



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A party with China: political party affiliation and perceptions of China in African countries

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## Abstract

Most of the attention on Africa-China relations has centred on China's economic activities. What remains unclear is the role of partisanship in shaping public perceptions of China in African countries. Since the Chinese government builds a favourable relationship with an incumbent party, incumbent party supporters tend to have positive views towards China whereas opposition party supporters perceive China more critically. This study conducts multilevel mixed-effects regression analyses of public opinion across 33 African countries, and finds that opposition party supporters are indeed more critical of China. While opposition parties are motivated by their office-seeking interests, they also hold an incumbent party accountable. This study sheds light on the agency of political parties and their supporters in African countries and the mode (instead of volume) of China's bilateral engagement.

**Keywords:** Africa; China; public opinion; political party; party affiliation

## Introduction

In 2015, the Chinese President Xi was received with open arms when he arrived in Harare with his wife Peng. The Zimbabwean President Mugabe expressed his affinity for the visitors by calling them 'true and dear friends of the people of Zimbabwe' (France-Presse 2015a). The adulation was a mark of China's long-term relationship with Zimbabwe: from the liberation movement to the deterioration of democracy in the early 2000s. China supported Mugabe's strong arm against his political opponents amid sanctions from the West, and the strong bilateral relationship is also reflected in

Zimbabwe's adoption of the Chinese yuan as a legal currency (France-Pressé 2015b).

However, China's investment in Africa has been a boon for some and a source of frustration for others, depending on what side of politics one is. Opposition parties tend to view China as the strength behind the regime and subsequently lay out their criticism of Chinese investment in their countries (Esteban 2010). In Zimbabwe, the leader of the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Nelson Chamisa, was a vocal critic of China's engagement in the 2018 presidential campaign (Sibiri 2020). Chamisa vowed to expel Chinese investors from Zimbabwe and annul unfair bilateral agreements with China if elected (Sibiri 2020). The opposition political positions are cues that reflect opposition public opinion or vice versa. The presence of China is a subject of controversy and political debate in many African countries.

This study examines public opinion towards China's involvement in African countries and the influence of partisanship. Some studies have argued that opposition political parties promote negative sentiments against China (see Sautman & Hairong 2009; Aidoo 2016; Sibiri 2020). However, it remains unclear if opposition party supporters hold more critical views of China than incumbent party supporters. What is missing in the extant literature is a systematic understanding of party-voter linkage on the issue of China and the influence of partisanship at the individual level. The studies on public opinion tend to focus on the influence of democratic values (Hanusch 2012; Keuleers 2015), due to the criticism that China undermines democracy in Africa by supporting authoritarian regimes (Carmody & Taylor 2010). The studies on political parties and elites tend to focus on macro-level observations and variations across countries (Sautman & Hairong 2009; Hess & Aidoo 2015; Sibiri 2020).

Therefore, this study fills this lacuna, and focuses on the bottom-up perception of the public by using nationally representative survey data to investigate the relationship between partisanship and perceptions of China's involvement in African countries. This approach emphasises the agency of the people as individuals driven by their political positions rather than the Chinese government's actions, as well as diverse (both favourable and critical) individual perceptions that exist across and within countries. Investigating the public opinion has critical implications for China's involvement in African countries. The potential influence of partisanship sheds light on a heterogeneous political environment with diverse citizen perspectives not dominated by the Chinese government or a single political party. We present a theory that hinges on three mechanisms: office-seeking, accountability and party cues. We analyse public opinion survey data from 33 countries to examine the relationship between partisanship and attitudes towards China.

The results of the multilevel mixed-effects regression analyses find that opposition party supporters are more likely to view China negatively than incumbent party supporters, although the overall views of China are generally positive. These results hold after accounting for country differences. The Chinese government's engagement tends to favour an incumbent party over opposition parties (Esteban 2010). Due to the office-seeking nature of political

parties (Riker 1962), opposition parties are critical of the incumbent party's close tie with China. Since partisan individuals follow party cues (Brader & Tucker 2012; Bisgaard & Slothuus 2018; Cavari & Freedman 2019), there is a partisan divide in attitudes towards China. This study also finds that those who disapprove of the executive's performance tend to be more critical of China. Citizens who are critical of the incumbent government including opposition partisans are more likely to have negative perceptions of China, since opposition parties and their supporters function to increase the incumbent government's accountability (Koenig *et al.* 2023). This has a potential to enhance transparency in making bilateral negotiations with China to mitigate the risks of unfair contracts and exploitations.

This study contributes to the existing scholarship by shedding light on critical voices among the public and focusing on the roles of partisanship. Pioneering studies on China-Africa relationships have mostly looked at states' views of China (e.g., see Brautigam 2009). While the overall perception of China is largely positive across these countries, this study points to the importance of considering diverse individual perceptions within each country. In studying Africa-China relations, little attention has been paid to 'African agency' (Mohan & Lampert 2013). Both positive and negative views of China's involvement tend to be deterministic and ignore the agency of the populace. This study emphasises the agency of political elites and citizens in African countries. This study also focuses on the mode (rather than volume) of China's bilateral engagement that favours incumbent parties over opposition parties.

The findings also have broader implications for China's increasing engagement with African countries. The existence of a partisanship divide among the public means that China does not have an unquestioned dominance over citizens. It also implies a limit to China's soft power influence, and suggests that China may face more challenges in its endeavour to increase influence as party competition intensifies in these countries.

### **Literature review: individual and contextual determinants of views towards China**

China's investment in Africa has so far received mixed evaluations: some positively perceive it as an opportunity for infrastructural development, while some critically perceive it as neocolonialism, exploitation and aid for authoritarian regimes. China's non-interference approach (Bwalya 2014) raises questions on its value for democracy. The longer it has been in Africa the more critical the public has become. Its cozy relationship with dictators has drawn criticism from those who see China as a force to undermine democracy (Carmody & Taylor 2010). However, China's involvement in authoritarian regimes is no different from its engagement with democratic countries because China's approach is more pragmatic (Carmody & Taylor 2010). It aims for economic benefits on a 'Win Win' basis (De Freitas 2019). By aiming for economic benefits, China's dealings with Africa are juxtaposed with exploitation associated with past European colonisation, hence China is characterised as a

neocolonialist power (Antwi-Boateng 2017). Whatever the claim of mutual benefits amounts to depends on the observer's vantage point. The public perspective can be driven by their socio-economic status, value preferences and partisanship.

