

The Distribution of Political Campaign Work: A Labor-Market Perspective from Uganda

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Abstract

Background: Electoral campaigns in sub-Saharan Africa mobilize vast numbers of people, yet their contribution to local labour markets is rarely examined. **Purpose:** This study reconceptualises campaign activity in Uganda as contingent informal labour and investigates which socio-economic groups supply this effort. **Design/methodology/approach:** Drawing on nationally representative Afrobarometer rounds 7 and 8 (2017, 2022), the research pools 4,800 adult observations and applies survey-weighted descriptive statistics and logistic regressions. Age, current employment, and a lived-poverty index test competing expectations that campaign work is either a stop-gap for the most vulnerable or a network-mediated opportunity for socially embedded workers. **Findings:** Campaign work is common: between one-quarter and one-third of adults reported working for a candidate or party during the most recent election. Participation rises monotonically with age; Ugandans aged 36 + are about 50 per cent more likely to participate than those aged 18–25. Employed respondents are modestly more engaged than the non-employed, while material deprivation shows no discernible association once age and employment are controlled. These patterns suggest that campaigns selectively recruit reliable, networked individuals rather than simply absorbing economically distressed youth. **Originality/value:** By treating elections as labour-demand events, the article bridges political economy and labour-market scholarship, demonstrating that campaign labour is structured by organisational embeddedness and life-cycle positioning, not acute poverty. The findings challenge vulnerability-centric narratives and offer a refined lens for analysing informal, episodic work in contexts of high under-employment.

Keywords: electoral campaign labour Uganda; informal employment dynamics; contingent political work; Afrobarometer survey analysis; voter mobilisation economics; sub-Saharan Africa labour markets; political economy of elections; network-mediated recruitment; episodic informal work; socio-economic participation patterns.

I. Introduction

Youth employment constraints remain among the most persistent structural challenges in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where demographic momentum, limited formal job creation, and large informal sectors shape labor-market trajectories (Filmer & Fox, 2014; Fox & Kaul, 2018). Even when economies grow, many young people experience weak labor-market attachment, moving between short-term income activities that do not reliably build skills, stability, or upward mobility (Fields, 2019; Page & Shimeles, 2015). This reality has pushed labor-market research to look beyond standard employment categories and examine “non-standard” and episodic work arrangements that are often poorly captured by conventional statistics.

In parallel, electoral politics across many African contexts is intensely organizational and labor-demanding. Competitive elections require large volumes of effort to mobilize turnout, disseminate messages, coordinate rallies, manage community engagement, and sustain local outreach. Much of this work is mediated through informal networks and intermediaries—actors who translate campaign resources into mobilization capacity and, in many settings, distribute material inducements or targeted benefits in exchange for political support (Jensen & Justesen, 2014; Kramon, 2016). Yet, despite a large literature on African political participation, clientelism, and electoral competition, campaign work itself is rarely analyzed as a form of labor, with systematic attention to who supplies this effort and under what socioeconomic conditions (Bratton & Houessou, 2019; World Development, 2024).

Treating campaign work as labor is analytically useful for two reasons. First, it reframes electoral periods as moments of temporary labor demand—where campaigns “hire” (formally or informally) people to execute tasks under tight timelines, weak regulation, and heavy reliance on personal networks. Second, it clarifies that campaign participation is not always best interpreted as purely civic engagement; it may also reflect economic calculation, networked opportunity, or access to political organizations that function as allocative institutions in contexts where formal employment is scarce. Evidence from African settings shows that party organizations can mobilize young people into roles such as “foot soldiers,” sometimes creating durable organizational identities, expectations of reward, and repeated engagement across

election cycles—dynamics that resemble contingent work more than conventional employment (Bjarnesen, 2020).

However, existing theory does not yield a single prediction about *which* groups should be most likely to engage in campaign work. One plausible account is an economic vulnerability mechanism: individuals facing constrained livelihood options may view campaign work as a stop-gap income strategy, particularly where vote buying and targeted inducements are prevalent (Jensen & Justesen, 2014; Kramon, 2016). An alternative account emphasizes organizational embeddedness and network access: campaign work may be more common among those with stronger social and political ties, reputational capital, and availability for intensive mobilization—attributes that can correlate with employment status or age rather than deprivation. Related work on intermediaries and local mobilization highlights that political actors frequently rely on trusted brokers and community nodes, which can privilege individuals with established standing or institutional linkage rather than the most economically deprived (Baldwin, 2022).

This paper advances the argument that campaign work should be treated as a measurable category of contingent labor embedded in informal institutions—and that its distribution across the population is an empirical question rather than an assumption. Conceptually, campaign work shares key features with precarious and informal labor: it is time-bound, weakly regulated, accessed through networks rather than open hiring, and often organized around tasks and short deliverables. This resonates with broader scholarship on informal work and non-standard labor arrangements, including task-based work that can resemble “gig-like” organization even outside digital platforms (Berg et al., 2018; Williams & Horodnic, 2018). Importantly, the paper does not presuppose that campaign work is concentrated among economically vulnerable youth; instead, it tests whether participation aligns more closely with vulnerability-based explanations or with organizational embeddedness and access.

