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

Melina R. Platas[*] and Pia Raffler[†]

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Abstract

Do party cues 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 turnout and vote choice in parliamentary elections, while varying the extent to which candidate party affiliation constitutes a meaningful voting heuristic. We employ a factorial design, randomly assigning voters' exposure to information in the context of primary elections, where candidates' party affiliation is held constant, or the general election, where party cues are a meaningful heuristic. Using a panel survey of 8,000 registered voters, we find that voters updated and altered their vote choice in response to information about candidate quality at similar rates across the two types of elections, crossing party lines in the general election. Even in a setting where partisanship is a strong predictor of vote choice, party cues were not a binding constraint on voter behavior.

1 Introduction

There is a longstanding debate on the relative importance of candidate party affiliation in shaping voting behavior (Stokes, 1962; Cox, 1986). While much work on party loyalty and partisan voting has focused on industrialized democracies, there are theoretical reasons to expect that candidates' party affiliation will be particularly important for voting decisions in developing countries. First, in these contexts, reliable information about candidate quality can be hard to come by, particularly for the many voters with relatively low levels of education, likely increasing voters' reliance on *heuristics* like party cues (Popkin, 1994; Kam, 2005; Casey, 2015; Conroy-Krutz, Moehler and Aguilar, 2016). Second, candidates' membership in the ruling party is often conflated with access to state resources; a ruling party candidate is expected to be able to engage in patronage and possibly even repression (Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Bratton, Bhavnani and Chen, 2012). Voters in such contexts are thus incentivized to consider party cues over candidates' individual attributes. But do these party cues prevent voters from updating when provided with new information about the quality of candidates? The answer to this question is important for assessing models of democratic accountability as well as civic education initiatives that are common in developing countries.

While the presence of party cues can be manipulated in the lab (Kam, 2005; Conroy-Krutz, Moehler and Aguilar, 2016), it is impossible to do so in a real world setting. In this study, we approximate real-world manipulation of party cues by implementing an intervention that provides information about candidate quality in two electoral contexts where party cues are more or less meaningful: intra-party primaries, where party affiliation is held constant, and inter-party general elections, where candidates' party affiliation varies across candidates and thus serves as a meaningful heuristic. We examine the effects of information on voter behavior across electoral contexts with a field experiment in 480 polling stations in Uganda's parliamentary elections. We employ a factorial design, randomly selecting 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 primary elections or general elections. 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 salience of party cues while holding constant many observable and unobservable covariates at the voter and constituency level.

We define candidate quality as having two components: first, alignment between a voter's and candidate's policy preferences, and second, competence. 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, we asked candidates to answer a set of questions about their policy positions, qualifications, and plans for office, in order to help assess voters the extent to which candidates' share their policy preferences and their competence. The intervention, which involved filming nearly 100 parliamentary candidates, was implemented in collaboration with the secretariats of Uganda's main political parties, the electoral commission, and civil society organizations.

To interrogate the effect of information on voting behavior, 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 the second wave taking place immediately after the election – allows us measure the extent to which voters update about and retain the provided information, and change their voting behavior in response. In the treatment group, we conducted an additional wave of the survey after the video 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 candidates' performance in the debate videos and surveys with all of the filmed candidates.

We find that information about candidate quality induced voters to *update their beliefs* about candidates and *alter their vote choice*, making voters more likely to switch away from their in-

tended vote choice. Voters responded similarly to information regardless of whether or not candidates' party affiliation provided a meaningful voting heuristic – that is, we observe similar effects on voting behavior across the two elections. However, the types of candidates whom voters switched to and from differed across election types. In the primary election, but not the general election, voters switched to the candidate ranked by experts as the best performer in the video. In the general election, voters switched 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.

Our results suggest that party cues did not serve as a barrier to updating in response to new information. Partisanship shaped voter behavior, but also had limits: party cues did not prevent voters from updating when faced with new information about candidate quality. In fact, the effect of information on turnout and vote choice was similar across contexts where candidate party affiliation was relevant for selecting among candidates and where it was not.[1] These results give us reason to believe that even outside contexts where party cues are typically studied, party cues matter but are not binding constraints on vote choice. Our study shows that Ugandan voters are sophisticated: When provided with credible information about candidate quality – in terms of both aligned policy preferences and competence – they absorb and remember the new information, and adjust their vote choice accordingly.

We build on the existing literature in several ways. First, we add to the research on information and voting behavior. Early work in this area often yielded mixed and often null results (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2012; Banerjee et al., 2011; Chong et al., 2014), while more recent research has

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[1]One 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 variation in party cues across candidates is one of the defining differences between intra- and inter-party competitions, it is not the only one. However, in the Ugandan context, these two types of elections are held at a similar scale, and the ruling party primaries involve about two-thirds of the national electorate.

begun to reveal the *conditions* under which information matters. For example, Adida et al. (2017) find that information about legislators' performance in the context of Benin only affected voter behavior when information was widely disseminated and accompanied by a civics message, pointing to the importance of information salience and voter coordination. We build on this literature by examining whether party cues impede updating when voters are given information about candidate quality.