Existing studies find that individuals' values and socio-economic status influence their perceptions of China. This includes individual values concerning democracy and democratic rights (Hanusch 2012; Keuleers 2015). Hanusch (2012) finds that those who value civil and political rights tend to have negative views of China across 20 African countries. Similarly, Keuleers (2015) finds that those who value democracy and civil/political rights tend to have more positive perceptions of the EU vis-à-vis China in 19 African countries. Individuals' socio-economic status also has an impact. In Equatorial Guinea, the small shop owners and traders tend to be more critical of China since they face economic competition with Chinese migrants who engage in the same businesses (Esteban 2010). On the other hand, employers and landowners who benefit from employing Chinese migrants tend to have more positive views towards China (Esteban 2010).

Further, the political atmosphere can also impact citizens' perceptions of China. Sautman & Hairong (2009) argue that politicians' rhetoric concerning China influences overall public opinion in each country. In countries where opposition parties amplify issues of China's engagement, public opinion towards China tends to be negative (Sautman & Hairong 2009). This result reveals the influence of political elites and parties at the country level. However, what remains unclear is the political influence at the individual level. What if an incumbent party and an opposition party have diverging positions towards China? When a critical opposition party is present, does it sway both incumbent and opposition party supporters? Alternatively, political parties' diverging positions may lead to polarising views of China among partisan individuals.

## **Theory: political party affiliation and perception of China**

### *Party cues and party positions on China*

Citizens follow cues from parties that they support to form their political attitudes. Extant research consistently documents the influence of partisanship and elite cues on public opinion across countries (Brader & Tucker 2012; Bisgaard & Slothuus 2018; Cavari & Freedman 2019). Political parties' issue positions serve as a heuristic cue for partisans to form their opinions (Brader & Tucker 2012; Bisgaard & Slothuus 2018). Partisan cues also activate motivated reasonings to frame opinions among partisan individuals (Petersen *et al.* 2013). Public opinion on foreign affairs is no exception (Cavari & Freedman 2019). Partisan cues influence citizens' attitudes towards foreign countries (Cavari & Freedman 2019). Partisan cues also matter in electoral authoritarian regimes, as a study finds that partisan cues impacted voting behaviours in Uganda shortly after electoral competition was introduced (Conroy-Krutz *et al.* 2016). Citizens even modify their opinions when their

party shifts its issue position (Bisgaard & Slothuus 2018). The theory of partisan cues suggests that an individual's views of China depend on the issue positions of political parties they support. Partisanship may influence citizens' views of China when political parties take diverging positions towards China.

Since the Chinese government usually builds a favourable relationship with an incumbent party, opposition parties tend to have more critical views towards China's engagement (Rebol 2010; Hess & Aidoo 2015). China's policy of non-interference (in domestic politics) 'operates as a pro status quo policy, actively supporting incumbent authorities at the expense of the opposition' (Esteban 2010: 235). Thus, ruling elites are more likely to benefit from China's economic engagement and more likely to have positive views towards it (Waweru 2020). In Namibia, the ruling South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) has a close relationship with China, and the public is increasingly critical that SWAPO officials are pursuing personal benefits from engagement with China (Amadhila 2012). In Equatorial Guinea, China built a favourable relationship with Obiang's authoritarian regime in exchange for oil and infrastructural contracts (Esteban 2010). The Chinese government provides aid and scholarships to Obiang's party, Partido Democratico de Guinea Equatorial (PDG), and PDG distributes the scholarships to its supporters and uses Chinese aid for electoral campaigns (Esteban 2010).

Opposition political elites have had a great influence in driving public opinion against China, questioning China's presence in Africa and its close relationship with the incumbent government. Therefore, China's control of Africa is not as inevitable as some commentators would have us believe. Criticism of China's presence by the opposition elite and opposition supporters signifies the agency of the African populace that is overlooked by critics who warn about China's inevitable dominance of Africa. The presence of critical opposition party supporters indicates subversion of the government's pro-China position, which is indicative of a critical public with agency.

### *Office-seeking interests*

Riker (1962) proposes that the main goal of political parties is to win. The prize of winning is control of the executive branch and government portfolios (Leiserson 1968; Strøm 1990). It is a bundle of rewards for the office. These rewards are divided among members of the winning coalition (Budge & Laver 1986). Thus, this office-seeking behaviour is characterised by yearning for office to benefit from goods that come with controlling the government (Strøm & Müller 1999). Opposition parties who criticise China's involvement in their countries yearn for control of the government that would afford them the benefits that the incumbent party enjoys. Their critical view of China becomes the means to the prize of being in office.

Hence, opposition parties lament that the ruling elites gain benefits from China and stay in power at the expense of natural resources and autonomy (Sibiri 2020). Sibiri (2020) demonstrates that the rise of anti-China sentiments and populism is attributed to China's cozy relationship with the incumbent party. The opposition parties employ negative rhetoric against China to gain

electoral support (Sibiri 2020). This is an opportunistic strategy by the opposition party whose ultimate goal is not to terminate the exploitative relationship with China but to gain votes and win an incumbent status. This also means that opposition parties may be more critical but may not necessarily run on anti-China platforms since they need to engage with China once they are the incumbent (Esteban 2010; Hess & Aidoo 2015). They may switch to a favourable position towards China once elected as observed in the case of Zambia and Ghana, which Sibiri (2020) shows using case studies. Sautman & Hairong (2009) and Bwalya (2014) corroborate Sibiri (2020) and show that in Zambia, Michael Sata, the leader of the opposition party Patriotic Front (PF), was critical of China during the 2006 presidential election, pledging to deport Chinese investors and form a diplomatic relationship with Taiwan. After winning the election in 2011, Sata became friendlier and was willing to work with China to reap the benefits from its investments. Aidoo (2016) also shows that in Ghana, there were parliamentary debates and protests from the opposition party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), about the legality of loans from China. The opposition party accused the ruling National Democratic Congress's (NDC) administration of undermining democratic processes in the parliamentary approval for a Chinese loan (Aidoo 2016). However, once in the government, the NPP was criticised for its relationship with China by the NDC, which had become the opposition (Sibiri 2020).