Uganda provides an analytically valuable setting for this investigation given its large youth population, persistent constraints in formal employment absorption, and recurrent, highly mobilized electoral competition. Using nationally representative Afrobarometer survey data for Uganda, the study asks: Who participates in campaign work, and how is participation patterned by age, employment status, and material deprivation? The empirical strategy estimates survey-weighted models of

campaign-work participation and presents predicted probabilities to clarify substantive differences across groups. By identifying the socioeconomic profile of campaign workers, the paper contributes to political economy and labor-market research by (i) making campaign work visible as a labor-like activity, (ii) treating electoral cycles as potential labor-demand events, and (iii) providing micro-level evidence on the distribution of this activity in an election-intensive context.

This paper makes three contributions to the literature on labor markets, informality, and political economy in low- and middle-income countries. First, it conceptualizes political campaign work as a distinct and empirically observable form of contingent informal labor, extending labor-market analysis into a domain that has traditionally been treated as purely political participation. Second, using nationally representative survey data, the paper provides the first micro-level evidence on how campaign work participation is distributed across age, employment status, and material deprivation. Contrary to common assumptions, the findings show that campaign work is not disproportionately concentrated among the poorest or unemployed youth; instead, participation is higher among older respondents and, to a lesser extent, among those already attached to work. Third, by documenting these patterns, the study reframes electoral campaigns as selective, network-mediated labor-demand events rather than residual safety valves for the most economically vulnerable. This refined perspective advances debates on informality and precarious work by highlighting the role of organizational embeddedness and network access in shaping contingent labor allocation during political cycles. Importantly, the analysis does not presume that campaign work is concentrated among economically vulnerable youth; rather, it treats this as an empirical question and allows the data to adjudicate between vulnerability-based and organizational-embeddedness explanations.

2. Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Political campaigns as labor-demand events

Political campaigns are conventionally examined as political phenomena, with scholarship focusing on voter behavior, turnout, electoral integrity, and clientelism. However, a growing body of political economy research emphasizes that election periods are also moments of intensified economic organization, particularly in contexts

characterized by weak labor-market institutions and high informality (Kao, Lust, & Rakner, 2022; Cazals & Léon, 2023). Competitive campaigns generate short-term demand for labor to perform time-bound tasks such as mobilization, coordination, logistics, security, and information dissemination. These activities are operationally closer to contingent and task-based work than to standard forms of civic participation.

Recent empirical studies highlight that electoral mobilization in many low- and middle-income countries relies on decentralized organizational structures rather than formal party bureaucracies (Dawson, Hanmer, & Levine, 2023). Parties and candidates frequently depend on local intermediaries and temporary workers who are recruited through social and political networks rather than open or regulated labor markets. From a labor economics perspective, such arrangements resemble informal employment: they are weakly regulated, episodic, and accessed through relational channels rather than contracts (Fields, 2019).

Despite these parallels, campaign work remains largely absent from labor-market research. Studies of informality and precarious employment rarely treat political cycles as sources of labor demand, while studies of electoral participation typically frame campaign involvement as civic engagement rather than economic activity. This conceptual separation obscures how electoral competition can reallocate labor supply during election periods. By explicitly conceptualizing campaign work as a labor-market phenomenon, this paper extends labor-market analysis into the political domain without collapsing political participation into purely economic behavior.

2.2 Youth labor-market attachment and entry into campaign work

Youth in sub-Saharan Africa face persistent barriers to stable employment, including limited formal job creation, rapid labor-force growth, and widespread informality (Fox & Kaul, 2018; Page & Shimeles, 2015). Rather than transitioning smoothly into stable jobs, many young people experience weak labor-market attachment, combining self-employment, casual labor, unpaid family work, and intermittent unemployment (Fields, 2019). This pattern produces heterogeneous forms of economic engagement that are often episodic and task-based.

Political campaigns intersect with this labor-market context by offering short-term opportunities that require

availability, mobility, and network access rather than formal credentials. Research on African electoral mobilization shows that campaign participation among young people is shaped less by ideology alone than by exposure to mobilization networks, organizational recruitment, and material inducements (Resnick & Casale, 2014; Bratton & Houessou, 2019). Campaigns frequently recruit individuals who are able to commit time and effort during intensive electoral periods, a condition that may correlate with employment status and age rather than extreme poverty.

Importantly, recent work cautions against interpreting youth campaign participation as straightforward evidence of empowerment or inclusion. Instead, participation often reflects structural conditions in which political organizations provide temporary opportunities for engagement that do not translate into durable economic advancement (Resnick, 2023). This insight motivates a more nuanced empirical question: whether campaign work is primarily associated with economic deprivation or with intermediate forms of labor-market attachment that combine availability, social embeddedness, and organizational access.

