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journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/worlddev](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/worlddev)Media exposure and political participation in a transitional African context<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Legal changes in the 1990s resulted in greater pluralism in African media, particularly FM radio. Theorists have long argued that media freedoms are necessary for democratic development, but effects on individual-level orientations and behaviors have not been fully explored. Specifically, there has been limited work on the effects of radio exposure on political participation in Africa, and individuals' self-selection of the media they consume complicates the measurement of causal effects. However, the fact that access to FM radio signals is largely exogenously determined provides a possible identification strategy. Here, data on station technicalities and local topography are used to predict FM propagation in Uganda soon after the implementation of media liberalization. Analyses of results from an Afrobarometer survey demonstrate that radio exposure is significantly associated with higher self-reported political participation. With regard to mechanisms, there is no evidence that exposure is associated with significantly greater efficacy, interest in politics, attitudinal extremism, or perceptions about distributional politics or violence, but those who listened to the radio with greater frequency were more knowledgeable about politics.

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## 1. Introduction

Democracy requires significant participation by a critical mass of citizens. Accountability mechanisms will not function if individuals do not voice concerns and demands, or engage in activities that might check representatives, such as voting, petitioning, and protesting. Improved transparency and participatory rights will have limited democracy-enhancing effects if most are politically quiescent (Almond & Verba, 1963). Further, participation by a narrow subset of the population threatens to produce policies that do not serve the majority (Lijphart, 1997).

Opportunities for enhanced representation and accountability, such as elections and referenda, civil society organizations and social movements, and venues to express voice through protest and media commentary are still relatively underdeveloped in

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many parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa. Participation is especially essential in settings that have recently undergone political liberalization. First, elites who have not accepted democracy as “the only game in town” (Linz & Stepan, 1996) will exploit mass inactivity to construct authoritarian enclaves (Weingast, 1997). And citizens might be less likely to develop diffuse support for democratic institutions, which might be essential for regime consolidation, if they do not personally engage with them (Easton, 1965; Ginsberg, 1982).

How do participatory impulses develop in such contexts? Democratic behavior often must be learned, in a sense, in these settings, where dictators had previously proscribed certain forms of participation, and highly managed others (Dahl, 1973). Further, elites often continue to try to manage participation, particularly around elections, with (de) mobilization strategies including electoral clientelism (Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, & Nichter, 2014; Mares & Young, 2016; Vicente, 2014) and intimidation (Bratton, 2008). Scholars have focused on a number of individual-level factors that affect participation (primarily voting) in Africa, including education, socioeconomic status, associational membership, age, satisfaction with the *status quo*, and gender (Bratton, 1999; Bratton, Mattes, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005; Croke, Grossman, Larreguy, & Marshall, 2016; Kuenzi & Lambricht, 2007, 2010; Resnick & Casale, 2011; Posner & Simon, 2002).

This paper focuses on the effects of exposure to mass media on participation. Media development often constitutes a crucial part of broader political liberalizations. During the immediate post-independence era in Africa, most governments recognized media as opportunities for legitimization and mobilization, but also as potential threats if opened to anti-regime voices. Hence, authoritarians often established *de jure* monopolies over print and broadcast sectors, and limited speech and press freedoms (Faringer, 1991; Mytton, 1983; Van der Veur, 2002). However, by the mid 1990s, increased civil society mobilization and pressures from Western donors brought an end to most state-run monopolies (Bourgault, 1995, pp. 208–209) and removed other impediments to press freedom, such as strict libel laws. The resulting media environments were considerably more diverse, as the injection of private capital into broadcast and print media generated hundreds of new outlets. Media environments today are by no means perfect: there are severe constraints on anti-regime voices in a number of countries, including Burundi, Eritrea, and Zimbabwe; journalists often lack adequate professional training and resources, making them vulnerable to corruption (Hasty, 2005); outlets are often owned by politicians or their allies, leading to biased messaging (Conroy-Krutz & Moehler, 2015); and elites often limit the release of information, through secrecy laws and even intimidation. Still, emergent commercial, religious, and community-run outlets frequently produce content in a wider variety of vernaculars, broaden discussions, and reach new, previously underserved populations (Nyamnjoh, 2005). Further, during times of significant political change, individuals are especially likely to turn to mass media for information (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

