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Connecting with constituents? Parliamentary aspirants' use of WhatsApp in Uganda's 2021 'scientific' election

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List of acronyms	
ANT	Alliance for National Transformation
DP	Democratic Party
EC	Electoral Commission
FDC	Forum for Democratic Change
JEEMA	Justice Forum
NRM	National Resistance Movement
NUP	National Unity Platform
OTT	Over the top tax
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
VPN	Virtual Private Network

Executive summary

- The backdrop to the campaign for Uganda's 2021 general election was a set of public restrictions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic that limited in-person gatherings and increased engagement through traditional and social media. The private messaging application WhatsApp has become ubiquitous in electoral organisation and mobilisation, despite direct users remaining a minority among voters.
- Parliamentary aspirants primarily use WhatsApp to reach campaign agents or supporters, who are then expected to spread the candidate's message both online and offline. Digital campaigning remains intertwined with offline mobilisation.
- Parliamentary aspirants face a range of challenges when using WhatsApp for election campaigning, from the high cost of data for end users to the spread of rumours and disinformation to online harassment (especially affecting women).
- Political parties lack a clear strategy that would allow their parliamentary candidates to harness the power of social media in their constituencies. However, all parties use WhatsApp to communicate internally and sometimes take decisions. It is perceived as a safe and quick way for party operatives to communicate at different levels, creating opportunities for increased communication and consultation between national executives and local branches, and across subnational structures.
- Nearly all parliamentary aspirants also indicated their intention to use WhatsApp to remain in touch with constituents if they were elected. Nonetheless, WhatsApp will not provide accountability in a vacuum, and access limitations must be kept in mind. But with concerted efforts, the application can be a useful tool for increasing communication between parliamentarians and their constituents.
- Based upon our findings, we identify various ways Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) can support election stakeholders, political parties, and parliamentarians in order to harness the positive potential that WhatsApp offers, and to address its harmful effects on political life, in Uganda and beyond.

Introduction

Uganda held general elections on 14 January 2021. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Electoral Commission (EC) announced that these should be 'scientific elections' and adopted social distancing measures. In effect, this led to the curtailing of public rallies and in-person campaigning. However, these were generally enforced on opposition parties more than on the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM). This forced political parties and candidates to rely heavily on newspapers, radio, and television - but also on social media. In this context, the 2021 election campaign provided an opportunity to better understand how parliamentary aspirants used WhatsApp, a Facebook-owned private messaging application, in their mobilising and organising efforts, and how stakeholders such as Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) can leverage these kinds of tools in their work with Ugandan political parties and parliamentarians in the future.

As a result of the growing access to, and importance of, social media platforms and private messenger applications - most prominently Facebook and WhatsApp, with Twitter and Instagram used primarily by a small, but influential, urban elite - politicians and political parties are increasingly coming to see social media as an integral part of their election campaign toolkit. As the top messenger application across much of the continent, WhatsApp plays an increasingly prominent role in electoral settings. As recent research has demonstrated, this can be both positive, including supporting election observation efforts or the coordination of anti-corruption campaigns, and negative, in facilitating the mass sharing of misinformation or disinformation.¹

There is growing research on how technology affects democracy across Africa, including on the role of social media platforms and closed messenger applications during elections.² So far it has shown that social media complements rather than replaces traditional mechanisms, and that while it can create positive opportunities for broader engagement and mobilisation, it can also be used to spread falsehoods. These platforms can be monitored or shut down by authoritarian governments - an increasingly common approach.³ Far from helping to close the gap between larger and smaller parties, social media can, on the contrary, increase the costs of campaigning.⁴ New roles have emerged within political parties, with social media entrepreneurs or communicators being tasked with using these new platforms to promote candidates or parties.⁵

Our research looked at how Ugandan parliamentary aspirants used WhatsApp during the 2021 election campaign and analysed how this tool can be leveraged in the future.

1. Nic Cheeseman, Jonathan Fisher, Idayat Hassan, and Jamie Hitchen, 'Social Media Disruption: Nigeria's Whatsapp Politics', *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 31, Number 3, July 2020, pp. 145-159; Maggie Dwyer, Jamie Hitchen, and Thomas Molony, 'Between Excitement and Scepticism: The role of WhatsApp in Sierra Leone's 2018 elections' in *Social Media and Politics in Africa: Democracy, Censorship and Security* by Maggie Dwyer and Thomas Molony (eds), ZedBooks, 2019.

