

# Closing the Gap: Information and Mass Support in a Dominant Party Regime

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What role does information play in shaping mass support in dominant party settings? We conduct a field experiment during the 2016 Ugandan parliamentary elections that provides voters with information about candidates from all competing political parties. Specifically, we produce and screen videorecorded candidate interviews in randomly selected villages just before the election. Voters have lower baseline knowledge about opposition candidates compared to ruling party candidates. We find that the video screening reduced this knowledge gap and caused voters to update more positively about the opposition. Further, those who watched the videos were less likely to vote for ruling party candidates, and those initially leaning toward ruling party candidates were more likely to vote for the opposition. These findings suggest that information asymmetries play a role in sustaining mass support for ruling parties in dominant party settings and that reducing them may strengthen electoral competition.

Dominant party regimes—which allow opposition parties to contest in multiparty elections, but those elections do not result in an alternation of power—have been the most common form of nondemocratic regime since the mid-1990s (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010).<sup>1</sup> This type of political organization has proven quite durable, with ruling parties controlling politics for decades in countries across such varied contexts as Mexico, Singapore, Tanzania, Egypt, and Malaysia (Brownlee 2007). Much of the existing research on dominant party regimes examines how these regimes employ institutions, such as parties, legislatures, and elections, to maintain political power (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Magaloni 2006). Although much of this work has examined how dominant parties manage the threat posed by rival *élites*, these regimes must also win electoral victories, which rely on the support of the *masses*.

In this article, we focus on the role that information plays in shaping mass support for ruling versus opposition parties

(Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011; Guriev and Treisman 2015, 2016; Hobbs and Roberts 2018). In dominant party regimes, information about the quality of the opposition is often sparse relative to the ruling party. This information asymmetry can be due to a variety of factors, including differential access to media platforms, campaign resources, restrictions placed on opposition candidates and parties, and manipulating information through the use of propaganda (Levitsky and Way 2010). However it is produced, it can result in greater uncertainty about the relative quality of opposition candidates as well as biased information about ruling party and opposition candidates, the former portrayed more positively and the latter more negatively.

We conduct a field experiment to investigate how an intervention that reduces this information asymmetry affects voters' evaluation of candidates and, ultimately, their vote choice. To do so, we produce videorecorded interviews with parliamentary candidates and conduct public screenings of the

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1. Other names for this regime type include "competitive authoritarian" (Levitsky and Way 2002), "hybrid regime" (Diamond 2002), "electoral authoritarian" (Linz 2000; Schedler 2002), and "hegemonic party" (Sartori 1976).

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interviews in randomly selected villages across 11 parliamentary constituencies in Uganda, a country governed by a dominant party regime.<sup>2</sup> The candidate interviews were designed to increase the information available about the quality of candidates from all parties. They closely mimic candidate debates, which have become increasingly common around the world. Since 1990, 18 countries in Africa and 17 countries in Latin America have held debates among candidates for head of state (app. A; apps. A–K are available online).

In each constituency, we invited all candidates to a television studio to record their timed responses to a set of six standardized questions about policy preferences and qualifications. We compiled a single video for each constituency featuring all the interviews of candidates contesting in that constituency. The candidate videos were publicly screened in 120 randomly selected villages, with another 120 villages serving as a control. This activity was conducted in collaboration with civil society organizations, a local university, and Innovations for Poverty Action, with approval from the Electoral Commission of Uganda, the President's Office, and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology.

Increasing access to information about candidates from both the ruling party and the opposition should have the effect of *reducing uncertainty* about candidate quality, particularly for opposition candidates, about whom there was less information to begin with. Information should also serve to *correct biases* in priors about the quality of candidates. Given the baseline information asymmetry, we expect greater and more positive updating about opposition relative to ruling party candidates. All else equal, voters who receive information about candidates should be more likely to vote for candidates about whom they update positively, compared to voters who do not receive information.

A panel survey with over 4,000 registered voters, with the second survey wave conducted on and immediately after election day, enables us to estimate the effects of the video screenings on voters' knowledge about candidates, their assessments of candidate likability, and their vote choice. We find that at baseline, voters have significantly less information about candidates from the opposition than about those from the ruling party—they are significantly less likely to have even heard of these candidates. We further find that watching candidate videos has the effect of, first, increasing voters' knowledge about opposition candidates and, second, increasing the lik-

ability of opposition candidates. While voters update their beliefs about candidates from all parties, we find significant asymmetries in updating, with larger shifts for opposition candidates. This asymmetric updating results in a decreased likelihood of voting for the ruling party and an increased likelihood of voting for the opposition, as measured in our endline survey. The effects of information on voting behavior are driven by those who initially supported ruling party candidates.

Why did the candidate videos cause voters, especially those who intended to vote for ruling party candidates, to move toward opposition candidates? We show that asymmetric updating translated into changes in voting behavior, especially among voters with high baseline levels of uncertainty about the opposition. Those least informed about opposition candidates relative to ruling party candidates were most likely to move away from the ruling party in response to information. However, the treatment effect on voting for the opposition was muted by fear of repercussions. At baseline, those who reported that they expected their area to receive fewer resources if not supporting the ruling party were significantly less likely to respond to the information treatment by voting for the opposition. These results suggest both the promise of strengthening the information environment to support electoral competition, as well as the limitations of such efforts in contexts where some voters fear punishment for supporting the opposition.

A growing body of work investigates how access to information and governments' control of information affect mass support and voter behavior (Boas and Hidalgo 2011; Enikolopov et al. 2011; Kronick and Marshall 2019; Larreguy, Marshall, and Snyder 2018). To our knowledge, this is the first field experiment on this topic that takes place in a dominant party regime, where information asymmetries are likely to be more severe than in democratic contexts. Panel data allow us to examine voters' prior beliefs about candidates and parties, how and when voters update in the face of new information, and how information shapes their choice over a set of candidates on election day.

Our study is also distinct from much of the existing work on information and accountability in that we provide information on all candidates rather than on incumbents alone (Bhandari, Larreguy, and Marshall 2019; Chong et al. 2014; Malesky, Schuler, and Tran 2012; Pande 2011). In the most coordinated set of studies to date, a meta-analysis found no effect of information about incumbent quality on turnout or vote choice (Dunning et al. 2019). We argue and show empirically that voters have relatively high levels of baseline information about incumbents—it is the challengers, and especially challengers from opposition parties, about whom voters are most uncertain. In such a context, providing more information about the incumbent is unlikely to move voters, but

2. Throughout the text we employ the term "information" as shorthand for the specific type and method of information provided, recognizing that different types of information and information dissemination may produce different results.

providing information about challengers can have important effects on vote choice.

We add to recent work on candidate debates by investigating different outcomes in a substantively different context. Specifically, we focus on vote choice rather than preferences (Brierley, Kramon, and Ofosu 2020) and voter reaction rather than candidates' response to the opportunity to participate in debates (Bowles and Larreguy 2019). Further, and as above, to our knowledge this type of intervention has not been studied in the context of a dominant party regime. The study most closely related to ours was conducted in Sierra Leone (Casey, Glennerster, and Bidwell 2019), which has seen alternations of power between political parties and is considered a democracy by Polity IV. Focusing on a dominant party regime enables us to study the effect of information in the context of an informational playing field slanted in favor of the ruling party.

