# Meet the Candidates: Videos and Voting Behavior in Uganda



In Uganda, preliminary findings suggest watching video interviews of parliamentary candidates during party primary and multiparty elections increases knowledge about the candidates and increases the likelihood that voters change away from their intended vote choice on Election Day.

Elections are one of the central components of the democratic process. In many countries, elections are the primary means by which citizens express their preferences for representatives and policies. However, many citizens lack even the most basic information about the candidates seeking to represent them in office.

There have been numerous efforts in countries around the world to provide citizens with information about incumbent politicians, parties, and governments, with the goal of increasing accountability and allowing voters to make more informed choices on election day. A growing literature looks at the effects of information on voter knowledge and behavior, including turnout and vote choice, but to date there have been mixed results. We still know relatively little about the conditions under which information is effective in shaping knowledge and behavior.

Meet the Candidates was designed to compare the effect of information in two different political contexts, while holding constant country and constituency: intra-party primary elections and multi-party general elections in Uganda. Unlike a number of information campaigns which provide information on the incumbent alone, Meet the Candidates was specifically designed with the goal of providing equivalent information about all candidates in a given constituency.

Researchers worked with Innovations for Poverty Action Uganda, the Agency for Transformation, the Political Science Department at Makerere University, and the Leo Africa Institute to conduct a randomized evaluation assessing the impact of pre-recorded informational videos of parliamentary candidates on voters' knowledge and behavior. In the videos, candidates for Member of Parliament in a constituency answered a set of questions about their background and policy

positions on three locally relevant issues. These responses were edited to form a single video, Meet the Candidates, featuring all participating candidates in a given constituency. Citizens then viewed these videos at public screenings in randomly selected polling station catchment areas in eleven parliamentary constituencies. One set of screenings took place in advance of the ruling party's 2015 primary elections and another prior to the 2016 general elections.

Preliminary results suggest that in both the primary and general elections, watching the Meet the Candidates videos increased voters' knowledge and affected voting behavior.

Voters who watched the videos knew more about the roles and responsibilities of Members of Parliament, were able to name more candidates, and were more likely to know the policy priority of the candidates for their constituency. Voters who were selected to view the videos were more likely to switch away from their intended vote choice on Election Day than those who were not. During the primary election, voters who watched the videos were more likely to switch their vote to the candidate perceived to have performed best. Finally, voter ratings of the likeability of all candidates increased in areas where the screenings took place.









## Context

In Uganda, parliamentary elections are held every five years. The ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), has held power continuously since 1986, and has held multiparty elections since 2006. The party holds the majority of seats in parliament and at all lower levels of government. NRM is the only party that holds primary elections that are open to all members—and since it has been the dominant party, its primaries are highly competitive and are an important part of the candidate selection process for the general election. 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.

Meet the Candidates took place in 11 constituencies across Uganda, with three each in the Central, Northern, and Western regions, and two in the Eastern region. Constituencies receiving the Meet the Candidates intervention were randomly selected from a set of constituencies projected to be competitive based on results from prior elections. In the constituencies studied, a total of 49 candidates ran in the NRM primaries (an average of 4.5 per constituency) and 64 in the general elections (an average of 5.8). Of these candidates, 37 of the 49 were filmed in the primaries, while 58 of the 64 were filmed in the general elections. Incumbents ran in nine of the 11 general elections. Two of the incumbents represented the NRM, four were from an opposition party, and five were independent.

# Evaluation

Researchers invited all candidates in a given constituency to a recording studio in Uganda's capital, Kampala. Candidates' responses to a set of standardized questions about their policy positions and qualifications were recorded and edited to produce one video per constituency. The videos began with a brief introduction including information on the minimum qualifications for parliamentary candidates and the roles and responsibilities of members of parliament.

Candidates answered six questions: three about policy positions and three about their background and experience. The policy questions asked candidates' positions on three separate policy issues: 1) their priority sector for the constituency (such as health, education, or security), 2) their position on whether additional administrative districts should be created in Uganda, and 3) their position on the legal consequences for candidates convicted of vote buying. The three background questions included: 1) their qualifications for running for office, 2) the personal characteristic that they believe best prepares them for office, and 3) how their past achievements demonstrate that they will be an effective representative of their constituents in parliament. Candidates answered all questions in local languages.

Meet the Candidates videos were shown in public screenings in a total of 240 polling station catchment areas, with 120 screenings in primary election and 120 in the general election. Attendance averaged between 50 and 100 viewers per screening. An estimated 12,000 to 24,000 Ugandans in the eleven constituencies watched the Meet the Candidates videos.

To study the effects of the Meet the Candidates program, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation. In each election, 120 polling stations were assigned to the video group and 120 to a comparison group. Meet the Candidates screenings took place in those polling station catchment areas assigned to treatment.

In each polling station catchment area, 20 respondents were randomly selected from the official voter register to participate in a three-wave survey. In the initial survey, participants in both the video and the comparison groups responded to an in-person baseline survey before viewing any videos. In the midline survey, respondents in the video group responded to an in-person survey immediately after the screening took place. In the concluding survey, respondents in both the video and the comparison groups were contacted by phone on election day and in the subsequent days. A total of 3,804 people participated in the surveys for the NRM primary and 4,357 in the general election.

