“Undermining Cooperation: Donor-Patrons and the Failure of Political Conditionality”
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Undermining cooperation: donor-patrons and the failure of political conditionality

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This study extends the debate concerning the feasibility of using foreign assistance to leverage political reforms in developing countries. This research combines both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in an effort to expand on the work done by previous scholars. Conclusions of the empirical analysis point to the finding that political conditionality is most effective when close cooperation exists between donors. This coordination, however, is frequently sabotaged by self-interested donor-patrons, illustrated by the case of Cameroon and France. This pattern is generalizable and significantly undermines the overall success rate of a political conditionality approach.

Keywords: political conditionality; donor-patrons; foreign aid; donor coordination; Cameroon; France

Introduction

Donors can have a significant impact on the behaviour of their aid recipients, far beyond the development projects they finance. This influence may potentially be used to encourage policy reform, or it can be deployed to shield aid beneficiaries from change. When foreign assistance is used as power, providing incentives and pressures for reform, this is referred to as a conditionality approach. Conditionality demands the implementation of particular policy modifications as a prerequisite for the provision of future aid. In this paper, I argue that donor coordination is critical to successful conditionality. However, this cooperation is frequently undermined by the self-interest of critical aid providers, referred to here as ‘donor-patrons’.

The political variant of conditionality has represented a watershed in North–South relations, and for the past two decades it has impacted the way aid has been provided from Pakistan to Peru, Belarus to Burundi, and beyond. In some instances, it has been relatively successful in encouraging democratic change. However, when analysed more closely, most political conditionality cases fail to...
induce deep, liberal governance reforms. For the most part, this failure is not born out of the resistance on the part of aid recipients to the evils of some ‘neo-colonial plot’, but, as argued here, because of the self-interest of donors themselves and specifically the breakdown of inter-donor cooperation. From the data gathered and analysed in this study, it appears that aid providers frequently succumb to their own realist impulses and refuse to work with other donors in imposing conditionality, undermining any hope of encouraging reform in this manner. This finding has broad policy implications, as donors continue to use aid sanctions on places such as Mauritania, Honduras and Guinea.

Key donors have repeatedly used their assistance to protect friendly developing world regimes from the uncertainties of democratic change that accompany political conditionality. These critical donor-patrons behave in this manner because democratic reforms, such as multiparty elections and the related possibility for regime change, may damage important relationships that link states, businesses and elites in the North and the South. Clearly, the possibility of a leadership transfer in a close ally can challenge long-standing patterns of interaction between capitals and leaders. The altruism of democracy promotion via a conditionality approach definitely has its normative value, but it can clearly have its drawbacks, especially for self-interested actors. This is clearly seen in the case with France and Cameroon, among a number of others as well. By underlining the critical concept of the donor-patron, this study illuminates one of the primary factors limiting the efficacy of political conditionality, that is to say the donor’s credible commitment problem to coordinate activities in order to make the aid sanction more effective. From the data presented and analysed in the following pages, this appears to be an important, generalizable phenomenon.

This study adds to the research findings on this subject by illustrating how self-interest can undermine the critical element of donor coordination in the application of conditionality. To accomplish this, I undertake a mixed methods approach, combining general statistics with the in-depth exploration of a critical case study. This is done in a two step process. First, a hazard model is applied to demonstrate the importance of donor coordination, comparing this factor with several other key variables from the relevant literature, on the ability of political conditionality to encourage democratic reforms in aid recipients during the 1990s. The results point to the conclusion that cooperation between donors is highly significant to the success or failure of conditionality. This analysis is followed by an investigation of Cameroon, tracing the central causal processes and providing a story to illustrate the general results seen in the statistical investigation. The overall aim of this study is to offer a deeper understanding of how self-interest acts as a critical factor undermining donor coordination and scuttling any attempt to encourage political reform with conditionality.

1. A political conditionality approach

Conditionality seeks to move leaders in authoritarian countries to adopt liberal reforms by using donor aid as both a carrot and a stick. Theoretically, the carrots
appear sweet enough and the sticks appear firm enough to provide the necessary incentives and pressures to encourage proper behaviour in the targeted aid recipient.

