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Elections in the time of covid-19: the triple crises around Malawi's 2020 presidential elections

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ABSTRACT


In June 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, Malawians went to the polls and voted to replace the incumbent government. Much like other natural disasters, the Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying economic and political shocks had the potential to shake voters' confidence in the government, reduce turnout, and/or reduce support for the incumbent if voters associated them with the ills of the pandemic. In this paper, we examine the extent to which the Coronavirus pandemic influenced Malawi's 2020 elections. We consider how fear of infection and economic distress affected citizens' trust and confidence in President Mutharika's government, their willingness to turn out to vote, and their choices at the polls using data collected pre- and post-Covid. We find that fears about the virus and its economic impact did influence trust and confidence in the government to handle Covid but had little to no effect on either abstention or vote choice.

KEYWORDS Covid-19; Malawi; elections; natural disasters

Introduction

On June 23, 2020, Malawians headed to the polls to elect a new president. Covid-19, which crept into Malawi shortly after the February 2, 2020 court ruling ordered fresh elections to be held within 150 days, had the potential to shape the election outcome. Much like other natural disasters, the pandemic and its accompanying economic and political shocks could shake voters' confidence in the government, reduce turnout, and/or reduce support for the incumbent if voters associated them with the ills of the pandemic.

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Yet, we find a surprisingly limited impact of the pandemic on the election. Using data from a survey implemented in 2019 – combined with two rounds of a telephone survey fielded before and after the June 2020 election – we find that the Covid-19 pandemic had some influence on confidence in the government; however, the effect on turnout and vote choice was limited. In the midst of the political crisis, we speculate that citizens were eager to elect a government with a popular mandate that could effectively combat the pandemic’s economic and health effects.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on natural disasters and elections to build expectations of how the current pandemic might impact Malawi’s elections. Second, we provide an overview of the triple crisis that Malawi faced in spring/summer 2020. Third, after describing the surveys, we explore the associations of Covid-19 with trust and confidence in government, electoral turnout, and vote choice. While the lens of pandemics as a natural disaster is valuable, we find little empirical support for the literature’s expectations of natural disasters and elections. At least in this case, this natural disaster had little impact on voter behaviour. Malawian voters ultimately removed an incumbent, but mainly due to the political crisis that preceded the pandemic, not the pandemic itself. Disasters may have the potential to derail politics – the focus of much of the literature – but they may also focus citizens on political solutions. Future work might explore the contextual factors that explain divergent outcomes.

Covid-19, natural disasters, and elections

How do pandemics and public health crises influence elections? From Anguilla to Zimbabwe, governments opted to postpone polls due to Covid-19 (IFES 2020b).¹ At least 25 US states postponed state, local, and presidential primary elections due to the pandemic. Even when elections continued, the Covid-19 crisis was likely to shape outcomes. Adida et al.’s (2020) study of the Ebola response in the US argues that politicians can politicize a public health issue to change people’s attitudes, specifically regarding immigration, especially through the polarizing lens of partisanship. More generally, if we consider Covid-19 a natural disaster, an increasingly robust literature suggests that it should affect elections.

First, by negatively impacting individuals’ welfare, the Covid-19 crisis can increase grievances against and reduce support for incumbents. Achen and Bartel (2004) found that disasters (e.g. shark attacks, droughts) lower support for incumbent presidents in the US. Other scholars have confirmed this relationship (Gasper and Reeves 2011) and noted the mediating effect

¹Botswana, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Kenya, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, South Africa, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe all postponed elections due to Covid-19 (IFES 2020a).

of partisanship (Malhotra and Kuo 2008). However, not all disasters sway voters, and previous findings may reflect selection rather than treatment effects. In their re-analysis of Gasper and Reeves' (2011) findings, Gallagher (2019) finds that Croatians in flooded areas were *not* more likely to punish incumbents.

Second, crises, and the subsequent disaster aid, may shape turnout. Chen (2013) finds that disaster aid following hurricanes in Florida led to an increase in Republican (co-partisans with Governor Jeb Bush) turnout of about 5.1% and a decrease of Democratic (opposition) turnout of about 3.1%. It may be possible then that Covid-19 pandemic aid could increase turnout among incumbents' co-partisans and decrease it among opposition supporters.