Our findings suggest that information asymmetries between opposition and ruling party candidates can play an important role in sustaining mass support for dominant parties. At the same time, they show that relatively simple interventions increasing access to information about all candidates can significantly decrease voting for the dominant party and may increase the competitiveness of elections. We believe our findings are most likely to apply to dominant party regimes but may extend to other types of nondemocratic regimes with more limited political competition as well. For example, Malesky and Schuler (2020) find that mass support in a single-party regime, Vietnam, is also supported by voters' certainty about the policy positions of and access to resources of party candidates. Our findings may also shed light on the effect of information on voter updating and behavior in democratic settings with locally dominant parties, although we expect information asymmetries to be less severe in such contexts.

### VOTING BEHAVIOR IN DOMINANT PARTY SETTINGS

Our theoretical framework builds on spatial voting models, which assume that voters prefer candidates whose policy preferences are closer to their own ideal points (Downs 1957). Similarly, we assume that voters prefer candidates who will perform best in office if elected, in expectation. However, in addition to policy preferences, we allow for a broader set of candidate characteristics to factor into expected performance, including perceived competence and access to state resources. Following a literature in American and comparative politics, we also assume that at least some voters are risk averse and prefer candidates about whose expected performance in office they have lower uncertainty (Bartels 1986; Shepsle 1972). Uncertainty is typically higher for challengers as compared to

incumbents (Eckles et al. 2014; Enelow and Hinich 1981; Jacobson 1981).

Voters infer candidates' expected performance in office both by consuming information, for example, through traditional media and candidate campaigns, as well as by using heuristics. Candidates' party affiliation is a particularly important heuristic in the context of voting decisions (Downs 1957; Rahn 1993). In developed democracies, party affiliation is often closely related to ideology. In sub-Saharan Africa, political parties tend not to be organized on an ideological spectrum (Van de Walle 2003) but can still provide meaningful information about candidates on the party ticket—for example, their likelihood of being able to access state resources (in the context of a dominant party regime) or their ethnic affiliation (in contexts where there are ethnic parties). Moreover, party cues can be especially important in low-information environments and among voters who are less politically aware (Kam 2005).

Increasing the amount of information voters have about all the candidates on the ballot should allow them to better assess expected performance in office and should reduce the need to rely on (party) heuristics. The extent to which voters update when provided with accurate information about candidates will depend on voters' priors about the set of candidates they are evaluating. We should expect little updating for candidates about whom voters have accurate prior beliefs and more updating for candidates about whom voters have inaccurate prior beliefs. Further, we expect more updating for those candidates about whom voters have greater uncertainty due to a lack of information. A central tenet of Bayesian theory is that, *ceteris paribus*, information results in more updating when the uncertainty around the prior belief is high. All else equal, voters should be more likely to vote for candidates about whom they update positively.

While the above describes a logic of voting in a generalized context, we focus specifically on how this calculus plays out in dominant party regimes. We expect that, in these regimes, one of the main differences affecting voters' decision-making, as compared to consolidated democracies, is that there exist significant asymmetries in the amount and quality of information voters have about candidates representing the ruling party as compared to those representing opposition parties (Levitsky and Way 2010). Specifically, we expect that voters have less information and thus greater uncertainty about opposition relative to ruling party candidates (Morgenstern and Zechmeister 2001) and that the information they do have about these candidates is negatively biased.

This imbalance in the quantity and the accuracy of information about the ruling party versus the opposition can be a result of several factors. First, ruling parties may strategically

seek to control the information environment and use information to their own electoral advantage (Levitsky and Way 2002). This can include the use of propaganda to convince the public of their competence, which can stabilize even incompetent regimes (Guriev and Treisman 2015). It can also involve limiting access to information—for example, via internet censorship, blocking access to social media, and aggressive regulation of the media (Hobbs and Roberts 2018; Knight and Tribin 2019; Kronick and Marshall 2019). In the case of non-democracies, such limits have been associated with higher support for governments (Enikolopov et al. 2011; Guriev and Treisman 2016). Ruling parties can actively restrict the access of opposition parties and candidates to the public and vice versa, for example, by preventing them from appearing in the media or holding campaign rallies.

Second, opposition parties in dominant party contexts are often institutionally weak and have few resources relative to ruling parties, the latter of whom may use state resources on behalf of the party, especially in nondemocratic settings (Schedler 2002). The weakness of opposition parties limits their ability to campaign, participate in traditional media, access voters, and otherwise share information about the quality of their candidates. Further, in the context of a dominant party regime, affiliation to the ruling party is a particularly salient heuristic, as it is associated with access to resources and the ability to govern (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010)—even in the absence of concrete information about specific candidates. Meanwhile, voters may assume opposition parties and their candidates are weak, non-viable, or simply unable to effectively represent voters because of their limited influence in governance decision-making.

Together, these factors lead to an asymmetric information environment where there is more positive and more substantial information about ruling party candidates compared to opposition candidates. We find, for example, that Ugandan voters in our sample were twice as likely to be able to name nonincumbent ruling party candidates as nonincumbent opposition candidates, suggesting a large gap in basic information about candidates across parties. Further, voters' priors are likely to be biased positively in the case of ruling party candidates and negatively in the case of opposition candidates.

Under these conditions, increasing access to credible and accurate information about all candidates should, first, cause voters to learn relatively more about opposition as compared to ruling party candidates, since they had less information about these candidates to begin with, thereby reducing uncertainty about opposition candidates. Second, it should cause voters to update more positively about opposition candidates as compared to ruling party candidates.

We thus begin with two assumptions: (1) voters are better informed about ruling party than opposition candidates,

and (2) voters have more negative priors about opposition as compared to ruling party candidates. We then derive the following hypotheses about how information will affect uncertainty and updating about ruling party compared to opposition candidates:

**H1.** Uncertainty reduction. Providing information will increase knowledge about opposition candidates to a greater extent than about ruling party candidates.

**H2.** Positive updating. Providing information will increase favorability assessments of opposition candidates to a greater extent than of ruling party candidates.

Then, if voters learn more about opposition candidates and update positively about them, they should also be more likely to vote for these candidates than they would have been in the absence of the provision of information.

**H3.** Voters who receive information about candidates will be more likely to vote for the opposition than those who do not.

Since the hypothesized effect is a shift toward the opposition in terms of favorability ratings and vote choice, the most relevant sample are voters who intend to vote for the ruling party at baseline.

Several factors may moderate these effects. First, following from the discussion above, treatments should be strongest for voters with the greatest asymmetry in their knowledge about ruling party and opposition candidates. We expect the effect on vote choice to be most pronounced among voters who have the greatest gap in knowledge between the ruling party and the opposition at baseline (moderator 1).