2. Maggie Dwyer and Thomas Molony, *Social Media and Politics in Africa: Democracy, Censorship and Security*, ZedBooks, 2019; Nic Cheeseman, Lisa Garbe, and Idayat Hassan, 'Digital democracy is still a long way off in Africa: it takes more than technology', *The Conversation*, 1 October 2020. <https://theconversation.com/digital-democracy-is-still-a-long-way-off-in-africa-it-takes-more-than-technology-147038>

3. Yomi Kazeem, 'Internet shutdowns in Africa were more frequent and lasted longer in 2019', *Quartz*, 27 February 2020. <https://qz.com/africa/1808728/african-internet-shutdowns-were-more-frequent-in-2019/>

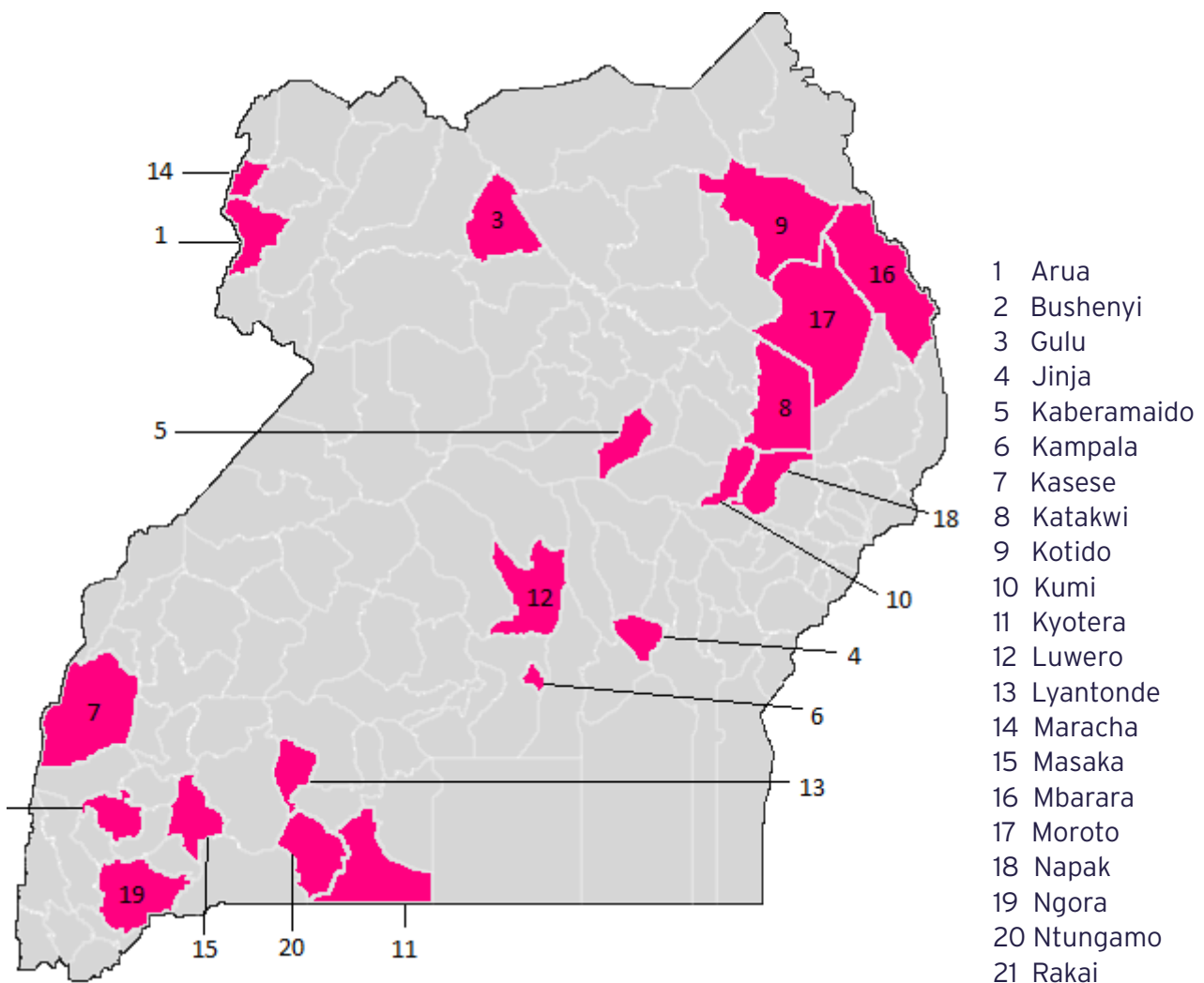
4. Gabrielle Lynch, Elena Gadjanova, and Ghadafi Saibu, 'The hidden costs of social media in African elections - the case of Ghana', *Democracy in Africa*, 23 February 2021. <http://democracyinafrica.org/hidden-costs-social-media-african-elections-case-ghana/>

5. Jamie Hitchen, Idayat Hassan, Jonathan Fisher, and Nic Cheeseman, 'WhatsApp and Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Mobilising the People, Protecting the Vote', Centre for Democracy and Development, July 2019. <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/whatsapp-nigeria-2019-elections/>

Research overview

We interviewed a total of 69 people, including 39 parliamentary aspirants and 17 party operatives involved in the 2021 campaign. Our sample included respondents from the NRM (the ruling party), opposition parties such as the National Unity Platform (NUP), the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), the Democratic Party (DP), the Alliance for National Transformation (ANT), and the Justice Forum (JEEMA), as well as independent candidates or their campaign team. We also interviewed social media experts, journalists, civil society activists, and an electoral commission local representative. 39 per cent of the respondents were women. Interviews were conducted in the capital city, Kampala, and in 20 districts around the country, covering a mix of rural and urban constituencies.

