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# KENYA VOTER TURNOUT EVIDENCE REVIEW

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## **ACRONYMS**

IEBC Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission

NGO Non-governmental organization

SMS Short Message Service

## SUMMARY INFORMATION


This report reviews existing evidence on state-of-the-art programmatic interventions designed to increase voter registration and turnout, especially where such interventions may be applicable to Kenya. In reviewing the efficacy of existing studies and their applicability to the Kenyan context, it aims to help guide the design of future interventions.

The report begins by summarizing key assumptions shaping the design of interventions aimed at improving voter registration and turnout. Before detailing key findings from these interventions, the report outlines relevant contextual factors of the Kenya case. It then lists several interventions—with both significant and null effects—that are most relevant and potentially applicable to Kenya. Each section provides summary points and implications for Kenya.

Overall, this report concludes that:

- There is little evidence to support the efficacy of “informational interventions” designed to increase turnout; where evidence does exist, effect sizes are generally small.
- Information about candidate performance boosts political knowledge, but there is little evidence that it improves levels of voter turnout.
- Negative information about candidates (e.g., poor performance or corruption) can discourage rather than motivate turnout.
- Personal (i.e., door-to-door) campaigns are generally most effective.
- There is some evidence that light-touch online interventions are effective in boosting turnout intention among younger voters.
- Information about the importance of voting tends to be more motivational than information about the process of voting; results are strongest when the two types of messages are combined.

<b>OUTCOMES CONSIDERED</b>	Political engagement and participation with a focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voter turnout.</li> <li>• Voter registration.</li> </ul>
<b>PROGRAMMATIC APPROACH</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information-based interventions.</li> <li>• Interventions targeting electoral administration.</li> </ul>
<b>VARIANTS ON THE PROGRAMMATIC APPROACH CONSIDERED</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance information about candidates or parties.</li> <li>• Information about process and importance of voting.</li> <li>• Information campaigns targeting women, youth, or other excluded groups.</li> <li>• Other interventions: electoral administration reforms.</li> </ul>

<p><b>STUDIES INCLUDED</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Field experiments (32).</li> <li>● Observational studies (4)</li> </ul>
<p><b>LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE</b></p>	<p>Throughout the evidence review, individual conclusions include a small symbol like that below.</p>  <p>A shaded in E means the finding is based on experimental or quasi-experimental evidence (like a randomized controlled trial) and a shaded in O means the finding is based on (or also includes) observational evidence without a comparison group or estimate of the counterfactual. If just the bottom cells are shaded then the finding is based on one or a small number of studies, and if the top cells are shaded in, it means the finding is consistent across a number of studies.</p>
<p><b>CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS</b></p>	<p>Important contextual factors when considering the relevance and applicability of studies to Kenya:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● High levels of political distrust and political disillusionment.</li> <li>● High levels of inequality and social exclusion.</li> <li>● High rates of gender-based violence and violence against women in politics.</li> <li>● History of election-related violence.</li> <li>● High levels of ethnic and political polarization.</li> <li>● High levels of political engagement and online mobilization capacity among urban youth (Gen Z).</li> </ul>

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

<p><b>TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR KENYA</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Effects of informational interventions are strongest when distributed widely, and by a credible source, such as a non-partisan non-governmental organization (NGO) (Dunning et al., 2019; J-PAL, 2019).</li> <li>● Both partisan and nonpartisan information have their place in democratic processes, depending on the goals of voter engagement and the characteristics of the electorate.</li> <li>● Partisan-provisioned information mobilizes partisan supporters but may discourage non-partisans.</li> <li>● In highly polarized and clientelistic environments such as Kenya, even non-partisan information can have partisan effects, as the study from Bangladesh indicates (see Ahmed et al., 2023).</li> <li>● Addressing fears of voting-related violence is key to encouraging turnout in contexts like Kenya with a history of election violence.</li> </ul>
<p><b>KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR INTERVENTIONS COMBINING PROCEDURAL AND MOTIVATIONAL MESSAGES</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Online vs. offline interventions:</b> There are pros and cons to each: online interventions are cheaper and have the potential to reach a broader audience, but they are more passive and impersonal (see Finkel et al., 2023).</li> <li>● Depending on message and frame, online civic education interventions may increase turnout, especially among youth.</li> <li>● Treatment effects can spill over; the extent of spillover (i.e., diffusion) depends on who is targeted, the spatial distribution of targeted communities, the density of social networks, and the influence of targeted individuals (e.g., household heads).</li> <li>● Potential for unintended side effects: this can include dampening turnout among opposition supporters and strengthening incumbent advantage, increasing perceived stakes of election, which can increase willingness to use violence, and provisioning negative information, which can prompt voter disengagement.</li> </ul>
<p><b>KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS TARGETING WOMEN OR OTHER EXCLUDED GROUPS</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Simple visual aids can be a helpful way to overcome illiteracy.</li> <li>● For interventions aimed at boosting turnout among women or other marginalized groups, messaging that emphasizes the secrecy of the vote can be key in mitigating fears of voting or fear of voting differently from other household members.</li> <li>● Door-to-door canvassing is more impactful than public campaigns, especially when canvassers are perceived as trustworthy.</li> <li>● Efforts to increase turnout among women rely not only on changing the views of behavior of women, but of <b>male household members as well</b>, especially where patriarchal gender norms prevail.</li> </ul>