Historically, there are two types or generations of conditionality: economic conditionality, in which fiscal and budgetary reforms are demanded, and political conditionality, where democratic governance reforms are required. The first generation, economic conditionality, began with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the early 1950s and continues today. Here, in theory as well as in practice, multilateral lenders, such as the IMF and the World Bank, require that their loan recipients implement specific economic reforms in order to facilitate loan repayment. If the conditions are not met, further disbursements of the loan are suspended.

However, by the late 1980s, a new consensus among multilateral lenders emerged, concluding that economic conditionality alone was insufficient in obtaining sustainable economic growth in developing countries. This change culminated in 1989, when the World Bank began to argue that development was not being achieved in the South primarily due to ‘adverse political environments’. That is to say, democracy and good governance reforms started to be viewed as imperative for economic development. The timing of the emergence of this new understanding of the development process cannot be ignored. Clearly, these policy recommendations dovetailed with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the rise of the perceived dual hegemony of multiparty democracy and liberal economics, along with, it must be mentioned, the important changes underway in much of Africa, specifically national democratization conferences in various countries. The materialization of a political conditionality approach at the end of the Cold War took little time to cross over from multilateral lenders to become a fundamental part of the foreign aid policies of most major bilateral donor countries, the focus in this study.

The diffusion of a political conditionality approach from multilateral lenders to bilateral donors began with France, under pressure to follow the above-mentioned wave of political change sweeping throughout much of francophone Africa at the time. This change in donor policies began in June of 1990, at the La Baule conference where African and French heads of state were meeting, when then French President François Mitterrand declared that Paris would thereafter provide more generous amounts of aid to countries pursuing multi-party democracy, and would subsequently reduce the sums to those that did not follow such a path. Shortly following this, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs at the time, Herman Cohen, argued for a similar link between democratic reforms and future United States foreign assistance. In less than six months, most bilateral donors moved quickly to adopt similar policies and political conditionality had become a fundamental part of the contemporary aid process.

How does political conditionality function as a foreign policy tool? A clear example of this approach can be illustrated by the donor reaction to the August 2008 military coup d’état in Mauritania. Political conditionality, in this instance, as in most cases, plays out in three acts: (1) donors condemn the coup or some other negative action on the part of the aid recipient, (2) donors suspend or
dramatically reduce their aid in response, and (3) donors request some sort of political reform, here a return to civilian, democratic rule in exchange for the return of normal aid flows. The hope is that aid beneficiaries will react positively in an expeditious manner to donor demands by instituting multiparty democratic reforms, calling for immediate elections, as well as respecting international norms of good governance and human rights. Yet, conditionality does not always function as smoothly in reality as predicted in theory.

2. Analysing political conditionality

Political conditionality failures (that is, the inability to promote democratic reforms with aid sanctions) far outweigh the successes. Conditionality has actually been instrumental in producing deep democratic reform in only a handful of cases. The most remarkable examples are Malawi, Mali and Thailand.

In this analysis, it is important to examine the question of timing. Since aid conditionality functions similar to a sanction, the length of time it takes the recipient to reform is a crucial indicator of the tactic’s strength. Like any sanction, successful reform under conditionality should occur earlier, rather than later. Sanctions should convince the target to concede in a relatively short period of time after having been put into place by the sender, or they will not achieve their goal at all. Accordingly, in the analysis of political conditionality cases examined here, as the time of the implementation of conditionality lengthens, the probability of reform is reduced. This decline flattens out after about four years of donor pressure. After this point, the effect of conditionality appears to have a relatively low impact on the survival function. That is to say, the longer that aid conditionality is in place, the less likely that the target will reform. If change does not take place within four years, it probably will not happen at all.

Given this, Table 1 presents the trends in governance reforms (from time $t$, or the imposition of conditionality, to time $t + 4$) across the 47 cases of political conditionality in the 1990s using Freedom House political rights (FH-pr) scores to determine the level of democratic reform. Note that the failures of political conditionality (that is, no change or a deterioration in political rights scores) outnumber the successes (that is, where political right scores improve). Out of the sample, some level of political reform occurred in only a minority of the cases (20 of 47, or 43%). However, a closer regard of the data reveals that only 8 of the 47 cases (approximately 17%) reached an acceptable level of what Freedom House considers to be a ‘free’, multiparty democracy (that is, scoring a one, two, or three in four years after the implementation of conditionality).

