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CIVIC CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN GHANA: IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

BY

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DECLARATION

Student's Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original research and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or elsewhere. All sources of materials used for this thesis have been duly acknowledged.

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Supervisor's Declaration

I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this thesis was supervised in accordance with the guidelines on supervision of thesis laid down by the University for Development Studies.

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ABSTRACT

Ghana's three decades of competitive democracy present a paradox where high political participation coexists with persistent developmental failures. More than half the population remains in or near poverty despite peaceful electoral transitions. This study investigated the relationship between political communication practices and citizens' civic cultural competence in Ghana. Using Tamale Metropolitan Area as the primary data collection site, the research examined why democratic participation fails to generate accountability in human development outcomes. These outcomes include infrastructure provision, service delivery, poverty reduction, and equitable resource distribution.

The research employed an integrated conceptual framework combining Political Communication Culture Theory, civic cultural competence dimensions (knowledge, awareness, understanding, and resistance), and Sen's human development approach. Qualitative methods included 4 focus group discussions (6-8 participants each), 16 in-depth interviews with citizens (45-60 minutes), and 10 key informant interviews with media personnel and political actors (60-90 minutes).

The findings reveal a sophistication-constraint paradox. Political elites employ sophisticated communication tactics—emotional appeals, symbolic gestures, recycled promises, and strategic ambiguity—to mobilize votes without delivering tangible development. Hierarchical digital networks and partisan media amplify these tactics. Citizens demonstrate remarkably high civic cultural competence across knowledge, awareness, and understanding dimensions. They accurately identify manipulation patterns and comprehend underlying political motives. However, structural barriers prevent citizens from translating sophisticated individual message-decoding capacity into collective resistance and counter-messaging. These barriers include fragmented organizing infrastructure, partisan divisions, meeting access constraints, patronage targeting potential organizers, and captured media.

The study makes three interconnected contributions. Theoretically, it develops the civic cultural competence framework and introduces the K-A-U-R (Knowledge-Awareness-Understanding-Resistance) analytical model for assessing democratic citizenship. Empirically, it provides first systematic evidence of the sophistication-constraint paradox in Ghanaian democracy, demonstrating that institutional barriers—not citizen ignorance—cause the democracy-development disconnect. Practically, it recommends structural reforms including campaign finance regulation, cross-partisan coalition-building, independent media support, and alternative communication platforms that enable sustained citizen counter-messaging to impose accountability costs on political elites.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Afiluwa, who never went to school but still supports me through yet another degree she doesn't quite understand—your faith in me transcends classrooms.

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ANC	-	African National Congress
CSO	-	Civil Society Organization
DCE	-	District Chief Executive
FGD	-	Focus Group Discussion
FM	-	Frequency Modulation
GDP	-	Gross Domestic Product
GoG	-	Government of Ghana
HDI	-	Human Development Index
ICT	-	Information and Communication Technology
KAUR	-	Knowledge, Awareness, Understanding, and Resistance
MDA	-	Ministry, Department and Agency
MP	-	Member of Parliament
NDC	-	National Democratic Congress
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organization
NPP	-	New Patriotic Party
SHS	-	Senior High School
TV	-	Television
UDS	-	University for Development Studies
UNDP	-	United Nations Development Programme

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter lays out the background of the study by introducing the research problem, questions, objective and relevance of the study. The chapter consists of seven sections that give a detailed introduction to the study.

Section 1.2 gives the background of the study that explores the thirty years of democratic experience of Ghana and the paradox of high political participation with low development accountability. The section provides the contextual foundation of the operation of political communication in Ghana especially with regard to the ability of the citizenry to decode elite messages and to demand human development outcomes. Section 1.3 presents the problem statement which suggests that there is a gap between the level of sophistication of the processes of elite communication and citizen interpretive capacity as a critical but understudied issue contributing to the poor performance of the Ghanaian democracy. Section 1.4 and 1.5 introduces the research questions and objectives respectively. The relevance of the study is reflected in section 1.6, where the theoretical, empirical, methodological, and practical significance of the work are discussed in terms of its implications on the perceived concepts of democratic accountability in Africa. Lastly, Section 1.7 presents the structure of the thesis. Together, the chapter introduce the reader to the main issues in the study.

1.2 Background of the Study

One of the most puzzling issues with Ghanaian democracy has been the consistent political backing of the poorest citizens in Ghana to the two main political parties: the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC). Even in the face of decades of empty promises and little significant human development, voter participation among the underprivileged classes, whose lives

have continued to be the most impacted by unemployment, poor infrastructure, and poverty, is astoundingly high (Bokor, 2014; Ayelazuno, 2019a; Bukari et al., 2022). This raises a fundamental question: why do citizens continue to believe that politicians will deliver what they promise? This problem is even more acute when exploring the culture of political communications in Ghana where the election periods are marked with spectacular promises, emotional appeals and symbolical gestures instead of policy discussions. Ayelazuno (2019a), Amadu et al. (2023), and Glate et al. (2024) identify a political context in which a performative messaging has become a new level of understanding, which is fueled by partisan media and embedded in cultural and local community standards. Even though Ghana has been praised to have peaceful post-election transitions since 1992 (Bokor, 2014; Bukari et al., 2022), the crisis is not in the electoral stability but in the culture of communication that facilitated political legitimacy without development accountability.

This is a paradox that is not peculiar to Ghana. Throughout the Global South, people still have hope in politicians who never keep their promises. For instance, Anti-corruption and development promises are recycled in Nigeria with the mass appeal and little delivery (Oyeniyi, 2020). Kenya shows that symbolic appeals, tribal loyalty, populist rhetoric, is more important than the record of policy in shaping voter support (Cheeseman et al., 2021). South Africans keep backing the ANC despite scandals and declining service delivery (Dawson and Sinwell, 2012) and the Philippines and Brazil have been characterized by populism and celebrity culture and strongman discourses that outweigh evidence-based discourse (Moffitt, 2016). Ghana is an interesting case of these paradox because there is relative political stability, multi-party democracy, and the intensity of emotional political loyalty among the poor (Ayelazuno, 2019a; Bukari et al., 2022; Sikanku, 2022). Ghana is, therefore, a strategic example on which to explore how communication practices can perpetuate political loyalty despite systemic developmental failure.

To figure out this puzzle, it is important to study the way in which political elites design their communication. Ghanaian politics appeal to the emotional and emotionally resonating messages that focus on the life of citizens and their aspirations instead of policy depth and logicality (Sikanku, 2022; Ayelazuno, 2019). Slogans like "we shall build factories in every district" or "one constituency, one million dollars" generate hope despite previous disappointments. Ayelazuno (2019) reports the experiences of community members in the Upper East Region who fondly remembered that Rawlings introduced electricity, and the people had hopes that one day politicians would not forget them- despite years of unkept promises on roads and dams. This kind of optimism does not take the form of tangible planning but rather symbolic and emotionally attractive messages. Sikanku (2022) shows that nationalism appeals, rebirth metaphors, and moral construction that appeal to collective feelings have been used to construct political speeches. According to Glate et al. (2024), emotionally appealing campaign messages have a psychological effect on voter socialization and behavior (beta = 0.46, p = 0.001). According to Coker and Afriyie (2018), this logic of political communication has been described as post-truth, in which emotional appeal outweighs the factual test. These processes are supported by the media environment, as Amadu et al. (2023) discovered that in the 2020 elections, 70 percent of political coverage violated the key principles of journalism, and nearly 40 percent did not pass the simplest fact-checking rules. Political messages are therefore an exercise of comfort, and their adherence to faith is maintained by the performance of affection and not showing outcomes (McNair, 2011).

This communication culture creates a striking paradox: continued loyalty despite governmental failure. Ayelazuno (2019) documents this contradiction ethnographically across five regions, where focus group participants expressed raw contempt for the political class, one stating "If I shit, my faeces are better than the Ghanaian government", yet promised never to miss elections, some traveling long distances at personal expense to vote. This loyalty reflects not naivety but belief that the ballot box offers the only mechanism to "punish or reward" government based on perceived attentiveness,

however symbolic (Ayelazuno, 2019). According to Van Gyampo, Lodge, and Appah (2018), the voting patterns that occur in an ethnic context are subsiding, but the loyalty has taken a new form whereby party affiliation, historical symbolism, and the perception that a given party cares about the poor are the factors that define the loyalty. This perception is perpetuated by the NPP and NDC in their communication that focuses on emotionally captivating identities in the form of prospects of development and cultural pride. Political loyalty remains in spite of disillusionment since voters recognize themselves as emotive subject of systems that provide symbolic redemption in the face of no tangible gains.

The persistence of this loyalty becomes more puzzling against Ghana's stark development challenges. Despite political showmanship, fundamental state services remain inadequate for the majority. According to Ayelazuno (2019), voters always use infrastructure and services which include roads, schools, hospitals, and electricity, potable water, as the litmus test of good government, but hope that they will do better in future, despite the evidence to the contrary. The 2020 UNDP report indicates that 30.1% of Ghanaians live in multidimensional poverty with 22% being at risk of poverty, almost half of the population is living in or close to poverty despite 30 years of multiparty democracy (UNDP, 2020). Human Development Index in Ghana is 0.611, which is also the 138th in the world, but when inequality is factored in, it reduces by 28 percent. All these imply that political communication has already managed to attract people without providing any significant development (Rubio, 2018; Ofori, 2018). The politics of Ghana is becoming more of spectacle than substance, superseding serious debates about structural change.

At the heart of this paradox lies a fundamental mismatch between elite communication sophistication and citizen interpretive capacity. Politicians are specialists in persuasive communication knowing when to offer promises, how to stand, what symbols to use to excite loyalty and suppress doubts. Yet, citizens show different degrees of civic cultural competence: the ability to identify systematic patterns

of elite political rhetoric, deconstruct strategic manipulation in real-time, see through the background political motives, and convert that insight into demands of human development accountability. This concept, adapted from cultural competence frameworks in healthcare and education (Flaskerud, 2007), addresses the specific challenge of navigating intentional political manipulation within institutionally constrained environments. Civic cultural competence, unlike the old concept of political knowledge or civic education, involves both interpretative and structural ability to follow through on that interpretation. Gadjanova et al. (2022) show that rural women and financially disadvantaged Ghanaians, who represent a majority of the electorate, are often unable to access essential information networks and have a lower probability of questioning political statements delivered via traditional or interpersonal press. Animal et al. (2022) unveil how globalization of media has changed communication trend in Northern Ghana and led to exposure to various content without necessarily fostering interpretive ability. In the meantime, the political rhetoric has become filthy: Ofori (2018) records that the politics of insult and personalization have become the order of the day, replacing policy criticism with emotional performance. In such cases, democracy is under threat of being performative given the fact that it is motivated by the graciousness of heart and not an informed consent (Rubio, 2018).

This study questions the culture of political communication in Ghana that perpetuates the belief in elite messaging even when it consistently yields no results as well as how the degree of civic cultural competence or incompetence in citizens determines their ability to engage in democratic processes critically and in a developmental manner. It discusses a timeless riddle of why subaltern classes keep believing and sticking to political elites in the face of empty promises, high levels of corruption and material successes. The key to this puzzle lies in how politicians speak, their use of strategic communication, their use of symbols, their emotional appeal, and their calculated ambiguity that make Ghanaian electoral cycles a puzzle and in the ability of citizens to recognize that culture and critically respond to its presentation. This study claims that the politics of communication in Ghana exists with

the culture of strategic performance that most citizens are not competent enough to decipher. This civic cultural incompetence which is the inability to read, interpret, and resist elite communication behavior makes the citizen vulnerable to manipulation and false promise leading to high levels of democracy participation and low levels of political accountability and low levels of developmental dividends. This study fills an important gap in the literature by examining the connection between the practices of political communication and the interpretive abilities of citizens in explaining how Ghana's thirty years of competitive democracy have not been translated into measurable developments in human lives.

1.3 Problem Statement

Ghana faces a fundamental democratic malfunction: three decades of competitive elections and strong political participation have failed to convert democratic engagement into tangible human development. More than half of the population is in or close to poverty (30.1 multidimensionally poor, 22 vulnerable), basic services are still unsatisfactory, and the Human Development Index in Ghana is ranked 138th in the world, declining by 28 percent after accounting inequality (UNDP, 2020). The problem is not about institutional design (elections work, power transfers are peaceful, parties engage in real competitions), but rather about the communication between political elites and citizen (Bokor, 2014; Bukari et al., 2022).

In order to build loyalty and support, political elites have created advanced communication tactics that use emotional appeals, symbolic imagery, religious appeals, and strategically placed promises to create an appeal (Sikanku, 2022; Amadu et al., 2023). A range of slogans such as Free SHS, One District One Factory, and Ghana Beyond Aid are promoted in the radio, TV, social and churches, and mosques, creating what Coker and Afriyie (2018) describe as post-truth politics in which emotional appeal overrules factual responsibility. Such strategic communication creates what Anaman and Bukari (2021) describe as the so-called voter mobilization capital a communicative force that helps the elites to persuade citizens with the help of affect and symbolism instead of showing tangible human

development outcomes. Political support is therefore based on performance and not policy results and messaging serve to act as ritual reassurance of sustaining belief in the face of systematic developmental failures (Ayelazuno, 2019a).

Meanwhile, citizens, especially those in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, where the majority of the electorate lives, are shown to have low ability to decode and resist these complex tactics. Most people are not able to distinguish between genuine commitments and empty gestures, or between credibility as displayed and as achieved (Flaskerud, 2007; McNair, 2011). Access to diverse information sources remains constrained, and partisan media amplify rather than challenge political messaging (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Amadu et al., 2023). This creates a widening gap: the elite communicative sophistication is growing, and citizen interpretive capacity is not (especially what will lead to resistance). The resultant effect is the democracy becomes theater: high turnout, emotional engagement, competitive elections, but low developmental payoffs (Rubio, 2018; Ofori, 2018). Citizens participate intensely, some traveling long distances and waiting hours to vote (Ayelazuno, 2019; Bokor, 2014; Bukari et al., 2022), but their participation legitimates a system that prioritizes symbolic responsiveness over material accountability.

This is a major contradiction to the democratic theory which assumes that people who are well informed can hold leaders accountable in order to make their life better. Yet, scanty literature has not addressed adequately how this contradiction works. Although previous research examines electoral behavior, patronage networks, and campaign messaging (Fridy, 2007; Lindberg, 2003; Glate et al., 2024), little has been done to examine how citizens make meaning out of political communication and how the process of making meaning influences subsequent developmental expectations and outcomes. Few studies in the Ghanaian political communication literature have explored the role played by civic cultural competence which is the ability of the citizens to identify systematic patterns in the rhetoric by the elite, decode strategic manipulation, comprehend motives behind the message, and convert such

cognition into accountability imperatives. This is a critical gap since the interaction of the elite communication practices with the citizen interpretive capacities would be critical to the explanation of the lack of developmental accountability by the democratic participation. This study fills this gap by exploring the relationship between civic cultural competence and political communication practices and how the two interact in producing high or low quality of democratic participation and tangible outcomes of development to Ghana in the changing democratic environment such as infrastructure provision (roads, electricity, and water systems), service delivery (healthcare and education), reduction of poverty, and equal distribution of resources.

1.4 Research Questions

General question

This thesis seeks to address the following general question: What is the relationship between the civic cultural competence of citizens and the communication of politicians in the promotion of human development outcomes?

Specific questions

Based on the general question, three specific questions are addressed by this thesis:

1. What is the mode, content, and intended effect of the communication of Ghanaian politicians?
2. What is the level of knowledge, awareness, understanding, and resistance (KAUR) of ordinary citizens of the political culture and communication practices of Ghanaian politicians?
3. What are the human development implications of the differential levels of ordinary citizens' KAUR of the political culture and communication practices of the politician?

1.5 Research Objectives

General Objective:

To investigate the relationship between the cultural competence of citizens and the communication practices of politicians in the promotion of human development outcomes in Ghana.

Specific Objectives:

1. To examine the mode, content, and intended effect of the communication of Ghanaian politicians.
2. To assess the level of knowledge, awareness, understanding, and resistance (KAUR) that ordinary citizens have of the political culture and communication practices of Ghanaian politicians.
3. To analyse the human development implications of differential levels of citizens' KAUR of political culture and political communication in Ghana

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study makes three interconnected contributions to scholarship and practice in political communication, democratic governance, and human development in African contexts.

Theoretically, the study develops a new conceptual framework of civic cultural competence that fills a gap in the critical aspects of the democratic theory. The incorporation of healthcare-centered cultural competence models and educational models with political communication scholarship and human development models in the, repositions citizen capacity not merely as political knowledge or civic attitudes but as interpretive capability operating within structurally constrained environments. The cultural competence framework includes four dimensions: knowledge, awareness, understanding and resistance. this offers the means of analysis on why sophisticated political consciousness do not work in creating development responsibility where the institutional mechanisms ensure individualized cognition does not translate into collective action. It fills the gap in theory of existing civic culture and political communication literatures on the dynamics of interactions between elite communicative sophistication and citizen interpretive capacity that generates democratic accountability or otherwise. The sophistication-constraint paradox the study identifies: high citizen awareness coexisting with low collective resistance, challenges conventional assumptions that political knowledge automatically

generates democratic engagement, revealing instead how participation can legitimate rather than transform existing power relations.

The study also provides systematic evidence empirically on the aspect of Ghanaian democracy, which has not been extensively studied. It is one of the first Ghanaian studies to examine directly how political communication is decoded by citizens and how the interpretative process influences expectations of infrastructure provision and service delivery, poverty reduction and distribution of resources equitably. The study focuses on the citizens experience as an active sense-makers, and not as a passive recipient of messages, to present evidence of the actual communicative practices where political elites constitute legitimacy and the differing abilities by which citizens negotiate in strategic manipulation. The case study on Tamale provides an understanding of how these processes work in situations that are described as economically marginalized, linguistically diverse, and where there is the overlap of traditional power and the formal democratic processes. Such empirical basis allows the study to go beyond outlining the developmental challenges of Ghana to understanding the communicative processes of how democratic participation is translated into developmental accountability.

To policy and practice, the study can be used to enhance democratic accountability in Ghana and other similar settings. The study can guide the implementation of interventions designed to increase the citizen capacity to decode the political manipulation and demand development accountability by determining the presence or absence of certain dimensions of civic cultural competence. By looking where, the translation between personal consciousness and collective resistance fails, more specific patterns of civic education, media literacy education, and institutional change would have an opportunity to empower the interpretive capacity of citizens to produce the real accountability pressures on the political elites. The study therefore does not only add to the scholarly knowledge but also the real work of restoring democracy as a human-development tool, as opposed to it being a ritual of Mass-controlled-belief.

1.7 Organization of the Study

The thesis is organised into five chapters. Chapter One serves as the introduction, covering the background of the research, a description of the problem, formulation of the research questions and objectives, and a discussion of the study's significance. Chapter Two is a literature review, in which the thesis surveys the relevant literature, focusing on the clarification of key concepts, discussion of major theories, and synthesis of existing and related empirical work. Chapter Three describes the research methodology, including the research philosophy, approach, study design, data sources, data collection procedures, analysis plan, and ethical considerations. Chapter Four presents results for each objective and discusses associated findings concerning political communication practices, cultural competence assessments and linkages to human development progress. Chapter Five is the conclusion, in which the significant findings are summarised, with remarks on the significant contributions the thesis makes intellectually to the field of Social Change Communication, as well as policy recommendations for the transformation of political communication to promote human development

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Introduction

This literature review explores the nexus between political communication, civic cultural competence and human development outcomes to shed light on why Ghanaian subaltern classes do not usually challenge elite manipulation of democratic discourse. Although the citizens actively participate in the political affairs by casting their votes and other electoral processes, subaltern participation often happens along parochial rationalities, such as ethnic, clan, or partisan affiliations, as opposed to cosmopolitan civic orientations that are oriented towards the interests of the classes, accountability, and human developments outcomes (like effective service delivery). Such disengagement of participation and accountability is partially due to the lack of civic cultural competence: the ability to decipher elite propaganda, knowledge of strategic manipulation, and mobilization of groups in action to demand accountable government.

Political communication constitutes, in Graber's (1993) formulation, the construction, sending, receiving, and processing of messages that significantly impact politics—what Karl Deutsch memorably termed "the nerves of government" because it functions as the essential activity linking various parts of society together. Such communication has normative consequences in the context of democratic societies: discourse ought to be clear, and honest to allow citizens to make informed conclusions about the state of governance. However, modern-day political communication is growing pathological in nature, with its systematic deception, emotional manipulation replacing policy content, and partisan media takeover, which destroys the accountability relationship between citizens and elites. Such political message has, long, been noted by the critical theorists to create the quiescence, and submissiveness among the mass publics, making elections seem more of a dramatized ritual that can legitimize the existing power structure, and not the genuine expression of the will of the people (Graber, 1993, p. 308).

Although political communication and civic culture literature look at elite tactics and the strategies of civic, less research links interpretive capabilities of citizens to the results of democratic development in post-colonial societies where regular lying is institutionalized. This review fills that gap by synthesising four thematic areas that are interconnected. Section 2.2 tracks the development of political communication and its connection to democratic accountability by exploring how every technological innovation, between the olden-day deliberation by mass media to modern digital applications, adds complexity to the skills needed by citizens to decode elite communications. Section 2.3 elaborates on the idea of civic cultural competence by modifying schemas of cultural competence in the healthcare and scholarly fields to political contexts where deliberate manipulation, competitive power dynamics, and demands of collective action characterize the interpretive problem of citizens. Subaltern agency under elite domination is theorized in section 2.4, in comparison to transformative resistance movements in other parts of the world and Ghanaian trends of electoral pliancy. Lastly, Section 2.5 explores the dual aspects of digitalization as both a means of grassroots mobilization and greater elite control before the chapter ends with an integrated framework connecting the quality of communication to the outcomes of human development.

2.2 Political Communication: Evolution, Democratic Functions, and Pathologies

Political communication, as a field of scholarly inquiry and a domain of practice, resists singular definition precisely because it encompasses the totality of communication processes through which power is contested, legitimized, and exercised in society. Graber (1993) gives some basic conceptualization political communication, saying it is communication with probable major political impact - what she describes, quoting Karl Deutsch, as the “nerves of government” that connect the parts of society into an integrated whole. This understanding has emphasized the consequential nature of political messaging: communication becomes political not just through subject matter but through capacity to influence collective decisions on power and resource allocation (Reinemann, 2014; Arackal, 2020). The interdisciplinary nature of the field reflects the complexity of political

communication that draws from rhetorical, political science, sociological, and media studies to investigate the ways people create and challenge political reality (Reinemann, 2014; Ryfe, 2001). Aristotle's classic forms of persuasion - ethos (character), pathos (emotion), and logos (evidence) - set up structures that still organize current practice, though technological shifts and strategic professionalization have radically altered how they are deployed (Roe-Crines, 2025). What we get out of these definitional efforts is a recognition that political communication is fundamentally about the exercise of power: not about neutral exchanges of information but strategic forms of communication aimed at influencing beliefs and behaviours in contexts where there are deep inequalities of communication resources, access, and interpretive capacity (McNair, 2011; Blumler, 2015; Pfetsch & Esser, 2012).

Each major revolution in communications technology has redefined both the conduct of political communications and the skills citizens need to deal effectively with it. Cammack (2020) re-examines conventional understandings of ancient Athenian democracy by showing that the mass of citizens exercised political agency not through public speaking, on which elite orators had monopoly, but through internal deliberation that resulted in collective decisions by vote. This early configuration set a very important precedent: civic competence as interpretive capacity, the capacity to critique competing elite arguments and make judgment rather than to speak publicly oneself. The advent of mass media fundamentally changed these dynamics by allowing messages to reach unprecedented numbers of people while consolidating communicative power at the same time. Tasențe (2020) describes this process in a series of different stages: the golden age of stable partisan loyalties; the depoliticization of the television age with personality-focused coverage; the professionalization stage in which commercial marketing techniques were adopted; and the current digital age which allows for unprecedented levels of interactions. Gurevitch and colleagues (2009) identify television's paradoxical contribution - bringing political communication into everyday life, and replacing attention to substantive policy with attention to image and spectacle. The digital transformation poses even sharper

paradoxes: Networked communication promotes horizontal communication and citizen voice, but also information overload and a lack of credibility and sophisticated manipulation exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities (Blumler, 2015; Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Epstein, 2018). Contemporary citizens are confronted with what Cano-Orono et al (2024) define as an increasingly fragmented, polarized public sphere in which actors employ communication strategies specifically geared towards exploitation, not the affirmation of democratic judgment.

