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## Summary

Media, and social media specifically, is often blamed for exacerbating political divides, yet media has the potential to reduce polarization and support democratic development by exposing people to alternative viewpoints.

In nondemocratic countries, where the government especially controls traditional media outlets, researchers investigated how access to online media affects participants' political attitudes and behaviors.

In Uganda, researchers found that access to social media during normal times reduced support for the ruling party among its supporters, but had no such effect during the election period when social media was technically banned.

In Turkey, researchers found that exposure to online news sources with different viewpoints led to more moderate attitudes towards the government, but had little effect on other attitudes or behavior.

The findings highlight how online media can act as a moderating political force, but also the power of nondemocratic governments to control political messages and viewpoints online as well as offline.

# Can Online Media Reduce Polarization and Foster Democratic Development?

Evidence from field experiments in Uganda and Turkey

## Background

In recent years, the world has seen a rapid rise in political polarization, marked by intense negative feelings and even acts of violence between people of different political parties or groups. While differing views and lively debate are critical components of democracy, polarization can erode trust and threatens societies' abilities to collectively respond to national and global challenges such as wealth inequality, public health emergencies, and climate change.

Many people have blamed both traditional and social media for exacerbating polarization, and there is evidence of social media's negative effects in some developed democratic contexts. But little research has been carried out in nondemocratic settings. In these contexts, the government heavily controls traditional media outlets, and increasingly influences social media too. Governments can limit online access (e.g., through taxes), censor content, and otherwise manipulate the online media landscape. Social media, or entire internet, bans are common during sensitive political moments like elections.

In settings like this, how does facilitating access to online media shape people's political attitudes? Can exposure to new sources of information online shift beliefs and behaviors, or is it too hard to get people to move away from their existing consumption habits? More broadly, to what extent are the potential democratic benefits of such media undermined by the increasing efforts by governments to control it?

To shed light on these questions, King Center postdoctoral fellow Jeremy Bowles and co-authors conducted field experiments in Uganda and Turkey that explored two key questions:

1. How does access to social media affect political attitudes during "normal times" compared to during salient political moments, such as elections?

2. When people are incentivized to get information from online news sources with opposing views, how does it affect their views and voting choices? Do they change their beliefs or behavior?

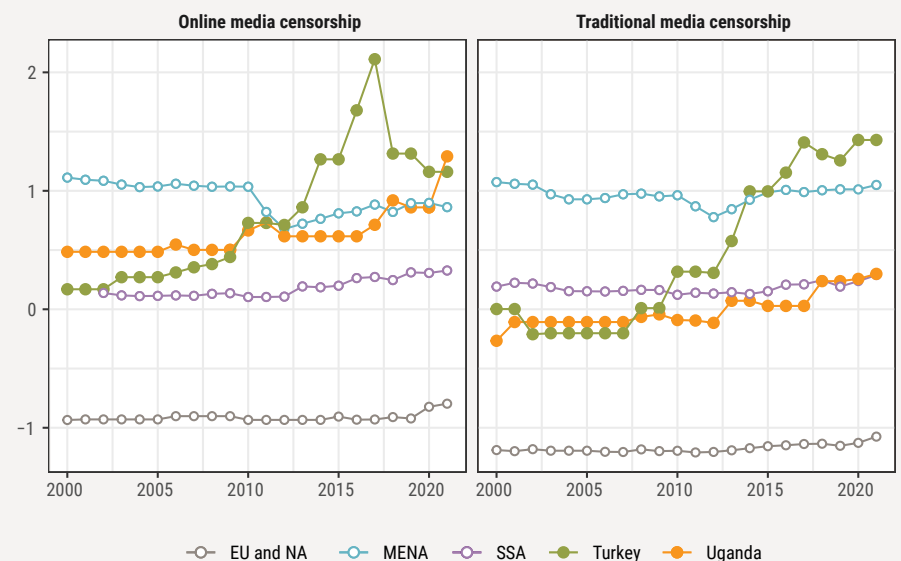
## The Context

Uganda and Turkey are both nondemocratic contexts with a dominant, longstanding incumbent political party: Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Movement (NRM) has governed Uganda since 1986, while Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) has governed Turkey since 2002. In each case, traditional media outlets, such as radio and newspapers, tend to be strongly pro-government, while social and online media has historically been associated with independent, often anti-government, political voices. In Uganda, for example, campaigning restrictions around the 2021 election meant that much of the opposition party’s campaigning had to occur through social media.

