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UGANDA'S REFERENDUM 2000: The Silent Boycott

by
Michael Bratton and
Gina Lambright

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On 29 June 2000, Ugandans faced an historic choice. They went to the polls to select a form of government for their country. The referendum question asked citizens to choose between an existing »movement« system and a »multiparty« system. At stake in the vote was the popularity of the »no-party« political arrangements that have evolved in Uganda over the last fifteen years, bringing to the country a measure of stability and growth. More broadly, the referendum was a test of the legitimacy of a political regime designed by one of Africa's so-called »new breed« of leaders, who, with tacit support from Western donors, have developed alternatives to full blown multiparty democracy.¹

Closely associated with president Yoweri Museveni and based on the National Resistance Movement (NRM) that came to power in 1986, Uganda's movement system is a hierarchy of elected organizations that stretches from village to national levels. Although broadly inclusive & all Ugandan citizens are automatically members of »the Movement«² & this form of government is a form of political monopoly. Political parties are permitted to exist but are forbidden from electoral campaigning. Yet Uganda has a tradition of political party competition based on a long-standing rivalry between the Democratic Party (DP) and the Uganda Peoples' Congress (UPC). Joined by a host of smaller parties, these entities chafe under the restrictions of the movement system and actively seek to restore multiparty competition in open elections.

President Museveni and his acolytes have repeatedly tried to associate multiparty competition with political violence. Recalling the state-orchestrated repression and subsequent anarchy that prevailed under the Obote I (1962-1971) and II (1980-85) regimes, the government argues that the multiparty option, as it exists today, offers little. Somewhat surprisingly, Uganda's mainstream political parties have never effectively countered these negative images. In fact, key figures such as Milton Obote (UPC) have been active as party leaders since Uganda's independence in 1962. And few party advocates have sought alternative institutional arrangements that would actually reduce the winner-take-all features of Uganda's current political and electoral institutions.

Instead, three polarized partisan positions emerged in the referendum campaign. First, President Museveni tirelessly toured the country to campaign for the Movement. In promoting his »no-party« version of democracy, he repeatedly argued that Ugandans are not yet ready for open party

competition because divisions between individuals and groups are not based on class differences, but rooted in more fundamental identities such as ethnicity and religion. In addition to reminding Ugandans about the (real or supposed) risks of partisan politics, Museveni's rhetoric highlighted the achievements of the NRM government.

Second, the DP and the UPC urged their supporters to boycott the entire referendum process, arguing that the right to form political parties and to campaign for elective office are fundamental human rights and therefore, not subject to vote. Right up until polling day on 29 June, 2000, representatives of these parties actively >decampaigned<, especially in parts of the country where they thought their support was strong.

Third, a conglomeration of new and minor parties organized an appeal on behalf of the multiparty option. They formed a Multiparty National Referendum Committee (MRC), which proved to be largely urban-based, inexperienced, and relatively ineffective. The MRC was plagued with internal divisions and strife, resulting in the forced resignation of the group's leader, Nelson Ochege, just weeks before the referendum took place.

At the same time, a coalition of church-based, community-based and civic organizations, working closely with the national Electoral Commission, undertook to monitor the campaign and the polls and to dispense civic education. During the late stages of the campaign, the authors conducted a national sample survey on popular knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding democracy, with special reference to the referendum. A description of the survey, which is part of an Afrobarometer, can be found in Appendix 1.

Using the survey findings, supplemented by the reports of monitors and official referendum results, we aim to answer the following questions: Why was the political *status quo* -- namely the movement system of government -- endorsed so resoundingly by the voters in Uganda's Referendum 2000? Why, on the other hand, did so few (only one half) of eligible voters turn out at the polls? Did those who stayed away do so because they sympathized with the idea of multiparty politics? If so, were they unwilling to say that they had joined the referendum boycott organized by the

established political parties? In short, was there a silent boycott?

Our research reveals that many Ugandans are ready to consider political change. In particular, educated urban elites and disaffected ethnic minorities in the north yearn for a widening of political competition. Although an overwhelming majority of survey respondents concurs that we should keep the present movement system, a sizeable minority simultaneously opts for a system of government based on many political parties that compete in free elections. We conclude that Ugandans give credit to Museveni and the movement system for their achievements in government. But the popular mind remains open on the question of multiparty politics.

The Constitutional Background

A heated debate about a suitable political system for Uganda was set in motion in the mid-1990s by a Constituent Assembly convened to draft a new national constitution. It revealed that Ugandans were intensely divided about whether political parties ought to be permitted. The 1995 Constitution of Uganda institutionalized this debate, specifically in Article 271, which called for a public referendum to decide the matter in the year 2000.³ Other procedures for holding similar referenda in the future were also included, but were considered by many NRM opponents to be so arduous as to ensure that the regime emerging from Referendum 2000 would remain in place indefinitely.

Although Article 29 of the 1995 Constitution guaranteed the right to form and join associations or unions, including trade unions and political or other civic organisations, political party activity is severely restricted in practice. For example, Article 269 prohibits political parties from opening and operating branch offices...holding delegates conferences...holding public rallies...sponsoring or offering a platform to, or in any way campaigning for or against, a candidate for any public elections...(or) carrying on any activities that may interfere with the movement political system for the time being in force.⁴

The bill to formalize the Referendum 2000 was passed on 1 July, 1999 amid tremendous controversy. The majority of multiparty sympathizers in parliament chose to stay away from the proceedings. More importantly, many NRM supporters, unhappy with both the bill itself and the way it

was tabled, chose to miss the vote rather than openly oppose it.⁵ Only 157 out of a total of 278 Members of Parliament (Mps) signed the legislative register that day and fewer than the 93 required to reach a quorum were actually present in the chambers when the sensitive bill was pushed through. The debate was continually disrupted by shouts of *no quorum*.⁶

The NRM government's heavy-handed legislative tactics prompted several legal challenges from opposition parties, including a law suit from the DP. The DP questioned the validity of the Referendum Act because the Speaker of Parliament used the parliamentary registers rather than an actual count of the MPs in the chambers to determine if a quorum was present. Based on technicalities, the Constitutional Court of Uganda initially refused to hear the DP's case, but was overruled by the Supreme Court. In response, the NRM government quickly voided the first act and pushed through a replica, the Referendum (Political Systems) Act 2000, on 6 June, 2000. Its retrospective provisions covered the campaign period, which officially began in July 1999, and was passed in a record three hours after numerous rules of parliamentary procedure were waived.⁷