Figure 1: Districts covered by the study



Interviews were conducted by a researcher and a team of 11 research assistants, following specially designed COVID-19 protocols. These research assistants were locally based journalists or civil society activists with interview experience and good local contacts. We also arranged phone interviews with these research assistants themselves to understand the local context and their own analysis of social media use during the campaign. The research was conducted during the electoral campaign, which meant that some party operatives were unavailable - especially those at the national level.

The use of social media in Uganda

In Uganda, like much of the continent, the use of social media and, particularly, WhatsApp is growing. WhatsApp is Uganda's most used social media or messaging site, as is the case for more than 60 per cent of countries on the continent.⁶ Although social media users amount to just 5.6 per cent of the Ugandan population, this figure grew by 27 per cent between April 2019 and January 2020, despite the introduction of a social media tax known as the 'over-the-top' tax (OTT) in 2018 by the Ugandan government.⁷ Social media's influence is not confined to the number of direct users, as content from these platforms shapes discussions and stories across radio, TV and print media, and infiltrates long-established rumour networks.⁸

Ugandan activists and politicians have used blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp in recent years, including during the Save Mabira campaign (2007-2011), the Walk to Work movement in 2011, and the 2016 election campaign.⁹ President Museveni himself has come to recognise the power of the internet and new technologies after initially claiming it as a place for '*olugambo*' (gossiping in Luganda). He regularly shares messages on his blog, his Twitter feed, and - until the platform was banned by the government in January 2021 - his Facebook page. He also joined Instagram in September 2020 to appeal to a youthful audience, referred to as '*Bazukulu*' (grandchildren in Luganda).¹⁰

Ahead of the 2021 elections, the ruling NRM set up a series of WhatsApp groups to mobilise supporters in selected areas. Museveni's team also launched an app called 'Mzee NALO' aimed at engaging young voters, showcasing governmental achievements, and collecting data on supporters.¹¹ Meanwhile, Robert Kyagulanyi (better known as Bobi Wine), Museveni's main challenger in the 2021 polls, drew on a strong social media following he has developed since he entered politics in 2017. His supporters and members of the NUP used Facebook, for example, to livestream his ill treatment by security forces during the campaigns.¹² At the parliamentary level too, political aspirants from all parties took to social media to reach out to voters.¹³

Despite the growing prominence of social media use during the campaigns, Ugandans voted on 14 January amidst a five-day internet blackout. Even when services were gradually restored, social media platforms continued to be blocked - accessible only through virtual private networks (VPNs). In fact, access to Facebook remains interrupted in Uganda at the time of writing, allegedly in response to the company's decision to remove a number of government-linked social media

6. We Are Social, *Digital 2020: Uganda*, February 2020. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-uganda>

7. Simone Schlindwein, 'Uganda: One year of social media tax', *DW*, 20 July 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/uganda-one-year-of-social-media-tax/a-49672632>

8. Selnes F. Namasinga and K. S. Orgeret, 'Social media in Uganda: revitalising news journalism?', *Media, Culture & Society*. Volume 42, Number 3, 2020, pp. 380-397.

9. Monica B. Chibita, 'Digital Activism in Uganda', in *Digital Activism in the Social Media Era* by Bruce Mutsvairo, Springer, 2016, pp. 69-93.

10. Kenneth Kazibwe, 'Museveni excited as he joins Instagram', *Nile Post*, 17 September 2020. <https://nilepost.co.ug/2020/09/17/museveni-excited-as-he-joins-instagram/>

11. Kenneth Kazibwe, 'Museveni launches mobile app to showcase his achievements', *Nile Post*, 29 September 2020. <https://nilepost.co.ug/2020/09/29/museveni-launches-mobile-app-to-showcase-his-achievements/>

12. Philip Effiom Ephraim, 'Bobi Wine case demonstrates the power of social media', *The Conversation*, 27 August 2018. <https://theconversation.com/bobi-wine-case-demonstrates-the-power-of-social-media-102179;>

George Ogola, 'Social media mobilisation is a bright spot in Uganda's dark Bobi Wine saga', *The Conversation*, 29 August 2018. <https://theconversation.com/social-media-mobilisation-is-a-bright-spot-in-ugandas-dark-bobi-wine-saga-102273>

13. Curthbert Kigozi, 'Hoima politicians begin social media classes for 2021 scientific elections', *Nile Post*, 23 June 2020. <https://nilepost.co.ug/2020/06/23/hoima-politicians-begin-social-media-classes-for-2021-scientific-elections/>

accounts prior to the polls for engaging in what the platform described as 'coordinated inauthentic behavior'.¹⁴ Internet disruption around elections is not new in Uganda: social media platforms were blocked on election day and as votes were counted in the previous election in 2016.

