

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN AFRICA

Likelihood of Ugandans Voting in the 2021 'Pandemic Elections'

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on political dynamics, as it did on other aspects of human life. The outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 almost brought the world to a standstill. This was mainly due to pandemic mitigation measures put in place, including social distancing. These actions greatly affected all levels of human interaction – politically, socially, and economically. Politically, it meant minimal or no electoral activities, no local or international face-to-face meetings, and the abuse of power. The restrictions saw elections postponed indefinitely in some countries, rescheduled or delayed in others, or held with minimal interaction elsewhere. Uganda is one of the few African countries that went ahead with holding elections in 2021 amid the pandemic. The study sought to examine and contribute to the broader understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on electoral participation by analysing available literature, Uganda's electoral laws and reports, and Afrobarometer survey data collected in Uganda before and during the pandemic. The focus was on individual-level predictors of voting intentions by Ugandans: demographic, political, social, and economic. Descriptive and inferential analyses were performed on citizens' likelihood of voting. The results demonstrate that party affiliation/identification and ethnic/regional identity are the strongest predictors of the likelihood of voting during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, democracy, election, electoral participation, voter turnout, Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Holding regular/periodic, free and fair elections is considered one of the essential defining elements of representative democracy. This is fundamental because elections allow citizens to choose who should take political office, who should be removed and who should replace those who are removed from office (Birch 2010 & 2011; Harrop & Miller 1987; Heywood 2000). This entails the democratic right to elect and/or be elected, as granted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21(3) which states:

The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of governments; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Elections must thus be not only periodic, but most importantly need to be free, fair and credible. Elections are credible if they reflect the people's free will and adhere to the norms of inclusivity, transparency, accountability, and competitiveness (Kaburu 2022, p. 45; Lindberg 2009). However, COVID-19 preventive measures and safety regulations had a devastating impact on democratic practice. Holding an election during the pandemic meant foregoing some or all of these attributes. Given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and the uncertainty of how long it would take for the situation to improve, a few countries made the difficult decision to hold elections during the pandemic, while most others postponed them (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

The decision whether to hold or postpone an election in such difficult times was prompted by factors that benefitted the incumbent in several ways. Firstly, there were concerns that the incumbents, especially those with authoritarian tendencies, attempted to exploit the restrictive measures to justify and consolidate their grip on power (Chirwa et al. 2021) by choosing to hold elections while limiting their competitors' ability to participate freely and fairly, as well as restricting various other political rights (Brown et al. 2020). This was more likely to occur in countries with a plurality voting system (winner takes all) than in countries with a majoritarian voting system (absolute majority). Plurality electoral systems are more susceptible to incumbent manipulations to win an election regardless of the low voter turnout the election attracts (Heywood 2002). Most countries that held elections during the pandemic experienced lower turnouts than in preceding elections (Figure 1), and most incumbents won these elections regardless of the low turnouts.

Secondly, in countries where institutions were weak or skewed in favour of the ruling party, the incumbent preferred to hold an election than to postpone it because the COVID-19 restrictions offered grounds for manipulation and electoral malpractice by the incumbent. This involved extensive use of the police, the army, and the media in favour of the incumbent while leaving the opposition side-lined (as discussed in detail below). Thirdly, other governments postponed elections indefinitely in order to extend their stay in office, citing COVID-19 as the reason (Brown et al. 2020). Therefore, in both cases, the incumbent benefited from the COVID-19 restrictions, either by taking advantage of the electoral system and weak institutions that could work in their favour, or by postponing elections and justifying their extended stay in office.

An election conducted in such restrictive conditions limits citizens' participation and jeopardises the principles of representative democracy. The restrictions affected the quality of the elections. With the low voter turnouts recorded in these elections, the responsibility and accountability of the elected leaders might be compromised as they are elected by a small number of voters or by a specific section of society. In broader terms, this might affect the policies made and the policy outcomes. Highlighting the significance of reasonable electoral participation in a polity and the quality of the outcome of this process, Birch (2011), Lijphart (2007), and Schlozman et al. (2012) correctly assert that an election should have the intent or effect of influencing government action – *directly* by affecting the making or implementation of public policy, or *indirectly* by influencing the selection of public policy, or by influencing the selection of people who make those policies.

Large open-air campaign rallies where candidates present and sell their manifestos to the voters are commonplace in Uganda, as they are in many other African countries. However, during the pandemic, candidates and voters could not hold outdoor rallies and gatherings as they would normally do. Therefore, COVID-19 indirectly deprived citizens of the opportunity to fully and openly participate in this important democratic activity. Most studies of the impact of COVID-19 on electoral democracy have focussed on electoral participation, voter turnout, the legitimacy and the quality of leaders elected, and the health risks of conducting elections during the pandemic (Chirwa et al. 2021; Landman & Splendore 2020; Matlosa 2021; Palguta et al. 2022; Picchio & Santolini 2022; Santana et al. 2020). The current study goes further by examining the impact of citizens' willingness or likelihood of going to the polls during the pandemic, who was likely or unlikely to do so, and why. The study also investigated the impact of enforced COVID-19 restrictive measures such as 'media-only campaigns' on electoral participation in Uganda.

DATA AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Data

This study reviewed available literature on COVID-19, Uganda's electoral laws, COVID-19 guidelines, and media reports on the experiences of electoral participation during the pandemic. It further complemented this with the Afrobarometer survey data for Uganda. Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that has provided reliable data on experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance and quality of life in Africa since 1999. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples. In Uganda, these surveys consist of a sample size of 2 400 respondents. Respondents are randomly selected, representing citizens of the voting-age population (18 years and above).

Using Afrobarometer survey data, the study could make an empirical and comparative analysis of Ugandans' likelihood of voting before and during the pandemic. Uganda is purposely chosen for two reasons: first, because of the availability of data. Uganda conducted two Afrobarometer surveys¹ not too far apart. The first was conducted between 30 September 2019 and 31 October 2019, a few months before the first COVID-19 case was reported in Uganda on 21 March 2020. The second COVID-19 survey was undertaken during the pandemic, from 22 December 2020 to 7 January 2021, and ended just one week before the elections on 14 January 2021. The COVID-19 survey also serves as a pre-election survey for this study as it, along with the COVID-19 modules (questionnaire), also contained pre-election modules. Data from these two rounds provide an excellent comparative framework within the context of this study to gauge Ugandans' likelihood to vote before and during the pandemic. The second reason for the choice of Uganda is because Uganda is one of the few countries in Africa that went ahead with holding elections during the pandemic.

