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Voter information in Kenya's 2013 election

News media, political discussion and party campaigns

Collette Schulz-Herzenberg, Peter Aling'o and Sebastian Gatimu

Recommendations

1 Media coverage of elections should strive for balanced reporting so that voters can make informed decisions.

2 The media can deepen democracy by exercising a watchdog role.

3 The broadcasting successes of 2013 presidential debates should be replicated for general elections and by-elections.

4 Political parties and candidates should explore other channels of communication, such as text messaging and social media.

5 Election administrators such as the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission and Registrar of Political Parties should work closely with the media to engage voters.

6 Media houses and the Media Owners Association should invest more in providing voters with non-partisan information and subsidise voter education.

Summary

The Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP) post-election survey was held in Kenya following the 2013 general election. Its primary objective was to generate data that could provide insights into the views and attitudes of Kenyan voters about their political institutions and the 2013 general election in particular. This policy brief forms one of a series and focuses on the information that was available to voters regarding the general election. Its purpose is to make recommendations that can assist electoral administrators, political parties, media, civil society organisations and the citizens of Kenya in improving the integrity of electoral processes and election outcomes, and the public's confidence in them.

AVAILABILITY OF AND ACCESS to information are necessary for citizens to make informed decisions at elections. To make decisions about the electoral choices on offer, citizens require exposure to a wide variety of political information sources. The more information citizens have, the better equipped they are to connect their interests with the selection of candidates and parties. Moreover, to hold the government to account and judge its performance, citizens must have adequate access to mainstream and alternative sources of information – positive and negative – about what government has achieved since the last elections. Politicians are also more likely to be responsive when they perceive citizens to be knowledgeable about their performance and behaviour.

Political communication in the 2013 election

What then are the main sources of political and electoral information for voters? Most depend on a range of intermediary sources for their political information. Citizens derive important political information about political parties, their manifestos, candidates and campaigns through face-to-face discussions, observations and media exposure. These sources have a strong influence on voters, especially when they are politically biased.

It is therefore important to establish not only the sources of information about campaigns and politics, and voters' levels of exposure to them, but also whether these sources are perceived to favour one or other political party or candidate.

The media have a particular role to play by being able to widely disseminate information to voters, helping to improve the quality of public discourse, and enhancing accountability. Moreover, in a society such as Kenya, which is divided along ethnic lines, the media can also play a vital role in building trust and tolerance among the various ethnic groups.[1] However, the media are not always neutral. They may try to influence elections outcomes with biased coverage, and some media platforms become powerful electoral actors. The political ownership of media outlets can act against the requirement for fiercely independent media – especially during election times.[2]

> The media were overly cautious in their coverage, focusing on the prevention of violence to such an extent that they censored themselves

Two key criticisms were levelled at the media over their coverage of the 2013 elections. First, far too much emphasis was given to the two main presidential candidates to the detriment of smaller parties and the other elections taking place, such as the elections of members of parliament, senators, women representatives, governors and county assembly representatives.[3] Second, the media were overly cautious in their coverage, focusing on the prevention of violence to such an extent that they censored themselves in reporting news.[4] In preparation for the coverage of the 2013 elections, in April 2012 the Media Council of Kenya – together with media houses, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Kenya Union of Journalists, other media stakeholders and the government – developed binding guidelines for reporting elections. The objective of the guidelines was to promote accurate, comprehensive, impartial, fair and responsible coverage of the elections, and to ensure that journalists were sensitive to the risk of conflict.[5]

After criticism that sections of the media were complicit in fuelling post-election violence after the 2007 elections, the media adopted a greater focus on peacebuilding in 2013. They deliberately altered their rhetoric and imposed self-censorship in news reporting and coverage before, during and after election periods. This trend, which some analysts described as 'professional surrender' or 'dumbing down',[6] made the media avoid covering the violence that erupted in Mombasa on the eve of elections, and the protests that erupted in Kondele, Kisumu and Kibera – strongholds of the opposition Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD) – following the Supreme Court verdict on the presidential election, for example. The media therefore abdicated their watchdog responsibilities by avoiding coverage of other issues.[7]