However, in response to the potentially destabilizing threats posed by unfettered access to online information, recent years have seen each government exerting increased control over the online media landscape. In Uganda, the government imposed a daily tax on access to social media apps in 2018, imposed internet blackouts and social media bans around the 2021 election, and levied increased taxes on mobile data in 2021. Such financial barriers to access mean that many citizens now use social media less for obtaining independent political information than they would like.

In Turkey, meanwhile, crackdowns on opposition online media outlets and the prosecution of journalists have been accompanied by pro-government business groups buying up independent media outlets. This consolidation in the online media landscape has led government-connected outlets to enjoy a far wider reach online than relatively small and fragmented independent outlets. This imbalanced playing field means that many people have little exposure to independent news sources.

Figure 1: Expansion over time of countries’ efforts to censor the internet and traditional media



This figure plots time trends using V-Dem data relating to the extent of efforts by countries to censor information critical about the government on the internet (left) and in traditional media outlets (right), both for Turkey and Uganda (bolded) as well as regional averages for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), and Western Europe and North America (EU and NA). Each variable is standardized to ensure comparability.

## The Research

**In Uganda, researchers evaluated whether and when social media access affects support for the long-standing incumbent party.**

The researchers combined a three-wave panel survey of 1,500 respondents interviewed in 2020–2021 with two research designs and granular data on respondents' social media usage patterns. In a field experiment conducted in comparatively “normal” times outside of an election period, the researchers randomly assigned participants to either a treatment or control group. Treated respondents had their social media taxes paid and received mobile data for taking a survey, with this subsidy making it easier for them to subsequently access social media. Those in the control group received a more flexible mobile money transfer.

Around the election period, when social media platforms were blocked for several months, the researchers studied the impact of retaining access to social media using a “difference-in-differences” design. They compared the changes in the attitudes of participants who were shut out to those who could maintain access because they already had access to virtual private networks (VPNs), which could be used to circumvent the ban.

**In Turkey, researchers implemented a randomized control trial that examined the impact of exposure to different online news outlets.**

This study of 2,500 participants in 2021–2022 studied the effects of encouraging citizens to consume online media sources with different viewpoints relative to their typical habits. This was done by encouraging pro-government participants to get their information from an independent media outlet (with one assigned outlet moderately anti-government and one more strongly anti-government), while anti-government participants were encouraged to read a pro-government outlet (again, with one moderate and one more extreme). All treated participants were required to follow their assigned outlet on social media and were sent a set of key stories from the assigned outlet every week during the seven-month treatment period of the study. Researchers measured changes in political attitudes and behaviors using surveys administered at midline (four months into the study) and endline (seven months into the study), combined again with rich data on participants' social media behaviors. The research design permitted the researchers to understand both what kinds of participants, whether moderate or extreme in their prior views, are most likely to shift their views after consuming different media sources as well as which online media outlets are most effective at shifting attitudes.

## Countering Exposure to Misinformation

Many concerns relating to the spread of social media in the Global South focus on its potential to spread harmful misinformation. In complementary research studies, Bowles and co-authors explore ways to counteract the influence of false information on people's beliefs. One of their studies took place in South Africa, where they worked with a prominent fact-checking organization to experiment with different approaches to disseminate their efforts to counter misinformation. The findings indicate that short, empathetic messages that correct false information were the most successful in enhancing participants' abilities to navigate the digital landscape effectively. However, although participants became more skilled at identifying misinformation, they did not change their broader patterns of media consumption that exposed them to misinformation in the first place.