Timing and the level of democratic reform are central to this study and its dependent variable. For example, after the imposition of political conditionality, Malawi’s FH-pr score improved by four points, from six to two. This process took two years, from aid sanctions to reform. The outcome variable used here is expressed as the ratio of these two factors: the movement of FH-pr divided by the number of years from the imposition of aid conditionality to the time of
Table 1. Political conditionality cases (1990–1999) by bilateral donors, arranged by change in Freedom House political rights scores (FH-pr).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year of imposition of conditionality (t)</th>
<th>Bilateral donors imposing aid conditionality</th>
<th>Freedom House political rights scores (FH-pr) at (t)</th>
<th>FH(pr) at (t + 4)</th>
<th>Change in FH-pr from t to (t + 4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>UK, US</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>−4</td>
</tr>
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<td>France, Germany, Netherlands</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>−4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>France, Germany, US</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>−3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Belgium, Japan, US</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>−3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>France, Japan, US</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>−3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesotho</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Germany, Japan, US</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>−2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Japan, US</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>−2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Congo-B.</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>France, US</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>−2</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>Canada, France, Germany, Japan, US</td>
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<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Germany, Spain, US</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Germany, Italy, Sweden</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Niger</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>France, Germany, US</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>US, Germany</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1999</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>−1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>−1</td>
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<td>Belgium, France, Spain</td>
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<td>−1</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>Japan, UK</td>
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<tr>
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(Continued)
Table 1. Continued.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year of imposition of conditionality ((t))</th>
<th>Bilateral donors imposing aid conditionality</th>
<th>Freedom House political rights scores ((FH-pr)) at ((t))</th>
<th>FH((pr)) at ((t + 4))</th>
<th>Change in FH((pr)) from (t) to ((t + 4))</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>France, Japan, US</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>Canada, France</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>((+2))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


reform. For Malawi, this score is two. A four point change in FH-pr divided by two years \((4/2 = 2)\). This is expressed in the following hazard function:

\[ h(t) = \frac{r(t)}{c(t)} \]

For comparison, a hazard function \(h(t)\) is created, and is defined as the time-dependent risk of conditionality leading to political reform in the target country. Let \(r(t)\) be defined as the level of political reform (change in FH-pr) at time \(t\) (the time of the imposition of conditionality) minus the level of political reform...
at time $t + n$ (the time when reform took place after conditionality). Finally, $c(t)$ counts the number of years from conditionality to reform. Overall, $h(t)$ indicates how much reform took place over time. Six explanatory variables are tested to determine their impact on this dependent variable.

The political conditionality literature identifies three primary factors that impact on the success or failure of the approach: inter-donor coordination, aid dependency and trade interdependence. Three further controls are added to the study and include: arms flows, recipient oil production and recipient economic growth. The next several pages have the following three objectives: (1) examine the six explanatory variables; (2) lay out the hypothesized relationships between the independent variables and political conditionality; and (3) assess the impact of these factors on the success or failure of a conditionality approach.

**Donor coordination**

How does a coordinated effort from the donor community impact on the effectiveness of political conditionality? Stokke hypothesizes that close cooperation between donors can present significant pressure on an errant regime. Crawford also argues, ‘[t]here is considerable evidence to support this hypothesis. The large majority of effective cases were characterized by donor co-ordination’. High levels of cooperation demonstrate the seriousness and credibility of donor sanctions. It is hypothesized here that close coordination should increase the pressure on the recipient, lowering coordination costs, relieving commitment problems among donors, and clarifying signals towards the aid recipient. However, coordination among rich-country donors is not as easy as it would seem. Significant credible commitment problems remain, undermining donor cooperation. This is because donors have their own priorities and interests. Close economic and strategic ties with the target may cause donors to fail to pressure their friends and allies, sometimes even seeking to protect them from external pressure. Aid recipients identify this and rightfully try to court friendly donors that take a more lax stance on political reform. In this study, the number of donors applying conditionality (that is, those significantly reducing their assistance shortly after time $t$) is used as a proxy for donor coordination. The larger the number of donors that apply aid sanctions together should strengthen the application of political conditionality and increase its overall success in encouraging reform.

**Aid dependency**

It would be logical to assume that ‘a highly aid dependent country should be receptive to demands for change in return for assistance’. Over-reliance on foreign assistance should make peripheral economies especially vulnerable to donor pressures. As Zartman and Rubin point out, aid dependency can widen power asymmetries between the donor and the recipient, thus facilitating conditionality, leaving
the targeted country with little bargaining power. This study hypothesizes that aid dependence increases the likelihood of recipient acquiescence to donor demands, strengthening conditionality. Aid dependency is defined as the amount of Official Development Aid (ODA) as a part of Gross National Product (GNP), expressed as the ratio ODA/GNP. These data are derived from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators (WDI).