However, reduced uncertainty and positive updating about opposition candidates may not result in changed votes if voters perceive voting for the opposition as sufficiently costly. We consider two reasons why crossing party lines may pose a cost to voters: loyalty and fear. First, voters may feel loyal to the party or its ideology (Stokes 1962), such that they derive disutility from voting for a different party's candidate. In such cases, the treatment effect of information should be stronger for voters with weaker party loyalty.

Second, in the context of a dominant party regime, voters may support ruling party candidates to avoid punishment by the regime (Magaloni 2006; Schedler 2015). In particular, they may expect that a low vote share for the ruling party in their area will translate into a lower allocation of government resources. Indeed, 49% of our sample reported believing that politicians or political parties monitor how their area voted



and made decisions about the allocation of resources depending on where they had received electoral support. Voters who expect resource allocations to be a direct consequence of their vote choice may be less likely to change their voting behavior, even if their opinions about opposition candidates improve. If the perceived cost of voting for the opposition is sufficiently high, some voters whose preferences change in favor of the opposition may stay home on election day rather than vote for their preferred candidate. Thus, we expect the effect of information on voting for the opposition will be stronger among voters with weaker loyalty to the ruling party (moderator 2) and that the effect of information on voting for the opposition will be weaker among voters who believe their vote is monitored by the ruling party (moderator 3).

Finally, by screening videos about candidates publicly, our treatment bundles the provision of information with an opportunity for deliberation. While deliberation could moderate the effect of information on vote choice, the direction of this effect is ambiguous in the context we study. Party representatives may try to counter negative information about their candidates (Humphreys and Weinstein 2012), thereby offsetting effects, but deliberation could also make the information provided more salient. We leave this important question to future research.

We test our theoretical expectations in the context of a dominant party regime, although it is possible our theoretical expectations may hold in other types of nondemocracies. We expect similar effects in cases of democracies with locally dominant parties. In these cases, information asymmetries of the type we describe above may exist but—since the active restriction of information about opposition candidates is less prevalent—are likely to be less severe. Next we describe the political context in which our intervention takes place and the factors contributing to information asymmetries between ruling party and opposition candidates.

### POLITICAL CONTEXT IN UGANDA

Uganda is an East African country that has been governed by President Yoweri Museveni and his party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), for more than 30 years. Between 1986, when Museveni and the National Resistance Army overthrew the previous government, and 2005, Uganda was governed by a single-party system. A referendum in 2005 saw the return of multiparty politics, and four multiparty elections have been held since, in 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021. Nevertheless, Uganda is considered a dominant party regime as the ruling party dominates all levels of electoral politics, from local councils to the national legislature. Despite the presence of multiparty elections, there has not been a turnover of power at the executive level since 1986. At the time of the study, the

ruling party controlled 72% of seats in the legislature and 77% of the elected heads of second-tier governments, the districts.

Voters elect members of parliament to a unicameral legislature in a single-member, first-past-the-post system. The share of seats opposition candidates hold in parliament had fallen in the three elections held since the reinstatement of multiparty elections in 2005—from 18% in 2006 to 13% in 2016. The number of parties represented in parliament had also declined in this period, from five in 2006 to three in 2016. The three opposition parties represented in the parliament elected during the 2016 election we study are the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), the Democratic Party (DP), and the Uganda People's Congress (UPC). All three opposition parties had candidates competing in the constituencies in which our study took place.

Uganda is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with more than 60 officially recognized ethnic groups. The ethnic composition of the population subnationally, however, is fairly homogeneous, as ethnic groups tend to be organized spatially. For this reason, the ethnic identity of candidates standing for member of parliament (MP) within a given constituency varies little; coethnicity with candidates thus generally plays a limited role in voters' decision-making. In seven of our 11 constituencies, there was no variation in candidates' ethnicity; in three, candidates with an ethnicity different from the modal one received less than 10% of the vote; and in one constituency, the minority candidate won (table E4; tables A1, B1, E1–E4, F1–F13, and G1–G21 are available online).

Ruling-party candidates at all levels have electoral advantages over their challengers, including their ability to reach voters through the media and during campaigns. Radio stations serve as most Ugandans' primary news sources. Sometimes the stations are owned by ruling-party politicians, and opposition candidates at both the parliamentary (Bindhe 2010) and presidential levels (ACME 2010) have reportedly been blocked from participating on radio shows during campaigns (Paul 2016), limiting their reach to voters. In 2013, the parliament passed the Public Order Management Act stipulating that all public meetings require advance approval by the police. Opposition parties have complained that this law has been used to prevent them from organizing and campaigning, a concern shared by international observers (Freedom House 2016). Organizations such as Human Rights Watch have also reported more pernicious ways of tipping the playing field against opposition candidates, including violence toward and physical intimidation of voters and candidates (HRW 2001, 2009). In addition, ruling party politicians are perceived as having more direct access to state resources. The president has repeatedly blamed poor services in specific constituencies on voters having elected opposition politicians, likening opposition legislators

to “blocked straws” who cannot access development programs and funding (see, e.g., NRM 2015).

This is not to say that Uganda’s ruling party and president do not also enjoy genuine support. The government has presided over relatively steady economic growth over the past several decades and is credited with bringing security, albeit after a protracted civil conflict in the north of the country (Izama and Wilkerson 2011). Public opinion surveys find relatively high levels of satisfaction with politicians’ performance,<sup>3</sup> and there have been improvements in health outcomes such as child mortality and in access to basic education.

In a nationally representative survey from May 2015, about nine months before the election in which our study took place, about 75% of respondents said they felt close to a political party. Of those, nearly 80% reported feeling close to the ruling party, followed by the FDC at 11%. Nearly half of respondents reporting trusting the ruling party “a lot” and nearly a quarter “somewhat.” By contrast, only 11% of respondents reported trusting opposition parties “a lot” and less than a quarter “somewhat.” A third reported not trusting opposition parties at all (Afrobarometer Round 6). The gap in trust between the ruling party and the opposition is substantial, even comparatively. Comparing 33 countries in the Afrobarometer survey, Uganda has the fifth largest gap in reported trust between the ruling party and opposition, just behind countries like Tanzania and Zimbabwe, which are also dominant party systems (fig. E3; figs. B1, E2–E4, and F5 are available online).

When asked whether the opposition presented a “viable alternative vision and plan for the country,” more than 40% disagreed while nearly 20% said they did not know (Afrobarometer Round 6). Again, in comparative perspective Ugandan respondents report some of the highest rates of uncertainty about the viability of the opposition, with the fourth highest percentage of respondents answering “don’t know” out of 34 countries with data on this question (fig. E4). Meanwhile, only 52% of Ugandan respondents felt that the media offered fair coverage of all candidates (Afrobarometer Round 6). In combination with our survey results presented below, this suggests that relatively weak support for opposition parties and candidates may be in part due to a lack of information about the candidates representing these parties.

## MEET THE CANDIDATES VIDEOS

The intervention we evaluate aimed to provide voters with standardized, comparable, accurate, and credible information about all candidates in their constituency in the run-up

to the 2016 Ugandan parliamentary elections. We produced and screened videos in which parliamentary candidates answered a set of questions about their policy preferences, qualifications for office, personal characteristics, and relevant experience.