In democratic systems, political communication implies normative expectations far beyond the functions of conveying information to include vital functions of governance. Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) express it fully: surveillance of the political environment, meaningful agenda-setting identifying key issues, provision of platforms for diverse advocacy, facilitation of dialogue across difference, mechanisms holding officials accountable, and incentives encouraging citizen learning and involvement. Particularly significant is the power of media to structure political reality by determining what issues are given attention and how they are framed - what McNair (2011) describes as the ordering and structuring of politics to structure what citizens see as important. Graber (1993) highlights the dramatic influence of agenda-setting, priming, and framing on citizen priorities and interpretation: when media highlight specific issues, it essentially alters the objects of audience concern, while previous knowledge influences how later messages will be interpreted. The normative ideal underlying such functions is simple: democracy depends on citizens being able to access accurate and understandable information to choose between government performance and make informed electoral decisions (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2022). When communication systems perform these functions well, they provide the conditions for the building of accountability relationships between citizens and elites that translate popular preferences into responsive policy. When they fail - or worse, when they become the target of interests antagonistic to democratic accountability - the implications are not limited to the political dysfunction they can have on development outcomes and human welfare.

Contemporary political communication has grown more and more pathological to the point that it detracts from democratic accountability rather than enhancing it. Propaganda (the deliberate, systematic attempt to influence how people interpret information and to manipulate their behaviour in ways that serve the interests of the propagandist) is the most fundamental violation of democratic norms (Abdullah et al., 2025; Ahmed, 2025). Kohring and Zimmermann's (2020) analytical precision is provided by their concept of disinformation: The knowing communication of empirically false information in the form of truth which, unlike honest mistakes, is intentional and, unlike isolated lies, systematic. Zimmermann and Kohring (2020) go further to find in this analysis the notion of a comprehensive disinformation order-not just isolated cases of false claims but continuous systematic disruption in democratic public spheres intended to destabilize institutions and processes. Post-truth politics is an especially corrosive version. Coker and Afriyie (2018) call this political culture where discourse is 'elusive in emotional appeals made systematically disconnected from policy details, where repetitive assertions displace factual rebuttal and manufactured evidence inflames audience feelings rather than inform judgment.' Trotter and Maconachie (2018) invoke Frankfurt's concept of the political bullshitter who cares not whether claims are true but only whether they persuade listeners. The multiplication of such practices undermines what Cano-Orón et al. (2024) describe as the epistemic underpinnings of democratic citizenship: when citizens are no longer able to distinguish truth and falsehood, or when they start to expect deception as a routine feature of political life, the very notion of accountability through informed choice is abandoned.

These pathologies are exacerbated by structural conditions that weaken the independence of the media and facilitate the manipulation of the media system. Media capture - the subordination of journalistic institutions to political or commercial interests - turns outlets that should be a watchdog for democracy into outlets of elite control (Yıldirim et al., 2020; Restendy et al., 2025). Ahmed (2025) describes this as Devils Journalism: deliberately orchestrated, ethically bankrupt, media practice involving weaponization of information, to shape discourse and attack adversaries rather than inform democratic

publics. The Ghanaian media landscape has these dynamics in their extreme forms. Danso 2025 notes that almost sixty percent of media professionals accept that the government uses media to control public narratives and almost half of them say that the political affiliations of media owners greatly influence editorial decisions. Both major political parties have affiliated media houses that are used to propagate favorable coverage and attack the opponents, thus making the information environment inundated with partisan information instead of independent journalism (Kwode & Selekane, 2023). Coker and Afriyie (2018) identify specific post-truth strategies in Ghanaian political communication - strategic timing, misinformation, and outright lies, which are made possible by partisan newspapers which focus on emotional appeals rather than factual verification. Compounding these structural problems is the wilful exploitation of emotion as an alternative to substantive engagement. Cano-OrON et al. (2024) document the use of fear, anger, and resentment by political actors to mobilize support and accentuate social divisions through the use of us-versus-them framing. McNair (2011) attributes this to professional campaign logic that arises and exploits audience anxieties as opposed to rational evaluation of policy. Critical scholars have long been warning that such communications patterns induce political quiescence and make elections into ritualistic exercises in legitimation rather than real mechanisms for democratic accountability (Graber, 1993).

The stakes of quality of political communication go beyond the political process, and include human development outcomes. Sen (1999) expresses the fundamental insight that development must be understood as increasing substantive freedoms and capabilities as opposed to economic growth as such, where political freedoms have both intrinsic and instrumental value as elements of human flourishing and as enablers for responding policies. Citizens need to act as agents who actively develop their collective future rather than passive recipients of elite decisions - an ability that is fundamentally dependent on access to accurate information and meaningful participation in the governance process (Sen, 1999; Fukuda-Parr & Cid-Martinez, 2019). Social movements and collective action have, historically, led to significant policy advances precisely because organised citizens were able to

translate collective understanding into effective pressure on those with power (Fukuda-Parr & Cid-Martinez, 2019). Yet this translation requires citizens to have both the interpretive capacity to decode elite messaging and the collective capacity to take action based on their understanding. Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) identified the structural vulnerability: of politicians, journalists, and audience members that make up political communication systems, audiences are least powerful since they are least organized; they are susceptible to oversimplification and dismissal by authoritative communicators. When communication systems are held by others, when disinformation runs riot, and when emotional manipulation replaces substantive engagement, citizens, especially those with fewer resources, are structurally disadvantaged in struggles for accountability (Norris, 2000).

2.2.1 Culture as Analytical Foundation

Before analyzing the practices of political communication and the frameworks of civic competence, it is necessary to define what culture means in this study and why cultural analysis offers indispensable tools to understand the democracy-development disconnect. Following Geertz (1973), culture consists of "webs of meaning" by which people interpret their experiences and by which they organize their actions. Culture is not simply customs or traditions but sets of symbolic systems, such as languages, stories, rituals, values, and so on that serve to offer interpretive frames for making sense of social reality. In the field of politics, culture influences the way citizens make sense of messages, assess promises, comprehend relations of power, and interact with democratic processes.

This basic understanding of culture as meaning-making systems has three important implications for understanding political communication and democratic accountability. First, political messages do not possess inherent, universal meanings; rather their meaning is generated through the culturally-situated interpretation. What counts as a "credible promise" and "empty rhetoric" or what is "legitimate patronage" and "corruption" is a matter of cultural frameworks of meaning, not merely of objective message characteristics. Second, elite political communication works not by conveying information

but by manipulating symbols of a culture, stories, and emotional resonances in such a way as to shape how citizens perceive political reality. Third, citizen capacity to hold elites accountable requires not only factual knowledge, but cultural competence - the ability to navigate, decode and possibly resist the cultural systems through which political communication operates.

This cultural foundation informs three derivative concepts that are central to this study. Cultural competence denotes the general ability to function effectively in the context of cultural difference, as a framework that has mainly been developed in healthcare and education in relation to the challenge of how practitioners address the relation of cultural systems (Flaskerud, 2007; Beach et al., 2005). Civic cultural competence adapts this framework to the political arena, conceptualizing the ability of citizens to detect systematic patterns in the communication of elite political agenda, decode the manipulation going on in real time, grasp underlying motives, and translate understanding into citizens' action - all within particular institutional configurations that facilitate or inhibit this translation. Subaltern class culture refers to distinctive meaning-making systems developed by marginalized groups to deal with domination, including the "hidden transcripts" of resistance (Scott, 1990), the parochial rationalities that combine modern and traditional frameworks (Lentz, 2013) and the collective identities that make or prevent cross-group solidarity (Boone, 2014).

These culturally-grounded concepts offer analytical leverage for analysing the reasons that Ghana's participation in democracy has not produced anticipated outcomes in terms of development. Rather than taking for granted that citizens are ignorant or that elites simply deceive ignorant populations the cultural lens offers a glimpse of more complex information relations: sophisticated elite manipulation of cultural symbols and narratives, differentiated citizen capacities to decode such manipulation depending upon their civic cultural competence, and institutional structures that prevent culturally-competent citizens from translating their sophisticated understanding into collective resistance. The sections that follow elaborate these dynamics in terms of detailed examination of: the political

communication cultures, the dimensions of civic cultural competence, and the constraints of subaltern agency.

2.3 Civic Cultural Competence: Knowledge, Agency, and Structural Constraints

The pathologies of political communications reviewed above require interpretive capacity from citizens, which raises a question about their capacity to decode elite messaging and translate understanding into accountability. Almond and Verba's (1963) framework of civic culture established that democracy depends on citizen-friendly dispositions of awareness, trust, efficacy supported by Putnam's emphasis on associational networks and reciprocity norms facilitating collective action (Paxton, 2002; Fukuyama, 2002). Yet applications to post-colonial contexts have limitations. Dalton and Shin (2011) go on to show that a parochial orientation of citizens of "developing" nations was taken for granted in the early civic culture studies and that contemporary evidence refutes it: political interest is not limited to economic development. The civic culture model's stress on allegiant citizenship falls short where governments engage in systematic rule-based deception and trust may facilitate rather than limit manipulation (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020). Moreover, the preoccupation of civic culture with general orientations does not get to specifics of interpretive demands in navigating intentional propaganda and in orchestrated misinformation and complex emotional manipulation in relation to cognitive vulnerabilities (Cano-Orón et al., 2024; Solomon et al., 2025).

Cultural competence frameworks from healthcare and education provide conceptual resources. In Flasherud's (2007) view, cultural competence is defined as the capacity to function effectively within the context of cultural difference and involves cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity and working with communities. Beach and colleagues (2005) pay particular attention to building effective relationships across cultural differences by understanding the impact of social factors on behavior. Critically, the factor analysis of Suarez-Balcazar and colleagues (2011) shows organizational support as key to turning individual awareness into practice because institutional contexts facilitate or hinder

dynamic capabilities for practitioners to put knowledge into practice. Adapting this to political communication requires acknowledging differences from healthcare while retaining insights about interpretive capacity functioning in systems of power (Romerheim, 2005). Healthcare addresses situations where providers seek to help patients; political communication involves intentional elite manipulation advancing partisan interests (Dai & Luqiu, 2020; Köstler & Ossewaarde, 2022). Medical encounters are about interactions among individuals; political communication requires collective response, such that individual skepticism is inadequate for accountability (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Druckman, 2004; Druckman et al., 2016).

Civic cultural competence consists of the capacity of citizens to identify systematic patterns in the political communication of elites, to decode the real-time manipulation, to understand the underlying motivations, and to translate understanding into collective action for democratic accountability - all in the context of institutional configurations that affect whether translation is possible or not. This includes four dimensions (Knowledge, Awareness, Understanding, and Resistance) that are interrelated and each one is necessary, but not sufficient on its own. Knowledge is factual understanding of political communication as systematic practice-knowledge of recurring patterns such as strategic promise-making disconnected from implementation, role confusion for accountability, and coordinated emotional escalation as a substitute for policy evaluation (Gadjanova, 2017). Köstler and Ossewaarde (2022) identify elites based on "the past as a mirror" to naturalize power relations. Awareness is the extension of knowledge to real-time identification of manipulation: recognizing when emotional appeals are used in place of substance, identifying coordinated messaging signaling orchestrated opinion formation (Cano-Orlon et al, 2024). Druckman (2004) calls this perceiving when one is being framed. Dai and Luqiu's (2020) research show the difficulty even educated citizens with media savviness struggle to distinguish between camouflaged propaganda and journalism, with education having no significant detection effect. Understanding deepens the awareness of the reason for manipulation: strategic deception is for the elite interest in access to the state resources, for patron-

client networks, for avoiding development accountability (Ayelazuno, 2019a, 2019b). This encompasses what Lears (1985) describes as piercing "contradictory consciousness" - this complex mental state mixing approbation and apathy that characterizes hegemonic domination. Ghanaian citizens know that vote-buying is politicians trying to get their money back with corruption, but vote-selling is them rational adaptation - getting "their share" before the elites grab the resources (Gyasi & Torsu, 2024; Agyepong et al., 2021; Takyi & Kyere, 2025).

The resistance capabilities dimension separates civic cultural competence from individual-level concepts of civic culture. Ekman and Amnå (2012) offer foundation in terms of the distinction between latent and manifest political participation: citizens may be highly engaged in civic participation - "monitorial citizenship" - but without institutional means to turn "pre-political" participation into manifest action on the decisions of the government. Their question strikes a note with the Ghanaian experience: Is it possible that we find a vivid civic engagement, but a decline in manifest participation? Research seems to point exactly to such a pattern - the sophistication-constraint paradox (Ayelazuno, 2019b; MacLean, 2014). Resistance capabilities demand capacity to organize collective responses that transcend individual skepticism and access institutional frameworks to enable the translation of understanding into effective accountability demands (Paxton, 2002; Fukuyama, 2002). Papa and Milioni (2013) differentiate "active citizenship," which is routinized activity within established processes, from "activist citizenship" that is an activity breaking with the routine and claiming rights outside the established frameworks. Kaim (2021) finds "alternative participation" to be action between conventional and unconventional categories, including information activism and connective action outside of traditional channels of action. When formal institutions are failing to process engagement into accountability, alternative manifest participation must take place - yet this requires individual capacity and structural enablement (Johann et al., 2020; Dambo et al., 2020).

What then is the difference between civic cultural competence and civic culture? Civic culture focuses on general orientations - trust, efficacy, propensity for participation; civic cultural competence treats with precision interpretive skills for the decoding of strategic communication (Magill et al., 2024). Where civic culture is indifferent to democracy, civic cultural competence is overtly hostile to the possibility of systematic elite manipulation as central challenge. Civic culture refers to relatively static orientations; civic cultural competence refers to dynamic skill development through deception experience: what Druckman and colleagues (2016) identify as motivated reasoning developing in terms of partisan framing experience, where citizens with political knowledge are more vulnerable to bias because they have more ammunition with which to counter the opposing side. Most critically, civic culture deals primarily with individual attitudes; civic cultural competence is an inquiry into the interaction of individual capabilities with institutional structures that make possible or impossible the translation of understanding into collective action (Kuklinski et al., 2001; Setiawan et al., 2025). Normative concerns are fundamentally different; civic culture asks if citizens have stability-supporting attitudes; civic cultural competence asks if citizens can decode consent-manufacturing communication practices and if institutional structures allow understanding to create development accountability (Appiah-Thompson, 2017; Nnindini et al., 2025). This is particularly urgent in post-colonial contexts where colonial legacies continue to shape patterns of communication, where linguistic diversity leads to asymmetries in information and where traditional authority interacts in complex ways with formal democratic institutions (MacLean, 2014; Danso-Wiredu & Brako, 2021).

The sophistication-constraint paradox can be seen clearly in empirical evidence from Ghana. Ayelazuno's (2019a, 2019b) work records the contempt of subalterns towards elites in Ghana, who are aware of manipulation and broken promises but are able to keep electoral excitement going through "party-tribal" divisions instead of class organizing. Citizens know politicians fabricate evidence to stir up emotions, partisan newspapers appeal to feelings more than fact-checking (Coker & Afriyie, 2018), and promises fall flat from capacity - yet understanding is not producing any collective resistance like

what's been seen in Bolivia, Kenya, or Senegal (Ayelazuno, 2019a). Gadjanova and colleagues' (2017) research shows the understanding of citizens about "information hierarchies" and the recognition of manipulation through ethnic wedge issues. Vote-selling is an illustration of paradox complexity: citizens express clear understanding that accepting handouts is rational response to elite failure (Gyasi & Torsu, 2024). As one respondent stated, "What can my individual opinion do?" - recognizing voting as symbolic opportunities, but ballot boxes are not enough for substantive policy responsiveness (MacLean, 2014; Ayelazuno, 2019a). Taden and colleagues' analysis of swing voting does find some nuance: performance motivated voters are 48.4% more likely to swing - suggesting that some citizens are increasingly considering policy delivery. Yet even emerging performance-based voting occurs within structures in which accountability translation is prevented due to systematic corruption: Vote-sellers cannot hold purchased politicians accountable, politicians direct resources to recovering campaign costs, partisan media capture prevents hold-up verification (Gyasi & Torsu, 2024; Danso, 2025; Kwode & Selekane, 2023).

This pattern reflects what Kuklinski and colleagues (2001) identify as political environment's profound influence on competence: when information environments have little diagnostic value, even motivated, educated citizens have a hard time making coherent judgments. The implication: responsibility for competence lies significantly in the hands of elites who shape information environments, which is very similar to Key's argument about the voice of citizenry as an echo - response quality as an environment provision. This sheds new light on the need for civic cultural competence to also include structural dimensions in addition to individual capabilities. The finding by Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2011) that organizational support is a distinctive competence factor that applies with power: Institutional frameworks make it possible or not to the citizen to translate the understanding into action. When media systems find themselves captured (with sixty percent of Ghanaian media professionals admitting to government narrative control), when formal accountability mechanisms (beyond elections) are still absent, when civic spaces seem limited through persistent "culture of silence" despite democratization

(MacLean, 2014), when economic precarity prioritizes survival over organizing, even the most sophisticated citizens find their ability to resist severely limited (Danso, 2025; Danso-Wiredu, & Brako, 2021). The problem is not individual ignorance but structural constraints that could prevent knowledge translation into collective action that creates development accountability - what Fukuda-Parr emphasises as the essential role of collective action as development "motor." The structural dimension acquires urgency in light of the fact that requirements of competences grow with each technological transformation. Setiawan and colleagues' (2025) research shows patterns likely to apply to similar situations: whereas 76% of citizens experience political content online, only 34% say they are confident at distinguishing information from manipulation. The "knowledge democracy deficit"-that is, formal participation without substantive information engagement-threatens disconnecting voting from informed policy preferences at a time when digital platforms make it possible to manipulate the elite through algorithmic echo chambers, micro-targeting exploiting vulnerabilities, deepfakes generating emotional responses irrespective of their veracity, and computational propaganda deploying coordinated inauthentic behavior at scale (Solomon et al., 2025; Cano-Orón et al., 2024). Civic cultural competence thus becomes both a question of individual analytical ability and a question of structural necessity: citizens certainly need to perfect their knowledge of communication patterns, awareness of real-time manipulation, and understanding of the logics behind these communication patterns, but these capacities are not effective without institutional frameworks that allow for their translation into collective resistance that can produce accountability.

Having established the conception of civic cultural competence as including both individual interpretive capabilities and structural enablement, the question arises: under what conditions do citizens translate competence with transformative resistance instead of electoral pliancy? Section 2.4 focuses on subaltern agency under the domination of elites by comparing the successful resistance movements in Bolivia, Kenya and Senegal with Ghanaian patterns of parochial participation to shed light on why similar degrees of political awareness led to different accountability outcomes.

2.4 Subaltern Agency and Democratic Citizenship: Participation, Resistance, and Constraints

The realization that civic cultural competence involves more than the ability for interpretation and is also a matter of structural enablement raises fundamental issues about subaltern agency under elite domination. If citizens have knowledge, awareness and understanding of manipulation but are still not able to translate competence into accountability, what are the forms of agency in and under what conditions does participation produce transformation instead of legitimizing existing power relations? The case in Ghana is especially disconcerting: 30 years of sustained democratic competition coupled with a high level of political consciousness among subaltern classes have failed to produce militant resistance to neoliberal policies or sustained mobilization demanding accountability of development policies-a pattern that contrasts sharply with transformative movements in other parts of the world that are up against similar conditions (Ayelazuno, 2019a; Danso, 2025; Danso-Wiredu, & Brako, 2021).

Scott's (1985) analysis establishes the subaltern classes as agents of agency in everyday resistance - foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, slander, sabotage - what he calls “weapons of the weak”. These strategies eschew direct confrontation inviting repression and preserve dignity and win small victories in extreme constraints. Yet Scott's analysis raises a critical limitation: everyday resistance does not normally alter power structures and can paradoxically uphold them through the lack of basic challenge to systems (Sant'Ana, 2007; Pye, 1985). Ayelazuno's (2019a) comparative analysis sheds light on the relationship between structural conditions, forms of resistance, and forms of resistance outcome. Bolivia in the early 2000s saw subaltern classes form militant movements against neoliberal policies directly through water wars and gas wars organizing multiclass and multiracial alliances around policy demands - control over natural resources, resistance to privatization, constitutional transformation. Through collective action in the form of blockades and strikes, two presidents stepped down ultimately leading to the election of indigenous president Evo Morales and fundamental redistribution of power. But Ghana shows very different patterns. Ghanaian subalterns are aware of systematic deception, of the broken promise, critique failure of elites, but retain

electoral enthusiasm organised through what Ayelazuno (2019a, 2019b) calls party-tribalism: loyalty to NPP or NDC organised substantially by historical ethnic alignments and patron-client networks rather than policy evaluation or class interests. When resistance emerges, it often comes in Scott's everyday forms of vote-selling as rational extraction, strategic withdrawal, spreading rumors about - rather than in organized confrontation demanding policy transformation (MacLean, 2014; Gyasi & Torsu, 2024). The result: regular electoral turnover poses a change in personnel without basic policy changes. Ayelazuno's (2019b) central formulation merits emphasis: if electoral politics has engendered perceptions among subalterns which are not conducive to militant resistance, the ballot box has been understood as the only available mechanism to punish or reward government, however symbolic this may be.

Understanding the multiple forms of participation becomes crucial in determining when forms of agency create accountability rather than simply legitimise domination. Verba (1967) defines democratic participation as processes by which citizens influence or control those making major decisions affecting them, with emphasis on the fact that messages are sent but may or may not be received and acted upon. Electoral participation is the democracy's most visible aspect, and limitations are important: elections take place from time to time, preferences are circumscribed by elite gatekeeping, voting is a blunt instrument for the expression of preferences (Schedler, 1999). Papa and Milioni (2013) makes an important distinction between active citizenship, which is routinized action within a formal process, and activist citizenship which involves acts that break routines and claim rights outside the established process. This typology shows us that some participation reinforces and other participation challenges existing power relations. Good civic cultural competence includes an understanding of what forms of participation are appropriate in given situations: voting might be adequate in contexts where electoral institutions do allow for accountability; protest might be required in contexts where formal channels are blocked; movement building might be crucial for achieving long-lasting transformation (Gaventa, 2006; Ekman & Amnå, 2012).

Recent African youth movements show conditions under which subaltern resistance is able to generate accountability in the face of elite advantages in access to resources. Kenya's Generation Z protests during June-July 2024 can serve as instructive example when Kenya's President Ruto's government proposed Finance Bill 2024 imposing new taxes on the economy amid hardship. Young Kenyans collectively mobilized mainly through social media in a way that crossed ethnic divides through hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024, launching leaderless protests in several cities, and keeping discipline around clear goals to be achieved: withhold the Finance Bill, ensure security forces are held accountable for deaths, and tackle the culture of corruption in the system (Ardebili, 2025; Nyabola, 2024). A number of characteristics made success reflective of what Tarrow (2008) calls cosmopolitan rather than parochial repertoires. First, cosmopolitan orientations: demands centered around policy substance, such as taxes, corruption, accountability, and not ethnic identity which allows for coalition building across traditional divides. Second, digital literacy: digital technologies were used very well by protesters for fast mobilization, real-time co-ordination, countering government propaganda. Third, youth leadership being less invested in existing party structures and willing to challenge traditional authority. Fourth, clear demands creating accountability metrics. Fifth, sustained pressure, which continues over weeks, despite police killings (Muiruri, 2024). The result was unprecedented: President Ruto withdrew the Finance Bill on 26th June, sacked his entire cabinet on 11th July and launched anti-corruption measures-a remarkable showing of the capacity of organized subaltern resistance to overcome elite resource advantages with effective organization (Ardebili, 2025). Senegal's movement, Y'en a Marre, combines hip-hop artists, journalists, activists contesting the unconstitutional third term attempt of President Wade's regime with cultural organising, voter registration, parallel vote monitoring and protracted protests to force Wade's surrender (Prause & Wiegratz, 2021; Toure, 2023). Crucially, Y'en a Marre became institutionalized beyond winning the moment, with an ongoing active monitoring of government performance, formulating policy demands around youth employment, education quality, anti-corruption. These cases have the following characteristics that are unique to

transformative resistance: cosmopolitan civic orientations that frame demands around policy substance rather than ethnic identity or expectations of patronage; access to the digital world as source of tools for coordination; youth leadership; clarity of achievable demands; pressure over time that imposes costs on elites (Edwards, 2017; Fox, 2015).