## THEORY OF CHANGE

Interventions designed to increase voter participation rely on two main assumptions. The first and most prominent is that low levels of political participation are driven primarily by a lack of information or education—people refrain from voting because they lack information about the voting process, the confidence to participate, the ability to make meaningful distinctions between parties or candidates, or, relatedly, a sense of political efficacy over the electoral process and outcome. These observations and assumptions have generated a large body of literature testing the effects of information-based interventions, including information about candidates and their performance (e.g., through debates, town hall meetings, or scorecards), information about the process of voting (i.e., how, when, and where to register or vote), as well as education campaigns that underscore the civic or political importance of voting. In this regard, information-based interventions encompass a broad range of campaign strategies, both technical and normative (e.g., appeals to civic duty).

A second and related assumption is that people avoid voting because it is costly: it requires time away from other activities (especially income-earning activities), often requires financial resources to access registration and polling sites, and may be viewed as dangerous in politically insecure regions. Information campaigns that aim to alter a voter's cost-benefit calculation may help overcome this collective action problem by underscoring the benefits of voting (e.g., civic virtue, improved policy, enhanced legitimacy) or by mitigating the social, financial, or security costs (e.g., ensuring physical security or secrecy of ballots or reducing time and financial burden). Interventions based on this assumption could be informational, such as a radio program extolling the importance of voting as a way to uphold democracy. But they could also be administrative or institutional, such as capping the length of polling station lines, making voter registration easier for the poor or elderly, providing free transport to polling station sites, or equipping voters with tools to report violence or fraud.

Importantly, many interventions are designed with both working assumptions in mind: they use education and information both to empower a potential voter and to convince them that the benefits of voting outweigh the potential costs.

Overall, despite the large volume of studies testing information interventions, there is limited evidence that they meaningfully change voter behavior, especially with respect to improving voter turnout (Dunning et al., 2019). Moreover, where interventions do produce effects, they tend to be small. Nonetheless, cumulative evidence, especially from weakly consolidated democracies such as Kenya, provides important lessons for designing programs and interventions that bolster electoral participation. This report summarizes these lessons.

## THE KENYA CONTEXT

Several features of Kenya's social and political landscape help explain trends in voter turnout while also informing the potential efficacy of future campaigns or interventions. Overall, Kenya has had **relatively high levels of voter turnout** in each presidential election, especially since 2002. In 2013, the turnout of registered voters reached nearly 86 percent—levels similar to countries like Sweden and Denmark. Yet even in 2013, the turnout among the total voting-age population was only 55.6 percent, indicating that many citizens who could vote were abstaining. More worrying, however, are the **recent declines in voter turnout over the last two general elections**. In 2017, turnout was 79.5 percent of registered voters, which dropped to 65 percent in 2022. The decline in voter engagement was most striking among young people (aged 18–35), whose share of the total registered population dropped by 5.3 percent from the previous 2017 election (Iraki, 2022). Efforts to interpret or improve these downward trends need to be contextualized within a broader set of social and political dynamics, which include:

- A history of large-scale political violence, especially around elections.
- Ethnic and social polarization.
- High levels of police abuse and impunity.
- High levels of gender-based violence, including the targeting of women in politics.
- Economic grievances related to rising inequality, unemployment, and inflation.
- Pervasive corruption.
- Aging and out-of-touch political elite.
- Low levels of political trust.
- Strong activist networks.
- High levels of digital competence.