Just as controversially, legislation to supercede Article 269 and thus, deregulate political party activity, was not passed prior to the referendum. Thus, political parties were simply unable to participate in the referendum campaign. In 1998, Parliament had declined to vote on a Political Organisations Bill, which created 49 different offenses that political parties could violate.⁸ Although criticizing the bill as overly restrictive, the Committee on Legal and Parliamentary Affairs was unable to bring back a revised version in time to enable parties to fully join the referendum process. In any event, the NRM government took the position that the enactment of the political organizations bill before the referendum would have nullified the need for the referendum since it would have implied a return to the multiparty system of government.⁹

The Referendum Campaign

The Movement position was represented by the image of a bus (all citizens were enjoined to leap aboard), while a dove represented proponents of the multiparty position. But, despite the fact that more than one camp participated in the referendum process, the playing field was far from level.

In addition to enjoying legal rights to organize at all levels of society and to prevent its opponents from doing so, the Movement made the most of its incumbency. Museveni's speeches were rife with promises of government services to localities, even undertaking to create new districts from within existing administrative boundaries in exchange for votes. For example, he promised a new district to the people of Yumbe county in Arua.¹⁰ Of the eleven new districts recently created by parliament, three are believed to directly result from pledges made during Museveni's countrywide referendum campaign tour.

Nominally, the referendum contenders received equal campaign resources: the government granted each participating side a contribution of 180 million Ugandan shillings (then approximately \$100,000) to facilitate its campaign. In May, the MRC complained that these funds allowed them to reach only 13 of Uganda's 45 districts.¹¹ But the NRM had access to additional state resources, a matter that became a central issue of the campaign and a major concern of the NGO referendum monitoring group, which repeatedly asked for a transparent accounting of campaign funds. For example, in September 1999, Movement representatives received 16 all-terrain vehicles and 20,000 bicycles to facilitate the campaign at an estimated cost of about 1 billion Uganda shillings (approximately \$0.5 million).¹² And, on 29 April, 2000, the National Executive Committee of the Movement held a one-day rally to draft its campaign manifesto, on which it expended almost one-third of the total funds officially disbursed for the campaign. The fact that the Movement later held over 60 rallies in 25 districts in the last two weeks of its campaign¹³ further heightened suspicions that central government coffers were being tapped.

Moreover, despite requirements that public officials extend equal treatment to referendum contenders, Resident District Commissioners and District Chairpersons routinely campaigned for the movement system.¹⁴ President Museveni did warn RDCs against partisanship, but he made this statement on 8 June, 2000, just three weeks before voting day. Likewise, the MRC raised questions about the independence of the Electoral Commission. Specifically, it complained that referendum leaflets distributed by the Commission included exact wording found in Movement literature, fueling a belief among some multiparty supporters that electoral administration was under the sway of the Movement Secretariat.

The administration of the referendum added further difficulties. Early on, referendum monitors noted with concern that voters faced problems in registering to vote and that turnout for registration appeared low. Despite Electoral Commission instructions that registration stations should stay open in the evenings, shortages of personnel and equipment hampered the process.¹⁵ Voter registers were initially posted at the district headquarters (only later being transferred to the parish level), which increased the distance voters had to travel to verify their registration and kept some voters from participating at all. Disturbingly, local council officials sometimes used voter registration to catch and arrest tax defaulters, despite a directive from President Museveni and the Chairman of the Electoral Commission against such actions, making at least some potential voters simply too scared to register.¹⁶ Finally, concerns about political and military security in eight districts (Bundibugyo, Katakwi, Kabarole, Kasese, Moroto, Kotido, Gulu, and Kitgum) created additional difficulties.¹⁷

Indeed, the campaign was not immune to sporadic incidents and threats of violence. In several instances, gatherings of multiparty supporters were forcibly disrupted by local police. For example, a 31 March rally in Mbarara organized by Hajji Nasser Sebaggala, the former mayor of Kampala, was violently broken up by armed police and the 34th Army Battalion using live ammunition.¹⁸ In the process, several people were injured. On such occasions, local police and army officials used their authority to interrupt canvassing meetings, especially when organized by multiparty supporters. The regulations required that groups notify local officials at least 72 hours in advance of the planned event and that the groups provide such information as officials "reasonably require."¹⁹ The referendum monitors noted that the authorities took advantage of the subjectivity of the "reasonably require" clause to inhibit opposition groups from carrying out campaigns.

Finally and importantly, the exact wording of the referendum question was not released by the Electoral Commission until 12 May 2000. As a result, civic educators were unable to discuss the actual referendum question with the citizenry prior to this time. There is reason to wonder, therefore, whether voters in Uganda in June 2000 really knew what the referendum was all about. One can accept the judgement of local monitors and international observers that the voting itself was "conducted in a

peaceful and orderly fashion despite some minor irregularities.²⁰ But one must question their inference that >people all over the country were free to vote for a political system of their choice.=²¹ As we will argue below, those who actually turned out on 29 June may not have been well-informed about the purpose of the referendum and may rather have been voting to endorse the performance in office of President Museveni and the NRM.

Popular Responses to the Campaign

To publicize the choice of governmental systems, the referendum was preceded by a brief civic education programme targeted at ordinary citizens and women=s groups.²² In May and June, 2000, our survey assessed how much information these citizens had absorbed about the referendum. It also compared the various sources of information to which citizens were exposed during the campaign.

Subjectively, Ugandans felt themselves quite well-informed. When asked >how much have you heard about the upcoming referendum ...or haven=t you had an opportunity to hear about it yet=, they replied as follows. Exactly half of the respondents (50 percent) said that they had >heard a lot=, a smaller group asserted that they had >heard a little= (43 percent); and, despite having been offered the option, only a small minority claimed to know nothing at all about the referendum (8 percent). As such, the referendum seemed to have entered popular consciousness.