Our information treatment differs from most others in the literature in that it provides information on *all* candidates, rather than the incumbent alone. Earlier research typically provided 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, 2018) or audit reports (Ferraz and Finan, 2008; 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). We do so in acknowledgement of the fact that voters often have the greatest uncertainty about challengers to the incumbent, since they have not yet held the respective office yet. Our findings are in line with recent work suggesting that information about all candidates may be effective in shaping vote choice (Casey, Glennerster and Bidwell, 2016; Bowles and Larreguy, 2018).

Second, we build on lab studies in the U.S. (Rahn, 1993) to explore how information about the quality of individual candidates competes with a common heuristic, party cues. While we cannot vary the presence of party cues in a real world setting, we can randomly vary whether we study the effect of information on voting behavior in the context of an intra- or inter-party election, where the presence or absence of party cues that differ across candidates. In doing so, we 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; Gottlieb and Larreguy, 2016), candidate party affiliation may be one of the primary factors in vote choice.

Finally, we add to a 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 – even though they are of particular importance for candidate selection in dominant party regimes, which abound on the continent (Schedler, 2015). Existing research outside of the U.S. and Western Europe has examined questions focused on the elite level, such as 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   Partisanship, information and voting behavior

Scholars have long recognized the role of heuristics in decision-making (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974), and the role of party affiliation as particularly important cue in the context of voting decisions (Downs, 1957; Rahn, 1993). Making voting decisions among a set of candidates is taxing, both economically (with respect to time) and cognitively. Given this, voters often use heuristics to help them process information and reduce uncertainty (Popkin, 1994). Such cues can be especially important in low-information environments and among voters who are less politically aware (Kam, 2005). However, there are reasons to believe these cues may prevent voters from updating when presented with new information about candidate quality, and thus prevent information from shaping voter behavior.

The process by which information affects voting behavior involves two steps, both of which can be affected by party cues. First, information leads to updating beliefs about candidate quality. A central tenet of Bayesian theory is that, all else equal, information results in more 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 (Arias et al., 2018; Bhandari, Larreguy and Marshall, 2018). Thus, updating is more likely when there is uncertainty around priors. The extent of updating should also be greater when information is new, relevant, and credible.

In step two, updated priors result in behavior change, turnout or vote choice. Behavior change is more likely when there is greater updating and when voters place relatively more weight on the dimension of information about which they update. Information may fail to affect behavior if it does not lead voters to update, or it is not meaningful to voters' assessment of candidates.

Party cues – candidates' party affiliation – can affect both steps of this process. First, partisan goggles may lead voters to discount good news (information that is positive relative to their priors) they learn about candidates from rival political parties, such that party cues impede *updating* about candidate quality. Second, even in the event that partisan voters update, crossing party lines may be quite costly, such that party cues serve as a barrier to *acting* on new information. Even if voters update negatively about the quality of their preferred candidate relative to the alternatives, the perceived cost of switching to a candidate representing a different party may outweigh the perceived quality advantage of the new candidate.

There are several reasons crossing party lines may be costly to voters. First, voters may feel loyal to a particular party or its ideology (Stokes, 1962), such that the voter derives disutility from voting for a different party's candidate. Second, in the context of a dominant party regime, candidates' party affiliation signals her ability to access state resources. Voters may select candidates according to their party affiliation so as to reap patronage rewards or avoid punishment (Magaloni, 2006; Schedler, 2015; Tripp, 2010). 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.[2] If the cost of crossing party lines is perceived as prohibitively high, a voter updating negatively about the relative quality of their preferred candidate may stay home rather than vote for another party's candidate.

For these reasons, we expect that where party cues are present – where candidate party affiliation is a meaningful heuristic for voting decisions, whether for patronage or ideological reasons – the effect of information on voter behavior will be dampened relative to a context where candidate party affiliation is held constant. While it is impossible to manipulate the presence of party cues in the real world, we can take advantage of the fact that there are two types of electoral contexts that vary on the extent to which candidate party affiliation is a meaningful heuristic: inter-party general elections and in intra-party primary elections.

We further expect that where voters update negatively about their intended vote choice, they will be more likely to stay home on election day in inter-party contexts, where voting for the better performing candidate would entail crossing party lines, than in intra-party contexts, where they can switch their vote to another co-partisan candidate. These hypotheses are outlined below:[3]

H1 The treatment effect on vote switching (deviating from the intended vote choice) will be greater in inter- than intra-party settings.