Trade interdependence

Following a realist argument, aid is justified in terms of the recipient’s potential contribution to the donor’s security and economic well-being. Donors can be expected to protect their close trading partners in the developing world. On this point Olav Stokke indicates that, ‘if relations...involve sensitive strategic interests related to trade and investment, the donor government’s willingness to take action is likely to be reduced...’. Therefore, I hypothesize that a close trade relationship may cause donors to soften conditionality. To capture this relationship, the measure total trade (imports and exports) as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is used. WDI provide the source for this variable.

Arms imports

Donors can be anticipated to overlook the authoritarian shortcomings of regimes that buy significant amounts of their weapons. These countries may present lucrative arms markets for developed nations. Aid beneficiaries with a large demand for weapons may escape the imposition of conditionality because of the market that they present. The total amount of armaments imports as a part of the country’s total imports is used as a proxy to test this hypothesis, and is taken from the WDI.

Oil producing countries

Donors can be expected to prefer maintaining linkages with oil producing regimes, rather than pressurizing them for political change. That is to say, oil may create a sort of reverse pressure on the donors, undermining their leverage. Based on the desire to maintain access to petroleum for their economies, it is predictable that some donors may prize privileged relations with oil exporters rather than criticize their democratic shortcomings. This minimizes the impact of conditionality. As a measure, I will use a dichotomous variable to identify the oil producers in the sample of aid recipients used in this study. Data from the US Energy Information Agency is used to determine if a recipient is an oil producer at the time in question.

GDP growth

This study also controls for economic growth. Economic downturns should facilitate regime transitions, and in theory make political conditionality more
The argument holds that poor economic performance erodes political legitimacy, leading to popular dissatisfaction that can eventually undercut an authoritarian regime with popular demands for democratization. Economic crisis becomes political crisis. Negative economic growth should put added pressure on an authoritarian regime to undergo a transition, increasing the effectiveness of donor pressure and a conditionality approach. This study will use the measure for GDP growth available from the WDI.

Observations from 158 aid recipients (including the 47 political conditionality cases) are examined over a 10-year span from 1990 to 1999 to check how aid sanctions are linked to political reform, and more centrally what influences this link. Unfortunately, due to a lack of data on a number of cases, 525 country-year observations are missing from the analysis, providing a cross-sectional time series with 1055 observations. Table 2 presents a hazard analysis of these data in both the form of coefficients and hazard ratios using a Cox proportional multivariate regression technique. The estimated coefficients and hazard ratios provide an indication of the particular explanatory variable’s impact on the overall hazard rate. A simple estimated hazard rate can be calculated by the ratio of the total political reform for all conditionality cases, over the total number of years that conditionality was applied. This gives us the overall resulting ratio of 38/228. This indicates that in a given year, approximately 17% of the cases in the analysis can be expected to undergo political reform when exposed to donor-imposed conditionality, in line with the descriptive statistics presented earlier. Table 2 addresses how the six explanatory variables advanced in my analysis impact this base hazard rate.

From the results shown above, it appears that three factors – donor coordination, aid dependency and trade interdependence – increase the probability that political conditionality will provoke democratic reforms in aid recipients. These variables have positive impacts (of varying intensity) on the base hazard rate and are all statistically significant (at varying levels). The indicators for arms imports, oil production and economic growth were not statistically significant. By far the strongest relationship is the variable for inter-donor coordination, or the number of donors cooperating on imposing conditionality. Indicators for aid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Model 1 (coef.)</th>
<th>Model 2 (hazard)</th>
<th>sig.</th>
<th>sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donor coordination</td>
<td>0.566 **</td>
<td>1.761 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid dependency (ODA/GNP)</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>1.018 *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trade interdependence (Trade/GDP)</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>1.016 *</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Arms imports/all imports</td>
<td>−0.093</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Oil production</td>
<td>0.469</td>
<td>1.598</td>
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<td>GDP growth</td>
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</table>

Note: * = p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001.
dependency and trade interdependence were slightly statistically significant, but the relationships were much weaker than that between the dependent variable and inter-donor cooperation. This suggests that increasing the number of donors putting pressure on an authoritarian recipient increases the probability of reform. This is an important empirical finding. As more donors compel conditionality on the target, vital international aid resources dry up. Additionally, this collective sanction may give the recipient a bad reputation on the world scene, impacting access to other sources of finance, such as multilateral aid and loans, as well as foreign direct investment.