In particular, after several scandals and alleged electoral irregularities, over 50 percent of sampled Kenyans have no or very little trust in the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) (Afrobarometer 2021). Low levels of institutional and political trust, especially in the IEBC, are especially relevant when designing interventions that might involve collaboration with the IEBC in the delivery of civic education.

Notably, while high levels of political disillusionment typically correlate with voter apathy or political disengagement, the recent protests—led by Gen Z political activists in opposition to the proposed finance law and subsequent police brutality—suggest that young people may be more politically engaged and informed than ever before. But they may also be more disillusioned with formal electoral politics. Interventions to increase turnout should thus be designed with the aim of channeling the energy, momentum, and collective action capacity of Gen Z into formal electoral participation.

Taken together, these features underscore the importance of designing voter turnout interventions that do not further polarize communities, appear partisan, or deepen political disillusionment. Relatedly, motivational messaging emphasizing the importance of voting runs the risk of heightening the perceived stakes of an election. Given that perceived high stakes have motivated participation in election violence in the past (Boone, 2011; Klaus, 2020), messaging will need to be carefully worded so as to restrain rather than inadvertently encourage violent behavior. Yet despite the challenges of the Kenya case, a strong civil society, high levels of digital literacy, and politically oriented youth culture make the country amenable to information campaigns that convey the societal and civic benefits of voting while mitigating real or perceived costs.

## **INFORMATION-BASED INTERVENTIONS**

This section provides an overview of the main information-based interventions aimed at increasing voter registration and turnout. These interventions tend to fall into three main categories, including those that: 1) provide information about party platforms or candidate performance, 2) provide information about the process of voting (e.g., how and where to register or vote or how to cast a ballot), and 3) emphasize the value and importance of voting (e.g., appeals to civic virtue). Yet in addition to the informational content of a given intervention, the identity of the messenger (e.g., non-partisan NGO vs. political party) and the mode of delivery (e.g., online video vs. door-to-door canvassing) are equally crucial in shaping the efficacy of the intervention. This section thus begins with a brief discussion of these latter two concerns and then summarizes key findings about procedural and motivational information interventions. A review of these studies indicates that the most promising interventions are multi-pronged, using procedural and informational messaging in combination with different modes of delivery. For example, they might combine



information about the electoral and voting process (e.g., via Short Message Service [SMS] or door-to-door campaigns) while also providing a venue for public deliberation (e.g., town hall meetings or virtual groups) alongside repeated reminders about voting and the importance of voting (i.e., nudges).

## MODE OF DELIVERY AND IDENTITY OF THE MESSENGER

Cumulative evidence from experimental research on voter turnout highlights that the mode of information delivery matters as much as its content (Ortega & Scartascini, 2020). While earlier interventions relied on print and radio, face-to-face contact, and SMS, many recent studies test the effects of distributing information online and through social media. The most robust finding is that **personally delivered messages** (e.g., door-to-door campaigns) are far more effective than impersonal contact such as mass emails, SMS, or public events (e.g., Chong et al., 2019; Nickerson 2015; Green, McGrath, & Aronow, 2013). For example, in a study of rural voters in Paraguay, Chong and co-authors found that door-to-door campaigns that disseminate the information in a conversational manner increase turnout by 4.6 percentage points compared to public rallies that had no statistically significant effect on turnout (p. 324). Yet, while door-to-door campaigns may be most effective, they are also labor-intensive and costly. Recent studies have thus moved to testing the effectiveness of scalable online interventions, a few of which indicate positive effects on voter turnout, especially among young people (see the discussion of Tunisia and Morocco studies in section 3.2). However, given the ubiquity of online misinformation, voters may be especially skeptical and dismissive of civic education distributed online.

One especially instructive study for deciphering the effects of different modes of information delivery was a randomized controlled trial conducted in Mozambique in 2009. Aimed at inducing voter turnout, it consisted of three treatments: 1) civic education messaging combining leaflets on voter procedures and SMS messages about the importance of voting, 2) an SMS hotline for reporting electoral misconduct, and 3) the distribution of a free, independent, and nonpartisan newspaper, which focused on messages of electoral education. Importantly, all treatments produced a strong and significant positive effect on voter turnout (Aker, Collier, and Vicente, 2013). The newspaper treatment, in particular, increased voter turnout by 3–6 percent and reduced the share of blank votes by 0.5 percentage points (Grácio & Vicente, 2021).