Operationalisation of the Variables and Empirical Analyses

The likelihood of voting formed this study's dependent variable. The study chose Afrobarometer's Round 8 survey question (the pre-COVID-19 survey for this study) which carried a question asking respondents how likely they were to vote should an election be held tomorrow. For the COVID-19 survey (Round 8.5), respondents were asked how likely they were to vote in the 2021 general elections, understanding that these elections would be held during the pandemic. It was hypothesised by this study that most respondents would be less likely to

1 The regular/scheduled survey (Round 8) and the Covid-19 survey (Round 8.5).

vote. Responses to these questions were recoded in a binary variable (i.e., 0=No, for those who said they would not vote/not likely to vote, and 1=Yes, for those who said they would vote/likely to vote). Using SPSS, descriptive and inferential analyses were performed on variables of interest (Table 2). Considering that the dependent variable is binary, logistic regression was performed to estimate the likelihood of voting (as discussed in the results section).

COVID-19 AND ELECTIONS: THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

According to the African election calendar, citizens from about 20 countries were supposed to go to the polls for presidential and parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2021 (Asplund & Akinduro 2020). However, some countries postponed their elections and rescheduled them for a later date. These include Senegal, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Libya, Burkina Faso, Mauritius, and Angola. Despite organisational challenges and barriers to participation, others held their elections as scheduled. These include Malawi, Burundi, Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Namibia, Togo, Zambia, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Uganda. Like presidential and parliamentary elections, lower-level elections in most countries were equally affected and positioned, as shown in Table 1.

The pandemic put political leaders and decision-makers to the test regarding the handling of elections during this time (CSPA 2020; Orlando 2020). They were supposed to make careful planning, risk mitigation and significant operational adjustments while protecting the integrity of the democratic process by increasing inclusivity while protecting democratic rights (Atkinson et al. 2020). The postponements of elections were protected and guaranteed by Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which explicitly states that:

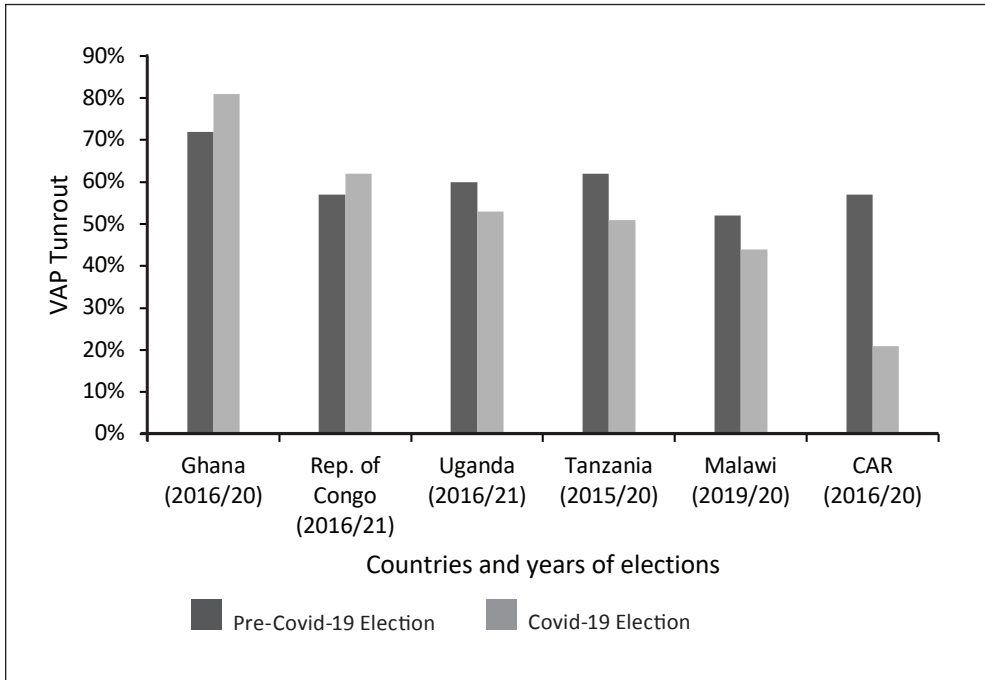
In times of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation and the existence of which is officially proclaimed, the States Parties to the present Covenant may take measures derogating from their obligations under the present Covenant to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation, provided that such measures are not inconsistent with their other obligations under international law and do not involve discrimination solely on the ground of race, colour, sex, language, religion or social origin.

(United Nations 1966)

Countries that postponed elections justified their choice to limit the spread of the disease (Asplund & Akinduro 2020), and they claimed doing so in order to protect the lives of their people. Conversely, those that went ahead with holding

elections defended their position on the grounds that they had to do so to allow citizens to exercise their political rights of choosing their leaders.

Whichever choice was taken, COVID-19 has indisputably affected electoral participation in several ways. Firstly, countries that decided to postpone elections denied citizens the opportunity of exercising their political rights. These governments became susceptible to a legitimacy crisis and a reduced or lack of trust and political support from citizens by not holding elections and remaining in power. On the other hand, countries that chose to conduct their elections recorded low voter turnouts (see Figure 1). Eventually, this also affected the legitimacy, trust and support of the elected representatives and governments as they were elected by a significantly small number of the people (low voter turnout) or a particular section of the society.



Source: International IDEA 2021

Figure 1: VAP turnout before and during the pandemic in countries that conducted elections during the pandemic

Therefore, any measures taken by governments affected not only the levels of electoral participation but also the legitimacy of elected leaders. While the postponement of elections denied the electorate their political right, holding elections during the pandemic exposed citizens to the risk of contracting and/or spreading the disease. As a result, governments were accused of exploiting the pandemic to extend their rule if they chose to postpone the elections, and of exposing citizens to the risks of the disease if they chose to hold elections (Atkinson et al. 2020, p. 4; Ellena & Shein 2020).

COVID-19 AND THE 2021 ELECTIONS IN UGANDA

Uganda's 2021 national election was its eighth successive election since the National Resistance Movement (NRM) took control in 1986. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni had been the sole candidate the NRM had put forward for all eight elections and had won every one of them, making him one of the longest-serving African presidents. Nevertheless, he has not always breezed to victory without much effort. At various times he has been challenged by opposition candidates, including Kizza Besigye of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), who ran against Museveni four times. In the 2021 elections, Museveni faced tight competition from the youngest-ever presidential candidate in the history of Uganda. Political analysts characterised this as a generational battle between father and son (Brooks 2019), i.e., the 76-year-old Museveni and the 38-year-old Robert Kyagulanyi, better known by his stage name Bobi Wine, a popstar turned-politician standing for the National Unit Platform (NUP) political party.

