, some unions had spent quite generously but failed to obtain the expected results. The workers voted following an evaluative rationale infused with perceived patronage.

## The relation between union instrumentality, patronage, and election results

Did spending interfere with the election results? To start with, the workers punished blunt electoral corruption. They rejected open forms of voter compliance, that is “compliance where recipients change, or do not change, their electoral behavior in exchange for tangible rewards” (Olarinmoye 2006: 69). On election day, for instance, one union handed out US\$20 to every voter leaving the booth with a picture of the ballot proving the vote for the union concerned.

The workers however slyly worked out a scheme to take the money but vote a union of their choice in spite of that. Only the very first voter had done as asked, but he spread his picture of the ballot with the requested vote through WhatsApp, allowing his colleagues to vote any union but cash in the money after leaving the booth anyway. Scholars frame his voters' practice as "slippage," meaning that the voters take the money and run, and it turns vote buying into an inherently risky undertaking (Lehoucq 2002: 5; Olarinmoye 2008: 69). Indeed, many workers did not find it morally reprehensible *not* to vote for the union who offered money and goods, especially in case it involved blatant electoral fraud. Although the head office saw it as a cost-efficient manner to obtain the desired results at the elections—after all, seats in a union delegation offer a considerable financial income which might by far exceed the total sum of the US\$20 banknotes distributed at the polling booths—it had failed to reckon with the voters' rejection of their corruptive strategy.

There is however no consensus on which practices can be defined as corruptive. Are the beers at the meetings signs of corruption? Many attendees disagreed; they stated it is a matter of courtesy. And although distribution empowers, it does not suffice. Let us go back to the president at the beginning of this article, handing out banknotes from his fancy car. He did not make it during the elections, worse than this, his union did not even obtain a seat in the union delegation. This was clearly "*un vote sanction*" as a delegate of another union expressed it (Pascal, 24 January 2019); workers punished him because he failed to meet their expectations, that is, improving labor conditions at the plant. The president of another company, Didier, did succeed in getting re-elected though. As we have seen, he had prevented mass lay-offs and was rewarded by the workforce.

So in the end, both union instrumentality and patronage influenced the election results. As Tetrick et al. (2007: 825) have observed, "[i]f instrumentality is perceived to be low, suggesting a lack of effectiveness in attaining member goals for good working conditions and employment security, then the level of support is likely to be lowered, leading to less loyalty and decreased participation in the union." By extension, the workers will not vote for this union either. The clientelist services distributed did affect the results as well, but it was not so much the gifts and goods that defined the outcome; it was job security that did.

This said, the elections remained "bogus elections" to use the words of one union branch leader (George, 13 December 2017) because, as I have shown through this article, the management has a strong grip upon the union delegation, its eligibility included. Employers instrumentalize the unions when they see fit. For one thing, they profile themselves not as opponents, but as collaborators, hereby undermining the position of the unions who are supposed to be on the side of the workforce. "The prime union, is the employer himself," one manager even said (Mandranel, 27 February 2017). Such statements seem influential. The president of a union delegation admitted that his manager had convinced him "that we should walk in symbiosis" (Didier, 14 January 2018). To resist the lure of the management is hard. The fancy car that the president of the delegation receives is a case in point. This favor consists of what Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (Blundo and de Sardan 2001: 17) define as "*investissements corruptifs*," or corruptive investments, favors with a turnover in the future. The car and other benefits, for instance, can be (temporarily) withdrawn as a means of punishment. A car enhances the grip the employer has upon the delegation, a grip that is already tight. Moreover, we have seen that the employer is able to exclude undesired unions from the elections. But even if it concerns "bogus elections," they remain important, as the mere existence of a union might depend upon them. Branch leaders prefer to exploit patronage and social proximity in an attempt to maximize their votes no matter how fake the elections

are. In the end, however, unions are rather powerless, not only inside the companies, but also in the broader socio-political level. As long as high-level national politicians have their stakes in the mining companies, this situation will remain unchanged.

**Acknowledgments** I wish to thank Thomas McNamara and Manos Spyridakis for their insightful and encouraging comments, as well as Benjamin Rubbers and Stylianos Moshonas.