Perhaps predictably, women (12 percent) and northerners (17 percent) were significantly more likely than other Ugandans to say that they had heard >nothing=. This finding suggests civic education of any kind was least likely to have reached these social groups. Formal schooling also had a profound effect on awareness of the referendum: whereas only a quarter of persons with no schooling said that they had heard >a lot= about the referendum, more than eight out of ten university graduates claimed to have done so. But formal education did not wipe out the gender gap in referendum awareness. At best, therefore, civic education workshops for women=s groups may have reduced the gender gap in referendum awareness, though it did not eliminate it.

People often heard about the referendum through informal channels such as friends (87 percent) and family (71 percent). Radio was also an important source of information, with more than

nine out of ten respondents (91 percent) saying they heard the referendum mentioned in a news bulletin or public service announcement. Moreover, almost six out of ten respondents (59 percent) reported having derived some information about the referendum from individuals whom they identified as >civic educators=.

Because respondents claimed an inordinately high level of exposure to civic education, we wondered what precisely they were referring to. They could well have been referring to *chakamchaka*, a mandatory programme of political education that routinely praised President Museveni and the NRM government.²³ This inference is supported by the fact that attendance at civic education meetings correlates closely with attendance at election rallies.

Civic education was not seen as particularly edifying. Almost twice as many people said it delivered only >a little= information. Friends were apparently regarded as being more informative, being equally likely to provide >a lot=. Many people also received information about the referendum from partisan sources, namely the NRM or political coalitions advocating the multiparty option. Indeed, people were just as likely to have heard a partisan message from the Movement itself (46 percent) as to have heard a (supposedly) non-partisan message from a church leader (48 percent). And the NRM was a much more effective purveyor of referendum information than political parties, whose message apparently reached only 26 percent of respondents. Thus, if Ugandans received partisan information, it was most likely to have come from, and to favour, the Movement.

How did people evaluate the material they received? Did they regard it as biased or as even-handed? Respondents were asked to rate radio, television and newspapers by standards of fairness. Whereas 57 percent thought that the media were balanced in their coverage of the referendum campaign, 43 percent found them biased. If media bias was perceived, it was more often seen as tilted toward the government (i.e. Movement) side (77 percent) than toward the opposition (i.e. multiparty) (23 percent).²⁴ This perception was similar for the three different types of media, though television was seen to be more biased in favour of the government (86 percent) than were newspapers (70 percent), no doubt reflecting the greater diversity of private print sources than private television stations.²⁵ Also, almost all posters portrayed the bus rather than a dove.

Objectively, were citizens well-informed? In some respects, Ugandans had a justified faith in their own knowledge of the referendum. For example, clear majorities of citizens correctly answered key survey questions about its purposes and procedures. For example, an overwhelming majority (92 percent) knew that voter registration was a legal prerequisite to referendum voting. A clear majority also knew that the referendum would employ a secret ballot (71 percent) though, significantly, more one in five respondents (22 percent) thought that >others will know how you voted=. A similar proportion was aware that the purpose of the referendum was to choose a system of government for the country (76 percent), though 17 percent thought that the referendum had some alternate purpose.

In other respects, Ugandans knew less about the referendum than they thought they did. We discovered several widespread popular misconceptions. A clear majority regarded a referendum as >the same thing as an election= (62 percent). Probing this issue further, we asked whether, in a referendum, >voters choose candidates for political office=. While a slim majority knew this to be wrong (51 percent), a significant minority (42 percent) thought that they were going to the polls to elect leaders. For further confirmation, we asked >if the voters in the referendum reject the movement system, (will) the government...have to resign?=. By a slight margin (47 to 44 percent), more people thought (incorrectly) that a victory by multiparty advocates would lead to the immediate ejection from office of the NRM government.

Similar responses were obtained to the open-ended inquiry, >in your opinion, what is the referendum about?=. Fewer than half of all respondents (42 percent) knew that the referendum concerned a choice among political systems. The next largest group thought the referendum, like an election, was about choosing government leaders (21 percent), or >choice= in general (13 percent). About one in six Ugandans (16 percent) admitted frankly that they had no idea what the referendum was about. Taken together, these results point to rather low levels of knowledge about the purpose of the June 2000 ballot and a substantial conflation of referenda and elections in the popular imagination.

Moreover, civic education had little observable effect on the quality of available information. To be sure, the survey data show variation in levels of knowledge about the referendum among people who heard «a lot» from civic educators. In some cases, civic education seemed to make a positive impact. For example, it increased the proportion of people who knew that the referendum was about a choice of political systems. In other cases its effect was slight: it reduced the number of people who «didn't know» whether a referendum was the «same thing» as an election, but did not at the same time reduce the proportion who thought that this statement was true! On occasion, civic education was even a vehicle for misinformation. For example, compared with those who heard «nothing», those who heard «a lot» from civic educators were more likely to think that «if citizens do not like the results of the referendum, they do not need to abide by them.»²⁶

Influences on the Referendum Vote

Did material inducements and political pressures play any part in the referendum campaign? The survey asked whether voters were promised «carrots» or threatened with «sticks».

Very few respondents (only 4 percent) admitted that anyone had «tried to influence your vote by promising rewards to you personally». But, when vote-buying was attempted, both sides appear to have been equally active. Among the few people who had been offered an inducement, 42 percent had been approached by the NRM and 41 percent by political parties. Most commonly, the promise of reward took the form of money (47 percent), whether or not it was ever actually paid, followed by alcohol (7 percent), probably when partisan advocates bought beer for prospective voters. Given the low levels of reported vote-buying and the fact that, when it occurred, it came from both sides, we suspect that material inducement had little effect, one way or the other, on the referendum result.

More people (12 percent) held the opinion that «public services (were) delivered, improved or repaired in (their) area for the purpose of influencing the outcome of the referendum». They confirmed that Movement cadres made ample use of the advantages of incumbency to distribute patronage benefits as a campaign strategy. Those who cited such incidents said that the government

delivered or upgraded the following facilities during the referendum campaign: roads (34 percent), schools (26 percent), water supplies (14 percent) and clinics (10 percent).