The flexibility in party position towards China suggests that a critical position against China is not necessarily a platform or a programme of a specific party. Political parties use China to their advantage to win an election and an office. Such empirical findings in Aidoo, Sibiri and Sautman and Hairong's studies underscore the argument of this study. Since 'critics and opposition political actors rehash public concerns by accusing the governing elites of being corrupted by China in a 'state capture' affairs where China provides the needs of the ruling elites in return for Chinese access to vital resources and influence' (Sibiri 2020), we argue that opposition party supporters use cues from party elites to evaluate China's involvement in Africa.

This strategy is possible in the discussed cases because China's dealings with African countries are more pragmatic than political (Carmody & Taylor 2010). China will work with any government that facilitates the achievements of its goal. China's policy of non-interference benefits whoever is in the incumbent position (Esteban 2010). Thus, in the case of Zambia and Ghana, the PF and NPP became important players to China's ambitions when they took office, their previous position notwithstanding.

What is missing in extant literature is a systematic understanding of party-voter linkage on the issue of China. Existing studies on public opinion focus on the influence of democratic values (Hanusch 2012; Keuleers 2015). While these studies document incumbent parties' close relationships with China and opposition parties' critical positions towards it across different countries (Sautman & Hairong 2009; Hess & Aidoo 2015; Sibiri 2020), the observations remain at the macro level. Public opinion has critical implications. A partisanship divide among the public means a greater challenge to China's soft power influence. There is a great diversity not only between countries but within

each African country. The potential influence of partisanship on citizens' views of China sheds light on a heterogeneous political environment with diverse citizen perspectives not dominated by a single actor whether it is the Chinese government, incumbent party, or even an opposition party.

Further, investigating party supporters' public opinion emphasises the agency of the public, and affords a critical study of the diverse perceptions towards China within and across countries. As the opposition party seeks for control of the government, the opposition party supporters seek influence in the government by having their party in power. The strong relationship between China and the incumbent party is perceived to limit the opposition party supporters' likelihood of influence. This facilitates receptivity to party cues, hence, the unanimity between supporters and the party in their view of China's presence.

### *Accountability mechanism*

Another important theoretical notion about the nature of party competition is the role of opposition parties and citizenry to hold an incumbent party accountable. Opposition parties play a critical function to check and scrutinise the incumbent government (Koenig *et al.* 2023). The role of opposition parties can be especially substantial in competitive and electoral authoritarian regimes. The core accountability mechanism in democracies is electoral accountability where citizens vote out undesirable incumbents. In countries without a power turnover despite a presence of opposition parties and electoral competition, opposition parties and their support base play an indirect yet considerable role to hold the incumbent party accountable. This suggests that opposition parties and their supporters function as watchdogs for the government's relationship with China.

Indeed, there was an instance where an opposition party functioned as a checking mechanism for the incumbent government's dealings with the Chinese government in Ghana. The leading opposition party New Patriotic Party (NPP) in Ghana was critical of the ruling party National Democratic Congress's (NDC) negotiation processes for China's three-billion-dollar loan (Aidoo 2016). The loan was expected to come with conditions that Ghana provide China with oil at a cheap price and Chinese companies contract the infrastructural projects (Aidoo 2016). The NPP's critical views towards the loan agreement gained public support, and the loan payment was stalled (Aidoo 2016). This function of checking for accountability is a role of opposition parties in general, rather than a position of a particular political party. After losing the presidential election to the NPP and becoming the opposition in 2016, the NDC criticised the NPP's close relationship with China (Sibiri 2020). This suggests that opposition parties in general may function to increase the ruling government's accountability and transparency in making bilateral negotiations with China, mitigating the risks of unfair loans, contracts and exploitations.

In general, citizens who are critical of the incumbent government including opposition partisans may be more likely to have negative perceptions of China. The distinction between the incumbent and opposition parties arises from the

disproportional mode of Chinese engagement. This suggests that a critical position against China is not necessarily a platform or a programme of a specific party. Rather, it is a property of opposition parties in general, and critical perceptions of China stem from critical views towards the incumbent government. In sum, this study expects that there is a negative relationship between support for opposition parties and perceptions towards China. Conversely, incumbent party support and attitudes towards China are positively associated. Thus, this study examines the following hypothesis.

*Partisanship Hypothesis (H1): Citizens who support opposition parties are more likely to have a negative perception toward China's engagement. Conversely, incumbent party supporters are more likely to have a positive view of China.*

## Data and variables

### Data

This study uses the Afrobarometer Round 6. The survey was conducted in 36 countries between 2014 and 2015. This study includes all the countries except for three countries where the questions about the ruling and opposition parties' performances were not asked.<sup>1</sup> This results in  $N = 50,337$  in 33 countries.<sup>2</sup>

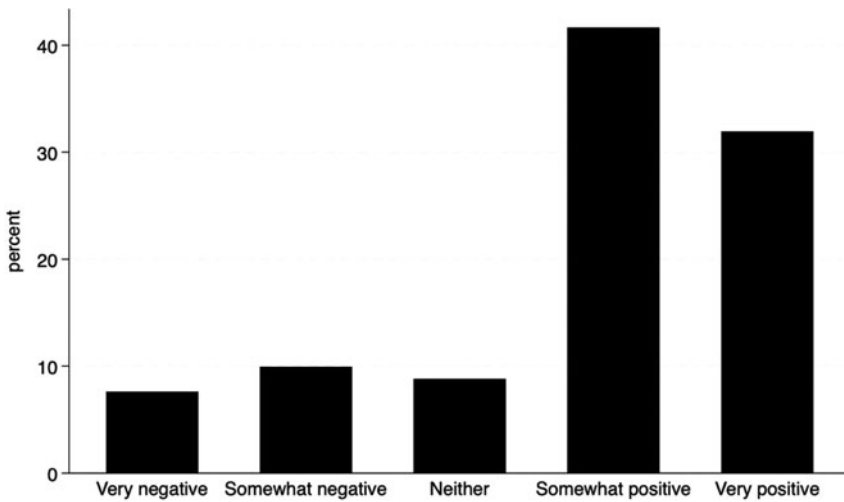
### Dependent variable

A dependent variable is a *perception of China*. This is based on a survey question: 'In general, do you think that China's economic and political influence on [country] is mostly positive, or mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?' The variable ranges from 1 to 5: 1 = very negative, 2 = somewhat negative, 3 = neither positive or negative, 4 = somewhat positive, and 5 = very positive. Figure 1 presents the distribution of this variable and shows that perceptions of China are overall more positive than negative.