H2 Bad news about the intended vote choice will depress turnout to a greater extent in inter- than intra-party settings.

However, partisanship can have a contravening effect. Because we are working in the context of a dominant party regime, uncertainty is likely to be especially high about opposition party candidates. In dominant party settings, opposition candidates often lack governing experience, access

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[2]See for example, this report on the website of the ruling party.
[3]Hypotheses 1 and 2 were prespecified, hypotheses 3a and b were not.

to media platforms, and campaign resources, and they are vulnerable to intimidation. The informational playing field is thus slanted in favor of ruling party candidates (Levitsky and Way, 2012). In such contexts, access to credible and balanced information about all candidates, regardless of party affiliation, should be particularly effective in reducing uncertainty about opposition candidates and correcting biased information about them. Thus, we might expect that these are the candidates about whom voters should update relatively more. This leads to a competing set of hypotheses about the effect of information on voter behavior:

H3a If the informational playing field is sufficiently skewed in favor of the ruling party so that voters have loose and negatively biased priors about opposition candidates, then the provision of credible and salient information about all candidates should lead to more positive updating about opposition candidates.

H3b If the cost of crossing party lines is not perceived as prohibitive due to fear of loss of patronage or fear of repercussions, such updating should result in vote switching in favor of the opposition.

We test these hypotheses in the context of a dominant party regime, Uganda. This case is ideal from a design perspective because primary voters are representative of general election voters to a greater extent than elsewhere (70% of the national electorate are registered to vote in NRM primaries), and thus we can meaningfully compare the treatment effects of information interventions on voter behavior across these two election types. We also consider a dominant party context to be a relatively hard test for information to shape voter behavior. There are relatively high costs to crossing party lines, and thus treatment effects we observe on vote choice in an inter-party setting could be considered a lower bound for other more competitive contexts. At the same time, however, information asymmetries about candidates may be higher in a dominant party setting, and thus in these places there may be greater scope for updating.

3   Parties and partisanship in Uganda

Uganda has been governed by the current president, Yoweri Museveni, and his party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), since 1986. 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, for which each of the 249 constituencies elects a representative in a first-past-the-post vote[4]: 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 our study took place. DP and UPC are long-standing parties that have existed since independence, while FDC was formed in the early 2000s.

Seven in ten Ugandans say they feel close to a political party[5] – much higher rates of partisanship than in the United States, where more than 40% of voters report being independent. Nevertheless, the two largest parties, the NRM and its 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.

Despite reporting strong partisan ties, voters tend to be poorly informed about candidates, both in the ruling party's primary elections and 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, or ethnicity. Members of the ruling party are poorly informed about opposition candidates relative to ruling party candidates. In our baseline survey of 4,357 registered voters, respondents felt significantly better informed about NRM candidates than their challengers in the lead-up to the general elections. Registered voters were ten percent-

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[4]In addition to these area MPs, each of the 120 districts, in which constituencies are nested, elects on woman MP. The focus of this paper is exclusively on area MPs.

[5]Data from Afrobarometer, Round 7.

age points more likely to have heard of NRM candidates at baseline and felt significantly more informed about them.

Ruling party candidates at all levels have electoral advantages over their challengers. 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."[6] Radio stations, which represent most Ugandans' primary news sources, are frequently owned by ruling party politicians and in campaign periods, opposition candidates at both the parliamentary and presidential level have reportedly been blocked from participating on radio shows through which they could reach more voters.[7]

Organizations such as Human Rights Watch have also reported more pernicious ways to tip the playing field against opposition candidates, including violence toward and physical intimidation of voters and candidates.[8] About half of respondents in our sample said that they believed politicians monitor how people vote in a given area, doling out rewards and punishments accordingly. In most cases, voters believed rewards and punishments were determined by their constituency's parliamentary representative, though a sizable minority also mentioned the president or the ruling party as culprits.

Among Uganda's registered voters, 70% are members of the NRM and thus eligible to participate in the ruling party's primary elections. Turnout for NRM primaries is nearly as high as in the general elections. In 2010, the NRM electoral commission reported 6.2 million primary participants, and the following year's general elections had 8.2 million votes cast. 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.

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[6]Qualitative interview with an NRM councilor, CII1.

[7]See coverage on ACME, Uganda Radio Network, Foreign Affairs, and HRW.

[8]Some 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).

4 "Meet the Candidates" videos

Our information intervention was comprised of the production and screening of a video recording in which parliamentary candidates 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 Casey, Glennerster and Bidwell (2016) in Sierra Leone. We selected questions that we expect to provide voters with information about candidate quality along two primary dimensions: *policy alignment* and *competence*. To help voters assess the extent to which candidates shared their own policy preferences, 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.[9] To help voters assess candidates' competence, we asked candidates about their qualifications and past achievements.