One likely mechanism explaining these results is treatment diffusion (i.e., peer influence): the effects of a given intervention beyond targeted individuals (Fafchamps, Vaz, & Vicente, 2019). The impact of a given treatment thus hinges critically on how, or to what extent, an intervention travels beyond its intended recipient, whether that be another household member, neighbor, or fellow parishioner.

A key takeaway is that understanding how social networks are configured within a society or region may help explain the effect size and reach of a given intervention as much as the particular mode through which an information campaign is distributed. While there is no clear takeaway about how information should be packaged and transmitted, several studies suggest that the more personal and direct the message, the more effective it will be in motivating turnout.

One inferential challenge common to many voter turnout experiments, including the Mozambique study, is that they rarely can distinguish independent effects between the method through which a message is distributed and the content of the message itself. Beyond establishing that personal campaigns are more effective than impersonal, very few studies test the effects of one delivery mechanism against another, which would require a study design that kept the message constant while varying the mode of delivery. Hence, little is known about whether, for example, a radio-based campaign might be more or less effective than a newspaper or social-media based campaign. Section 3.2 provides some additional discussion about the effects of different modes of information delivery on turnout.

A related variable is the identity of the messenger and, notably, whether the messenger is widely perceived as credible and trustworthy. In this regard, most experimental studies test the effects of non-partisan campaigns (e.g., using a local NGO). A smaller set of studies, however, examine the effects of partisan information provision (i.e., through the incumbent regime or other political party). Notably, while political parties are by far the most visible and ubiquitous conveyors of election-related information, they are very rarely the most credible or trusted. With respect to turnout, there are two notable takeaways with particular relevance to Kenya. The first is that partisan-delivered information may help mobilize turnout, but only among partisans. For example, Banerjee et al. (2011) distributed brochures across slum neighborhoods of Delhi, but randomized whether these brochures were partisan-branded or not. Their results indicate that while partisan information is effective in mobilizing core voters, nonpartisan information plays a crucial role in engaging undecided voters and encouraging more informed voting decisions.

A second finding, and a cautionary tale, is that information provided by a partisan source, especially the ruling regime, may increase local political polarization. For example, in Turkey, Baysan (2022) examined the effects of two information treatments about an upcoming referendum—both organized by the largest party opposing the referendum and carried out by party volunteers. Baysan found that the two campaigns had no effect on turnout but did increase neighborhood-level political polarization between pro-regime and opposition party supporters. Taken together, these studies indicate that in any information-based intervention, partisan or not, the perceived trustworthiness of the source is crucial in shaping whether and which voters turn out to vote.

## INFORMATION ABOUT CANDIDATES OR PARTIES

### CANDIDATE DEBATES, TOWN HALLS, AND SCORE CARDS



Several studies have aimed to improve voter turnout through interventions aimed at increasing voter knowledge about candidates. One such intervention is **candidate debates**. For example, in Uganda, Platas and Raffler (2021) tested whether a public video screening of candidate interviews before an election would increase voters' baseline knowledge, especially of opposition candidates, for whom voters tend to have less information. Yet, while the video screening reduced the knowledge gap between incumbent and opposition candidates, it had no effect on voter turnout. Similarly, in Sierra Leone, Bidwell, Casey, and Glennerster (2014) found that while public debate screenings built political knowledge and changed how people vote, they did not affect turnout. In other similar studies, candidate debates—whether live or televised—increased political knowledge without altering turnout.

A related set of studies has tested the effects of voter interactions with candidates, notably through **town hall-style meetings**. Here, too, such interactions improved how people voted (e.g., which candidate or party they selected) but overall, there is no evidence that townhall-style meetings improve turnout. For example, in Benin, Fujiwara and Wantchekon (2018) tested the effects of candidate-endorsed town hall meetings in which candidates discussed policies around public service provision, which were followed by an open deliberation among voters about such policies. The treatment improved self-reported measures of clientelism but did not affect turnout. Importantly, however, a recent study published by Wantchekon and Guardado (2024) does find evidence for a positive effect of townhall meetings on voter turnout. The study, based on a field experiment in Benin in 2011, suggests that town hall meetings with candidates may improve political knowledge, which may subsequently improve turnout.

Taken together, evidence from these interventions shows that there is value in creating space for public deliberation, especially as it encourages healthy political debate and improves political knowledge, but

there is only one known study (Wantchekon & Guardado, 2024) to find discernable and positive effects on voter turnout.