Politically, the detection of the first COVID-19 case in Uganda on 21 March 2020 sparked fear, speculation and contemplation over whether the country would still hold elections as scheduled on 14 January 2021, a little less than a year away. Uganda was unprepared to hold its elections amid this unprecedented pandemic. Hence, there were calls from a section of the public for the postponement of the elections to curb the spread of the disease. It was feared that holding elections would expose people to a substantial risk of contracting the virus if they participated in electoral activities such as attending campaign rallies and going out to vote on election day (Chirwa et al. 2021; Yang et al. 2020).

In the first few months of the pandemic President Museveni, his supporters, and some members of his party were among those who were sceptical about holding elections. In an interview with NBS TV in May 2020, Museveni was of the view that holding elections in the COVID-19 environment was suicidal, and he declared that 'it will be madness to say you go and people gather. I do not think it will be wise' (Kyeyune 2020). Similarly, some staff from the country's electoral management body (EC) were sceptical. For example, Jotham Taremwa, a

spokesperson for Uganda's Electoral Commission, said, 'you cannot have electoral activities conducted in a COVID-19 environment the same way as before' (Kyeyune 2020). Others, however, were opposed to the opinion. Among them is the national coordinator of the Citizen's Coalition for Electoral Democracy Uganda (CCEDU), a civil society organisation that had monitored Uganda's elections for years. He observed that postponing the elections would pose a significant legal challenge since it is not provided for under the national Constitution (Kyeyune 2020).

The public was equally caught in this impasse. However, after thoughtful deliberations by the government, the Electoral Commission (EC), political parties and other stakeholders, it was decided to have elections on 14 January 2021. Even so, Uganda held these elections when it had about 40 000 confirmed cases and a death toll of about 350 people (Wordometer 2021).

MEDIA-ONLY CAMPAIGNS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

With the government's determination to press on with the elections, the Electoral Commission instituted COVID-19 regulatory guidelines under which 'COVID-19 elections' would be managed. The guidelines comprised several precautionary measures and adjustments to contain the spread of the disease, which aligned with the Ministry of Health Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs). Some of these rules were the banning of outdoor election campaigns and rallies in favour of 'media-only campaigns'. This meant that election campaigns would only be conducted on traditional media channels (newspapers, radio, and television) and new media channels (digital media) like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and internet-based social networking sites. Additionally, candidates and parties were advised to use other non-contact means to interact with the electorate. This included using flyers, pamphlets, brochures, posters, billboards, and banners (Ministry of ICT and National Guidance 2020).

For the media to serve its functions effectively, it must be free, independent, and impartial. However, the Ugandan press has often been subject to state interference, harassment, intimidation by state authority and security officials, abhorrent laws and regulations, and skewed media ownership (African Center for Media Excellence 2021; International Press Institute 2020; Ssenoga 2021). Because of the escalation of these tactics, especially during politically-charged periods such as during elections and other times of contentious political debate, Uganda's position in Reporters Without Borders' annual ranking of global press freedom has steadily dropped over the past three years, from 117 in 2018 to 132 in 2022 (Reporters Without Borders 2022). Uganda has also been labelled by Freedom House as NOT a democracy, with a score of 34 out of 100 on their 2022 index of political

rights and civil liberties (Freedom House 2022) . According to Freedom House, a country is an electoral democracy if its elections adhere to certain standards, including a competitive, multiparty political system; universal adult suffrage for all citizens over the age of 18 without criminal convictions; regularly contested elections conducted under conditions of ballot secrecy; reasonable ballot security; the absence of massive voter fraud yielding results that are unrepresentative of the public will; substantial public access of candidates and political parties to the electorate through the media; and generally open political campaigning.

The media felt the state's harsh hand on multiple occasions and this is more pronounced during elections. In 2021, despite a media-only election, the government shut down the internet and banned social media just two days before the election. ACME reports that it registered two dozen instances between the beginning of the campaigns in November 2020 and the day of the election on 14 January 2021. These involved the harassment, detention, attack, and injury of journalists, as well as damage to or loss of property perpetrated by various state security agencies, and sometimes agents and supporters of the different presidential candidates (African Center for Media Excellence 2021, p. 5).

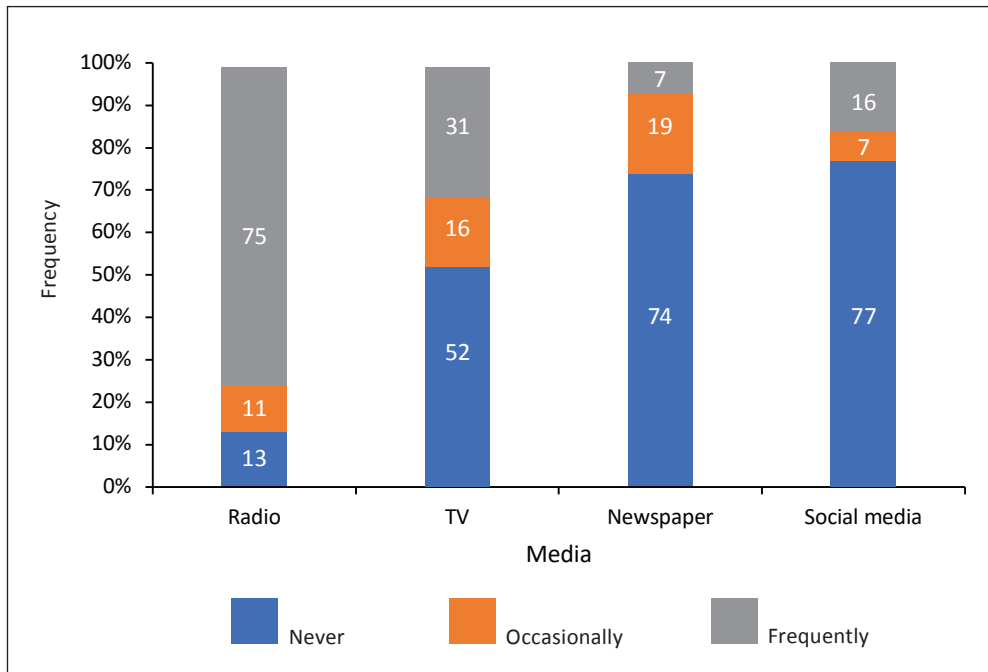
When preventing people from breaking the COVID-19 guidelines, the government's security agencies took an even harder stand, particularly against those who violated the guidelines and attempted to conduct face-to-face campaigns. As a result, many young people were brutally beaten, teargassed, arrested and/or jailed. This included the presidential opposition candidate Bobi Wine, who was arrested in November 2020. There was increased violence during the election due to such enforcement, with security personnel interfering with demonstrators and election campaigns. On 18 November, for example, there was a riot in which 54 people died when police dispersed demonstrators (OSSREA 2021; Sempijja & Brito 2022). The opposition alleged that the government and its security agencies were using the rules to target the opposition (Sempijja & Brito 2022; Siegle & Cook 2021).