Furthermore, natural disasters may decrease turnout in the short-term (Rambaud 2020), even if long-term effects could work in the opposite direction (Fair et al. 2017). For instance, those who are sick may be unable to go to the polls, or voters may be afraid to go to the polls, viewing polling stations as vectors of infection. Chirwa et al. (2021) find that Malawians concerned with infection were less likely to state they would attend the polls. We expect this relationship to persist during the elections.²

The literature on natural disasters, therefore, leads to several expectations. First, because the negative impacts of the pandemic are most likely to be pinned on the incumbent by those outside their party, we expect the incumbents' co-partisans are more likely to have a) greater pre-election trust in the government and b) greater confidence in the government's ability to handle the crisis. Second, pandemic-related sickness and economic hardship may also directly impact vote choice and turnout. We, therefore, expected that those who were sick, more worried, or either faced or feared economic constraints due to the pandemic would be less likely to vote for the incumbent because such individuals may blame them for their hardship. However, these effects should be muted for incumbent supporters. We also expect those who are sick or worse off due to the pandemic are less likely to turn out.

The triple crisis surrounding Malawi's 2020 election

Covid-19 struck Malawi just as political parties were embarking on their presidential election rerun campaigning. The rapid spread of Covid-19 through Asia, Europe, the United States, and, eventually, Africa put the Malawian government on high alert. President Mutharika proactively responded to the threat of Covid-19 by setting up a Special Cabinet Committee in March

²Natural disasters can also provide incumbents with an opportunity and justification to distribute aid to shore up support (Klomp 2020; Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011). However, Dulani and Dionne (2014), studying the 2014 Malawi elections, find little evidence that handouts can guarantee incumbents an election victory. However, our data does not allow us to investigate the role of Covid-related aid relief on Malawi's 2020 elections. This is not a large concern though, given that very little aid was provided by the government during this time, which our data confirms.

2020 to provide “policy guidance as it relates to assessing the impact as well as overseeing cross-government response to the threat posed by Covid-19” (Government of Malawi 2020). This was followed by the declaration of a State of National Disaster on March 20, 2020, which restricted public gatherings – including political rallies – to a maximum of 100 people and immediately closed schools and borders (Chilora 2020). Despite these measures, Malawi recorded its first Covid-19 cases on April 2, 2020.

As the number of Covid-19 cases began to rise, health experts called for a postponement of the election (Mulauzi 2020; Brown and Chinele 2020). They pointed to logistical challenges; added costs of providing personal protective equipment to electoral staff; reduced international election observation due to travel restrictions; and high exposure risk to voters during the campaign rallies and on the election day itself, potentially leading to a reduced turnout (IFES 2020b). About a month before the election, the government proposed a 21-day lockdown to contain the pandemic, but this was met with large demonstrations (Pensulo 2020) while civil society organizations obtained a court order declaring it unconstitutional.

The number of confirmed Covid-19 cases continued to rise, reaching 941 on June 23 – election day – with all but two of the country’s 28 districts recording cases. The pandemic was in its early days, but, as we show below, anxiety regarding the disease was high.

Despite growing concerns, calls for postponing the election went largely unheeded. The opposition saw these calls as an illegitimate attempt by Mutharika’s supporters to prolong his tenure. Meanwhile, other observers noted that an effective campaign against Covid-19 was not possible if led by a government with weak legitimacy (Pensulo 2020).

To some extent, the elections were propelled forward by the unique set of circumstances that characterized the triple crisis: the crisis of political legitimacy that both sides were determined to solve; a health crisis that required a legitimate government’s leadership; and an economic crisis that raised the stakes. This context must be kept in mind as we explore the pandemic’s effect on the electoral process. Although Malawi’s election was unique in some ways, it offers an opportunity to examine the health crisis’s impact on elections. Africa has seen a number of health crises (e.g. Ebola 2014–2016 and the HIV/AIDS pandemic of the 1990s/2000s), but we know little about how such crises impact elections.

The survey data

We interrogate expectations about the influence of health crises on elections using data collected before and after Covid arrived in Malawi. The pre-Covid data is taken from the 2019 LGPI (Lust et al. 2019), a face-to-face household survey covering topics such as governance and political participation. The

Covid-19 data is taken from two rounds of a telephone survey conducted before and after the elections (see full data timeline in Appendix B.1).³ We obtained phone numbers from our 2016 and 2019 LGPI surveys (Lust et al. 2016). About half (54%) of the respondents came from the 2019 study, which drew random samples from the capital city, Lilongwe, and districts along the Malawi-Zambia border. Because the 2019 study did not include districts in the Southern Region, we contacted southern region respondents from the 2016 study.⁴ The resulting sample is not a random sample of the Malawian population but includes respondents in all three regions. The overall response rate was 62%. (Details in Appendix A.)