Ghanaian subaltern agency reveals patterns that seem at odds: great political awareness and electoral participation, yet low accountability despite 3 decades of democratic competition. Voter turnout often exceeds 70 percent, but this enthusiasm does not translate into corresponding policy responsiveness as the same politicians recycle the same promises while the actual allocation of resources favors electoral financing and patronage distribution rather than development investment (MacLean, 2014; Lindberg, 2010). Despite the sophisticated understanding of the tactics of elite manipulation documented in Section 2.3, channels for participation are mainly through party-tribal loyalty based on historical ethnic alignments, family tradition, patron-client networks rather than evaluation of policy (Ayelazuno, 2019b). Van Gyampo (2012) records youth political participation driven by overwhelming personal interest as opposed to ideology: 76 of 158 respondents supported political parties for personal gains, but only 13.3 percent knew party ideology, and 86.7 percent have no awareness whatever. This is what Ichino and Nathan (2013) analyse as an instrumental ethnic voting that is driven by expectations of benefiting from locally nonexcludable club goods - like schools, roads, health facilities - that are distributed to the co-ethnics, leading to rational calculations that are disconnected from cosmopolitan policy preferences. Danso-Wiredu and Brako's (2021) analysis reveals the influence of economy of affection to structure participation: traditional authority is influential with chiefs acting as intermediaries between communities and partisan politicians who build relationships through material support generating reciprocal obligation expectations. Citizens know these dynamics as our day to chop, when one's ethnic group or party rules the government, expect the community members to access resources through connections (MacLean, 2014; Salifu, 2024).

Why do parochial rationalities survive despite sophisticated political awareness? Elite manipulation of cultural symbols offers some explanation as politicians deliberately appeal to ethnic identities, use the leverage of traditional authority figures as campaign surrogates, use respect for elders as a basis to deter youth demands (Köstler & Ossewaarde, 2022). In a long and fitting analysis, Coker and Afriyie (2018) identify specific post-truth strategies - strategic timing, misinformation, outright lies enabled by partisan media creating emotional mobilization disconnected from policy substance. Lynch and colleagues (2022) document the maintenance of sophisticated social media communications structures by both major parties through WhatsApp, with NPP employing social media armies of over 700 people, and NDC developing parallel structures creating information environments saturated with coordinated partisan messaging. Structural limitations on cosmopolitan organizing turn out to be equally important. Media capture by partisan interests creates environments where verification is a challenge with almost 60 percent of media professionals in Ghana admitting to government using media to shape public narratives and almost half admitting that owners have political affiliations that significantly influence editorial decisions (Danso, 2025; Kwode & Selekane, 2023). Economic precarity makes immediate survival more important than sustained organizing as unemployment leads to desperation that makes people susceptible to patronage appeals and vote-buying (Nathan, 2016). MacLean (2014) identifies culture of silence persisting despite democratization:Fear of reprisal for criticizing powerful figures Limited confidence in formal accountability institutions Socialization emphasizing deference constraining confrontational participation. Vote-selling reflects how complex these dynamics are. Gyasi and Torsu (2024) document citizens express understanding, clear and specific, of rational response to elite failure: we will collect before they come to power because afterwards they won't remember us. This is not being naive but pragmatic adaption - to secure immediate benefit against systems in which promises systematically disconnect from delivery and formal accountability mechanisms prove absent (Agyepong et al., 2021). MacLean's respondent captures the tragic dynamic: What can my individual opinion do? This is an accurate structural assessment of: isolation of

individuals is powerless; collective action requires organization; organization requires resources, time, risk-bearing capacity systematically denied economically marginal populations (Fox, 2015; Verba, 1967). The Ghanaian pattern thus reveals about sophisticated civic cultural competence's first three dimensions - knowledge, awareness, understanding - co-existing with severely constrained resistance capabilities. Comparing the patterns in Ghana with successful resistance in other places helps to highlight important differences to which Edwards (2017) has drawn attention: it is not only individual awareness but collective organizing capacity that is needed in resistance; it requires cosmopolitan framing that transcends parochial divides; it needs sustained pressure that imposes costs on elites; and it needs institutional contexts that allow that pressure to be translated into accountability. Where these conditions are absent or repressed, as structurally analysis attests for Ghana through media capture, defunct civic spaces, economic precarity and electoral channeling to discourage confrontational participation, even sophisticated citizens have their participation channeled into forms that legitimize rather than transform existing power relations (Ayelazuno, 2019a; Paalo et al., 2024).

2.5 Digitalization, Social Media, and AI: Intensifying Elite Power or Enabling Subaltern Resistance?

Digital communication technologies offer what Brooke (2016) describes as a fundamental paradox, the technologies that allow citizens to challenge elite narratives also allow elites unprecedented abilities for manipulation and control. Early hopes that digital platforms would democratize political communication by definition have given way to the recognition that the impact of technology is contingent and the outcome depends substantially on existing power relations, institutional contexts, and the interpretive capacity of citizens (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003; Elishar-Malka et al., 2020).

Elite exploitation of digital tools adds to pathologies found in Section 2.2, but creates new forms of systematic deception. Elishar-Malka and colleagues (2020) trace the evolution of digital political communication culminating in The Conquest of Cyberspace: the deliberate delegitimization of the

establishment media by politicians as they have flooded citizens with fake information. Contemporary elites use computational propaganda, bots, and algorithmic amplification that generates the illusion of grassroots support and data-driven micro-targeting that allows personalized messaging that exploits individual psychological weaknesses (Asif et al., 2025; Dharta et al., 2025; Yılmaz & Topsümer, 2023). As a result of algorithmic curation, echo chambers are formed dividing society in different information realities (Friedland et al., 2006). Most insidiously, artificial intelligence makes possible deepfakes - realistic fabricated media that fundamentally interferes with the ability of citizens to discern the difference between truth and manipulation (Durmus and Yildiz, 2023; Battista, 2024). Okolo, 2024 African elections increasingly plagued by AI-generated propaganda Nigerian and Gabonese case study showed the power of artificial intelligence-generated fake contents in elections. The result is what Bautista (2024) calls an information apocalypse: The effect of being continually exposed to manipulated content is that it creates a general distrust that allows elites to dismiss reliable evidence as fake: the liar's dividend in which systematic lying offers cover for denial of genuine accountability.

The Ghanaian context has these dynamics through the sophisticated digital infrastructure of both of the major parties. Lynch and colleagues (2022) document how NPP deployed social media armies of over seven hundred people during 2016 elections, with NDC developing parallel structures creating information environments saturated with coordinated partisan messaging. Fisher and colleagues' (2024) comparative analysis shows the parties in Ghana setting up hierarchies of WhatsApp communications structures linking national executives with ward levels via monitored administrators to ensure they follow party lines, recreating online the clientelism that already exists along patrimonial lines. Journalists have estimated that more than eighty percent of story leads come from social media, leaving constant information loops between social and traditional media in which partisan digital content influences mainstream coverage (Gadjanova et al., 2019; Lynch et al., 2022). Yet this sophistication drives up, rather than lowers, the cost of campaigns, further raising the electoral

financing requirements that are incentivizing corruption and diverting resources from development investment (Gadjanova et al, 2019). Elite digital sophistication grows more rapidly than citizen capacity to decode manipulation, widening the interpretive gap for the systematic capacity to deceive while channeling participation into the forms elite use to legitimate rather than develop accountability.

Yet digital transformation at the same time opens up opportunities for subaltern resistance where citizens use platforms in strategic ways and structural conditions permit to translate online engagement into offline mobilization. Brooke (2016) shows how the digitalisation of everything allows for industrial-scale leaks with findings of elite governance structures - WikiLeaks and the expenses scandals of MPs is a case study that shows digital tools can shake the pillars of elite rule. Social media platforms help in lowering the barriers of activism, bringing means to mobilize collective action (Yılmaz & Topsümer, 2023; Mahmood et al., 2022). Generation Z movements in Kenya, Senegal and Nigeria illustrate the effective use of digital literacy to enable the quick mobilization of those who may not be divided along ethnic lines, using hashtags to coordinate their efforts, livestream state violence and translate policy documents into accessible formats (Omweri, 2024; Nthiga, 2025; Kang'ethe & Odoyo, 2024). And indeed, the case of Kenya is instructive: The combination of party co-optation rejection by protesters as well as effective use of the platform led to the ability of the Kenyan public to achieve sustained pressure against the president, forcing him to withdraw the Finance Bill and sack his cabinet - it shows that organized resistance can overcome elite advantages as long as it is organized through cosmopolitan orientations around policy substance rather than parochial loyalties (Ardebili, 2025; Muchiri et al., 2025).

However, the realization of the emancipatory potential of digital technology comes with confronting significant structural barriers that prevent most citizens - especially rural populations, women and economically marginalised populations from accessing digital technology platforms or translating access into effective agency. The digital divide is not only about unfair connectivity, device ownership

disparities, prohibitive data cost but also about a lack of literacy requirements many do not have (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Setiawan et al., 2025). The work of Gadjanova and colleagues (2022) in Northern Ghana helps shed light on how digital inequalities produce hierarchies of information between first-hand user of social media and indirect user relying on others for content exposure - hierarchies based upon gender, socioeconomic status and geography. Northern Ghana displays this very starkly: ten percent only of households have internet at home; literacy rates average forty-three percent. Indirect users turn out to be nearly three decades less apt to question the credibility of the information and experience compound difficulties reacting to manipulation (Gadjanova et al., 2022). Setiawan and colleagues (2025) identify the resulting knowledge democracy deficit: formal participation that takes place without meaningful information engagement, seventy-six percent encounter political content but only thirty-four percent express confidence distinguishing information from manipulation. The Ghanaian youth experience presents the paradox of complexity: despite being engaged in social media, only three percent exercise franchise as online engagement offers adequate sense of engagement that voting seems to be superfluous; the realms of symbolic resistance is exercised with no imposition of accountability costs (Van Gyampo 2017; Mwangi 2025).

Artificial intelligence applications amplify these dynamics in ways that require immediate attention. AI allows personalised persuasion at unprecedented scale, generative disinformation including deepfakes, automated propaganda and algorithmic filter bubbles (Tamuli & Dasgupta, 2025; Shalevska, 2024). Okolo 2024 uncovers the specific vulnerability of African elections: Nigerian 2023 elections have faced AI-manufactured fake endorsements; Gabonese 2018 deepfake helped spark coup. Yet AI is at the same time a potential through translation tools, automated fact-checking and low-cost content creation (Okolo, 2024). The important question becomes access: if AI tools continue to be available to mostly the elite and if citizens do not have access to detection tools, then the accountability crisis is exacerbated. This replicates the problem of the sophistication-constraint paradox: consciousness of manipulation is not enough, unless there are structures in place that allow

it to translate into collective capacity to impose costs of accountability. Digital transformation's effects on civic cultural competence and democratic accountability are found to be fundamentally contingent, depending on the interactions of power relationships, institutional forms and citizen capacities with technological affordances. Ghana's experience indicates technology can create more rather than less inequality if elite resources make sophisticated infrastructure accessible while citizens are excluded by access barriers and knowledge deficits (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Lynch et al., 2022). The contrast with successful movements helps to shed light on what is proving to be necessary, not only individual access but collective organizing capacity, cosmopolitan framing, sustained pressure, and institutional contexts that make digital engagement help produce offline mobilization that imposes development accountability costs on elites.

2.6 The Missing Link: Political Communication and Human Development in African Democracies

While there is a long tradition of scholarship exploring political communication strategies in African democracies (Willems and Mano, 2017), civic culture and participation (Mattes and Bratton, 2007), and governance-development relationships (Whitfield, 2018), these fields work in isolation and do not theorize about how communication systems influence citizen interpretive capacities needed for translating participation into development accountability. Existing research includes citizens as passive recipients rather than active sense-makers (McNair, 2011), attention is given to voting outcomes rather than message decoding processes, and where cultural competence is viewed as individual skills (Flaskerud, 2007) without theorising collective capacity translation in institutional contexts. Three important lacunae remain: scholarship often fails to-linking the quality of political communication to development outcomes in a systematic fashion, notably on why informed citizens aware of manipulation continue to legitimize regimes of elite rule rather than transformation (Fukuda-Parr & Cid-Martinez, 2019); research underexamines the reasons for the lack of robust study in the post-colonial contexts of developing countries despite their unique dynamics in which colonial legacies,

traditional authority and linguistic diversity create distinctive requirements of civic competence (MacLean, 2014); and a lack of attention is given to why informed citizens willing These gaps are significant as they cloud ineffective interventions while also obscuring elite strategies to avoid accountability despite participating. This study addresses these gaps by adapting the idea of cultural competence to political contexts (Beach et al, 2005), developing the K-A-U-R framework for studying interpretive capabilities, the extent to which structural constraints prevent collective resistance and explicitly linking political communication to development outcomes through the lens of Ghana's Tamale Metropolitan Area.

2.7 Integrated Analytical Framework

This study has adopted an analytical framework (see **Figure 1**) that draws from three pillars of theory in order to explain the disconnect between democracy and development evident in Ghana and other nations of similar context. Rather than address political communication, civic competence and human development as distinct fields, the framework frames them as an interrelated set of dimensions of a single dynamic process in which subaltern citizens successfully, or unsuccessfully, translate democracy participation into development accountability. Pfetsch's (2001) political communication culture theory is the first pillar, which explains systematic patterns in elite messaging as cultural practices that are embedded in the structural conditions in political and media systems. Whereas Pfetsch's research examines how professional norms and institutional contexts shape whether communication is structured around media logic or party-political logic in established democracies, this research extends the framework to post-colonial contexts where partisan media capture, systematic deception, and asymmetries of resources structure elite-citizen interactions. Political communication culture therefore includes not just content or channel but the entire system of norms governing the way elites construct messages intended to affect subaltern behavior in situations of extreme inequality of power (McNair, 2011; Norris, 2004). The second pillar - civic cultural competence - is the conceptual contribution of this study, adapted from the healthcare frameworks but principally reconceptualized

for political contexts which involve intentional manipulation and requirements for collective action (Beach et al., 2005; Balcazar et al., 2009). As developed in Section 2.3, civic cultural competence has four interrelated dimensions that function simultaneously at the individual and the structural level. Knowledge entails the recognition that political communication is practiced as structured cultural activity with repetitive patterns of manipulation; awareness goes further to recognize manipulation in real time as emotional build-up replacing policy content and coordinated messaging signaling; understanding the connection why this type of manipulation serves elite interests in sustaining access to resources while eluding accountability for development (Köstler & Ossewaarde, 2022); Ayelazuno, 2019b). The resistance capabilities dimension differentiates this framework from traditional approaches to civic culture in that it explicitly theorizes how individual competence needs to be translated into collective capacity for imposing accountability costs on deceptive elites - a translation that requires institutional structures that enable rather than constrain organized action (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Filc, 2020). Sen's (1999, 2000) human development approach gives the third pillar, suggesting that development must be understood as the expansion of substantive freedoms and capabilities, not just economic growth, where collective action is what drives policy forwards with organised citizens being able to effectively pressure power holders (Fukuda-Parr & Cid-Martinez, 2019). This pillar defines what is at stake: not abstract democratic ideals but concrete development outcomes such as the provision of infrastructure, delivery of services, poverty reduction and equitable resource distribution that enhance the actual capabilities of citizens to live lives they have reason to value.

These three pillars work together to shed light on the processes that generate either accountability or a lack of it. Political communication culture influences the information ecology citizens have to deal with, which is often either a discourse that can be seen to provide diagnostic information for the purpose of citizen's informed judgement or a discourse that systematically uses deceptive manipulation of emotions and coordinated propaganda to manufacture consent (Kuklinski et al., 2001; Zimmermann

& Kohring, 2020). When media systems are captured by partisan interests - as is the case in Ghana where sixty percent of media professionals admit to government control of their narratives and partisan ownership of editorial decisions - the quality of political communication suffers to the extent that even motivated, educated citizens would find it difficult to make coherent evaluations of political policies (Danso, 2025; Druckman, 2004). Civic cultural competence comes between this communication environment and citizen capacity to resist manipulation. The framework anticipates that knowledge, awareness and understanding are proving necessary but insufficient: in the absence of resistance capabilities - both in terms of individual capacity to organise collective responses and institutional contexts to enable such organisation - competence remains at the individual level to produce what this study calls the sophistication-constraint paradox whereby citizens are aware of elite failure, but channel participation through forms of participation that serve elite legitimation rather than development accountability (Ayelazuno, 2019b). The Ghanaian case is a powerful illustration of this dynamic in terms of patterns of high turnout at elections alongside little progress in development, sophisticated awareness of manipulation alongside party-tribal rather than cosmopolitan civic orientations, and the rationalization of vote buying as pragmatic adaptation to systematic promise breaking (MacLean, 2014; Gyasi & Torsu, 2024). Bolivia's transformative movements of resistance during the water and gas wars have shown the alternative path, as when subaltern classes organize around cosmopolitan policy demands that transcend ethnic splitting, sustain pressure through strikes and blockades, and inflict costs that force two presidential resignations, the result is fundamental policy transformation including constitutional change and indigenous political empowerment-all outcomes that Ghana's electoral pliancy has failed to produce despite three decades of competitive democracy (Ayelazuno, 2019a; Tarrow, 2008).

The analytical power of the framework is that it offers conditions under which civic cultural competence leads to development accountability rather than the mere legitimization of existing power relations. At the individual level the following are needed for successful competence: knowledge about

systematic patterns of communication; awareness for the capacity to identify manipulation in real time; understanding of elite strategic motivations in grasping; ability to maintain a critical distance from emotional appeals (Druckman et al., 2016). At the collective level, being effective requires organising capacity building creating and sustaining coalitions beyond electoral cycles cosmopolitan orientations framing of demands of policy substance not parochial loyalties resource mobilising access to means for sustained engagement strategic deployment knowing when voting suffices and when protest or civil disobedience is called for (Ekman & AmnAA, 2012; Markovits, 2005; Fagan & Sircar, 2017). Most crucially, at an institutional level, for competence to be translated into accountability the following elements are needed: media independence that is free from partisan capture that can allow for watch dog journalism, formal accountability mechanisms beyond periodic elections that can offer sustained channels for citizen demands, protected civic space that allows for organisation and protest without repression, and development orientation that creates incentive structures that link electoral success to actual service delivery rather than patronage distribution (Norris, 2004; Lowndes et al., 2006). When such multilevel conditions persistently suffer from or are repressed by lack of capacity for verification by the media, economic precarity that limits capacities for organization in pursuit of survival imperative, culture of silence that limits capacities for confrontational participation, party-tribal divisions that limit capacities for class solidarity, even sophisticated citizens with high knowledge-awareness-understanding, are left with severely constrained capacities for resistance, producing participation that legitimizes rather than transform existing arrangements (MacLean, 2014; Ayelazuno, 2019b).

Recent youth movements in Africa bring these dynamics into special focus. Kenya's Generation Z protests leading to Finance Bill withdrawal shows that if digital literacy offers possibilities for cross-ethnic rapid mobilization, if cosmopolitan orientations shape demands around tax policy as opposed to ethnic identity, and if sustained pressure keeps demands visible in spite of repression, and if clear achievable demands offer measures of accountability, subaltern resistance can overcome elite resource

advantages and produce concrete policy responsiveness (Ardebili, 2025; Nthiga, 2025). Senegal's Y'en a Marre movement institutionization beyond immediate electoral win to preserve government performance as acts of monitoring is one of the most powerful examples and instances of how capacity for resistance goes beyond individual confrontations when organizational infrastructural remains and civic cultural competence develops collectively (Dimé, 2023; Toure, 2023). The contrast with Ghana is instructive in this regard: Similar awareness of elite manipulation present, but channels of participation mostly through party-tribal loyalty determined by historical ethnic relationships and expectations of patronage rather than policy appraisal, resulting in regular change of personnel between NPP and NDC but with no corresponding development transformation (Ayelazuno, 2019b; Van Gyampo, 2012). This is not a pattern of individual ignorance and rather structural constraints that prevent translating knowledge into collective action - the understanding of the ballot box as the only available way to punish or reward government - whatever it may be symbolic in the systems where systemic corruption prevents accountability even where voting occurs (MacLean, 2014).

The framework thus repositions civic cultural competence as a blend of individual analytical capability and structural requirement with outcomes of development depending crucially on whether or not institutional contexts allow the individual understanding to generate collective capacity for imposing accountability costs. This integrated understanding is relevant to explaining the divergent developmental consequences of democratic participation in contexts with similar formal institutional settings but with radically different communication ecologies, citizen competencies and elite-subaltern power relations-the key empirical dilemma of this study.

2.7.1 Theoretical Limitations and Complementarity

While the integrated analytical framework gains power from the integration of a number of theoretical perspectives, the individual component theories each have inherent limitations that need to be recognized. Understanding these constraints helps us understand why theoretical integration is not only

additive, but necessary to determine the comprehensive analysis of the democracy-development disconnect.

Pfetsch's (2014) Political Communication Culture Theory offers powerful tools for analyzing the processes that elite messaging strategies engage with in culturally-specific information ecologies. The theory sheds light on regular patterns of political discussions, media, and communications norms that make democratic systems stand out. However, this framework has three major limitations. First, it is primarily focused on the production of elite communication and media and transmission, and has limited analytical purchase on citizen reception and interpretation processes. The theory explains how messages are constructed and circulated but not the ways in which citizens decode, resist or appropriate messages. Second, the framework has no explicit normative standards against which the quality of democracy can be evaluated except for procedural communication norms. It can detect communication cultures as "adversarial" or "pragmatic" but does not really know how to determine if such cultures are conducive to human flourishing or to perpetuating domination. Third, the theory gives too little attention to asymmetries in structural power that affect possibilities for communication. It views communication cultures as somewhat autonomous spheres without properly theorizing the way that economic inequality, state repression, or media capture limit communication practices.

The framework of Civic Cultural Competence addresses one of the limitations by putting the interpretive capabilities of citizens at the center. Adapted from healthcare and education settings (Flaskerud, 2007; Beach et al., 2005), this framework conceptualizes differentiated citizen capacities to navigate political communication - and what we refer to as manipulation, understanding elite motivations and maintaining a critical distance from emotional appeals. The K-A-U-R (Knowledge-Awareness-Understanding-Resistance) operationalization is a systematic way of looking at competence dimensions for different levels. However, this framework is faced with its own limitations. First, it risks the individualization of structural problems that are fundamental in nature by focusing on

the capabilities of citizens rather than the barriers of institutions. If the citizens are demonstrating a high competence but things do not improve, is it a competency deficit or a constraint in the structure? Second, the framework imported from healthcare contexts may have borrowed unsuitable assumptions regarding relatively equal relations of power between "culturally competent" practitioners and diverse patient populations - a poor fit for analyzing elite-subaltern power asymmetries. Third, the framework does not have a clear link to development outcomes, it is unclear how civic cultural competence relates to infrastructure provision, poverty reduction or equitable resource distribution.

