# Social Networks and Voting in Africa

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Through surveys I conducted in the summer of 2010 (n=900) and prior to the October elections (n=630), I found that voters in Tanzania—where one party has ruled since independence— were more likely to support opposition candidates if their closest friends and family voted in the same way. This presented an answer to a puzzling question that drives my research: Why then do voters support opposition parties in elections where they have little opportunity to oust the incumbent regime? It appeared that likeness of political preferences within social (family and friend) networks influences opposition voting. But it left unexplained how and why this was the case.

In Zanzibar's 2010 elections, the opposition Civic United Front (CUF) finished 3,000 votes behind the incumbent Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the best they had done since 1995. This presented a great opportunity to understand why the number of voters that support the opposition rises and falls over time and to assess whether or not changes in people's closest friends and details about those friends—most importantly how they vote—could have attributed to the increase in their electoral support. During the summer of 2011, I conducted further study of the role of networks on voting behavior in Zanzibar, in conjunction with a project carried out with the International Law and Policy Institute (more below!).

One innovation of the study is that it improves our ability to look at a causal relationship between networks and political behavior, by looking how changes in social networks impact vote choice. I also col-lect data on the density of opposition support across geographical space, allowing me to disentangle the effect of friends and family having various political attitudes from the effect of like-minded people living in one's community. For my dissertation, I am developing a theory of why voters support challengers of a party in power when they have very little chance to win. The key, I argue, lies in how networks change beliefs about the state of the political world. Because voters in Africa often lack credible information about performance indicators and the popularity of a regime, I claim that changes in support for people that they know best signals to them that the opposition has a high level of support and that supporting them will be more than a wasted vote.

The project also was conducted for ILPI and the Good Governance Ministry of Zanzibar, looking at the quality of government and what could be done to improve. For this project, I implemented the citizen survey discussed above and also a survey with members of the House of Representatives. The results from this portion of the project, which are currently being presented to the Zanzibar government, are aiding in the development of a new anti-corruption and good governance law.

As I work on applications for dissertation research grants, I plan to return to Tanzania in order to complete a survey with members of the Parliament of Tanzania and also with opposition candidates who competed in 2010 and lost. This part of the dissertation reaches to questions similar to those that motivate the citizen survey: why do viable political candidates choose to join the opposition instead of the incumbent party and, when they do, what shapes their success? My research plan calls for me to later to head to Namibia, where I will implement both surveys during the 2012-2013 academic year.