The first phone survey in May 2020 included 4,641 respondents (Lust et al. 2020a), and the second survey conducted in August-September included 4,927 respondents with 3,408 respondents interviewed in both surveys (Lust et al. 2020b). 1,257 respondents were interviewed in the LGPI 2019 survey and both rounds of the phone surveys. The exact wording of survey questions used in our analyses can be found in Appendix B.

The telephone surveys lend essential insights into the effect of Covid-19 on Malawians. By May 2020, Covid-19 was creating economic hardship and fuelling fear. The majority of respondents (83%) feared going hungry; 65% reported that they had already experienced a loss of income due to the pandemic, and 54% were very or somewhat worried about infection.

Analysis and results

We explore two sets of hypotheses. The first set concerns how the pandemic affects government trust and the second considers turnout and vote choice.

Trust and confidence in government to handle covid

We anticipate the crisis may depress confidence overall, but the opposition is more likely than ruling party supporters to lack confidence in the incumbent's ability to handle the crisis. We test this by fitting binary logistic regression models using Round 1 telephone (R1) survey data gathered just before the elections. We explore two dependent variables: 1) respondents' trust in the (then-current) Mutharika government (a binary variable equal to 1 if the respondent trusts the government a lot), and 2) respondents' confidence in the government's ability to handle the crisis (a binary variable equal to 1 if the respondent has confidence in the government to handle Covid-19).

³Ethics approval was received from the UCL Ethics Committee, number 15927/003 and the University of Malawi, Chancellor College Ethics Committee, number P.05/20/17.

⁴The 2016 sample was a stratified random sample: we first sampled districts, then traditional authorities, and then villages. The 2019 sample was drawn by dividing the sample regions into 1km grids and randomly selecting from among these grids.

Our key independent variable is whether or not the respondent supported the DPP (incumbent party) measured using a standard “which party do you feel closest to” question. We also include key demographic variables: education (reference category: little to no education), age (reference category: less than 35), gender (reference category: male), ethnic group fixed effects, and district fixed effects.

Our data does not allow us to test whether Covid has *decreased* trust and confidence in the government,⁵ but we do test the cross-sectional relationship between Covid-related fears and experiences and these outcomes. To measure if an individual had experienced negative economic impacts of the pandemic, we created the variable *Economic Hardship*. We define *Economic Hardship* equals 1 if the respondent lost a job, lost hours at work, or experienced a reduction in income since March 2020, and zero otherwise. We also define the variable *Very Worried*, where *Very Worried* equals 1 if the respondent reported being “very worried” about becoming infected with Covid-19 and zero otherwise. See Appendix B for full details and Appendix C for alternative codings of *Very Worried* and select control variables.

The results reported in Table 1 partly confirm our expectations. Co-partisans with President Mutharika (DPP supporters) are significantly more likely to trust the government and have confidence in its ability to combat the pandemic. The odds that a DPP supporter trusts the government is about twice ($p < 0.001$) that of a non-DPP supporter, and the odds that a DPP supporter has confidence the government can handle Covid is almost four times ($p < 0.001$) that of a non-DPP supporter.

We find that being very worried about infection does *not* have a general impact on trust in the government, but does have a substantial impact for DPP supporters. Looking at the interaction between the two, we see that the odds of trusting the government for a DPP supporter who is very worried about infection is 41% ($p < 0.05$) *greater* than the odds for a non-DPP supporter who is not very worried. The odds of having confidence in the government to handle Covid-19 is 30% ($p < 0.01$) *higher* for those who are very worried about infection.

We also find a relationship between experiencing economic hardship and trust in government. The odds of trusting the government are 35% ($p < 0.001$) *less* for those who have experienced economic hardship since March 2020. We find weak evidence that a similar relationship might exist with confidence in the government to handle Covid-19, with odds 15% ($p < 0.1$) *less* for those who experienced economic hardship. There is no evidence that being a DPP supporter mitigates the effect of experiencing economic hardships.

The results confirm expectations that partisanship is strongly associated with confidence to handle crises and government trust. However, concern

⁵We lack pre-Covid-19 data on trust in government.

Table 1. Binary logistic regression on *Trust Government A lot* and *Confidence to Handle Covid* using Round 1 Data.