Sen's (1999) Human Development Approach tries to overcome these shortcomings by offering explicit normative standards by which democratic performance can be evaluated. Rather than understanding democracy as procedural (free elections, civil liberties), Sen understands democracy instrumentally as an essential component of human capability expansion and intrinsically as a constitutive component of freedom itself. Development becomes not economic growth but expansion of people's substantive freedoms to lead the life they have reason to value. This flips the research question to "why don't citizens participate better?" to "why doesn't democratic participation increase capabilities and freedoms?" However, Sen's framework also has analytical shortcomings. First, although it sets some normative norms for what democratic outcomes should be, it provides few tools for analyzing the mechanisms by which and when participation does or does not generate accountability. The way addresses that democracy should produce development and doesn't explain as much about why it often fails to do so. Second, the optimistic assumptions of the framework with regards to informed public reasoning (Sen, 2009) underestimate the extent to which elite communication can manufacture consent through manipulation, rather than persuasion, in a systematic way. Third, the approach gives too little attention to the way subaltern groups deal with domination through complex strategies that include a combination of compliance, appropriation, and resistance.

Theories of Subaltern Agency (Scott, 1985, 1990; Spivak, 1988) and African Democratic Citizenship (Boone, 2014; Lentz, 2013; Lynch et al., 2019) attempt to address this last limitation by theorizing the ways in which marginalized groups perform their agency in conditions of severe constraint. Scott's hidden transcripts also demonstrate how subordinate groups manage to have critical consciousness even when they are publicly performing deference. Boone illustrates how ethnic boundaries function as elite mobilization resources and subaltern survival techniques at the same time. However, these views are also not without their limitations. First, the focus on the everyday resistance and hidden transcripts can fetishize the agency of subalterns, while downplaying the roles of structural barriers that prevent the crystallization of individual resistance into collective transformation. Second, there is the fact that the frameworks at times regard "subaltern culture" as relatively autonomous from elite domination rather than dialectically shaped by domination-resistance dynamics. Third, these theories have a difficult time explaining variation in when subaltern resistance is successful in producing new accountability and when it is merely successful in legitimizing existing arrangements.

The power of analysis of the integrated framework arises precisely from the manner in which these theories complementariness addresses each other's weaknesses. Political Communication Culture Theory's elite communication orientation is joined by Civic Cultural Competence's citizen interpretation orientation. The individualism of Civic Cultural Competence framework is limited by the structural attention of Subaltern Agency theories and the standards of development of Sen. Sen's optimism towards informed public reasoning is moderated by the analysis of systematic manipulation performed by Political Communication Culture Theory. Subaltern Agency theories' romanticization of resistance is controlled by Civic Cultural Competence's orderly evaluation of interpretive capacities and Sen's normative development standards.

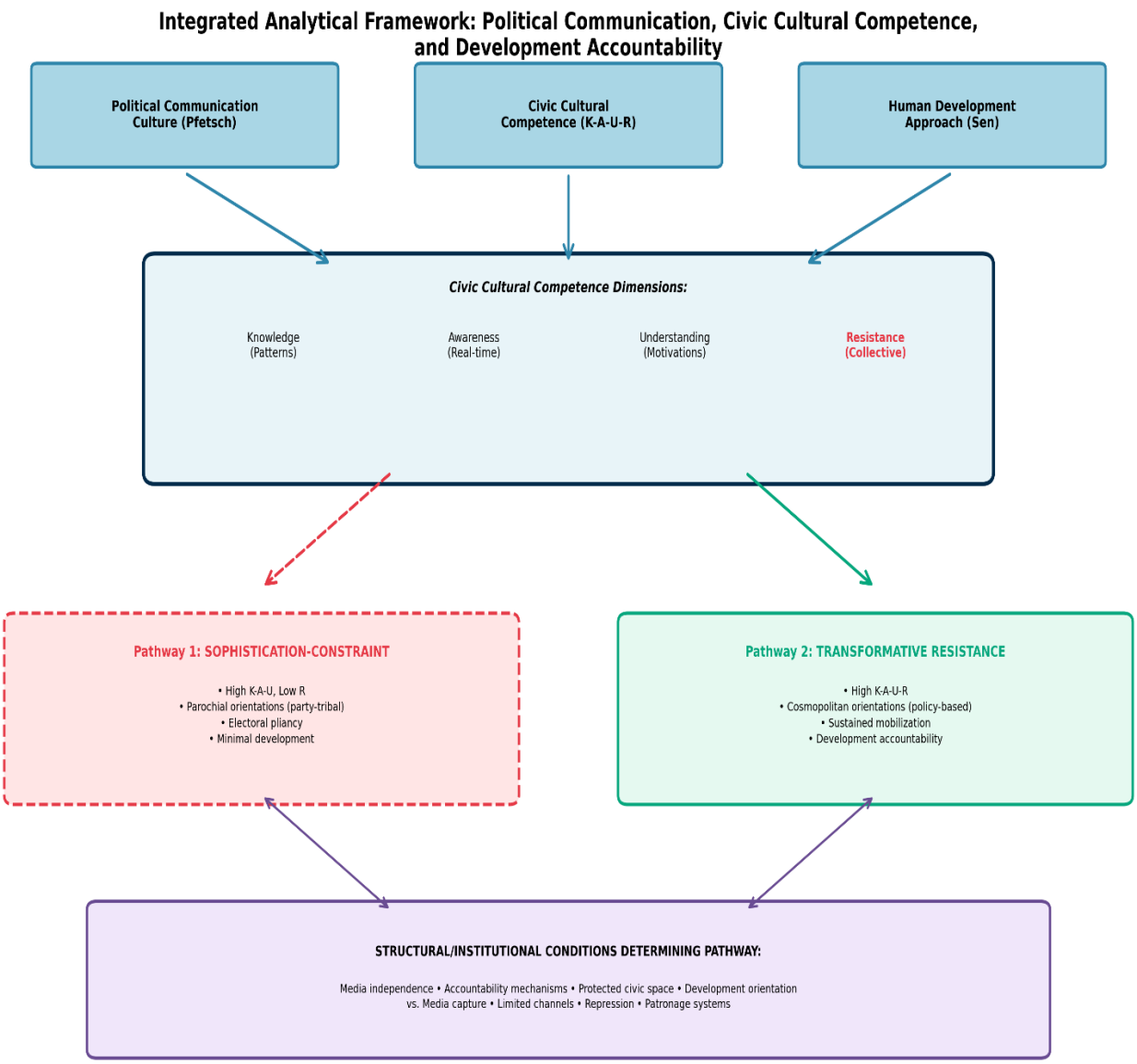
More specifically, the framework facilitates the analysis of conditions under which civic cultural competence results in the development of accountability instead of the mere legitimization of. It raises

the question: Given elite communication strategies (Political Communication Culture Theory), what are the dimensions of citizen interpretive capacity (Civic Cultural Competence), what are the structural barriers to the translation of individual understanding into collective action (Subaltern Agency theories), and what patterns of development impact resulting (Sen's Human Development Approach)? This integrated question is not well dealt with by any one theoretical perspective alone.

The sophistication-constraint paradox that arises from the empirical analysis in this study is a good example of the explanatory power of this framework. Political Communication Culture Theory sheds light on the manipulation sophistication of the elite. Civic Cultural Competence framework uncovers high levels of decoding abilities of citizens, in terms of knowledge, awareness, and understanding. Subaltern Agency theories, in order to explain the development of mass state failures to engage in corrective reform politics, essentially explain structural barriers (fragmented organizing infrastructure, partisan divisions, patronage targeting) that prevent collective resistance despite individual sophistication. Sen's Human Development Approach offers normative standards that show how high participation with no accountability does not increase capabilities or freedoms. No single theory could capture this paradox, and indeed only their systematic integration makes possible the recognition and explanation of the pattern.

This methodological integration - recognition of the limitations of a theory while demonstrating complementarity - furthers rather than debases the credibility of the integrated framework. It indicates the theoretical self-awareness, the avoidance of overgeneralizations from partial perspectives, and shows how the analytical possibilities of systematic combination are available to theoretical approaches that remain disjunct.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: (Constructed by Author, 2025)

2.8 Beyond Participation: Toward a Fuller Understanding of Democratic Competence and Accountability

This literature review has helped explain one of the fundamental paradoxes that undermines democratic development in countries such as Ghana; citizens have a sophisticated consciousness about elite manipulation, but are still unable to convert this consciousness into a collective action that

produces development accountability. The paradox of sophistication-constraint shows that participation is not enough for democracy to fulfill its developmental promise. While political communication scholarship records elite strategies and civic culture literature examines citizen orientations, these conversations have been disconnected from each other and from development outcomes, hiding the mechanisms by which the quality of communication affects the interpretive capacities and collective capabilities of citizens (McNair, 2011; Norris, 2004; Sen, 1999). The review shows that, unlike the militant resistance that characterized Bolivia's water and gas wars and the transformative youth mobilizations recently seen in Kenya and Senegal, electoral pliancy in which sophisticated subalterns funnel participation through parochial party-tribal loyalties that serve elite legitimation over development transformation characterized Ghana's three decades of competitive democracy (Ayelazuno, 2019a, 2019b; Ardebili, 2025).

The analytical framework developed here addresses these disconnections by recontextualizing civic cultural competence, placing it as individual analytical capability and as structural requirement. Where traditional civic culture approaches deal with the issue of whether citizens share democratic orientations, this framework raises the questions of whether citizens can decipher systematic manipulation and whether institutional structures can enable individual understanding to build collective capacity for imposing accountability costs on deceptive elites. The dimensions of Knowledge-Awareness-Understanding-Resistance offer analytical precision for analyzing these translation mechanisms that fail or succeed: Citizens in Ghana exhibit high KAU but extremely limited R due to media capture reducing capacity for verification, economic precarity focusing on survival rather than organizing, and party-tribal divisions that divide against class solidarity (MacLean, 2014; Danso, 2025; Gadjanova et al., 2017). Successful transformative resistance elsewhere sheds light on what is found to be necessary: cosmopolitan orientations that frame demands around policy substance rather than ethnic identity, collective pressure over time to keep the movement visible despite

repression, and institutional contexts that offer protected civic space and accountability mechanisms outside of periodic elections (Dimme, 2023; Ekman & Amnna, 2012; Lowndes et al., 2006).

Integrating the political communication culture theory developed by Pfetsch with the human development approach proposed by Sen through the lens of civic cultural competence allows for the investigation of the relationship between communication practices and concrete development outcomes in a systematic way. The framework involves mechanisms to which subaltern agency is either facilitated or foreclosed by elite control over political discourse: When communication systems employ systematic deception, emotional manipulation and coordinated propaganda, while media capture makes verification impossible, even sophisticated citizens have a difficult time translating awareness into effective resistance (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020; Kuklinski et al., 2001). We find that in order to understand these dynamics, we must move beyond aggregated voting behavior or generalized trust measures, and instead examine the actual processes of citizen interpretation, the constraints of the structures within which they operate, and the conditions in which competence produces accountability rather than simple legitimacy of existing arrangements (Ayelazuno, 2019b; Filc, 2020).

The empirical investigation that follows, examines these dynamics in Ghana's Tamale Metropolitan Area and specifically examines how politicians structure communication, what levels of civic cultural competence citizens demonstrate and what are the implications for development as a result of the interaction between elite messaging and subaltern interpretive capacity. By focusing on citizen experiences as active sense-makers, as opposed to passive receivers of messages, the study explores the reasons democracy leads to divergent development outcomes in different cases that share similar formal institutions but have extremely different communication ecologies and power relations - revealing the potential for enhancing the democracy-development nexus in post-colonial African contexts.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter covers the research methodology for the study. The study considers three inter-related questions: how politicians frame their communication, what are the levels of civic cultural competence that citizens display when decoding these messages, and what are the implications for development as a result of this communication relationship. To answer these questions, the research takes a qualitative approach that is based on an interpretive pragmatic philosophical approach, articulated through multi-site fieldwork in Tamale alongside systematic work with the secondary literature on the wider political communication patterns in Ghana.

The chapter sets the philosophical foundations to guide study, discusses the qualitative approach and study design, explains the study area and sampling strategies, explains the data collection and analytical procedures, and includes measures taken to ensure methodological rigour and ethical conduct. This methodological framework allows a systematic examination of civic cultural competence as individual interpretive ability and structurally constrained capacity, looking at the interplay between elite communication sophistication and citizen interpretive ability that leads to democratic accountability or to lack of democratic accountability.

3.2 Philosophy and Paradigm of Research

This study is based on an interpretivist paradigm, which includes interconnected ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions about the nature of reality, the creation of knowledge and the position of values in research (Crotty, 1998). The interpretivist paradigm rejects positivist assumptions of an objective, external reality that can be measured through observation that is value-neutral. Instead, it assumes that social reality is socially and culturally created through human interpretation and meaning-making and that research approaches that are meaningfully concerned with the ways in which people understand and negotiate their worlds are needed (Schwandt, 1994). Within

this general paradigm, the work formulates certain positions concerning the ontological, epistemological, and axiological aspects and integrates pragmatic features required for assessment of the systematic competence.

Ontologically, the research uses a social constructionist stance which is in line with interpretivist philosophy (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015). This position argues that meanings that citizens give to political communication are created socially through interaction in specific cultural, historical, and institutional settings and are not inherent properties of messages themselves (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Political messages are only made meaningful by citizens active interpretive processes, which have been shaped by their cultural frameworks, lived experiences, collective memories and structural positions in society. Importantly, this constructionist ontology does not negate the fact that material realities exist (that poverty, infrastructure gaps and resource inequities are real for example) but it states that these realities are understood, experienced and acted upon through the lens of socially constructed meaning systems (Burr, 2015). Ghanaian political communication takes place in culturally specific systems of meaning shaped by the traditional authority systems, linguistic diversity, legacies of colonialism, and modern democratic systems. These systems of meaning are not well understood by externally imposed analytical categories developed in the context of Western societies and attention needs to be paid to locally-situated interpretive frameworks.

Epistemologically, from the interpretivist paradigm, knowledge is seen to emerge through engagement with the lived experience and interpretive frameworks of participants as opposed to observational distance from predetermined variables (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). The research is aware of the need to enter into the sense-making processes of citizens who decode political communication: entering into the cultural logics, experiential knowledge, and contextual reasoning that citizens use to evaluate what elites are communicating. Knowledge about civic cultural competence thus cannot be generated via surveys measuring responses to researcher-defined stimuli, but needs to be a matter of

qualitative exploration of how citizens themselves formulate their understanding of political manipulation, institutions of accountability, and structural constraints. This epistemological position prioritizes the views of the participants but acknowledges that the researcher's theoretical frameworks shape what is investigated and the way it is interpreted (Maxwell, 2012).

Axiologically, the interpretivist paradigm accepts that research is value-laden as opposed to value-neutral (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher carries with him/her theoretical commitments (to democratic accountability, human development, subaltern agency), political orientations (critical of elite manoeuvre, sympathetic to citizen struggles), and social positions (educated, mobile, possessing access to institutional resources) that shape what is studied, and how the findings are interpreted. Rather than claiming its objectivity when it is false, the study makes these value commitments explicit. The research privileges voices usually marginalized in scholarship on political communication - ordinary citizens pursuing economic precarity, traditional authorities in mediating between customary and formal systems, media personnel dealing with the pressures of the political - while holding elite claims up to critical scrutiny. This axiological perspective is an interpretivist recognition that all knowledge is situated and that accepting value commitments enhances not undermines the credibility of research (Schwandt, 1994).

This philosophical orientation deals directly with the research questions of the study. The first of these research questions - examining modes, content and intended effects of political communication - calls for interpretive analysis of the workings of strategic messaging in the context of Ghana's particular cultural situation. Understanding elite communication requires attention to culturally particular symbols (appeals to traditional authority, ethnic identity), language patterns (code-switching between English, Twi, Dagbani), and contextual meanings (what constitutes credible promises and what constitutes empty rhetoric within local understandings). Quantitative content analysis counting message frequencies would miss those culturally embedded meanings which determine

communication effectiveness. The second of the research questions, which deals with measuring the level of civic cultural competence of citizens, involves both interpretation of the nature of citizen's engagement with the political message and the systematic evaluation of the differences in the level of competence in the dimensions of knowledge, awareness, understanding and resistance. The pragmatic component allows for this systematic assessment to take place and it is grounded in the articulations of participants themselves rather than predefined categories imposed by the researcher. The third research question - the analysis of development implications of differential competence - demands the interconnection of the interpretive capacities of citizens to produce real results (infrastructure provision, service delivery, poverty reduction), and the resultant need for combining participant meanings with structural analysis of patterns of resource distribution.

This philosophic basis has direct methodological implications. The interpretivist paradigm necessitates qualitative approaches which capture depth and complexity in the meaning-making processes as opposed to quantifying responses to predetermined variables (Creswell & Creswell 2018). As a research design, the study uses in-depth interviews allowing to explore the ways through which individual citizens articulate their understanding of politics, focus group discussions allowing to capture collective sense making and shared interpretive frameworks and key informant interviews with media personnel and political actors allowing to access elite perspectives on strategic communication. These methods support intensive interaction with the conceptual frameworks and experiential knowledge of the participants. The pragmatic component defends the justification of systematic analytical procedures, namely thematic analysis with structured theoretical frameworks, competence evaluation by systematic coding of dimensions of K-A-U-R, triangulation from multiple stakeholder perspectives, which will help to identify patterns while keeping in mind the participant's voice. The multi-stakeholder research design is an expression of the understanding that political communication is an interactive process that requires investigation of the ways in which messages are strategically

framed by the elites, conveyed through the media systems, and understood by the citizens under structural limitations.

3.3 Research Approach: Qualitative Research

This study uses qualitative research methods to examine civic cultural competency and politics communication dynamics. Qualitative approaches are suitable methodologically as the questions in the research require an understanding "how" and "why" rather than measuring "how many" or "how much" (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The central puzzle - why sophisticated political awareness fails generating development accountability - cannot be adequately addressed through quantitative measurement of political knowledge or voting behavior. It involves delving deeply into the interpretive processes by which citizens decode messaging by elites, the frameworks of meaning they use, and the structural constraints that they travel in.

Civic cultural competence is a complex contextually dependent phenomenon for which rich descriptive analysis is needed rather than measuring the variables too. While quantitative methods might be used to measure political knowledge by using survey instruments, they fail to capture the interpretive sophistication with which citizens identify patterns of manipulation, decode strategic ambiguity, or recognize structural constraints limiting alternatives. The sophistication-constraint paradox in the centre of this research, i.e. high citizen awareness but low collective resistance, calls for qualitative studies on the mechanisms through which the translation from individual understanding to collective capacity fails. Quantitative data may document the disconnect between awareness and action but it cannot explain the communicative and structural dynamics creating the disconnect.

Moreover, the research is in relatively uncharted analytical territory. The civic cultural competence framework is a new conceptual contribution that requires qualitative exploration before any quantification of a meaningful nature could possibly occur. Qualitative methods allow to develop and refine the theory through repeated contact with the empirical phenomena, allowing the dimensions of

the developed framework to be tested, elaborated and adapted according to how they explain the actual dynamics of political communication (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This exploratory dimension justifies depth of understanding over breadth of coverage, over intensive analysis in favor of extensive measurement.

The research has fundamental features of qualitative inquiry outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2018) and Patton (2015). It uses naturalistic inquiry, which involves researching political communication and citizen meaning making in real settings rather than controlled settings. The design was emergent and flexible so that unexpected patterns that emerged during fieldwork could be pursued. The research used purposeful sampling strategies to select information-rich participants and sites on the basis of their ability to illuminate the phenomena under study. Holistic analysis was carried out and the issue of civic cultural competence was seen in broader contexts of Ghanaian democratic practice and Northern Ghana's political economy as well as Tamale's specific cultural dynamics. The researcher was the major instrument of data collection and analysis, and interpretation was informed through sustained engagement with data, by theoretical sensitivity, and by reflexive awareness of positionality.

3.4 Study Design

This study uses a qualitative multi-site research design with focus on Tamale with four constituencies as the primary research sites. Rather than labeling Tamale as a "case" that stands for Ghana or using formal case study methodology, this design acknowledges Tamale as an information-rich context that displays elements especially pertinent to the research questions - cultural and linguistic diversity, simultaneous appearance of traditional and modern political systems, economic marginalization, and competitive electoral politics. The combination in design is a mix of intensive primary data collection from Tamale and extensive interaction with secondary literature covering Ghana's broad political communication patterns.

The four constituencies, Tamale South, Central, North and Saganarigu, are research sites that allow for study of variation in the urban setting of Tamale, while allowing for cultural and linguistic coherence. This multi-site design with secondary literature integration has a number of analytical advantages. Intensive fieldwork in Tamale makes possible a deep understanding of the dynamics of political communication, citizen meaning-making processes and structural constraints that shape civic cultural competence. The multi-constituency approach reflects the variation in socioeconomic and urban density characteristics and also retains the focus on a culturally coherent context. Secondary literature processes prevent the treatment of Tamale findings as isolated phenomena and make it possible to establish analytical connections to documented patterns across the regions of Ghana. This combination enhances both internal validity on the basis of contextual depth and analytical transferability on the basis of systematic comparison with existing evidence.

Tamale was chosen as the main research area because it has some characteristics that make it particularly information-rich in terms of exploring civic cultural competence in political communication (Patton 2015). The choice is strategic rather than representative logic (Flyvbjerg, 2006), with analytical potential over statistical generalizability. Tamale is a complex interplay of traditional and contemporary political systems, where traditional institutions of chieftaincy co-exist with democratic governance structures. This dual environment means that citizens have to negotiate between multiple systems of authority and communication practices, making civic cultural competence especially relevant to successful political engagement. The cultural and linguistic diversity of the area - with Dagomba, Mamprusi and Gonja communities plus a range of 'migrant' communities - makes it an arena in which politicians must adopt sophisticated communication strategies to construct cross-ethnic coalitions (Anim et al, 2022). Northern Ghana's history of economic marginalization compared to the south generates a set of conditions in which promises of development and political communication surrounding resource allocation have special meaning. Citizens are materially

deprived - with limited infrastructure, lack of access to education and healthcare, high rates of poverty - which are regularly addressed through campaign messaging by political actors (Ayelazuno, 2019).

3.5 Study Area

Tamale Metropolitan Area is the third-largest urban center in the country of Ghana and the capital of the Northern Region that functions as the political, economic, and administrative center of Northern Ghana. The metropolitan area has had a population of about 371,000 according to the 2021 Population and Housing Census. The demographic picture of the area is a reflection of a high level of ethnic diversity with Dagombas forming the dominant ethnic group alongside significant Mamprusi, Gonja and migrant populations from across Ghana and West Africa.

The political landscape has a number of characteristics that are relevant to this research. Traditional authority structures are still influential, with the Ya-Na (paramount chief of Dagbon) wielding considerable political and cultural power which intersects with formal democratic institutions. Electoral politics shows a high competitiveness between the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC), with the results of the constituencies often determined by close margins. Both sides have significant organizational presence, with active communication infrastructure in the form of party-affiliated radio stations, social media operations and extensive grassroots networks.

The media environment is a combination of traditional and digital media. Off the air, multiple FM radio stations operate in the area and carry out political programming in both the Dagbani and English languages. Research shows that radio has relatively high levels of trust among populations in Northern Ghana as compared to political institutions, which makes it an important channel of political communication (Gadjanova et al., 2022). Digital media use is on the rise, especially for younger populations, but traditional media and interpersonal communication are still the predominant forms of communication for most citizens.

Economically, the region has some of the features of underdevelopment typical of Northern Ghana as compared to the south. Infrastructure deficits are poor road network, irregularity in power supply in certain areas and lack of access to potable water. Educational facilities are resource constrained, and healthcare is a challenge for many residents. These challenges of development give rise to conditions in which political communication about infrastructure, services and poverty reduction has direct material significance to community welfare.

3.6 Sources of Data and Sampling Strategy

This study uses both primary and secondary sources of data to offer better understanding of the issues. Primary data is the original fieldwork carried out in Tamale through focus group discussions with citizens, in-depth individual interviews with citizens, as well as key informant interviews with media personnel and political actors. These primary sources give direct empirical evidence on how political communication works, how citizens read and react to political messages, and what participants link communication practices to development outcomes. The secondary data include published journal articles, books, research reports and dissertations on the political communication patterns, democratic practices and development challenges in Ghana. These sources contribute to the national contextualization of Tamale findings and provide comparative perspective.