To abide by the government's decision to continue with the elections and the implementation of media-only campaign regulations and guidelines, as pointed out above, political parties, candidates, and the entire electorate had no choice but to adjust, adhere to and conform to them. And, for the first time in the history of multiparty democracy in Uganda, the electorate was compelled to hold media-only campaigns despite uncertainties about the efficacy of this approach. These concerns were reasonable, given the unpreparedness of the political parties, candidates and voters, as well as the fact that some parts of the country have limited media penetration (both traditional and digital) and that not all citizens have access to all forms of media.

A survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2020 examined, among other things, the viability of ‘media only 2021 election campaigns’ and access to media. According to this survey, while more than eight in ten (87%) of Ugandans said they own a mobile phone, just a quarter (26%) of them own a mobile phone which can connect to the internet (Afrobarometer 2020). This is consistent with the 2014 census data, which shows that of the estimated population of 46 million people, only one million homesteads had television sets, and 3.4 million had radio sets. Internet penetration stood at only 42%, with up to 19 million Ugandans connected to the internet (UBOS 2014). These findings reveal that only a small proportion of Ugandans could make full use of the media-only campaigns, despite the country having more than 300 registered radio stations across the country, more than 30 television stations, and more than 30 newspapers (African Center for Media Excellence 2021).

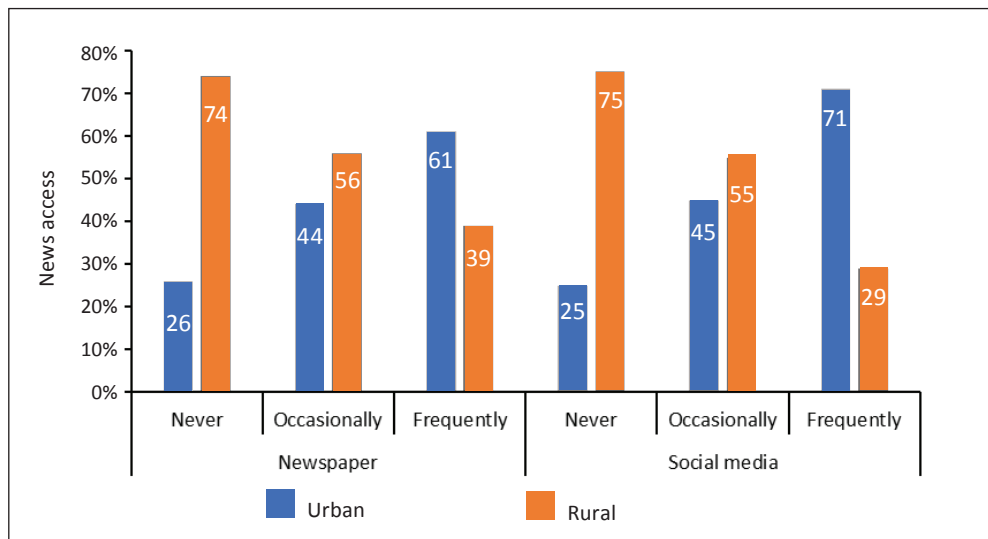
The reliance on this approach left many voters underinformed because only a fraction of the population had full access to the media outlets. Older individuals, persons with lower levels of education, rural dwellers, women, and the destitute were among those disadvantaged by lack of media access. Although radio is widely available across the country, not everyone has radio access. For instance, while about three-quarters (75%) of the respondents cited radio as the source from which they frequently get news, the breakdown of rural and urban residents’ access to media shows that of those who never listen to radio news, the majority (74%) are rural dwellers (Figure 2). On the other hand, while 71% of urban dwellers frequently access social media, more than 71% of those living in rural areas, who constitute the majority of Uganda’s population, do not have access to social media (Figure 3). Regarding newspapers (presented in Figure 3), only 39% of rural dwellers frequently read newspapers, against 61% frequent newspaper readers from urban areas. These findings compare with those of the African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME) in their February 2021 election report, which reported that radio was the most significant source of information for 80% of Ugandans, followed by television (31%), social media (13%) and lastly, newspapers (12%) (African Center for Media Excellence 2021).

Secondly, the media-only campaigns were not only a challenge to the voters but also to candidates. For instance, opposition and private candidates accused the state-owned media of giving more airtime to the ruling party NRM and its candidates at various levels (Ssenoga 2020). The ruling party’s presidential candidate enjoyed uninterrupted coverage by the presidential press unit and the state-owned media, which covered his official and non-official activities countrywide (African Center for Media Excellence 2021; Ssenoga 2020). This is true, particularly in a country where the public media is dominantly state-owned.



Source: Afrobarometer, 2021

Figure 2: Frequency of news access from different forms of media in Uganda (%)



Source: Afrobarometer, 2021

Figure 3: Frequency of news access from different sources between rural and urban residents in Uganda (%)

Similarly, the privately-owned media was accused of a lack of balanced, free, and fair coverage, and deliberately, or under coercion, denying access by opposition parties and their candidates (Daily Monitor 2020). This is justified by the court cases pursued by opposition candidates, in particular by Bobi Wine against government officials (including the Mbale Resident District Commissioner (RDC)), who reportedly denied him access to a radio station at which he (Wine) had booked a talk show (Daily Monitor 2020). Indeed, the media-only campaign mostly affected the opposition parties by giving them little or no opportunity to leverage election campaigns and mobilise their supporters and voters to vote for them.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

Despite the obstacles and challenges noted above, the media-only campaign enhanced the country's use of social media and demonstrated its value in elections, particularly in nascent democracies. This follows technological advancement and internet penetration, which is seeing social media overtake traditional media in terms of influence and use.² Social media has had a tremendous impact on electoral engagement and voter turnout, particularly among the youth, who comprise most of the voting-age population in Africa and Uganda. The use of social media allows people with similar or dissimilar interests and opinions to easily interact, debate, and even challenge one another, regardless of the physical distance between them.

Based on this reality, candidates and political parties strategically invested in social media to reach out to their followers and potential voters. They did so mainly because voters and candidates could only engage virtually under the lockdown and social distance norms. Secondly, the youth make up the majority of voters and are the leading social media users. The World Population Review (2022) and UBOS (2017) estimate that around 70% of Uganda's population is under 40 years. This is similar to the Electoral Commission (EC) data, which shows that the total number of registered voters for the 2021 elections was 17 658 527, with more than seven out of ten (72%) being youthful, between 18 and 40 years. Therefore, politicians needed to use social media to reach this vital political constituency.