2.3 Electoral cycles, uncertainty, and local economic organization

Beyond individual labor supply, elections are increasingly understood as sources of economic uncertainty that reshape local organization. Firm-level evidence from developing economies shows that electoral cycles are associated with delayed investment, reduced hiring, and operational disruptions due to heightened political uncertainty (Cazals & Léon, 2023). These effects can indirectly alter labor supply by changing the opportunity cost of time and reducing alternative income-generating activities during election periods.

In this environment, campaign work may emerge as a partial substitute for disrupted or foregone economic activity. While this paper does not estimate firm-level responses directly, it situates campaign labor within a broader literature that treats political cycles as economically consequential events rather than purely institutional processes. Campaign work can therefore be understood as one mechanism through which electoral competition interacts with local labor allocation under conditions of uncertainty.

2.4 Theoretical framework

This study draws on three complementary strands of theory to conceptualize campaign work as an economic activity and to explain its distribution across individuals. Together, these perspectives clarify both the nature of campaign work and the mechanisms governing participation, while avoiding assumptions not supported by the data.

First, informal labor market theory provides the foundation for characterizing campaign work as employment-like activity. In contexts where formal employment opportunities are limited, workers frequently rely on short-term, weakly regulated, task-based activities to smooth income and manage risk (Fields, 2019; Williams & Horodnic, 2018). Campaign work shares key features of such informal labor: it is time-bound, episodic, weakly protected, and organized around discrete tasks rather than stable contracts. From this perspective, campaign work is best understood as a form of contingent informal labor that emerges during electoral cycles rather than as an anomaly external to labor markets.

Second, political mobilization and brokerage theory provides the primary mechanism for explaining who participates in campaign work. In settings characterized by weak party institutionalization, electoral mobilization relies heavily on decentralized intermediaries—local brokers, coordinators, and trusted operatives—who recruit participants and allocate campaign tasks through relational networks rather than open recruitment (Kramon, 2016; Kao et al., 2022). These intermediaries function as informal labor-market gatekeepers, prioritizing reliability, reputational capital, and local embeddedness. As a result, access to campaign work is likely structured by social and organizational ties rather than by economic vulnerability alone.

Third, political uncertainty theory situates campaign labor within broader electoral cycles that reshape local economic behavior. Elections in developing economies are associated with heightened uncertainty, delayed investment, and shifts in firm-level activity, which can alter opportunity costs and reallocate labor effort toward campaign-related activities (Cazals & Léon, 2023). Under this view, campaign work represents a temporary reorganization of labor during politically salient periods rather than a persistent labor-market outcome.

Importantly, these perspectives imply that participation in campaign work should be non-randomly distributed, but they do not yield a single prediction centered exclusively

on economic deprivation. While material vulnerability may increase receptivity to short-term income opportunities, access to campaign labor is mediated by organizational embeddedness, broker trust, and network access. Consequently, campaign work may be more prevalent among individuals who are already economically active and socially connected, rather than among those with the weakest labor-market attachment.

Taken together, the framework treats campaign work as selectively allocated contingent labor embedded in

informal political institutions. Informal labor theory explains the employment-like character of campaign work, while brokerage theory explains its patterned distribution across age and employment status. This integrated framework guides the empirical analysis without presupposing that campaign work functions as a safety valve for the most economically deprived.