Purposive sampling methods were used to select information-rich participants in different stakeholder groups in order to appreciate understanding political communication as an interactive process, which requires looking at different perspectives (Patton, 2015). Criterion sampling was used in choosing the citizens to participate in the research with specific inclusion criteria to ensure that participants could contribute meaningful information: being registered voters of their constituencies with at least two experiences of participating in a general election and showing basic awareness of political processes and party differences; living in the constituency for at least five years to show that they are familiar with local politics; willingness to openly discuss their political communication experiences. Citizens

were identified by community gatekeepers such as local opinion leaders and community center coordinators with snowball referrals to others meeting criteria. Four participants were chosen from each constituency to represent geographical locations.

Expert sampling was used to select media personnel and political actors depending on specialized knowledge and professional experience (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants for this study were chosen according to professional roles directly related to political communication (radio hosts of political programs, journalists working on political news, editors of radio or newspaper programs), and had evidence of experience in political news coverage from Northern Ghana. Political actors were chosen from those who were actively engaged in local or regional party politics and who had shown experience in political communication and campaign activities as well as a willingness to discuss communication strategies candidly. Both groups were accessed through professional networks, formal requests to media houses and party offices and snowball referrals.

Secondary literature was drawn from systematic database searches in Google Scholar, JSTOR and African Journals Online. Search terms were a combination of concepts such as "political communication Ghana" "civic engagement Ghana" "cultural competence politics" "democratic accountability Ghana." Inclusion criteria focused on Ghana relevant empirical or theoretical contributions published between 2010 and 2024 with seminal earlier works included if foundational to theoretical frameworks.

The multi-stakeholder sampling approach is consistent with the study's conceptualization of political communication as an interactive process that needs to be studied from multiple perspectives. Citizens stand for the receivers and interpreters of messages whose interpretation processes are the central focus. Media personnel represent the message transmitters and amplifiers whose professional practices affect the ways in which political messages are offered to citizens. Political actors represent message producers and strategists whose communication choices affect what messages get into circulation. This

triangulation makes possible comprehension of the logics of message production and of reception processes, looking at the interaction between elite communication sophistication and citizen interpretive capacity.

3.7 Sample Size and Justification

The study had 26 primary participants, spread across multiple stakeholder groups as follows: 16 citizen participants (4 from each constituency) through in-depth interviews of 45-60 minutes duration; 4 focus group discussions (1 for each constituency, with 6-8 participants each); 5 media personnel through key informant interviews of 60-90 minutes duration; and 5 political actors through key informant interviews of 60-90 minutes duration.

Sample size adequacy is determined with Malterud, Siersma and Guassora's (2016) information power framework, which determines whether studies can be considered to have adequate information power based on five key dimensions. First, study aim specificity: this research has a narrow aim which is highly specific, which is to investigate civic cultural competence in Tamale's political communication context using a defined theoretical framework. Highly specific aims require smaller samples than broad explorative studies as analytical focus is clearly delimited. Second, sample specificity: the study uses very specific sampling with clear inclusion criteria for each participant type. Criterion sampling for citizens ensured that they had relevant political engagement experience and expert sampling for key informants selected individuals with specialized knowledge. Third, established theoretical framework: research is based on a strong theoretical framework, i.e. civic cultural competence model with well-defined dimensions, that guides the data collection and analysis. Established theoretical frameworks allow for smaller samples because they are focusing on dimensions that are theoretically relevant to the collection of data. Fourth, quality of dialogue: data collection emphasized in depth engagement through 45–90-minute interviews that allowed detailed exploration of participant's experience and perspectives. High quality dialogue which is characterized by depth, trust and detailed articulation

allows for smaller samples. Fifth, analysis strategy: the study uses a strategy of deductive thematic analysis (theoretical frameworks) and inductive openness (emergent patterns).

Applying this framework, the sample of 16 citizens, 5 media personnel and 5 political actors, suffices the information power considering the study aims, the specific sampling, the strong theoretical framework, the quality of dialogues and the strategy for analysis. Additionally, a measure of data saturation as conceptualized by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) was reached after the twelfth citizen interview, with subsequent interviews across all four constituencies verifying patterns already established while providing geographic representation. New themes stopped emerging and existing patterns were reinforced, which indicates adequate coverage of samples.

3.8 Data Collection Methods

Four focus group discussions were held, in each of the four constituencies, each lasting 90-120 minutes. Focus groups allowed exploring of collective sense making processes and articulation of political views in social situations (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Discussions were held mainly in Dagbani, to ensure comfort of participants and that they express themselves sincerely and in English if participants preferred or while discussing formal political concepts. Sessions were guided by broad thematic areas (experiences with political campaigns, interpretation of political messages, evaluation of political promises and the connections between political communication and development expectations) but participants were given the flexibility to bring up issues they found important. With the consent of the participants, each session was audio-recorded and complemented with extensive field notes of group dynamics, patterns of interaction, and non-verbal communication.

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were held with citizens in the four constituencies, and each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. The use of the interview format allowed for rich exploration of individual processes of meaning making which may not be apparent in group settings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Topics covered included: personal experiences of political campaigns, understanding of

political promises and their fulfillment, ways of evaluating politician credibility, recognition of manipulation techniques, understanding of political motivations, and links made between political communication and development expectations. The semi-structured format used involved prepared interview guides and flexibility to follow interesting threads that surfaced during interview conversations. Open-ended questions pushed participants to develop their experiences and interpretations in their own terms. Interviews took place in the language of the participant's preference (generally Dagbani with some English) and in places that they felt were private and comfortable (for them).

Ten interviews have been undertaken with media personnel (5) and political actors (5) with the aim of understanding the dimension of production and transmission of political communication. These interviews centered on professional experiences, communication strategies used, knowledge of audience response, perceptions of the role of the media in democratic processes, and reflections on the relationship between political communication and outcomes of development. Each interview took 60-90 minutes and was conducted in English. Media personnel interviews examined the process of political content production, editorial decision-making about political content, relationships with political actors, perceptions of audience sophistication, and perceptions about media's role as an accountable institution. Political actor interviews included with reference to: campaign communication strategies, message development processes, targeting of different sections of people, response to demands of citizens and views on relations between political communication and development delivery.

3.9 Data Collection Procedures

All interviews were carried out in comfortable and private venues of participants' choosing, to ensure confidentiality and minimise social desirabilty bias. Prior to each interview/focus group, the researcher explained the study's purpose, informed consent was obtained and permission to audio record

interviews was obtained, and confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any time were assured.

Semi-structured interview guides were developed for each participant type using the theoretical framework and research questions. Guides were pilot tested with three participants not included in the final sample with refinements made based on pilot experiences. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with the participant's consent, resulting in some 35 hours of recorded material. Field notes were kept throughout data collection covering environmental contexts, participant behaviours, non-verbal interactions, reflections and preliminary analytical observations made by the researcher. Audio recordings were professionally transcribed with word for word transcription of Dagbani content translated to English by the researcher.

3.10 Data Analysis

This study used a thematic analysis as the main method of analysis, and more precisely, in hybrid deductive-inductive method that combines theoretical guidance and empirical openness (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022). Thematic analysis refers to the systematic identification, analysis and reporting of patterns (themes) in data. The hybrid approach is an expression of the theoretical basis of a study that is still open to emergent understandings that may refine or expand the civic cultural competence framework.

The analytical component that used deduction involved the K-A-U-R framework that was developed in Chapter 2 as an initial analytical structure. This offered the categories (knowing systematic patterns, aware of real-time manipulation, knowing underlying motivations and constraints and capability to resist) that predetermine the dimensions that were of theoretical interest for the analysis. The inductive component stayed open to themes that emerge in the data that could not be assigned to predetermined themes allowing for identification of context-specific communication practices and citizen response specific to Tamale or Northern Ghana.

Analysis grounded on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase process. Phase 1 was data familiarization through repetitive reading of all transcripts after transcript and translation verification and initial observations were noted about patterns, contradictions and connections to theoretical concepts. This resulted in the generation of around 450 pages of transcript material. Phase 2 produced initial codes by systematic coding using both predetermined codes of the theoretical framework (e.g. systematic pattern recognition, real-time manipulation identification, understanding elite motivations) and emergent codes (i.e. institutional role confusion exploitation, vote-buying normalization, electoral debt servicing). Coding generated about 850 coded segments of 45 initial codes.

Phase 3 included the search for themes in an iterative process of sorting, combining and refining codes into broader themes. Related codes were collated into candidate themes in terms of the three research questions. Phase 4 reviewed themes at two levels: coded extracts within each theme were reviewed to ensure internal homogeneity and themes were reviewed against the whole dataset to ensure external heterogeneity. Phase 5 identified and named each theme clearly to represent the essence and boundaries of each, with sub-themes identified where themes had meaningful internal variation. Phase 6 involved the production of the report through building analytical narratives linking themes to research questions and theoretical frameworks by selecting compelling extracts as evidence while weaving together participant voices, thematic pattern and theoretical interpretation.

Secondary literature was analyzed using the same thematic framework as used for primary data to facilitating the process of systematic integration. Patterns found in data from the Tamale were compared with patterns documented in other Ghanaian contexts reported in the existing literature. This integration validated the point where Tamale patterns mirrored more general national dynamics, identified the point where Tamale displayed distinctive characteristics, gave theoretical basis to emergent themes, and made connections analytically between observations made at the local level and established scholarship.

3.10.1 Analytical Tools and Procedures

Data analysis was conducted manually without Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). While tools such as NVivo or Atlas.ti offer systematic coding features, the decision to conduct manual analysis was informed by three considerations. First, the relatively manageable dataset size (30 transcripts totaling approximately 450 pages) made manual analysis feasible. Second, manual analysis enabled deeper immersion in participant language, cultural nuances, and contextual meanings that automated coding might obscure. Third, the hybrid deductive-inductive approach required flexible movement between theoretical frameworks and emergent patterns, which manual analysis facilitated more effectively than predetermined CAQDAS coding structures.

The analytical process employed systematic manual procedures to ensure rigor and transparency. All transcripts were imported into Microsoft Word for coding. Initial codes were marked using comment features and highlighting, with codes organized in a separate Excel spreadsheet that tracked code definitions, frequencies, and representative quotes. Related codes were then transferred to large physical papers where they could be visually sorted, clustered, and reconfigured into candidate themes—a tactile process that enabled recognition of patterns and relationships across the dataset.

3.10.2 Application of Braun and Clarke's Six-Phase Framework

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase framework, which provided systematic procedures while accommodating the study's hybrid deductive-inductive approach.

Phase 1: Familiarizing with the Data

Data familiarization began during data collection through careful attention to participant responses, follow-up questioning, and immediate post-interview reflection notes. Following transcription and translation verification, the researcher engaged in repeated reading of all transcripts (minimum three complete readings per transcript). During these readings, initial observations were noted about recurring patterns, internal contradictions, surprising statements, and connections to theoretical concepts. For example, early familiarization revealed a pattern where citizens articulated sophisticated critiques of political manipulation in one breath, then described voting for the same politicians they criticized—an initial indication of what would later emerge as the sophistication-constraint paradox. This immersive familiarization process generated approximately 450 pages of transcript material alongside 80 pages of analytical memos capturing preliminary observations.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Systematic coding employed both predetermined codes derived from the K-A-U-R theoretical framework and emergent codes arising from the data. Predetermined codes included "systematic pattern recognition" (citizens identifying repeated tactics across electoral cycles), "real-time manipulation identification" (recognizing deceptive communication as it occurs), "understanding elite motivations" (grasping strategic purposes behind political messaging), and "resistance capacity constraints" (structural barriers to collective action).

Emergent codes arose through line-by-line analysis attentive to participant language and locally-specific phenomena. Examples include "institutional role confusion exploitation" (politicians deliberately blurring boundaries between government positions and party roles), "vote-buying normalization" (citizens treating monetary payments as expected electoral practice rather than corruption), "electoral debt servicing" (politicians framing vote-buying as repayment for past electoral support), "promise recycling tactics" (deliberate redeployment of identical unfulfilled promises across

cycles), and "meeting format manipulation" (strategic structuring of citizen engagement to prevent accountability dialogue).

The coding process generated approximately 850 coded segments organized into 45 initial codes. Each coded segment was marked in the transcript with the code name and transferred to a master coding spreadsheet that included: code name, code definition, transcript source, participant identifier, page number, and full quoted text. This systematic organization enabled subsequent retrieval and comparison of all instances of each code across the dataset.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Theme development involved iterative processes of sorting, combining, and refining codes into broader patterns meaningful for answering the research questions. Codes were printed on individual cards and physically arranged on large papers to enable visual pattern recognition. Related codes were collated into candidate themes organized around the three research questions.

For Research Question 1 (elite communication practices), codes clustered into three candidate themes: "Multi-platform communication strategies" (encompassing codes about radio programs, social media, face-to-face meetings, and strategic channel selection), "Message content patterns" (incorporating codes about promise recycling, infrastructure rhetoric, patronage messaging, and strategic ambiguity), and "Intended strategic effects" (combining codes about electoral mobilization, accountability avoidance, and loyalty maintenance).

For Research Question 2 (citizen competence levels), an unexpected pattern emerged. Codes indicating high competence across knowledge, awareness, and understanding dimensions coexisted with codes showing low resistance capacity. This clustering led to the emergence of the "sophistication-constraint paradox" as a central organizing theme—a pattern not predetermined by the theoretical framework but

arising from systematic comparison of citizen decoding capabilities against their collective action constraints.

For Research Question 3 (development implications), codes about incomplete infrastructure, service delivery failures, and resource inequities were collated with codes about how communication practices perpetuate these outcomes, generating the theme "The sophistication-constraint development trap."

This phase produced 8 candidate themes with 23 sub-themes, organized in a thematic map that visually represented relationships between themes, sub-themes, and research questions.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

Theme refinement occurred at two levels, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, coded extracts within each candidate theme were reviewed to assess internal homogeneity—whether all coded segments meaningfully cohered around the theme's central organizing concept. This process revealed that the initial candidate theme "Citizen awareness levels" was internally inconsistent, combining both descriptive awareness of political events and analytical awareness of manipulation tactics. This theme was subsequently split into "Factual political knowledge" (a sub-theme under Knowledge dimension) and "Real-time manipulation awareness" (a distinct dimension).

Second, the entire dataset was re-read against the refined themes to assess external heterogeneity—whether themes were sufficiently distinct from one another and whether important patterns in the dataset had been overlooked. This review confirmed that the major themes captured the essential patterns in the data while revealing that participant discussions of media's role had been under-coded. Additional coding was conducted on media-related segments, strengthening the "Partisan media amplification" sub-theme.

The review process also involved returning to the theoretical framework to ensure themes maintained analytical connection to the civic cultural competence dimensions while remaining grounded in participant meanings. Three candidate themes were merged where distinctions proved analytically unproductive, reducing the thematic structure from 8 to 6 major themes.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Each refined theme was clearly defined to represent its essence, scope, and boundaries. Theme names were formulated to be concise yet analytically meaningful, capturing the core pattern while signaling theoretical significance. For example, the theme "Promise Recycling Without Consequences" was refined to "Promise Recycling as Strategic Communication" to emphasize that this practice represents deliberate elite strategy rather than political incompetence or memory lapses.

Sub-themes were identified where themes contained meaningful internal variation requiring analytical distinction. For instance, the theme "Structural Constraints on Resistance Capacity" contained four sub-themes: "Organizing infrastructure deficit," "Economic vulnerability and vote-buying," "Partisan fragmentation barriers," and "Captured communication platforms." Each sub-theme was defined with clear scope, illustrative quotes, and connections to both participant accounts and theoretical concepts.

Definitions were documented in a thematic codebook that included: theme name, theme definition (2-3 sentences), scope and boundaries (what the theme includes and excludes), illustrative quotes (2-3 representative examples), sub-themes (where applicable), and analytical significance (how the theme addresses research questions and connects to theory).

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final phase involved constructing analytical narratives that weave together participant voices, thematic patterns, and theoretical interpretation to answer the research questions. For each theme, the analysis selected compelling extracts that illustrated the theme's dimensions while providing sufficient

context for reader understanding. Extracts were chosen to represent the range of perspectives within the theme (variation across participant categories, constituencies, and demographic characteristics) while foregrounding the most vivid and articulate expressions of the pattern.

Analytical narratives linked themes explicitly to research questions and theoretical frameworks. Rather than simply presenting themes as descriptive categories, the analysis demonstrated how patterns revealed in the themes address theoretical questions about political communication culture, civic cultural competence dimensions, and human development implications. Participant quotes were analyzed rather than merely presented, with interpretation explaining the theoretical significance of participant statements and showing how multiple voices triangulate to support analytical claims.

The chapter structure in Chapter 4 reflects this analytical approach: Section 4.2 presents elite communication practices (RQ1), Section 4.3 presents citizen competence patterns (RQ2), and Section 4.4 analyzes development implications (RQ3), with the sophistication-constraint paradox serving as the integrating analytical concept across all three sections.

3.11 Assessing Civic Cultural Competence

Civic cultural competence assessment was based on the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2, where it was investigated how the participants demonstrated different levels of knowledge, awareness, understanding, and resistance capabilities in terms of political communication practices. Assessment was continued in the form of participant discourse analysis instead of using predetermined measurement scales, and this allowed the interpretive-pragmatic philosophical orientation of the study to be preserved, while at the same time allowing for the systematic assessment of the variation in competence.

The assessment framework was devoted to finding evidences for four dimensions in the way participants discussed about political communication. Knowledge competence was measured in the form of participants recognising systematicity of political behaviour as opposed to treatment of

political failures as isolated incidents or understanding of how institutional role confusion operates strategically, and of patterns of resource allocation between electoral and development purposes. Awareness competence was assessed based on people's ability to recognise manipulation in real-life political encounters, recognition when emotional appeals are replacing policy substance, and understanding of coordination between the various communication platforms. Understanding competence was measured in terms of participants understanding the underlying motives of elites, outside of surface behaviors; an awareness of structural constraints on political alternatives; and awareness of how citizen behavior and political manipulation could lead to mutually reinforcing cycles.

Resistance capabilities though distinguish analytically in the framework, was mainly studied as not in terms of individual attribute but in terms of structural capability. Analysis was centered on how people understood the possibilities of collective action, identified barriers to organizing, and recognized constraints that prevented individual awareness from leading into collective resistance. During data analysis, the responses of the participants were systematically examined for indications of each of the competence dimensions. Responses demonstrating sophisticated competence were included such as identifying recurring patterns across electoral cycles, identifying specific manipulation techniques with examples of such, understanding strategic logics driving political behaviour and understanding structural causation rather than just identifying individual causation. This assessment was again interpretive and qualitative and not quantitative measurement. The aim was variation in the ability to make meaning and to discern patterns in the way that different competence levels manifested in the participant's discourse.

3.12 Ensuring Rigor

The rigor of qualitative research was addressed following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Kekeya, 2021). Credibility was

ensured by triangulation by data sources (focus groups, individual citizen interviews, media personnel interviews, political actor interviews, secondary literature) and methods (group discussions, individual interviews, document analysis). Member checking was done informally during the data collection process, in which the researcher summarized and confirmed the responses of participants. Profound engagement during four months of fieldwork allowed to build rapport and develop deep contextual understanding. Peer debriefing with thesis supervisors contributed to exogenous perspectives on emergent interpretations.

Transferability has been addressed through thick description of research contexts, participant characteristics and analytical processes. Detailed description of Tamale's political, cultural, and economic characteristics allows readers to judge similarity to other situations. The integration of secondary literature on the broader patterns in Ghana allows for the determination of the relationship of the Tamale findings to other contexts in Ghana. Dependability was ensured by the detailed documentation of the methodological procedures in sufficient detail for process assessment. Confirmability was ensured through a grounding of findings in participant voices and captured evidence. Extensive use of direct quotations shows that conclusions are drawn from data. Reflexive awareness of researcher positionality was kept through reflective memo-writing throughout research.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

This study complied with established principles of ethics in social research, with special focus on considerations arising from the sensitivities of political research. Ethical approval was sought from the University for Development Studies Research Ethics Committee before conducting fieldwork. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants in a two-stage process, which involved explaining the study purposes, procedures, and potential risks, and participants rights, verbally in language that participants preferred, and then in writing using informed consent forms that were provided in English and Dagbani. Participants were clearly informed of their right to withdraw at any

time without consequence, to refuse to answer particular questions, and to ask that recording be stopped.

Anonymity and confidentiality had a particular focus in light of the political nature of research. Participants were assigned alphanumeric codes instead of using names. All identifying information was removed from transcripts. Data was securely stored and access was limited to the research team. Given Northern Ghana's relatively tight knit communities, extra care was taken to ensure that participants could not be identified through combinations of characteristics mentioned in reporting. Special ethical consideration was taken to protect participants who discussed sensitive political topics. The researcher stressed guarantees of confidentiality and avoided enquiry about specific politicians where there might be a risk arising.

Cultural sensitivity was preserved in the research. Interviews were conducted in participants preferred language, being aware of cultural norms in respectful communication. Traditional protocols were followed when accessing communities including courtesy calls to chiefs and community leaders. The researcher is a Northerner who knew the local cultural contexts and was able to maneuver through such protocols in appropriate ways while maintaining analytical distance required for rigorous research.

3.14 Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the methodological framework for studying the topics of civic cultural competence and political communication in the context of democracy in Ghana. The study takes on an interpretive-pragmatic philosophical orientation, as political communication meanings are seen to be socially created and as pragmatic elements can be included that allow for a systematic assessment of competence. This philosophical foundation recognizes the tension between interpretation of participant meanings and making analytical judgments about differential capacity and reflects methodological maturity.

The research uses qualitative approach that is implemented via the multi-site design targeting the four constituencies of the Tamale Metropolitan Area using both intensive data collection (primary) and extensive (secondary) literature. Twenty-six primary participants were selected with purposive sampling strategies, 16 citizens by criterion sampling, 5 media personnel and 5 political actors by expert sampling with sample size justified based on information power framework. Data collection methods were focus group discussions, in-depth individual interviews, and key informant interviews, which produced about 450 pages of transcript material.

Analysis followed the six-phase process of Braun and Clarke, using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach that allowed for both theoretical guidance to analysis (using the K-A-U-R framework) and openness to emerging patterns. Civic cultural competence was measured by the systematic analysis of participant discourse to ascertain dimensions of knowledge, awareness, understanding and resistance, while preserving interpretive integrity while allowing for the analysis of the difference in competence. Rigour was ensured through triangulation of multiple data sources and methods, thick contextual description, detailed methodological documentation and grounding of findings in participant voices. Ethical procedures addressed informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, cultural sensitivity and specific protections required to conduct political research. This methodological framework offers strong foundation for exploring the reasons for democratic participation failure to translate into development accountability despite sophisticated citizen awareness and studying the communicative mechanisms and structural constraints producing this paradox of sophistication and constraint.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings the study. The analysis combines primary data gathered from focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with citizens and key informant interviews of media personnel and political actors, and secondary literature that deals with broad patterns in Ghanaian democracy and comparative Africa.

The research examined how politicians organise their communication in order to reach citizens, what are the levels of civic cultural competence of citizens in deciphering these messages and what are the implications for development arising from this relationship of communication. Data collection was done using 16 citizen participants in four constituencies (Tamale South, Central, North and Saganarigu) through individual interview, four focus group discussions with 6-8 participants each, five interviews with media personnel and five interviews of political actors. This multi-stakeholder approach made possible the analysis of political communication as an interactive process from many standpoints - message producers (political actors), transmitters (media personnel), and receivers and interpreters (citizens).

Table 1: Summary of Study Participants and Coding

Participant Category	Code	Number	Duration	Method
Citizens (In-depth Interviews)	C1 - C16	16	45-60 minutes	Individual Interviews
Focus Group Discussions	FGD1 - FGD4	4 groups (6-8 participants each)	90-120 minutes	Group Discussions
Media Personnel	M1 - M5	5	60-90 minutes	Key Informant Interviews
Political Actors	P1 - P5	5	60-90 minutes	Key Informant Interviews
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	**-**	**26 participants**	**-**	**-**

Source: (Constructed by the Author, 2025)

The results show a striking paradox at the core of the political communication culture in Tamale: citizens have a sophisticated awareness of political manipulation: they recognize recycled promises, manipulation of strategic role ambiguity, vote-buying as substitute for development, and elite self-interest, but are at the same time structurally unable to translate this awareness into collective action that produces development accountability. This sophistication-constraint paradox is manifest in clear ways across all three dimensions of individual civic cultural competence (knowledge, awareness, and understanding), but the fourth dimension (resistance capabilities) is almost totally absent as a result of structural barriers such as lack of organizing infrastructure, strategic patronage silencing, partisan divides precluding class-based solidarity, and captured accountability institutions.