Thirdly, as more people own devices that are fitted with internet access and can access and afford the internet, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp (particularly WhatsApp groups) gained popularity and importance during the pandemic in mobilising voters. Because of this widespread use of

2 Social media has become more convenient to users due to the ease of use and the ability to sidestep the bureaucracy involved in accessing traditional media, such as radio, television and newspapers.

social media, the 2021 election was dubbed, as noted above, a ‘generational battle’ between the old, Born Before Computer (BBC) generation, which uses social media minimally, and the digital or dot-com generation that uses the most social media.

The presence of a young presidential contender, Bobi Wine (38), and many other young people standing for various political positions, including candidates for parliamentary seats, amplified unprecedented youth participation in the 2021 elections. Popular young candidates for a parliamentary seat included 24-year-olds John Katumba and Kabuye Frank and the youngest Member of Parliament, Hellen Auma, who was 23 years old when she stood for the position. Due to the massive youth mobilisation and widespread use of social media among the youth, many young people were elected to the Parliament, making the 2021–2026 Ugandan Parliament the most youthful in Africa.

Bobi Wine’s role in the 2021 Ugandan elections is crucial and cannot be overemphasised. Using online music shows and social media, he garnered a large following among young voters because of his musical lyrics that addressed social and economic problems mainly afflicting the youth (African Union 2021, p. 19). With his campaign slogan ‘New Uganda’ and his campaign song *Tuliyambala Engule* (literally meaning, an era where all will be perfect, happiness, no toil, no stress but jubilation), he appealed to the youth for change.

In what can be categorised as ‘the Bobi Wine factor’, coupled with the ‘media-only campaigns’, the influence of social media use among the youth, and ‘the NUP election vote weave or Vote the Umbrella weave’, some young candidates won elections despite never campaigning in person. As a result, 26 seasoned politicians, including the previous government’s vice president, Edward Kiwanuka Ssekandi, lost their parliamentary seats (OSSREA 2021; *The Chronicles*, 2021).

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

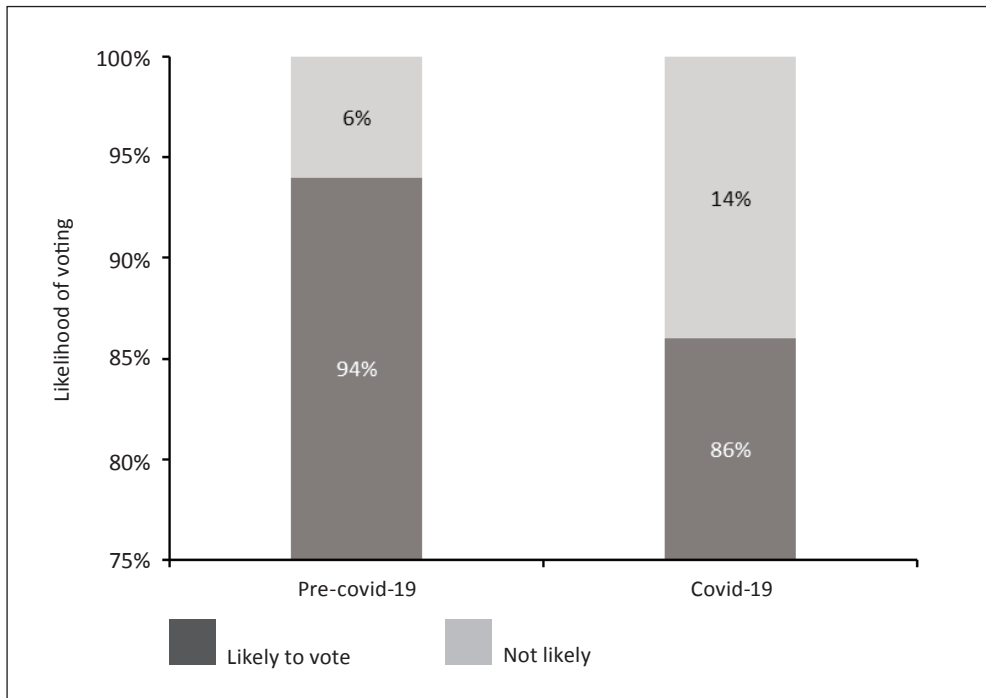
Descriptive analysis

From the univariate analysis (Table 2 and Figure 4) the results show that a majority of Ugandans expressed the likelihood that they would vote both before (94%) and during the pandemic (86%). However, they were generally 8% less likely to vote during the pandemic than they were before the pandemic.

Reflecting the fact that Uganda’s population is predominantly youthful, more than three-quarters (75%) of survey respondents were 45 years old or younger for both pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 surveys. Regarding education, our data show that the majority (60%) of the respondents for both pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 surveys had no formal or primary school education. This is closely followed by respondents with secondary and high school education who make up slightly

more than one-third (38% in the pre-COVID-19 survey and 40% in the COVID-19). Furthermore, fewer than 5% of respondents in both rounds had a college and university education.

Regarding party support, when asked which party's candidate they would vote for if elections were held tomorrow, the univariate results for both rounds reveal that more than two-thirds would vote for the ruling party NRM, (75%) in the pre-COVID-19 survey and (72%) in the COVID-19 survey (Table 2).

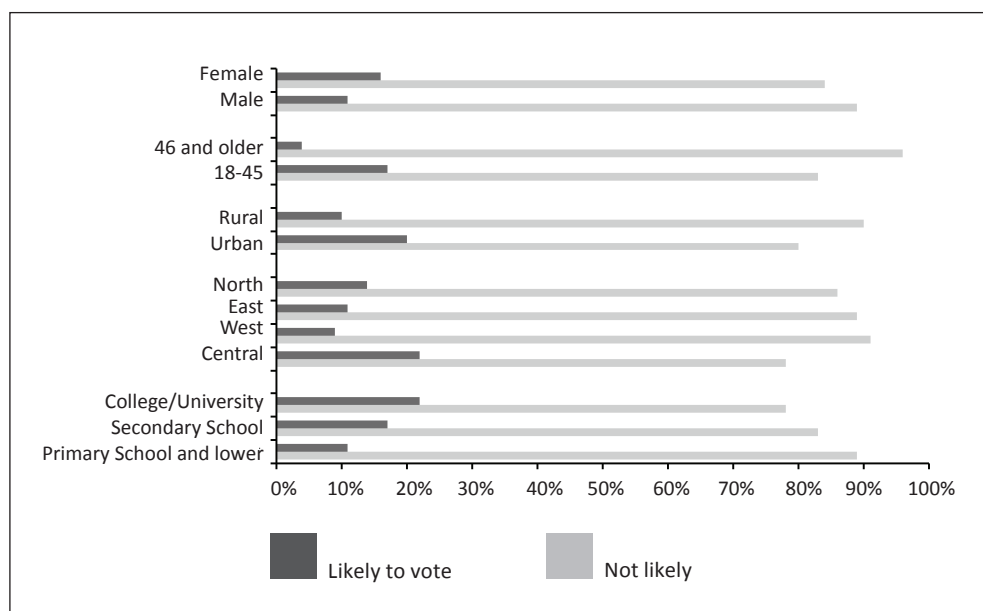


Source: Afrobarometer, 2020 and 2021

Figure 4: Likelihood of voting, pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 in Uganda (%)

