

Introducing

Matthias Krönke

PhD Student at the Department of Political Studies at the University of Cape Town

Matthias is a PhD student in the Department of Political Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and a graduate researcher at the Institute of Democracy, Citizenship and Public Policy in Africa (IDCPPA) / Afrobarometer. He studies Comparative Politics and Political Behaviour with a regional emphasis on Sub-Saharan Africa. His research focuses on two related themes (1) the internal organisation of political institutions, and (2) the consequences of these organisations for democracy and development in Africa.

Hi Matthias! You were a part of the GLD project, the Zambian Election Panel Survey (ZEPS), that surveyed democracy and public opinion in Zambia pre-and post-election. Could you tell the readers about your experience with this project, and were there any findings that stood out to you?

Yeah, sure. The ZEPS project has been a great experience. The idea started only a few months before the Zambian general elections (12 August 2021), in the middle of the pandemic years. It was my first time being part of an organising team for a project of this size, so I was unsure about how we would manage to design multiple questionnaires and implement fieldwork on such short notice. But thanks to Zoom, we gathered a group of scholars scattered across three continents who had never met in person. Looking back at it, it feels like everything happened at breakneck speed.

I am really happy with how everything worked out. Not only did we get the surveys into the field on time, but I think the entire project has been a good opportunity to connect people who work on related but different topics. I don't think any of us would have been able to collect data this interesting by ourselves, especially since panel studies



are still quite rare in political science research in Africa. Although we are still in the early stages of the data analysis, some of the preliminary findings on campaign mobilisation and citizens' experience of the elections are very exciting. I am sure we will see more of this in the following months on GLD's website. We have also started making the data available to the broader academic community. I hope that the data from the three surveys will help other colleagues answer questions about politics in Zambia and elsewhere. I am also grateful to use some of the panel data for my PhD dissertation. I honestly never expected that I would be able to use this type of data when I started thinking about my dissertation.

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I know that you once tried to convince the co-founder of Afrobarometer that surveys don't tell us anything about what people think and now you try to convince students the opposite today on behalf of Afrobarometer. What made you change your mind?

Haha, yeah, that's true. At the time, I knew very little about how scientific surveys are conducted and how one would go about analysing survey data. And so, I thought, how can you learn anything about what people think and do if you don't have a real conversation with them? However, over the course of a semester, my lecturer [and co-founder of Afrobarometer, Robert Mattes] managed to convince me that there is quite a lot that we can learn about the people we survey and those they represent. I still remember two moments that changed my view on how useful surveys can be. The first was when we learned about how much thought goes into each Afrobarometer survey, from question design to sampling and then, of course, analysis. The other thing I still remember was when the same survey data confirmed some of my personal experiences but also challenged some of my other beliefs about 'what people think'. At that point, it became really hard to ignore the responses of 1200 people to any question. Since then, I have tried to create similar experiences for other people.

You grew up in Germany but have lived in South Africa for 14 years – in what ways would you say your research has benefited from living in the two places

Growing up in Germany and then spending this much time in South Africa has allowed me to ask different, more interesting research questions. After I finished high school in Germany, I came to a small town in South Africa to complete 12 months of social service work. From there, I decided to live and study in Cape Town for my undergraduate and, eventually, my postgraduate studies.

Living in two countries has allowed me to do and see quite a few different things along the way. For example, I was in Germany during the 2006 FIFA World Cup, and then a few years later, I lived in South Africa when the tournament took place there in 2010. Just observing how different and similar the conversations were around this event was extremely fascinating. At the same time, hearing what matters to people daily has really changed my perspective on many things. The topics for both my Master's and PhD theses are the result of conversations and experiences that I had with people in South Africa. I am convinced I would have asked very different and probably less meaningful questions if I had decided not to come to South Africa.



*Power Cut in South Africa.
Photo Credit: Matthias Krönke.*

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