

The Limits of Partisanship: How Information Can Encourage Crossing Party Lines

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Abstract

Does partisanship shape voters' response to information about candidate quality? We conduct a field experiment in Uganda to investigate how information in the form of debate-like candidate videos influences vote choice and turnout, varying the salience of party cues by randomly varying in which of 480 polling stations the study is implemented in the Parliamentary general elections (varying party cues across candidates) and in which in the primaries of the ruling party (constant party cues across candidates). We find that even in a setting in which partisanship is a strong predictor of vote choice, voter behavior changed as a result of new information about candidate quality, and we observe this effect in contexts with and without party cues. In the absence of party cues in the primary elections, voters switched to the candidate popularly perceived as the *best performer*. In the presence of party cues in the general election, information about relative candidate quality led voters to move *away from ruling party candidates*. We suggest that by providing credible information about the quality of opposition candidates, the intervention helped close the information gap between ruling party and opposition candidates, leading some voters to cross party lines.

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1 Introduction

In the face of abysmal social services (Chaudhury et al., 2006; Amin, Das and Goldstein, 2008; Glewwe, Kremer and Moulin, 2009), corruption (Mauro, 1995), and waste of public resources, scholars have asked whether democratic systems of governance have often failed to produce vibrant economies and provide public goods because citizens are electing low quality political leaders. If so, improving governance requires understanding why citizens vote for low quality candidates, and what would help them select better candidates from the available set. In this article, we investigate the effect of information about candidate quality on voter behavior, and in particular, whether *partisanship* interferes with updating about candidate quality in the context of Uganda – a developing country with a long-standing dominant party system and low levels of service delivery.

Selecting among candidates is a cognitively taxing and time consuming activity. For this reason, voters often turn to heuristics like party cues or social identity markers to help them decide among a set of candidates, even when information about candidate quality is available (Downs, 1957; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). In developing country contexts, reliable information about candidates can be hard to come by, in particular for the many voters with relatively low levels of education, rendering reliance on heuristics particularly high (Popkin, 1994; Kam, 2005). To what extent do heuristics serve as a barrier to updating in the presence of new information? If provided a full information set about candidates, would voters choose the same candidate, or a different one? If voters switch, would this lead to an improvement in the quality of candidates selected?

To date, much work on heuristics in consolidated democracies, such as the United States, has focused on the role of party cues (Rahn, 1993; Lupia, 1994; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Bartels, 1996; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001), while in developing countries – and especially Africa – scholars have focused to a far greater degree on the role of ethnicity in shaping voter behavior (Conroy-Krutz, 2013; Carlson, 2015; Adida, Gottlieb, Kramon, McClendon et al., 2017). Yet there are theoretical reasons to expect that party cues will also be salient in nascent democracies, and even electoral autocracies. In these latter contexts, party cues indicate whether a candidate belongs to the ruling party, which serves as a signal for the degree of access a candidate has to state resources thus their ability to engage in patronage, or even repression (Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Bratton, Bhavnani and Chen, 2012).

If party cues signal candidates' access to state resources and ability to engage in patronage, voters may discount any additional information about candidate quality, and partisanship may act as a barrier to voting behavior change in the face of new information. If so, we should expect to see little effect of information on vote choice where party cues are salient, such as general elections, and a larger effect where they are not, such as in primary elections. Similarly, if a voter learns

her preferred candidate is not as high quality as his challengers, she is more likely to abstain in a context where party cues are salient, preferring to stay home than vote for a candidate from another party. At the same time, information is likely to have a stronger impact for candidates about whom initial levels of uncertainty were high. In light of a skewed playing field, in which the ruling party influences access to information, this is often the case for opposition candidates.

In collaboration with the secretariats of Uganda’s main political parties, the electoral commission, and civil society organizations, we designed and implemented a field experiment that varies both the presence of party cues and information about candidate quality, and examine how information affects voter behavior across context where party cues are more or less salient. The information we provide takes the form of debate-like videos featuring candidates standing for Member of Parliament in a set of constituencies. In the videos, which featured nearly 100 candidates across eleven constituencies, candidates answered a set of questions about their policy positions, background, and plans for office.

Using a factorial design, we randomly selected polling stations in each constituency to, first, be exposed or not to the public dissemination of information about candidate quality, and second, receive this information in the context of Parliamentary primary elections of the ruling party or the general election. In primary elections, party affiliation of candidates is held constant and thus not a meaningful cue, while in the general election, political party affiliation is one of the defining features of candidates’ identity. Because more than two-thirds of the national electorate is eligible to participate in the ruling party primaries, and because we randomize the selection of polling stations and assignment to treatment across elections in the same set of constituencies, we are able to provide an unusually clean comparison of how voters respond to information across electoral contexts, varying the presence of party cues while holding constant many observable and unobservable covariates at the voter and constituency level.

To interrogate the role of party cues versus information on vote choice, we leverage fine-grained data on voters’ partisan attitudes, prior and posterior beliefs about candidates, turnout and vote choice, and candidate behavior from a variety of sources. A panel survey with over 8,000 Ugandan registered voters – with the first wave taking place before the screening and thus serving as baseline, and second wave taking place immediately after the election – allows us measure turnout, vote choice, the extent to which voters update about and retain the provided information, and their perception of the electoral process. In the treatment group, we conducted an additional wave of the panel survey the day after the screening to assess voters’ posterior beliefs about candidate qualifications and their assessment of candidate performance in the videos. In addition, we draw on expert assessments of candidate performance in the debate videos and surveys with all of the filmed candidates. While we cannot say definitively whether information led voters to select objectively

better candidates, we do show that with and without party cues, when given a more full set of information about the candidate pool, voters selected different candidates than they would have without additional information.

Our main finding is that, even in a setting in which partisanship is a strong predictor of vote choice, voter behavior changed as a result of new information about candidate quality, and we observe this effect in contexts with and without party cues. In the absence of party cues, voters switched to the candidate popularly perceived as the *best performer*. In the presence of party cues, information about relative candidate quality led voters to move *away from ruling party candidates* – some abstained, some voted for opposition candidates instead. We show suggestive evidence that the latter effect is due to positive updating about the quality of opposition candidates, about whom ruling party members had relatively less information and lower priors at baseline. Treatment effects are particularly strong among voters whose preferred candidate in the primary election dropped out of the general election race, thus weakening party attachment.

These results suggest that party cues did not serve as a barrier to updating on the basis of new information. In fact, the effect of information on vote choice and turnout was very similar across contexts with and without party cues – voters updated in both cases and similar percentages switched away from their intended vote choice in response to information. One important caveat is that while we randomly assign which polling stations are studied in the primaries and the general election, it is necessarily a bundled treatment: while the presence and absence of party cues is one of the defining differences between intra- and inter-party competitions, it is certainly not the only one. However, we note that in the Ugandan contexts, these two types of elections are held at a similar scale, and the ruling party primaries involve about two-thirds of the national electorate. These results give us reason to believe that, even outside contexts where party cues are typically studied, and where parties are relatively easily placed on an ideological spectrum, party cues matter for vote choice but do not serve as binding constraints.

We make several contributions to existing literature. First, we add to the research on information and voting behavior. Early work in this area appeared to yield mixed and often null results (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2012; Banerjee et al., 2011; Chong et al., 2014), while recent research has begun to reveal more about the *conditions* under which information matters. For example, Adida, Gottlieb, Kramon and McClendon (2017) find that information about legislators’ performance in the context of Benin only affect voter behavior when information was disseminated widely and accompanied by a civics message, pointing to the importance of information salience and voter coordination. Arias et al. (2018) find that in the context of Mexican municipal elections, neither benchmarked information nor common knowledge about information moderated the effects of information on voter behavior, but responses were instead shaped by voters’ priors. We build

on this literature, examining how context shapes the relationship between information and voter behavior. Our work specifically seeks to examine the extent to which partisanship moderates the effect of information on voting behavior.