The main outcomes measured in the concluding survey were political knowledge, voter turnout, and vote choice in the parliamentary election.
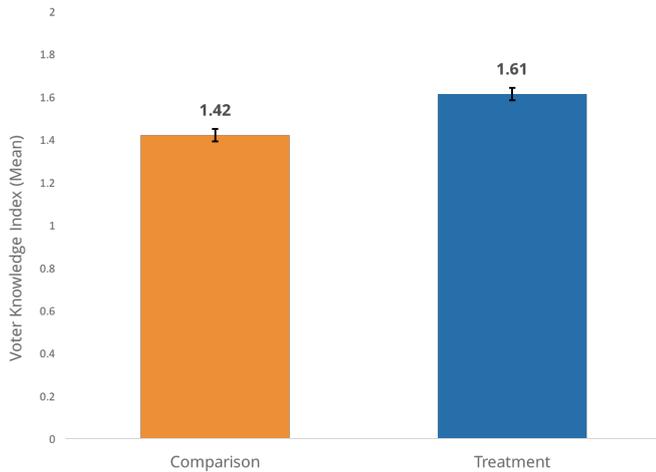
# Preliminary Results

*These results are preliminary and subject to revision.*

» **Watching Meet the Candidates increased political knowledge.** Voters who watched the videos were more likely to know the roles and responsibilities of Members of Parliament, to name a greater share of candidates running in their constituency, and to know the policy priority sector of candidates.

» **Watching Meet the Candidates videos did not affect overall turnout.** In aggregate, voters were not more or less likely to vote after watching Meet the Candidates videos.

» **Voters were more likely to switch away from their intended vote choice after watching the Meet the Candidates videos.** Voters who watched the videos were more likely to either vote for a different candidate than they had initially intended to vote for or not to vote at all.

» **Voters who watched Meet the Candidates in the primary election were more likely to switch their vote to candidates who performed better in the videos.** Voters and a panel of experts from Ugandan civil society rated the performance of candidates in the videos. Voters who watched the videos in the primary election were more likely to switch their vote to those candidates who were rated as performing best, compared to voters who had not seen the videos. This pattern was not observed in the general election.

» **Meet the Candidates neither hurt nor helped incumbents.** Voters were no more or less likely to vote for incumbent candidates after watching Meet the Candidates.

» **Candidates were rated as more likeable by those who watched Meet the Candidates videos.** Voters who watched the videos gave candidates higher scores on a seven-point likeability index.

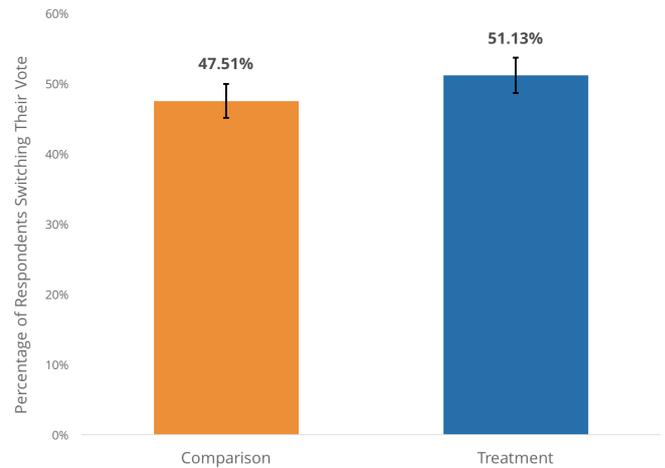### Watching MTC increased voters' knowledge.

Respondents' political knowledge was evaluated with a Voter Knowledge Index. The minimum score was 0, while the maximum was 3.

### Voters who watched the videos were more likely to switch their vote choice.

Respondents who watched the videos were more likely to either vote for a different candidate than they had initially intended to vote for or not to vote at all.



*Note: in each graph, black error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.*

## Conclusions

Taken together, this project's preliminary findings suggest that candidate video screenings are a promising means of sharing information that can help voters make more informed choices on Election Day. Voters became more knowledgeable about the candidates, and the citizens who did vote made more informed choices after having seen the videos. The intervention was distinctive among voter information efforts in that it included information about non-incumbent candidates and studied the effect of information in two different types of electoral environments: the primary election of the ruling party and the multiparty general election.

The videos had somewhat different effects on vote choice in the primary than in the general election. For example, in the primary election, voters who watched Meet the Candidates were more likely to vote for the candidates who voters and a panel of experts rated more highly, but in the general election they were not.

Future research should further examine how the effect of information on political behavior varies across intra- and inter-party contexts. The difference in the videos' impact on vote choice between the primaries and the general election may be rooted in voters' reluctance to cross party lines in the general election, suggesting that information campaigns may be particularly effective in intra-party contests. Additional research could clarify this and other questions to determine the conditions under which watching candidate interviews shapes voters' behavior.