### Independent variable

The key independent variables are *opposition party support*. This is based on a survey question: 'Looking at the ruling and opposition political parties in this country, which would you say is most able to address each of the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?' The respondents provide their answers for four issue areas: controlling prices, creating jobs, improving basic health services, and fighting corruption in government. The answers are recorded as: ruling party, opposition party or parties, or neither of them. Using these survey responses, this study generates a dichotomous variable, *Opposition party support (dichotomous)*. If a respondent chose 'ruling party' for all the four issue areas, it is coded as 0. If a respondent chose 'opposition parties' in at least one issue area, it is coded as 1. *Opposition party support (continuous-addition)* uses the same survey responses, but code -1 for supporting an incumbent party for each issue area, code 1 for supporting opposition





**Figure 1.** Perceptions of China's economic and political influence.

Source: Afrobarometer Round 6.

parties for each issue area, and 0 when neither party is selected. This results in a variable ranging from  $-4$  to  $4$ . *Opposition party support (continuous-subtraction)* is a continuous variable generated by subtracting the number of issues a respondent prefers to be handled by an incumbent party from the number of issues a respondent prefers to be handled by opposition parties. In all three estimates described above, the higher values indicate greater support for opposition parties.

### Control variables

This study also includes socio-economic status as control variables, including age, gender, education, economic status, and employment status. *Age* is a continuous variable ranging from 18 to 105, with a mean of 37. *Gender* is a dichotomous variable: 0 = men, 1 = women. *Education* ranges from 0 to 9, with higher values denoting higher levels of educational attainment. *Economic status* is based on a survey question: 'Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: (1) Gone without enough food to eat? (2) Gone without enough clean water for home use? (3) Gone without medicines or medical treatment? (4) Gone without enough fuel to cook your food? (5) Gone without a cash income?' For each of the five issue areas, the answers are recorded as: 1 = always, 2 = many times, 3 = several times, 4 = just once or twice, 5 = never. *Economic status* is an additive index of the responses in the five issue areas, ranging from 5 to 25. The higher values denote better economic status. *Employment status* is a dichotomous variable: 0 = unemployed, 1 = employed.

Other control variables address media influence and democratic values. *TV exposure* estimates the frequency of television use to obtain news, and ranges

from 0–4: 0 = never, 1 = less than once a month, 2 = a few times a month, 3 = a few times a week, and 4 = every day. *Support for democracy* is a dichotomous variable: 1 = support or 0 = no support. This is based on a survey question that asks respondents to choose the closest statement from three statements. It is coded as 1, if a respondent chose a statement ‘democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.’ It is coded as 0, if a respondent chose either of the two statements: ‘in some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable’ and ‘for someone like me, it doesn’t matter what kind of government we have.’

## Methods

This study employs multilevel mixed-effects ordered logistic regression analyses to examine the hypothesis. The multilevel mixed-effects analyses are required to examine the influence of both individual and country level factors. The analyses of random effects are critical since perceptions of China may vary significantly across the 33 countries. In other words, country-level factors and contexts can influence individual perceptions of China. Thus, this study accounts for country-level (cross-country) variation by including the country random intercept. There is also a possibility that the relationship between opposition party support and views of China vary across countries. There is a great heterogeneity across African countries in terms of both local political context and China’s level of engagement. To account for this heterogeneity, this study also examines random coefficients for opposition party support.

In addition, this study delves further into the case of Zimbabwe to articulate the theoretical mechanisms. Zimbabwe is a suitable case because it has a long history with China, dating back to the liberation movement and strengthened after Zimbabwe’s economic crisis following Western sanctions (Hodzi *et al.* 2012). China’s presence in Zimbabwe has made it a bone of contention between the major parties. The opposition party is very critical of China due to its support for the ruling party and the ruling party projects unwavering support for China because of the economic benefits it receives. It was one of the main issues during the 2018 presidential election.

## Analyses and discussion

### *Public opinion across 33 countries*

Table 1 presents the results of the multilevel mixed-effects ordered logistic regression, and supports the partisanship hypothesis (H1) that a perception of China is negatively related to the opposition party support and positively related to the incumbent party support. The opposition party support (dichotomous) is negative and significant in Model 1, meaning that opposition party supporters are less likely to have positive views towards China. The results remain robust across different estimates of opposition party support. In Model 2, opposition party support (continuous-addition) is negative and significant. In Model 3, opposition party support (continuous-subtraction) is

**Table 1.** Factors influencing perceptions of China

|  | Model 1               | Model 2                | Model 3                | Model 4               | Model 5               | Model 6               |
|--|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Fixed Effects</b>                                 |                       |                        |                        |                       |                       |                       |
| Opposition party support<br>(dichotomous)            | -0.253***<br>(-10.28) |                        |                        | -0.283***<br>(-4.47)  |                       |                       |
| Opposition party support<br>(continuous-addition)    |                       | -0.0620***<br>(-16.06) |                        |                       | -0.0494***<br>(-3.83) |                       |
| Opposition party support<br>(continuous-subtraction) |                       |                        | -0.0570***<br>(-13.81) |                       |                       | -0.0443***<br>(-3.51) |
| Education  | -0.0395***<br>(-6.27) | -0.0442***<br>(-7.81)  | -0.0394***<br>(-6.24)  | -0.0390***<br>(-6.16) | -0.0445***<br>(-7.84) | -0.0394***<br>(-6.22) |
| Women  | -0.101***<br>(-4.61)  | -0.105***<br>(-5.27)   | -0.104***<br>(-4.74)   | -0.100***<br>(-4.54)  | -0.102***<br>(-5.13)  | -0.101***<br>(-4.56)  |
| Age  | 0.000164<br>(0.20)    | -0.000452<br>(-0.61)   | 0.000250<br>(0.30)     | 0.000209<br>(0.25)    | -0.000435<br>(-0.58)  | 0.000343<br>(0.42)    |
| Economic Status                                      | 0.0160***<br>(5.83)   | 0.0148***<br>(5.95)    | 0.0152***<br>(5.55)    | 0.0151***<br>(5.48)   | 0.0136***<br>(5.41)   | 0.0138***<br>(5.00)   |
| Employed   | 0.0886***<br>(3.73)   | 0.0843***<br>(3.95)    | 0.0903***<br>(3.81)    | 0.0833***<br>(3.50)   | 0.0772***<br>(3.61)   | 0.0831***<br>(3.49)   |