Our information treatment differs from most others in the literature in that it provides information on *all* candidates, rather than the incumbent alone. Most existing work provides information on incumbents' or parties' performance while in office, for example in the form of a politician scorecard (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2012; Grossman and Michelitch, 2017) or audit reports (Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Arias et al., 2018; Jablonski et al., 2018). This retrospective information necessarily excludes challengers, who were not in office. However, in the absence of information about alternatives to the incumbent, it is not clear how information about the incumbent will affect voter behavior. An incumbent may perform poorly, relative to other incumbents or to a voter's priors, but if all the challengers are likely to perform similarly or worse, a voter may support the incumbent despite bad news about their performance. By contrast, in our study we provide voters with information about (nearly) all candidates in a constituency, under the assumption that voters compare the incumbent to the expected quality of the challengers (Fearon, 1999). Our findings are in line with a set of ongoing and recent studies suggesting that information about all candidates may be more effective in shaping vote choice (Casey, Glennerster and Bidwell, 2016; Bowles and Larreguy, 2018).

We also take seriously the role of parties and partisanship in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Although political parties in Africa are generally considered weakly institutionalized (Kuenzi and Lambright, 2001), candidate party affiliation may be one of the primary factors in vote choice. Much work on voting behavior in Africa focuses on the central role of ethnicity in shaping vote choice, but the role of ethnicity may be limited to elections where constituencies is ethnically diverse (for example, national-level presidential elections) or where there is a strong correspondence between ethnicity and party. Parties in ethnically diverse countries necessarily must garner support from a multi-ethnic base, and in these contexts, which include countries such as Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, co-ethnicity may a weak predictor of vote choice.

Finally, we add to a small but growing literature on the role of primary elections outside the U.S. and Western Europe. While primaries are recognized as central to candidate selection in the U.S. (Hall, 2015; Ansolabehere et al., 2010; Brady, Han and Pope, 2007), there has been relatively little work on understanding how these elections affect the political environment in Africa. Existing research outside of the the U.S. and Western Europe has examined questions of why party elites participate in primary elections in some constituencies and not others (Ichino and Nathan, 2012), the effect of primaries on the electoral performance of political parties (Ichino and Nathan, 2013) and candidate strength (Carey and Polga-Hecimovich, 2006), we focus instead on how voter

behavior differs across primary and general elections among the same pool of voters.

2 Information and Voting Behavior

A canonical model of politician selection frames electoral accountability as a principal-agent relationship between voters and politicians (Fearon, 1999). Voters – the principals – seek to monitor the behavior of their agent, the politician, but have limited information about her quality. Forward-looking voters receive a noisy signal on their incumbent’s past performance, which they use to predict future performance, and on this basis decide whether to keep or vote her out of office. If the incumbent is expected to be of higher quality than the alternative candidates she is re-elected, and otherwise voted out.

Informational problems may cause electoral accountability to break down – voters often have limited data available to evaluate the quality of the incumbent alone, and even less so to evaluate it relative to that of the challengers. This information problem is exacerbated in low-income countries where both levels of education and media penetration are often low.

Uncertainty about challengers, and especially opposition party candidates, can be especially high in dominant party settings. Here, information about opposition candidates is often sparse relative to ruling party candidates due to differential governing experience, access to media platforms, campaign resources, and intimidation of opposition candidates. In other words, the playing field is skewed in favor of the ruling party (Levitsky and Way, 2012), implying greater uncertainty about the quality of opposition candidates.

An obvious solution to the information problem is to directly provide citizens with information about candidate quality, or past performance, which in theory should help voters make a better decision on election day. As information about the quality of challengers is typically not available – particularly for retrospective performance metrics such as attendance of legislative sessions – many interventions provide information about the incumbent candidate or party but not information about the challenger (see for example Ferraz and Finan (2008); Humphreys and Weinstein (2012); Dunning (Forthcoming)). However, the candidates about whom voters have the least information and the greatest uncertainty – making information about them potentially the most effective – are challengers to the incumbent. Bayes’ theory suggests that, all else equal, information is more likely to result in updating when the uncertainty around the prior belief is high. The proposition is intuitive: the more uncertain voters are about the state of the world, the greater weight they will attach to new information they receive. Recent empirical work supports this argument (Arias et al., 2018; Bhandari, Larreguy and Marshall, 2018).

However, new information about candidates competes with heuristics – shortcuts which voters use to make decisions in the absence of comprehensive information, or in the absence of incentives or the ability to process it (Rahn, 1993). While heuristics can take many forms, in the context of a dominant party regime, we expect party cues to be a particularly important heuristic. Voting on the basis of party affiliation of a candidate may be the result of loyalty to a certain party (ideology), such that the voter derives disutility from voting for a different party’s candidate. But candidates’ party affiliation in the context of a dominant party regime also signals ability to access state resources, and voters may select among candidates on the basis of party affiliation in order to reap patronage rewards from the state or to avoid punishment. For example, in Uganda, the current president has repeatedly blamed poor services in particular constituencies on voters electing opposition politicians – likening opposition MPs to “blocked straws” who cannot access development programs and funding.¹

Thus, we expected information to have a greater effect on voter behavior where party cues are not salient (primary election) than where they are salient (general election). This is because absent a common heuristic (party cues) and access to information about candidates we should see more updating about candidate quality in primary elections, but also because updating in the context of a primary election does not entail crossing party lines. When all candidates belong to the same party, switching to a different candidate does not result in any disutility from being “disloyal” to one’s preferred party. Furthermore, voting for one candidate rather than another is unlikely to result in differential access to public goods and resources administered by the ruling party, or in repercussions by the central government for voting for the “wrong” party. Thus, all else equal, information about candidate quality should be more salient in intra versus inter-party elections. Therefore, we expected information to have a greater effect on vote choice in the primaries than in the general election.

By the same token, when voters are disappointed by relative performance of their preferred candidate, we expected that they would be more likely to stay home on election day during the general election, where voting for the better performing candidate would entail crossing party lines, than in the primary election, where they can fairly costlessly simply vote for another co-partisan candidate. Thus, we expected that turnout would be depressed in response to disappointing information about one’s preferred vote choice in an inter-party setting, but less so in an intra-party setting.

However, greater uncertainty about opposition candidates plays a countervailing role. If the informational playing field is sufficiently skewed in favor of the ruling party so that voters have lose and negatively biased priors about opposition candidates, and the cost of crossing party lines

¹See for example, [this report](#) on the website of the ruling party.

is not perceived as prohibitive due to fear of loss of patronage or repercussions, then the provision of credible and salient information about all candidates can result in a leveling of the playing field that ultimately leads more voters to switch to the opposition.

Together, our predictions for treatment effects, derived from theoretical expectations, were the following:²

- H1 Bad news about the intended vote choice (performance in video relative to other candidates) will reduce turnout to a greater extent in inter- than intra-party settings.
- H2 The treatment effects on vote switching (deviating from the intended vote choice) will be greater in inter- than intra-party settings.
- H3 Information on all candidates levels the playing field and therefore disproportionately benefits candidates about whom uncertainty was particularly high.

3 Parties and Partisanship in Uganda

Uganda has oscillated between multi-party and single party rule since independence in 1962, and has never seen a peaceful transfer of power at the executive level. The current president came to power in 1986 after overthrowing the previous government, and his party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) has governed since. The NRM dominates all levels of electoral politics, from local councils to the national legislature, and is thus considered a dominant party regime. Three opposition parties are represented in the current parliament: the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), the Democratic Party (DP), and the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), all of which had candidates featured in the constituencies in which the study took place. The percentage of seats held in parliament by opposition candidates has fallen over the three multi-party elections held since 2005 – 18 percent in 2006, 15 percent in 2011, and 13 percent in 2016. The number of parties represented in parliament has also declined during this time, from five in 2006 and 2011 to three in 2016.