These patterns seen in Tamale reflect larger dynamics recorded in the democracy of Ghana but with local specificities imposed by the political economy, ethnic configurations and problems of development in Northern Ghana. The chapter shows how elite communication strategies evolve to sustain electoral support without the need for development accountability, how citizens at different levels of competence deal with these evolving communication strategies, and why high political participation at the same time as highly sophisticated political awareness is insufficient to produce infrastructure provision, delivery of services, or poverty reduction in practice.

The chapter continues in three basic sections relating to the research questions. Section 4.2 focuses on the practices of elite political communication by analysing the modes, content, and intended effects of the way politicians communicate with citizens in Tamale. Section 4.3 measures citizen levels of civic cultural competence based on the K-A-U-R (Knowledge, Awareness, Understanding, Resistance) model created in Chapter 2 and finds that there is differential capacity across these dimensions and between segments of the population. Section 4.4 analyzes the human development implications of the patterns identified explaining the mechanisms by which the sophistication-constraint paradox produces democracy's failure to deliver development outcomes despite three decades of competitive electoral

politics. Throughout these parts, the analysis draws comparative insights from secondary literature to place the Tamale findings in the context of the political communication culture in Ghana more broadly and to understand why patterns that are detected here differ from successful subaltern resistance movements documented in Kenya, Senegal, and elsewhere on the continent.

4.2 Elite Political Communication Practices: Maintaining Support Without Delivering Development

This section addresses the first research question: What is the mode, content, and intended effect of the communication of Ghanaian politicians? The analysis focuses on the ways in which the political elites in Tamale organize their communication in order to generate and sustain electoral support without making binding development commitments. Three subsections examine the channels of communication and strategic time frame used by politicians, the specific patterns of content in their communication, and the intended effects such practices are intended to produce.

4.2.1 Communication Modes and Channels: Multi-Platform Strategy with Controlled Access

Politicians in Tamale use a sophisticated multimodal communication strategy that mixes traditional mass media with digital communication platforms and face-to-face communication. Participants identified four main channels: radio, television, social media and direct personal meetings. All channels have systematic patterns that aim to maximize message dissemination by elites with minimum chances for citizens to question.

Radio was the most relevant channel among the participants, in line with studies of the central role of radio in Northern Ghana (Gadjanova et al., 2022). In the case of Van Gyampo (2017) where parties have designated communicators who systematically post policies in various platforms. This coordination allows messages to be disseminated rapidly and at the same time creates redundancy to ensure messages receive multiple exposures among the audiences. One focus group participant noted:

I largely follow political issues through radio (FGD1).

A media professional elaborated:

> *The parties usually make choices of who appears on their behalf on all of our political programs... So, in fact, three days in a week, they come to talk. So generally, whenever they come here, they want to talk on behalf of their party regardless of the issues you present for discussion (M1).*

Television provides visual and emotional dimensions audio cannot convey. Van Gyampo (2017) observes partisan discussions prioritize party defense over development dialogue, creating spectacle engaging audiences while deflecting from substantive policy evaluation. One focus group participant described:

> *On the TV, sometimes discussions can become so intense to the extent that the panelists will start using abusive words intended to damage each other's reputations. Sometimes they get angry at each other and you the one watching will even get very scared about what will happen next. So much emotions are used doing some of these political talks (FGD3).*

A citizen expressed skepticism about developmental value of such performances:

> *That is one of the reasons I rarely listen to radio. Because these people are not truthful and they will do anything to defend their party. These kinds of discussions do not serve the right purpose in bringing out the real development issues (C8).*

Social media platforms enable both elite coordination and potential citizen mobilization. Van Gyampo (2017) documents how parties designate people posting policies systematically on social media. A political operative revealed coordinated infrastructure parties maintain:

We have social media communicators. They are there, the parties aware... They are in their small corners. So, if a news portal let's say Joy News put up something, if it is sensationalized to paint the government black you have to go there. So, you see that the pro NDC members, supporters who will go to that platform and call them out (P2).

AI-enabled deepfakes represent concerning developments. Gadjanova et al. (2022) document how misinformation crosses digital divides through "pavement media," creating information hierarchies. A media professional warned:

The use of AI now to generate videos, people go about putting information attributed to people which is not their best... they can implant certain things and create an impression that this person is going around doing something bad. The level of manipulation that can now be put out there I think it's very dangerous for our communication in terms of quality (M4).

Face-to-face meetings concentrate during elections and prevent accountability dialogue. Van Gyampo et al. (2024) document how manifestos create promise platforms yet encounters avoid binding commitments. A political operative explained strategic targeting:

When you are going, you have to consider your target audience... You are looking at what would the people want to hear? So, you take advantage of things that they yearn for so much. So, you capitalize on it. Even if you don't have any idea as to how to fix it (P3).

Participants described systematic barriers. A focus group member explained:

The way they organize their meetings with us, we are not given the chance to ask questions. The time we meet them is election time, during this period they are very busy... When they finally arrive sometimes at odd hours like 12:00am going, they will say they do not have time and that he will just spend 10-15 minutes with you (FGD4).

The communication infrastructure is a sophisticated system of elite message control with democratic engagement make-believe. Multiple platforms provide for message saturation, emotional formats create spectacle over substance, social media enables micro-targeting and hierarchies coordinate response while face-to-face meetings provide visibility without accountability. This is an example of Brooke's (2016) paradox: instruments that in theory allow the citizen challenge, offer elites unprecedented capacity for manipulation.

4.2.2 Message Content: Promises Without Commitments, Patronage Without Development

The content of political communication in Tamale shows some systematic features in an effort to produce electoral support and to avoid binding development commitments. Analysis shows four interrelated content strategies used in the recycling of empty promises focused on infrastructure and services, strategic role ambiguity avoiding accountability, vote buying and material distribution as an alternative to development and personalized patronage targeting voices of influence to avoid collective organizing. These patterns work in concert with each other to sustain what Ayelazuno (2019) describes as the paradox of continued loyalty in spite of governmental failure.

Recycled promises are the backbone of political messaging with politicians repeatedly using the same old promises in the election cycle, despite systematic failure to deliver. Brierley and Kramon (2020) document how parties call on voters through rallies, canvassing, and gifts all over Africa, with the making of promises being central campaign strategy. Yet Van Gyampo et al. (2024) see manifestos form a platform for promises that hardly translate to implementation in settings where programmatic factors should influence development. A focus group participant explained the pattern:

> *Usually the message is about their promises. For instance, some of them will meet with the youth and start talking about employment and how they will solve our development needs. So, it is usually about promises to bring development to the communities. But when they get to*

power these promises are rarely achieved. Every election time they come back with the same promises (FGD1).

A citizen provided specific example of systematic promise recycling:

In this community, the major development needs that we want is the source of water. Source of water. And every blessed election season, they will say they are going to do A and B to fix this problem. Every election season, this comes out. But it's not been fixed (C1).

Another focus group member characterized broken promises morally rather than as policy failures:

I think these fake promises by political elites is everywhere across the world, but the Ghanaian one is the worse. At least if you lie your way to power, do something that resembles what you promise to do. This is thievery (FGD2).

Strategic role ambiguity prevents accountability by obscuring institutional boundaries during campaigns while invoking them post-election. Politicians promise infrastructure provision knowing constituents cannot distinguish MP from central government responsibilities. A focus group participant explained this pattern:

Sometimes they will come back to give the excuse that it is the government that gives jobs, he does not have the power to do that. But this is not what he told us before we voted for him. During campaigns the responsibility of each political actor is blurred—they are not honest about what they can do and cannot do (FGD2).

Another participant provided specific example:

You will often hear our MPs saying that their power is elsewhere, that it is the central government that is in charge of providing jobs. But this will never come out of his mouth during campaigns. Like this roads and water issue they will come and say they will be able to

do it when given the power, but later they will say it is the central government responsibility (C2).

Vote buying and material distribution function as development substitutes, providing immediate benefits precluding sustained accountability demands. Gyasi and Torsu (2024) document vote-selling emerges from unfulfilled campaign promises combined with politicians' readiness to spend and voters' willingness to exploit electoral moments. Kramon (2017) observes vote-selling becomes rationalized as "collect before they come to power" due to systematic promise-breaking. A focus group participant described the practice:

Another issue is vote buying. Sometimes they use money, other times they buy cloths and even cooking ingredients like Maggie, salt, rice. Just anything they can give to the poor for their votes (FGD3).

A citizen explained how terminology evolved to legitimate the practice:

This time around, that is the order of the day. It's very common. This time around, they call it transportation (C3).

A political operative acknowledged the cynical calculation underlying vote buying strategies:

You know we the politicians we have made the people poor. I don't know whether to say we have deliberately made them poor just to exploit their poverty. If somebody is already poor, and I also understand his problem that for him to get money is difficult, what is GHS20 or GHS50 to him? It means a lot. So, you are taking advantage of his situation (P1).

A media professional explained vote buying's developmental implications:

Absolutely, it is not a very good recipe for development. If you look at the fact that when they did the population housing census back in 2021, the conclusion that came out was that even

at the individual level, there were a lot of uncompleted structures in Ghana and at the governmental level. So, you visit a community or district and there are a lot of incomplete government projects and the reason for this is simple: politicians have designed the mechanism such that they get into elections, start some project to make you believe that if you vote for them, they'll complete it. Once they win the election, they leave it and wait until another election year (M2).

Personalized patronage targeting influential voices prevents collective organizing by creating individual incentives for silence. A citizen described how accepting benefits produces political constraint:

The reason behind it is that the promise that he made to you and he couldn't fulfil it to you. When you have a naming ceremony and you just do your small tactics and get in touch with him, he will give you something. So, your mouth will become shut. You can't talk of the promise. And again, he will single out prominent people in the community. Those who have voices in the community and whatever they say will stand. And then they will now be giving them gifts that they themselves cannot reject. So, how can you talk? (C4).

These content patterns work in synergy with one another to ensure electoral support without accountability on development. Promise recycling helps build expectation of government action while at the same time leaving governmental failure without attribution. Vote buying offers tangible benefits that are immediate in nature and crowd out demands for sustained infrastructure provision. Personalized patronage silences potential leaders of resistance before collective organizing takes place. Together, these strategies facilitate what Ayelazuno (2019) calls electoral democracy's attenuation of subaltern resistance - citizens recognize manipulation in sophisticated yet structural ways and are nevertheless structurally unable to demand accountability in spite of their awareness.

4.2.3 Intended Effects: Generating Loyalty While Avoiding Accountability

The communication practices that have been documented above have clear strategic purposes: to generate and maintain electoral support while avoiding binding development commitments that require resource allocation and/or governmental performance. Participants in the different categories all pointed to elite self-interest as the main motivation leading to political communication, with development rhetoric serving as the instrumental tool for gaining power rather than indicating any real policy intent. This section analyzes the combination of the multi-platform messaging strategy, the recycled promises, the vote buying and the silencing of patronage with the goal of securing the desired outcome of electoral victory without the ensuing accountability obligations.

Electoral mobilization stands out distinctly as the overriding goal of political communication. Brierley and Kramon (2020) report on how parties employ rallies, canvassing and handouts in a strategic manner to mobilise voters during campaigns, with each of the methods calibrated to optimise electoral returns. However, there was a marked difference among participants between mobilizing efforts and actual intentions of development. A focus group participant explained:

I think they are here for their own selfish interest. That is to get power and maintain that power so that they can have better life for themselves and their children, not necessarily to bring development to the communities (FGD4).

A political operative confirmed this electoral focus candidly:

> *No, it's all about winning the elections. So, you see NPP just lost election because the people were tired. Now they are thinking about how to win the next election. They are doing reorganization. They want to get their flag bearer. In the end, all we think about is how to win the next elections (P2).*

The communication strategies documented earlier function systematically to maintain this focus on electoral victory while avoiding development accountability. Strategic ambiguity prevents citizens from attributing responsibility for failures to specific officials, while recycled promises create perpetual expectation without requiring delivery. A citizen articulated how this dynamic reproduces itself:

> *I think we made them to be lying to us. Because, if I say we made them to be lying to us, you know, whatever that he is saying, we have precedents. It is the same promises they keep recycling, but they still get the needed support. If they lie and it did not work, they will stop using lie or lying to us (C5).*

Media platforms amplify this accountability avoidance by prioritizing partisan defense over development dialogue. A media professional described the systematic nature of this dynamic:

> *So, they'll be running away from accountability from the majority of Ghanaians, who are these ordinary people, looking for them to kind of lead them somewhere and tell you that, when your party was in power you did worse things. So, what we have done is not even close to what you did. So, there is no sincerity if you ask me in the manner of communication that political parties do. They come and all what they do is justify what their party has done whether it is good or bad (M3).*

Another media professional explained how partisan loyalty pressures prevent accountability messaging even when communicators privately acknowledge governmental failures:

> *There are even sometimes off air you are having a chat with them; they'll tell you that what this our member has done is not good. But they will never say it on air especially when they know that they're engaging with the public, and the public are listening. They can be sincere to you*

one on one, but what they want the public to know is that they are behind this act or person (M1).

Vote buying and patronage serve crucial functions in fragmenting potential opposition and preventing collective accountability demands from emerging. Lynch et al. (2022) document how elite coordination infrastructure enables rapid synchronized messaging that atomized citizens cannot match. A political operative explained the poverty exploitation underlying this strategy:

You know we the politicians we have made the people poor. I don't know whether to say we have deliberately made them poor just to exploit their poverty. If somebody is already poor, and I also understand his problem that for him to get money is difficult, what is GHS20 or GHS50 to him? It means a lot. So, you are taking advantage of his situation (P1).

A citizen confirmed how accepting individual benefits precludes collective demands:

For those small groups during election time are usually formed to get something small from the politicians. For them they have already made up their mind who to vote, but they are just calling the politicians to give them something small (C6).

Participants demonstrated sophisticated awareness that these communication practices undermine development outcomes. A media professional articulated the systemic developmental harm:

It is not a very good recipe for development. You visit a community or district and there are a lot of incomplete government projects and the reason for this is simple: politicians have designed the mechanism such that they get into elections, start some project to make you believe that if you vote for them, they'll complete it. Once they win the election, they leave it and wait until another election year. No matter how pressing the development need maybe. In some cases, it also leads to big projects for communities which they did not necessarily want. So, in terms of human development, it doesn't help (M2).

Yet this sophisticated awareness coexists with continued electoral support for the same politicians citizens recognize as manipulative. A citizen explained this apparent contradiction:

> *Some get that they are just manipulating them, but others are not getting. Because let's just take last election for instance, people were making pronouncements that they could see what was happening. But yes, because of the political figure in them, I belong to NDC, I want NDC to be in power. So, whatever be the case, even if my people are not doing well, I want them to be in power. Those with these party identities just do not want their parties to be in opposition (C7).*

The intended effects of the political communication practices of Tamale therefore crystallize well: maximization of electoral support and minimization of development accountability. Multi-platform messaging helps in message saturation, recycled promises help in perpetual expectation without delivering requirements, strategic ambiguity means no responsibility is attributed, vote buying helps in giving immediate benefits crowding out sustained demands, and patronage helps in silencing potential leaders before collective organizing comes up. These strategies are successful precisely because they make use of rather than require citizen incompetence. Sophisticated awareness about the unreliability of promises, the strategic use of role ambiguity, the unreliability of vote buying as a development tool, and the silencing of voice through patronage is insufficient to spark collective resistance in situations of translation failure from individual to organized campaigns of accountability when structural barriers such as deficits in infrastructure provision, partisan fragmentation, institutional capture, economic vulnerability prevent translation from the individual to organized campaigns of accountability.

4.3 Citizen Civic cultural competence: Decoding Elite Messages

The sophisticated political communication behavior that can be observed in Section 4.2, such as multi-platform messages coordination, empty promise copying, strategic role ambiguity, vote buying, and

patronage silencing, leads to a very important question: are citizens culturally competent enough to decode these elite manipulation tactics? The classical theory of civic culture, as developed by Almond and Verba (1963), holds that long term elite manipulation is an indication of lack of knowledge of citizens, and failures in political socialization leaves populations susceptible to deception. This framework, applied to the political communication environment faced by Tamale, would hypothesize that continuous development accountability failures are as a result of the fact that citizens do not have the factual knowledge, critical awareness, or systemic understanding to identify elite strategies and to demand true responsiveness. Nevertheless, the empirical research based on the K-A-U-R (Knowledge-Awareness-Understanding-Resistance) framework demonstrates the paradoxical tendency that puts these deficit-based explanations to the challenge.

The Tamale citizens are high in terms of civic cultural competence in terms of knowledge, awareness and understanding aspects. They have precise factual information concerning political actors, institutions, and processes; they see the manipulation strategies in action, not in retrospect; and they can explain complex causal reasons why elite strategies are effective even when citizens notice them. This level of sophistication is evident in the demographic categories and groups of stakeholders, as media professionals and political operatives have validated citizen competence, as opposed to crying foul about ignorance. But this wisdom-consciousness-insight refinement is coupled with lack or gross restriction of resistant powers. Structural barriers render translation of individual understanding into collective demands of accountability: lack of infrastructure organization, silencing through patronage, cross-party fragmentation hindering the coordination, as well as economic vulnerability enabling short-term gain acceptance at long-term development cost.

This part records what I refer to as the sophistication-constraint paradox: citizens demonstrate civic cultural competence which the civic culture theory identifies as the precondition to democratic accountability, but structural constraints make this competence rather inadequate in creating the

resistance capabilities which would translate the level of awareness into development result. Section 4.3.1 lays down citizen sophistication in the knowledge, awareness and understanding levels. In section 4.3.2, the rationale of the inability of sophistication to be an adequate factor is discussed, with four barriers to resistance capacity in the presence of high cognitive competence being examined.

4.3.1 Sophisticated Decoding: High Knowledge-Awareness-Understanding

In Tamale, citizens have a lot of factual information regarding the political system of Ghana, and this goes against the belief that the continued experience of development failure is a consequence of lack of information. Conroy-Krutz (2013) reports about the same tendencies in Kenya where voters exhibited advanced levels of political process-related knowledge even though they still supported the non-performing incumbents, indicating the need to explain competence-outcome disconnects not only by knowledge gaps but also through the spectrum of possible alternative explanations. Through Afrobarometer surveys, Mattes and Bratton (2007) note that Africans citizens are becoming more politically informed than established democracies, but this information is highly unrelated to the democratic consolidation results. Citizens in Tamale demonstrate four different types of knowledge; institutional knowledge defining governmental roles and responsibilities, historical knowledge about electoral trends and election results, procedural knowledge about campaign and voting procedures, and actor knowledge that defined particular politicians and political affiliations.

The institutional knowledge was especially advanced in terms of role demarcation between MPs and the central government. Although Section 4.2.2 reported the way politicians politically negotiate these boundaries during their campaigns, citizens expressed clear knowledge on formal divisions of institutions. A citizen explained:

> *I think we made them to be lying to us. Because, if I say we made them to be lying to us, you know, whatever that he is saying, we have precedents. It is the same promises they keep recycling, but they still get the needed support. Now there are several radio stations in*

Tamale, we can be educated on the role of each political actor in bringing development. So, when an MP comes to talk about any issue, you know if it is out of his power or role. The information is out there, but people will not try to understand this thing (C5).

This statement demonstrates institutional knowledge—distinguishing MP from central government responsibilities—combined with metacognitive awareness that information availability does not guarantee utilization. Another focus group participant provided specific example:

You will often hear our MPs saying that their power is elsewhere, that it is the central government that is in charge of providing jobs. But this will never come out of his mouth during campaigns. Like these roads and water issues they will come and say they will be able to do it when given the power, but later they will say it is the central government's responsibility (FGD1).

Historical knowledge manifested through references to past electoral cycles and pattern recognition across time. A media professional confirmed this citizen competence:

Yeah, absolutely. So, the key issue here I look at it in two folds. Number one, you know, in the past we used to have this culture of appointing influential people in our communities as polling agents or party representatives. These people, they were the mobilizers. But now, I think the level of political awareness and consciousness of the average Ghanaian, especially in the urban centers, has improved significantly. People are now asking questions. People are now demanding accountability (M3).

This media professional's observation—that "political awareness and consciousness has improved significantly" with citizens "now asking questions" and "demanding accountability"—directly contradicts deficit-based explanations while simultaneously acknowledging the paradox: awareness

increases yet systematic accountability remains absent. A political operative provided similar assessment, noting changing citizen capacity:

> *You see, some are able to, as I mentioned, some are becoming sophisticated. If you do it to them once and the next time—one thing about the electorates is that even if they see the politicians as the same, they still have limited options. But they are learning (P4).*

The political operative's own admission that citizens "are becoming sophisticated" and "are learning" attests to competence development from the elite perspective, while at the same time admitting structural contraptions ("limited options") that prevent sophistication from translating into changed elite behavior. This knowledge base institutional role understanding, or historical pattern recognition, or procedural awareness is a foundation for the levels of awareness and understanding documented next.

Beyond factual knowledge, citizens exhibit sophisticated awareness - the ability to identify the tactics of manipulation in real-time, rather than just in retrospect. Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) report on the development of "manipulation literacy" among citizens of competitive authoritarian regimes, which is the ability to spot electoral manipulation strategies as they occur rather than needing external verification. Resnick (2014) finds similar trends in African urban centers, where citizens engage in "strategic voting" that shows awareness of the tactics of elites but without necessarily having the capacity to change elite behavior. Lynch et al. (2022) state that voters in Kenya are aware of ethnic appeals as strategic mobilization rather than being expressions of actual ethnic preferences but this is not enough to disrupt ethnic voting patterns. In Tamale, the citizens presented five different types of awareness: promise recycling awareness, vote buying awareness as a strategic manipulation, role ambiguity awareness as a deliberate manipulation technique, media capture awareness, and patronage silencing mechanism awareness.

Promise recycling awareness manifested through explicit recognition that politicians deploy identical commitments across electoral cycles. A citizen explained:

> *In this community, the major development need that we want is the source of water. Source of water. And every blessed election season, they will say they are going to do A and B to fix this problem. Every election season, this comes out. But it's not been fixed. That is one. Two, our road network is very bad. And that one, I hardly hear them even speak about it because we ourselves, we don't communicate that to them. But for the water, we always talk about it. Even in the last elections he came to meet some women's group here, that was the major problem that they discussed (C1).*

This statement demonstrates not simple complaint but sophisticated pattern recognition: the citizen identifies promise recycling ("every blessed election season"), distinguishes addressed versus ignored issues (water promises versus road silence), and recognizes strategic response to constituency demands (water discussed because "we always talk about it"). A focus group participant characterized this pattern morally:

> *I think these fake promises by political elites is everywhere across the world, but the Ghanaian one is the worse. At least if you lie your way to power, do something that resembles what you promise to do. But what we see is that they just go silent. This is thievery (FGD2).*

Vote buying awareness demonstrated recognition that material distribution constitutes strategic manipulation rather than genuine development investment or cultural obligation. A citizen explained the euphemistic terminology evolution:

> *This time around, that is the order of the day. It's very common. Even with those, you see they are following politics based on party colours or chieftaincy issues. This time around, even if*

they know they will vote for you, you have to get something from them. They call it transportation (C3).

Media capture awareness proved particularly sophisticated, with citizens distinguishing partisan messaging from development journalism. A citizen explained media skepticism:

That is one of the reasons I rarely listen to radio. Because these people are not truthful and they will do anything to defend their party. Just see how things were difficult last year and the NPP people were very arrogant. On the panels they will be defending all sort of unreasonable things, which is not fair. These kinds of discussions do not serve the right purpose in bringing out the real development issues. The party boys are forced to defend the party no matter what (C8).