The objective in designing the intervention was to provide balanced information about all candidates in a constituency such that voters have (a) more information overall and (b) equal amounts of and comparable information about the different candidates available. The goal was to provide more credible information than is often provided at rallies: first, since promises are on tape and the same message is provided to all constituents. Second, voters can judge candidates’ qualifications—such as eloquence, grasp of policy issues, and knowledge of problems affecting the constituency—from directly observing the candidates side by side. The intervention focused on programmatic information. In the terms of our theoretical discussion, the goal was to reduce uncertainty about candidates and to shift priors closer to reality. In practice, our treatment was publicly provided and thus also offered a venue for deliberation.

We selected questions to elicit answers that would provide voters with information about candidate characteristics with respect to policy positions and qualifications. To help voters evaluate which candidates held policy preferences similar to their own, we asked candidates about their position on three salient issues at the time of the election: (1) constituency policy priorities, (2) the creation of new administrative units (districts), and (3) the legal consequences for those convicted of vote buying (see script in app. K). The question about constituency priorities asked candidates which specific sector—such as health or education—they deemed the top priority for their constituency, why, and how they would ensure improvements in their priority sector. The creation of new districts is a highly salient topic in Uganda, where, since 2000, the number of districts has increased from 56 to 127 in 2016. Finally, we selected a policy proposal for electoral reform being debated at the time: banning candidates convicted of vote buying from contesting for five years. In addition, to help voters assess candidates’ competence, we asked candidates about their qualifications, past achievements, and reasons for their policy positions.

To create the videos, we invited all parliamentary candidates in sampled constituencies into a professional TV studio in Kampala several weeks before the election. Trained moderators conducted the interviews in local languages and ensured each candidate answered every question and received equal time. Recordings of candidates’ responses were professionally edited, producing one video per constituency. Each resulting video purposely resembled a debate to facilitate comparisons across candidates; the final videos showcased the candidates’

3. For example, in the 2015 Afrobarometer survey in Uganda (Afrobarometer Round 6, [https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Summary%20of%20results/uga\\_r6\\_sor\\_en1.pdf](https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Summary%20of%20results/uga_r6_sor_en1.pdf)), the president had an approval rating of over 80%.

responses to each question consecutively. Candidates' names and party logos were included in the video to increase voter recognition of name and party affiliation. Ninety-one percent of all candidates in the 11 constituencies participated in the videos. Figure 1 shows a screenshot from one video.

We implemented the intervention 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 policy debates. The project was designed in consultation with the Electoral Commission of Uganda, the NRM Electoral Commission, and the main political parties.

The videos were shown publicly in a "village road show" in a randomly selected set of villages in the weeks leading up to the elections. More than 100 people on average attended each screening; in total across the 11 constituencies, approximately 12,000 people saw the videos.

Research teams mobilized voters to attend the screenings and incentivized a randomly selected subset of voters to attend and participate in surveys before and after the screening. Thus, our treatment consists of the opportunity to watch the candidate videos as a group and the answering of a set of follow-up questions. As such, the intervention combines the gathering of voters and the provision of information. We therefore cannot rule out that the gathering itself contributed to the effect—for example, because it allowed voters to deliberate or to coordinate on their vote choice. However, our results on updating suggest that the information provided played a critical role. This is consistent with the finding by Casey et al. (2019) that both information in the form of candidate videos

and deliberation were necessary to influence voter behavior in Sierra Leone.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The study took place in 11 parliamentary constituencies, spread across all four regions of the country (for details on constituency and village selection, see app. B). Sample constituencies look very similar to the average constituency in Uganda in terms of the vote share the ruling party received in both the parliamentary and the presidential elections in 2016 and with regard to vote margins. In our sample, the ruling party received 61% in the presidential elections, compared to 62% in the remainder of the country, and 51% compared to 49% in the rest of Uganda in elections for MPs. The vote margin is slightly lower in the presidential election (27 percentage points compared to 35 percentage points), while the reverse is true for MP elections (24 percentage points compared to 21 percentage points). None of the differences between our sample and the national sample are statistically significant at conventional levels (table B1).

The primary unit of randomization was the village. We selected villages to maximize overlap with polling-station catchment areas. Within each rural parish in the sampled constituencies, we randomly selected one polling station with high overlap between the polling station catchment area and the primary village it served. We define this primary village as the one contributing the highest number of voters to a polling station according to the updated voter register of the Electoral Commission of Uganda as of 2015.

We randomly assigned these villages to a treatment condition, which involved holding a video screening in the village,



Figure 1. Screenshot of candidate video. Color version available as an online enhancement.

or to a control condition. In each sampled village, we randomly selected 20 voters to participate in a survey, drawing them from the official voter register compiled by the Electoral Commission of Uganda. 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, a condition met by 98% of those at the listing stage.

## Data

We conducted a baseline and endline survey to collect our primary outcomes of interest, which are knowledge about candidates, candidate likability, and vote choice. In the baseline survey, conducted in January 2016, we collected data on respondent characteristics and prior beliefs 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 in the second half of January. Respondents were told that if they attended the screening and were willing to conduct a brief interview afterward, they would receive a small compensation in the form of cell phone credit (about USD 0.50), redeemable by presenting the invitation at the follow-up interview. Within 24 hours of the video screening, those in the treatment group also received a postscreening survey, collecting data on respondents' perception of candidate performance in the videos.

We contacted all respondents by phone on the evening of the election (February 18, 2016) to ask about their individual voting behavior and witnessed vote buying. Because of time constraints, we randomly selected one-half of respondents to complete an additional survey module that elicited their political knowledge and perceptions of the candidates' likability. Respondents who could not be reached on election day were tracked over the course of several days. We were able to reach 92% of enrolled respondents at endline. Attrition is balanced across treatment and control groups for the full sample. However, we find a slight imbalance in attrition for the restricted sample of NRM-leaning voters (app. E). To ensure this imbalance is not driving our findings, we show that our results are robust to using inverse probability weights (tables G10 and G15) and Manski bounds (tables G11, G12, and G16).

Our primary measures of interest are as follows:

*Heard of.* A binary variable indicating whether a voter can independently name a candidate (measured at baseline and endline).

*Knowledge.* An index consisting of the following indicators, each taking the value 1 if a respondent correctly answers a question about a candidate and 0 otherwise:

candidate's education level, religion, tribe, and occupation, and whether the candidate's policy preferences align with those of the respondent with respect to the priority sector for the constituency, district creation, and a ban on candidates convicted of engaging in vote buying (baseline only).

*Informed.* Voters' self-assessment of how informed they feel about a given candidate, measured on a four-point scale, where 1 indicates "not informed at all" and 4 indicates "very well informed" (baseline only).

*Priority.* A binary variable indicating whether a voter correctly identifies a candidate's sector priority for the constituency, information that is verified in the candidate interview (baseline and endline).

*Likability.* A 10-point scale where voters indicate how much they like a given candidate, where 0 = "don't like them at all," 5 = "neither like them nor dislike them," and 10 = "like them very much" (endline only).