The two largest parties, the NRM and the main opposition party, FDC, are not differentiated ideologically or ethnically – both draw on a support base from across the country and are not dominated numerically by any single ethnic group. Yet 7 in 10 Ugandans say they feel close to a

²Hypotheses 1 and 2 were prespecified. Results from other pre-specified hypotheses are presented in a companion book chapter, [Platas and Raffler \(Forthcoming\)](#).

political party³ – much higher rates of partisanship than in the United States, where more than 40 percent of Americans report being independents.⁴

Despite report strong partisan ties, voters tend to be poorly informed about candidates in both the primary elections of the ruling party as well as in the general election. For example, three to six weeks before the scheduled general election, only a quarter of respondents knew a given candidate's positions on three salient policy issues: the proliferation of administrative units (22% correct), a proposed ban on candidates found to have engaged in vote buying (25% correct), and the priority sector for the constituency (24% correct). Further, voters had relatively little knowledge about candidates' education, occupation, religion, and even ethnicity. As we show, members of the ruling party are also poorly informed about opposition candidates relative to ruling party candidates. In our baseline survey of 4,357 registered voters, we find that respondents felt significantly better informed about NRM candidates than viable (defined as those with at least ten percent of the vote share) opposition and independent candidates in the lead-up to the general elections. In particular, registered voters were ten percentage points more likely to have heard of NRM candidates at baseline, and to feel significantly more informed about them.

Why? Those inside and outside the ruling party highlight the numerous ways in which ruling party candidates at all levels have a leg up compared to opposition candidates. As one local politician put it: "If you are not the flagbearer [candidate representing the ruling party in the general election] it is very difficult to go through. [...] Once you capture the flag of NRM that is the beginning of the journey."⁵ Radio stations, the most common means through which Ugandans consume news are frequently owned by politicians, particularly members of the ruling party. During campaign periods, there are regular reports of opposition candidates at both the parliamentary and presidential level being blocked from participating on radio shows through which they could reach more voters.⁶ There are also more pernicious ways to tip the playing field against opposition candidates, including violence and physical intimidation of voters and candidates, which have been documented regularly by organizations such as Human Rights Watch.⁷

While 57% of our baseline respondents in the general elections consider it very unlikely that "powerful people" can find out how they personally voted, only 39% consider it very likely that the counting of votes will be free and fair (n=4,709).⁸ At the same time, about half of respondents

³Data from Afrobarometer, Round 7.

⁴See, for example: <http://news.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx>

⁵Qualitative interview with an NRM councilor, CIII.

⁶See coverage on ACME, Uganda Radio Network, Foreign Affairs, and HRW.

⁷Some reports include "Uganda: Not a Level Playing Field,"(2001), "Preparing for the Polls: Improving Accountability for Electoral Violence in Uganda," (2009), "Uganda: End Police Obstruction of Gatherings," (2009).

⁸Interestingly, the reputation of primary elections is slightly better. Restricting to the subset of voters who are eligible to vote in the primary elections to ensure comparability of samples, 62% compared to the same 57% consider

say that they believe politicians monitor how people vote in a given area, and on this basis decide to reward or punish voters in that area. Of these, 16 percent believed monitoring took place at the level of the district, 19 percent at the parliamentary constituency level, 43 percent at the sub-county level, 31 percent at the parish-level, 46 percent at the village level, and 11 percent at the polling station level.⁹ In most cases, voters believed rewards/punishment were given by the member of parliament representing their constituency, but a sizable minority also mentioned the president or the ruling party.

70 percent of all registered voters are members of the NRM and thus eligible to participate in the primary elections of the ruling party. Turnout for NRM primaries is nearly as high as in the general elections. In 2010, the NRM electoral commission reported 6.2 million voters participating in its primaries, while the following year's general elections had 8.2 million participants. Thus, Uganda provides a setting in which we are able to compare the behavior of voters across electoral contexts – intra and inter-party – holding constant a variety of observed and unobserved factors.

4 Meet the Candidates Videos

Our information intervention was comprised of the production and screening of a video recording in which candidates for the office of Member of Parliament answered a set of questions about their policy preferences, qualifications for office, personal characteristics, and relevant experience. This intervention is thus similar to the one studied by [Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster \(2014\)](#) in Sierra Leone. We selected questions that we expect to provide voters with information along two primary dimensions: *policy* and *quality*. Policy includes candidates' policy positions on several important policy issues. Providing information about candidates' positions allows voters to determine the extent to which policy alignment exists between the voter and the candidate on a set of three issues: 1) constituency policy priorities, 2) the creation of new administrative units (districts), and 3) the legal consequences for those convicted of vote buying.¹⁰

In order to create the videos, we invited all parliamentary candidates in a set of eleven constituencies into a professional TV studio in Kampala to respond to a set of standardized questions about their policy positions and qualifications several weeks prior to the election. The responses were then edited to produce one candidate 'debate' video per constituency. For both primaries and general elections, trained moderators facilitated the candidate debates to ensure uniformity of

the ballot to be secret. The share of voters who expect the elections to be free and fair does not differ across the two types of elections.

⁹Respondents could select more than one level.

¹⁰The precise wording of the questions asked of candidates can be found in the online SI.

treatment across constituencies. Moderators ensured that each candidate answered every question and each candidate received equal time, and candidates responded in local languages. The recordings were professionally edited to give the appearance of a debate: After brief introductions, all recorded candidates for a given constituency answered one question in turn before moving on to the next question. Their names and image of their party symbol were included in the video to increase name and face recognition. In the primary elections, 80 percent of candidates participated, while in the general elections, 91 percent of candidates participated. A screenshot of the one of the candidates in the video, as seen by voters, is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Screenshot of debate video

The intervention was implemented in collaboration with a consortium of partners, including Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), the Department of Political Science at Makerere University, the Agency for Transformation, a Ugandan civil society group, and Leo Africa Forum, a Ugandan civil society group organizing regional and national policy debates. The project was designed in consultation with the Uganda Electoral Commission and the NRM Electoral Commission.

These videos were then screened publicly in a randomly selected set of polling stations within the constituency, in a “village road show” in the weeks leading up to the primary and general election respectively. An average of 50-100 people attended each screening; in total the videos were seen by 12,000 to 24,000 people across the eleven constituencies. Voters were mobilized to attend the screenings, and a randomly selected subset of voters were incentivized to attend and participated in surveys before and after the screening. This subset of voters was then contacted again on election day to report their voting behavior, described in more detail below.

5 Research Design

The field experiment took place in 11 of Uganda’s 249 directly elected parliamentary constituencies in all regions of the country.¹¹

The primary unit of randomization was the village. We selected villages to maximize overlap with polling station catchment areas. We worked in all 240 rural parishes in the sampled constituencies. Within each parish, we selected the three villages with the highest overlap between a polling station catchment area and the primary (main) village it served. We define the main village as the village contributing the highest number of voters to a polling station according to the updated voter register of the National Electoral Commission (2015).¹²

We used a factorial design, with the treatment and control assignment in the general and the primary elections, respectively, being the two dimensions, as shown in Table 1. We randomly assigned 480 villages to one of the following four treatment arms, with equal probability: i) primary elections - treatment, ii) primary elections - control, iii) general elections - public treatment, and iv) general elections - control. Each village was only included in the study once.

To minimize spillover, only one village per parish was included per study round, primaries and general elections. To accomplish this, we first randomly assigned parishes to one of the four treatment conditions below. Then, we randomly allocated villages within each parish to be sampled in the primary or general election round.¹³ Randomization of parishes was blocked at the constituency level. Since the elections we analyze were held at the constituency level, this strategy effectively blocks on legislative performance of the incumbent, level of electoral competition, quality of service delivery, performance of the incumbent in the debate, number of challengers, and other constituency level characteristics.

