

# Baldwin Book Review

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## Review

Across contemporary Africa, traditional institutions often exist in parallel with the formal state, but their impact on democracy has remained understudied. In this impressive book, Kate Baldwin marshals a wide variety of evidence to explore the role that one such institution (traditional leaders) has on a crucial aspect of democracy – the direct connection between voters and politicians.

Building her argument around an in-depth study of Zambia, Baldwin argues against the dominant view in the literature that traditional leaders are inevitably antithetical to democratic accountability. Instead, she argues that local chiefs may actually improve the responsiveness of elected representatives, by helping them to provide public goods to their constituents in a weak state setting. In addition, she also provides convincing evidence that, as a result of this co-production of public goods, rural voters who vote in line with the local chief may in fact be doing so as the result of sophisticated assessments about a candidate's ability to deliver once in office, rather than as the result of coercion or loyalty.

Overall, this book represents an important contribution to a woefully understudied topic in political science. Baldwin masterfully combines different types of evidence in her analysis, and her main arguments are both elegant and well made. She also provides a strong, and much-needed, challenge to the commonly advanced view of rural voters in Africa as unsophisticated citizens who are easily manipulated to act in ways that go against their own interests.

The work is, however, at its strongest when it focuses on the Zambian context – where Baldwin has worked on these questions for many years – and the arguments weaken slightly in the final section, when she tries to extend her analysis outside of the country. Baldwin is also, at times, vague on the motivations and incentives of the chiefs, and, although she is careful to avoid presenting an overly positive view of the role of traditional leaders, her reduction of chiefly authority to a position focused on public goods provision is likely to make some readers nervous.

Minor quibbles aside, however, the broad findings remain strong, and the book is well structured, insightful and a pleasure to read. It is written at a level that will engage novices and experts alike, and would appeal to anyone interested in traditional institutions, electoral politics, democracy and democratization, or political accountability. Highly recommended.