

Does African Aid Buy UN Security Council Seats?

Evidence from Nigeria

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Abstract

Multilateral aid often promotes donor interests. With notable exceptions, scholarly research on this phenomenon centres on major Western powers. I focus on an African donor: Nigeria. The country sponsors the Nigeria Trust Fund (NTF) at the African Development Bank. Interview evidence suggests that Nigeria rarely uses the NTF in pursuit of self-interest. I highlight one of these rare instances: United Nations Security Council (UNSC) membership. Estimation results show that members of the Economic Community of West African States—a must-win constituency for Nigeria’s UNSC campaigns—get preferential access to NTF loans during Nigeria’s UNSC term. The paper provides insights into competitive elections in a region otherwise known for its turn-taking norm as well as the motivations of African powers as aid providers.

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1 Introduction

Africa is famous for taking turns. It rotates seats across different sub-regions and countries in international organisations (IOs), like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and United Nations (Dreher et al., 2014). This contrasts with Europe, which competes for seats on the global stage. So well-established is the African turn-taking norm that scholars leverage African UN Security Council (UNSC) membership to exploit quasi-random variation in a country’s geopolitical importance (Vreeland and Dreher, 2014; Mikulaschek, 2016).¹

But Nigeria—Africa’s most populous country—has apparently jumped the queue. It left a larger African constituency at the World Bank for a smaller 3-member group with South Africa and Angola, allowing the country to more frequently serve on the executive board. Most prominently, Nigeria has served on the UNSC five times—one of the most numerous for any African country.

How do developing-country governments get elected to these international committees? Consistent with research on other countries, I suspect that Nigeria uses aid to buy seats (see Vreeland, 2011; Lawrimore and Vreeland, 2018; Reinsberg, 2019). For nearly half a century, the country has provided development assistance to African countries through a lending facility established within the African Development Bank (AfDB)—eponymously called the Nigeria Trust Fund (NTF). The NTF is the first and (so far) only African-funded concessionary financing vehicle at a major international financial institution (IFI).

For a successful UNSC campaign, Nigeria needs the endorsement of its sub-region: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). I argue that, in return for their support, ECOWAS members get preferential access to NTF loans following Nigeria’s election to the UNSC. Estimation results suggest that the odds of receiving NTF commitments are higher for ECOWAS members when Nigeria is on the UNSC than non-ECOWAS members. These findings have important implications not just for the study of middle powers in a multipolar world, but also for possible identification strategies to test the effectiveness of aid to African countries.

In the following sections, I discuss Africa’s UNSC election process (Section 2) and present a brief background on the NTF, drawing on interviews with three AfDB staffers and one former Nigerian government official (Section 3).² In Sections 4 and 5, I turn to descriptive data and statistical analysis. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of the findings.

¹Others exclude Africa from analyses of UN membership patterns to avoid introducing “a selection process that operates differently from the processes at work in other regions” (Edwards et al., 2008, 397).

²Interview details included in Appendix D. Interviewees referenced with unique alphabetical identifier.

2 Nigeria, Africa, and UNSC elections

UNSC elections are often modelled as discrete choices at the regional (nomination) and UN General Assembly (ratification) level (Dreher et al., 2014). In the case of Africa and its three UNSC seats, the African Union (AU) nominates candidates based on a long-standing turn-taking norm: Central and North Africa rotate one of the seats every two years, Eastern and Southern Africa rotate the other seat every two years, and the third seat is always reserved for West Africa (Security Council Report, 2009).³

But Africa also relies on a third, subregional level of endorsement. This comes prior to AU nomination and introduces a level of competition that deviates from the between-region turn-taking norm that has come to characterise existing understandings of African participation in IOs. Consider the multiple examples of within-sub-region competition for African UNSC seats: Ghana and Liberia (West Africa) in 1985, Mauritania and Morocco (North Africa) in 2011, and Djibouti and Kenya (East Africa) in 2020. Given the country’s goal of occupying leadership positions in the UN, cases involving Nigeria also stand out: it was chosen over Niger in 1977, Guinea-Bissau in 1993, Sierra Leone and Togo in 2009, and Gambia in 2013.⁴ In the latter case, the smaller West African country ultimately withdrew its candidacy “in [the] face of Nigeria’s diplomatic weight.”⁵

Research suggests that such competitive elections provide an opportunity for powerful countries to make aid-for-vote deals (Vreeland, 2011; Reinsberg, 2019). Nigeria, however, is unlikely to pursue ECOWAS’ endorsement so openly with direct bilateral transfers. African studies scholars often argue that the normative culture of African international relations—characterised by sovereignty-conscious and inequality-averse states—privileges less overt attempts at political influence (Clapham, 1996, 121-122). However, scholars of international political economy show that powerful Western donors use multilateral channels to exercise influence over other countries in precisely the kind of more covert ways that such normative culture might demand.⁶ Connecting these two literatures, I expect Nigeria to curry political favour from other ECOWAS members—as part of its UNSC campaigns—through more discrete channels, like aid from IFIs.

³See Appendix A for regional groupings.

⁴BBC Africa (2009), Akinterinwa (2014), Vreeland and Dreher (2014, 104), Saliu and Oshewolo (2018, 399). On Nigeria and the UN, see Agwu (2011); Saliu and Shola Omotola (2008); Mbara (2019); Akindele (2013); Zondi (2013); Gambari (2012).

⁵See Daily Trust. ‘Nigeria Wins UN Security Council Seat.’ 18 October, 2013. <https://allafrica.com/stories/201310180097.tml>

⁶Copelovitch (2010); Kilby (2011); Lim and Vreeland (2013); Dreher et al. (2022b).

3 Background on the NTF

When Nigeria created the NTF at the AfDB (Africa’s foremost IFI) in 1976, it wanted to both prove that African countries could fund their own institutions without foreign assistance (Gowon, 1989: 45) and establish its “giant of Africa” status.⁷ Armed with oil revenues during the 1970s boom, Nigeria made an initial \$100 million investment. While the AfDB ultimately admitted non-African countries to cover shortfalls in financing, the NTF remains one of the AfDB’s three lending windows.⁸

The Nigerian government retains some—albeit limited—level of control and oversight over which country gets loans. AfDB officials shortlist some projects and present it to the Nigerian executive director, which sends to the Nigerian Ministry of Finance, at which stage the Nigerian government then decides to either approve or reject the project.

When asked about the motivations behind the NTF, AfDB staffers were sceptical of any politically-motivated aid allocations. According to one interviewee, “the NTF is run on an altruistic platform.”⁹ Even less controversial goals like enhancing the visibility of the donor’s contribution to the AfDB and economic development in Africa more generally are not being realised.¹⁰ Instead, two other interviewees suggested that Nigeria uses the NTF to play the “big brother” role to lower-income countries and appears “less concerned about interests and more concerned about maintaining African influence at the bank.”¹¹ While they do not completely dismiss the idea that Nigeria has political goals, there was consensus that Nigeria, compared to other donors, hardly pushes for strategic alignment with its self-interest.

Interviews with a former Nigerian government official offered a more nuanced perspective. According to the official, there are two reasons why Nigeria is “not using the [AfDB] as a key tool for pushing our foreign policy goal.” The first is regional politics. Other African countries “do not like it” when Nigeria’s power is exercised (for much of the same reasons identified by Clapham (1996)), so “we keep our soft power hidden.”¹² While scholars suggest international organisations offer donors less overt means to exercise influence, the eponymous NTF at Africa’s premier international financial institution is in fact too overt for the country—it uses even more opaque avenues. The second reason relates to domestic politics.¹³ Nigeria refrains from drawing much attention to the NTF because of the potential backlash it could generate from Nigerian citizens who might think the funds should

⁷Interview A.

⁸See Fordwor (1981); Mingst (1990); Anyiam-Osigwe (2025).

⁹Interview C.

¹⁰Interview C.

¹¹Interview A and B, respectively.

¹²Interview D.

¹³Interview D.

be directed towards Nigeria’s own development needs rather than those of other African countries.¹⁴

Still, the official did not dismiss the political value of the NTF, instead suggesting that the initiation of the exchange of favours is often times from the recipient side. Prospective beneficiaries of NTF loans “can make the first move.”¹⁵ For example, following Liberia’s “passionate pleas” to Nigeria for debt relief, Nigeria authorised a \$13 million withdrawal from the NTF to clear Liberia’s debt arrears as part of its post-conflict transition efforts (Reuters, 2007; AfDB, 2024, 8). In the UNSC context, while Nigeria may not proactively use the NTF to reward countries for their support, ECOWAS members may indeed use their leverage to request for more loans during Nigeria’s term. After all, getting funds from the NTF and through the AfDB—an IFI in which African countries are majority shareholders—is less contentious than direct aid from Nigeria.

The quantitative approach I employ does not allow me to definitively confirm this demand-side perspective—though it remains the most plausible. What can be established, however, is that there is a systematic and robust relationship between Nigeria’s temporary membership in the UNSC and the likelihood of ECOWAS members receiving NTF funding commitments.

4 Descriptive data

The data covers the 1976-2019 period, with gaps for some years.¹⁶ There are 32 countries in the dataset, reflecting the eligibility criteria for NTF loans: low-income and fragile countries, as classified by the AfDB. NTF loans have totalled UA460 million.¹⁷

Allocation of NTF loans have been selective and relatively rare. Since 1976, there have been less than 100 NTF projects compared to nearly 3000 for the African Development Fund—the AfDB’s other concessionary facility created just two years before. Only 8% of country-year observations in the dataset receive some level of funding commitments from the NTF—well within the 25% threshold for positive outcomes in a dataset to be classified as cases of true rare events (Timoneda, 2021).

The independent variable of interest is an interaction term accounting for a country’s membership in ECOWAS and Nigeria’s UNSC membership. Both variables are indicator variables. Nigeria’s membership is coded 1 during the country’s term on the UNSC and

¹⁴Interview D.

¹⁵Interview D.

¹⁶Available from the AfDB’s operations database. For example, there is no data/loans during 1997-1999 and 2017.

¹⁷about \$617 million in US\$2023.

0 otherwise. Nigeria has been elected to the UNSC 5 times, serving 2-year terms each time: 1966-1967, 1978-1979, 1994-1995, 2010-2011, and 2014-2015. ECOWAS membership is coded 1 if the country is an ECOWAS member, and 0 otherwise. Excluding Nigeria, there are 14 ECOWAS members (Mauritania left in 2001). 41% of observations are ECOWAS country-years.

In Figure 1a and Figure 1b, I plot the proportion of country-year observations that receive NTF loans in the run up to Nigeria’s term on the UNSC, during Nigeria’s two-year term, and in the two years immediately after Nigeria finishes its UNSC tenure. In Figure 1b, I disaggregate the countries based on ECOWAS membership. Across the entire period observed, the loan occurrence was 9% for ECOWAS member country-years and 8% for non-ECOWAS country-years. However, in years Nigeria serves on the UNSC, this rises to 13% of country-year observations for ECOWAS members. The percentage of non-ECOWAS member country-years receiving NTF funding commitments conversely reduces to 6%.

These statistics can be considered a first indication of an association between Nigeria’s UNSC membership, ECOWAS membership, and NTF loan allocation. However, as this is a more descriptive way of examining data, it does not allow me to examine whether other factors are responsible for this association. I thus turn to more rigorous regression methods that have been used by several scholars for rare events data.

5 Regression analysis

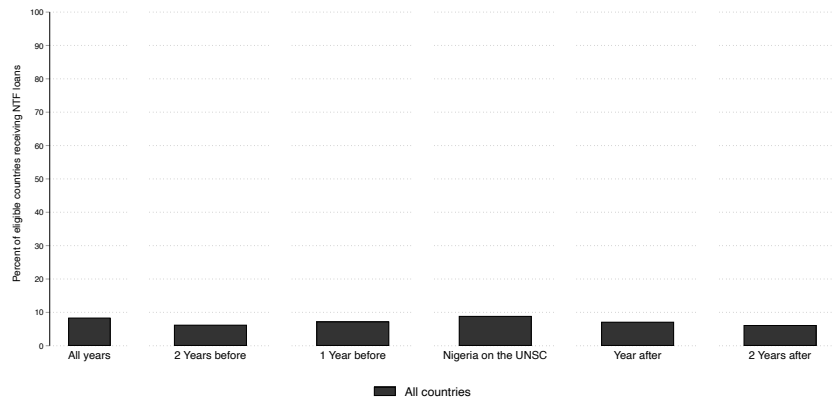
I first use a penalized maximum likelihood (PML) estimator developed by Firth (1993).¹⁸ The PML estimator allows for more consistent and less biased estimates of parameters for rare events data, even where separation—where predictors can nearly perfectly predict outcomes—is present or the binary dependent variable are unevenly distributed (Heinze and Schemper, 2002; Rainey and McCaskey, 2021).¹⁹ I include controls drawn from the foreign aid literature: Bailey et al.’s (2017) UNGA ideal point differences, shared membership in post-colonial institutions (Commonwealth), election year, population, GDP growth, and GDP per capita.

Table 1 presents the results of the PML estimation. In terms of controls, less populous countries are associated with higher log-odds of receiving NTF funding commitments. The

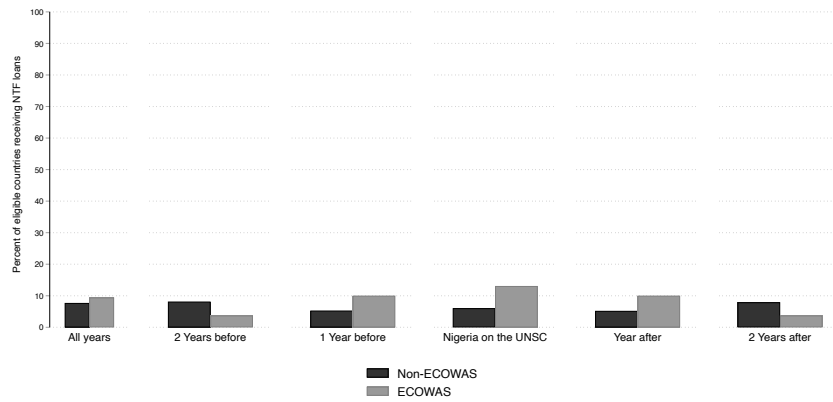
¹⁸This follows the approach of Bell and Miller (2015); Cook et al. (2020); Owsiak and Vasquez (2021); Betz and Pond (2023).

¹⁹I include year dummies in all estimations in Table 1. I exclude recipient country fixed effects because a lot of the variation implied by my argument takes place between countries—for example, ECOWAS versus non-ECOWAS membership. Other scholars have adopted this approach for similar reasons. See Hoeffler and Sterck (2022).

Figure 1: Receiving NTF loans and Nigeria's UNSC membership



(a) All countries



(b) ECOWAS and Non-ECOWAS countries

coefficient for political distance from Nigeria, proxied by UNGA ideal point difference, is also positive and statistically significant—although this finding is not robust.

Turning to the main variables of interest, across the specifications, I find that ECOWAS membership, on its own, is not systematically associated with increased log-odds of receiving NTF commitments, as shown in Column [1] and Column [3]. Column [2] and [4] suggest that Nigeria’s UNSC membership moderates this relationship. The coefficient estimate of 1.034 in Column [4] indicates that the odds of ECOWAS members getting NTF loan commitments are 2.81 times than those for non-ECOWAS members. Interpreted differently, the marginal effect of Nigeria’s UNSC membership for non-ECOWAS members is -0.05 while for ECOWAS members, it is 0.08. Both the marginal effect and multiplicative effect of Nigeria’s UNSC membership is larger for ECOWAS members than non-ECOWAS members.

As a robustness check, I conduct the analysis using alternative estimators. The first is a linear probability model with year fixed effects (LPMFE). Timoneda (2021) notes that the LPMFE is equally reliable for cases of true rare events. Kersting and Kilby (2019) use the LPMFE in their analysis of World Bank supplemental loans, which are similarly rare in the World Bank’s lending portfolio. Other scholars have used the rare events logistic regression (ReLogit) developed by Tomz et al. (2003).²⁰ Results presented in Table C1, Appendix C are consistent with the findings from the PML estimator.²¹ Overall, the findings provide evidence that suggests a link between Nigerian-sponsored aid and ECOWAS members during times when Nigeria serves on the UNSC.

6 Conclusion

This research note presents novel evidence of a well-known trade in international politics: aid for influence. While ample evidence on aid allocation exists for Western donors and more recently, China, there is comparatively less empirical analysis on the development assistance provided by other non-Western donors, despite their re-emergence (Mawdsley, 2012).²²

With few exceptions, scholars tend to ignore aid supplied by African donors, seeing them almost exclusively as aid recipients (Whitfield, 2008). African countries certainly do rely heavily on aid, but regional powers, like Nigeria and South Africa, also act as important donors.²³ To my knowledge, this is the first systematic analysis of Nigerian aid/NTF alloca-

²⁰See, Rosendorff and Smith (2018), for example.

²¹I also consider the logit estimator—although such non-linear estimators face convergence problems when modelling rare events. The results, presented in Table C2, Appendix C, are nevertheless consistent.

²²Notable exceptions include studies on India (Fuchs and Vadlamannati, 2013), Brazil (Apolinário, 2016; Semrau and Thiele, 2017), Saudi Arabia (Neumayer, 2003), and Turkey (Kavakli, 2018).

²³For an analysis of South African aid, see Dreher et al. (2011).

Table 1: Selection for NTF loans

	Without year dummies		With year dummies	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
ECOWAS	0.0499 (0.258)	-0.194 (0.289)	0.0372 (0.257)	-0.200 (0.289)
Nigeria on the UNSC		-0.413 (0.417)		-1.194 (0.899)
ECOWAS x Nigeria UNSC		1.077* (0.556)		1.034* (0.552)
UNGA Ideal Point diff	0.687* (0.412)	0.677 (0.413)	0.716* (0.434)	0.696 (0.435)
Commonwealth member	-0.164 (0.287)	-0.156 (0.288)	-0.192 (0.288)	-0.189 (0.288)
Election Year	0.317 (0.257)	0.362 (0.258)	0.332 (0.259)	0.382 (0.260)
Population	-0.163* (0.0900)	-0.170* (0.0907)	-0.165* (0.0959)	-0.170* (0.0963)
GDP growth	0.0211 (0.0221)	0.0219 (0.0224)	0.0139 (0.0227)	0.0168 (0.0229)
GDP per capita	-0.289 (0.178)	-0.293 (0.179)	-0.265 (0.184)	-0.268 (0.185)
Observations	955	955	955	955

Dependent variable = 1 if country received any NTF commitments, 0 otherwise. SEs in parentheses clustered by country; * p<.10, ** p<.05, *** p<.01.

tion, with significant policy implications as Nigeria re-assesses the value of its contribution (AfDB, 2024).

The results also have important implications for the study of African aid as well as African international relations and middle powers in a multipolar world. While I do not specifically test causal effects, the types of correlations I report have so far been widely used in the international political economy literature. They point to the various motives behind aid allocation by non-African donors, even when transfers are channelled through IFIs (Neumayer, 2003; Vreeland and Dreher, 2014; Kaya et al., 2021; Kaya and Woo, 2021). Here, I apply the same reasoning to an African donor. And assuming that Nigeria’s elections to the UNSC are unrelated to development outcomes in ECOWAS countries, the findings present a possible identification strategy for the effectiveness of NTF loans.

Beyond Nigeria, the paper also provides insights into Africa’s turn-taking norm. This has been used in several studies as a source of exogenous variation in political importance to estimate key political outcomes—from aid effectiveness to the effects of political importance and power in international relations (see, for example, Dreher et al., 2018). Yet, as Mikulaschek (2016, 11) and Vreeland and Dreher (2014, 104) acknowledge, African countries can compete for seats within their regions, making the natural experiment setup applicable only to rotations of seats between African sub-regions rather than individual African states.

What competition at the sub-regional level means for the utility of relying on turn-taking to overcome the problem of non-random selection in Africa samples remains an open question. Carnegie and Mikulaschek (2020, 812) suggest that “incomplete knowledge of the assignment process” risks unobserved heterogeneity for these designs. Proposing a mechanism through which richer countries get elected to the UNSC (see Dreher et al., 2014), this research note provides evidence suggesting that sub-regional competition in the midst of a regional turn-taking norm favours an aid-giving sub-regional power in the assignment process.

More broadly, the world of development assistance is shifting away from Western dominance. Under a new multipolar order, scholarship has appropriately shifted attention to emerging-market donors, like China (Dreher et al., 2022a) and Chinese-led institutions (Kaya et al., 2021; Qian et al., 2023). But intra-region aid is also growing in importance. Historically, African leaders have often called for greater independence from outside influence (Obasanjo, 1993; Kagame, 2017, 14). Scholarship has always had an important role to play in understanding the motivations and consequences of major power foreign aid. The continued rise of African powers in providing aid to Africa should not be treated differently.