A simple crosstabulation between the likelihood to vote and socio-demographic factors (Figure 5) shows that, on average, more than eight in ten (80%) Ugandans across all demographic categories were likely to vote during the pandemic. However, there were variations in a few categories. For instance, the results reveal that the more educated Ugandans were less likely to vote. Ugandans with no formal or primary education were more likely to vote (89%) than those with secondary education (83) and college or university education (78%). Regionally,

Ugandans in the West were much more likely to vote (91%) than the rest, with those in the Central being the least likely to vote (78%). Urban residents were 10% less likely to vote (80%) than rural dwellers (90%). Despite being the largest demographic group and having the most access to social media and use, young people were less likely to vote than those aged 46 and older (96% vs. 86%, respectively). Lastly, when broken down by gender, females were 5% more likely to vote (89% vs 84%).

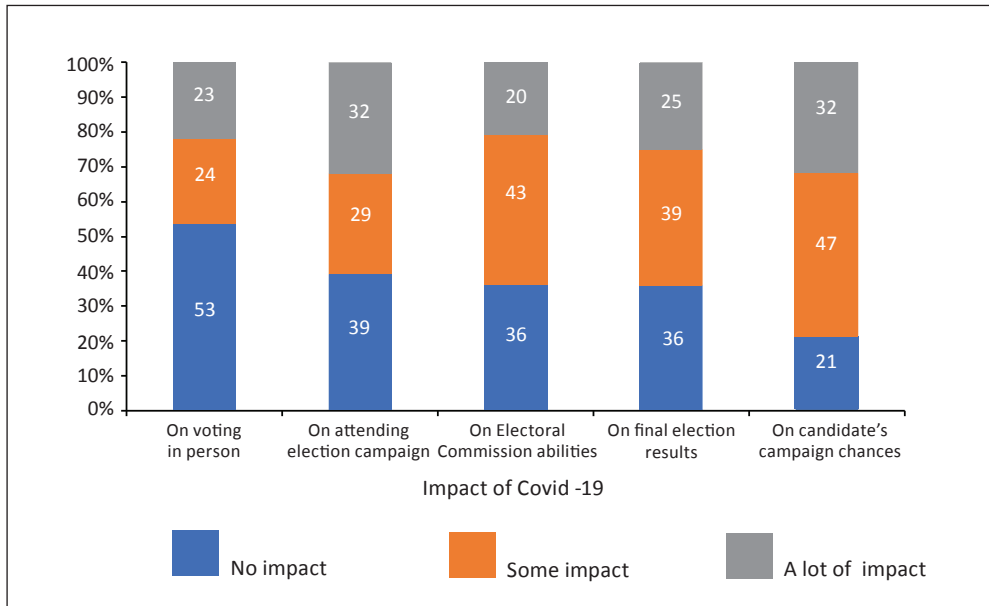


Source: Afrobarometer, 2021

Figure 5: Likelihood of voting during the pandemic by socio-demographic factors

Besides the socio-demographic characteristics and likelihood of voting, we also examined Ugandans' opinions on how COVID-19 would affect the upcoming 2021 elections (Figure 6). Expressing their overwhelming likelihood of voting despite the pandemic, when asked whether COVID-19 would have an impact on the 2021 elections, more than half (53%) said there would be 'no impact' on voting in person, less than a quarter (24%) said there would be 'some impact' and only 23% said that COVID-19 would have 'a lot of impact'. Nonetheless, the majority of Ugandans agreed that COVID-19 would have 'a lot of impact or some impact' on attending the election campaign (61%), the ability of the Electoral Commission to manage the elections (63%), and the final results of the election (64%).

When asked whether it was reasonable to postpone elections due to COVID-19, more than half (52%) favoured postponement, of these 24% said they ‘strongly agree’ and 28% ‘agree’. Likewise, the majority (73%) agreed that COVID-19 would ‘somewhat likely and very likely’ spread due to elections (Table 2 in the Appendix).



Source: Afrobarometer 2021

Figure 6: The impact of COVID-19 on Uganda's 2021 elections (%)

Logistic regression

Three multinomial logistic regression models were performed to determine the respondent's likelihood of voting before and during the pandemic. This involved the likelihood of voting as the dependent variable, and a number of individual-level predictors of the likelihood of voting as independent variables. The selected independent variables included demographic (age, gender, and regionalism), SES/resource (education), psychological (trust in the president and political interest), and mobilisation (partisanship and media exposure). In the first model, we looked at respondents' likelihood of voting in the round that was held before COVID-19 (the pre-COVID-19 model). The second model constituted the same variables but from the pre-election survey (the COVID-19 model). In the third model, we pulled COVID-19 variables into the second model to see their effect on the likelihood of voting during the pandemic. The COVID-19 variables included variables like

COVID-19 will spread due to elections, postpone elections during the pandemic, and COVID-19 impacting election campaign attendance. An overview of the results from these three models is summarised in Table 3 (in the Appendix).

The overall model fitting for the pre-COVID-19 model showed not to be statistically significant (14.95, $p=0.09$). However, the other two models were both statistically significant with the result (93.20, $p=0.00$) for the COVID-19 model without COVID-19 variables, and (60.70, $p=0.00$) when COVID-19 variables are introduced into the model (Table 3).

In the pre-COVID-19 model, none of the socio-demographic variables yielded any statistically significant results. However, in the second model, trust president, political interest, age, and partisanship were all statistically significant. In the third model, the same variables remain statistically significant, but with the addition of three COVID-19 variables the variable on the postponement of elections showed to be statistically significant.

This implies that respondents who trust the president were more likely to vote during the pandemic than those who do not trust the president. The same can be said for those who share membership of and support for the ruling party; these were similarly more likely to hold on and vote during the pandemic than were supporters of the opposition. Regarding age, even with COVID-19, the model shows that younger voters were four times more likely to vote than older voters (OR=3.56, $p=0.00$). Supporters of the ruling party were two times more likely to vote than those who support the opposition (OR=2.29, $p=0.04$). Those whose opinion was to postpone elections were less likely to vote ($p=0.00$) than those who did not support the idea of going ahead with holding elections.