2.5 Conceptual framework

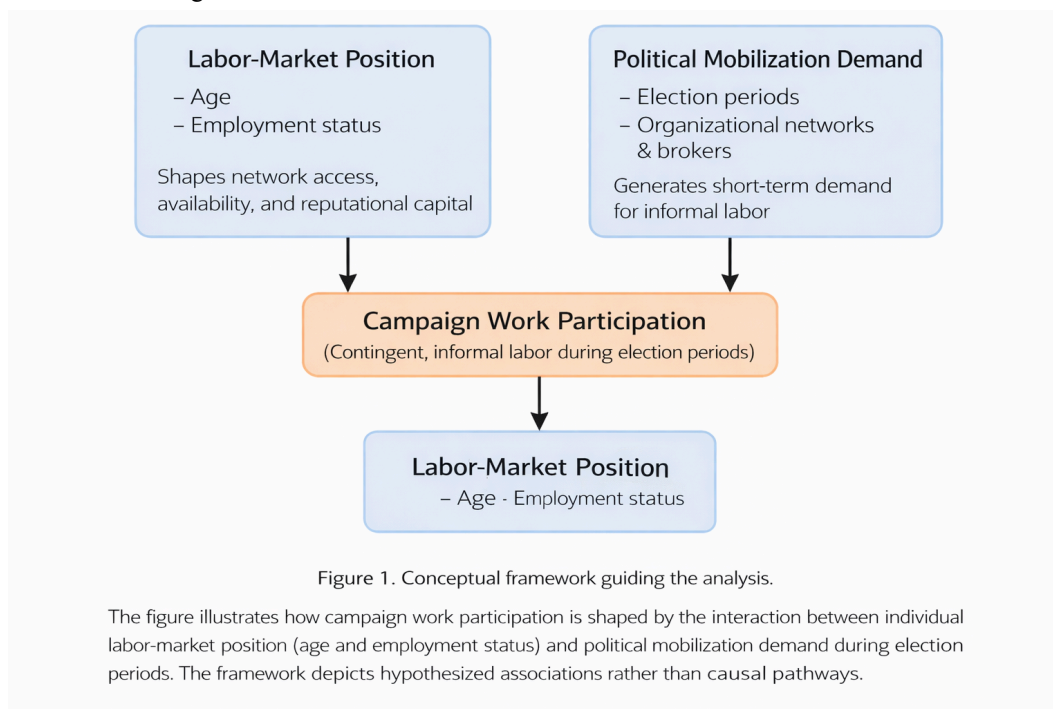


Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding the empirical analysis. The framework treats campaign work participation as a form of contingent, informal labor that emerges from the interaction between individual labor-market position and short-term political mobilization demand during election periods.

On the supply side, individuals' labor-market position—proxied by age and employment status, shapes their availability, mobility, and access to informal opportunities. Age captures accumulated local embeddedness, reputational capital, and familiarity with political organizations, while employment status reflects time flexibility and integration into local economic and social networks. Importantly, these attributes are not interpreted as indicators of labor-market security per se, but as factors that condition access to network-mediated, short-term work opportunities.

On the demand side, political mobilization demand increases sharply during election periods. Campaigns generate short-term labor needs for tasks such as mobilization, coordination, logistics, and outreach. In contexts characterized by weak party institutionalization, this demand is typically mediated through organizational networks and brokers rather than formal hiring channels, producing labor arrangements that are informal, time-bound, and relational.

The interaction of these supply- and demand-side forces raises the probability of campaign work participation, depicted at the center of the framework. Campaign work is thus conceptualized as neither purely civic engagement nor conventional employment, but as a network-mediated form of contingent labor activated during electoral cycles.

Crucially, the framework does not posit a direct or mechanical role for economic deprivation. Instead, material vulnerability is treated as a background condition

that may coexist with campaign work participation but does not, on its own, determine access. This reflects the paper's empirical orientation: campaign work participation is understood as an outcome shaped by labor-market attachment and organizational embeddedness interacting with episodic political labor demand, rather than as a residual survival strategy for the poorest.

The framework is intentionally associational rather than causal. It guides variable selection and interpretation by clarifying expected patterns of participation, while remaining agnostic about long-term labor-market effects. In doing so, it links political mobilization processes to labor-market dynamics without overstating claims about employment outcomes or poverty alleviation.

3. Data, Variables, and Methodology

3.1 Data Source and Sample

The analysis draws on nationally representative survey data from Rounds 7 and 8 of the Afrobarometer conducted in Uganda in 2017 and 2022, respectively. Afrobarometer employs a stratified, multistage probability sampling design to interview adult citizens aged 18 years and older, ensuring representativeness across regions, urban–rural strata, and major demographic groups. Interviews are administered face-to-face in respondents' preferred languages by trained enumerators following standardized field protocols.

The two survey rounds correspond to post-election periods following Uganda's 2016 and 2021 national elections, making them particularly well-suited for examining participation in campaign-related activities. Pooling data across these rounds increases statistical power and allows the analysis to identify structural patterns in campaign work participation, rather than dynamics tied to a single electoral cycle or short-term political shock.

Sampling weights provided by Afrobarometer are applied throughout the analysis to correct for unequal probabilities of selection and to restore national representativeness. All descriptive statistics and regression models are estimated using survey-weighted procedures that account for the complex sampling design.

The analytical sample is restricted to respondents for whom information is available on campaign work

participation, age, employment status, and key covariates. Observations with missing values on these variables are excluded using listwise deletion. Robustness checks confirm that the main results are not sensitive to alternative treatments of missingness, including mean imputation for continuous covariates and the inclusion of missingness indicators.

3.2 Outcome Variable: Campaign Work Participation

The primary outcome variable is campaign work participation, measured as a binary indicator equal to one if a respondent reports having worked for a political candidate or party during the most recent national election period, and zero otherwise. This measure captures direct engagement in campaign-related activities that require the provision of time and effort to political organizations, including tasks such as mobilization, coordination, logistics, or other forms of campaign support.

Importantly, the indicator distinguishes campaign work from broader forms of political participation such as voting, attending rallies without compensation, or expressing partisan preferences. While the Afrobarometer survey does not observe hours worked, task specialization, or remuneration, the measure is sufficient to identify who supplies labor to political campaigns and to examine how participation is patterned across demographic and economic groups at the population level.

Conceptually, the analysis treats campaign work as an employment-like activity undertaken during election periods rather than as purely civic engagement. Although the survey does not differentiate between paid and unpaid campaign activities, campaign work is interpreted as contingent and informal labor insofar as it is time-bound, weakly regulated, and typically accessed through social and political networks rather than open labor markets. The paper therefore focuses on the distribution of campaign labor participation, not its intensity or compensation, consistent with the broader framing of electoral campaigns as episodic labor-demand events.

