

Beyond Ethnicity: Unraveling the Complexities of Political Participation in Zambia

Policy Issue

Researchers, policymakers, and development practitioners often view ethnic identity as the main driver of African political participation. However, new evidence from Zambia shows that co-partisanship has the strongest effect on political participation, while co-ethnicity and regionalism play secondary roles.

What Makes Citizens Engage Politically?

Prisca Jöst, Matthias Krönke, Sarah J. Lockwood, and Ellen Lust's recent article challenges the prevailing view that ethnic identity is the primary influence on citizen engagement in African elections. The study was conducted in Zambia, a country with a history of dynamic participation, multiple democratic power transfers, and highly salient ethnic identities. It explores how ethnicity, locality, gender, and partisanship mobilize citizen engagement in campaign activities, including campaigning for a candidate or meeting with an MP.

The study was conducted in 2021, just before the national elections. It centers on a survey experiment administered to 1536 respondents from Zambia's urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. The experiment allowed the researchers to explore how different identities and incentives, especially ethnicity and partisanship, affected citizens' willingness to engage in campaign activities.

The study's three primary findings are:

- **Partisanship:** partisan links are independent of ethnicity. It is a distinct identity and an independent social cleavage that influences political participation, putting shared ethnicity and material incentives in perspective.

- **Identity factors:** co-gender, co-residence, and co-origin do not statistically affect political participation.
- **Incentives:** material incentives do not increase participation, while social sanctions by local leaders and community members do.



Photo Credit: GovernmentZA, Flickr

Implications and Recommendations:

These results illustrate the oft-overlooked importance of partisanship while also highlighting previously overlooked forms of political participation. A community-level comprehensive approach to policy or program design should consider a broad spectrum of identities influencing individuals' political mobilization. Support for, and engagement in, political parties may be fruitful avenues to enhance citizens' abilities to express their preferences, influence public policies, hold politicians accountable, and legitimate the electoral processes.

Specifically, the study calls on practitioners engaged in democracy promotion and development to:

- **Recognize Political Parties:** Acknowledge political parties as key citizen mobilizers, even in contexts with prominent ethnic divisions.

- **Transcend Ethnicity:** Recognize the diversity of identities influencing citizens' political behavior, encouraging NGOs and policymakers to connect with different identity groups. This approach can help identify key local partners and build stronger community relationships.
- **Foster Active Citizenship:** Create meaningful opportunities for citizens to participate in non-electoral activities that resonate with their lives. This includes establishing platforms for dialogue and consultation with candidates and elected officials, implementing effective feedback mechanisms, and rewarding active citizenship.

It also provides lessons for scholars, suggesting they:

- **Expand Beyond Voting and Rallies:** Extend the analysis of political participation in Africa to include non-electoral forms crucial for democratic development and political involvement.
- **Investigate Beyond Zambia:** As party systems across Africa consolidate, partisanship may overshadow ethnicity and regionalism.

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About GLD

The Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) is a research institute based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The institute is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.