However, central to the discussion at hand, the inverse appears to hold as well. When donors do not cooperate, or when a critical donor-patron baulks at imposing sanctions, the probable success of conditionality dramatically decreases. Such behaviour is seen in the case of Cameroon and France, although this pattern is far from being exclusive to this pair. This study demonstrates that realist tendencies appear to lie at the heart of the failure of political conditionality, undermining the decisive element of donor coordination. The pervious section presents clear empirical evidence that donor coordination matters. The following pages support this finding by explaining why cooperation fails.

3. Self-interest and the failure of donor coordination

In exploring the impact of political conditionality, one cannot underestimate the magnitude and importance of existing bilateral relations between donor and recipient. The aid relationship is a complex one. It goes beyond the simple transfer of funds from rich to poor. Frequently, donors use their assistance to help (or even gain leverage over) countries that enter into their own foreign policy priorities. A fundamental assumption here is that donor interests frequently dominate foreign aid calculations, undermining their ability to cooperate with other donors and collectively initiate aid sanctions. It is certainly not new to argue that the realist interests of rich countries get in the way of more lofty liberal ideals at the heart of their aid programmes. Furthermore, the notion that donor self-interest dominates foreign assistance allocations is almost axiomatic in the scholarly literature on the subject. Empirical tests advance the point that donors are highly self-interested and habitually use their aid to reward their friends. Others go so far as to posit that the strategic interests of donors are critical determinants of the direction and amount of aid flows. This study advances this logic and finds strong empirical evidence supporting the fact that conditionality fails precisely because of this problem. Aid providers cannot work together and be successful in imposing conditionalities when the most powerful and connected donor fails to work against them.

From such a perspective, donors can be understood to want to shelter close client regimes from the storm of conditionality unleashed by other international aid providers. This behaviour severely undercuts the success of a conditionality
approach. As indicated in Table 3, one-third of the political conditionality failures examined in this study are linked to the presence of a donor-patron.

Note that the donor-patrons dominate the mass of aid provided to the recipient, granting on average over half of the target’s total bilateral aid from the DAC countries. These key donors (namely France and Japan) also have the odd tendency of increasing their aid at critical junctures, primarily when other donors are attempting to impose aid sanctions. This pattern of behaviour merits closer attention. The case of Cameroon and its intimate relationship with France clearly illustrates this. During a tumultuous democratic transition in the early 1990s, and with Yaoundé under strong domestic and international pressure to reform, Paris moved in to protect its historic ally with a windfall of assistance.

4. France and Cameroon: the archetypal donor-patron relationship

France maintains a considerable presence in Africa, even after nearly a half century since independence. Paris preserves extremely close diplomatic, economic and military bonds with a number of its former dependencies in Africa and dislikes any outside interference in their affairs. Countries such as Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, the Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, and Senegal have historically been referred to in French policy circles as their ‘chasse gardé’, or private hunting reserve, underlining the deeply patrimonial links that still exist between the former ‘metropole’ and its ‘periphery’. French assistance flows have historically facilitated this relationship.

Furthermore, most of the scholarship on French foreign affairs argues that its aid disbursements have been oriented towards meeting Paris’ major foreign policy goals for quite some time. Foreign assistance is a critical diplomatic tool for
France. Quinn and Simon argue that, ‘France has been characterized as a traditional middle power that has had nondevelopmental concerns at the heart of her aid program.’ Some have gone farther, arguing that the cooperation policy is its main instrument of French power politics. As Hook points out, France’s ‘ODA has become an important tool in reviving the country’s status abroad. French leaders concentrated on their existing spheres of influence in the Third World, particularly in francophone Africa...’ Furthermore, the literature suggests that ‘foreign aid constitutes one component of a remarkably integrated system of economic relationships...that was predicated on maintaining and enhancing a network of ties within the francophone world.’

Squarely put, French aid acts as the central cog in its patron–client machine at the heart of its relations with Africa.