3.3 Key Explanatory Variables

Age and Youth Status

Age is the central explanatory variable of interest. Respondents are grouped into three categories: 18–25, 26–35, and 36 and above, with the youngest group serving as the reference category in multivariate models.

This categorization reflects common practice in African labor-market research and allows for heterogeneity within the youth population rather than treating youth as a single, undifferentiated group.

Labor-Market Attachment

Labor-market attachment is measured using respondents' self-reported employment status at the time of the survey. A binary indicator distinguishes respondents who report being employed (either wage-employed or self-employed) from those who are not employed (including those actively seeking work or not currently working). This distinction captures attachment to ongoing economic activity rather than formal employment alone.

Economic Deprivation

Economic vulnerability is measured using a deprivation index constructed from Afrobarometer's standard "lived poverty" items. The index aggregates respondents' reported frequency of going without basic necessities—such as food, water, and cash income—with higher values indicating greater material deprivation. The index captures experienced economic precarity, rather than income or consumption levels, and is treated as a continuous covariate in the analysis.

3.4 Control Variables

All models include a parsimonious set of demographic controls to account for confounding factors commonly associated with political participation and labor-market behavior. These include gender and urban–rural residence. Region fixed effects are included in robustness checks to account for geographic variation in political mobilization intensity and local economic conditions.

The selection of controls is intentionally conservative. The analysis avoids conditioning on variables that could plausibly lie on the causal pathway between labor-market attachment and campaign participation, in order to preserve interpretability and avoid post-treatment bias.

3.5 Empirical Strategy

The empirical strategy proceeds in three steps.

3.5.1 Descriptive Analysis

First, the study reports survey-weighted descriptive statistics documenting the prevalence of campaign work participation overall and across employment status and

age groups. These estimates establish campaign work as a non-trivial and systematically patterned phenomenon, rather than a marginal form of engagement.

3.5.2 Multivariate Participation Models

Second, the analysis estimates survey-weighted logistic regression models to examine the association between age, employment status, economic deprivation, and the likelihood of participating in campaign work. The baseline specification takes the form:

$$\Pr(\text{CampaignWork}_i = 1) = f(\text{AgeGroup}_i, \text{Employed}_i, \text{Deprivation}_i, X_i)$$

where X_i includes demographic controls. All models are estimated using Afrobarometer sampling weights, and standard errors account for the survey design.

3.5.3 Predicted Probabilities

Because log-odds and odds ratios are difficult to interpret substantively, the analysis places particular emphasis on model-based predicted probabilities. Predicted values are computed for key covariates while holding other variables at observed values. These probabilities are presented graphically to illustrate substantive differences across age groups, employment status, and levels of deprivation.

This approach allows the paper to move beyond statistical significance and to assess whether observed differences are meaningful in magnitude, which is essential for interpreting campaign work as a labor-market phenomenon.

3.7 Data Limitations

Two limitations merit emphasis. First, the survey does not capture the duration, remuneration, or specific tasks associated with campaign work, precluding direct assessment of income effects or skill accumulation. Second, interview timing relative to election cycles varies across respondents, which may attenuate estimated associations.

These limitations motivate cautious interpretation and point to future research using higher-frequency or task-level data. They do not undermine the study's core contribution: identifying campaign work as a systematically patterned form of informal labor participation.

4. Results

This section presents descriptive and multivariate evidence on participation in political campaign work in

Uganda. The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, it documents the prevalence and distribution of campaign work across employment status and age groups. Second, it estimates multivariate associations using survey-weighted logistic models. Third, it translates model estimates into predicted probabilities to assess substantive magnitudes.

4.1 Prevalence and distribution of campaign work participation

Table 1a. Probability of Campaign Work by Employment Status

Employment _Status	Probability	SE	CI
Not employed	0.258	0.0145	[0.23, 0.287]
Employed	0.307	0.0168	[0.274, 0.34]

Table 1b. Probability of Campaign Work by Age Group

Age_Group	Probability	SE	CI
18–25	0.231	0.0210	[0.189, 0.272]
26–35	0.272	0.0198	[0.233, 0.311]
36+	0.318	0.0171	[0.285, 0.352]

Table 2. Survey-Weighted Logit Estimates of Campaign Work Participation

Variable	Estimate	SE	p_value	OR	CI
(Intercept)	-1.279	0.149	0.000	0.278	[0.208, 0.373]
employedEmployed	0.209	0.111	0.060	1.233	[0.992, 1.533]
agegrp26–35	0.195	0.157	0.214	1.215	[0.893, 1.653]
agegrp36+	0.418	0.145	0.004	1.520	[1.144, 2.018]
depr_index	-0.001	0.068	0.991	0.999	[0.874, 1.142]

Table 2 presents results from a survey-weighted logistic regression model estimating the likelihood of campaign work participation as a function of employment status, age group, and economic deprivation.

Age emerges as the most robust predictor. Relative to respondents aged 18–25, those aged 36 and above have significantly higher odds of campaign work participation

Table 1 reports survey-weighted probabilities of campaign work participation by employment status and age group. Campaign work is widespread: between one-quarter and one-third of respondents report having worked for a political candidate or party during the most recent election period.