**Funding information** This article was written as part of the WORKinMINING project (<http://www.workinmining.ulg.ac.be/>). The project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 646802). The ideas developed in this article reflect only the author's view. The ERC is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Bayart, Jean-François. 1989. *L'État en Afrique: La Politique du Ventre*. Paris: Fayard.
- Blundo, Giorgio, and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan. 2001. La corruption quotidienne en Afrique de l'Ouest. *Politique africaine* 83: 8–37.
- Chabal, Patrick, and Jean-Pascal Daloz. 1999. *Africa works. Disorder as political instrument*. Oxford: James Curry.
- Cissokho, Sidy. 2015. La compétition syndicale à la loupe. Débats, affrontements et arbitrages autour de la question de la représentation dans les gares routières au Sénégal, *Revue Tiers Monde* 224 (special issue: Les Chantiers du Syndicalisme en Afrique, eds. Benjamin Rubbers and Alexis Roy): 83–102.
- Confédération Syndicale Internationale (CSI). 2010. *La République Démocratique du Congo et les normes fondamentales du travail reconnues internationalement*. [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/RDC\\_Congo-FR.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/RDC_Congo-FR.pdf). Accessed June 2018.
- Davy, Jeanette, and Frank Schipper. 1993. Voter behavior in union certification elections: a longitudinal study. *Academy of Management Journal* 36 (1): 187–199.
- Durrenberger, Paul, and Karaleah Reichart. 2010. Introduction. In *The anthropology of labor unions*, ed. Paul Durrenberger and Karaleah Reichart, 1–15. Colorado: University Press of Colorado.
- Geenen, Kristien. forthcoming. Writing local narratives of capitalism. The domestic diggers of a mining city in DR Congo.
- Green, Elliott. 2010. Patronage, District Creation, and Reform in Uganda. *Studies in Comparative International Development* 45 (1): 83–103.
- Jansson, Johanna. 2012. Views from the “periphery”. The manifold reflections of China's rise in the DR Congo. In *The Rise of China. The Impact on semi-periphery and periphery countries*, ed. Xing Li and Steen Fryba Christensen, 173–203. Aalborg: Aalborg University Press.
- Kesküla, Eeva, and Andrew Sanchez. 2019. Everyday barricades: bureaucracy and the affect of struggle in trade unions. *Dialectical Anthropology* 43: 109–125.
- Landry, David. 2018. The risks and rewards of Resource-for-Infrastructure deals: Lessons from the Congo's Sicomines agreement (Working Paper 2018/16. China-Africa Research Initiative, Johns Hopkins University, Washington). <https://foreignpolicymag.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/01911-sicomines-workingpaper-landry-v6.pdf>. Accessed 4 August 2018.

- Lazar, Sian, and Andrew Sanchez. 2019. Understanding labour politics in an age of precarity. *Dialectical Anthropology* 43: 3–14.
- Lehoucq, Fabrice. 2002. *When do parties buy votes? Theoretical and empirical perspectives on electoral corruption*. Paper presented at conference Trading Votes: The Comparative Politics of Vote Buying. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, 26–27 August 2002.
- Lindberg, Staffan I., and Minion K.C. Morrison. 2008. Are African voters really ethnic or clientelistic? Survey evidence from Ghana. *Political Science Quarterly* 123 (1): 95–122.
- Mbata B. Mangu, André Mprariseni Budeli. 2008. Democracy and elections in Africa in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Lessons for Africa. *African Journals Online (AJOL)* <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/idd/article/view/52884>. Accessed 10 May 2019.
- Martens, Georges. 1999. Congolese Trade Unionism: The Colonial Heritage. *Brood en Rozen* 2: 129–149.
- Marysse, Stefaan, and Sara Geenen. 2009. Win-win or unequal exchange? The case of the Sino-Congolese cooperation agreements. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47 (3): 371–396.
- Newman, Alexander, Brian Cooper, Peter Holland, Qing Miao, and Julian Teicher. 2019. How do industrial relations climate and union instrumentality enhance employee performance? The mediating effects of perceived job security and trust in management. *Human Resource Management* 58: 35–44.
- Olarinmoye, Omobolaji Ololade. 2006. Godfathers, political parties and electoral corruption in Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2 (4): 66–73.
- Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre. 1999. A moral economy of corruption in Africa? *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37 (1): 25–52.
- Organisation Internationale du Travail. 2010. Pluralisme syndical et prolifération des syndicats en Afrique francophone. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/%2D%2D-ed\\_dialogue/%2D%2D-actrav/documents/publication/wcms\\_143550.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/%2D%2D-ed_dialogue/%2D%2D-actrav/documents/publication/wcms_143550.pdf). Accessed 4 March 2018.
- Segatti, Aurelia. 2015. ‘Mobutu’s Ghost’: Mobilizing against foreign retailers in contemporary Congo. *Africa* 85 (1): 13–36.
- Sinclair, Robert, and Lois Tetrick. 1995. Social exchange and union commitment: a comparison of union instrumentality and union support perceptions. *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 16: 669–680.
- Tetrick, Lois, Lucy McClurgg, Lynn Shore, and Robert Vandenberg. 2007. A Model of Union Participation: The Impact of Perceived Union Support, Union Instrumentality, and Union Loyalty. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92 (3): 820–828.
- Trapido, Joe. 2016a. Potlach and the articulation of modes of production: revisiting French Marxist anthropology and the history of Central Africa. *Dialectical Anthropology* 40 (3): 199–220.
- Trapido, Joe. 2016b. Kinshasa’s theatre of power. *New Left Review* 98: 57–80.
- Trapido, Joe. 2017. *Breaking Rocks. Music, ideology and economic collapse, from Paris to Kinshasa*. New-York: Berghahn.
- Trefon, Theodore. 2016. *Congo’s environmental paradox. Potential and predation in a land of plenty*. London: Zed Books.
- van de Walle, Nicolas. 2007. The path from neopatrimonialism: Democracy and clientelism in Africa today. Working paper series 3–07, Center for International Studies. <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/55028>. Accessed 11 May 2019.
- Vicente, Pedro C., and Leonard Wantchekon. 2009. Clientelism and vote buying: lessons from field experiments in African elections. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 25 (2): 292–305.

**Publisher’s note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.