## The Results

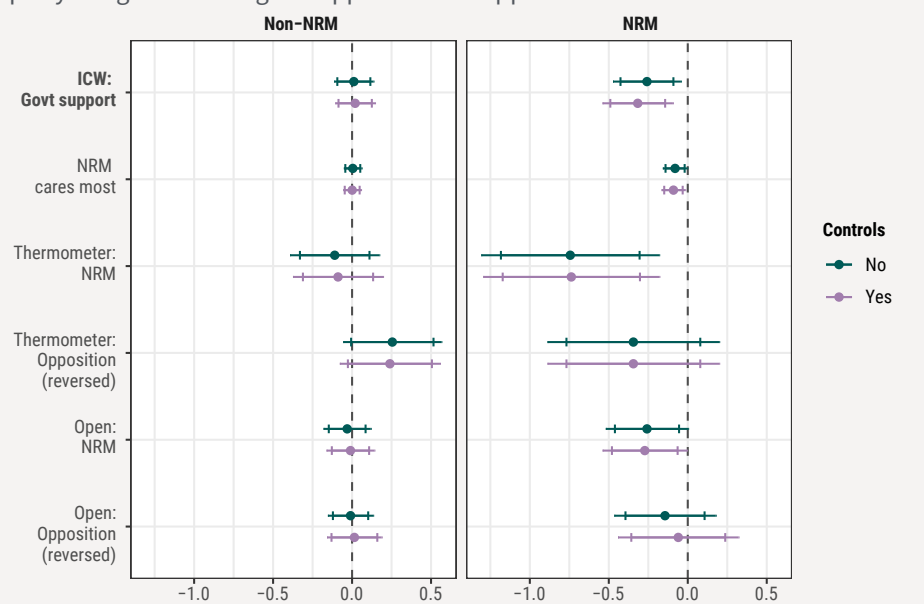
In Uganda, researchers found that encouraging social media use during “normal” times led pro-government supporters to reduce their support for the ruling party.

The social media subsidy led to large and persistent increases in participants’ usage of online platforms including WhatsApp and Facebook. Consistent with the fact that social media is generally a space where independent political voices are more prominent, but also that many citizens use social media for entertainment rather than politics, this increased access led to only modest average reductions in their support for the government. Importantly, however, these reductions were much starker among pro-government participants who came to view the ruling party more negatively and the opposition (and their supporters) more positively. In contrast to studies from more democratic countries, encouraging increased access to social media, then, overall had a moderating effect.

However, during the election period, the ability to maintain access to social media led people to become relatively more positive about the government than those blocked from accessing social media due to the election-period ban.

People who were able to continue using social media during the ban, who were largely opposition supporters, became more likely to believe the ruling party cared most about Ugandans’ welfare, felt more warmly about the party relative to opposition parties, and became more open to voting for the ruling party candidates in the future, relative to individuals that did not have access to social media (non-VPN users). The research suggests that this potentially owes to a supply-side effect: during the ban, the reach and negativity of anti-government accounts decreased more than that of pro-government accounts. Due to these changes in public posting behavior, the content people were then likely exposed to was relatively more pro-government than at other points in time. In turn, the research finds some evidence that those excluded from access punished the government for imposing these restrictions. These findings cut against the hope that social media can promote influential independent voices during politically salient moments, given the ability of governments to silence online dissent.

Figure 2: Impact of social media subsidy treatment on attitudes towards ruling party in Uganda among its supporters and opponents



This figure plots treatment effect estimates on how study participants responded at endline about their beliefs regarding the ruling NRM party. The sample is split between those who did not identify as NRM supporters before the intervention (left) and those that did (right). The top row is a standardized index aggregating the other variables. The other rows reflect (1) whether respondents think the NRM cares most, out of all parties, about their welfare; (2) how warmly they feel about the NRM; (3) how coldly they feel about opposition parties; (4) how likely they are to vote for NRM in the future; (5) how unlikely they are to vote for the opposition.

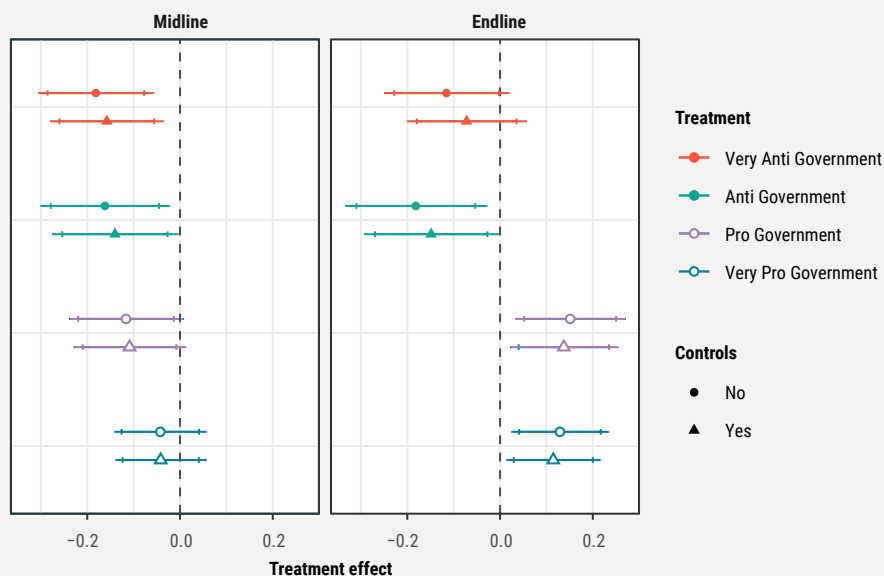
**In Turkey, researchers found that encouraging exposure to opposing-view online media had moderating effects on participants' beliefs about the government.**