Employment status is associated with participation, but not in a strictly exclusionary direction. As shown in **Table 1a**, employed respondents exhibit a higher probability of campaign work participation (0.307; 95% CI: 0.274–0.340) than non-employed respondents (0.258; 95% CI: 0.230–0.287). This pattern suggests that campaign work often coexists with other forms of employment rather than functioning exclusively as a fallback option for the unemployed.

Age gradients are more pronounced. **Table 1b** shows a monotonic increase in campaign work participation across age groups. Individuals aged 18–25 display the lowest probability (0.231), followed by those aged 26–35 (0.272), while respondents aged 36 and above exhibit the highest participation rate (0.318). Confidence intervals across age groups show limited overlap, indicating systematic differences rather than random variation.

4.2 Multivariate correlates of campaign work participation

(OR = 1.52; 95% CI: 1.14–2.02; $p = 0.004$). The coefficient for the 26–35 age group is positive but not statistically significant. These results confirm that the age gradient observed descriptively persists after adjusting for labor-market attachment and deprivation.

Employment status is positively associated with campaign work participation, although the estimate falls just short

of conventional significance thresholds ($OR = 1.23$; $p = 0.060$). This result reinforces the descriptive finding that campaign work is not confined to the unemployed.

By contrast, economic deprivation does not exhibit a statistically or substantively meaningful association with campaign work participation. The deprivation index coefficient is near zero and precisely estimated, indicating no detectable gradient once age and employment status are controlled for.

4.3 Predicted probabilities and substantive magnitudes

Regression coefficients are difficult to interpret substantively. To clarify magnitudes, predicted probabilities from the multivariate model are presented graphically.

Figure 1: Campaign Work by Employment Status (Weighted)

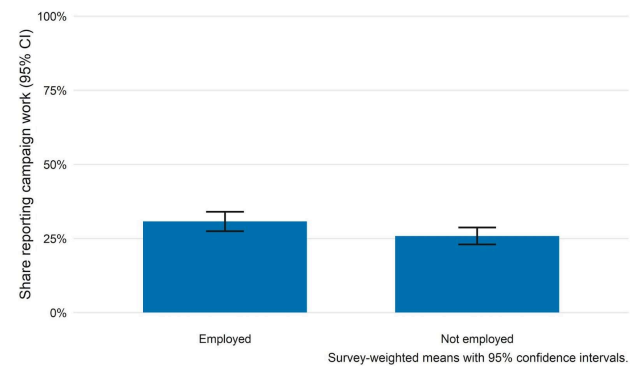


Figure 1 plots predicted probabilities of campaign work participation by employment status. Employed respondents display a higher predicted probability than non-employed respondents, though the difference is modest in size. This visualization underscores that campaign work frequently complements, rather than replaces, other forms of employment.

Figure 4: Predicted Probability of Campaign Work by Age Group

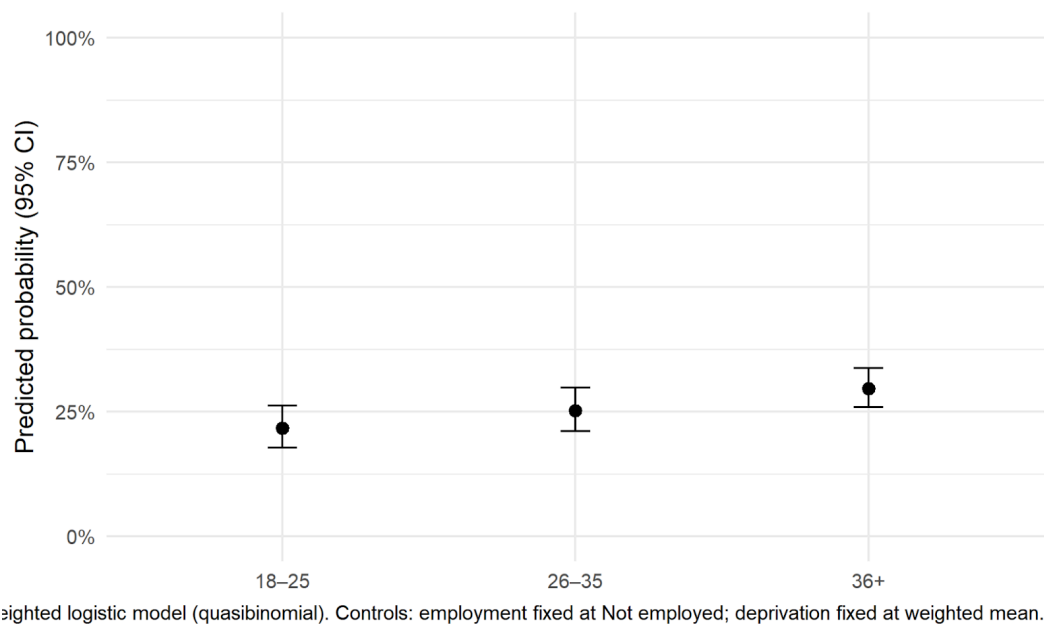


Figure 2 presents predicted probabilities by age group. A clear and monotonic age gradient is evident, with older respondents substantially more likely to engage in campaign work. This pattern mirrors the regression results and highlights age as the dominant structuring factor.