Nevertheless, some reports did give credit to the media for their extensive coverage of the elections, and for providing voter information and education and allowing voters to access information about key contestants.[8] In the months running up to the elections, the indication from the public was that coverage of political events was positive, and in one survey, 83% of respondents stated that media reporting on political events was fair.[9]

Media credibility

Before voters can use the media to inform themselves about politics and elections they must have some level of trust and confidence in media companies and their content. The media are one of Kenya's most trusted public institutions. When people were asked how much they trusted a range of election-related institutions the data showed various media to be the most trusted, with private television channels ranking highest and the only institution to draw trust from a majority of Kenyans (51%). Newspapers were trusted by 44% and the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation by 42%, although both also attracted similar measures of distrust (33% and 42% respectively). High levels of trust in the media have been noted elsewhere and have been attributed to the extent of media plurality in the country.[10]

Some 66% of those interviewed felt that the country had a largely free and uncensored news media at the time of the 2013 elections; 28% declared the media to be completely free and 35% declared them to be free but with minor problems, while 15% thought the media was partly free but with major problems. However, 11% thought it was not free. Satisfaction with the amount of news media freedom in Kenya showed a similar distribution, with 27% of respondents indicating that they were completely satisfied and 31% that they were fairly satisfied, while almost one-third expressed dissatisfaction. As one might expect, people who rated Kenya's media freedom positively also expressed the highest levels of satisfaction with the amount of news media freedom.[11] Moreover, people who rated Kenya's media freedom positively were also more likely to regard Kenya as 'a full democracy.'[12]

Use of media sources

Exposure to political news through media, including television, radio and newspapers, and more recently the Internet and mobile (cell) phone messaging, are well-documented sources of political information.[13] Figure 1 presents the percentage of respondents who self-reported exposure to political news about

the 2013 election campaign from various media sources, either once or twice a week, or more frequently.

The most popular media for weekly political news were radio and television, followed by newspapers. Even though social media and the Internet have gained significant traction in Kenya in the past five years, the spread was not pervasive enough to reach all corners of Kenya by the time of the 2013 elections. The fact that all the contesting political parties and their presidential and other candidates used social media to drive their campaigns created an impression that social media would be integral to the elections – with the focus being mainly on the trendy middle class and young voters. The threat of social media becoming a platform for political and ethnic activism and fundamentalism was therefore real.

> Social media did not have a significant impact on political and electoral dynamics in Kenya, or in swaying voters' political choices

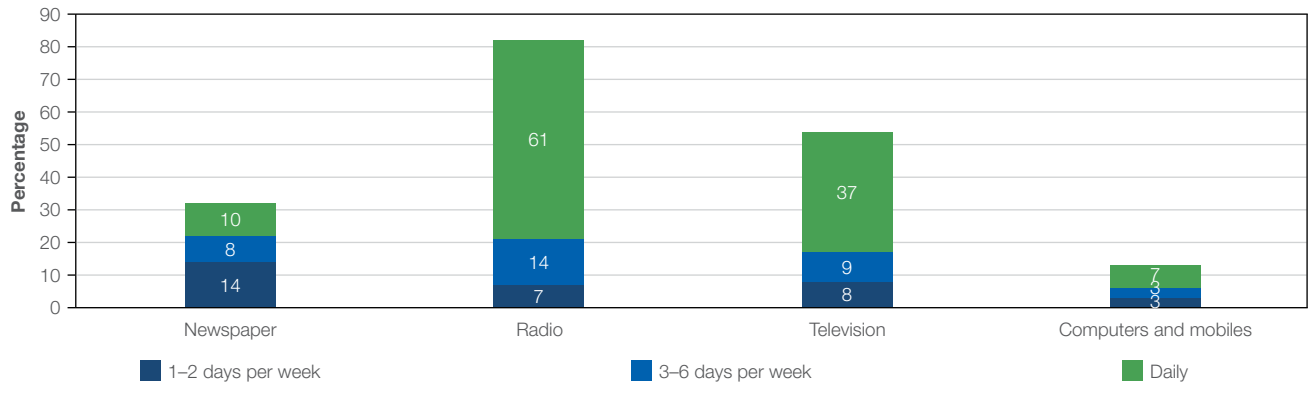
Nevertheless, and given its limited penetration in the country, social media did not have a significant impact on political and electoral dynamics in Kenya or sway voters' political choices. Accordingly, CNEP data showed that very few Kenyans reported that they used computers or mobile devices to access political news during the 2013 elections. But social media enabled Kenyans to know the outcome of the elections in near real time and supported the spread of messages of peace in the pre- and post-election periods.