Nonetheless, all the stakeholders we interviewed reported that social media was more widely used in this electoral campaign compared with 2016. Many attributed this increase to the restrictions that accompanied campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic. A social media 'handler' for an NRM parliamentary candidate in Luwero District argued that *'the COVID-19 pandemic demystified beliefs that social media was for learned and corporate people. Everyone now can use WhatsApp for communication.'*

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that social media engagement did not completely replace offline campaigning - far from it. Small rallies of up to 200 people were later permitted under the Electoral Commission (EC) of Uganda's standard operating procedures (SOPs). Larger rallies were replaced by door-to-door campaigning in many areas, especially where social media penetration is lower. This approach has been costly due to expectations of 'chai' - small amounts of money to help the person with their current problems.¹⁵ Traditional media outlets were also used, though several interviewees reported that the cost of advertising and appearing on radio stations - which are often owned by political actors¹⁶ - went up following the announcement of restrictions by the EC.¹⁷

Despite imposing the SOPs curtailing in-person campaigning and promoting the use of (social) media, the Commission rarely used social media platforms to disseminate its own messages. According to a journalist and civil society activist in Kasese, *'the Electoral Commission, which is a major player in the elections, has been at its weakest in deploying social media'*. She further argued that *'it is disappointing that the Electoral Commission is encouraging campaigns to go online yet they have been slow at adopting social media for communication themselves.'* A sub-regional EC officer in West Nile acknowledged that the Commission *'has no direct connection on social media with voters and candidates'* and predominantly uses broadcast media to reach out to voters, but added they looked at what was posted on social media platforms with interest.

How parliamentary aspirants use WhatsApp on the campaign ground

All the parliamentary aspirants we spoke to were using WhatsApp during their campaigns, in addition to Facebook and, to a much lesser extent, Twitter and other social media platforms. They described WhatsApp as *'easy to use'*, low-cost, and secure due to its end-to-end encryption. An NRM parliamentary aspirant in Kotido District argued that to participate in a one-hour talk show on the radio, he would have to pay up to 1.2 million Ugandan shillings (UGX), or £240, whereas broadcasting his message for an hour via WhatsApp would cost him only UGX 1,000 (£0.20). WhatsApp also presents fewer non-financial barriers for opposition politicians than traditional media - in particular radio stations - where they are routinely prevented from speaking. An independent (FDC-leaning) MP aspirant in Kasese explained that: *'For radio it is quite often that opposition politicians are denied access. We have seen it with Hon. Kyagulanyi, Besigye and even many MPs being denied the platform. This doesn't happen with WhatsApp'*. Aspirants regularly used the platform to announce

14. DFR Lab, 'Facebook removes inauthentic assets linked to Ugandan government', *Medium*, 10 February 2021. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-inauthentic-assets-linked-to-ugandan-government-c3949be9f810>

15. Interview, NUP Woman MP candidate, Moroto District, 23 November 2020.

16. African Centre for Media Excellence, *The Views Expressed Must Represent Those of Management. Radio ownership and its impact on political speech in Uganda*, June 2011. <https://acme-ug.org/wp-content/uploads/Radio-ownership-and-its-impact-on-political-speech-in-Uganda.pdf>

17. Interview, Deputy Regional Coordinator of the NUP women's league in Acholi, Gulu, 11 December 2020.

their campaign schedule, disseminate manifesto promises, and share news and reactions during the campaign. Simply put, WhatsApp has become ubiquitous in the campaign mobilisation effort.

Many candidates also stated that using WhatsApp allowed them to target specific audiences, in a more controlled manner than more public social media platforms. These specific audiences varied from one candidate to another: some had groups organised geographically; others by professional categories; others had specific groups for their campaign agents or potential financial backers. The NUP contestant for Moroto District Woman MP explained: *'I can spread specific messages to specific group[s] of people when I want.... You can't do it on any other social media platform'*.

Many interviewees reported that they also get responses and feedback through WhatsApp: the communication does not go only from the campaign team to their audience, but triggers responses and comments. The same Moroto Woman MP candidate further stated: *'you might think you actually know the best strategies, but when you get to put it out there for people to see, [the] comments you get from them help you to better yourself because some people give you advice in return. Of course, some criticise but nevertheless you keep learning every day.'*

Managing groups, creating content

Candidates manage some WhatsApp groups themselves, but most rely on the assistance of their campaign operatives or supporters to manage them, either voluntarily or in exchange for airtime, data bundles or in some instances smartphones. Two Woman MP aspirants in the Central Region had hired external communication consultants, but these were an exception, not the norm. WhatsApp groups can typically hold a maximum of 256 members, although up to 3,000 people can join a group using a joining link (as opposed to being added by an administrator) - a feature only a few interviewees seemed to know and use. Some candidates only had a couple of WhatsApp groups, while others were more prolific with up to ten groups targeting different audiences. Many candidates also used smaller groups, solely involving their agents to address campaign logistics. These were separate from the larger, more public groups.

Content is shared in a mix of English and local languages, that are location specific. All the interviewees said they shared some content in English. An NUP parliamentary aspirant in Moroto justified this by saying that *'we understand that by the time someone gets a smartphone, he or she is able to at least read [in English]'*. Still, they also used local languages to maximise their message's accessibility across the wider constituency. A Woman MP candidate in Luwero District said she created a separate group for those who did not speak English: *'We use English but there are groups that are run in our local language [Luganda]'*. Text messages and images, but also videos and audios, were used. Videos were perceived to be popular, but also required more data to watch them, a cost to be borne by the watcher. This was highlighted by the NRM candidate for Mbarara City Woman MP, who said: *'We realised that in most cases people don't open those videos because they consume a lot of data.'*

The type of content created by candidates and their campaign team drew heavily on traditional, in-person campaign activities. An FDC campaign operative in Kasese explained: *'Photos are usually good especially when you take pictures of large crowds on campaign meetings of a candidate, it helps to demonstrate that indeed the candidate has a lot of support.'* Ironically, the restriction on rallies and other campaign activities reduced the content available for social media campaigning. The FDC MP aspirant in Ntungamo Municipality argued that: *'In this campaign we would have used social media more if there was no COVID-19. We don't have much to share [without campaign activities]'*.