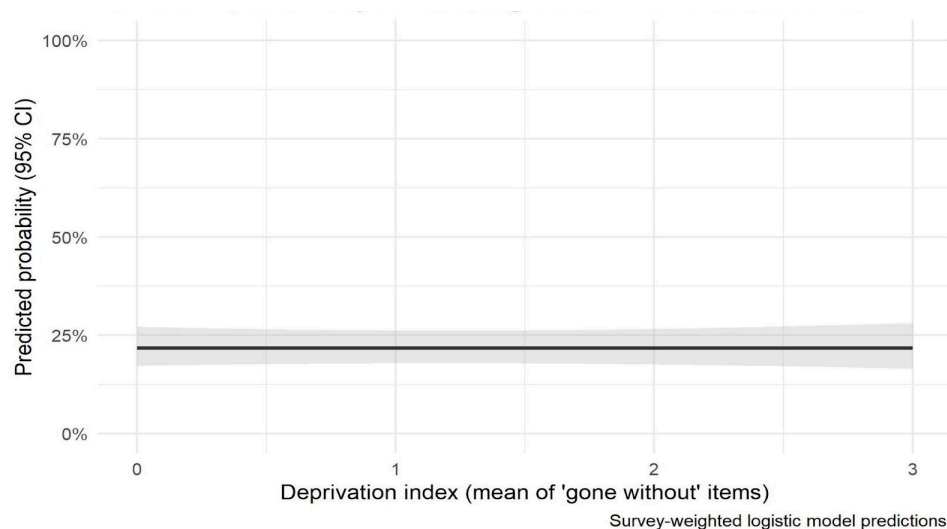
Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Campaign Work Across Economic Deprivation

Figure 3 plots predicted probabilities across the observed range of economic deprivation. The relationship is essentially flat, indicating that deprivation does not meaningfully alter the likelihood of campaign work participation once age and employment status are held constant. This finding suggests that campaign work participation is shaped more by life-cycle and labor-market positioning than by short-term material deprivation alone.

4.4 Robustness and sensitivity

Results are robust across alternative specifications. Probit models yield substantively identical estimates. Excluding students does not alter the age gradient or employment effect. Alternative age cutoffs produce consistent directional patterns, and clustering standard errors at the regional level does not affect inference.

5. Discussion

The contribution of the paper is therefore not to identify causal mechanisms, but to document the socioeconomic distribution of campaign labor participation and to clarify which theoretical accounts are consistent with observed patterns. This study examined whether participation in political campaign work in Uganda is systematically concentrated among economically vulnerable youth, consistent with the framing of electoral campaigns as temporary informal labor markets. The descriptive and multivariate evidence does not support a vulnerability-concentration narrative in the form initially

hypothesized. Instead, campaign work participation appears to be patterned primarily by age and, to a lesser extent, by existing labor-market attachment rather than by economic deprivation.

Descriptively, campaign work participation is higher among employed respondents than among those not employed, which may proxy access to local networks and reputational capital rather than labor-market security per se, consistent with network-mediated mobilization accounts with participation rates ranging between one quarter and one third of respondents. Importantly, participation is higher among employed respondents than among those not employed (approximately 30.7% versus 25.8%; Table 1a), indicating that campaign work frequently coexists with other forms of employment rather than functioning solely as a fallback for the unemployed. Age differences are more pronounced and monotonic: participation increases from approximately 23.1% among respondents aged 18–25 to 27.2% among those aged 26–35 and reaches 31.8% among respondents aged 36 and above (Table 1b; Figure 2). These descriptive gradients suggest that campaign work is not disproportionately concentrated among the youngest cohort of labor-market entrants.

Multivariate survey-weighted logit estimates reinforce and refine these patterns. After adjusting for employment status and economic deprivation, respondents aged 36 and above remain significantly more likely to participate in campaign work than those aged 18–25 ($OR \approx 1.52$; 95% CI excludes 1; Table 2). The coefficient for employment status is positive but only marginally significant ($OR \approx$

1.23; $p \approx 0.060$), suggesting that while campaign work is more common among the employed, employment status alone does not sharply segment access to campaign labor. By contrast, the deprivation index is substantively and statistically indistinguishable from zero, with odds ratios tightly centered around unity. Predicted probability plots confirm these findings visually: age gradients persist after adjustment (Figure 3), while predicted participation varies little across the observed range of deprivation (Figure 4).

Taken together, these results suggest that campaign work is not primarily a stop-gap labor market absorbing the most economically vulnerable youth. Instead, participation appears to be structured by social embeddedness, organizational access, and reliability, attributes that plausibly increase with age and labor-market attachment. This interpretation aligns closely with political brokerage theories emphasizing relational contracting and intermediary-based mobilization in weakly institutionalized party systems (Kramon, 2016). In such settings, parties and candidates rely on locally embedded actors-brokers, coordinators, and mobilizers, who possess social networks and reputational capital, rather than recruiting workers through open or poverty-targeted labor markets. Evidence from distributive politics further suggests that campaign activities prioritize reach, trust, and enforcement over strict targeting of the poorest when allocating campaign tasks (Kao et al., 2022).