A related set of interventions aims to improve information about candidate performance through interventions that package factual information about candidate performance and behavior into easily digestible formats, such as **candidate report cards**, and then disseminate such information via SMS, social media, or more traditional forms such as local radio, newspaper, or pamphlets (Dunning et al., 2019). Overall, providing information about candidate performance appears to have little effect on turnout, regardless of whether candidate performance was rated as good or bad (e.g., Jablonski et al., 2020; Banerjee et al., 2020; Lierl & Holmlund, 2017). Importantly, however, a few studies suggest that negative information about candidates may actually discourage voter turnout. For example, results from an experimental study in Mexico indicate that when voters received information about incumbent corruption, it decreased voter turnout in local elections, prompting voters to withdraw from the political process entirely (Chong et al., 2014). One related benefit, however, is that providing voters with performance information about candidates may make local politicians more accountable and incentivize pro-poor spending while also encouraging programmatic voting behavior (Adida et al., 2020; Cruz et al., 2024).

## TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR KENYA



- Overall, candidate debates, town hall meetings, and candidate scorecards improve political knowledge, but do not have a clear effect on improving voter turnout, with the notable exception of the Wantchekon and Guardado study (2024), which finds positive effects of townhall meetings on voter turnout.
- Results suggest that both partisan and nonpartisan information have their place in democratic processes, depending on the goals of voter engagement and the characteristics of the electorate.
- Effects are strongest when information is distributed by credible print or online media, while non-media sources such as pamphlets tend to dampen potential effects (Dunning et al., 2019).
- Partisan-provisioned information mobilizes partisan supporters but may discourage the election participation of nonpartisans.
- In highly polarized and clientelistic environments such as Kenya, even nonpartisan information campaigns can have partisan effects, as the study from Bangladesh indicates (Ahmed et al., 2023).

## INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROCESS AND IMPORTANCE OF VOTING

A second potentially impactful type of information that may increase voter registration and turnout is information about 1) how and when to register to vote or cast a ballot and 2) the importance of voting. These interventions, which vary significantly in terms of the mode and extent of contact with citizens, aim to combat uncertainty and anxiety about the process of voting, which can deter potential voters, and counter feelings of political apathy and alienation. While these are distinct interventions, many studies combine elements of both, aiming to increase knowledge about the electoral process or provide basic civic education about the value of political participation and voting in particular.

## INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROCESS OF VOTING



Providing information about how and when to vote is generally more straightforward than altering feelings of political apathy or self-efficacy. These interventions take several forms. The most low-cost of these are

nudges that take the form of impersonal reminders to vote. Most experimental studies of such interventions show no effects.

There is, however, some evidence that SMS messages and other low-cost interventions may boost turnout. As one important example, a study in Kenya tested whether SMS messages sent from the IEBC would impact voter participation, as well as attitudes and trust in institutions (Marx, Pons, & Suri, 2021). It found that SMS reminders—sent six days prior to the 2013 election and consisting of one of three messages—did indeed have a small effect in increasing turnout. However, the study also found that the treatments (i.e., the SMS nudges) decreased trust in the IEBC, especially among individuals from the losing side. The study points not only to the potential of voting nudges sent via SMS but also to the pros and cons of information coming from an electoral management body. The unintended side effect of this study—deepening distrust in the IEBC—is especially relevant for Kenya, where there are overall low levels of political trust, especially in the IEBC.

## INTERVENTIONS COMBINING PROCEDURAL AND MOTIVATIONAL MESSAGES



As noted, the most promising results emerge from interventions that combine both procedural and motivational messaging designed to mitigate voter anxieties and uncertainties while also addressing voter apathy. The efficacy of these combined interventions depends partly on the mode of dissemination, as discussed in Section 3.1, but also on the content or framing of a given informational intervention.

For example, a study conducted in Morocco tested the effectiveness of a low-cost online intervention on voter turnout. Using Facebook ads to reach their targeted population (voters aged 18–35), it randomized participants into one of three online treatments: one that assisted with registration, one that provided civic education material outlining the societal benefits of voting, and one that helped participants identify the party that best matched their political views. The first procedural treatment had no effect on turnout. The other two treatments had small effects on boosting reported turnout, but only among conditional voters.<sup>1</sup> Null results from the first treatment underscore the challenge of inducing turnout through procedural information alone.

While the latter two treatments of the study yielded only small subgroup effects (i.e., among conditional voters), they point to the potential efficacy of light-touch online interventions that help make voting feel meaningful—either through messaging that underscores its societal importance or by providing engaging tools for voters to identify candidates whose platforms align with their political preferences.

As another example, a study in Tunisia (Finkel et al., 2023) varied exposure to three different online videos, each with varying messages: one about democracy gains, a second about democracy loss, and a third that was purely instructive (i.e., information about the voting process). The design of these frames are based in prospect theory: that people are more sensitive to potential loss (e.g., of democracy) than gains. The “loss treatment” primed voters to think about the previous authoritarian regime, while the “gains treatment” primed people to reflect on Tunisia’s recent democratic accomplishments. Overall, all three treatments were effective in boosting intentions to register or vote, but exposure to the loss and gain frames was more effective in boosting participation than the instructional video. Effects were especially significant for those exposed to the loss frame. One implication here is that messages that emphasize the stakes of an election—what can be gained or lost—are potentially powerful motivators for voting. The potential risk, however, especially in a context like Kenya, is that emphasizing the high stakes

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<sup>1</sup> Conditional voters are those who will choose to participate under certain conditions. They are distinct from unconditional voters (who will always vote) and unconditional non-voters: those who will never participate even when provided with additional information.

of an election increases not only one’s willingness to vote but also one’s willingness to use coercion or violence to bring about a particular political outcome.

In another study in Bangladesh, Ahmed, Hodler, and Islam (2023) tested two different messages meant to motivate turnout: one emphasizing the importance of voting for policy outcomes and the other emphasizing the importance of voting for bolstering the legitimacy of the winning party. Both messages altered voter turnout, but in divergent ways: increasing turnout in government strongholds and dampening turnout in opposition areas. The legitimacy treatment had especially large effects on dampening turnout in opposition areas, pointing to the ways that a seemingly neutral message about the importance of voting can have unintended effects, causing opposition supporters to deliberately disengage and abstain from voting as a way to delegitimize the regime. These findings are especially relevant in competitive authoritarian regimes (Ahmed, Hodler, & Islam, 2023).

Messaging may also be aimed at diminishing fear of voting. This is especially relevant in countries like Kenya, where violence has frequently accompanied elections, and where fear of violence—both electoral and criminal—may deter turnout (van Baalen, 2024; Gutiérrez-Romero & LeBas, 2020; Ley, 2018). A few studies are instructive. In Nigeria, Collier and Vicente (2014) conducted a nationwide field experiment and found that exposure to an anti-violence campaign conducted by ActionAid—consisting of town meetings, popular theaters and door-to-door distribution of materials—increased voter turnout. While fears of violence may indeed shape decisions to vote, there is surprisingly little evidence demonstrating the effects of interventions aimed at mitigating such security concerns. Scholars also raise the concern that voter education campaigns in post-conflict contexts that explicitly address fears of violence may inadvertently raise the salience of security concerns, working to intimidate rather than empower potential voters (Davis et al., 2018).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There are pros and cons to distributing interventions online: online is cheaper and has the potential to reach a broader population than offline, but it is more passive and impersonal (Finkel et al., 2023) and may be met with skepticism by recipients.
- Treatment effects can spill over; the extent of spillover (i.e., diffusion) depends on who is targeted, the spatial distribution of targeted communities, the density of social networks, and the influence of targeted individuals (e.g., household heads).
- The more powerful or effective a given intervention is, the more potential for unintended side effects, which can include dampening turnout among opposition supporters and strengthening incumbent advantage, increasing perceived stakes of the election (which can increase willingness to use violence), and deliberately disengaging from the electoral process.
- Addressing fears of voting-related violence is key to encouraging turnout in contexts like Kenya that have a history of election violence.

## INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS TARGETING WOMEN OR OTHER EXCLUDED

### GROUPS

One of the key challenges in creating an inclusive and democratic electoral process is ensuring that certain members of society are not excluded or discouraged from the voting process. In this regard, designing interventions that specifically target the electoral participation of women and other marginalized groups is crucial. This is especially important in Kenya, where patriarchal gender norms may discourage women from voting or influence how they vote, especially in more rural or traditional areas (Yoon & Okeke,

2018). Women may also abstain from voting at higher rates due to physical safety concerns and the time required to vote (i.e., travel time to polling stations and time waiting in line), which takes them away from domestic responsibilities.