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued.)

|                            | Model 1   | Model 2   | Model 3   | Model 4   | Model 5    | Model 6    |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Rural                      | 0.0586*   | 0.0661**  | 0.0562*   | 0.0460    | 0.0527*    | 0.0404     |
|                            | (2.32)    | (2.92)    | (2.22)    | (1.81)    | (2.32)     | (1.59)     |
| TV exposure                | 0.0320*** | 0.0324*** | 0.0323*** | 0.0341*** | 0.0342***  | 0.0343***  |
|                            | (3.93)    | (4.37)    | (3.97)    | (4.18)    | (4.60)     | (4.20)     |
| Support for democracy      | 0.00748   | 0.0398    | 0.0110    | 0.0131    | 0.0484*    | 0.0186     |
|                            | (0.28)    | (1.68)    | (0.42)    | (0.49)    | (2.03)     | (0.70)     |
| (cut omitted in table)     |           |           |           |           |            |            |
| Random Effects             |           |           |           |           |            |            |
| Intercept (Country)        | 0.637***  | 0.635***  | 0.632***  | 0.634***  | 0.645***   | 0.642***   |
|                            | (4.02)    | (4.03)    | (4.02)    | (4.13)    | (4.01)     | (3.99)     |
| Coefficient                |           |           |           | 0.154***  |            |            |
| (opposition party support) |           |           |           | (3.54)    |            |            |
| Coefficient                |           |           |           |           | 0.00477*** |            |
| (opposition party support) |           |           |           |           | (3.61)     |            |
| Coefficient                |           |           |           |           |            | 0.00440*** |
| (opposition party support) |           |           |           |           |            | (3.54)     |
| N                          | 30,129    | 36,535    | 30,129    | 30,129    | 36,535     | 30,129     |

Note: Multilevel mixed-effects ordered logistic regression; coefficient with t statistics in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Source: Afrobarometer Round 6.

also negative and significant. This result is in line with this study's expectation that opposition parties hold critical positions towards China's favourable relationship with an incumbent party out of an office-seeking interest. Since opposition party supporters take cues from the party elites, they tend to be more critical of China.

The result is consistent when controlling for country-level differences. Model 1 to 3 accounts for country-level factors through an inclusion of a country random intercept. Additionally, the models show that the random intercept itself is statistically significant. This means that there is a significant variation in views of China across African countries. In other words, there are country-level factors that influence perception of China. Model 4 to 6 allows the relationship between opposition party support and perception of China to vary across countries through an inclusion of the random coefficient for opposition party support. The random coefficient is statistically significant, indicating a heterogeneity across countries in terms of the relationship between opposition party support and perception of China. At the same time, the results of the fixed effects remain consistent.

The results of the control variables suggest that women and the more educated tend to view China critically, and the employed and wealthier have more positive views. Individuals with higher levels of education may be more likely to be aware of the unfair deals and loans with China, and be more critical of China's engagement. The employed and the wealthier may perceive China's engagement more positively because they are less likely to face economic competition with Chinese companies and migrants, compared to small shop owners, traders and miners. They may actually be gaining benefits from China's economic engagement, as the existing studies suggest that business owners and landowners are more likely to benefit (Esteban 2010; Waweru 2020). They are also less likely to be employed by Chinese construction and mining companies and face poor labour conditions.

The result of the TV exposure further supports this study's argument that those who follow an incumbent party's rhetoric are more likely to view China positively. Those who watch TV more frequently have positive perceptions of China. The incumbent parties tend to have more influence over TV, especially in countries with low levels of press freedom. Thus, individuals with higher levels of TV consumption have greater exposure to incumbent partisan cues favourable towards China. On the other hand, support for democracy does not have a statistically significant relationship with perceptions of China. This is inconsistent with a previous study's results (Hanusch 2012), potentially because the current study includes a greater number of countries with more variation in regime types.

### Robustness checks

For the purpose of robustness check, this study also estimates opposition party support in three additional manners respectively. Table 2 shows that the result is robust across different measurements. *Opposition party support (categorical)* ranges from 0 to 4. Incumbent party supporters are coded as 0. The codes of

**Table 2.** Factors influencing perceptions of China (with different measures of party support)

|   | Model 1               | Model 2                | Model 3               | Model 4               | Model 5               | Model 6               | Model 7               |
|---|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Fixed Effects   |                       |                        |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| Opposition party support<br>(categorical)               | -0.114***<br>(-13.81) |                        |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| Opposition party support<br>(categorical w/independent) |                       | -0.0997***<br>(-13.01) |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| Opposition party support<br>(dichotomous w/independent) |                       |                        | -0.218***<br>(-9.93)  |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| Incumbent party support<br>(dichotomous)                |                       |                        |                       | 0.454***<br>(13.33)   |                       |                       |                       |
| Incumbent party support<br>(categorical)                |                       |                        |                       |                       | 0.114***<br>(13.81)   |                       |                       |
| Incumbent party support<br>(categorical w/independent)  |                       |                        |                       |                       |                       | 0.111***<br>(16.55)   |                       |
| Incumbent party support<br>(dichotomous w/independent)  |                       |                        |                       |                       |                       |                       | 0.406***<br>(15.43)   |
| Education   | -0.0394***<br>(-6.24) | -0.0458***<br>(-8.10)  | -0.0456***<br>(-8.07) | -0.0404***<br>(-6.41) | -0.0394***<br>(-6.24) | -0.0433***<br>(-7.65) | -0.0452***<br>(-7.98) |
| Women   | -0.104***             | -0.102***              | -0.101***             | -0.101***             | -0.104***             | -0.104***             | -0.101***             |