Primarily, the French foreign aid policy is designed to keep pro-Paris elites in control. More than just a part of normal state-to-state relations, the French leadership, regardless of any left–right political affiliation, maintains close personal relationships with key African elites. This personalization of relations facilitates interactions between capitals. Political and economic leaders in particular countries can draw on these contacts in an emergency or when lucrative business deals are in the works. In such an event, a friendly voice in the Elysée Palace is only a phone call away. This patron–client system is frequently referred to as the Françafrique network.

Because of this behaviour, it is clear why some less-developed countries might want to maintain a close relationship with a rich donor-patron like France. However, why should a relatively powerful country such as France care so much about these mostly marginal players on the international scene (besides the obvious desire to maintain access to certain important commodities)? Bernard Conte argues that Paris is keen on ’maintaining a political clientele [that] has proved useful to France, in international institutions, because it has given it the rank and the prestige of a medium size power’. Its African clients allow France to play a larger role in the international system than it would otherwise be able to without them. With these allies, the French voice is stronger in international organizations like the United Nations or the World Trade Organization. This is why countries like Cameroon, Gabon, or Senegal matter so much in French foreign policy circles. The loss of a friendly regime has real costs for French diplomacy.

When confronted with concrete foreign policy choices, French leaders have regularly appeared much more willing to prop up their close friends and allies on the continent than to defend the abstract ideal of multiparty democracy, especially since this could potentially undermine such important strategic economic and political relationships. This desire continues with Sarkozy today, despite the early rhetoric in his presidency to the contrary. As Schraeder points out, ‘In essence, as long as authoritarian leaders continued to underscore their commitment to close ties with France, they were unlikely to find themselves under heavy pressure from Paris to democratize.’ France’s relations with Cameroon mark a case in point most clearly.
Almost simultaneously with the fall of the Berlin Wall, much of the African political landscape began to undergo a dramatic transformation. Single-party regimes across the continent (the regime choice *par excellence* for much of the developing world since the mid-1960s) fell under the combined weight of domestic and international pressures for political liberalization. Cameroon began to feel these historic winds of change early in 1990. However, the route taken by this central African country was not an easy one. Virulent demands for multiparty democratic reform were primarily made by a variety of domestic actors tired of ‘politics as usual’, and deeply inspired by wider global and African processes of reform. In the end, the effort to bring fundamental political change to Cameroon was subverted by a combination of repression, electoral manipulation, and a critically massive influx of aid from the country’s primary benefactor, or donor-patron, France. The unprecedented flood of assistance from Paris was crucial in maintaining President Paul Biya and his ruling clique in place during this tumultuous period, and undermined the conditionality approach applied by the United States and other donors.

In the autumn of 1990, after months of incessant domestic and international pressure, the regime of President Paul Biya was forced to initiate a transition to multiparty democracy. However, the limits of these changes were quickly demonstrated. The highly controversial presidential elections of 11 October 1992, led Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle to call what transpired in Cameroon a ‘flawed transition’. This is an example of where dubious elections...returned the incumbent to power...[in which] strongmen...exploited the powers of incumbency to dictate the rules of the political game by manipulating electoral laws, monopolizing campaign resources, or interfering with the polls.

The US-based National Democratic Institute, after monitoring the elections, echoed these points, concluding that the poll had a ‘number of serious problems’ and was far from free and fair. This manipulation of the democratic process was underscored by widespread human rights abuses on the part of the country’s security forces, including numerous civilian deaths of those protesting the regime. Regardless, international pressure was for the most part muted, as the global community looked to France to take the lead in condemning Biya and those around him. In all of this, Germany and the United States stood relatively alone in being openly critical of the violence and the electoral irregularities. On 9 November 1992, days after the contested presidential election, the German parliament suspended a large portion of its bilateral aid to the Biya government. As a result, Germany reduced its aid from $50 million in 1992 to approximately $30 million in 1993, a drop of some 40%. Germany maintained this aid reduction for several years to protest ‘President Biya’s actions against the opposition...and...fraud during the recently-held presidential elections’. Additionally, Germany attempted to influence the European Union’s...
multilateral donor) assistance flows, but was blocked by France. In the end, under pressure from Paris, the EU only made ‘veiled threats but took no action’ against Cameroon.39

Shortly after the German aid sanction, the United States deployed its own conditionality approach toward the Cameroonian government. It should be mentioned that during much of the 1980s, the United States’ economic assistance to Cameroon were about the same as that of the country’s historic primary donor, France, at approximately US$50 million annually. The events of the early 1990s would dramatically change this pattern. As demonstrated in Figure 1, the behaviour of the Biya regime had a significant impact on US economic aid disbursements to Cameroon.