*Vote choice.* A set of binary variables indicating whether or not a voter voted for an ruling party candidate, an opposition candidate, and an independent candidate (endline only).

We use the measures *heard of*, *knowledge*, and *informed* to assess our assumption that there exist information asymmetries between ruling party candidates and opposition candidates. We use the two knowledge measures collected at endline, *heard of* and *priority*, to examine the effect of our information treatment on voters' knowledge of candidates. We use *likability* to assess shifts in voters' assessment of candidates, and we examine treatment effects on the likelihood of voting for three types of candidates: ruling party, opposition, and independent (*vote choice*).

We took two measures to minimize social-response bias involved in reporting that a voter had turned out to vote at all (a question we asked before asking vote choice). First, we signaled that it may have been beyond the person's control if they were unable to vote and then asked, "While talking to people about today's elections, we find that some people were able to vote, while others were not. How about you—were you able to vote or not?" Second, we asked verification questions that were far more likely to be answered correctly by those who had voted. We took advantage of the fact that biometric machines for voter verification were used for the first time in the 2016 elections by asking voters which of their fingers was used to verify their identity.



In the analysis, we only consider people who correctly answered verification questions (79% of respondents who reported having voted) as having voted in actuality (robustness checks with responses taken at face value yield similar results; see table G14). Similarity with official election records gives us further confidence in our data: self-reported, verified turnout in our sample was 75%, compared to 70% in the official election records for the polling stations serving our sampled villages. The 5% difference can be explained by our removal of those voters who were registered but deceased or no longer living in a village from our sampling frame as well as those too sick or too old to 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 not suggest a desirable response. Social response bias would pose a particular threat to internal validity if it were affected by treatment. As we report in the section on alternative explanations, we do not find any evidence for differential response bias between the treatment and control groups.

Among our 4,357 respondents, the average respondent is 40 years old (SD 15 years) with six years of education (SD 4 years), 44% are female, 74% reported voting in the last election, 62% reported intending to vote for the ruling party candidate, and 17% of our sample did not have a coethnic candidate in the race (table E3). Summary statistics for the subset of the sample who intended to vote for the ruling party candidate at baseline are almost identical to those of the full sample. It is difficult to compare our sample to all registered voters because there is little demographic information available on registered voters. However, only a handful of registered voters were excluded from our sample, such that registered voters should be similar to the full sample of voters in our 11 constituencies, across all regions of the country.

## Estimation

For the candidate-specific outcomes, *knowledge* and *likability*, the relevant unit of analysis is the voter-candidate dyad. To examine how treatment effects vary by candidate party, we interact the treatment dummy with an indicator for the candidates' party affiliation:<sup>4</sup>

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 T_i \times \text{Opp}_j + \beta_3 T_i \times \text{Ind}_j + \beta_4 \text{Opp}_j + \beta_5 \text{Ind}_j + \sum_{n=1}^k (\nu_k Z_{ij}^k + \psi_k Z_{ij}^k T_i) + \delta_{ij} + u_{ij}, \quad (1)$$

4. For dyad-level analyses, dyads involving candidates who were not filmed are not included in the sample for the main specifications. Appendix G shows that results are robust to their inclusion.

where  $Y_{ij}$  refers to the outcome measure for voter  $i$  and candidate  $j$ ;  $T_i$  refers to the treatment assignment of voter  $i$ ,  $\text{Opp}_j$  and  $\text{Ind}_j$  are indicators for whether candidate  $j$  is a member of the opposition or an independent, respectively; and  $Z_1, Z_2, \dots, Z_k$  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), respondent's access to political information, whether a respondent considers the information provided in the video as salient, and the extent to which a candidate video is the preferred source of information of a respondent (with the final two questions asked before respondents were informed of the video screening). Here, we also include the following candidate and dyad-specific variables: whether the candidate is the incumbent, an index measuring the respondent's knowledge about the candidate at baseline, and indicators for whether the respondent voted for the candidate in the 2015 primaries, is of the same gender, and is of the same ethnicity as the candidate. All covariates are measured at baseline and standardized. The model includes constituency fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered by the unit of randomization, the village.

To examine treatment effects on vote choice, where the unit of analysis is the individual voter rather than the voter-candidate dyad, we estimate the following equation:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_i + \sum_{n=1}^k (\nu_k Z_i^k + \psi_k Z_i^k T_i) + \delta_i + u_i, \quad (2)$$

where  $Y_i$  refers to the outcome measure for voter  $i$ ,  $T_i$  refers to the treatment assignment of voter  $i$ , and  $Z_1, Z_2, \dots, Z_k$  is the vector of covariates noted above. The model includes constituency fixed effects, and standard errors are clustered by village. Since we are particularly interested in understanding the behavior of voters who state an intention at baseline to vote for the ruling party candidate, we subset the data to this sample in a number of analyses. Average treatment effects for the full sample were prespecified in the preanalysis plan, although the subset analyses were not. A discussion of deviations from the preanalysis plan is included in appendix H.

## RESULTS

### Voters know less about opposition candidates

We begin by providing evidence for our assumption that voters know less about opposition candidates than about ruling party candidates at baseline. We focus on our three variables of candidate-specific knowledge that were measured at baseline: *heard of*, *knowledge*, and *informed*. In table 1, we report the results from regressing knowledge about candidates on indicators for candidate partisanship. Odd columns show the

Table 1. Respondents Know Less about Opposition Candidates at Baseline

	Heard Of		Knowledge		Informed	
	All (1)	Lean NRM (2)	All (3)	Lean NRM (4)	All (5)	Lean NRM (6)
Opposition	-.208*** (.020)	-.293*** (.024)	-.222*** (.059)	-.551*** (.065)	-.213*** (.034)	-.548*** (.038)
Independent	-.001 (.014)	-.045** (.018)	-.189*** (.066)	-.533*** (.074)	-.264*** (.036)	-.567*** (.035)
Coethnic	-.020 (.023)	-.065*** (.022)	1.161*** (.151)	1.068*** (.251)	.060 (.095)	.062 (.095)
Incumbent	.159*** (.014)	.149*** (.017)	1.200*** (.056)	1.278*** (.063)	.420*** (.031)	.427*** (.031)
Constant	.922*** (.014)	1.013*** (.014)	1.900*** (.101)	2.251*** (.178)	2.516*** (.064)	2.768*** (.067)
<i>N</i>	9,384	4,830	7,831	4,107	7,831	4,107
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.501	.568	.711	.714	.666	.734

Note. The unit of observation is the voter-candidate dyad. Candidates are restricted to viable candidates, i.e., those obtaining at least 10% of the vote share. The dependent variables are whether a respondent has heard of a candidate (0–1), a knowledge index (0–7), and how informed a respondent feels about a candidate (measured on a four-point Likert scale). Columns 3–6 restrict the sample to candidates voters have heard about. Columns 2, 4, and 6 restrict the sample to respondents intending to vote for the ruling party (“lean NRM”). All models include respondent and village fixed effects. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by village.

\*  $p < .10$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

results for the full sample, even columns show the results for the subset of respondents who stated at baseline that they intended to vote for the ruling party candidate (henceforth referred to as “lean NRM”).