|                        |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|                        | (-4.74)   | (-5.14)   | (-5.05)   | (-4.60)   | (-4.74)   | (-5.23)   | (-5.09)   |
| Age                    | 0.000250  | -0.000500 | -0.000544 | 0.000436  | 0.000250  | -0.000360 | -0.000227 |
|                        | (0.30)    | (-0.67)   | (-0.73)   | (0.53)    | (0.30)    | (-0.48)   | (-0.30)   |
| Economic Status        | 0.0152*** | 0.0157*** | 0.0162*** | 0.0160*** | 0.0152*** | 0.0148*** | 0.0158*** |
|                        | (5.55)    | (6.31)    | (6.52)    | (5.86)    | (5.55)    | (5.95)    | (6.37)    |
| Employed               | 0.0903*** | 0.0837*** | 0.0827*** | 0.0914*** | 0.0903*** | 0.0838*** | 0.0823*** |
|                        | (3.81)    | (3.92)    | (3.88)    | (3.85)    | (3.81)    | (3.93)    | (3.86)    |
| Rural                  | 0.0562*   | 0.0706**  | 0.0719**  | 0.0551*   | 0.0562*   | 0.0633**  | 0.0622**  |
|                        | (2.22)    | (3.12)    | (3.18)    | (2.18)    | (2.22)    | (2.79)    | (2.75)    |
| TV exposure            | 0.0323*** | 0.0314*** | 0.0311*** | 0.0312*** | 0.0323*** | 0.0329*** | 0.0314*** |
|                        | (3.97)    | (4.24)    | (4.20)    | (3.83)    | (3.97)    | (4.43)    | (4.23)    |
| Support for democracy  | 0.0110    | 0.0450    | 0.0419    | 0.0180    | 0.0110    | 0.0362    | 0.0433    |
|                        | (0.42)    | (1.90)    | (1.77)    | (0.68)    | (0.42)    | (1.52)    | (1.83)    |
| (cut omitted in table) |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Random Effects         |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Intercept (Country)    | 0.632***  | 0.651***  | 0.654***  | 0.639***  | 0.632***  | 0.630***  | 0.641***  |
|                        | (4.02)    | (4.03)    | (4.03)    | (4.02)    | (4.02)    | (4.03)    | (4.03)    |
| N                      | 30,129    | 36,535    | 36,535    | 30,129    | 30,129    | 36,535    | 36,535    |

Note: Multilevel mixed-effects ordered logistic regression; coefficient with t statistics in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Source: Afrobarometer Round 6.

1 through 4 indicate the number of issue areas in which a respondent favours opposition parties, hence higher values denote greater opposition party support. *Opposition party support (categorical w/independent)* also ranges from 0 to 4. The only difference is that the code of 0 includes both incumbent supporters and independents. *Opposition party support (dichotomous w/independent)* is a dichotomous variable: 0 = incumbent supporters and independents or 1 = opposition party supporters. All the opposition party support indicators show a consistent result that opposition party supporters are more critical of China than incumbent party supporters and independents (see Model 1 to 3).

For a further robustness check, Model 4 to 7 estimates incumbent party support in four ways. *Incumbent party support (dichotomous)* is a dichotomous variable: 0 = supporting ‘opposition parties’ in all the four issue areas or 1 = supporting a ‘ruling party’ in at least one issue area. *Incumbent party support (categorical)* ranges from 0 to 4, where the value 0 indicates support for opposition parties and the values 1–4 indicate the strength of support for an incumbent party. *Incumbent party support (categorical w/independent)* also ranges from 0 to 4, and the value 0 includes both incumbent supporters and independents. *Incumbent party support (dichotomous w/independent)* is a dichotomous variable: 0 = opposition supporters and independents or 1 = incumbent party supporters. Again, the effect of incumbent party support is consistent regardless of its operationalisation (see Model 4 to 7). Incumbent party supporters are more likely to view China positively.

Table A1 in Supplementary Materials introduces two additional variables that address citizens’ evaluations of the incumbent executive: *disapprove executive performance* and *perceived executive corruption*. Given the role of opposition parties and their supporters in the accountability mechanism (Koenig *et al.* 2023), this study expects that citizens who are discontent with the incumbent government’s performance will have more critical views of China. *Disapprove executive performance* is the level of disapproval for the performance of the executive (president or prime minister) in the past one year. It ranges from 1 to 4: 1 = strongly approve, 2 = approve, 3 = disapprove, and 4 = strongly disapprove. *Perceived executive corruption* is based on how many people in the executive office (president/prime minister and officials in the executive office) the respondents perceive to be involved in corruption. It ranges from 0 to 3: 0 = none, 1 = some of them, 2 = most of them, and 3 = all of them.<sup>3</sup>

Table A1 Model 1 indicates that the disapprove executive performance variable is negative and significant, meaning that those who disapprove the executive’s performance are less likely to have positive views of China. According to Model 2, the perceived executive corruption is also negative and significant, meaning that those who perceive that the executive is corrupt are less likely to perceive China positively. These results are in line with this study’s argument that those who are critical of the incumbent are also critical of China. Citizens who are critical of the incumbent government including opposition partisans function as a checking mechanism to hold the ruling government accountable as it makes bilateral negotiations with China.



Lastly, further examination is needed for the argument that a critical position against China is not a programme of a specific party, but rather a property of opposition parties in general. This requires public opinion survey data before and after a power transition. Only Afrobarometer Round 6, 8 and 9 have included the survey question on perception of China. During this timeframe, Ghana has experienced an executive power transition. In 2015 when Afrobarometer Round 6 was conducted, NDC was the incumbent under President John Mahama. The NPP candidate Nana Akufo-Addo won the 2016 presidential election. Thus, for the time of Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019) and 9 (2022), NPP is the incumbent.

According to the Afrobarometer survey results, the NDC supporters had more positive views of China compared to the opposition NPP supporters in 2015. While about 38% of NDC supporters had positive views of China, about 31% of NPP supporters had positive views of China. However, after the power transition in 2016, the public opinion switched between the party supporters. In 2019, the NPP supporters had more positive views of China compared to the NDC supporters. The percentage having a positive perception of China was higher among the NPP supporters (50%) than the NDC supporters (46%). Despite the limited evidence, this result may illuminate the influence of party cues.

### *Political parties and mobilization in Zimbabwe*

The Zimbabwe-China relationship can be traced back to the period of the struggle for independence (Youde 2007; Hodzi *et al.* 2012). China supported the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in its struggles against the ruling White minority government (Youde 2007). China's ambition to emerge from the shadows of the Union Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and establish itself as a global player led to a split between China and USSR. China sought to convey its image as a supporter of the Global South and liberation movements (Alao 2014). Such a move meant countering the USSR (Alao 2014). In Zimbabwe's first multiparty election, China supported ZANU-PF and countered the USSR's support for Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). China's decision to support the ZANU-PF paid off, since ZANU-PF won the election to continue its relationship with China. The leader of ZANU-PF, Robert Mugabe, called himself 'a Marxist-Leninist of Maoist thought' (Youde 2007), sent soldiers to be trained in China and committed to maintaining the bilateral tie (Alao 2014).