But content created for WhatsApp, or shared through the groups created, is not just confined to the platform. It is spread across other social media platforms, such as Facebook, and reaches traditional media outlets. For example, the NUP candidate for Woman MP in Kaberamaido District stated that: *'information on Facebook is also forwarded to various WhatsApp platforms.'* Journalists pick up tips and stories out of the WhatsApp groups they are in, and follow up to report on them as needed. Candidates share statements with the press via WhatsApp, for example through audio recordings that are broadcast on the radio, or text communiqués provided to journalists. The DP reportedly has a WhatsApp group to liaise with the media which party operatives use to announce topics of press conferences and send tips to journalists.¹⁸

Limited audience

Though many interviewees stated that more and more people have access to social media, and considered WhatsApp to be 'widely used' - one of the app's advantages - most of them also acknowledged that important disparities still exist. A journalist and civil society activist in Kasese explained that *'the boda boda, chapatti makers,¹⁹ youth in rural areas, youth in the informal sector, who are majorly the voters do not have access to social media platforms.'* Poorer individuals and rural populations tend not to have access to smartphones, and cannot afford airtime, data, and social media tax costs. Some rural areas, particularly in Karamoja, have poor network coverage affecting people's ability to access internet services.²⁰

The primary audience on WhatsApp remains young, urban people. An NRM parliamentary aspirant in Jinja District stated that: *'Some voters deep in the village ask some of my agents what WhatsApp and Facebook are. So that is a very big challenge considering that they form the bulk of the voters.'* The incumbent Moroto District Woman MP, running for re-election on an NRM ticket, shared this assessment: *'for the rural [population] it is not easy because they don't have the smart phones, they have these button phones so you just need to reach them.'* In light of this, she relied on *'children in the community that have WhatsApp phones'* to disseminate the content, but this was not enough: *'you need to reach them physically'*, she concluded.

Purpose

From our interviews, the purpose of engaging online is to mobilise existing supporters, rather than to convince undecided voters - even though most respondents described the audience they are targeting on WhatsApp in broad terms ('voters'). These supporters or members of the campaign team belong to WhatsApp groups and are expected to organically share messages and campaign on behalf of the candidate, online and offline. This is especially true in constituencies covering rural areas, where social media is not an appropriate way to reach most of the population. An NRM candidate in Kotido explained that his main audience on WhatsApp was the *'campaign team'* in order for them to *'continue disseminating to other people who do not have smartphones or access to social media'*. Similarly, the NUP candidate for Woman MP in Moroto District explained that she had a WhatsApp group for her *'foot soldiers'*. She further explained that: *'in every village, I have five foot soldiers in the entire district. These are the ones who actually keep spreading our messages every day. They are the ones who keep it moving so we can tell them that today's theme is about this.'* This approach can be less formalised, but with the same purpose of targeting intermediaries. The FDC Mbarara City Woman MP aspirant illustrated this: *'If you post in a group another person will post it in another group. This person then will transfer it to an individual who is their friend.'*

18. Interview, DP MP candidate, Arua Central Division, 28 November 2020.

19. Boda bodas are moto-taxis, and chapatti is a type of street food.

20. Interview, NRM MP candidate, Kotido Municipality, 1 February 2021.

Overall, the main purpose is to mobilise a network of informal agents who will share messages and campaign for the candidate online, but they can also help ensure these messages reach an offline audience.

A few interviewees mentioned using WhatsApp as a way of raising funds, particularly from the diaspora. The NUP candidate for Woman MP in Moroto District explained that: *'we have got connected to people in the diaspora, they can send you little money for fuel and this has greatly improved our campaigns'*. She further indicated that she had a WhatsApp group specifically for fundraising, including people of the diaspora, close family members, and other potential donors. The amount of money raised this way remains small; however, given that the average cost of running for parliament in Uganda was estimated to be UGX 465 million (£90,000) in 2016.²¹ Candidates also use WhatsApp to provide accountability to their financial backers. An independent Woman MP candidate in Maracha described how donors asked her for updates about her campaign and feedback from voters, and she sent pictures and videos from her rallies through the platform.

Challenges and limitations

WhatsApp and other social media platforms undoubtedly provide useful tools for parliamentary aspirants to disseminate their messages, engage with their supporters, and coordinate their campaign. However, challenges were associated with the use of WhatsApp in the campaign, that were seen as reducing its impact in shaping electoral contests and outcomes.