Since we are interested in assessing the extent to which knowledge about specific candidates varies by candidates’ partisanship, the unit of observation is the voter-candidate dyad. We regress the outcomes on indicators for whether the candidate is a member of the opposition or an independent. In the Ugandan context, independent candidates may be either truly independent or ruling party candidates who lost the party’s primary. To avoid a lopsided comparison between the ruling party and other candidates, the sample is restricted to *viable* candidates, defined as those with a vote share of 10% or more (as prespecified). Sample constituencies have between two and four viable candidates each, one of which is always the NRM flag-bearer (see table E4 for summary statistics of candidate characteristics by constituency). We include covariates for whether candidates are coethnic with the respondent and whether they are the incumbent candidate, as well as fixed effects for respondent ID and village. The estimating equation is included in appendix F.

Compared to ruling party candidates (omitted category), respondents are significantly less likely to have heard of op-

position candidates (21 percentage points, or 23%), to have lower baseline knowledge (by 0.22 points on the seven-point knowledge index, or 12%), and to feel informed about them (by 0.21 points on a four-point Likert scale, or 8%). These differences are larger among the subset of respondents who intended to vote for the ruling party, suggesting information asymmetries by candidate party are particularly acute among this sample. In descriptive terms, in the full sample, 95% of all respondents were able to name the NRM candidate in their constituency at baseline, compared to 58% of opposition candidates. Among candidates who were not incumbents, the gap was even larger—93% among NRM candidates and 44% among opposition candidates. We also find suggestive evidence for our second assumption, that voters’ priors about opposition candidates are negatively biased—a point we return to below.

### Voters learn more about opposition candidates

Having verified our assumption that information asymmetries exist in the amount of knowledge and the degree of uncertainty voters have about ruling party as compared to opposition candidates, we now examine whether our information treatment caused voters to learn about candidates and, in particular, about opposition candidates (hypothesis 1). We

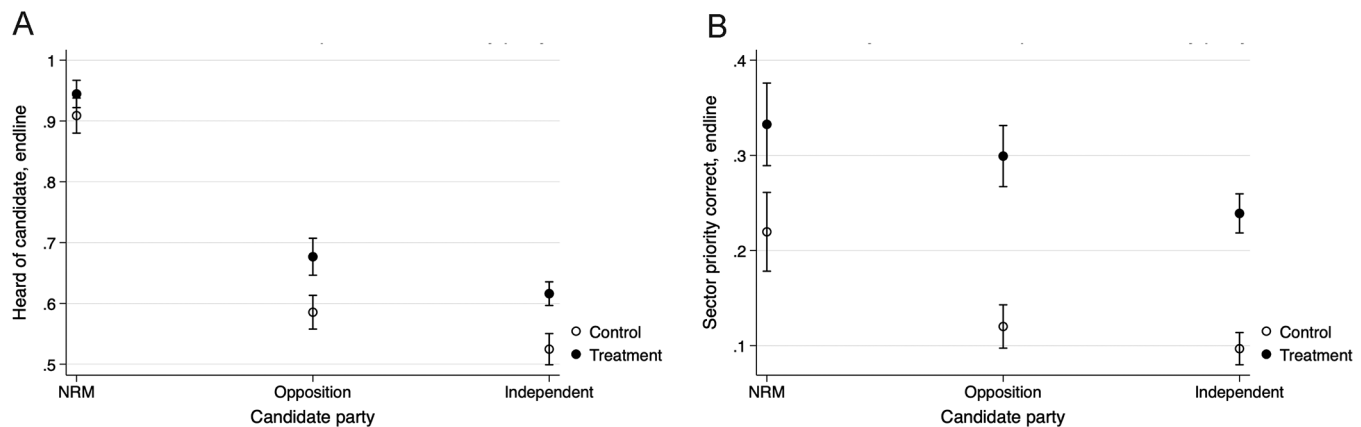


Figure 2. Candidate knowledge, predicted probabilities by treatment status, and candidate party. A, Heard of candidate, predicted values by party. B, Priority sector correct, predicted values by party. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals shown.

examine the two measures of candidate-specific knowledge taken during the endline survey: *heard of* and *priority*. We find that overall, the treatment increased the share of candidates the respondents could name by 8.1 percentage points (a 10% increase) and the share of candidates for whom respondents could name the priority sector by 14.6 percentage points (an 83% increase; see table F1). Figure 2 shows the predicted probabilities for candidate knowledge by candidate partisanship and treatment status of the respondent, estimated using equation (1). We find that both treatment effects were weakly significantly larger for opposition candidates ( $p = .066$  and  $p = .098$ , respectively; table F2, col. 3), suggesting that the videos allowed respondents to learn more about opposition than ruling party candidates. Among voters who intended to vote for the ruling party, we find a larger and strongly significant effect on being able to name opposition candidates, suggesting greater learning among those who were initially inclined to support the ruling party (table F2, col. 2).

### Voters update more positively about opposition candidates

We have assumed that voters not only know less about opposition candidates but also have more negatively biased priors about them. Exposure to balanced information should therefore lead to more positive updating about these candidates (hypothesis 2). To test this hypothesis, we assess the heterogeneous treatment effect of the video screenings on candidate likability by candidate party.

We find that voters in the control group indeed had less favorable assessments of opposition candidates, compared to ruling party candidates. Figure 3 shows the predicted probabilities of candidate likability by candidate party and treatment status of the respondent, estimated using equation (1). Voters' assessment of the likability of opposition candidates

was 3.5 on a 10-point scale in the control group, compared to 6.5 for ruling party candidates ( $p = .000$ ; table F3).

The intervention led voters to improve their assessment of candidates in general (by 10%; table F3, col. 1), but the positive treatment effect on likability is driven by opposition candidates. The difference is relatively large and weakly significant (coefficient = 0.566,  $p = .088$ ; table F3, col. 2). The treatment effect on likability of opposition candidates among those who had intended to vote for the ruling party is even larger and highly significant (coefficient = 0.944,  $p = .002$ ; table F3, col. 4), again suggesting greater updating among the group of voters who initially supported the ruling party. Exposure to the information thus resulted in a partial narrowing of the likability gap between ruling party and opposition candidates.

### Voters move toward opposition candidates and away from the ruling party

Next, we test the hypothesis that disproportionately large increases in knowledge about and likability of opposition

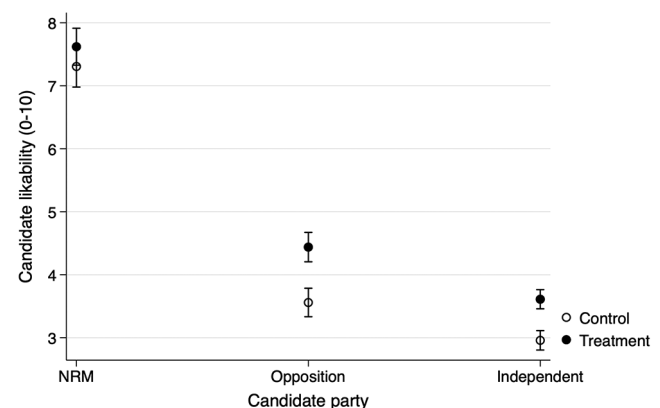


Figure 3. Candidate likability, predicted probabilities by treatment status, and candidate party. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals shown.

candidates result in voters being more likely to cast their vote for these candidates (hypothesis 3). Figure 4 shows panels for three outcomes: voting for a ruling party candidate (*top*), voting for an opposition candidate (*middle*), and voting for an independent candidate (*bottom*). Dependent variables are coded 1 if a voter cast a vote for a candidate of the respective party and 0 otherwise (regardless of turnout). We show results for two samples: the full sample and the ruling party–leaning sample.