However, mobile phones (via calls and SMS), the primary medium used to spread violent messages during the 2007 elections, were subject to tight guidelines and scrutiny during the 2013 elections, creating fear among users. The Communications Authority of Kenya (CAK) issued guidelines to political parties regarding the content of campaign messages using SMS. The mobile phone was no longer an uncontrolled device for disseminating dubious content. Mobile telephone companies were required to register all SIM cards and to allocate unique Internet protocol addresses to all phones on their networks to make it easier to track down culprits. According to the CCK guidelines, no political message was to contain offensive, threatening, abusive, insulting obscene or profane language.[14] In addition, Google, non-profit technology company Ushahidi, the Umati project and the Code4Kenya programme, among others, worked with state actors, such as the National Cohesion and Integration Commission, the IEBC and the National Intelligence Service, and non-state actors, such as the media and civil society, to implement open source platforms to monitor very closely the usage of social media in a bid to avoid a repeat of the post-election violence in 2007–08.[15]

Radio

Radio has the highest penetration among Kenyans. Of the 82% of respondents who listened to the radio, 61% reported listening to the radio daily, 14% 3–6 days a week, and 7% 1–2 days a week. Kenya has numerous national and vernacular radio stations and it was feared that these could be used to incite political and ethnic hatred as was the case in 2007. The most popular stations listened to during the 2013 elections were Citizen Radio (28%) and KBC (11%), which also broadcast a number of regional vernacular radio programmes. In terms of perceived political bias in reporting and coverage, the respondents' ratings were: KBC (17%); Capital FM (22%); Classic 105 FM (18%); Hope FM (33%); Citizen radio (16%); Kameme FM (20%); Inooro FM (33%). The rest of the radio stations had negligible percentages (less than 5%). Overall,

Figure 1: Exposure to campaign news via media



Source: CNEP Kenya Survey, 2013.

there was a fairly restrained approach in election coverage by the mainstream national language radio stations, although the same could not be said of the regional vernacular radio stations, which have ties to regional and ethnic interests.

Television news

Television is the second most popular source of political news. During the election campaign 54% of all respondents reported watching news broadcasts on television once a week or more, with 37% watching television news daily. The most popular stations were Citizen TV (32%) and KTN and Nation TV (8% each). While 43% of respondents reported that they did not watch news broadcasts, 45% thought the news broadcasts did not favour a particular party or candidate during the 2013 campaign, while 11% thought they did; the numbers of respondents who perceived a bias in reporting were 38% for Citizen TV, 27% for NTV, 19% for KTN and 15% for KBC, while the rest were less than 1%. Political bias in the reporting and coverage by television stations stemmed mainly from media companies' owners' interests and ethnic identities. While media ownership can be considered the greatest influence on bending the journalist code of ethics, ethnic identities also appear to hold a strong influence on journalists and broadcasters, which negatively affects ethical standards in Kenyan media.[16] Many local journalists admitted that their coverage of the 2013 general election required self-censorship to accommodate the interests of their respective employers.[17]

Newspapers

Only around one in three voters (32%) read newspapers on a weekly basis for their campaign news, with just 10% reading them daily. The most popular newspapers were the *Daily Nation* (17%) and the *Standard* (13%). Very few respondents (6%) thought that the newspapers they read favoured a particular political party or candidate during the campaign, and of those that perceived partisan bias the political party favoured was split evenly between the opposition Coalitions for Reforms and Democracy (CORD) and the Jubilee Alliance.