Fear of possible retribution for voting the »wrong« way was more prevalent. Almost one out of five respondents (18 percent) reported that they were concerned that »negative consequences for you personally« might follow »if you fail to vote a certain way in the referendum«. Among those who expressed these concerns, respondents worried about consequences for their personal safety (37 percent), the safety of their families (14 percent), or the protection of their property (9 percent). In some cases, respondents seem to have referred to national conditions (e.g. the resumption of war, general political violence) rather than to intimidation directed at themselves personally (11 percent). In still other cases, the expected »negative consequences« were self-imposed and reflected a sense of civic obligation, as with those who said »I would feel bad because I did not vote« (6 percent).

In any event, the survey did not reveal any widespread or systematic political intimidation during the campaign. The June 2000 referendum in Uganda did not resemble the June 2000 election in Zimbabwe. Fear of »negative consequences« was either relatively isolated, quite subtle, or connected loosely to memories of political instability in Uganda's recent history. And unlike carrots, which were dangled in front of a few voters by both sides, sticks were wielded mainly by the multiparty side. When asked about »consequences from whom«, fully half the respondents named political party officials (50 percent) as compared to just 16 percent for Movement officials.

These findings suggest two interpretations. Either multiparty advocates were more likely than Movement supporters to resort to strong-arm tactics. Or, more likely in our view, President Museveni had succeeded in planting an association in people's minds between multiparty politics and political instability in Uganda. In this regard, fear for personal safety was particularly high in the central region of Uganda, as was the concern that political parties undermine national unity. One possible explanation for these attitudes is that this region contains the Luwero Triangle, a former epicenter of political terror.

We do not mean to imply that Movement activists never applied undue stress on voters. At least some voters felt compelled to side, perhaps unwillingly, with the majority. Given the pervasive presence of NRM officials, structures, and supporters at the grassroots level in most regions, there were strong social expectations that loyal citizens would support the Movement. For example, in Masaka District in the central region, some residents complained that they were forced to attend *chakamchaka* meetings and were extorted for the payment of fees.²⁷ The survey detected much stronger concerns about negative consequences in western Uganda, a Movement stronghold, than in northern Uganda, where parties garner more support (19 percent versus 11 percent). And people who doubted the secrecy of the referendum ballot were somewhat more likely to say that they planned to vote for the movement system. Taken together, these findings suggest that, even in the absence of overt intimidation, voters may have felt strong peer pressure to go along with an official consensus.

Voting in the Referendum

Ugandans showed considerable interest in taking part in the Referendum 2000, with a large proportion (85 percent) saying they had registered to vote. Note that this survey figure is lower than the Electoral Commission's estimate that 92 percent of voters had registered.²⁸ But it is high by African standards, compared, for example, to the 78 percent of eligible voters who presently say they are registered to vote in Nigeria.²⁹

Behind such averages, voter registration varies significantly by gender and age. Whereas 91 percent of men in Uganda asserted that they were registered, only 80 percent of women did so. Even more strikingly, whereas 91 percent of middle-aged and older persons (over 36 years old) were registered, only 74 percent of young people (aged 18-25 years) made the same claim. Prominent among eligible voters without voting cards were young people who had recently turned 18 years old.

Why were some Ugandans not registered as voters? As many as one out of ten (11 percent) of the survey respondents said that they wanted to register but were unable to do so. This response was twice as prevalent among young people (21 percent). These groups cited several common

reasons for not registering. Either they missed the voter registration drive in their area (29 percent), were absent from the area when registration took place (18 percent), or were physically unwell during registration (15 percent). A further 15 percent of unregistered persons said they were simply not interested in voting.

Only a small minority of Ugandans (4 percent) reported making a conscious choice to abstain from voter registration. For whatever reasons, more than twice as many people in Kampala (9 percent) consciously turned their backs on voter registration than in the rest of the country. We cannot determine whether abstention from voter registration was an act of protest or an expression of apathy. But Ugandans are not generally apathetic about politics: when we add together the people who chose not to register with those who express no interest in voting, we find that no more than 5 percent openly display political apathy. This figure compares somewhat favourably with Zambia in 1996, where 8 percent said that they chose not to register because they were not interested in voting.³⁰

The survey asked all respondents whether they intended to cast a ballot in the referendum. At first glance, this potentially sensitive question did not seem to threaten people since very few (one-half of 1 percent) refused to answer it. Of course, a high response rate does not preclude the possibility that people protected themselves by offering a safe answer. More than eight out of ten Ugandans (83 percent) said that they intended to vote in the referendum. This figure stands in stark contrast to the actual voter turnout rate of 52 percent reported by the Electoral Commission.³¹ A discrepancy of this size begs explanation, which we attempt in the next section.

For the moment, we note again that more men than women, as well as more older than younger people, expressed an intention to cast a referendum vote. A strong regional difference was also evident: 90 percent of the respondents in western Uganda said they intended to vote compared to 75 percent in northern Uganda. The lower level of intended voting in the north was due apparently in large part to problems of access to voter registration; this region had the largest proportions of people who said both that they >wanted to register= (13 percent) and >wanted to vote= (15 percent) but were unable to

do either. Overall, about one out of ten adult Ugandans (11 percent) said that they would like to vote, but could not. Not only in the north, but countrywide, this group was made up overwhelmingly of persons who were not registered as voters.³²

Notably, few people came out openly in support of the campaign to boycott the referendum. Just 2 percent were willing to say to the survey interviewers that they agreed with the statement that 'I plan to boycott the referendum'. These self-identified boycotters were outnumbered, not only by intended voters, but also by those who said that they aimed to abstain from voting in the referendum for other (i.e. non-boycott) reasons (3 percent). Among the boycotters, a common approach was to hold back, not only from voting in the referendum, but from registering to vote in the first place.

Finally, we asked Ugandans how they intended to vote. The survey question on this critical matter was worded as follows: 'in the upcoming referendum of June 2000, will you vote for the movement system or for a multiparty system?'. The refusal rate (19 percent) was somewhat higher on this genuinely sensitive question, with many respondents asserting their right to keep their voting intentions secret. Nevertheless, sufficient valid responses were obtained to allow the following analysis.

Whereas 78 percent of the remaining respondents said they intended to vote for the movement system, some 6 percent planned to choose the multiparty option. Others said they would not vote (14 percent) or did not know how they would vote (2 percent). To arrive at an accurate prediction of the actual vote tally, it is necessary to exclude non-voters and to assume that the 'undecided' voters split in the same proportions as those who are willing to declare their preferences. By this calculation the survey data show that 91 percent intended to vote for the movement system and that 7 percent intended to vote for the multiparty system.