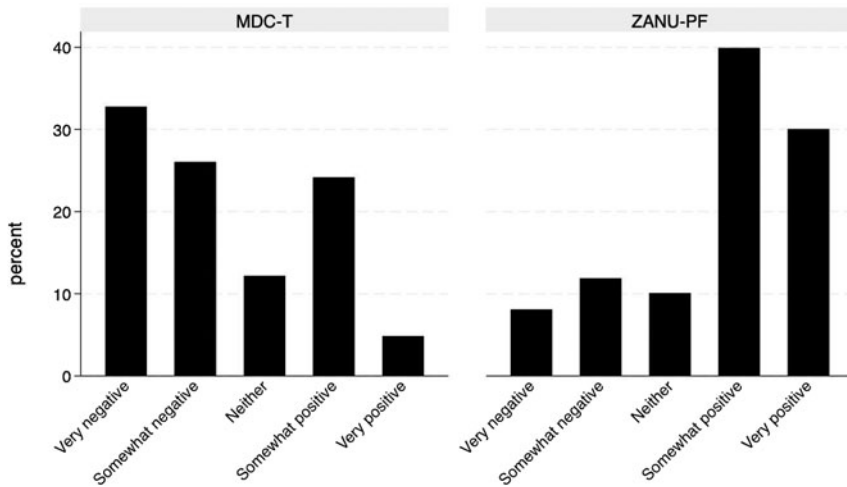
Since then, strong ties remain between Zimbabwe and China. Under the ZANU-PF leadership, Zimbabwe and China's unconditional friendship is vivid, such that they refer to each other as 'all weather friends' (Chipaike & Bischoff 2019). This friendship became obvious when Zimbabwe went under the European and North American countries' economic sanction after the land acquisition policy that saw White Zimbabweans expelled from farms (Hodzi *et al.* 2012). The economic malaise that followed the sanctions meant that Zimbabwe had to look elsewhere for assistance. Hence, the Look East Policy that reintroduced China as an important player in Zimbabwe's economy

(Ojakorotu & Kamidza 2018). China and Zimbabwe maintain the position that Zimbabwe's troubles are the design of the Western powers, and this stance is manifested during opposition demonstrations against the government and China (Xinhua 2020).

China has also kept its unconditional support despite Zimbabwe's poor human rights record (Chikwanha 2009). Reports of vote rigging, corruption and heavy-handed dictatorship have not swayed China away. In 2010, China threw Mugabe a birthday party (Reuters 2010), which was a tone-deaf reaction to Human Rights groups' criticism of the Mugabe regime. China has also provided anti-riots gear that police use to crack down on opposition protests (International Group Crisis 2006). The two countries remain strong trade partners and political allies even after the death of Mugabe. China imports most of Zimbabwe's tobacco and also has a large influence in other industries, including telecommunication, media, mining, construction, agriculture, retail and hospitality (Alao 2014). When the European Union's exports to Zimbabwe fell, China's exports to Zimbabwe rose (Alao 2014). China is an important pillar of ZANU-PF's effort to hold onto power, and the robust bilateral relationship continues under the government of Emmerson Mnangagwa, the current president of Zimbabwe who was once trained in China during the liberation wars (Alao 2014).

However, despite the government's propaganda and its control on media (Mano 2016), what is seen as China's positive impact on Zimbabwe by ZANU-PF supporters is countered by the opposition supporters' negative views of China's involvement in Zimbabwe. Opposition party supporters and dissatisfied citizens pushing for a regime change in Zimbabwe perceive China as an obstacle. China has been perceived as a supporter of dictatorships and a stumbling block to a power turnover. The opposition party, MDC, has criticised China for keeping Mugabe in power and continuing to saddle Zimbabwe with debt. (Alao 2014). The rhetoric from the late MDC(-T) leader Morgan Tsvangirai and his successor Nelson Chamisa, shaped the negative view of China in Zimbabwe.

Chamisa criticised ZANU-PF's close ties with China during the 2018 presidential election, and had significant electoral gains (Sibiri 2020). Civil society and the opposition have mobilised amid dissatisfaction with the incumbent government and its steadfast ally, China. Discontent partly arises from environmental degradation due to China's mining activities and exploitation of wildlife that ZANU-PF turns a blind eye on. A protestor said, 'what China needs to understand is that not everything in Africa is for sale', and lamented to President Mnangagwa that 'seeing the wildlife as something which can be uplifted and sold like a ripe fruit off a tree into a terrifying chasm... Zimbabwe's Elephants are the jewels in her crown, do not sell them' (Humane Society International 2019). This message aligns with the opposition view of China's economic dealing with Zimbabwe, as Chamisa said that the deals that President Mnangagwa 'has entered into with China and others, they are busy asset-stripping the resources of the country' (BBC 2018). Chamisa's rhetoric resonated with the MDC's political base, who perceive Chinese loans as fundamental in keeping ZANU-PF in power (Crabtree 2018).



**Figure 2.** Perceptions of China's influence by partisanship in Zimbabwe.  
Source: Afrobarometer Round 6.

Criticism by the opposition has been a mechanism for checking ZANU-PF and pressuring China. During the unrest after the 2008 elections, the opposition and civil society were successful in compelling China to halt its shipments of weapons to Zimbabwe, amid fear that the weapons were going to be used for repression (Dugger *et al.* 2008). The opportunity structure was ideal because China wanted to boost its image as the government prepared for the Beijing Olympics (Dugger *et al.* 2008). In the same year, Beijing was compelled to force Mugabe to negotiate with the opposition (Evans 2008) a move that led to the power sharing agreement between ZANU-PF and MDC (Tran 2008).

The opposition has continued to organise protests against labour exploitation practices in Chinese-owned mines. There were anti-China and anti-government demonstrations planned on 26 May 2022 (Jiamei 2022). The protests were expected to disrupt production at Chinese-run mines (Jiamei 2022). The government claimed that the opposition 'supporters and civil society members set to protest disguised as mine employees' (Nyikadzino 2022). These protests against Chinese mining firms fell short of moving the government from its obstinate position on China. The government continues to grant new licenses to Chinese mining companies (Africa Intelligence 2021). President Mnangagwa has claimed that the opposition protests against Chinese mines in Bikita were orchestrated by Western governments (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2023).