Participants in the study showed persistent willingness to get their news from media sources across the political aisle from their normal consumption—particularly pro-government participants assigned to (much less well-known) independent media outlets with more limited reach. In turn, those assigned to independent media outlets developed more favorable attitudes towards opposition parties, while those assigned to pro-government outlets developed more favorable attitudes towards the incumbent party. These effects are driven by participants' increased trust in opposing-view information sources, plus increased knowledge of independent sources (among pro-government participants) and reduced perceptions of the bias of pro-government sources (among anti-government participants).

**However, exposure to independent online media had more muted effects on other political attitudes and behaviors.**

Exposure to independent online outlets did not result in a change in vote intention among pro-government participants, even if their attitudes became more moderate. This finding highlights the challenge of mobilizing anti-incumbent sentiment in nondemocratic settings. For one, this potentially owes to the persuasiveness of the (often more entertaining) content being produced by pro-government media outlets. For another, it highlights how moderating attitudes towards the ruling party might not induce citizens to switch their political allegiances to a different party altogether. Further, the research finds only limited evidence of long-term changes in *affective polarization* (i.e., the distrust of individuals holding opposing views). A more significant change in news consumption may be needed to foster a shift in social interactions and increase trust. Further, the research uncovers little effect on participants' perceptions of democracy or how democracy was performing in the Turkish context during this salient pre-electoral period.

Figure 3: Impact of exposure to diverse online media sources on affinity towards ruling party in Turkey



This figure plots treatment effect estimates on how study participants viewed the ruling AKP party midway through the study (left) and at the end of the study (right). Each row reflects one treatment group: the top two reflect pro-government participants assigned to strongly/weakly anti-government outlets; the bottom two reflect anti-government participants assigned to weakly/strongly pro-government outlets. The figure provides some evidence of a “backlash” among this latter group at midline which dissipates, and even reverses, by endline.

## Policy Implications

- **The findings from both studies highlight how social media can act as a moderating political force by exposing citizens to new perspectives and political viewpoints.** In the Ugandan field experiment, pro-government citizens had more moderate views after increased exposure to social media. In Turkey, citizens from both sides of the political aisle had more moderate views of the ruling party after exposure to counter-attitudinal online media.
- **However, the results also underscore the power of nondemocratic governments to control the political impact of online media.** In Uganda, access to social media during a ban led citizens who retained access to feel more positively about the regime than those who lost access, potentially due to the distorted supply of news during this period. In Turkey, sustained exposure to independent media had only limited effects on broader political beliefs, while highly biased pro-government outlets were highly persuasive.
- **Further, inducing welfare-enhancing behavioral change often faces constraints beyond the provision of diverse information sources through online media.** In Uganda, the research uncovers little impact on citizens' compliance with government policies, including preventative policies against COVID-19. In Turkey, shifts in attitudes were accompanied by more limited impacts on participants' political behavior.
- **These results point to the contingent impact of social media,** highlighting that research findings from democratic countries relating to welfare and polarization might not easily travel to other settings.

### This brief is based on the following papers:

Akbilyik, Ahmet, Jeremy Bowles, Horacio Larreguy, Shelley Liu. 2023. "Exposure to Counter-Attitudinal Media in a Dominant Party State." Working Paper.

Bowles, Jeremy, John Marshall, Pia Raffler. 2023. "Access to Social Media and Support for Dominant Incumbents: Natural and Field Experimental Evidence from Uganda." Working Paper.

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#### Author

Laura Burke

#### Featured Researcher

Jeremy Bowles

King Center Postdoctoral Fellow 2021–2023

### ABOUT THE FEATURED RESEARCHER



**Jeremy Bowles** was a King Center Postdoctoral Research Fellow from 2021 to 2023 and from September 2023 is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and School of Public Policy at University College London. His research agenda explores the political economy of development, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa.