Natural resources have been the economic mainstay of Africa for a long time. Natural resources and especially subsoil wealth by definition are more of a ‘destiny’ than ‘enterprise’. In other words, the location of subsoil wealth is determined by geology rather than human endeavour. Typically their distribution under the earth’s surface is uneven with some groups, ethnicities, or countries are more fortunate than others to inherit certain types of minerals. Standard theory of political economy would postulate that such variation in resource endowment should have a direct effect on local or ethnicity level economic and political power. Indeed, one would expect such mechanism to be even more active in Africa as ethnicity is perceived to be the fundamental organising principle of the continent’s politics. Yet the micro ethnicity level effects of natural resources on political power sharing in Africa remains largely unknown.

We investigate the effect of resource discoveries on ethnicity level political patronage in Africa using a large geospatial dataset of 254 ethnic groups in 15 countries over the period 1960 to 2004. We find that the first (or single first) resource discovery in a virgin ethnic homeland increases the share of cabinet posts of that ethnicity. The effect is induced by both expectations and rent. Overall the effect is mainly driven by major mineral discoveries as opposed to oil and gas. The discovery shocks do not trigger monopoly or dominant access to power, autonomy, separatism, and exclusion. Our analysis reveals that point source resource (mineral) rents are far more important political currency than diffuse agricultural commodity rents. Furthermore, by ranking ministries into Top and Bottom levels we find some evidence of window dressing politics. Our results survive a battery of robustness tests and controls.