Logistical difficulties

As has already been addressed, a large share of the Ugandan population does not have access to social media platforms, because they lack smartphones, live in an area with poor internet connectivity, or cannot afford the cost of data or OTT. This affects rural populations, but also the elderly, and poorer individuals. As an NUP Woman MP aspirant in Kaberamaido District told us, *'though [social media platforms] spice up the campaigns in one way, they have less influence on the common electorate who cannot afford smartphones. The hype about social media for [these] elections is majorly among the well-to-do persons in urban settings.'* The direct influence of WhatsApp and other social media platforms is therefore limited - though it also has an indirect impact through intermediaries who bring messages offline or to more accessible communication media like radio.

On the issue of cost, interviewees explained that whilst WhatsApp is a low-cost tool for them to use, their targeted audience might have difficulties in getting the messages if they cannot afford data and OTT. Indeed, the cost of using social media for a candidate - which candidates estimated to be UGX 60,000 (£12) per month²² - is a derisory amount when compared to the broader cost of running for parliament in Uganda.²³ In contrast, for the average Ugandan, data costs remain expensive, especially as they have to add the OTT costs - UGX 200 per day - or use a VPN which allows them to avoid the tax, but uses up their data bundle more quickly. Daily data bundles range from UGX 250 (£0.05) for 15MB to UGX 2,000 (£0.20) for 300MB, with longer-lasting bundles

21. Emmanuel Kitamirike and Peter Kisaakye, 'How much does it cost to be a politician in Uganda? We found out', *African Arguments*, 10 November 2020. <https://africanarguments.org/2020/11/cost-doing-politics-uganda/>

22. Interview, NRM Woman MP candidate, Mbarara City District, 16 December 2020.

23. Emmanuel Kitamirike and Peter Kisaakye, 'The Impact of the Cost of Politics on Inclusive Political Participation in Uganda', Westminster Foundation for Democracy and Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, Kampala, 2020. https://www.wfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WFD_NIMD_Report-on-the-Impact-of-the-Cost-of-Politics-in-Uganda.pdf

also available. Ugandan newspapers reported in 2020 that several surveys found that Uganda has among the highest rates for mobile data in East Africa.²⁴

Finally, the use of WhatsApp and social media more broadly is dependent on internet access. For most of the campaign period, the internet provides a more level playing field for opposition politicians, who are often physically prevented from holding rallies or speaking on a radio programme by security forces. Yet, as election day neared, access to social media platforms was disrupted, and a total internet shutdown was imposed on the eve of the elections. A few interviewees had indicated they intended to use WhatsApp to monitor the vote counting and tallying processes in their constituencies, but these plans were disrupted by the internet black-out.

Falsehoods and attacks

As in other contexts, the use of WhatsApp and other social media platforms during the campaign was accompanied by the problematic spread of misinformation and disinformation. Several candidates interviewed reported that someone had spread the fake news that they (the candidates) had contracted COVID-19 during the campaign.²⁵ The NUP candidate for the Mbarara South parliamentary seat explained that someone posted that he had crossed to the NRM and was now contesting for the Mbarara North seat – apparently to confuse voters and demobilise his supporters. All interviewees were aware of this challenge, and described various strategies to deal with it. Most declared that they simply ignored the fake news to avoid reinforcing it. The same NUP candidate explained: *'So I looked at the post and said, "if I respond will it generate unnecessary debate?" I ignored it and it ended there.'* Others denounced falsehoods as incorrect and sought to verify such claims. Some candidates indicated that some of the people on their teams were specifically in charge of dealing with the misinformation. An ANT candidate in Bushenyi indicated that he had a small group and they *'always find a formal and intellectual way of counteracting fake news that does not distort our information.'* Unsurprisingly, no respondent stated that they had a hand in the creation or dissemination of fake news. However, aspirants or their campaign teams are likely engaging in the spreading of rumours.

Candidates are also on the receiving end of unsolicited, inappropriate communications, or even harassment – with women disproportionately targeted. An independent Woman MP aspirant in Maracha District illustrated this by saying that *'sometimes people think being on social media is all about one falling in love'*. The NUP Woman MP candidate for Luwero District stated: *'You find that someone picks your number from a group and tries to engage you privately into different things like love advances.'* The NRM candidate for Mbarara City Woman MP described how the agents of an NRM-leaning independent candidate vilified her: *'you find them posting that "Bonnie used her 'legs' to get the [party] flag"; something like that. Then another posts "that one, I pity [her] husband", those kinds of accusations.'* Reflecting on these remarks, she commented: *'Actually I have at times found WhatsApp a bit unfriendly, I don't know if it's only me, on the basis that there is a lot of fabrication; there is a lot of unfounded information, there is a lot of toxicity; someone thinks of something and just puts it there.'* This is a pervasive problem: one in three Ugandan women who use the internet have experienced some kind of gender-based violence online.²⁶ Yet almost none of them know of any policies or laws they can turn to for protection, and half of Ugandan victims who reported the experience to the social media platform had no resolution.

24. *Daily Monitor*, 'Ugandans paying highest for mobile data in E. Africa – survey', 21 September 2019. <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/ugandans-paying-highest-for-mobile-data-in-e-africa-survey-1849040>

25. Interview, FDC MP candidate, Ntungamo Municipality, 12 December 2020; interview, FDC Woman MP candidate, Mbarara City District, 19 December 2020.