Although it is hard to substantiate those claims, opposition party supporters follow partisan cues. The Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2015 shows that a majority of the incumbent party supporters perceive China positively, whereas a majority of the opposition party supporters view China negatively. About 70% of the ZANU-PF supporters have positive perceptions of

**Table 3.** Views of China's influence by partisanship across Afrobarometer Rounds.

|               | Round 6             |                      | Round 8             |                      | Round 9           |                      |
|---------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
|               | Opposition<br>MDC-T | Incumbent<br>ZANU-PF | Opposition<br>MDC-C | Incumbent<br>ZANU-PF | Opposition<br>CCC | Incumbent<br>ZANU-PF |
| Very positive | 5%                  | 27%                  | 7%                  | 19%                  | 5%                | 13%                  |
| Very negative | 32%                 | 7%                   | 23%                 | 5%                   | 34%               | 4%                   |

Note: The survey question asked: 'In general, do you think that China's economic and political influence on Zimbabwe is mostly positive, or mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?'  
Source: Afrobarometer Round 6 (2015), 8 (2022), and 9 (2022).

China. On the other hand, 59% of the MDC-T supporters have negative perceptions of China (see [Figure 2](#)). Therefore, incumbent party supporters are likely to follow the ZANU-PF party cues and opposition party supporters are likely to follow the MDC's cues.

This trend is consistent with the subsequent waves of the Afrobarometer survey. [Table 3](#) shows the percentage of respondents having very positive or very negative views of China by partisanship across different waves of Afrobarometer. There is a similar pattern across the three waves of the Afrobarometer. The incumbent ZANU-PF supporters consistently have more positive perception than supporters of a main opposition party. The main opposition party was MDC-T for Round 6, MDC-C for Round 8, and CCC for Round 9. Across the waves, opposition party supporters have more negative views of China than ZANU-PF supporters.

ZANU-PF supporters are likely to align with both the Chinese and Zimbabwean government narrative. The Chinese and Zimbabwean government's positions were similar regarding protests that were planned during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 against the Zimbabwean government's handling of corruption and the economy. The Chinese official media blamed the United States and other 'detractors' for being behind the planned protests ([Xinhua 2020](#)). The Zimbabwean official media, *Herald*, similarly claimed that the U.S. is facilitating the training of local reporters to write anti-China stories with a view to undermine Chinese investment in Zimbabwe ([Kumar 2021](#)). This instance illustrates a backdrop against which the oppositions criticise the incumbent party's close relationship with China.

The orchestrated reports by the Chinese and Zimbabwean state media also bring to light the attempts by both governments to counter Zimbabwe's opposition party cues and sway the public opinion. They reveal China's wish to present a positive image in Zimbabwe, as well as ZANU-PF's wish to portray China as an important player in the Zimbabwean economy to continue deepening the party-to-party relationship. For instance, President Mnangagwa recently responded to criticism of China's presence in Zimbabwe by emphasising that China has brought employment to Zimbabweans through mutual partnerships ([Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2023](#)). Such a response is designed to counter opposition criticisms. In short, the findings from Zimbabwe further underscore the general trend observed across African countries in the statistical analyses that opposition party supporters are likely to have a negative view of China and incumbent party supporters tend to view China positively. Most importantly, Zimbabwe's experience illustrates the heterogeneous political environment where the Chinese government, ZANU-PF, and opposition parties compete to influence the public opinion. The Zimbabwean case articulates this study's arguments and theoretical mechanisms.

## Conclusion

The findings suggest that opposition party supporters are more likely to have critical views of China than incumbent party supporters. Since incumbent elites are more likely to benefit from China's engagement ([Waweru 2020](#)),

incumbent party supporters tend to perceive China positively. On the contrary, opposition party supporters tend to be critical of the incumbent party's close ties with China and China's engagement in general, because they follow partisan cues of opposition parties seeking for an electoral gain. This study also finds that those who disapprove of the executive's performance are more critical of China. Citizens who are critical of the incumbent government including opposition partisans function to check and monitor the government's bilateral negotiations with China, mitigating the risks of unfair loans, contracts and exploitations.

The findings indicate that critical views towards China can arise in both democratic and authoritarian regimes. In a democracy the effect of elite rhetoric can be determined by electoral outcomes. On the other hand, in an authoritarian regime, elections provide little information because their accuracy is always in question. However, public opinion can mitigate the lack of informative outcomes from elections in authoritarian regimes and facilitate a broader investigation of the influence of opposition party support across different regime types.

We also highlight the limitations of this study. While this study accounts for differences among countries through random intercepts and coefficients in the analysis, the result also suggests that there is heterogeneity among countries. This may be due to the diversity in local political contexts and degrees of China's involvement in the economy and politics of different African countries. Future studies can examine cross-level interaction between country level factors and partisan factors at the individual level.

Another caveat is that there is currently no longitudinal data that enables an examination of the public opinion before and after an executive power turnover in democratic countries. Since both incumbent and opposition parties are driven by office-seeking interests and the checking function is a property of opposition parties in general, a critical position towards China cannot be associated with any particular party. If political parties alter their positions upon a power turnover, it corroborates such mechanisms. Thus, future studies are needed to examine consequences of power turnovers with longitudinal data.

This study has implications for China's engagement with African countries. The findings suggest that China does not have unquestioned dominance over the public in African countries. This study also points to the importance of considering diverse individual perceptions that exist across and within African countries. The growing grievances among the public in many of these countries need greater attention. This study also points to the critical roles played by political parties and the agency of partisan individuals. Lastly, the mode of China's bilateral engagement demands greater attention rather than the volume of such engagement. The partisan divide in attitudes towards China stems from the Chinese government's favourable relationship with incumbent parties. The Chinese government does not base its bilateral relationship on regime types of partner countries, but it has a tendency to base it on a party-to-party connection.

**Supplementary Material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X24000314>.

## Notes

1. These three countries are: Eswatini, Burkina Faso, Egypt.
2. The 33 countries are: Algeria, Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.
3. Opposition party support is weakly correlated with disapprove executive performance and perceived executive corruption at the correlation coefficients of 0.29 and 0.20 respectively. The disapprove executive performance and perceived executive corruption are also not fully correlated at 0.42. Therefore, Table A1 Model 1 and 2 include disapprove executive performance and perceived executive corruption separately.

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