Computer and mobile devices

The 2013 elections saw social media being used as a key tool for presidential candidates to engage with young voters. However, the survey data showed that Internet usage was still very limited. Only 13% of all respondents reported using a computer or mobile device to obtain information about the election campaign from sources such as websites, email, social networks, and SMS, with 7% doing so daily. News media were the most common source of information (11%), followed by information and comments about politics from personal acquaintances (7%). Some 7% of all respondents used email or social networks to pass on political information. Internet and mobile users were far more likely to be young, better educated and based in urban areas.[18]

Presidential television debates

A key media output in the elections were two televised presidential debates on 26 November 2012 and 25 February 2013. A media-sponsored initiative, the debates were broadcast live by eight national television stations and 34 radio stations with a broad reach across the country. For the first time in Kenya's history, presidential candidates were questioned on various issues of national interest and held accountable for their previous performance in office, affording voters an opportunity to observe and question candidates and their coalitions. For the most part, experts interviewed in a media study thought the debates to be one of the more 'positive stories around the elections'.[19]

> Television debates helped people to form opinions about the presidential candidates and their respective coalitions

When asked if they watched either or both of the television debates, more than one in four CNEP respondents (28%) said they had watched both debates on television, 7% had watched only the first one, 3% only the second one, and the majority (57%) had not watched the debates at all. Of those that watched, most respondents had preferred Uhuru Kenyatta during both debates (43%), followed by Raila Odinga (27%), Dida Abduba (12%) and Peter Kenneth (10%). It appears that the television debates helped people to form opinions about the presidential candidates and their respective coalitions: a majority stated that the debates had helped either a great deal (39%) or helped somewhat (23%).

The proportion of respondents who watched both debates was higher among urban than rural voters.[20] People with higher levels of education were far more likely to have watched the debates,[21] as were men over women.[22] People between the ages of 25 and 50 years were far more likely to have watched the debates compared to the youngest voting cohort (18-24) or older (50+) voters.[23]

Personal discussions about politics

Exposure to politics through informal discussions – with a spouse or partner, family member or friend, or more distant associates such as neighbours and co-workers – is one of the strongest sources of influence on a voter and has been found to trump media in its importance.[24] Moreover, since individuals are likely to adopt the political views of those around them, the stronger the convergence of similar political beliefs (when

discussants are in agreement with an individual's political preferences), the more likely the voter is to follow suit. CNEP asked a range of questions about discussions regarding the 2013 election campaign with personal discussants and the political preferences of these discussants. The data showed highly politically congruent relationships between voters and their intimate partners, friends and family.

Family, friends, neighbours and co-workers

When asked how frequently respondents talked about the election campaign, the data showed the most popular choice of discussants to be friends (68%), followed by neighbours (59%), family (58%), and lastly, co-workers (22%). While the majority of respondents thought that their family members supported the same party as themselves (61%), only 42% thought that their friends supported their party. Some 19% of voters were unsure which party their friends supported, while 26% believed their friends supported a different party to themselves. Some 35% of respondents' believed that their neighbours supported the same party as themselves, and only 9% that their co-workers did.

One-third (34%) of all respondents had a friend who tried to persuade them to vote for a particular party or candidate; while 29% of respondents experienced family members trying to persuade them, 27% a neighbour and 10% a co-worker. Attempts by personal discussants to persuade respondents were overwhelmingly made in person rather than via telephone or other modes of communication such as email.

Spouses/partners

The most intimate discussants, such as a spouse or partner, tended to have the strongest influence on voter behaviour. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents stated that they were married or lived with a partner. Of these, 64% (42% of the entire sample) stated that they talked about the elections either often or sometimes with their spouse or partner, and 61% (37% of entire sample) thought that their spouse or partner was well informed about politics. A simple correlation between respondents' preferred party and that of their spouse/partner confirmed strong matches between their supported parties in 2013.[25] For example, of all the respondents who supported the ODM in 2013 89% of their spouses/partners supported the same party. Likewise, 91% of the spouses/partners of TNA supporters also supported that party.