In each sampled village, we randomly selected 20 voters from the relevant official voting register to participate in the survey. For the NRM primaries, this was the list of registered party

¹¹Considering both representativeness as well as study feasibility, the 11 sampled constituencies were randomly drawn from 27 constituencies which met our criteria for inclusion in the study. First, in order to avoid working in places without any semblance of party competition, we considered only constituencies with an average vote margin below 20% and at least one change in winning party, both in the past two elections. We further excluded constituencies that were considered as having a high risk of election-related violence by local experts, and constituencies in which the population spoke rare languages or a significant share of polling stations was located on islands or in hard to reach mountainous areas. As such, the sample is not nationally representative. Further details of constituency selection can be found in the online SI.

¹²We excluded polling stations from the sample which were part of the sample of another election related study by (Buntaine et al., 2018), and/or had a main village where voters were registered in polling stations in two different parishes. Additional details on polling station sampling can be found in the online SI.

¹³In four constituencies, the third village was assigned to a companion study arm with individual level randomization in the general election. Results of this study are presented in (Platas and Raffler, Forthcoming). In the remaining constituencies, the third village was not included in the study.

		Primaries	
		Treatment	Control
General Elections	Treatment	TT	TC
	Control	CT	CC

Table 1: Randomization Two-by-Two

members, who were eligible to vote in the party primary. For the general election, this was the official voter register compiled by the National Electoral Commission. Since endline data collection was conducted by phone, we restricted our sample to those who could be reached via cell phone, whether their own or that of a family member, friend, or neighbor. 2% of respondents were excluded at the listing stage because they could not be reached by any phone.

Data

We collected data on the primary outcomes of interest, voter-level *turnout* and *vote switching*, through a phone survey on the evening of the election for all treatment and control groups. In addition to the phone-based endline survey, we conducted a baseline survey in all treatment arms and a posterior survey in the treatment group only after the video screening. The entire data collection and video screening process was conducted twice, and consecutively to maintain consistent timing between the baseline survey, treatment, and endline in each study round.

In the baseline survey, we collected data on respondent characteristics and priors about candidates in the respondent’s constituency. At the end of the baseline survey, respondents in the treatment group were given an invitation card to attend the debate screening. The invitation card contained their respondent ID. They were told that if they attended the debate and were willing to conduct a brief interview afterwards, they would receive a small compensation in the form of airtime (about USD 0.50) conditional on presenting the invitation card. Within 24 hours of the debate screening we conducted a posterior survey with respondents in the treatment groups, collecting data on posterior beliefs about candidates. Finally, all respondents sample were called on the evening of election day to ask about their individual voting behavior. For a random subset of respondents (50%) we conducted an ‘exit poll plus’ which also elicited political knowledge, perceived likability of the candidates and information on candidate behavior in the polling station catchment area. Respondents who could not be reached the on Election Day were tracked over the course of the coming days.

We consider two primary dependent variables: turnout and switching.¹⁴ *Turnout* is a binary

¹⁴We also pre-specified political knowledge and vote choice as outcome variables. Results on political knowledge

measure that takes a value of 1 if the respondent reports that they voted on election day *and* can answer two verification questions about the election process correctly during the exit poll, 0 otherwise. *Switch* is a binary variable for each voter which takes the value 1 if a voter voted for a different candidate than reportedly intended at baseline¹⁵ or did not vote at all, and 0 otherwise.

We recognize the potential of overreporting with respect to turnout, which is common in surveys, and address it using verification questions that those who in fact voted are much more likely to answer correctly than those who did not. First, the question is phrased “While talking to people about today’s primary elections, we find that some people were able to vote, while others were not. How about you - were you able to vote or not?” to minimize social response bias by signaling that it we understand that it may have been beyond people’s control whether they were able to vote. Second, we asked verification questions which only voters who voted in the respective election are likely to be able to answer correctly.

In the primaries, the first verification question asks whether the vote choice was handwritten or pre-printed on the ballot paper (it was pre-printed). 93% of respondents who said they had voted answered this question correctly. The second verification question asks whether the candidate they voted for was wearing a suit or a t-shirt in the photo on the ballot paper. This is a trick question, since there were no photos on the ballot paper. The correct answer is thus that neither is true since there was no picture. 90% of respondents who said they had voted answered this question correctly. In the general elections, biometric machines for voter verification were used for the first time. We took advantage of this fact and asked voters which of their fingers was used to verify their identity. 79% of respondents who said they had voted answered this question correctly (right thumb).

In the analysis we only consider people who answered these questions correctly (85% of primary respondents who reported having voted, 79% of general election respondents) as having in fact voted. Robustness checks with responses taken at face-value are included in the online supplemental information (SI) and yield similar results. Similarity with official election records gives us further confidence in our data: Self-reported, verified turnout in our sample was 75%, compared to 70% according to the official election records for our polling stations. The 5% difference can be explained by the fact that we removed voters who are registered but deceased or no longer living in a village from our sampling frame as well as those too sick or old to respond to a survey. We are less concerned about differential social response bias in favor of certain candidates, since the videos and survey treated all candidates equally and did therefore not suggest a desirable response.

are reported in the paper and vote choice is addressed in a companion paper.

¹⁵Respondents were asked at baseline: “If [NRM primary elections/general elections] were held tomorrow, which candidate would you vote for as member of parliament for this constituency?”

We were able to reach 85% of enrolled respondents at endline (78% during the primary phase of the study, 92% during the general election phase). Attrition is balanced across treatment and control. As shown in the Appendix, treatment is mostly balanced when regressing the treatment dummy on all baseline covariates. The p-value for the joint hypothesis tests are 0.887 for the pooled sample, 0.993 for the general election sample, 0.850 for NRM members in the general elections, and 0.710 for the primary sample, respectively. Two variables (wealth and perceived credibility of videos as information source) are slightly imbalanced and included in the vector of controls.

On average, our 8,161 respondents across the two election rounds are 40 years old (SD 14 years) and have six years of education (SD 4 years). 42% of our sample is female. 71% report having voted in the last election (74% in the last general election, 68% in the last primaries). 62% of the general election sample reports intending to vote NRM. 22% of our sample does not have a coethnic candidate in the race. Respondent characteristics by election round are presented in the Appendix. It is difficult to compare our sample to the full sample of registered voters, since much demographic information (such as education level) on registered voters is not available. However, we note that only a handful of registered voters were excluded from the sample, such that registered voters should be similar on to the full sample voters in the eleven constituencies where we work, which cover all four regions of the country.

Estimation

We estimate the following equation:

$$E(Y_i) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_i + \sum_{j=1}^k (\nu_j Z_i^j + \psi_j Z_i^j T_i) \quad (1)$$

where Y_i refers to the outcome measure for voter i , T_i to the treatment assignment of voter i , and where Z_1, Z_2, \dots, Z_k is a vector of covariates: respondent's age, gender, education, assets (index), identification with the ruling party, past turnout, whether a respondent expects the ballot to be secret (four point scale) and fair (four point scale), respondents' access to political information, whether a respondent considers the information provided in the debate as salient, and the extent to which a debate is the preferred source of information of a respondent (both questions asked before respondents were informed of the debate). All covariates are measured at baseline and standardized.