	(1) Trust Government A lot	(2) Confidence in Government to Handle Covid
Very Worried	0.064 (0.084)	0.265** (0.086)
Economic Hardship	-0.431*** (0.085)	-0.159^ (0.087)
DPP Supporter	0.775*** (0.153)	1.336*** (0.201)
DPP Supporter X Very Worried	0.343* (0.153)	0.005 (0.217)
DPP Supporter X Economic Hardship	0.145 (0.165)	0.430^ (0.222)
Age Group: 35–59	0.010 (0.073)	-0.035 (0.081)
Age Group: 60 and above	0.268* (0.137)	0.314* (0.158)
Female	0.226** (0.071)	0.231** (0.077)
Primary School	0.169 (0.145)	-0.281 (0.182)
Secondary School	-0.030 (0.157)	-0.488* (0.192)
Post-Secondary School	-0.539* (0.239)	-1.068*** (0.250)
District Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Ethnic Group Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Constant	-0.255 (0.290)	0.897* (0.357)
Observations	4,058	4,039

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, ^ $p < 0.10$.

about infection and experiencing economic hardships have different associations with trust in the government and confidence in its ability to handle Covid-19. The finding that being very worried about infection is associated with *higher* odds of having confidence in the government to handle Covid-19 is not in line with expectations from the literature on natural disasters. There are two ways to understand the relationship: 1) the government's proactive measures to limit Covid-19's spread instil worry about the infection in those who have the most confidence in the government or 2) because greater worry is associated with a greater appreciation for the government's proactive measures in the hope that it is (and remains) capable of handling the crisis.

Turnout and vote choice

We next test expectations regarding turnout and vote choice. We expect those worried about infection and who have experienced economic hardship to be less likely to vote. Regarding vote choice, we anticipate that those who

have experienced economic hardship or express worry about infection are less likely to support Mutharika (the incumbent). We also expect that these effects will be muted for the ruling party's supporters (the DPP).

Our first outcome of interest is *Abstention*, a binary variable taking the value 1 if the respondent reports having abstained from voting and zero otherwise.⁶ To study the impact of Covid-19 on turnout, we first use a proportions test to compare the share of respondents who report abstaining from voting in the May 2019 election to the share who abstained in the June 2020 election. We then explore if individuals who are very worried about being infected with Covid-19, or those who had experienced economic hardship, are more likely to report having abstained from voting than others. We fit binary logistic regression models with explanatory variables taken from Round 1 (R1) of our telephone survey, collected just before the election, and dependent variables taken from Round 2 (R2), collected right after the election. According to our earlier reasoning, we expect the effects of fear of infection and the experience of economic hardship are conditional on co-partisanship with the incumbent; therefore, we also include interactions between these variables and the indicator variable for DPP supporter. All models also include the same socioeconomic and demographic control variables discussed above. As we have data on reported abstention from both the May 2019 and the June 2020 elections, we further estimate the difference-in-difference effect of being very worried about Covid-19 infection and having experienced economic hardship during Covid-19.

The proportions test results in Table 2 suggest that our respondents were significantly ($p < 0.000$) less likely to abstain in 2020 compared to 2019 and thus contradict our initial expectations. The logistic regression results in Table 3 and the difference-in-difference models (see Appendix Table C1.1) do not support our expectations regarding the influence of fear of infection and economic hardship on reported abstention. The results in column (2) suggest that the odds of a DPP supporter reporting abstention from voting in the June 2020 election are 40% ($p < 0.001$) less than non-DPP supporters. However, the interactions between the DPP supporter indicator and two explanatory variables of interest are *not* statistically significant, suggesting that partisanship does not condition these factors' impacts on abstention. Overall, in the context of the 2020 elections, it does not seem like the pandemic was a key driver of abstention.

Our second variable of interest is *Voted DPP*, a binary variable taking the value 1 if the respondent reports to have voted for Mutharika in the June 2020 election and zero otherwise. To explore the association between vote

⁶We focus on abstention rather than turnout because, given strong social norms in Malawi favoring turnout, respondents who have indicated that they did not vote are more likely to be accurately describing their behavior than those who say they did vote.

Table 2. Proportions test of Abstention pre = 2019, post = 2020 Round 2.

Two-sample test of proportions- dependent variable: Abstained		
	Proportion	n
Pre	0.148	1213
Post	0.112	1195
Difference	0.127	
<i>p</i> -value	0.0000	

choice and fears of infection and economic hardship, we fit the same binary logistic regressions as in Table 3, now using *Voted DPP* as the dependent variable.

With respect to vote choice, our results in Table 4 suggest that co-partisanship and co-ethnicity matter. The odds of reporting to have voted for Mutharika were nearly four times greater ($p < 0.000$) for DPP supporters. Furthermore, the odds of reporting to have voted for Mutharika for respondents co-ethnic with him (Lhomwe) or his running mate (Yao) are four ($p < 0.000$) and three ($p < 0.000$) times greater, respectively than those who belong to the Chewa ethnic group. We find further weak evidence that

Table 3. Binary logistic regression on Abstained using only Malawi Covid Round 1 & 2 Data.