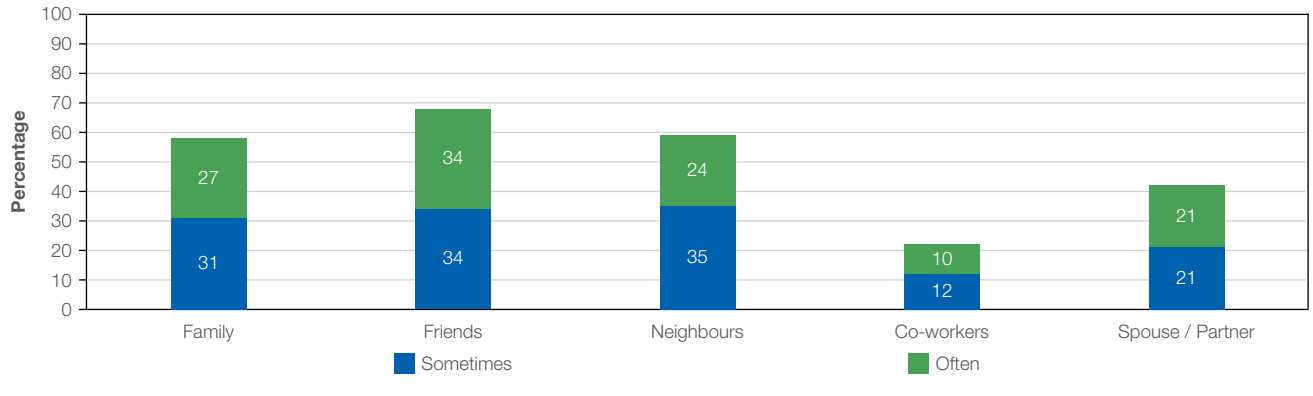
Community and religious leaders

When respondents were asked if they had received any advice from a local community leader or a religious leader about which party to support in the elections, the majority had not (72%), while 16% had received advice from a community leader, 7% from a religious leader, and 5% from both. Voters in rural areas were more likely to have experienced contact with community and religious leaders, as were less educated voters. Unsurprisingly, respondents who described themselves as religious had a much higher level of contact with religious leaders. Community leaders were most prominent in the Coast and Rift Valley regions, while religious leaders were most prominent in Eastern, Rift Valley, and Central regions. Men and women were fairly equal in their contact with these leaders about the elections.

Political party campaigns

Political parties use election campaigns to inform voters about their policy proposals, how these differ from other parties, and to highlight the strengths and failures of incumbents. Ideally, parties use campaigns to persuade potential or undecided voters and retain traditional supporters. However, to be persuasive parties and their candidates need to reach voters with a meaningful message. The data suggested that direct contact by party coalitions with voters was limited. Of the two largest coalitions, CORD had directly contacted 12% of respondents and mostly in person, with less than 1% contacted via SMS. Their reach using other technologies such as email, social networks, websites, or telephone was virtually non-

Figure 2: Exposure to campaign news via personal discussion



Source: CNEP Kenya Survey, 2013.

existent. The other largest coalition, the Jubilee Alliance, had contacted a similar 13% of respondents, also in person and with minimal use of technologies. The smaller coalitions such as Amani Coalition, Pambazuka Coalition and Eagle Alliance managed to reach 3% of the sample or less.

One-third (33%) of all respondents reported having attended a coalition meeting or rally during the election campaign, while two-thirds (66%) had not. Of those that did attend a coalition event, most reported attending a CORD event (51%), followed by a Jubilee Alliance event (39%).

If voters are to distinguish effectively between political parties and their candidates at elections they have to perceive real differences in their policies and stances on major issues. Some 50% of respondents thought that there were major differences between political parties, 32% perceived minor differences, while 12% thought there were no differences, and 6% did not know. Likewise, almost half (47%) thought there were major differences between the presidential candidates, 35% perceived minor differences, 12% detected no differences at all, and 6% did not know.

For election campaigns to be effective, voters also need to have some level of interest in politics in general. When asked about their interest in politics, almost half the respondents (48%) stated that they were not very interested or not at all interested in politics, while a slim majority (51%) expressed an interest and therefore it was most likely that they followed the 2013 party coalition campaigns.