Regarding age, younger people (18–45 years) seem to be more willing and likely to vote than older people. While age is not statistically significant in the model before COVID-19, it is significant in the other two models, without COVID-19 variable ($p=0.00$) and in the COVID-19 model ($p=0.04$).

DISCUSSION

According to descriptive analysis, most Ugandans had a 94% likelihood of voting before the pandemic and an 86% likelihood of voting during the pandemic. Despite survey data showing a high self-reported likelihood of voting, the official voter turnout was lower than that in the 2016 and 2021 elections. The official voter turnout data declared by the Electoral Commission was 68% in 2016 and 57% in 2021 for presidential elections (Electoral Commission of Uganda 2021). According to Bernstein et al. (2001) and Chirwa et al. (2021), this inconsistency is usual in surveys as respondents tend to exaggerate their likelihood of voting in order to appear to have more politically and socially desirable behaviour than is the case. Regardless of these numbers, the decline in the likelihood of voting

expressed by respondents before and during COVID-19 is consistent with official voter turnout data from the Electoral Commission, which shows about 10% decline in turnout in the election before (2016) and during the pandemic (2021). With these findings, it is apparent that COVID-19 had an impact on the low voter turnout in the 2021 elections. This could be attributable to a number of causes, including fear of contracting COVID-19 and the impact of restricted campaign activities, which were limited to 'media-only'.

COVID-19 had a significant impact on Ugandans' likelihood of voting during the pandemic, as evidenced by the overall COVID-19 models being significant and the number of variables significant in the two COVID-19 models (Table 7 in Appendix), as discussed below. This is inferentially supported by the fact that none of the variables in the first model (pre-COVID-19 model) were statistically significant.

Partisanship, Loyalty and Trust in the President

The results show that partisanship had a significant influence in predicting the likelihood of voting, even in the face of the pandemic. The majority of Ugandans express support for the ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Given that Uganda is a dominant one-party state which has had only one party and one president in power since the restoration of multiparty democracy in the 1990s, the ruling party may have registered loyal supporters who are unwilling to let their party lose an election to the opposition. Even in tough times like the pandemic, they are likely to stand by their party. This was particularly important given that the 2021 election was hotly contested between the incumbent NRM's Yoweri Museveni and the youngest-ever presidential and opposition candidate, Bobi Wine. Hence, supporters of the ruling party might have been determined to support both their party and their leader lest they lose the election to the young opposition candidate. Such a display of loyalty is consistent with findings from empirical studies in Western European and American established democracies. These indicate that partisanship is a strong predictor of propensity and the likelihood of voting; and that they do so in support of their party's policies and ideology due to long-established loyalty (Dalton 2014; Dalton et al. 2011; Holmberg 2007; Norris 2002). However, African voters are generally perceived as being less devoted to parties, and have weak partisanship personalities (Bleck & Van de Walle 2019; Wahman 2014).

Age and the Likelihood of Voting

Regarding age, the entry of a young candidate in the presidential contest for the first time in Uganda's history of multiparty democracy might have attracted

substantially more young voters to vote than older voters. The other factor likely to have been influential in the likelihood of voting is the use of media-only campaigns, which attracted younger voters as they are the majority of users of the social media that gained significance during the 2021 elections. Similarly, the perception that older people were more susceptible and likely to succumb to COVID-19 than the young (Athumani & Bearak 2021; Maragakis 2020) could have made young voters more willing and likely to vote than older voters. Considering that Uganda is relatively youthful, this massive likelihood of voting by the majority of young voters had a significant effect. These results corroborate what has long been established in the literature, that there is a significant relationship between age and voting, with an individual's likelihood of voting increasing with age to adulthood (Lane 1959; Blais 2007, p. 630; Bratton 1999, p. 565; Dalton 2014) and then declining with ageing and the withdrawal from social and political life (Cutler & Bengtson 1974). Hence, it is not surprising that young Ugandan voters were more likely to vote than older voters, particularly during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 drastically altered all political dynamics. It impacted levels of political participation, voter turnout, and egregious violation of human rights by governments and individuals, particularly in Africa. There was, for instance, an increase in cases of arbitrary detentions and security forces placing opposition candidates under house arrest, allegedly for violating COVID-19 protocols, as with Bobi Wine in Uganda. Consequently, most of Africa experienced the 'consolidation of authoritarianism' rather than the 'consolidation of democracy'.

In countries where the election calendar coincided with the pandemic, governments and the electorate were faced with the uncertain choice of whether to postpone elections and keep the same governments in office until the situation permitted reasonable participation, or go to elections in order to have 'legitimately' elected leaders and governments while risking contracting and spreading the disease. Despite the challenges of the 'COVID-19 election' Ugandans had the opportunity to exercise their right to vote and be voted in for political office. The turnout was relatively more impressive than expected, falling by only 10% from the previous election. Citizens were given a chance to elect their representatives at various levels in an election that saw the ruling party, the National Resistance Movement, losing 20 parliamentary seats to the opposition and the main opposition party, the National Unit Platform (NUP), accruing 56 seats out of 529.

However, the challenges that COVID-19 posed to electoral democracy call for governments to devise hybrid modes of conducting elections, both physically

and virtually or digitally. This should be achieved by using media to campaign and for electronic or postal voting avenues that have not been fully utilised thus far in Africa. Such efforts will make future ‘pandemic elections’ more credible, inclusive, and participatory.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Elections postponed or delayed due to COVID-19, as of 11 May 2021

Country	Electoral event	Decision	Scheduled date of elections	New date
Botswana	Local by-election	Postponed	May 2020	Postponed indefinitely
Cameroon	Local by-election	Postponed	First round: 04/04/ /2020 Second round: 14/04/2020	Postponed indefinitely
Chad	Legislative elections	Postponed	10/06/2020	Postponed indefinitely
Ethiopia	Parliamentary elections	Postponed	29/08/2020	August 2021
Gabon	Partial legislative elections	Postponed	04/04/ and 18/04/2020	Postponed indefinitely
Ghana	New Patriotic Party primary elections	Postponed	25/04/2020	Postponed indefinitely
Kenya	Local by-elections	Postponed	April, June and July 2020	15/12/2020
Liberia	Midterm Senate Elections and referendum	Postponed	13/11/2020	08/12/2020
Libya	Municipal elections	Postponed	Beginning 18/04/2020 (7 municipalities)	First week of June (12 municipalities)
Nigeria	Local elections (Cross River and Benue States)	Postponed	28/03/2020	31/10/2020
Somalia	Presidential election	Postponed	Before 21/02/2021	08/02/2021
Tunisia	Municipal elections	Postponed	29/03/2020	05/07/2020
Uganda	Elections of Special Interest Groups	Postponed	April-May 2020	11, 13, 17/08/2020
Zambia	Local by-elections	Postponed	01/05/2020	Postponed indefinitely
Zimbabwe	Local by-elections	Postponed	04/04 and 25/042020	2021

