

Is Information Power?

A Study of Voter Education Using Cell Phones in Mozambique



In brief

- Like other African countries with post-soviet democratization processes, Mozambique has experienced a decline in voter participation. The ruling party FRELIMO secured over 75% of the vote in the latest elections and Afrobarometer shows a significant degree of political apathy and a weak sense of political accountability in Mozambique.
- This study proposes voter education as a possible response to increase the quality of democratic institutions in Mozambique. Three types of interventions were tested during the national elections of 2009 at over 161 locations nationwide.
- The three types of interventions were as follows:
 1. Text-messaging - messages regarding electoral procedures, candidates and the parties were sent in the two weeks before the election.
 2. Hotline of electoral problems - citizens could report problematic occurrences on the campaign trail and this information was disseminated after verification
 3. Distribution of newspaper @Verdade - which focused on electoral education messages including pamphlets detailing how to report electoral problems.
- Key findings:
 - Voter education increases electoral turnout. All treatments increased turnout.
 - Voters react to the strictly-political contents of the information they are provided with. Party preferences were weakened due to violent occurrences.
 - Voters' perceptions changed very differently depending on the type of intervention.
 - The newspaper was particularly effective with women in increasing participation.
- We believe voter education can drive voter behaviour, but is unlikely to produce dramatic changes in demand for political accountability in the short run.

Background

“The ruling party FRELIMO has consolidated an overwhelming degree of control over all levels of the Mozambican society”

Like many other African countries with post-soviet democratization processes, Mozambique has witnessed a dramatic decrease in voter participation from the first elections. At the same time, the ruling party FRELIMO has consolidated an overwhelming degree of control over all levels of the Mozambican society (FRELIMO secured 75% of the vote in the latest elections). Afrobarometer data has shown a high degree of political apathy and a weak sense of political accountability in the population. The study we conducted proposes voter education as a possible response by policy makers interested in increasing the quality of democratic institutions in the country. This note targets not only the electoral authorities, political parties of Mozambique, but also NGOs interested in improving electoral standards and energizing civil society for political participation.

The Study

During the national elections of October 2009 in Mozambique, we conducted a study about the effectiveness of different forms of electoral education. Together with local partners, newspaper @Verdade and electoral observation NGO consortium Observatorio Eleitoral, we implemented three types of interventions in the context of a field experiment taking place in 161 locations nationwide across four provinces of Mozambique (Maputo Province, Gaza, Zambezia, and Cabo Delgado).

The first intervention was electoral education through cell phone text messaging; messages gave information about the electoral procedures, candidates, parties, and were received during the two weeks just before the election-day. The second was a hotline of electoral problems; citizens could report, through text messaging, occurrences of the electoral campaign and election-day they deemed problematic; this information was widely disseminated after verification, primarily in the locations where the hotline was present. The third was the distribution of newspaper @Verdade during the electoral period, for a period of approximately six weeks; @Verdade focused on an electoral education message, including National Electoral Commission (CNE/STAE) pamphlets and the dissemination of a national mechanism of reporting of electoral problems.

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In terms of measurement of the effects of the interventions, we conducted panel household surveys (including the collection of factual data on voter turnout), implemented behavioral measures of political participation, and gathered data on electoral problems from a national hotline.

Results and Policy Implications

The research statements (derived from our main findings) that are closest to informing policy-makers interested in voter education are:

- Voter education increases electoral participation, namely voter turnout. All treatments increased voter turnout. Specifically, the newspaper was able to move

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our behavioral measure of political participation which embedded elements of demand for political accountability (a more complex type of participation).

- Voters react to the strictly-political contents of the information they are provided with. Namely the preference for an opposition party was weakened as a result of violence occurrences related to that party, broadcasted by our hotline intervention.
- Voters’ perceptions are changed very differently depending on the type of information they are provided with. The purely electoral education intervention decreased the perception of the prevalence of electoral problems, while the hotline increased it. The hotline intervention led to an increased call for political authority.
- The newspaper was particularly effective with women, namely in terms of increasing their electoral participation. This fact points to the need not to forget the goodness of more classical means of voter education. Cell phones are effective but they may be less effective with women (who usually do not own the equipment).

We believe that voter education using cell phones or newspapers is effective in driving voter perceptions and behavior. However it is unlikely to produce dramatic changes on the demand for political accountability in the short run – related, we welcome more research on persistence of the effects that we encountered. We also would like to draw attention to the very cost-effective nature of implementing cell-phone based voter education. At the same time, free newspapers can be closer to more fundamental changes in voter attitudes, and can reach sections of the population that are not easily targeted through the use of cell phones.

Further Readings

For a full description of fieldwork, including photos, maps, and materials used, please visit: www.pedrocente.org/Fieldwork/Mozambique/mozambique.htm

For the working paper that constitutes the research base for this policy brief, please visit: www.pedrocente.org/cell.pdf

About the authors

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