6 Information and Updating Across Elections

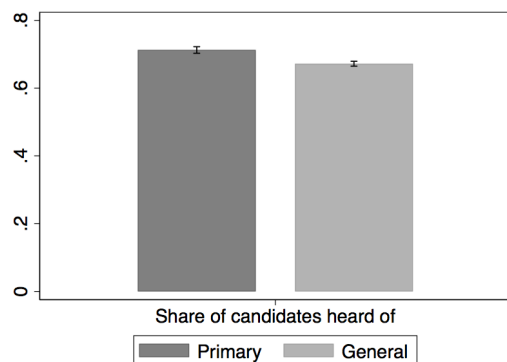
First we examine the extent to which the assumptions discussed in Section 2 are met. We expect that information will have a greater effect on behavior when uncertainty around priors is higher, and make two assumptions about the variation of uncertainty. First, we assume that uncertainty about candidate characteristics – in particular, quality, policy positions, and competitiveness – is higher in primary than in general elections, where voters are first exposed to candidates and party cues are absent. Second, we assume that in the context of general elections in a dominant party regime, uncertainty about candidates running on the ticket of an opposition party is higher than about those representing the ruling party, in particular among voters favoring the ruling party.

Distribution of uncertainty

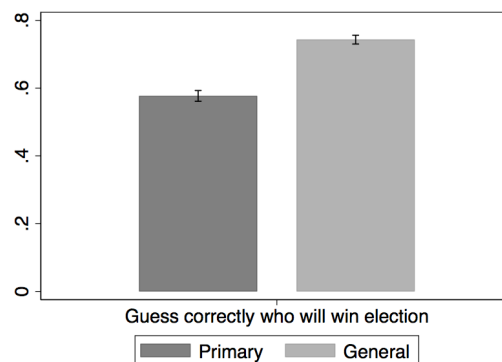
We measure uncertainty at baseline in three ways: ability to correctly predict who the winner of the election will be, the share of candidates who are known at baseline, and objective knowledge of candidates based on seven factual questions. When we consider summary statistics for these measures, we find that voters in the primary know a greater share of candidates at baseline, but are less likely to predict the outcome of the election correctly. This aligns well with the expectation that ruling party voters know the candidates within their party, but have lower levels of knowledge, on average, about candidates from other parties in the general election. At the same time, because voters most often expect the ruling party candidate to win – and these candidates are most likely to win – voters in the general election are more likely to guess the winner correctly than in the primary election, where there is greater uncertainty about the election results. These summary statistics are shown in Figure 2.

We also find that in the general election, in line with our expectation about the information asymmetries between ruling party and opposition candidates, that voters are much more likely to have heard of ruling party candidates and have greater information about them than candidates from opposition parties. The probability that an average voter in the general election can name an opposition candidate at baseline is 34 percentage points lower than for a ruling party candidate, and the gulf widens further if we consider only non-incumbent candidates – less than half of voters have heard of the non-incumbent opposition candidates in their constituency while 92 percent have heard of the non-incumbent NRM candidate. Even when voters have heard of the opposition candidate, they can answer 0.87 fewer factual knowledge questions about opposition than ruling party candidates. Together, these findings confirm our assumption that knowledge of opposition candidates in this context is particularly low.¹⁶

¹⁶Tabular results using regression analyses can be found in the SI.

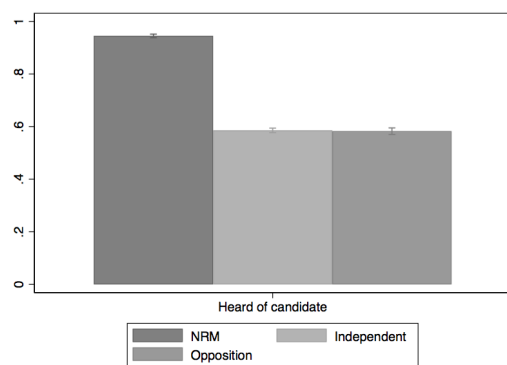


(a) Heard of candidates

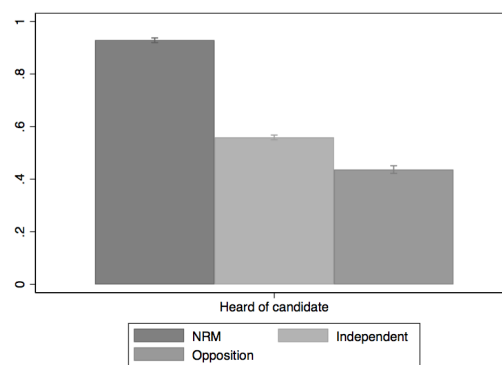


(b) Guess winner correctly

Figure 2: Baseline information about candidates, by election



(a) All candidates



(b) No Incumbents

Figure 3: Baseline information about candidates in the general election, by candidate party

Relevance of the information provided

Next we examine whether the candidate videos provide information on candidate characteristics that matter to voters. To investigate this question, we leverage our multi-round survey data and regress reported vote choice on voters' baseline perceptions of candidates for the subset of respondents in the control group. The baseline survey asked respondents about their perception of each candidate along a number of dimensions, some of which corresponded with information provided by the videos (policy positions, partisanship, character and competence), and some of which are standard predictors of vote choice in the literature, such as co-ethnicity and measures of clientelism. We then regress (probit) a binary indicator for whether a respondent voted for a given candidate on respondent priors. The unit of observation is the voter-candidate dyad. Since vote choice is correlated within voter – due to the fact that someone can only vote for one candidate – we cluster standard errors at the voter level and include constituency fixed effects.

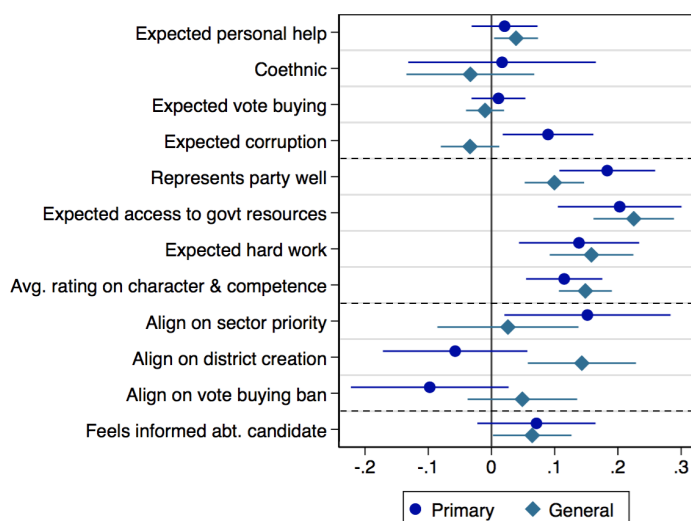


Figure 4: Determinants of Vote Choice in Control Group, by Election

As shown in Figure 4, we find that the best predictor of candidate's vote choice is their perception of candidate quality (the second panel from above) and, to a lesser extent, policy alignment (the third panel) – dimensions the videos provide information on. The perceived probability of a candidate to engage in clientelism and corruption does not systematically predict vote choice, nor does coethnicity (top panel). We also find that the type of information we provided was perceived as credible. About half of the sample named a candidate video as their first or second most trusted source of information, compared to other sources of information, such as performance scorecards, and influential community member, or a flyer from an NGO.¹⁷ While debates at the parliamentary

¹⁷Importantly, videos were screened after the baseline survey, alleviating concerns about social desirability bias.

level are relatively rare, debates at the presidential level are becoming increasingly common, which may explain why voters perceived this type of information as particularly credible.

Respondents learn and remember

In order for information to affect voting behavior, it does not only need to be relevant and credible, but also to be absorbed and remembered until the election – in our case, up to six weeks after receiving the information. To what extent do respondents remember the information we provided?