Patronage silencing mechanism recognition demonstrated understanding that individual benefits create voice constraints. A citizen articulated the silencing dynamic:

The reason behind it is that the promise that he made to you and he couldn't fulfil it to you. When you have a naming ceremony and you just do your small tactics and get in touch with him, he will give you something. So, your mouth will become shut. You can't talk of the promise. And again, he will single out prominent people in the community. Those who have voices in the community and whatever they say will stand. And then they will now be giving them gifts that they themselves cannot reject. So, how can you talk? (C4).

This level of awareness, that there is promise recycling, vote buying as strategic manipulation, capturing the media and silencing mechanisms of patronage, is sophisticated real-time decoding, not post-hoc rationalization. Citizens don't need outside validation to detect manipulation, they recognize the tactics as they are happening. Yet as the last quote implies ("how can you talk?"), awareness is insufficient if there are structural constraints which preclude translation to resistance. This leads to the

level of understanding where citizens show causal reasoning as to why recognized manipulation is successful despite awareness.

The most sophisticated competence level is the understanding of - articulation of causal explanations of the reason why the manipulation succeeds despite the recognition - systemic rather than descriptive analysis. Whitfield (2018) describes the construction of "political economy literacy" by citizens of Ghana, who explain the behavior of government in terms of analyzing the structure of incentives, not moral character. Abdulai and Hickey (2016) note that citizens in Northern Ghana do articulate sophisticated theories about the dynamics of elite-citizen bargaining and acknowledge how poverty constraint provides elite leeway while at the same time limiting resistance from citizens. Ayelazuno (2019) argues African citizens demonstrate what he calls "subaltern consciousness"-that is, sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms of domination coexisting with limited capacity of resistance. In Tamale, citizens demonstrated four types of understanding: elite incentive structure comprehension on why politicians are more interested in power than in developing their countries, poverty exploitation logic recognition on why vote buying works, institutional failure understanding on accountability lack, and systemic reproduction understanding on persistence of the pattern.

Elite incentive structure understanding turned out to be amazingly sophisticated. Rather than individual flaws in the characters, citizens defined and explained elite behavior in structural terms. A focus group participant explained:

> *I think they are here for their own selfish interest. That is to get power and maintain that power so that they can have better life for themselves and their children, not necessarily to bring development to the communities (FGD4).*

This statement articulates political economy logic: politicians maximize power and personal benefit rather than development outcomes because institutional structures create no binding incentives for responsiveness. A political operative confirmed this understanding from elite perspective:

> *No, it's all about winning the elections. So, you see NPP just lost election because the people were tired. Now they are thinking about how to win the next election. They are doing reorganization. They want to get their flag bearer. In the end, all we think about is how to win the next elections (P2).*

Poverty exploitation understanding demonstrated sophisticated grasp of how economic vulnerability enables manipulation. Citizens did not merely complain about poverty but articulated its strategic function in elite calculation. A political operative provided unusually candid explanation:

> *You know we the politicians we have made the people poor. I don't know whether to say we have deliberately made them poor just to exploit their poverty. If somebody is already poor, and I also understand his problem that for him to get money is difficult, what is GHS20 or GHS50 to him? It means a lot. So, you are taking advantage of his situation (P1).*

This political operative's statement—acknowledging politicians "have made the people poor" to "exploit their poverty" and "take advantage" of economic vulnerability—represents political economy analysis citizens themselves articulated. A citizen explained the rationality of accepting immediate benefits despite long-term costs:

> *Yes, because those money that he's giving to you, where is the money coming from? So, if he should be given nod to lead, he has to service all those money back. It could happen that maybe he also took loan to do those things. So, all those things he's going to think about how to get his money back. When he gets into power, he has to service those loans and pay back all the monies he has spent. He's not really going for the people (C6).*

Systemic reproduction understanding connected individual tactics to broader patterns explaining persistence. A media professional articulated how elite strategies systematically undermine development:

> *Absolutely, it is not a very good recipe for development. If you look at the fact that when they did the population housing census back in 2021, the conclusion that came out was that even at the individual level, there were a lot of uncompleted structures in Ghana and at the governmental level. So, you visit a community or district and there are a lot of incomplete government projects and the reason for this is simple: politicians have designed the mechanism such that they get into elections, start some project to make you believe that if you vote for them, they'll complete it. Once they win the election, they leave it and wait until another election year. No matter how pressing the development need may be (M2).*

Finally, citizens demonstrated understanding of how partisan fragmentation enables elite manipulation. A citizen explained loyalty persistence despite manipulation recognition:

> *Some get that they are just manipulating them, but others are not getting. Because let's just take last election for instance, people were making pronouncements that they could see what was happening. But yes, because of the political figure in them, I belong to NDC, I want NDC to be in power. So, whatever be the case, even if my people are not doing well, I want them to be in power. Those with these party identities just do not want their parties to be in opposition (C7).*

This is a level of understanding which includes articulation of elite incentive structures, the logic of exploitation of poverty, reproduction mechanisms of systemic oppression and the partisan fragmentation effects, sophisticated political economy analysis, not simple frustration or moral judgment. Citizens articulate the reasons for the success of manipulation despite the recognition,

relating the tactics of the individual to the structural limitations. Yet as the last quote suggests, knowing why partisan fragmentation makes it amenable to manipulation does not give you capacity to overcome it. This opens the way to Section 4.3.2 where you are asked why a high knowledge-awareness-understanding is not enough to generate the resistance capabilities.

4.3.2 Constraint Without Resistance: The Organizing Capacity Gap

The sophisticated knowledge-awareness-understanding documented under Section 4.3.1 gives rise to an important question - if citizens have the competences to decode elite manipulation, to recognize tactics in real-time, and to articulate causal explanation for the success of manipulation, why is this sophistication not translated into resistance capabilities that would generate development accountability? Classical civic culture theory predicts that the better informed a citizen is, the less likely they are to show respect for the incumbent government: informed, aware citizens should demand responsiveness and punish non-performing elites (Almond & Verba, 1963). Yet Tamale shows a pattern of sophistication with no resistance, citizens show high levels of K-A-U with compromised or no R (resistance capabilities).

Resistance capabilities would manifest through: collective organising infrastructure to enable sustained campaigns beyond electoral moments, electoral sanctioning coordination and translation of awareness to changes in voting behaviour, development demand articulation through associational channels, civil society capacity amplifies the voice of citizens against elite manipulation. Yet none of these capabilities existed systematically in Tamale for all the prevalence of sophistication. This absence requires more explanation than competence deficit. Four structural barriers limit resistance in spite of sophistication: organizing infrastructure deficits atomizing citizens in spite of shared understanding, patronage silencing mechanisms co-opting potential leaders before collective action emerges, partisan fragmentation preventing cross-party development coalitions, economic vulnerabilities creating rational short-term benefit acceptance despite long-term development costs.

These barriers function independently of cognitive competence and explain how citizens can be at one and the same time sophisticated and constrained.

Organizing Infrastructure Deficit

Lynch et al. (2022) Systematic asymmetry between elite coordination capacity and citizen atomization in African democracies. While elites have sophisticated communication infrastructure; coordinated social media teams, systematic appearances on the radio, and hierarchical party structures that allow rapid message coordination (as documented in Section 4.2); citizens do not. Branch and Cheeseman (2009) note this trend across the African context, where opposition movements mobilize during election periods but are unable to maintain organization between electoral periods, thereby allowing continuous manipulation by the incumbents in the ruling party in the face of citizen awareness. Gyimah-Boadi (2015) writes of civil society specifically in Ghana, with most CSOs hijacked by partisan interests or reliant on donor flows that result in accountability to external and not domestic constituencies.

In Tamale, citizens did not enjoy sustained organizing infrastructure despite sophisticated understanding. Meeting forms systematically avoided coordination. A focus group participant explained temporal constraints:

> *The way they organize their meetings with us, we are not given the chance to ask questions. The time we meet them is election time, during this period they are very busy moving from one place to the other. So, they really do not have time to come and listen to us. They will tell you they are coming to your place; you will organize yourselves and wait for hours. When they finally arrive sometimes at odd hours like 12:00am going, they will say they do not have time and that he will just spend 10-15 minutes with you (FGD4).*

These temporal constraints—concentration during elections, short duration (10-15 minutes), late arrival times—systematically prevent sustained dialogue or coordination. Group size requirements compound atomization. A citizen explained:

> *For those small groups during election time are usually formed to get something small from the politicians. They will not even accept to come and meet us in small numbers, so we have to get other people to join us before. That day we were closer to 75. The highest we ever receive is GHS1,500.00 and we are about over 30 in the group (C5).*

Large group requirements (30-75 people) dilute individual voice, prevent coherent demand articulation, and enable money distribution that satisfies immediate needs while avoiding development commitments. No mechanisms existed for sustained engagement, follow-up accountability, or collective demand coordination. Citizens remained atomized despite shared sophisticated understanding, creating what Lynch et al. (2022) term "awareness without agency"—recognition of manipulation coexisting with inability to coordinate resistance.

Patronage Silencing Mechanisms

Stokes et al. (2013) document how clientelist systems employ selective incentives targeting potential resistance leaders, creating individual rationality to remain silent despite collective benefits from accountability. Wantchekon (2003) demonstrates experimentally in Benin that clientelist appeals succeed not through voter ignorance but through strategic targeting of swing voters and opinion leaders, preventing coalition formation. Bob-Milliar (2012) observes in Northern Ghana that traditional authorities and youth leaders become incorporated into partisan networks through material benefits, constraining their capacity to articulate development demands independently.

In Tamale, patronage operated preventively—silencing potential leaders before organizing could emerge. A citizen articulated the mechanism explicitly:

> *He will single out prominent people in the community. Those who have voices in the community and whatever they say will stand. And then they will now be giving them gifts that they themselves cannot reject. So, how can you talk? Your mouth will become shut. You can't talk of the promise (C4).*

This statement demonstrates sophisticated understanding of patronage function: targeting "those who have voices," providing "gifts they cannot reject," producing silence ("your mouth becomes shut"). The question "how can you talk?" after receiving benefits acknowledges individual rational constraint created by accepting patronage. A focus group participant provided specific example of this preventive silencing:

> *Actually, we like the money they give a lot. This might be one of the reasons why this persists. My other mother is one of the women leaders for one of the parties. Yesterday the national party executives called them to a meeting. They want to provide jobs to some of them, but the local executives told my grandmother and the others that when they go, they should turn down the jobs and request for money instead. They told her to inform all her colleagues that they should all go for the money and not the job opportunities (FGD3).*

This example demonstrates systematic co-optation of potential leaders (women's group leaders), with party hierarchies explicitly preferring money distribution over genuine benefits (jobs), recognizing that immediate cash payments provide greater control than employment relationships. Patronage thus operates as structural constraint independent of citizen sophistication—understanding the silencing mechanism does not provide capacity to refuse benefits when economic vulnerability creates rational acceptance despite long-term costs.

Partisan Fragmentation and Identity Politics

Bob-Milliar (2012) records how Ghana's Fourth Republic party system gives rise to "partisan polarization" which prevents cross-party co-operation even on common interests in development. Asante and Gyimah-Boadi (2004) state that NDC-NPP divisions organize political discourse in a more fundamental way than class, regional, or ethnic cleavages and lead to the development of identity politics where party loyalty supersedes programmatic demands. Fridy (2007) points out ethnicity's electoral importance operates through the party system, whereby ethnic groups are consistently found to affiliate with specific parties, with performance variation, in every election cycle. Whitfield (2018) suggests such partisan fragmentation is in the interests of the elite to prevent the formation of development coalitions that would cross party lines to demand accountability from whoever governs.

In Tamale, partisan fragmentation was unable to resist despite sophisticated knowledge that both parties are similarly manipulating. This dynamic was articulated by citizens. The citizen quoted earlier (C7) caught the paradox in a nutshell: acknowledging manipulation ("they are just manipulating them") and at the same time being a member of the party ("I belong to NDC, I want NDC to be in power . . . even if my people are not doing well"). A media professional confirmed this fragmentation from observational perspective:

> *Yeah, I think the media is key in that, but one area and even one of the research topics I've been thinking about maybe in future to write something about is media ownership. Media ownership doesn't give the media the independence to do the work of promoting development. For us at Diamond FM, we have been grateful to the owner for one thing that anytime he meets us, he tells us that this station was set up for commercial purposes. So, I'm not setting it up for you to promote a party (M5).*

This media professional's observation about media ownership constraining independence demonstrates how partisan fragmentation extends beyond voters to infrastructure that should enable accountability. Most media outlets serve partisan rather than development functions, preventing the cross-party accountability journalism that would support resistance organizing. A citizen explained how partisan divisions operate at community level:

> *Too much! The illiterates are more than the literates. Because, if there was more literate population, we would have changed a member of parliament in this constituency. Because, looking at the way he led us, he even calls himself 'Sawula' meaning that he's done well. But when you look on ground, nothing, because of these party supporters. Party supporters here, they won't vote for the person because he's performed, but they are voting for him because he's NDC (C9).*

This statement attributes continued support not to ignorance ("illiterates"), but to partisan loyalty ("party supporters… voting for him because he's NDC") despite performance failure and sophistication ("looking at the way he led us"). Partisan fragmentation thus works as structural constraint independent of consciousness - citizen transgress cross-party similarity in bipartisan manipulation but cannot coordinate across partisan lines despite co-construit development interests.

Economic Vulnerability and Rational Clientelism

Kramon (2017) records vote-selling in Africa as rational response to elite failure rather than ignorance or short-sightedness. When promises are broken systematically by politicians, citizens rationally "collect before they come to power" rather than trust for delivery in the future. Abdulai and Hickey (2016) note in Northern Ghana that poverty leads to structural constraint: citizens cannot afford to decline immediate benefits for uncertain long-term development gains, despite sophisticated

understanding of costs of this trade-off. Stokes (2005) is showing that clientelism is effective not because of voter ignorance but because of poverty creating vulnerability to short-term inducements.

In Tamale, economic vulnerability allowed elite manipulation in the face of citizen sophistication. The political operative quoted earlier described explicitly the exploitation of poverty ("we have made the people poor . . . in order to exploit their poverty"). A citizen articulated the rational calculation underlying acceptance:

> *Yes, because those money that he's giving to you, where is the money coming from? So, if he should be given nod to lead, he has to service all those money back. So, all those things he's going to think about how to get his money back. When he gets into power, he has to service those loans and pay back all the monies he has spent (C6).*

This statement demonstrates sophisticated understanding (money distribution creates debt politicians recoup through corruption) coexisting with implicit acceptance (posed as rhetorical question rather than refusal). Another citizen explained the immediate needs constraining resistance:

> *In this community, the major development need that we want is the source of water. Source of water. And every blessed election season, they will say they are going to do A and B to fix this problem. Every election season, this comes out. But it's not been fixed. We suffer for water, especially during dry season (C1).*

Economic vulnerability, pressing needs like water scarcity creates rational basis for accepting immediate benefits even when sophisticated understanding recognizes this prevents sustained accountability demands. Poverty operates as structural constraint independent of cognitive sophistication, explaining how citizens can simultaneously understand exploitation logic and accept client relationships.

Why Sophistication Alone Proves Insufficient

These four barriers; organize infrastructure deficits, patronage silencing, partisan fragmentation, economic vulnerability, function relatively independently of citizen cognitive competence as sophisticated citizens coexist with constrained resistance. Individual competence is not collective capacity. The citizens may have knowledge, awareness and understanding but lack of the organising infrastructure that translates the individual recognition into coordinated accountability campaigns. Sophistication turns out to be a necessary but not sufficient condition when it comes to resistance if there are structural barriers to collective action.

This pattern is contrary to the deficit model of the classical civic culture theory. Almond and Verba (1963) predicted that citizen incompetence allows elite manipulation, which suggests that competence would lead to accountability. Yet Tamale is evidence of sophistication-constraint paradox: high K-A-U levels coupled with absent or very limited R capabilities. This is not the civic culture gap that Almond and Verba found (knowledge deficits) but a different version of it: sophistication without organizing capacity. Solutions cannot be limited to the education of citizenship or the development of competence-the latter already exists. Rather, transformation requires addressing structural barriers preventing translation from individual understanding to collective resistance - building organizing infrastructure, disrupting patronage networks, building cross-partisan development coalitions, addressing economic vulnerabilities creating rational short-term acceptance of benefits.

Section 4.3 makes the sophistication-constraint paradox central to the political communication environment in Tamale. Citizens exhibit complex civic cultural competence in terms of knowledge, awareness, and understanding dimensions. They have accurate factual knowledge of the role of institutions and recognition of historical patterns (K level). They Recognise Manipulation Tactics in Real Time Promise Recycling Vote Buying Role Ambiguity Media Capture Patronage Silencing As a manipulation tactic unfolds, rather than retrospectively (A level) They explain causally their success

in manipulating, demonstrating political economy literacy explaining elite incentive structures, poverty exploitation logic and systemic reproduction mechanism (U level).

Yet this sophistication is accompanied by a lack or severe limitation of the resistance capabilities (R level). Four structural barriers stop translation from individual competency to collective accountability: organizing infrastructure deficits atomizes citizens despite shared understanding, patronage mechanisms preventivelyLaren silencing potential leaders, partisan fragmentation prevents cross party development coalitions, and economic vulnerabilities create rational acceptance of immediate benefits despite long-term costs. These barriers are independent of cognitive sophistication, and thus explain how citizens can be both competent and constrained at the same time.

This is a paradox that challenges deficit-based explanations that attribute development failures to citizen ignorance or incompetence. Citizens in Tamale are not ignorant, ignorant or incapable of understanding the manipulation of elites. Rather, they exhibit sophisticated capacity for decoding that civic culture theory recognizes as required to hold those in power accountable to citizens. The issue is not competence deficit but organizing capacity gap - refined people confined by structural barriers from collective resistance. This reformulates development accountability issues from education or awareness issues to organizing and structural transformation needs.

Section 4.4 discusses the implications for development of this paradox of sophistication and constraint. Without the capacity to resist, if citizens are competent, what does this mean for human development outcomes? How does sophistication without organising capacity impact on infrastructure provision, service delivery and development accountability? The following section goes on to show that the sophistication-constraint paradox generates specific development pathology, including incomplete projects, recycled promises without delivery, vote-buying distributions in place of sustained investment and a perpetual expectation, side-by-side with systematic disappointment.

4.4 Development Implications: The Sophistication-Constraint Development Trap

The sophisticated practices of political communication presented in Section 4.2, multi-platform messaging coordination, recycled promises, strategic ambiguity, vote buying and patrimonial silencing, coupled with the sophistication-constraint paradox presented in Section 4.3, lead to specific pathology of development. Citizens show strong communication competence but are structurally incapable of demanding accountability and this creates conditions for sustained development failures despite widespread awareness. This section examines three interrelated development implications which can be summarized as infrastructure development failures characterized with incomplete projects and unfulfilled promises, service delivery gaps in which vote buying replaces sustained investment and development deficits of perpetuity where underdevelopment is reproduced despite citizen sophistication.

Whitfield (2018) argues the political settlement in Ghana generates "limited responsiveness" in the sense that electoral competition leads to the generation of promises and no policy implementation as elite survival requires mobilization rather than delivery. Abdulai and Hickey (2016) document that Northern Ghana shows especially acute development deficits compared to the Southern parts regarding infrastructure, services, and poverty reduction, despite a high political awareness and electoral participation. Booth and Golooba-Mutebi (2012) compare clientelist politics in Ghana with developmental regimes such as Rwanda and Ethiopia, where elite incentive structures focus on providing infrastructure and delivering services. In Tamale the sophistication-constraint paradox forms a development trap where communication strategies work to set up support without obligations of accountability while structural barriers keep sophisticated citizens from translating their awareness into demands for development. The result is systematic development failure in the face of citizen capability- incomplete infrastructure, under-delivered services and enduring poverty even though the elite's manipulation and expressed development needs are widely known.

4.4.1 Infrastructure Development Failures: The Incomplete Projects Cycle

The promise-recycling communication strategy documented in Section 4.2.2 produces systematic infrastructure development failures through an incomplete projects cycle. Politicians make infrastructure promises during campaigns, occasionally initiate projects near elections, then abandon incomplete structures until subsequent electoral moments. A media professional explained this systematic pattern:

> *"Absolutely, it is not a very good recipe for development. When they did the population housing census back in 2021, the conclusion was that there were a lot of uncompleted structures in Ghana at both individual and governmental levels. You visit a community or district and there are incomplete government projects. The reason is simple: politicians have designed the mechanism such that they get into elections, start some project to make you believe that if you vote for them, they'll complete it. Once they win the election, they leave it and wait until another election year. No matter how pressing the development need may be."*

This statement identifies incomplete projects not as implementation failures but as strategic communication: starting projects signals responsiveness while incompletion enables promise recycling. Water infrastructure exemplified this pattern. A citizen explained perpetual unfulfillment:

> *"In this community, the major development need is water. Source of water. And every blessed election season, they will say they are going to do A and B to fix this problem. Every election season, this comes out. But it's not been fixed. We suffer for water, especially during dry season."*

Twenty-year pattern of water promises without delivery demonstrates how communication strategy (promise recycling) produces development outcome (continued scarcity) despite citizen awareness. Citizens recognize the pattern yet structural barriers prevent translation to accountability demands.

Road infrastructure exhibited similar dynamics, with participants describing unfulfilled promises across multiple electoral cycles. The incomplete projects cycle creates development trap where infrastructure gaps persist not from technical or resource constraints but from political economy logic privileging electoral mobilization over sustained development investment.

4.4.2 Service Delivery Gaps: Vote Buying as Development Substitute

Vote buying documented in Section 4.2.2 functions as development substitute, providing immediate material benefits crowding out sustained service delivery demands. Rather than infrastructure or services requiring ongoing investment, politicians distribute cash, goods, or hajj sponsorships creating satisfaction without development transformation. A political operative acknowledged exploitation logic:

> *"You know we the politicians we have made the people poor. I don't know whether to say we have deliberately made them poor just to exploit their poverty. If somebody is already poor, what is GHS20 or GHS50 to him? It means a lot. So, you are taking advantage of his situation."*

Vote buying amounts reveal development substitution scale. Individual distributions ranged GHS20-50, group distributions GHS1,500-5,000, hajj sponsorships GHS68,000. A citizen described group dynamics:

> *"For those small groups during election time are usually formed to get something small from the politicians. There was one organized here. The candidate gave GHS5,000 to the group. The women took GHS3,000 and the men took GHS2,000. Each woman got only GH30 from the money. That is what they got and voted for him again for the next 4 years."*

GHS30 per person for four-year mandate contrasts sharply with infrastructure costs: water systems require millions, road rehabilitation millions. Vote buying provides immediate satisfaction, GHS30

addresses urgent needs while precluding collective demands for sustained investment. Citizens recognize this substitution, with another explaining consequences:

> *"Yes, because those money he's giving you, where is it coming from? If he's given power to lead, he has to service all those monies back. When he gets into power, he has to service loans and pay back all the monies he spent. He's not really going for the people."*

Understanding that vote buying creates debt politicians recoup through corruption demonstrates sophisticated awareness coexisting with acceptance driven by immediate needs. The service delivery gap thus reflects not ignorance but poverty constraints enabling elite exploitation. Citizens need water systems but accept GHS30 because immediate needs trump uncertain long-term gains when structural barriers prevent sustained organizing.