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Appendices

A African Union regions

Table A1: AU member states grouped by region

Central	Eastern	Northern	Southern	Western
Burundi	Comoros	Algeria	Angola	Benin
Cameroon	Djibouti	Egypt	Botswana	Burkina Faso
Central African Republic	Eritrea	Libya	Eswatini	Cabo Verde
Chad	Ethiopia	Mauritania	Lesotho	Côte d'Ivoire
Congo Republic	Kenya	Morocco	Malawi	Gambia
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Madagascar	Western Sahara	Mozambique	Ghana
Equatorial Guinea	Mauritius	Tunisia	Namibia	Guinea
Gabon	Rwanda		South Africa	Guinea-Bissau
São Tomé and Príncipe	Seychelles		Zambia	Liberia
	Somalia		Zimbabwe	Mali
	South Sudan			Niger
	Sudan			Nigeria
	Tanzania			Senegal
	Uganda			Sierra Leone
				Togo

B Dataset

Table B1: Country list

Benin
Botswana
Burundi
Cabo Verde
Cameroon
Cote d'Ivoire
Djibouti
Eswatini
Ethiopia
Gambia
Ghana
Guinea
Guinea-Bissau
Lesotho
Liberia
Madagascar
Malawi
Mali
Mauritania
Mauritius
Mozambique
Namibia
Niger
Rwanda
Sao Tome and Principe
Senegal
Seychelles
Sierra Leone
Somalia
Tanzania
Togo
Uganda
Zambia

Table B2: Summary statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
ECOWAS	0.414	0.493	0	1	1180
Nigeria on UNSC	0.191	0.393	0	1	1180
UNGA ideal point diff	0.28	0.254	0	2.066	1013
Commonwealth	0.4	0.49	0	1	1180
Election year	0.224	0.417	0	1	1180
Population	15.237	1.52	11.037	18.526	1013
GDP growth	1.171	5.100	-22.383	21.772	955
GDP per capita	6.81	0.857	5.124	9.832	972

C Additional results

Table C1: Selection for NTF loans

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	LPMFE	LPMFE	Relogit	Relogit
ECOWAS	0.00443 (0.0194)	-0.0140 (0.0225)	0.0507 (0.233)	
ECOWAS x Nigeria UNSC		0.0846* (0.0494)		0.623* (0.334)
UNGA Ideal Point diff	0.0630 (0.0505)	0.0603 (0.0510)	0.695 (0.514)	0.720 (0.502)
Commonwealth member	-0.0132 (0.0189)	-0.0126 (0.0186)	-0.165 (0.232)	-0.112 (0.199)
Election Year	0.0283 (0.0264)	0.0316 (0.0263)	0.316 (0.279)	0.344 (0.281)
Population	-0.0143** (0.00621)	-0.0143** (0.00612)	-0.165** (0.0712)	-0.172** (0.0684)
GDP growth	0.00128 (0.00221)	0.00131 (0.00219)	0.0211 (0.0260)	0.0204 (0.0258)
GDP per capita	-0.0230** (0.0107)	-0.0224** (0.0107)	-0.292** (0.128)	-0.305** (0.129)
Observations	955	955	955	955

Note: Includes year dummies. Dependent variable = 1 if country received any NTF commitments, 0 otherwise. SEs in parentheses clustered by country; * p<.10, ** p<.05, *** p<.01.

Table C2: Selection for NTF loans

	(1) Logit	(2) Logit
ECOWAS	0.0439 (0.244)	-0.210 (0.282)
Nigeria on the UNSC		-1.371 (0.924)
ECOWAS x Nigeria UNSC		1.122* (0.624)
UNGA Ideal Point diff	0.740 (0.545)	0.721 (0.555)
Commonwealth member	-0.205 (0.236)	-0.203 (0.234)
Election Year	0.341 (0.305)	0.394 (0.309)
Population	-0.173** (0.0753)	-0.178** (0.0740)
GDP growth	0.0150 (0.0252)	0.0180 (0.0257)
GDP per capita	-0.284** (0.133)	-0.288** (0.135)
Observations	928	928

Note: Includes year dummies. Dependent variable = 1 if country received any NTF commitments, 0 otherwise. SEs in parentheses clustered by country; * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

D Interviews

The interviews were conducted as part of a larger project on the AfDB, with IRB approval (No. 14861).

Table D1: Interviews

ID	Interviewee	Interview date
Interview A	Senior official at the AfDB	June 2023
Interview B	Senior staffer at the AfDB	March 2025
Interview C	Junior staffer at the AfDB	March 2025
Interview D	Former Nigerian government official	April 2025