To create the videos, we invited all parliamentary candidates in a set of eleven constituencies into a professional TV studio in Kampala several weeks prior to the election. Their responses to the standardized questions were edited to produce one video per constituency. For both primaries and general elections, trained moderators facilitated the interviews to ensure uniformity across constituencies. Moderators also ensured that each candidate answered every question and received equal time. Interviews were recorded in local languages and the recordings were professionally edited to resemble a debate and facilitate comparisons across candidates. After brief introductions, all recorded candidates for a given constituency answered one question, then all candidates answered the next and so on. Candidates' names and party logos were included in the video to increase name and party affiliation recognition. In the primary elections, 80% of candidates participated, while in the general elections, 91% participated. Figure 1 shows a screenshot from one video seen by voters.

The intervention was implemented in collaboration with a consortium of partners, including

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[9]The precise wording of the questions asked of candidates can be found in the SI, Section 7.

Figure 1: Screenshot of debate video

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.

The videos were screened publicly in a "village road show" in a randomly selected set of polling stations in the weeks leading up to the primary and general elections. On average, over 100 people attended each screening; in total, the videos were seen by approximately 24,000 people across the eleven constituencies.[10] Voters were mobilized to attend the screenings, and a randomly selected subset of 20 voters per village 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.

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[10]Estimate based on attendance observations of 144 screenings, conducted by research staff.

5 Research design

The field experiment took place in 11 of Uganda's 249 directly elected parliamentary constituencies, spread across 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 village it served. We define this main village as the one contributing the highest number of voters to a polling station according to the updated voter register of the National Electoral Commission (2015).

We used a factorial design, with the treatment and control assignment in the general and the primary elections, respectively, serving as 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 - treatment, and iv) general elections - control. Each village was only included in the study only once. To minimize spillover, only one village per parish was included per election. 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.

	Treatment	Control
Primaries	120 villages	120 villages
General elections	120 villages	120 villages

Table 1: Factorial design

In each sampled village, we randomly selected 20 voters to participate in the survey. For the

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[11]Considering 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. Further details of constituency and polling station selection can be found in the SI, Section 1.

NRM primaries, these were drawn from the list of registered party members, and, in the general election, they were drawn from the official vote 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. Only 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. For those in the treatment group, we conducted a second survey within 24 hours of the debate screening, collecting data on posterior beliefs about candidates. Finally, all respondents sample were called on the evening of the election 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 several days.

We consider two primary dependent variables: turnout and switching.[12] *Turnout* is a binary measure that takes a value of one if the respondent reports that they voted on election day *and* can

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[12]We also pre-specified political knowledge and vote choice as outcome variables. Results on political knowledge are reported in the paper and vote choice is addressed in a companion paper.

answer two verification questions about the election process correctly during the exit poll, zero otherwise. *Switch* is a binary variable for each voter, which takes the value one if a voter voted for a different candidate than reportedly intended at baseline or did not vote at all, and zero otherwise. For the analysis of turnout, we define the type 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 expert 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.[13]

In the election day followups, to minimize social response bias, we signaled that it may have been beyond the person's control if they were unable to vote, and we asked "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?" Then, recognizing the common potential for overreporting turnout, we asked verification questions that were far more likely to be answered correctly by those who voted. In the primaries, the first verification question was whether the vote choice was handwritten or pre-printed on the ballot paper (it was pre-printed and 93% of respondents who said they had voted answered this question correctly). The second verification question was whether the candidate they voted for was wearing a suit or a t-shirt in the ballot's photo (a trick question, as no photos were printed on the ballot, and 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, and so we took advantage of this fact to ask 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 correct answered verification questions (85% of

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[13]A more complex coding of news type is described in the SI, Section 8, 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*.

primary respondents and 79% of general election respondents who reported having voted) as having in fact voted. Robustness checks with responses taken at face-value are included in the online supplemental information (SI, Section 4) 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% in the official election records for our polling stations. 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 old to survey. (We have low concern 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.) 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 (SI, Section 3).

Among our 8,161 respondents across the two election rounds, the average respondent is 40 years old (SD 14 years) with six years of education (SD 4 years); 42% are 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 reported intending to vote NRM; and 22% of our sample did 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 there is little demographic information (such as education level) available on registered voters. However, we note that only a handful of registered voters was excluded from the sample, such that registered voters should be similar on to the full sample voters in our eleven constituencies across all four regions of the country.

Estimation

We estimate the following equation:

$$E(Y_i) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_i + \sum_{j=1}^{k}(\nu_k Z_i^k + \psi_k Z_i^k T_i) \tag{1}$$

where Y_i refers to the outcome measure for voter i, T_i to the treatment assignment of voter i, and where $Z_1, Z_2, ..., Z_k$ 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 (with the final two questions asked before respondents were informed of the debate). All covariates are measured at baseline and standardized.