Experimental studies from Pakistan and Guatemala provide potential lessons for boosting turnout among women. Giné and Mansuri (2018) conducted a field experiment in rural Pakistan testing the effects of a door-to-door non-partisan information campaign. The campaign relied on visual aids emphasizing the importance of voting and the significance of the secret ballot. For women exposed to one or both of these treatments, turnout increased by 11 percent. These strong results underscore the power of targeting women specifically, using simple imagery and messaging, and conveying information that reduces fear of voting (in this case, that the ballot is secret). The power of the treatment also underscores peer network effects, which may be especially strong among networks of women.

Another more recent and important study (Cheema et al., 2023), based on a field experiment in Pakistan, found that targeting women with a nonpartisan get-out-the-vote campaign had no effect on their turnout in a national election. However, when men were canvassed, women’s turnout increased by 5.4 percentage points, and when both women and men were canvassed, women’s turnout increased by 8 percentage points. The results underscore the importance of changing men’s views of women’s political participation. Meanwhile, another study focused on political engagement among internal migrants in India. It found that door-to-door campaigns facilitating voter registration substantially boosted voter registration rates.<sup>2</sup> Their results highlight how assistance in navigating the electoral bureaucracy can significantly boost participation among more marginalized communities (Gaikwad and Nellis, 2021).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Simple visual aids can be a helpful way to overcome illiteracy.
- Messaging that emphasizes the secrecy of a woman’s vote can be key in mitigating fears of voting or fears of voting differently from other household members.
- Door-to-door canvassing is more impactful than public campaigns.
- Women-only canvassing teams may be especially effective in bolstering participation of women.
- Efforts to increase turnout among women rely on changing the views of male household members, especially where patriarchal gender norms prevail.

## BEYOND INFORMATION INTERVENTIONS

Provisioning information to voters is one of many possible ways to improve voter turnout. A handful of other studies, several conducted in Kenya, focus instead on how improvements to election administration can improve turnout. The first relevant finding is that reducing election-day polling station lines can improve turnout. Specifically, Harris (2021) examines how variation in the length of such lines can create systemic inequities for registered voters, with polling station congestion discouraging turnout. Harris finds that turnout is 2.4 percent lower in congested polling places just below the threshold relative to polling stations above threshold. Harris’ study reinforces similar findings elsewhere, which find that with each additional hour of waiting in line, there is around a 1–3 percent decrease in turnout (see Pettigrew, 2021 and Highton, 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the treatment (at-home assistance facilitating voter registration) increased migrant registration rates by 24 percentage points and next-election turnout by 20 percentage points.

In another study, conducted in coordination with the IEBC, the authors conducted a large-scale experimental study testing the effects of national voter registration policies on voter registration in Kenya. Importantly, they find no evidence that SMS reminders to vote, sent by the IEBC, have any effect, at least in isolation. Instead, what matters in boosting turnout is increasing the ease and accessibility of registration by localizing it—sending IEBC staff with mobile registration equipment to register citizens. Effects of localization are strongest in poor and sparsely populated areas. The effects of localization are even stronger when they are combined with SMS reminders to register (by 20 percent compared to localization alone).

Taken together, these studies point to the potential efficacy of interventions that make voter registration and turnout easier and less costly by reducing the time and administrative burden of voter registration and reducing the time that voters must stand in line. Such interventions, of course, require coordination with county-level electoral administrators, but are likely to be much more efficacious than informational interventions alone.

## SUMMARY

Taken together, the efficacy of interventions meant to induce voter registration and turnout are quite mixed. Overall, most interventions are relatively ineffective, and where they are effective, the size of their effects is quite small. That there are few robust results, especially those that travel across different country contexts, makes it challenging to know how to effectively allocate resources in order to improve voter participation. An additional inferential challenge is that most experimental studies are not designed to distinguish between the informational content of a given campaign and the method through which information is delivered.

Nonetheless, there is compelling evidence that when an intervention comes from a credible source that combines information about the process and importance (i.e., value) of voting, it is possible to boost turnout.

There are two notable gaps in existing research. The first is that most interventions do not, at least in any meaningful way, address the issue of voter apathy. This is true across a range of democracies, both new and consolidated. But it is especially relevant in newer democracies such as Kenya, where decades of authoritarian rule followed by multi-party politics marked by corruption, polarization, and violence have led to political disillusionment and disengagement. Future interventions will need to be more creative in thinking about how to convince voters that their vote matters, not only for procedural reasons, but for substantive reasons as well.

Second, because most interventions are based on the assumption of low information environments, and hence focus on information provision, they overlook the many other factors that can motivate voter participation. For instance, very few studies test emotional factors that might motivate turnout, such as pleasure in agency (Wood, 2003) and excitement and joy from participating in a collective movement or process.