The distribution of the intended vote closely matches the Electoral Commission's tally of actual results. Official figures gave the movement system 91 percent of the valid votes cast countrywide; multiparty crusaders received 9 percent.³³ In other words, the survey results exactly predicted the share of the vote going to the Movement side but slightly underestimated the share captured by multiparty

sympathizers. This stands to reason: whereas Movement supporters had nothing to lose by declaring their political loyalties to a survey interviewer, multiparty sympathizers were probably more cautious about admitting that they held a dissenting view.

Explaining Referendum Choice

Given demographic patterns discussed earlier, one might expect to find that age and gender influenced whether and how individuals voted in the referendum. At first glance, this appears to be true. In simple bivariate analyses, young Ugandans were less likely to plan to vote and women were less likely to prefer the multiparty option. But once statistical controls for geographic region were introduced, these demographic effects disappeared. All told, the place where Ugandans live is a more powerful predictor of both the intention to vote and the eventual vote choice. Region (northern, central, eastern, western) and residential location (urban or rural) were much more determinative of voting behaviour in Referendum 2000 than how old one was or whether one was male or female.

The principal line of political cleavage in Uganda divides the western and northern regions. Survey respondents told us that the Movement would run strongly in western Uganda, the region from which the NRM had originally mounted its ascent to power, and weakly in northern Uganda, formerly a stronghold of the UPC and now an axis of anti-government insurgency. A regional voting breakdown of this kind in fact came to pass. According to official reports, the Movement won a remarkable 97 percent of the vote in the west as compared to a still respectable, but significantly lower, 77 percent in the north.³⁴ The Electoral Commission even reported that over 99 percent of ballots were cast for the Movement in three districts in western Uganda: Kabale, Kisoro and Rukungiri! By contrast, in the only district where it failed to secure a majority, the Movement received only 43 percent of the vote in Gulu, a northern heartland that has been hard hit by armed rebellion and forced population resettlement.

The survey also predicted that the multiparty side would run reasonably well in Kampala where it would capture 19 percent of the vote, a figure almost identical to the 20 percent later reported by the Electoral Commission. This concentration of multiparty sentiment was not limited to Kampala alone, but spread across all urban areas in Uganda.³⁵ Generally speaking, urban voters were three times

more likely to opt for multiparty rule than rural voters (17 percent versus 5 percent); and conversely, rural voters were significantly more likely to extend their loyalty to the Movement (95 versus 83 percent). In sum, multiparty advocates drew support in the towns (and in the north) and the Movement captured the bulk of the countryside (especially in the west). In an under-urbanized country, these demographic distributions were bound to favour the party that could mobilize the rural vote.

We suggested earlier that many Ugandans saw the referendum less as a choice of governmental system and more as a popularity contest about Museveni and the Movement. To test this hypothesis we explored whether popular assessments of governmental performance would predict the referendum choice. Indeed they did, and remarkably well. For example, Ugandans who were ›satisfied= with the performance of President Museveni, who rated the performance of the government as ›good=, and who said they ›trusted= the NRM, were all very likely to vote for the movement system.³⁶ Moreover, these performance indicators did not drop out when region and urban residence were included in a multivariate explanation of referendum choice. Positive assessments of the performance of incumbent leaders and ruling institutions were clearly an important part of the explanation of the referendum outcome.

Attitudes to Multiparty Competition

Beyond the referendum decision, we seek to gauge how Ugandans approach the idea of multiparty competition. Do they think that competing parties are necessary for good governance? For democracy? For Uganda? To answer these questions, survey respondents were asked to agree or disagree with eight statements about political parties and their functions in a competitive political system. Table 1 shows the percentage who took a ›pro-party= (i.e. ›pro-competition=) stance on each item. We conclude from these data that Ugandans are generally suspicious of political parties. When the opinions of persons who ›don't know= are included, respondents never express an absolute majority in favor of multiparty competition on any individual item.³⁷

Table 1: Popular Attitudes to Political Parties (percentages, including >don't knows=)	Percent Pro-Party	
	Agree	Disagree
By causing conflict and confusion, political parties undermine national unity		24
In order to get elected, political parties simply make promises that they can never fulfill		25
Many political parties are needed to make sure that all points of view are represented in government	35	
Even without political parties, we already have enough choice among candidates for		36
Political parties will not necessarily include people like you in political discussions and decisions		38
At least two political parties are needed to provide people with real choices of leaders	40	
Political parties help to ensure that people in government don't abuse their power	44	
Through political parties, young leaders will arise to replace the older leaders who have run this country	49	

Specifically, Ugandans are most concerned about the potentially disruptive effects of party competition on national political stability. This result suggests that President Museveni has struck a deep popular chord in linking party politics with >conflict and confusion=. Ugandans also take a skeptical view of the promises made by out-of-power politicians, regarding them largely as empty electioneering. As for political representation B which is supposed to be a key function of political parties B Ugandans seem to see little advantage in making their system more competitive. Clear majorities say that the existing movement system provides enough choice of leadership and adequate space for the expression of diverse viewpoints. And they argue that multiple parties would be insufficiently inclusive of people like themselves.

Public opinion about political parties is split on only two topics. Substantial minorities of respondents (which turn into slim majorities if >don't knows= are excluded) recognize that multiple parties may confer a couple of advantages. They can help to control abuses of government power; and

they can refresh the ranks of the political elite by recruiting younger leaders. Consistent with the second point, thirteen candidates have emerged to contest the presidency in Uganda's general elections scheduled for March 2001. These manifestations of support for multipartism can be read to mean that at least some citizens in Uganda have underlying concerns that President Museveni and his colleagues may have stayed too long in office and that such a situation invites potential abuses of power.

Ugandans are skeptical about political parties because they associate these institutions with the array of parties (the DP, UPC etc.) inherited from the past. We asked: "when you hear the term 'political party', what is the first thing that comes to your mind?" The most common reaction was for respondents to give the names of mainstream parties like the DP and UPC (18 percent).³⁸ Interestingly, people were equally likely to connect political parties with violent conflict (in their words, "war", "hatred", "division", "death", also 18 percent). On the basis of all the evidence presented here, we suggest that Ugandans are dissatisfied with the existing choice of political parties. But they remain open to the prospect that, at some time in the future, a new and different set of political parties may be able to bring about improvements in public governance.