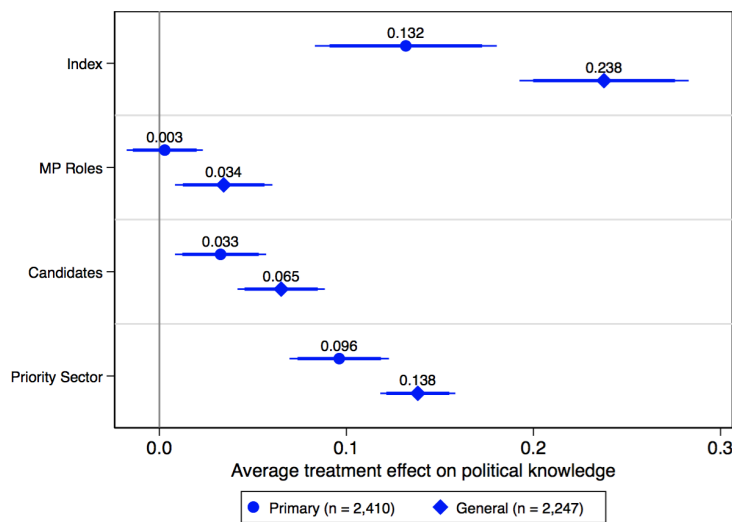


Figure 5: Treatment effect on political knowledge, by election

Figure 5 shows a large, positive effect of video screenings on political knowledge, as measured during the endline survey. Political knowledge is measured as answering a set of factual questions about the roles and responsibilities of MPs (*MP Roles*), the share of candidates whom a respondent could name (*Candidates*), the share of candidates for whom respondents could correctly identify their priority sector for the constituency (*Priority Sector*), and the additive index of the three (*Index*). The share of candidates respondents could name increased by 6.5 and 3.3 percentage points, respectively, for the general and primary election, and the share of candidates about whom respondents could name the priority sector increased by 13.8 and 9.6 percentage points, respectively, in the general and primary election. Thus, levels of learning were similar across the two elections, although slightly higher for the general election. We also find that respondents learned more about the policy preferences of opposition candidates (proxied by priority sectors for the constituency), but no differential treatment effect on name recall. In other words, we see movement on the intensive margin of knowledge about opposition candidates, but not the extensive margin.¹⁸

¹⁸Results in SI.

7 Turnout and Vote Switching

Having established that the conditions for the provided information to matter are met, we now turn to the treatment effects on the two primary outcomes of interest: turnout and vote switching. We expected that the treatment effect on turnout would be conditional on receiving bad news about the candidate for whom the voter intended to vote. Further, we expected that this effect would be larger in the general election, *if* the cost of vote switching – crossing party lines – is a binding constraint.

In fact, as we show below, we find similar effects of our intervention on both turnout and vote switching across the general and primary election. Those who received news that their intended vote choice performed relatively poorly were slightly less likely to turnout to vote at all. Meanwhile, those in our treatment group were about 4 percentage points more likely to switch away from their intended vote choice than those in the control. Interestingly, baseline rates of switching were quite high in general, and slightly higher in the primary election. This suggests that, far from being a forgone conclusion, there is much uncertainty about which candidate a voter will cast a ballot for on election day, suggesting a quite competitive field of candidates.

For our analysis on turnout, we define the quality of news – good or bad – as a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not the respondent’s intended vote choice at baseline was determined as the best performer by an expert panel that reviewed the videos and scored each candidate. The panel was comprised of Ugandan journalists, academics, and members of civil society, and each candidate received between three and five independent scores along the same dimensions as respondents in the survey.¹⁹

We find significant net reductions in turnout among voters who received bad news about their intended vote choice. We present results from four subsets of our sample of voters: the pooled sample of both primary and general election voters (“Pooled”), general election voters only (“GE”), general elections voters who are NRM members and thus comparable with the primary sample (“GE-NRM”), and voters in the primary election only (“Primary”). The relevant metric for interpreting our treatment effect is the linear combination of the coefficients on *Treatment* and *Treatment * Bad news* intended, which captures the net effect of the treatment conditional on receiving bad news about one’s intended vote choice, as reported at baseline.

¹⁹A more complex coding of news type is described in the online SI, as pre-specified according to the preanalysis plan. It is function of policy alignment and the difference between respondent priors and expert assessments of candidate quality. Results from the prespecified version are substantively similar to those presented here. We present this version as the coding of news quality is both more transparent and intuitive. We also note that we do not find any effect of good or bad news on *vote choice*, a question which is addressed in a companion paper.

Table 2: Treatment effect of bad news about intended vote choice on turnout

	(1) Pooled	(2) GE	(3) GE-NRM	(4) Primary
Treatment	-0.008 (0.023)	0.017 (0.029)	0.008 (0.032)	-0.024 (0.037)
Treat x Bad news intended	-0.038 (0.028)	-0.062* (0.033)	-0.071* (0.036)	-0.024 (0.049)
Bad news intended	-0.008 (0.019)	0.030 (0.023)	0.039 (0.024)	-0.020 (0.044)
Constant	0.781*** (0.018)	0.744*** (0.021)	0.751*** (0.023)	0.785*** (0.030)
N	6,362	3,823	2,932	2,539
R ²	0.020	0.029	0.030	0.046
Coeff (Treat + Treat x Bad news intended)	-0.045**	-0.045**	-0.063**	-0.048
SE (Treat + Treat x Bad news intended)	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.025)	(0.038)

Notes: The dependent variable is verified, self-reported turnout. All models include constituency fixed effects and covariates. Standard errors are clustered by polling station. *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

Turnout was reduced by 4.5 to 6.3 percentage points among respondents who received bad news shown in the bottom panel of Table 2. The effect is not significant in the primary elections, but the coefficient is of comparable magnitude, so we cannot reject the null hypothesis that treatment effects were the same across election rounds.

Next we examine whether the treatment affected vote choice. We find that respondents in the treatment group are indeed significantly more likely to switch away from their intended vote choice. In the general election, the effect size is larger for NRM members: those who report affiliation to the ruling party are especially likely to change their vote choice after viewing the videos. As with turnout, we find that results are quite similar across the two types of elections. Table 3 shows the main results for vote switching across the four samples, where the treatment increases vote switching by 3 to 4 percentage points.

In the primary elections, seeing the videos made voters more likely to switch to the debate winner, defined as the candidate deemed as the best performer in the video by either the local expert panel or by the respondents, as assessed during the posterior survey. The treatment had no such effect in the general elections. In either election, the treatment did not make voters more likely to switch to incumbents, nor to switch away from them.²⁰

²⁰All results shown in SI.

Table 3: Treatment effect on switching

	(1) Pooled	(2) GE	(3) GE-NRM	(4) Primary
Treatment	0.041** (0.018)	0.035* (0.020)	0.043* (0.023)	0.044* (0.026)
Constant	0.436*** (0.014)	0.448*** (0.013)	0.423*** (0.015)	0.497*** (0.018)
N	7127	3949	3015	3178
R ²	0.043	0.044	0.045	0.104

Notes: The unit of observation is the voter. *Switch* is an indicator variable that takes value 1 if a voter did not vote for the candidate whom she was planning to vote for at baseline (self-reported), 0 otherwise. All models include constituency fixed effects and covariates. Standard errors are clustered by polling station. Data from one constituency with missing major candidate is omitted. *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$

What types of voters are switching their vote, and which candidates are they switching to and from?²¹ First, we find that in the general election, voters are switching *away from the ruling party*. Figure 6 shows that the treatment significantly increased the share of voters who switched away from the ruling party candidate in their constituency, while it had no such effect on switching from the opposition or independents. Here, switching away from a party is a dichotomous variable that equals 1 when a voter states an intention to vote for a party/candidate at baseline and then does not report voting for that candidate on election day.