As shown in the top panel of figure 4, we find that watching the videos had a negative effect on voting for ruling party candidates. This effect is observed in the full sample, where the effect is  $-3.4$  percentage points ( $p = .090$ ). Among those who intend to vote for the ruling party, the effect is even larger:  $-6.3$  percentage points ( $p = .009$ ). We also find that the treatment had a positive effect on voting for opposition candidates among voters who leaned toward the ruling party (middle panel). The magnitude of the effect is about  $1.9$  percentage points among the sample of those who intended to vote for the ruling party ( $p = .042$ ). In the full sample, the magnitude of the effect is  $1.4$  percentage points (insignificant). The treatment effect on voting for the opposition is significantly different from the treatment effect on voting for the ruling party in both subsamples (see table F5). We do not observe any treatment effects on voting for independent candidates. We do not detect treatment effects on vote choice using the official polling station results (see app. sec. F.7), which may be due to the fact that the mapping between polling stations and villages is not straightforward. Polling stations typically serve multiple villages, and voters from the same village are often assigned to different polling stations.

We also do not observe significant treatment effects on turnout (coefficient =  $-0.021$ ,  $p = .287$  for the full sample; coefficient =  $-0.037$ ,  $p = .110$  for NRM-leaning vot-

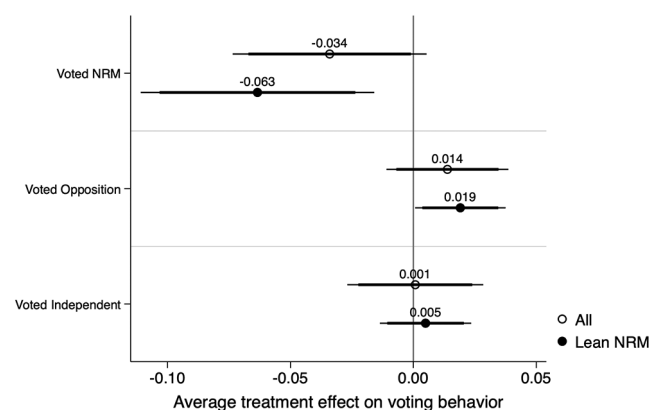


Figure 4. Treatment effect on vote choice. Ninety and ninety-five percent confidence intervals shown.

ers; table F8). Although insignificant, the negative coefficient on turnout may raise questions about the normative implications of the intervention. We do not view a reduction in turnout as necessarily a normatively bad outcome in this context. Existing research has shown that, in nondemocratic contexts, more educated voters deliberately opt out of electoral processes that they deem illegitimate (Croke et al. 2016); that high turnout may provide an impression of popular support, thereby extending the longevity of the regime (Isiksel and Pepinsky 2019); and that voters may turn out to vote not out of civic obligation but due to social norms arising from beliefs about clientelistic relationships between communities and the state (Rosenzweig 2019). While in general, political participation is seen as a democratic ideal (Lijphart 1997), it could be that the information we provided reduced social pressure to vote for the ruling party. Thus, even if the treatment had reduced turnout, the normative implications for democratization processes would be ambiguous.

### Who responds to information and why?

We investigate three factors that may moderate the effect of information on voter behavior: reduced uncertainty, party loyalty, and fear of repercussions. First, we examine whether those with the largest gaps in their knowledge about ruling party versus opposition candidates are particularly responsive to new information because it reduces their uncertainty about these candidates (moderator 1).

To test whether reduced uncertainty about the opposition is the mechanism underlying the shift away from the ruling party, we construct a variable measuring the baseline gap between knowledge about the ruling party candidate and the average knowledge about viable opposition candidates.<sup>5</sup> We then test whether ruling party–leaning voters with knowledge gaps above the median were more likely to switch away from the ruling party. As shown in column 1 in table 2, we find that this group of respondents was significantly less likely to vote for the ruling party; this group is almost entirely driving the effect. We conclude that reducing uncertainty about opposition candidates played a critical role.

Second, voters with weaker party allegiance, or loyalty, may be more likely to switch away from the ruling party when given more equal access to information (moderator 2). We use two measures to investigate whether ruling party voters who switch have weaker party attachments, in other

5. We construct the knowledge gap measure by subtracting a respondents' average knowledge about all viable opposition candidates from their knowledge about the ruling party candidate. As before, knowledge is measured on a 0–7 scale, where respondents get one point for each factual question they answer correctly about a given candidate.



Table 2. Determinants of Voting for the Ruling Party

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment	-.002 (.042)	-.045 (.031)	-.036 (.058)
Treat × high knowledge gap	-.140** (.065)		
High knowledge gap	.103** (.049)		
Treat × primary candidate dropped		-.117** (.051)	
Primary candidate dropped		.023 (.038)	
Treat × open other parties			-.046 (.088)
Open other parties			.039 (.056)
Constant	.574*** (.030)	.671*** (.021)	.631*** (.038)
N	1,410	2,029	2,433
R <sup>2</sup>	.060	.049	.046

Note. The dependent variable is whether a respondent reported voting for the ruling party. The sample is restricted to those intending to vote for the ruling party at baseline. The unit of observation is the voter. All models include constituency fixed effects and covariates. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by village.

\*  $p < .10$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

words, less party loyalty. The first measure is whether the voter's preferred candidate lost the primary election and is therefore not the ruling party flag-bearer in the general election (*primary candidate*). If a voter's preferred candidate lost the primary elections of the ruling party, we expect the voter will be more open to hearing and responding to information about alternative candidates, including members of the opposition.

The second measure of attachment is self-reported relative openness (*open other parties*). At baseline, we asked respondents how close they feel to each major party, on a scale of 1–7 (weak to strong). We operationalize relative openness as the difference between the score of closeness to the ruling party minus the highest score of closeness to any other party. Respondents with a difference below the median are coded as being relatively open to voting for other parties. As shown in columns 2 and 3 of table 2, respondents with lower values of either measure of party attachment are more likely to switch away from the ruling party in response to the treatment (i.e.,

they are less likely to vote for the ruling party). The heterogeneous treatment effect is only significant for the first measure of lower party allegiance, the dropping out of one's preferred candidate.