Preferences for Governmental Systems

Indeed, Ugandans do not entirely dismiss competitive politics. Despite the referendum result and notwithstanding popular reservations about existing parties, they have not closed their minds on the issue of multiparty rule. This finding emerges when the referendum question is recast, which we did in two ways in the survey.

First, we asked about patience with the existing political regime, without using symbolically fraught words like "movement", "parties" or "democracy". We simply asked people to choose between two statements: "A. Our present system of government ought to be able to deal with problems inherited from the past, even if this takes time" and "B. If our system of government can't produce results soon, we should try another system". More than seven out of ten respondents chose "A", thus confirming patience with the political *status quo*; only 22 percent chose "B", thereby opting for a change

of political regime. Nevertheless, although support remains high for the current regime, more people (22 percent, versus 9 percent in the referendum) were willing to countenance change when the question is posed this way.

Table 2: Popular Attitudes to Alternative Regimes (percentages, including >don't knows=)	Percent Agree
We should keep the present movement system	84
We should have many political parties that compete in free elections	37
We should have only one political party	39
We should go back to a traditional system of government by kings and chiefs	16
We should get rid of elections so that a strong leader can decide everything	13
The army should come in to govern the country	9

Second, we asked people to compare various types of political regime that Uganda has experienced or might conceivably adopt. The survey reminded respondents that >there are many ways to govern a country= and asked them, >what do you think about the following options?= (See Table 2). The results cast new light on support for multipartism. On one hand, the overwhelming majority of respondents still prefer the existing movement system, though at a slightly lower level (84 percent) than in the referendum (91 percent). On the other hand, multiparty democracy (>a system with many political parties that compete in free elections=) attracted considerable support, now from more than one out of three Ugandans. In this instance, the gap between the referendum result (9 percent support for the multiparty option) and survey result (37 percent agree with a system based on multiparty elections) was quite wide.

Multiparty sentiment was concentrated among the social groups that one might expect: males, younger people, urbanites and educated persons. And, yet again, the key discriminating factor was geographic region. We even found *majorities* in two regions who agreed with the statement that >we

should have many political parties that compete in free elections: in Kampala (where 50 percent agreed and 43 percent disagreed) and in the north (where 50 percent agreed, compared to 17 percent in the west). Indeed, this last distinction was one of the strongest in the study.³⁹

Against such multiparty preferences, we note that Ugandans are also tolerant of one-party rule (39 percent). It is difficult to say whether they prefer a single party to multiple parties since the difference in levels of support for these two types of regime lies within the study's margin of sampling error. But, by entertaining the possibility of one-party rule, Ugandans clearly diverge from other Africans: in all other places surveyed in the Afrobarometer, few citizens still support unipartism: under 12 percent in Nigeria and under 20 percent in Ghana and Zambia. Nonetheless, Ugandans clearly prefer the idea of multiparty democracy to numerous other forms of government. Echoing what they said earlier about parties checking abuses of power, Ugandans resoundingly reject the option of getting rid of elections so that a strong leader can decide everything (only 13 percent agree). And Ugandans rebuff two other forms of government with which they are intimately acquainted. We found little nostalgia for the return of traditional chiefs (16 percent) or army officers (9 percent) to the national helm.

The preferences of Ugandans about systems of government are therefore less fixed than the lopsided referendum result implies. Outside of the heated context of a government-driven electoral contest, Ugandans express more reflective and open-minded opinions on this subject. Our survey question on alternative regimes shows that many Ugandans are not opposed to multiparty democracy *per se*. In our opinion, the survey indicates that they may be willing to consider such a regime at some time in the future.

A Silent Boycott

Finally, we wonder whether multiparty sympathies can help solve a remaining puzzle. Are these pro-democratic sentiments the reason for the wide gap between intended and actual voter turnout in Uganda's Referendum 2000? Recall that many more citizens (83 percent) said they planned to vote in the referendum than did so in practice (52 percent). Was this wide turnout gap caused by administrative

obstacles (like voter registration) before the election? Or did it arise from natural events (like rain) on polling day? Another possibility is that voters abstained in a conscious act of boycott.

To address these questions, we shift the unit of analysis from the individual citizen to the administrative district. And we combine sources of data, using both survey findings and official referendum results. The Electoral Commission of Uganda has provided an approved referendum tally by administrative district; it reports, among other data, the actual turnout of registered voters.⁴⁰ As a first step, we seek to identify factors that are related to voter turnout.

We noted earlier that some Ugandans wanted to register to vote but were unable to do so. We therefore hypothesize that, in any given district, complaints about problems with voter registration will reduce actual voter turnout. This turns out to be the case. The greater the frequency of reported problems with registration in a district, the lower its rate of voter turnout. For example, in Gulu District in northern Uganda, where almost a quarter of would-be voters reported encountering problems with registration procedures, voter turnout was 24 percent, the lowest rate in the country. By contrast, only 2 percent of eligible adults complained about registration in Kabale District in western Uganda, where turnout reportedly reached 95 percent.

A second consideration plausibly affecting turnout is the wet weather on polling day. We raise this issue precisely because election officials and observers announced publicly that rain kept voters away.⁴¹ These claims can be evaluated by means of official meteorological data on the amount of rainfall that fell in each administrative district on referendum day, 29 June, 2000.⁴² While we find that rainfall slightly suppressed actual voter turnout across all 45 districts, the relationship is not statistically significant. Moreover, any rainfall effect was concentrated in the five districts that received downpours on voting day and was invisible in the remaining districts, half of which had no rainfall whatever!⁴³

Our major hypothesis is that multiparty sympathies are sound predictors of voter turnout. We expect that people who want >many political parties that compete in free elections= are less likely to have voted, perhaps because of the limited choices available in the referendum. Again, our expectations held. The higher the level of multiparty sentiment in a district, the lower its rate of voter

turnout. For example, in Apac District in northern Uganda, where almost two-thirds (63 percent) of residents are multiparty sympathizers, voter turnout was just 33 percent. Yet in Kibale District in western Uganda, where only 7 percent would consider multiparty rule, voter turnout was a far-healthier 70 percent.