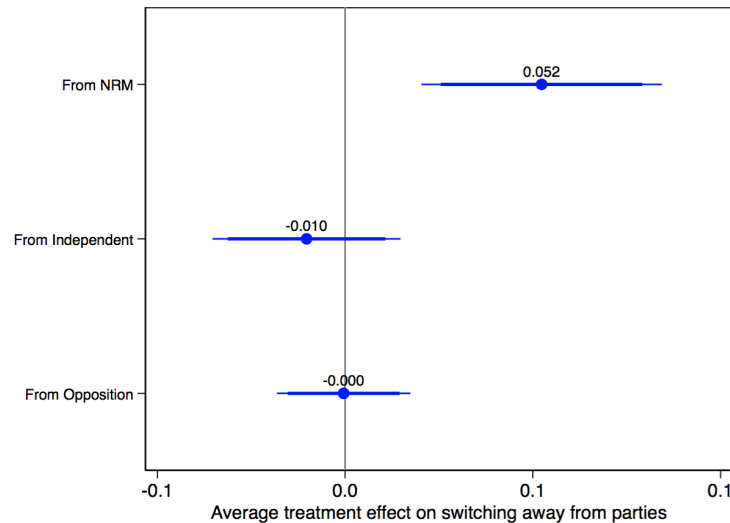


Figure 6: Treatment effects on switching, by party of intended vote choice

²¹We note that the analysis presented in the remainder of this section was not pre-specified, but undertaken as an exploratory analysis to investigate the mechanisms underlying switching.

To investigate the behavior of those who switched away from the ruling party, we restrict the sample to voters who reported intending to vote for the NRM candidate at baseline (62% of the sample) and assess the treatment effect on their propensity to abstain or cast a ballot for the ruling party, independent candidates or opposition candidates. As shown in Figure 7, we find that the treatment reduced the NRM vote share among this sample by 6.3 percentage points. Of those who switched away from the NRM, 3.7 percent abstained (p-value = 0.110), 1.9 percent voted for an opposition candidate (p-value = 0.044), and 0.5 percent voted for an independent candidate (p-value = 0.610).

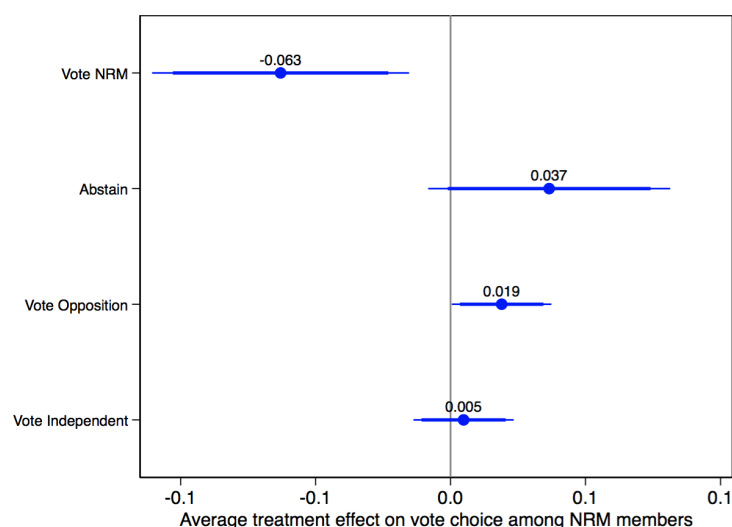


Figure 7: Treatment effects on voting behavior among those intending to vote for ruling party

The 6.3 percentage point reduction in the vote share of the ruling party among its purported supporters is surprising in a context where ruling party candidates are overwhelmingly expected to win, and where many voters report being subject to rewards and/or punishments as a result of how their area votes. Under what conditions did voters undertake this relatively risky behavior? As we show below the data suggest that switching away from the ruling party is due to positive updating about the quality of opposition candidates – about whom ruling party members had relatively less information and lower priors at baseline. Treatment effects are particularly strong among voters whose preferred candidate in the primary election dropped out of the general election race, which may result in reduced party attachment.

8 Discussion

In this section, we investigate several potential mechanisms that may have led voters to switch away from the ruling party and – in part – cross party lines. The first builds on the observation that in dominant party regimes – where opposition candidates are at times prevented from campaigning freely and accessing media – voters, and in particular those leaning towards the ruling party, often have relatively little information about the quality of opposition candidates. In this context, the provision of information about *all* candidates may be particularly effective in leveling the (informational) playing field.

In support of this mechanism, we find significant differences in self-reported updating about candidates from ruling and opposition parties. A day after the screenings, we conducted a survey with respondents in the treatment condition, and asked if and how watching the video had altered their views about specific candidates. We find that NRM-leaning respondents updated more positively about the quality of opposition than ruling party candidates, measured as eloquence, qualifications, understanding of policy issues. This suggests that ruling party voters learned more about opposition candidates’ qualifications than ruling party candidates, and that they were updating positively about these dimensions of candidate quality. At the same time, they update more positively about NRM and independent than opposition candidates on “soft” issues, such as trustworthiness and care for voters.

Table 4: Self-reported updating among NRM-leaning voters

	Candidate qualifications		
	Grasp of policy (1)	Eloquence (2)	Qualifications (3)
Opposition candidate	0.183*** (0.055)	0.127** (0.057)	0.146** (0.058)
Constant	2.445*** (0.029)	2.375*** (0.027)	2.305*** (0.032)
N	4,547	4,559	4,518
R ²	0.027	0.022	0.035

Notes: The unit of observation is the voter-candidate dyad. The dependent variable is a posterior assessment (“Compared to how you felt before watching the film, how do you rate [candidate’s ...]”), measured on a five-point scale, where 1 equals updated very negatively, 3 equals did not update, and 5 equals updated very positively. All models include constituency fixed effects and a vector of controls. Standard errors are clustered by polling station. *** p<0.01; ** p<0.05; * p<0.10.

Importantly, these self-reported short-term updates translate into changed views on attitudes

towards candidates representing the opposite side 2-6 weeks later. At endline, on election day, NRM-leaning voters view opposition candidates as more likable, compared to respondents in the control group (0.9 points on a ten-point scale), as shown in Figure 8. Similarly, opposition-leaning voters view NRM candidates more favorably as a result of the treatment (by 0.8 points), but not opposition candidates.²² Thus, the intervention had a moderating effect. These findings are consistent with those of Brierley, Kramon and Ofori (2018), who find an increase in the perceived likability of opposing-party candidates on the day of a debate screening in Ghana. We find that this boost in likability not only persists for weeks, but, as shown above, also translates into changes in voting behavior.

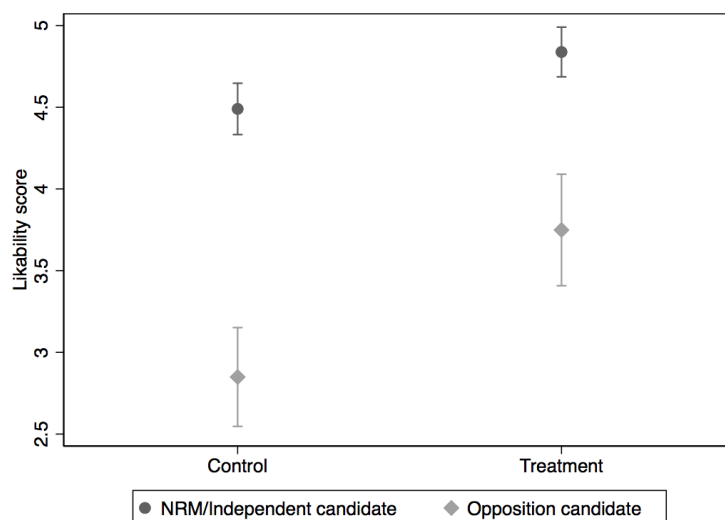


Figure 8: Treatment effects on candidate likability among those intending to vote for ruling party, by party

In addition to positive updating about opposition candidates in the context of a relatively low-information environment about the quality of the opposition, we also investigate whether ruling party voters who switch have less strong party attachments – less party loyalty – than those who do not. We investigate two different measures of attachment. The first is the self-reported party attachment relative to attachment to other parties. This is measured at baseline, where respondents are asked how close they feel to each major party, on a scale of 1-7, where 7 indicates the strongest attachment. We measure attachment to the ruling party as the difference between the score of party closeness for the ruling party minus the second highest score of party closeness to any other party. The second measure of attachment is whether there is discord between the ruling party flagbearer in the general election and the voter’s preferred candidate in the primary election race. If a voter’s preferred candidate lost the primary, we expect they will be more open to hearing and responding

²²Tabular results in the Appendix.

to information about alternative candidates, including members of the opposition.