> It is notable that Kenyans identify with particular candidates more than they do with parties

Electoral availability

How easily can information that the media, personal acquaintances and political parties communicate during an election campaign influence voters? Many voters' minds are made up long before the campaign season begins. Most voters hold a preference towards a particular political party that they feel close to on a long-standing basis; this is called a partisan identification. Many of the parties that contested the 2013 elections were relatively new parties (e.g. TNA-Uhuru, United Republican Party-Ruto, United Democratic Forum-Mudavadi, Kenya National Congress-Kenneth, Restore and Build Party-Kiyapi, Alliance for Real Change-Dida), formed between 2011 and 2012. ODM and the Wiper Democratic Movement were formed around 2005–06. It is only the Kenya African National Union (KANU) that has a long history in Kenya, as the party of independence, and therefore can be said to attract long-standing support. Yet KANU's support weakened significantly after the 2002 elections. Furthermore, KANU had no presidential candidate in 2013 because of a weakened support base.

It is notable that Kenyans identify with particular candidates more than they do with parties. There is no strong political party culture in Kenya because of the changing nature of the party system. Party support is based on the party leader/candidate of a particular party or coalition.[26] When asking about party identification it is assumed that respondents also think of the respective leader and current coalition. The CNEP 2013 data showed that more than two-thirds (70%) of Kenyans held an attachment towards a particular party, while almost one-third (29%) of the electorate did not. Moreover, asked when they decided to vote for their preferred presidential candidate, more than two-thirds (69%) had always intended voting for their chosen candidate, 10% had decided on a candidate at least a month before the election, and only 6% in the weeks before or on the day.

Taken all together, the data suggest that in the weeks leading up to the 2013 elections when parties were in the midst of electioneering, and political debate and media coverage at their most vigorous, surprisingly few voters were open to persuasion. Most voters were guided by their long-standing party identification and had decided on the party they supported long before election day. Political parties have to work that much harder at persuading these voters to change their party orientation between elections. The almost one-third of voters with no party affiliations are easier to sway but are notoriously harder to get to the polls.

Concluding remarks

- The public has a high regard for the Kenyan media and the majority of people believe the media should adopt a watchdog role over public affairs. Perceptions about the freedom of the media also help to shape perceptions about the extent of democracy in Kenya.
- Traditional media sources still provide a greater reach for political parties and other actors at elections than new technologies.
- The televised presidential debates were watched by one-quarter of all eligible voters and were opinion-forming for a significant minority.
- Contrary to conventional wisdom, the most powerful political persuasion at elections came from people's immediate conversations with those closest to them. While the media undoubtedly helped to shape opinions coverage, they were not perceived as biased towards particular parties and attempts to influence voters directly towards a particular candidate or party coalition were therefore minimal.

- Political messages via community and religious leaders have a limited but significant influence over voters at elections, especially in rural areas.
- While party identification is strong in Kenya, it is largely leader or candidate based. There is a significant pool of non-partisans who comprise almost one-third of the eligible electorate and are potentially open to persuasion at elections. With the slim margins of victory seen in the 2013 elections, this pool of voters could become pivotal in future elections. Political parties that wish to broaden their support bases should explore the demographic and attitudinal bases of this group to create appealing messages.

Methodology

The Institute for Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi and the University of Cape Town, with the support of the ISS, conducted survey fieldwork for the CNEP post-election survey between October and December 2013. Principal investigators at the University of Cape Town, and the IDS, with the assistance of the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics designed the sample. The sample was a nationally representative cross-section of all Kenyan citizens aged 18 years and older, and employed a stratified, multi-stage cluster sampling methodology with a size of 1 200 respondents (with a sampling error of no more than +/- 2.8% and a confidence level of 95%). The sample was stratified along a rural/urban population divide, with the province (used as silent variable) providing rural/urban population for determining electoral constituencies as either 'predominantly rural' or 'predominantly urban'. The electoral constituencies were then used as secondary sampling units from which enumeration areas were randomly selected.

A total of 30 electoral constituencies (10 predominantly urban and 20 predominantly rural) were randomly selected from a frame of 210 constituencies, from which the eventual sample of 1 200 respondents was randomly selected. Interviews were clustered into eight per enumeration area in predominantly rural constituencies and four for predominantly urban constituencies. It is worth noting that while the frame was based on 210 constituencies (harmonised population figures for 80 new constituencies), the eventual distribution of enumeration areas was across all selected constituencies.

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