Let us now combine these considerations into a comprehensive explanation of voter turnout in Uganda's Referendum 2000. We find that, once controlled for other factors, rainfall disappears entirely as a cause of voter abstention.⁴⁴ Problems with voter registration remain an important explanatory factor, alone accounting for some 17 percent of the variance in voter turnout. And multiparty sympathies emerge as the most important ingredient, accounting on their own for about one-third (34 percent) of variance. Together, registration obstacles and multiparty sympathies explain almost one-half of voter turnout in Uganda's referendum.⁴⁵

To conclude the analysis, we focus on the «turnout gap». This gulf between the expressed intention to vote and the actual voter turnout captures whether people say one thing but do another. Stated differently, voters abstained from voting without revealing that they planned to do so. As such, the turnout gap signifies the extent of any *silent* boycott in the referendum. We measured it as the percentage point difference between the intention to vote that respondents expressed in the survey and the actual voter turnout as reported by the Electoral Commission.

In 34 of the 36 districts for which we have such data, the turnout gap is a positive figure, indicating that the intended vote was almost always higher than the actual vote. Thus, while the survey overestimated actual turnout, it did so consistently in one direction. Perhaps people were submitting to social and political pressures; trying to be «politically correct», they purposely gave a false impression of their intention to vote. Only in Kabale and Rukungiri (both in the western region, a Movement stronghold) was there a negative figure for the turnout gap. In other words, the Electoral Commission reported that, here, more people voted (95 percent or more!) than had said they intended to do so. If nothing else, this observation raises a red flag signaling possible over-reporting in official

turnout figures or other electoral irregularities in these two districts.

If there was a silent boycott, then multiparty sympathies should predict the turnout gap.

Any observed linkage should fulfill several requirements: it should run in a positive direction, the variables should be strongly associated, the relationship should be statistically significant, and the connection should hold regardless of the influence of other explanatory factors. All these criteria were convincingly met in a multivariate regression analysis: multiparty sympathies were positively, strongly and significantly related to the turnout gap.⁴⁶ Moreover, because *both* rainfall *and* registration obstacles now became insignificant, multiparty sympathies emerged as the *only* powerful explanatory factor. Alone, multiparty sympathies explain almost one-third (31 percent) of the gap between intended and actual votes.

In sum, the *main* reason that voter turnout fell short of expectations in Uganda's Referendum 2000 was that multiparty sympathizers decided to stay away from the polls. But, in our opinion, voters did not abstain in response to the DP-UPC call for a referendum boycott. Remember that only a tiny minority (a mere 2 percent) openly declared that they supported the opposition call to stay away. Many more people accepted Museveni's assertion that the DP and UPC could lead the country back toward conflict and disorder. Thus, many Ugandans silently boycotted the polls because they did not like the referendum choice, which amounted to acquiescence to the Movement's hegemony or accepting a return to power by unpalatable, old-guard partisans. Instead, especially in the urban areas and the north, citizens chose to await the emergence of new leaders in an alternative system of many political parties that compete in free elections.

Conclusion

On the surface, the results of Uganda's Referendum 2000 suggest that the voting population rejected political pluralism in favour of an effective and inclusive Movement. Yet, this tells only part of the story. Multiparty sympathizers figure prominently among Ugandans who told survey interviewers that they intended to vote in the referendum but actually stayed away. We think they

dissembled because they felt constrained by social or political pressure to reveal their true voting intentions. Judging that the political atmosphere does not allow the open expression of partisan preferences, they engaged in «silent» forms of boycott.

These findings help characterize Uganda's current political regime. On one hand, the NRM has created a novel form of popular rule that has mobilized considerable participation and which enables a measure of political responsiveness. On the other hand, the official rejection of political party competition raises suspicions that the movement system is little more than an authoritarian one-party state in disguise. We conclude that Uganda currently has a partial, hybrid regime. While this regime is relatively democratic in parts of civil society, which features independent NGOs and a relatively free press, it remains undemocratic in others, notably because political parties remain under the tight control of the state. On the basis of this study we can add that Ugandan citizens do not yet feel that they enjoy the full range of expressive, associative and voting choices that characterize a complete democracy.

Appendix 1: The Survey and the Sample

The survey was designed by Michael Bratton and Gina Lambright for the International Foundation for Election Systems, Washington D.C. The authors thank Robert Sentamu, Robert Mattes, and Yul Derek Davids, who made major contributions to sample and questionnaire construction. Under the direction of Robert Sentamu, Wilsken Agencies (Uganda) Inc. implemented the fieldwork. Funds were provided by the Donor Technical Monitoring Group for the Uganda Referendum 2000, to whom the authors are grateful. Note, however, that none of the donors in this multilateral consortium can be held responsible for any results or interpretations presented here.

The Uganda survey forms part of an ongoing, twelve-country Afrobarometer project that tracks and contrasts public attitudes to democracy and economy across the continent. As such, the research instrument contained various items derived from surveys already conducted in several countries in West and Southern Africa. The Afrobarometer is a joint venture of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, Ghana), and Michigan State University (MSU).

The Uganda survey was conducted between May 17 and June 21, 2000. The respondents were a representative cross-section of 2271 adult Ugandans aged 18 years or older. The research instrument was a questionnaire containing 85 items that was administered face-to-face by teams of trained interviewers. To adapt the questionnaire to local conditions, we translated the English version into nine local languages: Luganda, Luo, Rutooro, Lusoga, Rukiga, Lumasaba, Ateso, Runyoro and Lugbara. All interviews were administered in the language of the respondent's choice.

To ensure that every adult Ugandan had an equal chance of selection, a multi-stage, random sampling method was employed. The actual sample closely matches the distributions of subgroups within the national population in key respects such as gender, occupation, and religion. Nonetheless, the sampling procedures produced a set of respondents that was slightly younger and more educated than indicated by Uganda's 1991 census, though demographic changes in the population itself since 1991 could well account for these minor

discrepancies. The survey covered all four regions of Uganda (northern, eastern, central and western) in proportion their relative size in the national population, including 36 of the 45 official districts. Because 30 returns from the northern region had to be discarded because data collection did not meet the project's quality standards, the sample was weighted by region to ensure that the north was represented in accordance with its proportional population size. All descriptive statistics in this report reflect this weighting.