As shown in Table 5, we find that NRM voters whose primary election candidate dropped out and who received the information treatment were significantly more likely to switch away from the ruling party, swamping the treatment effect among ruling party voters. We take this as evidence that the treatment primarily affected the voting behavior of those whose preferred candidate had lost the primary election and thus were less enthusiastic about the party flagbearer. We also find that those who switched away from the NRM were more open to other parties at baseline, measured as the degree of party attachment, but this factor does not interact with the treatment.

Table 5: Determinants of switching away from the ruling party

	(1)	(2)
Treatment	0.003 (0.038)	-0.009 (0.038)
Treat x Primary candidate dropped	0.073* (0.038)	0.080** (0.038)
Treat x Open to other parties	0.021 (0.038)	0.028 (0.038)
Primary candidate dropped	0.016 (0.027)	0.017 (0.026)
Open to other parties	0.067** (0.029)	0.067** (0.029)
Controls	Yes	No
Constant	0.373*** (0.024)	0.376*** (0.024)
N	3,015	3,015
R^2	0.048	0.038
F-statistic (TreatxPCD = TreatxOpen)	0.891	0.857
p-value (TreatxPCD = TreatxOpen)	0.346	0.355

Notes: Sample restricted to NRM members in the GE sample. The unit of observation is the voter. All models include constituency fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered by polling station. *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

That being said, party loyalty in Uganda is generally high: in the control group, 68 percent of registered NRM members – i.e. those eligible to vote in the party primaries, or 70 percent of the electorate – cast their vote for the ruling party, conditional on turning out. The share is markedly higher among voters whose preferred candidate won the primaries (75 percent) than among those whose preferred candidate lost and dropped out of the race (64 percent). The treatment lowered the latter share by a considerable ten percentage points, suggesting that reduced uncertainty about alternative vote choices is particularly effective in combination with reduced party attachment due to the dropping out of a favored candidate.

Alternative explanations

We test four alternative explanations for switching away from the ruling party, and find no evidence for any of them. First, it could be the case that the ruling party candidates simply performed poorly in the videos relative to other candidates. To investigate this possibility, we created a variable that indicates whether or not a given candidate is above or below the median in terms of popularly assessed performance, derived from a question asking respondents to rank video performance across candidates. In fact, we find that ten of the eleven ruling party candidates scored above the median in terms of performance in the video, and seven were deemed the debate winner by the plurality of respondents, suggesting that it is not low relative candidate quality that is driving voters away from the ruling party. Moreover, NRM candidates went on to win in eight of the eleven constituencies in the sample.²³

Second, it could be that voters are afraid to report voting for candidates outside the ruling party, and especially for opposition candidates, in a context where one party dominates the electoral space so profoundly. Respondents may be wary that enumerators were sent by the government – either the ruling party, the president, or a related institution – and may therefore be reluctant to report support for the opposition to them. Perhaps respondents in our treatment group, with whom our research team interacted more frequently than with those in the control group (since the former saw a video and also took an additional survey), came to downgrade the possibility that enumerators were affiliated with the government, and were therefore more inclined to truthfully report support for the opposition. To assess this possibility, we re-estimated our main analyses differentiating between voters who did and did not report a belief at endline that those conducting the study were sent by the government. If response bias was driving our results, we would expect the treatment to have a weaker effect on respondents who believed that the research team was sent by the government. In fact, we find the opposite: treatment respondents who thought the government sent our enumerators were, if anything, *more* likely to report switching away from the ruling party (not significant, $p=0.350$).²⁴

Third, it may be the case that our intervention is not directly affecting voting behavior, but rather that candidates' campaigns respond strategically to the intervention, which may in turn alter voters' calculations. To assess this possibility, we collected information during the endline survey on candidates' behavior in the villages where voters live. We do not find any evidence that candidate behavior – such as the number of visits or likelihood of distributing patronage goods (such as soap, sugar, money, etc.) – was systematically affected by the treatment.²⁵

²³Debate winners and election winners by constituency can be found in the Appendix.

²⁴Results available in the online SI.

²⁵Results available in SI.

Finally, it could be that the mere existence of the videos, which literally put all candidates on a level playing field, signaled to voters – and especially ruling party voters – that the “rules of the game” had changed and that it was “okay” to vote for other candidates. This is an intriguing possibility that we cannot completely rule out, but we do not find that those in the treatment groups were more likely to assess the elections as free and fair.²⁶ Thus, while seeing the videos may have led some voters to conclude that they had freedom to choose among candidates, we find no direct evidence that voters assessed the political environment as having fundamentally changed.

9 Conclusion

How and when does information affect voting behavior, particularly in the context of a dominant party regime where crossing party lines is costly? We show that, information can overcome partisanship, at least under certain conditions. Information about the relative quality of candidates can even induce voters to move away from the ruling party. We conducted a field experiment involving over 10,000 Ugandan voters and nearly 100 candidates in eleven parliamentary constituencies in the 2015 primary elections of Uganda’s ruling party and in the 2016 general elections in order to assess the effect of information on voter behavior, and also to investigate whether voters respond to information about candidate quality differently in settings where partisanship is more and less salient. We recorded debate-like videos of candidates answering a set of questions about their policy positions, background, and experience and screened these videos in 240 polling stations across the country.

We show that in the context of a dominant party regime, voters have much less information about opposition candidates than ruling party candidates, but also that there is considerable uncertainty about candidate quality in primary elections. Voters in both elections learned about candidates through the videos, and were able to name more candidates and identify candidates’ policy priorities than voters who did not watch the videos.

We find that the treatment effects on both turnout and vote switching were remarkably similar across the two electoral environments. Voters in both elections who received bad news about their intended vote choice, defined as the relative performance of their preferred candidate, were significantly more likely to stay home on election day. These findings suggest that some voters would rather not vote than switch to a better performing candidate, but that voters make this decision at more or less equal rates across intra and inter-party elections.

We also find that in both elections, voters responded to new information about candidate quality

²⁶Results available in SI.

by switching away from their intended vote choice. Voters in the general election who watched the videos were more likely to switch away from the ruling party candidate and toward opposition candidates. What explains this shift away from the ruling party in response to information?

We find that switching away from the ruling party was driven by voters whose preferred candidate had lost the party primaries but who, in the absence of receiving credible information about the quality of alternatives, would likely have voted for the ruling party candidate. These results reflect the electoral implications of the existence of an unlevel playing field with respect to the availability of information about non-ruling party candidates. Opposition and independent candidates may be of sufficient quality that ruling party voters, especially those disappointed in the party primaries, would be willing to vote for them – but these voters often lack the information to be confident enough to deviate from the default vote choice, the ruling party.

Our findings suggest that information asymmetries about the quality of ruling party and opposition candidates are impediment to competitiveness in Ugandan elections, and likely in other dominant party settings as well. We show that, once provided with information, voters update their priors on candidate quality and alter their voting behavior accordingly. Providing information about *all* candidates can help provide a more level playing field in an electoral environment dominated by one party, allowing even members of the ruling party to consider other candidates by providing information about opposition candidate quality in a setting where information on these candidates is scarce. As such, information in the form of candidate debates may strengthen party competition even in the context of a dominant party regime.

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