26. Neema Iyer, Bonnita Nyamwire and Sandra Nabulega, 'Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets. African Feminist Research for a Feminist Internet', Pollicy, August 2020. <https://ogbv.pollcity.org/>

Short on strategy

Efforts to engage on social media platforms lack a coherent strategy, and vary greatly according to candidates' digital proficiency and their ability to draw on party agents and supporters. The FDC candidate for Ntungamo Municipality stated that: *'The party has no strategy for using WhatsApp. As candidates we form our own WhatsApp groups. It's our own initiative.'* Very few interviewees stated they had received any kind of training. One of the rare exceptions was the DP candidate for Arua Central Division who stated he took part in a training organised by the party in 2017.²⁷ An NRM social media 'handler' in Luwero stated he had received 'minor' training introducing him to the various platforms from NRM party officials. Others benefitted from capacity-building initiatives emanating from civil society or donor programmes. But coordination at the party level is minimal. The ANT spokesperson mentioned that the party offered *'general advice on the use of social media'* during regional engagement with party members, but ANT candidates we spoke to did not mention this. Messages and templates are sometimes shared from the centre to the periphery, but these are generally about the presidential race. In some parties, national leaders are among the members of local WhatsApp groups and can therefore see what is being shared there. Some parties tried (with little success) to set up digital processes to monitor the presidential results. The NUP launched its 'U vote-Uganda' application, and the ANT planned to collect result forms from polling stations through WhatsApp. Neither functioned as envisaged, nor did these parties attempt to replicate these efforts to observe parliamentary results.

WhatsApp's potential beyond election time: party organising and accountability

The use of WhatsApp can extend beyond the election campaign. It can increasingly be a tool for political parties and parliamentarians to foster increased communication within the party organisation and between elected officials and their constituents.

WhatsApp has already been embraced for its capacity to increase communication between parties' various levels (national, regional, and local) and across constituencies and regions, at lower costs. This has the potential to facilitate the exchange of experiences and lessons learned among candidates and party activists, and can provide avenues for more internal consultation and feedback. All parties appear to use WhatsApp to communicate internally and sometimes to take decisions. It is perceived as a safe and quick way for party operatives to communicate at different levels.

A DP candidate in Arua explained that: *'DP members are now able to share information more safely and fast and it also helps to link all candidates and officials to the party president and get immediate feedback'*. Another DP parliamentary aspirant in Luwero Duero district credited the national WhatsApp group with *'help[ing] to ease communication between the Party secretariat and we the candidates'*. Another DP candidate from Toroma further argued that: *'It has eased modes of communication, we don't need national announcements to be placed on national media in order to learn about party functions, the messaging from the party headquarters is directly delivered to one's WhatsApp platform.'* This is true for other parties as well. The FDC Woman MP candidate for Kasese stated that: *'As FDC we also use WhatsApp a lot for our internal communication. The district leadership team for example has a group. Nationally you find committees and various organs of the party such as the women's league having their groups where they do engage on their particular assignments and communicate to each other easily.'*

27. One of the authors previously observed a training on the role of youth and the use of social media organised by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for DP young leaders held in Kampala in June 2016.

WhatsApp is also used to replace in-person meetings, which can be more costly and complicated to organise. An NUP Woman MP aspirant in Kaberamaido District stated that: *'the online meetings through social media have eased the financial hurdles that were involved, paying party members allowances in transport refund, this has been lessened'*. An ANT MP candidate in Luwero similarly described WhatsApp communication replacing party meetings in his district: *'Before we used to call people daily for meetings but now we discuss most issues on WhatsApp where we share ideas and messages about the candidates as well as party messages.'* The NRM Woman MP aspirant for Kasese District also stated that *'physical meetings have been reduced by WhatsApp which is very convenient especially in this busy season'*.

Nearly all parliamentary aspirants also indicated their intention to use WhatsApp to remain in touch with constituents if they were elected. However, they provided little detail about how this would work. According to the FDC Woman MP candidate for Ngora District, *'social media will be of help in passing matters discussed in parliament to the people back at the constituency level, and also receiving feedback and people's views they want to be raised on the floor of parliament.'* However, the challenges and limitations highlighted earlier still need to be considered: WhatsApp is useful to reach young urban elites, but requires further efforts to allow other populations to be consulted. Unsurprisingly, contestants in rural constituencies tended to be more circumspect about this potential. A few interviewees were also uncertain about the audience's enthusiasm for this: the FDC candidate for Ntungamo Municipality stated that when *'you post something on accountability, no one responds, you post something about someone who has been stripped naked everyone will respond'*.

WhatsApp will not provide accountability in a vacuum, but with concerted efforts could be a useful tool to increase communications between parliamentarians and their constituents. One example of how this is already happening elsewhere on the continent comes from Freetown, Sierra Leone, where the Mayor has initiated 'WhatsApp Town Halls' to collect citizens' views on proposed tax reforms and to provide space for them to articulate how the increased revenues could be better used to address prevailing challenges.²⁸ Another is that of local WhatsApp groups in Kenya gathering citizens and elected officials to discuss county government affairs.²⁹

Conclusion

WhatsApp's use in the 2021 parliamentary elections in Uganda shows that it has become a ubiquitous part of the electoral campaign toolbox of parliamentary aspirants across Uganda. All candidates use it to some degree, even when running in predominantly rural constituencies where social media penetration is low. Yet, we found that the approaches they use to engage their supporters on social media lacked strategic direction. Parliamentary aspirants and their campaign team are mindful of the limited reach of WhatsApp - which remained predominantly confined to young urban elites - but use this platform to target intermediaries who can then disseminate information about the candidate's message, and campaign on their behalf both online (by sharing to other groups) and offline (through word of mouth or traditional media for example).