The survey's margin of sampling error (at a 95 percent confidence level) is plus or minus 2.5 percent. At the request of the Donor Technical Monitoring Group, the survey was conducted in the late stages of campaign for the Referendum 2000. Because the heated political atmosphere at the time may have induced some citizens to provide socially or politically incorrect answers, the level of response error may be higher in this survey than in Afrobarometer surveys conducted in other countries under calmer circumstances. Readers should bear both sources of possible error in mind.

Endnotes

1. Marina Ottaway, *Africa's New Leaders: Democracy or State Reconstruction?* (Washington D.C., Carnegie Endowment, 1999). For the guiding vision in Uganda, see Yoweri Museveni, *What is Africa's Problem?* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000). In *Women in Politics in Uganda* (Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 2000) Aili Mari Tripp characterizes the political regime in Uganda, correctly in our view, as "semi-authoritarian".
2. As in one-party regimes, the NRM has consciously sought to blur the distinction between its own identity and organization on the one hand and the national system of government on the other. We seek to preserve this distinction by capitalizing the partisan organization (the Movement) but using lower case for the political regime it espouses (the movement system).
3. *The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda* (Kampala, Government Printer, 1995). Article 271 stipulates that a public referendum be held in the last month of the fourth year of the term of the Parliament, which began in 1996.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.166-7.
5. Some Members of Parliament felt that the Referendum Bill should not allow a 50 percent plus one majority to determine the future political system of the country. They feared contention in the event of a tight race.
6. *The Monitor* (Kampala) 2 July, 1999.
7. NGO Monitoring Cluster, *Enhancing Civil Society's Role in Democratic Processes through Election Monitoring: Final Report on Uganda's Referendum on Political Systems* (Kampala, NGO Monitoring Cluster, 2000), p.11.
8. Nabudere, Dani Wadada. *Uganda Referendum 2000: Winners and Losers* (Kampala, Monitor Publications, 2000), p. 8.
9. NGO Monitoring Cluster, *Final Report*, p.12. 2000.
10. *New Vision* (Kampala) 23 May, 2000.
11. *New Vision*, 16 May 2000.
12. *The Monitor*, 30 September, 1999.
13. NGO Monitoring Cluster, "June Interim Statement", p.3.
14. NGO Monitoring Cluster, *Final Report*, p. 24.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.15-16.
16. *Ibid.*

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17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 28.
19. *Ibid.*, p.24
20. *Ibid.*, p.39.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Uganda Referendum 2000: Civic Education and Monitoring Project* (Kampala, Donor Technical Monitoring Group, February 2000). Coordinated by the Electoral Commission and implemented through various NGOs, the civic education effort lasted only one month and was hampered by inadequate financing (*New Vision*, 22 March, 2000). *Africa Confidential* noted that people were not turning up for civic education workshops (41, 9, 2000, p.5).
23. The Electoral Commission suspend *chakamchaka* activities only in March 2000, recognizing that the courses only campaigned in favour of the Movement system leaving out the multipartists side (*New Vision*, 23 March, 2000).
24. These figures confirm the NGO monitors' analysis of news coverage on the two government radio stations, Radio Uganda and Star FM 100, which revealed that over 70 percent of coverage on both stations focused on the Movement campaign. NGO Monitoring Cluster, *Final Report*, p.34 2000.
25. The monitors' assessment of the government-owned *New Vision*, found no evidence that the newspaper did not meet its special responsibility to citizens to provide accurate and balanced news (Monitoring Cluster 2000, 32).
26. 43 percent versus 35 percent.
27. *New Vision*, 11 September, 1999.
28. Calculated from the Commission's figure of 9,609,703 registered voters out of a projected national population aged 18 years or older of 10,463,934 in mid-1999.
29. The Nigerian data are drawn from a parallel survey reported in Peter Lewis and Michael Bratton, 'Attitudes to Democracy and Markets in Nigeria', *Afrobarometer Paper No.3* (East Lansing, Michigan State University, 2000) www.polisci.msu.edu and www.afrobarometer.org.
30. Michael Bratton, 'Political Participation in a New Democracy: Institutional Considerations from Zambia', *Comparative Political Studies* 32, 5, 559.
31. Calculated from the 4,914,500 valid votes cast (reported on 2 July, 2000) as a proportion of the total number of registered voters (9,609,703).

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32. Contingency coefficient = .689, sig. = .000.
33. As reported in *Africa News Online* (10 July, 2000) the movement system received 4,322, 900; the multiparty option received 442, 823 votes. Spoiled ballots are excluded.
34. Ninety six and 76 percent, respectively, according to the survey.
35. In a regression analysis, an urban-rural variable was statistically significant whereas a variable distinguishing Kampala voters from those in the rest of the country was not. The dependent variable was the respondent's intended vote choice with intended abstention and 'don't know' treated as a middle value on a three-point scale.
36. Pearson's correlations = .202, .198 and .114, respectively, all significant at .000.
37. All eight items cohere into a single attitudinal dimension that might be thought of as 'support for multiparty competition' (Reliability index: Cronbach's alpha = .865 with 'don't knows', .721, without 'don't knows').
38. After 'don't knows' (24 percent) are excluded.
39. Contingency coefficient .390, sig =.000.
40. Republic of Uganda, *Summary Results Sheet*, September 2000.
41. Under the headline 'Rain Hinders Kampala Voters', *The Monitor* reported that 'the exercise registered a general low turnout...which election officials blamed on the morning shower' (30 June, 2000). An OAU observer called for sheltered polling stations in the light of 'the frequency of rain over most of Uganda and the disruption that inclement weather caused in this particular referendum' (*New Vision*, 1 July, 2000).
42. Government of Uganda, Ministry of Water, Lands and Environment, Meteorological Department, "Daily Rainfall", June 29, 2000.
43. Mpigi and Mukono (central region), Gulu and Lira (northern region) and Mbale (eastern region) received over 5mm.
44. In an ordinary least squares regression equation, the sign turned positive and the relationship was insignificant.
45. Adjusted R square = .486.
46. B = .481, standard error = .128, standardized beta = .571, sig. = .000.