4.4.3 Perpetual Development Deficits: Sophistication Trapped

The sophistication-constraint paradox produces perpetual development deficits where awareness fails to generate transformation. Citizens recognize communication manipulation, understand poverty exploitation, articulate systemic dynamics—yet development failures persist because structural barriers prevent translation from individual competence to collective resistance. Ayelazuno (2019) terms this "electoral democracy's attenuation of subaltern resistance," where democratic participation coexists with development stagnation. A citizen explained persistence despite awareness:

> *"Some get that they are just manipulating them. Because let's take last election, people were making pronouncements that they could see what was happening. But yes, because of the political figure in them, I belong to NDC, I want NDC to be in power. So, whatever the case, even if my people are not doing well, I want them to be in power. Those with these party identities just do not want their parties in opposition."*

Recognizing manipulation ("they could see what was happening") coexists with partisan loyalty preventing cross-party development coalitions. This produces perpetual cycle: sophisticated awareness generates expectation of change, structural constraints prevent transformation, disappointment confirms sophistication, yet pattern persists because barriers remain unaddressed. A focus group participant characterized this futility:

> *"I think these fake promises by political elites is everywhere, but the Ghanaian one is the worse. At least if you lie your way to power, do something that resembles what you promised. But what we see is that they just go silent. This is thievery."*

Moral judgment ("thievery") involves awareness beyond mere recognition to ethical condemnation - yet, structural constraints make such a moral judgment politically ineffective. The state of perpetual deficit is not a product of civic ineptitude, but a product of a gap in organizing capacity: sophisticated individuals atomized by structural barriers, are unable to express shared understanding in collective demands for accountability. Development is stuck in the paradox of sophistication versus constraints: citizens are enlightened that something is wrong, they know why it continues, but there is not yet the infrastructure to turn that awareness into change.

Section 4.4 creates the manner of how the political communication practices along with the sophistication-constraint paradox leads to the development failure in a systematic manner. Infrastructure development fails in cycles of incomplete projects where promise recycling allows for unending unfulfillment. Service delivery gaps are enlarged as vote buying substitutes immediate distributions for sustained investment. Perpetual development deficits reproduce underdevelopment in spite of widespread citizen awareness because of the structural barriers preventing resistance organising. This development trap functions independently of citizen competence - and development fails not because citizens lack knowledge or awareness but because organising infrastructural deficits, patronage silencing, partisan fragmentation and economic vulnerabilities act to prevent sophisticated

individuals from translating their understanding to collective demands for accountability. The sophistication-constraint paradox thus creates the pathology of development that needs structural transformation, rather than civic education solutions. Chapter 5 discusses theoretical implications and policy recommendations that address this organizing capacity gap as opposed to presumed competence deficits.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together the implications of the central finding of this study: citizens report a sophisticated level of civic cultural competence but are nonetheless structurally inhibited from putting that understanding into collective resistance. The chapter is divided into three sections. First of all, it summarizes the paradox of sophistication and constraints and its significance in theory. Second, it offers policy recommendations on structural transformation. Third, it identifies the limitations of the research as well as directions for further research.

Table 2: Summary of Key Findings

Research Question	Main Finding	Evidence Sources
RQ1: Elite political communication practices	Multi-platform communication strategies deploy promise recycling, patronage messaging, and strategic ambiguity to mobilize votes while avoiding development accountability	Political actors (P1-P5), Media personnel (M1-M5), Citizens (C1-C16, FGD1-4)
RQ2: Citizen civic cultural competence levels	Citizens demonstrate high Knowledge-Awareness-Understanding but low Resistance capacity due to structural barriers—the sophistication-constraint paradox	All citizen participants (C1-C16), Focus groups (FGD1-4), Political operative (P4), Media professional (M2)

RQ3: Human development implications	Sophistication-constraint paradox creates development trap: infrastructure failures, service delivery gaps, perpetual poverty despite democratic participation	Participant accounts of incomplete projects, vote buying normalization; secondary development indicators; political settlement analysis

Source: (*Constructed by the Author, 2025*)

5.2 The Sophistication-Constraint Paradox: Summary and Theoretical Implications

The citizens of Tamale are sophisticated political communicators. They decipher elite messages, identify manipulation strategies as they happen and put into words the systemic reasons why development accountability failures continue. Yet this communication competence coexists with continued underdevelopment; water systems remain incomplete; roads fall into disrepair; vote buying substitutes for sustained investment; and development promises get recycled in electoral cycles with no delivery. This is the paradox of sophistication-constraint; the question of high communication competence (knowledge, awareness, understanding) limited by structural barriers for collective resistance capabilities. This study asked and tried to answer how the political communication practices in Tamale Municipal Assembly, affect the citizen civic cultural competence and development accountability outcomes. The answer tests fundamental assumptions in civic culture theory with regard to the relationship between citizen competence and democratic performance.

The Paradox Explained: High K-A-U, Low R

The K-A-U-R (Knowledge-Awareness-Understanding-Resistance) framework that is applied to the citizen civic cultural competence reveals systematic pattern. Citizens show great competence in three dimensions but still are limited on the fourth. Knowledge (K) level analysis revealed that citizens have correct factual information on political institutions, channels of communication, electoral processes

and historical patterns. They separate MP from central government responsibilities in spite of elite strategic ambiguity, they understand multi-platform coordination of communication, and they experience media's partisan messaging functions. This is not ignorance, or information deficit.

Awareness (A) level analysis showed citizens are aware of the tactics of manipulation as they happen and not just in hindsight. They recognize promise recycling patterns (every blessed election season), the vote buying as strategic manipulation of the votes rather than cultural obligation, role ambiguity as deliberate tactic, media capture dynamics and patronage silencing mechanisms. This is not some sort of naivete or false consciousness; this is sophisticated real-time message decoding.

Understanding (U) level analysis showed that citizens express causal explanations for success in manipulation. They discuss elite incentive structures (maximising power over delivery of development), poverty as a tool for exploitation to buy votes, reproduction mechanisms in the systems of incomplete projects, and partisan fragmentation dynamics against cross-party coalitions. This amounts to political economy literacy regarding why recognised manipulation is effective - sophisticated systemic analysis, not mere complaint.

Yet Resistance (R) capacities are still lacking or severely limited. Citizens have no organising infrastructure to translate individual competence into collective demands for accountability. Four structural barriers are at work: organizing infrastructure deficit atomizing citizens despite shared understanding patronage mechanisms preventively silencing potential leaders partisan fragmentation preventing cross party development coalitions economic vulnerabilities creating rational acceptance of immediate benefits despite long-term costs Additionally, deficits in counter-communication capacity means that citizens are unable to produce, disseminate and coordinate other messages that challenge elite narratives when the media capture and access to platforms systematically favour elite coordination.

This creates the problem of the sophistication-constraint paradox: citizens display the civic cultural competence that classical theory points out as necessary for democratic accountability, yet structural constraints make this civic cultural competence insufficient for producing resistance capabilities. The problem is not one of a lack of competence - citizens already have sophisticated decoding capacity. The problem is organizing capacity gap - sophisticated individuals remain atomized by structural barriers from collective action despite shared sophisticated understanding.

Theoretical Contribution: Challenging Civic Culture Deficit Models

These finding challenges the deficit model of classical theory of civic culture. Almond and Verba (1963) predicted that the performance of democracy requires citizen civic competence - political knowledge, participatory attitudes and critical engagement. When democracies fail to deliver, the framework of civic culture identifies deficits of competence: citizens lack information, fail to recognize manipulation or cannot understand political dynamics. The solution prescribed is logical: civic education, awareness campaigns, voter information programs and interventions to build competencies.

The sophistication-constraint paradox shows that this diagnosis is fundamentally wrong in contexts such as Tamale. Citizens already have the knowledge, awareness and understanding that is identified in civic culture theory as needed. The explanation of a competence deficit falls through because competence exists. What's lacking is not the cognitive capacity but organising infrastructure. This is a new type of democratic dysfunction: sophistry without organizing capacity, in which individual competence cannot become collective resistance, because functional barriers are independent of cognitive levels of competence.

This has theoretical implications for understanding democratic accountability in Africa. Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) document citizens in competitive authoritarian regimes develop "manipulation literacy" but regimes are maintained by co-optation and constraint rather than deception. Lynch et al.

(2022) note that the voters of Kenya are aware of ethnic appeals as strategic manipulation but ethnic voting patterns persist because the infrastructure of elite coordination overwhelms atomized citizens.

The sophistication-constraint paradox combines these observations to form an understanding of the fact that democracies can be both high in citizen competence and low in development accountability. The mechanism is organizing capacity gap not competence deficit (the classical civic culture gap). This is reframing accountability failures as problems of infrastructure, not education, or problems of collective organizing capacity, not individual capacity-building, or problems of civic competence training, not structural transformation.

Key Empirical Findings

The empirical analysis throughout Chapters 4 established three sets of findings that are interlinked:

Elite Political Communication Practices (Section 4.2): Political elites in Tamale use multi-faceted communication strategies on a variety of media and platforms that are aimed at winning electoral support without development accountability requirements. Communication modes range from radio programs, television appearances, coordination of social media and face-to-face meetings to ensure message saturation and redundancy. Message content include recycled empty promises redeployed through electoral cycles without responsibilities delivery, strategic role ambiguity for not being able to attribute responsibility, vote buying allowing immediate material gains substituting for the lack of sustained development investment and patronage silencing targeting potential resistance leaders preventively. The desired outcomes are electoral victory without binding policy commitments because the communication infrastructure is for mobilization and not for accountability functions. This represents not communication failure but communication success from elite perspective - that is, strategies achieve intended electoral outcomes, yet avoid development constraints.

Citizen Civic cultural competence (Section 4.3): Citizens show sophisticated competence in terms of knowledge, awareness and understanding dimensions. They have institutional knowledge of the roles of government, historical knowledge of patterns across the electoral cycles, and communication channel knowledge of multi-platform coordination. They show awareness of promise recycling, vote buying as manipulation, role ambiguity as deliberate tactic, media capture, and patronage silencing mechanisms - in real-time as the tactics get deployed. They express understanding explaining elite incentive structures, exploiting poverty logic, systemic reproduction, and partisan fragmentation impacts. But resistance capacities are still limited by organizing infrastructure weaknesses, patronage silencing, partisan diffusion, economic vulnerabilities and counter-communication capacity gaps. The sophistication is there, organising capacity is not.

Development Implications (Section 4.4): The sophistication-constraint paradox leads to certain development pathology. Infrastructure development fails by unfinished projects cycles where promise recycling is possible for perpetual unfulfillment despite citizen awareness. Service delivery gaps are increasing where vote buying replaces immediate distributions (GHS20-50 individual amounts, GHS1,500-5,000 group distributions) with sustained investment (water systems costing millions, road rehabilitation requiring sustained allocation). Perpetual development deficits perpetuate underdevelopment in spite of sophisticated citizen awareness because barriers in structure of underdevelopment mean that translation from individual awareness to collective demands for accountability is not possible. Development is still trapped not by citizen ignorance but by organizing capacity gaps that allow elite manipulation in spite of citizen sophistication.

5.3 From Civic Education to Structural Transformation: Policy and Research Implications

The Misdiagnosis Problem

Standard development interventions to political accountability failures focus on civic education, voter information campaigns and competence-building programs. These interventions assume the deficit

model of civic culture: citizens are lacking in the knowledge, awareness, or understanding that they need in order to demand accountability. International development agencies, civil society organizations and governmental programs invest substantial sums of money in voter education, media literacy training, and civic engagement workshops based upon this diagnosis of a competence deficit.

The sophistication-constraint paradox exposes this as basic misdiagnosis. The issue in Tamale is not that citizens are uncompetent - they already have sophisticated communication decoding capacity, are aware of manipulation techniques, and have an articulation of systemic analyses. Additional civic education cannot put into place organizing capacity shortfalls, patronage silencing, partisan fragmentation, economic vulnerabilities, or counter-communication infrastructure shortfalls. Teaching citizens to recognize vote buying is ineffective when they already recognize it but accept it rationally because of lack of money and the infrastructure of collective action. Information campaigns on role ambiguity are a waste of resources when citizens may already know about institutional divisions but are unable to organize collectively in order to demand accountability because of structural barriers.

This misdiagnosis is important because it leads to misallocating intervention resources to competence-building efforts when assessing that the binding constraint is organizing capacity. It also runs the risk of blaming citizens for something beyond their control - creating a culture of blaming development failure on citizen ignorance when citizens are demonstrating a level of sophistication constrained by structural barriers they cannot individually overcome. The solution space changes fundamentally from individual capacity-building to structural transformation from cognitive competence to infrastructure organization from awareness campaigns to removal of barriers.

Structural Transformation Requirements

The answer to the problem of the sophistication-constraint contradiction lies in structural transformation in four dimensions interconnected by:

Organizing Infrastructure Development: Citizens require ongoing mechanisms of engagement which translate individual awareness to a collective responsibility demand. This requires the need for civil society organizations that are independent of partisan capture, community-level organizing platforms for sustained coordination beyond electoral moments and communication technologies for horizontal coordination among citizens rather than only vertical elite to citizen broadcast. The Kenyan experience with grassroots accountability platforms and the Senegalese Y'en a Marre movement show how organizing infrastructure can help sophisticated citizens translate the awareness into coordinated demands. Without such infrastructure, sophistication is atomized and politically ineffective.

Economic Vulnerability Reduction: Vote buying is successful not by deceiving but by exploiting poverty. GHS30 is of tremendous importance where immediate needs are so pressing and long-term development promises are so systematically unreliable. Working on this involves economic empowerment as bringing about a reduction in vulnerability to short-term inducements - livelihood diversification, social protection systems that ensure security without political conditionality, local economic development that provides alternatives to patronage-dependent survival. This is not naivety that the elimination of poverty alone leads to accountability (there would be structural barriers for example), but recognition that economic vulnerability is one of the binding constraints that allow elite manipulation in spite of citizen sophistication.

Political System Reforms: Patronage silencing and partisan fragmentation demand political reforms disrupting the strategies of elites. This means campaign finance regulation to limit the capacity to buy votes, strengthening Electoral Commission enforcement against clientelist practices, local government fiscal decentralization to make direct community control of development possible and institutional mechanisms for cross partisan crumbling of development coalitions around shared infrastructure priorities. The challenge is that beneficiaries of current systems (political elites) must approve reforms

which undermine their strategies, creating collective action problems requiring external pressure or elite factional competition creating reform openings.

Counter-Communication Infrastructure: Citizens need platforms that will generate and circulate alternative messages that are contrary to elite narratives. This means media pluralism to reduce partisan capture, community radio stations to enable citizen voice, social media literacy to enable counter messaging and public discourse spaces for development dialogue independent of elite control. The contrast with elite communication infrastructure documented in Section 4.2 - systematic multi-platform coordination, designated spokesperson persons, rapid response capacity - shows the asymmetry. Building the capacity of citizens for counter-communication requires not only message literacy (which is out there) but infrastructure for sustained alternative message production and circulation.

These dimensions interconnect: organization of infrastructure is not enough if economic vulnerability allows for co-optation, political reforms do not work without organization capacity demanding implementation, counter-communication requires organization of infrastructure coordinating messages. The problem of the sophistication-constraint paradox continues to exist until more than one structural barrier is addressed at once. This is substantial transformation challenge and explains why sophisticated citizen awareness alone is not enough - the barriers which demand transformation are at the systemic level beyond the capacity of individuals or communities to address unilaterally.

5.4 Limitations, Future Research Directions, and Conclusion

Study Limitations

These findings of this study need to be interpreted through scope and methodological limitations. Geographically research was centered on Tamale. While there are theoretical arguments pointing to the operation of sophistication-constraint dynamics in similar class contexts, there are empirical findings reflecting Tamale's specific political economy as the context of the operation of clientelist

political economy in competitive democracies. Northern Ghana has some historical, ethnic and developmental features that could influence the specific way in which manifestations of sophistication-constraint are played out differently from that of Southern places or other parts of Africa. Generalization is comparative research in different situations.

Theoretically, the K-A-U-R framework focuses on specific dimensions of competence while conceivably excluding others - emotional intelligence in navigating patronage relationships, resistance strategies of strategic silence or everyday resistance practices that will not be visible in formal interview configurations. Scott (1985) documents "weapons of the weak" - forms of resistance that are subtle and often not considered in formal political analysis. The sophistication-constraint framework emphasizes formal organizing and explicit resistance and may underestimate informal resistance taking place through networks that are invisible to research methods used.

Despite these limitations, findings do show theoretical generalizability to other contexts that present similarities in political economy configurations, namely competitive electoral systems and clientelist resource distribution, sophisticated urban populations with high media exposure and political participation, weak civil society institutions with partisan capture, and high levels of poverty with economic vulnerabilities. The sophistication-constraint paradox probably does work in such contexts even as specific manifestations vary.

Future Research Directions

The paradox of sophistication constraint raises a number of fruitful avenues of research: Comparative Sophistication-Constraint Research Where else is the paradox? Comparative research among different regions of Ghana (Northern and Southern, Urban and rural), in other African democracies (Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania, South Africa) and outside Africa (India, Philippines, Latin America) could map patterns of sophistication constraints. Key questions include the following: Are there systematic differences in levels of sophistication? Are constraint types context-dependent? What political

economy configurations lead to the paradox, as opposed to alternative patterns? Such research would establish scope conditions; that is, situations in which sophistication has produced resistance because of context, as opposed to situations where constraints have bounded despite competence in a situation. Organizing Infrastructure Experiments: What are the effective interventions for turning sophistication into resistance? Experimental or quasi-experimental research testing organising infrastructure interventions could identify effective structural transformation approaches. This could be community organizing programs, building sustained engagement capacity, communication technology platforms, facilitating horizontal coordination, cross-partisan development coalitions formation, or economic empowerment initiatives lowering clientelist vulnerabilities. Longitudinal impact assessment could measure whether organization of infrastructure actually does translate existing sophistication to accountability demands or whether there are other barriers for limiting even well-organized sophisticated citizens.

Conclusion

This study resolves the dilemma of the sophistication-constraint paradox as a unique pattern of democratic dysfunction in cases such as that of Tamale. Citizens are not stupid - they exhibit sophisticated civic cultural competence, neat decoding of elite manipulation, strategic tactics and systemic explanations for accountability failures. Yet development outcomes are still poor - from infrastructure left unfinished to services under-delivered to poverty that has not been abated - not because people are aware of their rights but because there are structural barriers that prevent the transformation from individual sophistication to collective resistance.

This finding radically shifts the development accountability challenges. The issue is not one of civic education deficit that requires information campaigns and voter literacy programs. The problem is organizing capacity gap that requires structural transformation - include: building organizing infrastructure, disruption of patronage networks, creating cross-partisan coalitions, reducing economic

vulnerabilities and building counter-communication platforms. Solutions need to address barriers to sophisticated citizens from turning awareness into collective action, rather than assume the role of citizen incompetence that needs to be remediated.

The sophistication-constraint paradox also poses a challenge to how we make sense of African democracy and development. High electoral participation, competitive multi-party systems and sophisticated citizen awareness exist together with consistent elite dominance and development stagnation not because of deception or false consciousness but because of structural incorporation - citizens know the system but are limited by barriers that work independently of their cognitive competence. Democracy's promise of informed citizens demanding accountability and responsive governance being limited when organizational infrastructure gaps prevent collective articulation of demand despite mass individual sophistication.

For Tamale, and situations with similar sophistication-constraint patterns, transformation is about more than civic competence interventions, or rather moving to structural barrier removal. Citizens already have what the civic culture theory identifies as the awareness necessary. What they lack is the organising capacity to make awareness translate into resistance. Until the structural barriers fall - organising infrastructure emerges, economic vulnerabilities are reduced, patronage networks are disrupted, counter communication platforms develop - development will remain trapped despite the sophistication of citizens. The sophistication is there, the structures to translate it politically do not exist. That is the paradox and that is what needs to change..

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APPENDIX

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

PART 1: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Study Information

- **Study Title:** Civic Cultural Competence and Political Communication in Ghana: Implications for Human Development

Political Engagement

1. How do you usually get information about politics or elections? *(Probe: radio, TV, social media, community meetings, word of mouth)*
2. What kinds of political messages or promises do you remember hearing recently?

Decoding Political Messages: Knowledge & Awareness

3. When politicians make promises during campaigns, how do you decide whether to believe them?
   (Probe: past experience, tone, medium, who is speaking)
4. Can you give an example of a promise you've heard many times but never seen delivered? *(Probe: water, roads, jobs, schools)*
5. Some people say politicians speak in ways that are emotional or symbolic rather than clear. Have you noticed this? Can you give an example?
6. How do you know when a politician is being honest versus when they are just trying to win votes?
7. Do you think media (radio, TV, newspapers) help you understand what politicians really mean, or do they confuse things more?
8. *(Probe: partisan programs, biased reporting)*

Understanding Motives & Structural Barriers

8. Why do you think politicians keep making promises they don't fulfill?
9. What do you think is the main goal of political communication here—to inform, to persuade, or something else?
10. Some people receive money, gifts, or favors during election time. Why do you think this happens?
    (Probe: Is it charity, strategy, or something else?)
11. If you know a promise is unlikely to be kept, why might someone still vote for that politician?
12. What makes it difficult for ordinary people to hold politicians accountable after elections?

Resistance & Agency

13. What could citizens do—individually or together—to make sure politicians deliver on promises?
14. Have you ever joined others to demand development (e.g., roads, water, schools)? If yes, what happened? If no, why not?
15. If you could send one message to politicians about how they should communicate with voters, what would it be?

PART 2: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDES

GUIDE A: POLITICAL ACTORS

Political Communication Strategy & Messaging

1. How do you plan and design political messages for voters in Tamale? *(Probe: Who is involved? What platforms do you prioritize?)*
2. What kinds of messages tend to work best here—policy promises, emotional appeals, symbolic gestures, or something else? *(Probe: Can you give an example?)*
3. How do you decide what promises to make during campaigns? *(Probe: Do you consider feasibility? Past unfulfilled promises?)*
4. How do you handle situations where you or your party made a promise that was not fulfilled? *(Probe: Do you acknowledge it? Redirect blame? Use new promises?)*
5. Some say voters here are becoming more aware of political tactics. Have you noticed this? *(Probe: Does it change how you communicate?)*

Perceptions of Voter Awareness & Competence

6. How would you describe the average voter's ability to understand political messages here? *(Probe: Are they easily persuaded? Critical? Cynical?)*
7. What do you think voters want most from political communication—information, hope, respect, material benefits, or accountability? *(Probe: How does this shape what you offer?)*
8. How do you respond when voters challenge you or ask tough questions about unfulfilled promises? *(Probe: Do you engage, deflect, or avoid?)*
9. In your view, why do voters sometimes support politicians even when they haven't delivered development? *(Probe: Party loyalty? Identity? Lack of alternatives?)*

Structural Realities & Accountability

10. Some say "politics here is about winning elections, not delivering development." What is your response to that?

11. How much does the need to fund campaigns influence political communication and promises? *(Probe: Does it lead to vote-buying? Overselling?)*
12. What structural factors make it hard for politicians to deliver on promises? *(Probe: Resources? Bureaucracy? Political system?)*
13. If citizens were better organized to demand accountability, how would that change political communication here?
14. What reforms would help make political communication more development-oriented? *(Probe: Media regulation? Campaign finance rules? Civic education?)*

GUIDE B: MEDIA PERSONNEL

Media's Role in Political Communication

1. How would you describe the media's role in political communication in Tamale? *(Probe: Informer? Watchdog? Platform for debate? Amplifier?)*
2. What challenges do you face in covering politics in a balanced and factual way? *(Probe: Pressure from owners? Politicians? Audiences?)*
3. How do you decide which political messages or promises to highlight or question? *(Probe: Editorial criteria? Newsworthiness? Public interest?)*
4. Do politicians or parties try to influence how they are covered? How? *(Probe: Access, threats, incentives, partnerships?)*
5. How has social media/AI changed political communication from your perspective? *(Probe: Fake news, propaganda, citizen journalism?)*

Audience Awareness & Media Literacy

6. How would you rate the average listener/viewer's ability to critically evaluate political messages?
   (Probe: Are they passive or active decoders?)
7. Do audiences ever push back against biased or manipulative political content? *(Probe: Calls, social media comments, boycotts?)*
8. What kind of political content gets the most engagement here—emotional debates, policy discussions, exposés, or something else?
9. In your view, do media help or hinder citizens' ability to hold politicians accountable? *(Probe: Examples?)*

Structural Constraints & Independence

10. How independent is media here from political and business interests? *(Probe: Ownership ties? Sponsorship? Government advertising?)*
11. What would it take for media to play a stronger role in promoting development accountability?

12. How do economic pressures affect political reporting? *(Probe: Ratings, revenue, survival?)*
13. What reforms are needed to improve the quality of political communication in Ghanaian media?
14. Can you share an example where media successfully held power to account or, conversely, failed to do so?