Digital engagement is an increasingly important feature of campaigning, but it amplifies physical campaigns, more than it replaces them. This is in part due to the limited number of connected voters in more rural parts of the country, but also is tied to notions of what MPs and aspirants are

28. Freetown City Council, 'FCC to Start Digital Town Hall Initiative', 24 September 2020. <https://fcc.gov.sl/fcc-to-start-digital-town-hall-initiative/>

29. Duncan Omanga, 'WhatsApp as "digital publics": the Nakuru Analysts and the evolution of participation in county governance in Kenya', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Volume 13, Issue 1, 2019, pp. 175-191.

expected to provide to voters as part of their campaigns. While you can share ideas and engage in discussions online, you cannot build a borehole. But organised online campaigning on WhatsApp can supplement offline efforts, be that to promote a candidate's agenda, or for more nefarious purposes.

Given Uganda's young population, and the ever-increasing numbers of online users, platforms like WhatsApp are likely to become increasingly prominent parts of political campaigning at the parliamentary level. There is also an opportunity for this digital engagement to be sustained between election cycles in ways that improve internal party democratic processes and engagement between elected officials and their constituents. WhatsApp is widely used to facilitate communication within all party structures, in a vertical and horizontal manner, and sometimes replaces in-person meetings. There is potential to build on this to increase communication, consultation, and internal democracy.

Policy recommendations

Based upon this research, we identify a series of recommendations aimed at WFD, to inform their work in Uganda and beyond in three areas: on the electoral process, with political parties, and with parliamentarians.

Enhance participation in the electoral process

WFD could support civil society organisations, political parties, and community stakeholders in harnessing the potential WhatsApp offers towards bringing the electoral process closer to the voter, and in addressing the platform's shortcomings and negative effects on the campaign process. Engaging with trusted stakeholders at the community level – who are listened to and believed when they share information – to ensure accurate information about the voting process and the campaign is disseminated across WhatsApp would be key. Messages could specifically target first-time voters or focus on electoral integrity mechanisms.

WFD could support local community and civil society stakeholders to set up virtual discussions involving local candidates, in order to ask them questions and engage them on issues relevant to voters – before, during and after elections.

WFD could coordinate with other organisations providing support to political parties to identify opportunities to strengthen their capacities to use social media for issue-based campaigning.

WFD could support the creation of informal women candidates' WhatsApp networks – along or across partisan lines, at sub-regional, regional, or national levels – to offer them a space to share their experiences and support each other. This would provide a secure forum for them to identify common challenges and share mitigation strategies. These networks would be driven by women candidates in a way that suits their needs. WFD could share tools and resources in the groups, and encourage the creation of a toolbox for online campaigning – and mitigating its risks – as a woman.

As with any tool, WhatsApp can also be misused, with disinformation and harassment being two concerning dynamics that must be addressed. WFD could support the elaboration of a code of conduct for online campaigning – in line with existing initiatives for traditional campaigning – that political parties at the national level, and candidates at the local level, would be encouraged to commit to. Civil society and community leaders should be involved in these processes, and play the enforcement role. Sensitising members of the community – and respected local figures particularly – on these 'terms of engagement' could help promote expectations of 'good behaviour' from candidates and their supporters, and encourage them to speak out when individuals fail to respect the rules in their messages.

Improve intra-party organisation and communication

WFD could support political parties at the national level in using WhatsApp to increase communication between their national structures and their local branches across the country, in a way that is cost-effective, quick and can support and strengthen internal democratic processes.

WFD could also support political parties to create media WhatsApp groups. These groups would be comprised of journalists and other media stakeholders, who will be able to use the groups to ask questions about stories and to receive reliable information about the activities or statements of a political party position. WFD could support party media teams by training them on how to create this WhatsApp content and on how to engage with traditional media, using social media. Party officials and MPs could also be encouraged to make use of the broadcast option on WhatsApp to share information with journalists and radio presenters.

Strengthen the links between parliamentarians and their constituencies

WFD could encourage MPs to engage with their constituents through digital dialogues, using WhatsApp as a medium. This could take the form of virtual town hall meetings, or a communications channel for constituents to raise questions in WhatsApp groups at 'digital' constituency hours. Using the voice note feature of the platform to capture local languages, and intermediaries/agents to reach rural areas, can ensure wider access beyond simply those with direct online access.

WFD could also work with the women caucus in parliament to engage Facebook on the issue of abuse that disproportionately affects women candidates and female elected officials. WFD could train individuals on the existing tools available to report abuse received on online digital platforms and support them to advocate for strong measures, tailored to the local context.



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