To date, scholarship on the relationship between media exposure and participatory politics in Africa has been limited. Studies by Kuenzi and Lambright have found that country-level voting rates are positively correlated with radios per capita (2007), while individuals who listen to radio news more frequently are also more likely to vote (2010). Mattes and Mughogho (2009) find positive correlations between self-reported media exposure and formal contact with officials and protesting in Africa; however, media exposure is associated with decreased participation in community-level activities and has no significant relationship with informal contact with officials or voting. Focusing on a different type of participation, Straus (2007) finds limited evidence that radio ownership was correlated with rates of violence during the 1994 Rwandan genocide.<sup>1</sup> Several field experiments have attempted to identify more clearly the causal effects of media exposure on various types of participation in Africa. Aker, Collier, and Vicente (2017) find that the distribution of free newspapers before an election in Mozambique significantly increased voter turnout. And Moehler and Conroy-Krutz (2016) find that exposure to live FM radio broadcasts of political-talk programming during an election campaign in Ghana significantly increased cognitive political engagement; however, exposure to messages biased against subjects' previous political leanings significantly reduced participation in a petition drive.

Additionally, it is important to identify possible mechanisms that might link media exposure to participation. Aker et al. (2017) note that their newspaper treatment could have encouraged voting through arguments about civic duty or by presenting information about politics and participatory processes, while Moehler and Conroy-Krutz (2016) argue that cross-cutting radio decreased participation in a petition drive because of the moderating—and thus demobilizing—effect of such messages.

This paper identifies six factors that might be affected by media exposure and, in turn, affect participation: (1) internal efficacy, (2) external efficacy, (3) political knowledge, (4) political interest, (5)

attitudinal strength, and (6) expectations about the rewards and costs of (non-) participation. In brief, individuals who have greater confidence in their own ability to effect change and political elites' likelihood of responding to action, know more about politics, are more interested in politics, have stronger attitudes, and believe that participation will yield certain benefits, such as clientelistic payoffs or added security, will be more capable of participation, and more motivated to be engaged.

Given that FM radio is the most widely accessed mass medium in Africa, its effects on political participation are particularly relevant to study. Specifically, this paper focuses on the case of Uganda, at a time when political competition in the country and the media sector had both been recently liberalized.<sup>2</sup> In 1996, the country held its first direct presidential elections; three years before, it issued the first private licenses to FM broadcasters after a long history of *de jure* state-run monopoly. Drawing on data from the first round of the Afrobarometer (2000) allows for an examination of the relationships between media exposure and participation at an important transitional point.

Many studies of media effects have relied on correlations between observational data on exposure and various attitudes and behaviors. However, individuals' decisions to access media of different types and in different amounts are often largely determined by their pre-exposure attitudes and behaviors, making identification of causal effects difficult. This study differs from most pre-existing ones of media effects in Africa in that, while it draws on observational data on exposure and participation, it employs a plausibly exogenous source of variation in access to FM radio: geographic features and station-specific characteristics that affect signal propagation and, thus, populations' ability to access stations. In short, there is wide geographic variation in FM signal availability, and Ugandans' ability to access media has been largely determined by where they live. Several other researchers have used similar methods to study the effects of media exposure on participation of various types, to varying results (Crabtree, Darmofal, & Kern, 2015; Olken, 2009; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014).

Instrumental variable analyses find that greater radio exposure in Uganda in 2000 is associated with higher levels of political participation. Further, the mobilizational effects of radio exposure seem to be limited to political activities: there is no significant relationship between radio exposure and participation in apparently apolitical associational life. This suggests that radio exposure spurs behavioral engagement because it affects individuals' orientations towards or knowledge about politics, specifically, rather than their social capital or general willingness to engage with others. In fact, radio exposure is not significantly associated with generalized trust, suggesting that media—or, at least, radio—in post-liberalization Uganda do not seem to have undermined social capital, as they might have elsewhere (Olken, 2009; Putnam, 1995).

Additionally, most of the factors that might be affected by media, and possibly in turn be associated with participation, are not, in fact, significantly related to exposure. Frequently used measures of internal and external efficacy are generally not significantly associated with radio exposure, although Ugandans who listen to the radio more often are more likely to think that elites do not try to look after citizens' interests. While standard accounts of efficacy argue that such sentiments depress engagement (Finkel,

<sup>1</sup> See, however, as discussed below, Yanagizawa-Drott (2014).

<sup>2</sup> "Liberalized" should not suggest that the country underwent a full transition to democracy. In fact, the political system in Uganda remains heavily biased in favor of President Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (Carbone, 2008; Rubongoya, 2007; Tripp, 2010), and Freedom House consistently rated the country as "partly free" (and, more recently, as "not free"). Rather, liberalization refers to any reform that makes politics more open or competitive, in comparison to the pre-reform period.

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