6 Updating across elections

There is a large, positive effect of video screenings on political knowledge, and especially knowledge about candidates, as measured through the endline survey (Figure 2). Political knowledge is measured as answering a set of factual questions about the roles and responsibilities of MPs (*MP Roles*), the share of candidates 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. Thus, while updating about candidates occurred across the two elections, there was greater updating in response to information in the general election.[14] 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 re-

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[14]Differences are large and significant for the knowledge index and the priority sector, as shown in the SI, Section 4.1.

call. In other words, we see movement on the intensive margin of knowledge about opposition candidates, but not the extensive margin.
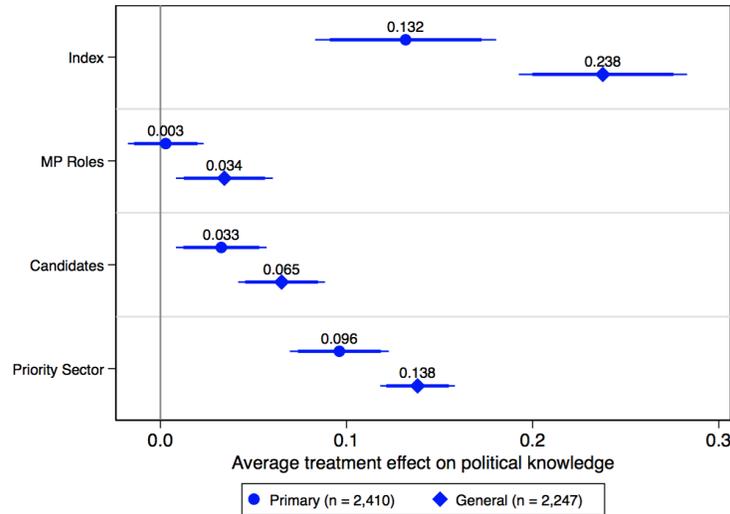

Figure 2: Treatment effect on political knowledge, by election

In the general election we also 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, asking whether and how watching the video had altered their views about specific candidates. NRM-leaning respondents updated more positively about the quality of opposition than ruling party candidates, measured in terms of eloquence, qualifications, and understanding of policy issues. This suggests that ruling party voters learned more about opposition candidates' qualifications and that they were updating positively about these dimensions of candidate quality. We also find that they update more positively about NRM and independent than opposition candidates on "soft" issues, such as trustworthiness and care for voters.

Table 2: Self-reported updating among NRM-leaning voters

	Candidate qualifications		
	Grasp of policy (1)	Eloquence (2)	Qualifications (3)
Opposition candidate	0.183***	0.127**	0.146**
	(0.055)	(0.057)	(0.058)
Constant	2.445***	2.375***	2.305***
	(0.029)	(0.027)	(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. *** $p<0.01$; ** $p<0.05$; * $p<0.10$.

Self-reported updating translated into changed attitudes towards candidates representing the opposite side two to six weeks later. On election day (endline), NRM-leaning voters viewed opposition candidates as more likable than did respondents in the control group (0.9 points on a ten-point scale, shown in Figure 3). Similarly, opposition-leaning voters viewed NRM candidates, but not opposition candidates, more favorably as a result of the treatment (by 0.8 points).[15] Thus, the intervention had a moderating effect. These findings are consistent with Conroy-Krutz and Moehler (2015), who find that Ghanaian voters moderated their political positions when exposed to news coverage sympathetic to the opposing party. As we show below, this boost in likability not only persists for weeks, but also translates into changes in voting behavior.

To understand why respondents updated more and more positively about opposition candidates in the general election, we compare uncertainty at baseline between ruling party and opposition candidates. In line with our expectations, voters are considerably more likely to have heard of ruling party candidates and have greater information about them. The probability that an average general election voter can name an opposition candidate at baseline is 14.3 percentage points

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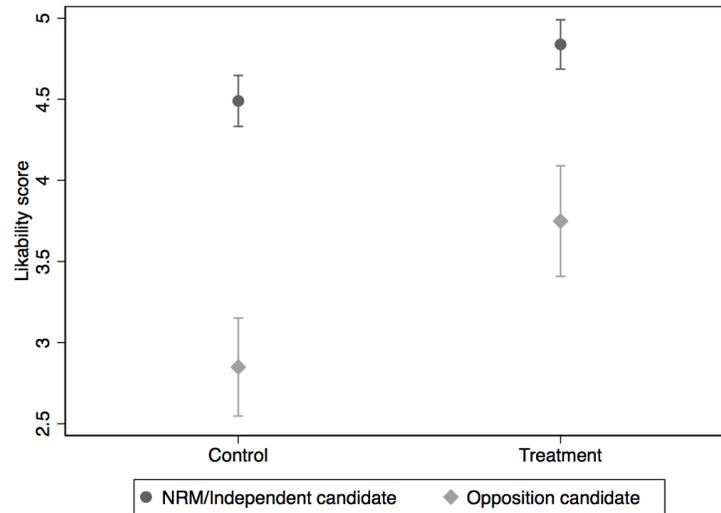
[15]Tabular results in the Appendix.