Third, we examine whether fear of repercussions for voting for the opposition may have muted the treatment effect on voting behavior (moderator 3). While it can be difficult for parties and their brokers to monitor the voting behavior of individual voters, vote shares by polling station are readily available. To investigate whether such fear of repercussions may have muted the effect of updating on vote choice in our setting, we test for heterogeneous treatment effects among respondents who indicated at baseline that they believed politicians or parties monitored how different localities had voted and would—if elected—allocate fewer resources to areas that did not support them. Forty-nine percent of our sample answered this question affirmatively.<sup>6</sup>

As shown in table 3, we do not find significantly different treatment effects on voting for the ruling party among people who felt monitored (col. 1). However, this group of voters is significantly less likely to respond to the intervention by voting for the opposition (col. 2). The effect of feeling monitored more than offsets the treatment effect. Voters who do not feel monitored are on average 3.8 percentage points more likely to vote for the opposition because of the intervention. Voters who feel monitored are more likely to respond to the intervention by abstaining from the election, but this effect is not significant (col. 3).

### Assessing alternative explanations

We test four alternative explanations for switching away from the ruling party and toward the opposition, and we find no evidence supporting 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 a given candidate is above or below the median in terms of popularly assessed performance, derived from a question asking respondents to rank candidates' performance in the video. In fact, 10 of the 11 ruling party candidates scored above the median in terms of performance in the video, with seven deemed the best performer by the plurality of respondents (table F9). This suggests relatively low perceptions of candidate quality did not drive voters away from ruling party candidates.

6. Fear of being monitored is orthogonal to demographic variables and measures of partisanship (app. E). The only significant correlates are doubt of the secrecy of the ballot and naming candidate videos as a preferred hypothetical news source (both positive). Both variables are included in our vector of covariates, thereby allaying concerns about omitted-variable bias.

Table 3. Voting Behavior by Feeling Monitored

	Voted NRM (1)	Voted Opposition (2)	Turnout (3)
Treatment	-.013 (.049)	.038* (.020)	.007 (.043)
Treatment × feeling monitored	-.033 (.063)	-.044* (.027)	-.041 (.055)
Feeling monitored	-.005 (.043)	.008 (.018)	-.007 (.039)
Constant	.640*** (.032)	.042*** (.012)	.750*** (.028)
Observations	1,095	1,085	1,095
R <sup>2</sup>	.045	.146	.049

Note. The dependent variables are whether a respondent (1) reported voting for the ruling party or (2) the opposition party and (3) turned out (verified self-report). The sample is restricted to those intending to vote for the ruling party at baseline. The unit of observation is the voter. All models include constituency fixed effects and covariates. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by village.

\*  $p < .10$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

A second possibility is that voters were afraid to report having voted for candidates outside the ruling party, especially opposition candidates. Respondents may be wary that enumerators were sent by the government—whether the ruling party, the president, or a related institution—and may therefore be reluctant to report supporting the opposition. To assess this possibility, we reestimated our main analyses, differentiating between voters who did versus did not report a belief that the government sent the enumerators conducting the study (measured at endline). If response bias was driving our results, we would expect the treatment to have a weaker effect on respondents who believed that the government sent the research team. In fact, we find the opposite: albeit insignificant, treatment respondents who thought the government sent our enumerators were, if anything, more likely to report switching away from the ruling party (table F10).

Third, candidates' campaigns may have responded strategically to the intervention, altering 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 such candidate behaviors as the number of visits or likelihood of distributing patronage goods (e.g., soap, sugar, or money) were systematically affected by the treatment (app. sec. F.6).

Fourth, the mere existence of the videos, which showcased all candidates, may have signaled to voters that the “rules of the game” had changed (Ahlquist et al. 2018) and that it was “okay” to vote for other candidates. This is an intriguing possibility, and we cannot completely rule it out, but we do not find that those in the treatment groups were more likely to assess the elections as free and fair (app. sec. F.6). Thus, while watching 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.

## CONCLUSION

Much of the recent scholarly literature on dominant party regimes has focused on elite-level strategies and behavior, in particular repression and the use of authoritarian institutions to facilitate power sharing among the elite (Gandhi 2008). In this article, we have focused on the role of information—operationalized as public screenings of candidate interviews—in shaping mass support and how reducing information asymmetries between the ruling party and opposition candidates affects voter behavior.

We find that in Uganda, where a dominant party has governed for over 30 years, voters are significantly less informed about and hold more negative views of opposition as compared to ruling party candidates. When voters are provided with balanced and credible information about both ruling party and opposition candidates via filmed candidate interviews, they learn more and update more positively about opposition candidates relative to ruling party candidates. Among voters who had intended to vote for the ruling party, those who receive information are also more likely to vote for opposition candidates than those who did not receive information.

We identify two factors that moderate the effect of the video screenings on vote choice among voters leaning toward the ruling party: party loyalty and fear of distributional repercussions. Voters whose preferred candidate had lost the party primaries, and, as a result, may have felt less wed to the ruling party, were more likely to respond to the information by switching away from the ruling party. Further, voters who reported at baseline that politicians were monitoring vote shares and allocating resources away from areas that did not support them were significantly less likely to switch to the opposition.

These results reflect the electoral implications of information asymmetries between ruling party and opposition candidates in dominant party regimes. Low levels of information about opposition candidates relative to ruling party candidates can help sustain mass support for ruling parties and can be an impediment to the competitiveness of elections. At the same

time, our findings suggest that even minor improvements to the information environment can meaningfully affect voter behavior. Our relatively modest, one-off intervention that marginally reduced information asymmetries had a substantive effect on voting behavior, resulting in increased electoral support for opposition candidates. These results, in conjunction with related studies by Bowles and Larreguy (2019) and Casey et al. (2019), suggest that interventions providing information about all candidates, rather than the incumbent alone, may be particularly useful in strengthening competition by providing information about relative candidate quality and allowing voters to consider—and support—high-quality but lesser known candidates.

Recently, similar efforts have been undertaken to introduce information of this type on a wider scale. For example, the social media platform Facebook introduced a new tool called “Candidate info” that includes candidates’ answers to questions very similar to those asked of candidates in the study presented here, including, “What is your top policy priority, and why are you the right person to work on it?” and “What makes you most qualified to represent your district?” These types of interventions may be particularly effective in dominant party regimes where the playing field is skewed in favor of the ruling party.

While strengthening the information environment appears to be a boon for the competitiveness of elections, it is also easy to see why dominant parties may resist such efforts. In this study, there was backing by ruling party and government officials to provide voters with information about all candidates and even discussions among government officials and members of civil society about how to make parliamentary candidate debates more commonplace in future elections. Indeed, 11 of the 18 African countries that held debates among candidates for head of state since 1990 were considered anocracies or autocracies at the time of the first debate (app. A). While this speaks to the willingness of at least some officials to support more transparent electoral processes, there are surely other dominant party contexts where governments would be less willing or actively resistant to efforts aimed at strengthening the information environment. As such, the general equilibrium effects of information interventions such as candidate debates may be regime specific and difficult to predict. The existence of information asymmetries, whether inadvertent or as an intentional strategy, can sustain mass support for ruling parties, and thus these parties may have incentives to maintain or exacerbate asymmetries.

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