Introducing
Adam Harris

Associate Professor, University College London

Adam Harris is an Associate Professor in Development Politics in the Department of Political Science at University College London and is an associated researcher at the Centre for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg. Adam's research focuses on ethnic and identity politics, ethnic and immigrant prejudice, the determinants of political protests, the resource curse, service delivery in weakly institutionalized states, the effects of urbanization and social institutions on governance, informal housing and collective action, communal land rights, and the effects of foreign aid in recipient countries.

Much of your work looks at how identity shapes political choices in African countries, especially around elections. For people who might assume voters always support candidates from their own ethnic group, what does your research reveal about when—and why—that doesn't happen?

My core contribution to the study of identity politics, developed in my book, _Everyday Identity and Electoral Politics_ (Oxford University Press, 2022), is a new conceptualization of race and ethnicity that foregrounds identity construction in explaining political behavior. I argue that taking the identity construction process seriously requires theorizing both this process and its impact on electoral behavior. In order to do this, I have developed the concepts of ethnic and racial distance, which capture variation in how individuals within groups experience and construct their identities.

I then used these concepts to argue that individuals who are more ethnically distant from their own group because they are not considered "typical" members, are frequently mistakenly categorised as members of other groups in society and thus have to defend their group membership. This then weakens these individuals' identification with their group and thus the importance they place on group identity when deciding how to vote. Empirical analyses published in my articles in the _Journal of Ethnicity, Race, and Politics_ (2019) and _Politikon_ (2020) show that, across a variety of contexts, including South Africa, Uganda, and the United States, varied identity construction processes lead individuals to make very different political and electoral decisions. My novel theoretical approach and associated results open a new research agenda that moves away from the field's pre-occupation with group memberships and toward an investigation of the impact of ethnic and racial distance on a variety of political outcomes.

As it is a new year, do you have any new research areas of interest?

Using original data from Zimbabwe, I have begun to explore party strategies in electoral authoritarian elections and ways to reduce homophobia in difficult contexts. For the latter, I have teamed up with Phillip Ayoub and local activists in Harare and Bulawayo to explore "rooting messages" that might help reduce homophobia in a context in which, according to survey data, 85% of the population is in opposition to the LGBTQ+ community. These "rooting messages" are being used by LGBTQ+ activists around the world to combat narratives that LGBTQ+ lifestyles are foreign impositions.This work was published in the British Journal of Political Science in 2025.

While these narratives take different forms in different contexts, in much of Africa, they take the form of colonial and neo-colonial importing of western lifestyles that are fundamentally un-African. In response, activists in Zimbabwe seek to show queer individuals' rightful place in Zimbabwe's pre-colonial history. We then adapted these messages in a survey experiment. We found that, not only do these messages reduce homophobia in some instances, they never cause any backlash, an important consideration for activists and any scholars seeking to build on this study. There are little to no costs to correcting the dominant historical narrative and potentially massive gains that can have real impact on the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in homophobic contexts.

Across your work, you combine surveys, experiments, and on-the-ground research to understand politics as people actually experience it. What have you learned from talking directly with citizens that challenges common assumptions about politics, governance, or protest in Africa?

Unfortunately, I think what I have learned is that we as scholars, especially "Western" scholars, do not give the African voter/citizen enough credit. As a result of implicit biases, the "danger of a single story" (see Chimamanda Adichie's TED talk), and colonial legacies (even though we often seek to directly counter them), we often approach African voters without giving them the credit they deserve.

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They are informed, aware, and understand the complexities of the systems they live in. I think we especially downplay the sophistication of rural voters to our own detriment. We can do more to approach these voters/citizens on equal terms with their Western counterparts. I have sought to do this in my research and theorizing, but I know that I and the academy have a long way to go.

Adam is a former GLD postdoctoral researcher and long-standing contributor to GLD. He has worked on several GLD projects, including the LGPI 2016 and LGPI 2019. He has also published GLD working papers, contributed to journal articles based on GLD research, and been featured on the *Governance Uncovered* podcast. you can read more about Adam's research on his website.

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