Figure 3: Treatment effects on candidate likability among those intending to vote for ruling party, by party

lower than for a ruling party candidate, and the gulf widens if we consider only non-incumbent candidates – less than 60% of voters have heard of the non-incumbent opposition candidates in their constituency, while 92% have heard of the non-incumbent NRM candidate. Even when voters have heard of the opposition candidate, they can answer 0.87 fewer factual questions about opposition than ruling party candidates. NRM leaning voters are particularly poorly informed about opposition candidates. Together, these findings confirm our expectation that knowledge of opposition candidates in this context is particularly low.

Table 3: Uncertainty

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	GE		GE-NRM		GE-No incumbents	
	Heard of	**Cand know**	**Heard of**	**Cand know**	**Heard of**	**Cand know**
Opposition candidate	-0.143***	-0.046	-0.220***	-0.441***	-0.342***	-0.867***
	(0.021)	(0.103)	(0.025)	(0.131)	(0.026)	(0.140)
Constant	0.938***	2.661***	0.980***	2.990***	0.926***	2.441***
	(0.008)	(0.048)	(0.007)	(0.053)	(0.008)	(0.052)
N	9,905	9,905	5,176	5,176	6,407	6,407
R^2	0.156	0.156	0.256	0.167	0.197	0.162

Notes. The unit of observation voter-candidate dyad. Candidates are restricted to viable candidates, i.e. those obtaining at least 10% of the vote share. Heard of indicates whether a respondent listed a candidate at baseline, upon being asked to name all candidates in the race. *Candidate knowledge* is a composite index of seven factual questions about a candidate, asked at baseline, where each correct answer translates into a point. Knowledge is set to 0 if a candidate is unknown. Columns (3)-(4) restrict the sample to those intending to vote NRM. Columns (5)-(6) exclude incumbents. All models include constituency fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered by polling station. *** $p<0.01$; ** $p<0.05$; * $p<0.10$

7 Voting behavior across elections

Having shown that voters update in response to information across both election types, we now turn to the treatment effects on the two main behavioral outcomes of interest: turnout and vote switching. We expected that the treatment effect on turnout would be conditional on receiving bad news about the respondent's intended candidate, and 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. Meanwhile, those in our treatment group were about four 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 more so 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.

We find significant net reductions in turnout among voters who received bad news about their intended vote choice.[16] 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 election 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.

Table 4: Treatment effect of bad news about intended vote choice on turnout

	(1) Pooled	(2) GE	(3) GE-NRM	(4) Primary
Treatment	-0.008	0.017	0.008	-0.024
	(0.023)	(0.029)	(0.032)	(0.037)
Treat x Bad news intended	-0.038	-0.062*	-0.071*	-0.024
	(0.028)	(0.033)	(0.036)	(0.049)
Bad news intended	-0.008	0.030	0.039	-0.020
	(0.019)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.044)
Constant	0.781***	0.744***	0.751***	0.785***
	(0.018)	(0.021)	(0.023)	(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 reduced between 4.5 and 6.3 percentage points among respondents who received bad news (bottom panel , Table 4). 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 held across election rounds.

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[16]A priori, the net effect of the intervention on turnout is ambiguous. On the one hand, the video mentions the importance of voting and may thus make voters more likely to turn out. On the other hand, receiving negative news relative to one's priors about one's intended vote choice should depress turnout. To differentiate between these two effects, we look at heterogeneous effects by whether respondents received negative news about their intended vote choice.

As to 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 5 shows the main results for vote switching across the four samples, where the treatment increases vote switching by three to four 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 during the posterior survey. The treatment had no such effect in the general elections. While we cannot say definitively why this is the case, we do find that there is a greater discrepancy between popular (polling respondent assessments) and expert assessments of the candidates in the general election as compared to the primary election, suggesting that there was less consensus, or that the latter measures are noisier. In neither election did the treatment make voters more likely to switch to incumbents, nor to switch away from them.[17] We do not observe treatment effects on turnout or vote shares in the official polling station results (available in SI, Section 4), although the coefficients have the expected signs – likely explanations for the lack of significant results at the polling station level are that our treatment effects are relatively small, only a fraction of voters in each polling station catchment area were treated, and we have lower statistical power to detect effects.