This reframing tightens the economic interpretation of campaign work. Rather than conceptualizing campaign labor as disguised unemployment, the evidence supports viewing it as short-term, contingent political work that is frequently complementary to existing employment. This pattern resonates with broader research on precarious and informal work in developing economies, where episodic labor is often undertaken by individuals combining multiple income sources rather than exclusively by those at the bottom of the income distribution (Fields, 2019; Williams & Horodnic, 2018). Campaign work, in this sense, resembles other forms of network-mediated contingent work that are selective rather than residual.

The null association between economic deprivation and campaign work participation is substantively important. While poverty is strongly linked to many forms of political behavior and material inducement, the present results indicate that lived deprivation—measured through “gone without” indicators, does not independently predict campaign labor participation once age and employment

status are taken into account. This does not imply that poverty is irrelevant to political mobilization more broadly, nor does it rule out deprivation effects for specific campaign tasks, compensation schemes, or intensity of work-dimensions not observed in Afrobarometer data. Rather, it suggests that the labor-market dimension of campaign participation cannot be reduced to material vulnerability alone, reinforcing political economy accounts that emphasize relational enforcement, credibility, and organizational capacity in informal contracting (Kramon, 2016; Kao et al., 2022).

Finally, these findings impose a disciplined scope condition on the paper’s central contribution. The evidence supports treating campaign work as an employment-like activity that is systematically patterned and economically meaningful. However, it supports a distributional and organizational interpretation rather than a vulnerability-absorption thesis. Campaign work in Uganda appears to be concentrated among older and more labor-attached individuals, operating through locally embedded networks, rather than functioning primarily as a safety valve for the poorest youth. This reframing preserves the paper’s core insight, that electoral cycles reallocate labor in measurable ways, while avoiding claims that extend beyond what the data can sustain.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined political campaign work as a form of contingent informal labor using nationally representative survey data from Uganda. Moving beyond conventional treatments of campaign participation as purely civic behavior, the study reframed electoral campaigns as episodic labor-demand events and asked how participation in campaign work is distributed across age, employment status, and material deprivation.

The results provide a clear and disciplined answer. Campaign work participation is widespread and systematically patterned, but not in the manner often presumed. Rather than being concentrated among the poorest or most economically marginalized youth, participation is higher among older respondents and, to a lesser extent, among those already attached to work. Economic deprivation, measured through lived poverty indicators, does not predict participation once age and employment status are taken into account. These findings are robust across alternative specifications and are consistent across descriptive and model-based analyses.

These patterns sharpen how campaign work should be conceptualized within labor-market research. The evidence supports treating campaign work as employment-like activity—temporary, informal, task-based, and network-mediated—but challenges interpretations that frame it primarily as a stop-gap livelihood strategy for the most vulnerable. Instead, campaign work appears to be selectively allocated through social and organizational networks that privilege reliability, availability, and local embeddedness. In this sense, campaigns reallocate labor through relational contracting rather than absorbing surplus labor at the bottom of the distribution.

The contribution of the paper is therefore conceptual as well as empirical. By making campaign work visible as labor, the study extends analyses of informality and precarious work into the political domain. By documenting who participates, it refines theories that link political mobilization to economic vulnerability, showing that labor-market attachment and network access matter at least as much as material deprivation. More broadly, the findings highlight how electoral cycles can shape economic behavior in ways that are not captured by standard employment statistics, without implying that campaigns function as a safety valve for unemployment.

Several limitations point to directions for future research. Survey data do not capture the duration, remuneration, or task composition of campaign work, preventing analysis of income effects or skill accumulation. Nor can cross-sectional data identify whether repeated campaign participation affects longer-term labor-market trajectories. Future work using panel data, task-level information, or qualitative evidence on campaign organization would help distinguish between different types of campaign labor and assess their economic consequences more precisely. Comparative analyses across countries and electoral systems would also clarify the generalizability of the patterns documented here.

In sum, this study shows that political campaigns constitute a distinct but selective segment of informal labor markets. Recognizing campaign work as contingent labor—without overstating its role as a poverty coping mechanism—offers a more accurate and analytically useful way to understand how political cycles intersect with employment precarity in developing economies. The findings should be interpreted within clear scope conditions. Uganda is characterized by recurrent, highly mobilized electoral competition and extensive use of

localized campaign structures, which may shape the organization of campaign labor differently than in contexts with stronger party institutionalization or lower reliance on brokers. While the analysis demonstrates that campaign work is systematically patterned within this setting, the extent to which similar distributions hold across other African countries remains an open empirical question. Future cross-national analyses using harmonized survey data could assess whether the organizational embedding of campaign labor observed here generalizes to other electoral environments.

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