Source: International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) 2021

Table 2: Univariate analysis for dependent and independent variables

Variable	Variable description	Pre-COVID-19 Round	COVID-19 Round
<i>Dependent variable</i>			
Likelihood of voting	Likely	94%	86%
	Not likely	6%	14%
<i>Independent variables</i>			
Age	≤45	75%	77%
	46≥	25%	23%
Gender	Male	50%	50%
	Female	50%	50%
Residence	Urban	25	32
	Rural	75	68
Region	Central	27%	23%
	West	25%	29%
	East	26%	23%
	North	21%	26%
Education	Primary school and lower;	58%	56%
	Secondary and high school	38%	40%
	College and university	4%	4%
Trust president	Not at all	12%	27%
	Just a little	23%	21%
	Somewhat	22%	21%
	A lot	42%	31%
Partisanship	Ruling party	75%	72%
	Opposition	25%	28%
Political interest	No interest	29%	39%
	Interested	71%	61%
Media exposure	Never	11%	13%
	A few times a week	33%	35%
	Everyday	56%	52%

COVID-19 will spread due to elections							.849	.642-1.123	.252
Postpone elections during pandemic							.823	.678-.999	.049***
COVID-19 impacts attending campaigns							1.145	.942-1.393	.174

Source: Afrobarometer Survey

Significance: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Table 4: Variable definition

Variable	Variable description
<i>Dependent variable</i>	
Dependent variable (likelihood to vote)	Binary variable: 1=likely to vote; 0= not likely
<i>Independent variables</i>	
Age	Binary: $\leq 45=1$; ≥ 46
Gender	Binary: 1=Male; 2=Female
Region	Binary: 1=Central; 2=West; 3=East; 4=North
Education	Categorical variable: 1=Primary school and lower; 2=Secondary and high school; 3=College and university
Trust president	Categorical variable: 0=Not at all; 1=Just a little; 2=Somewhat; 3=A lot;
Partisanship	Binary variable: 1=Ruling party; 2=Opposition
Political interest (discuss politics)	Categorical variable: 0=Never; 1=Occasionally; 2=Frequently
Media exposure	Categorical variable: 0=Never; 1=A few times a week; 4=Everyday
COVID-19 will spread due to elections	Categorical variable: 0=Not at all likely; 1=Not very likely; 2=Somewhat likely; 3=Very likely
Postpone elections during pandemic	Categorical variable: 1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree
COVID-19 impacts attending election campaigns	Categorical variable: 0=No impact; 1=A little impact; 2=Some impact; 3=A lot of impact

Table 5: Pre-COVID-19 Model

Parameter Estimates									
Likelihood of voting ^a		B	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% Confidence Interval for Exp(B)	
								Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Not likely	Intercept	-2.674	2.063	1.680	1	.195			
	Education	-.140	.921	.023	1	.879	.870	.143	5.290
	Trust president	-.182	.402	.205	1	.650	.833	.379	1.834
	Political interest	-.840	.844	.991	1	.319	.432	.083	2.257
	Media exposure	-.468	.569	.677	1	.410	.626	.205	1.910
	Region	.731	.402	3.297	1	.069	2.077	.944	4.570
	[Age=1]	-1.542	.856	3.245	1	.072	.214	.040	1.145
	[Age=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
	[Gender=1]	-1.304	.960	1.843	1	.175	.272	.041	1.783
	[Gender=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
	[Urban/Rural=1]	1.032	.991	1.084	1	.298	2.807	.402	19.592
	[Urban/Rural=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
	[Partisanship=1]	-1.677	.944	3.156	1	.076	.187	.029	1.189
	[Partisanship=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
a. The reference category is: Likely.									
b. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.									

Table 6: COVID-19 Model (without COVID-19 variables)

Parameter Estimates									
Likelihood of voting in 2021 election ^a		B	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B) Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval for Exp(B)	
								Upper Bound	
Not likely	Intercept	-2.232	.486	21.140	1	.000			
	Education level	.268	.148	3.291	1	.070	1.308	.979	1.747
	Trust president	-.178	.083	4.543	1	.033	.837	.711	.986
	Political interest	-.615	.166	13.765	1	.000	.541	.391	.748
	Media exposure	-.176	.117	2.262	1	.133	.838	.666	1.055
	Region	-.066	.081	.654	1	.419	.937	.799	1.098
	[Age=1]	1.272	.310	16.798	1	.000	3.566	1.942	6.551
	[Age=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
	[Gender=1]	-.260	.169	2.346	1	.126	.771	.553	1.075
	[Gender=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
	[Partisanship=1]	-.513	.208	6.063	1	.014	.599	.398	.901
	[Partisanship=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
	[Urban/Rural=1]	.067	.181	.136	1	.712	1.069	.750	1.523
	[Urban Rural=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
a. The reference category is: Likely.									
b. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.									

Table 7: COVID-19 Model (with COVID-19 variables)

Parameter Estimates									
Likelihood of voting in 2021 election ^a		B	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B) Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval for Exp(B)	
								Upper Bound	
Not likely	Intercept	-2.070	.791	6.844	1	.009			
	Education level	.283	.213	1.763	1	.184	1.327	.874	2.016
	Trust president	-.267	.125	4.533	1	.033	.766	.599	.979
	Political interest	-.592	.243	5.910	1	.015	.553	.343	.892
	Media exposure	-.275	.172	2.562	1	.109	.760	.542	1.064
	Region	-.031	.127	.059	1	.808	.970	.756	1.244
	COVID-19 will spread due to elections	.164	.143	1.314	1	.252	1.178	.890	1.558
	Q84c. Postpone elections / limit campaigns during pandemic	.195	.099	3.875	1	.049	1.215	1.001	1.475
	Q87b. COVID-19 impacts attending in-person campaigning	-.136	.100	1.844	1	.174	.873	.718	1.062
	[Age=1]	.766	.377	4.124	1	.042	2.152	1.027	4.507
	[Age=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
	[Gender=1]	-.196	.250	.614	1	.433	.822	.504	1.341
	[Gender=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
	[Partisanship=1]	-.831	.303	7.527	1	.006	.436	.241	.789
	[Partisanship=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.
	[Urban/Rural=1]	-.060	.269	.049	1	.825	.942	.557	1.595
[Urban/Rural=2]	0 ^b	.	.	0	.	.	.	.

a. The reference category is: Likely.

b. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.