Third, where experimental studies do observe effects, they tend to be measured in the immediate period following exposure to treatment, leaving remaining questions about the enduring effects of a given intervention. In addition to thinking about existing gaps in research, voter engagement campaigns should also heed the warning of past interventions and, notably, the potential for unintended consequences. In addition to inadvertently benefiting one political side over the other, interventions run the risk of providing information that discourages voters, leading voters to deliberately disengage from the formal electoral process altogether (see Finkel and Lim, 2020).

As outlined in this report, Kenya faces several significant challenges in boosting electoral participation, not least of all being strong distrust in political institutions, a pervasive feeling that voting will not bring about meaningful change, and, for millions of Kenyans living in poor and marginalized areas, a limited ability to take the time and resources that registering to vote and queuing to vote requires (poverty rates, distance from the election office, and population sparsity are negatively related to voter registration).

An intervention designed to increase voter registration and turnout should be designed with these issues in mind. In light of the evidence summarized in this report alongside dynamics specific to Kenya, a future impact evaluation could consider the randomization of three distinct treatments. The first treatment could be procedural: a series of SMS nudges sent about how, when, and where to both register to vote and vote. These SMS nudges could come from the IEBC or a trusted third party. While informational interventions alone are likely to have little effect on turnout, they are relatively low cost and, when combined with other interventions, may be effective.



A second treatment should be motivational. The most effective way of disseminating such a message would be a door-to-door campaign conducted by trusted, non-partisan, and well-trained individuals who engage in personal conversations about the importance of voting (e.g., to safeguard or “claim back” the democratic process). Door-to-door campaigns could be paired with a newspaper or radio campaign to amplify the message and increase the audience. The potential effects of a door-to-door campaign would likely be increased in localities where settlement patterns are conducive to social interaction (i.e., more geographically concentrated areas). These two informational treatments could be combined with an intervention aimed at reducing the cost burden of voter registration. In line with the experimental study by Harris et al. (2021), this could be an intervention aimed at expanding the localization of voter registration (i.e., IEBC mobile units), with effects on registration likely to be highest in poor and rural areas.

## Effects of Interventions on Voter Turnout and Registration: Summary of Evidence

INTERVENTION	TURNOUT EFFECT	OTHER CONSIDERATIONS & TRADEOFFS	NOTABLE STUDY
CANDIDATE DEBATES	✗	Improves political knowledge.	Platas and Raffler (2021)
TOWNHALL MEETINGS	✓	Improves political knowledge; limited evidence of positive turnout effect.	Wantchekon and Guardado (2024)
CANDIDATE SCORECARDS	✗	Improves programmatic voting; negative information can suppress turnout.	Chong et al. (2015)
PARTISAN CAMPAIGN	✗	Improves turnout among supporters; increases polarization.	Baysan 2022
CIVIC EDUCATION: PROCEDURAL	✓	Weak evidence for independent effects; stronger effects for marginalized groups.	Gracio and Vincente (2021)
CIVIC EDUCATION: MOTIVATIONAL	✓		
CIVIC DUTY	✓	Limited evidence for effect on turnout.	Ferrali et al. (2024)
“PROTECT DEMOCRACY”	✓	Especially effective to prime loss.	Finkel et al. (2024)
POLICY IMPACT	✓	Mixed findings.	
INCREASE LEGITIMACY OF WINNING PARTY	✓	Reduces turnout among opposition voters.	Ahmed, Hodler, and Islam (2023)
CLOSENESS OF ELECTION	✗		Peisakhin et al. (2020)
ADDRESS SECURITY CONCERNS	✓	Mixed results; risk of priming fear.	Collier and Vicente (2014)
ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION REFORM	✓	Strong positive effects.	
REDUCE CONGESTION AT POLLING STATIONS	✓	Reduced queue time increases turnout; requires coordination with IEBC.	Harris et al. (2021)

INTERVENTION	TURNOUT EFFECT	OTHER CONSIDERATIONS & TRADEOFFS	NOTABLE STUDY
<i>LOCALIZE VOTER REGISTRATION</i>	✓	Effects strongest in poor/rural areas; requires coordination with IEBC.	Harris et al. (2021)
Civic education: iterative program	✗	Improves political knowledge, democratic enthusiasm, and non-electoral participation.	Mvukiyeh & Samii (2017)

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