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[17] All results shown in SI, Section 4.

Table 5: Treatment effect on switching

	(1) Pooled	(2) GE	(3) GE-NRM	(4) Primary
Treatment	0.041**	0.035*	0.043*	0.044*
	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.023)	(0.026)
Constant	0.436***	0.448***	0.423***	0.497***
	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(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? Which candidates are they switching to and from?[18] In the general election, voters are switching *away from the ruling party*. Figure 4 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 one when a voter states an intention to vote for a party/candidate at baseline and but does not report voting for that candidate on election day. It is unlikely that voters switched because they thought the ruling party candidate would lose – especially since these candidates were popularly considered the best performers – but rather that a handful of voters voted sincerely after receiving information about relatively less-known opposition candidates.

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[18]We 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.

Table 6: Treatment effect on switching to debate winners

	(1) Pooled	(2) GE	(3) GE_NRM	(4) Primary
Treatment	0.016	-0.001	-0.010	0.032**
	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.015)
Constant	0.086***	0.096***	0.100***	0.057***
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.007)
N	5,175	2,889	2,223	2,286
R^2	0.029	0.031	0.039	0.134

Notes: The unit of observation is the voter. All models include constituency fixed effects and covariates. Standard errors are clustered by polling station. *** $p<0.01$; ** $p<0.05$; * $p<0.10$
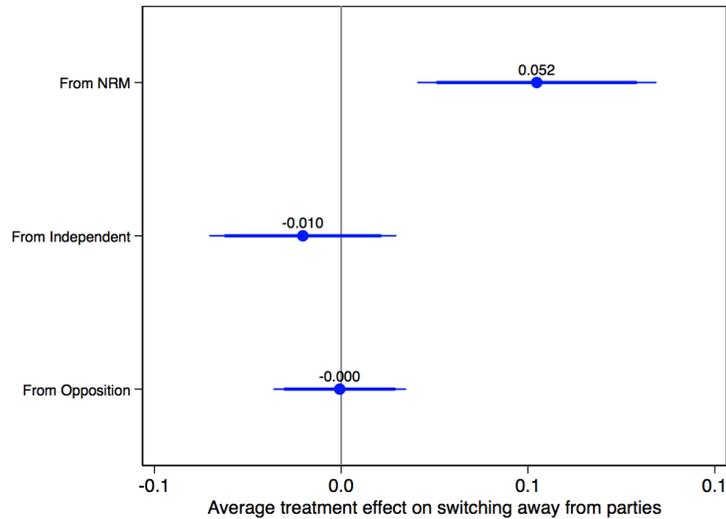

Figure 4: Treatment effects on switching, by party of intended vote choice

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 5, 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% abstained (p-value = 0.110), 1.9% voted for an opposition candidate (p-value = 0.044), and 0.5% voted for an independent candidate (p-value = 0.610).

The 6.3 percentage point reduction in the vote share of the ruling party among its purported
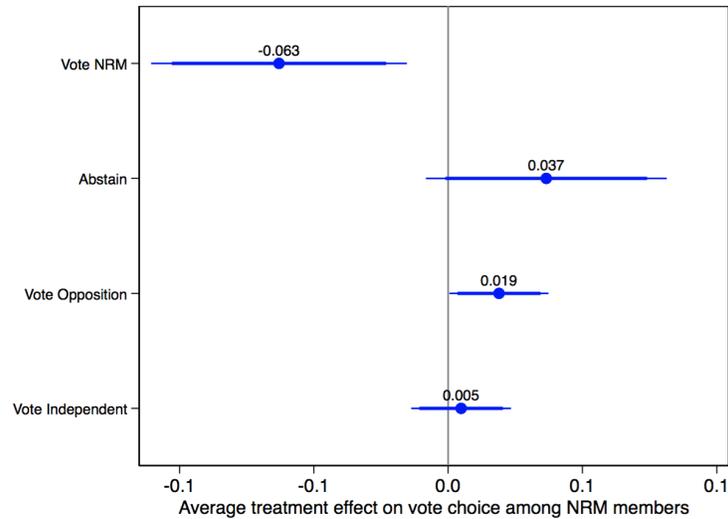
Figure 5: Treatment effects on voting behavior among those intending to vote for ruling party

supporters is surprisingly large 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 primary candidate dropped out of the general election race, possibly reducing party attachment.

8 Discussion

Several potential mechanisms 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 sometimes prevented from campaigning freely and accessing media – voters, especially those leaning towards the ruling party, often have relatively little information about the quality of opposition candidates. Thus, the provision of information about *all* candidates

may be particularly effective in leveling the (informational) playing field.