According to USAID, economic assistance to Cameroon from the US was reduced from US$34.7 million in 1991 to US$18.4 million in 1992, a decline of almost 50%. American aid virtually ended after 1993, except for an extremely limited amount of humanitarian assistance provided directly to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Aid from Washington would remain at these levels.

Immediately following the October 1992 elections the US State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher, issued a stern warning concerning this situation, accusing the Biya regime of ‘using intimidation to strengthen his position, after the presidential election which was beset by fraud’.40 Along the lines of a conditionality approach, Washington demanded that the Biya regime immediately end the state of emergency imposed on the west and the northwestern regions of the country, both opposition bastions. US officials also demanded the release the opposition leader John Fru Ndi, who by many accounts won the 1992 presidential poll, and had been arrested immediately afterwards.41 If these preconditions were met,

Figure 1. US economic aid to Cameroon (millions of current US$).
Washington would consider recommencing normal bilateral relations with Yaoundé. In a response to a lack of improvement of the political situation, in 1994 the USAID liaison office in Yaoundé (for Cameroon and all of Central Africa) was closed permanently. In its reasoning for the dramatic reduction in relations, the US State Department cited its ‘concerns over human rights abuses and the pace of political and economic liberalization’. Yet, political conditional-ity, as applied by Germany and the United States, had an extremely limited impact on the Biya regime. As will be demonstrated in the next section, only one donor is truly important in Cameroon’s policy-making calculations: France.

France plays the ‘perfect’ role of the donor-patron in Cameroon. Since independence, Yaoundé has remained tightly under French influence. Cameroon plays an important role in offering France both access to primary commodities (oil, timber, aluminum, cocoa, etc.) and as an export market for French manufactured goods and services. As discussed earlier, Cameroon also presents France with an ally in global politics. In return, Paris offers Cameroon substantial amounts of aid (Cameroon has historically been one of France’s priority aid partners, normally one of the leading destinations of its assistance), preferential loans, market access, and what can be described as ‘protection’ from hostile actions from other international actors, such as the application of conditionality by donors, or in the resolved dispute over the Bakassi peninsula with neighbouring Nigeria. However, this privileged relationship has proven to be corrosive for efforts to build a competitive, multiparty democratic system in Cameroon. French elites desire to keep Biya in power because he represents a close friend in the Francophone network. Elections might bring someone else to power not in line with this long-standing French-African réseau. This was especially the case in Congo-Brazzaville, one of France’s closest allies in Africa, when in the early 1990s newly elected president Pascal Lissouba canceled oil contracts with France’s national champion, Total, accusing them of corruption, and accepted an offer from US-based Occidental Petroleum. This deeply soured relations between Paris and Brazzaville. Because of this reaction, many in French foreign policy circles feared that democratization would mean a wholesale reorientation of some of Francophone Africa towards actors such as the United States. Specifically in Cameroon, France has feared that an Anglophone president (seeing that the main opposition candidate, John Fru Ndi, is from an English-speaking region of the country) would undermine that country’s ties with Paris. Because of this fear, French elites had no desire to facilitate democratization in the country. These realist priorities undermined the success of a conditionality approach. Out of fear of losing one of its most important allies in Africa, Paris decided to provide overwhelming support to the Biya regime during Cameroon’s tumultuous transition.

Regarding bilateral assistance flows, the French reaction to instability in Cameroon during the early 1990s was dramatic, to say the least. The massive wave of economic assistance from France, as seen in Figure 2, overshadowed the relatively small trickle of funds coming from other donors like the United States or Germany. For much of the early 1990s, France’s aid distributions to
Cameroon represented the second most important destination for French aid worldwide, slightly behind that of the Côte d’Ivoire, another bastion of French influence. Paris was by far the number one donor to Biya’s Cameroon, granting US$2.4 billion in the 1990s, with over half of that being allocated in the critical period of 1992–1995, as other donors greatly reduced or suspended their aid.