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, using two measures. The first is the self-reported party attachment relative to attachment to other parties, measured at baseline, with respondents are asked how close they feel to each major party, on a scale of 1-7 (weak to strong). 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 to information about alternative candidates, including members of the opposition.

As shown in Table 7, 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 7: Determinants of switching away from the ruling party

	(1)	(2)
Treatment	0.003	-0.009
	(0.038)	(0.038)
Treat x Primary candidate dropped	0.073*	0.080**
	(0.038)	(0.038)
Treat x Open to other parties	0.021	0.028
	(0.038)	(0.038)
Primary candidate dropped	0.016	0.017
	(0.027)	(0.026)
Open to other parties	0.067**	0.067**
	(0.029)	(0.029)
Controls	Yes	No
Constant	0.373***	0.376***
	(0.024)	(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, partisanship matters for vote choice: party loyalty in Uganda is generally high. In the control group, 68% of registered NRM members – those eligible to vote in the party primaries, and 70% of the electorate – cast their vote for the ruling party in the general election, conditional on turnout. The share is markedly higher among voters whose preferred candidate won the primaries (75%) than among those whose preferred candidate lost and dropped out of the race (64%). The treatment lowered the latter's share by 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.[19] 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 vari-

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[19]Full results in SI.

able that indicates whether or a 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, 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. This suggests that it is not low relatively candidate quality that is driving voters away from NRM candidates, who went on to win in eight of the eleven constituencies in the sample.

A second possibility is that voters were afraid to report voting for candidates outside the ruling party, especially 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 – whether 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), downgraded 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, see SI, Section 4.6).

Third, it may be the case that our intervention was not directly affecting voting behavior, but that candidates' campaigns 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 were 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 (SI, Section 4.6).

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Fourth, it could be that the mere existence of the videos, which literally put all candidates on a level playing field, signaled to voters (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 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 (SI, Section 4.4). 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.

Differences across election types

Finally, it is worth considering whether there are other differences besides the salience of candidate party cues across election types that could be driving results. First, due to an unexpected delay of the primary elections, there was a greater length of time between treatment and outcome data collection in the primary than general election, which would result in downward bias of treatment effects in the primary election. We test for this possibility by regressing different knowledge indicators on the interval between the screening and the election and find no evidence that respondents in villages with a greater interval are less knowledgeable about candidates.[20]

Second, one might expect greater uncertainty about candidate quality in primary elections, at least regarding ruling party candidates, some of whom they are seeing for the first time. Furthermore, in our case, the primary elections feature constituencies without incumbents, who are typically better known candidates (because the incumbent is not a ruling party member). However, we find that while knowledge about candidates at baseline is indeed lower in the primaries, voters catch up. By the endline, knowledge levels are slightly higher than in the general election.[21] While we cannot rule out completely that the similar effects found in the two election rounds are not due to differences that counteract variation in the existence of meaningful party cues, these results alleviate our concerns.

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[20]Results in Section 4.6 of the SI.
[21]Results in Section 4.1 of the SI.

9 Conclusion

While partisanship is an important driver of voter behavior, it has limits, even in a dominant party setting: party cues do not prevent voters from updating when faced with new information about candidate quality. Voters in both intra and inter-party settings update when provided with new information about candidate quality, and change their behavior in response to this information. Although there are costs to crossing party lines, perhaps especially in the context of a dominant party regime, we find that in Uganda, voters were willing to do so when provided with information about the alternatives to ruling party candidates – the latter of whom they had much more baseline knowledge compared to opposition candidates. Thus, information about the relative quality of candidates has the potential to increase the competitiveness of elections.

Our theoretical expectations were that because crossing party lines is costly, the presence of meaningful party cues would reduce the effect of information on voter behavior. Our real-world test of this intuition was to compare two elections with comparable groups of voters that varied in the extent to which candidates' party affiliation was a meaningful cue for voters: the primary elections of Uganda's ruling party and inter-party general elections. In fact, voters updated in response to new information – provided in the form of debate-like candidate videos – in both elections. Similarly, in both elections, voters responded to new information about candidate quality by switching away from their intended vote choice.

General election voters who watched the videos were more likely to switch away from the ruling party candidate and toward opposition candidates. This switching was driven by voters whose preferred candidate had lost the party primaries and 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 an uneven informational playing field. 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 in deviating from the default vote choice, the ruling party.

Our findings suggest that information asymmetries are impediments to competitiveness in Ugandan elections, and likely in other dominant party settings. Providing information about all candidates can help level the playing field in an electoral environment dominated by one party, allowing even – or perhaps, especially – ruling party members to consider other candidates. These results, in conjunction with related studies by Casey, Glennerster and Bidwell (2016) and Bowles and Larreguy (2018) suggest that candidate debates 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.

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