This assistance dwarfed that of the next most important provider, the United States, by over five times. As seen in Figure 2, in an immediate reaction to the instability surrounding Biya’s reign, France more than doubled its annual aid, which increased from US$175 million in 1991 to over US$407 million in 1992. In the four years between 1992 and 1995, Paris disbursed US$1.4 billion, or about US$106 to each citizen of Cameroon (given an approximate population of 13.2 million people at the time). This aid was used by Yaoundé to pay back salaries to critical civil servants, the security services, etc., not to mention relieving the country’s growing debt burden. France and its assistance played a highly significant role in maintaining Biya in power. It served to undermine the efforts of other donors to encourage democratic political change through their rather poorly organized political conditionality approach. The critical element of coordination between donors in the application of aid sanctions was undoubtedly undermined by the realist behaviour of France, the ultimate donor-patron. As indicated, at the time, clearly ‘France holds the key to political developments in the country: if Paris closes the financial pipeline, few believe Biya’s government would survive.’

The current ruling clique in Cameroon has maintained its hold on power and resisted significant domestic and international pressure because of extensive French help.

France’s behaviour in Cameroon represents the death of what Mitterrand argued for at La Baule, where he underscored the policy of conditioning future aid on democratization of the recipient. The case of Cameroon demonstrates that...
French foreign policy circles were more interested in symbolic rather than substantial political change. When confronted with significant foreign policy choices, French leaders were much more willing to prop up their friends and allies than to defend the virtues of liberal democracy, an ideal that could potentially undermine certain fruitful relationships. As Schraeder points out, ‘as long as authoritarian leaders continued to underscore their commitment to close ties with France, they were unlikely to find themselves under heavy pressure from Paris to democratize’. More specifically concerning Cameroon, Dicklitch hits the nail on the head by arguing that ‘[t]he French have been willing to support the Biya regime in order to maintain political and economic stability as well as continued French influence and access to Cameroonian natural resources’.48

Cameroon’s President Paul Biya, a reluctant reformer to say the least, certainly more than benefited from France’s help, and clearly maintained power because of it. Even significant human rights abuses and blatant electoral fraud could not deter the African regime’s backers in Paris. As the well-respected bi-monthly publication, *Africa Confidential* indicates ‘[r]egardless of Biya’s behavior there appears to be no diminution in French support’. More importantly, ‘when Cameroon’s economy was nearly crippled and the regime seriously threatened, it was France that moved quickly to provide financial support for the regime, thus preventing it from collapsing’. Mitterrand acted as kingmaker in Cameroon during the chaos of the early 1990s. He preferred to maintain his personal friend, Paul Biya, in power instead of the uncertainties of multiparty democracy and the potential victory of what Paris perceived as unfriendly, nonfrancophone, forces. To illustrate this point, while the international community was calling the 1992 presidential election a farce, the Elysée Palace sent a letter to Paul Biya congratulating his victory. 51 This study has shown that when the donor-patron is dominated by self-interest, the efforts of other donors to act together in deploying a political conditionality approach will always be undermined.

**Conclusion**

A consistent strand of reasoning exists in the conditionality literature. It claims that donors frequently find it in their self-interest, put in both economic and diplomatic terms, to not impose, or even to undermine, the conditionalities put in place by others. This study agrees that when donors allow ‘neorealist criteria to dominate aid allocation decisions, the chance that aid will induce positive...outcomes diminishes’ but goes further by providing clear empirical evidence and analysis to further articulate this hypothesis. From the research provided here, it appears that the crucial element of donor coordination, vital to the success of a political conditionality approach, is repeatedly undermined by the self-interest of key donors. As illustrated by the case of France and Cameroon, the donor-patron frequently refuses to exercise its leverage and force the aid recipient to undergo political change out of its own realist concerns. It appears that France is satisfied with the status quo in Cameroon and by implication in Africa more generally. Change,
as we have seen, appears in some cases to be counterproductive to the perceived interests of France, which invests heavily in diplomatic, economic, and military terms, in relation to with close aid recipients, such as Cameroon.

In sum, donor self-interest is a critical constraint on the application of conditionality, undermining the close cooperation necessary for the successful application of related aid sanctions. This pattern is highly significant in the overall failure of political conditionality and should not be discounted in future efforts by donors to leverage political reforms with foreign assistance. The donor-patron is vital in the success or failure of aid sanctions. If they opt not to go along with the international donor community and support conditionality, such an approach will almost certainly fail.

Notes
10. World Bank, *World Development Indicators*.
Notes on contributor

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