	(1) Abstained 2020	(2) Abstained 2020	(3) Abstained 2020
Very Worried	-0.0788 (0.113)	-0.0409 (0.134)	0.0972 (0.160)
Economic Hardship	-0.170 (0.113)	-0.156 (0.140)	-0.167 (0.164)
DPP Supporter		-0.497** (0.176)	-0.363 (0.291)
DPP Supporter X Very Worried			-0.426 (0.284)
DPP Supporter X Economic Loss			0.0353 (0.306)
Age Group: 35-59		-0.539*** (0.139)	-0.543*** (0.139)
Age Group: 60 and above		-0.722** (0.275)	-0.722** (0.274)
Female		0.268^ (0.138)	0.262^ (0.138)
Primary School		-0.103 (0.262)	-0.101 (0.262)
Secondary School		-0.0476 (0.288)	-0.0512 (0.286)
Post-Secondary School		-0.241 (0.472)	-0.240 (0.473)
Constant	-1.820*** (0.0964)	-1.217* (0.602)	-1.269* (0.602)
District Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes
Ethnic Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,204	2,649	2,649

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, ^ $p < 0.10$.

Table 4. Binary Logistic Regression on Voted DPP using only Malawi Round 1 & 2 data.

	(1) Voted DPP	(2) Voted DPP	(3) Voted DPP
Very Worried	-0.0127 (0.0904)	-0.274* (0.129)	-0.286 (0.190)
Economic Hardship	0.406*** (0.0984)	0.112 (0.146)	0.0942 (0.204)
DPP Supporter		1.345*** (0.144)	1.315*** (0.273)
DPP Supporter X Very Worried			0.0199 (0.261)
DPP Supporter X Economic Loss			0.0314 (0.294)
Age Group: 35–59		-0.226^ (0.137)	-0.226^ (0.137)
Age Group: 60 and above		0.135 (0.242)	0.136 (0.242)
Female		-0.0529 (0.134)	-0.0530 (0.135)
Primary School		0.231 (0.238)	0.231 (0.238)
Secondary School		-0.0168 (0.267)	-0.0165 (0.267)
Post-Secondary School		-0.982 (0.648)	-0.982 (0.649)
Lhomwe		1.453*** (0.343)	1.451*** (0.345)
Yao		1.245*** (0.366)	1.243*** (0.370)
Constant	-1.300*** (0.0896)	-1.786*** (0.514)	-1.768*** (0.533)
District Fixed Effects			
Ethnic Fixed Effects			
Observations	2,680	2,260	2,260

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, ^ $p < 0.10$.

those who were very worried about infection were less likely to report having voted for Mutharika, but the magnitude of the estimated coefficient is small (the effect is only significant in column (2) of Table 4). Our results suggest that there is no correlation between having experienced economic hardship and voting for the DPP.

The pandemic, and its ensuing economic impacts, do not appear to have fundamentally altered a pre-existing political crisis, neither saving nor particularly damaging the incumbent beyond the wounds already inflicted before the pandemic. Instead, the political crisis and Malawi’s extraordinary court ruling appear to have shaped the outcomes. The court ruling to shift from a simple plurality to an absolute majority threshold for victory – pushing the opposition into an alliance and working in their favour – combined with months of political frustration,

likely drove voters to support holding elections and prompted their choices at the polls. The results of Malawi's 2020 election occurred *despite* the pandemic, not because of it.

Conclusion

Pandemics, like any natural disaster, have the capacity to derail politics. Voters, perversely affected by the disaster and fearful of what is yet to come, might punish incumbents or abstain from voting altogether. Yet, natural disasters are not always decisive in politics.

We have explored the effects of a natural health disaster, the Covid-19 pandemic, on Malawi's June 2020 election, which saw an incumbent already enfeebled by a preceding legitimacy crisis surrounding a flawed election and annulment. Contrary to extant literature on natural disasters, we find little evidence that the pandemic shaped the election. Partisanship was related to views of Mutharika's trustworthiness and ability to handle the pandemic, but these effects did not translate into greater individual-level support for the incumbent. Moreover, fears about the virus and its economic impact had little to no impact on either abstention or vote choice, suggesting that collapsing Mutharika support reflected initial concerns about his legitimacy, not his handling of the pandemic.

Malawians in June 2020 faced a triple crisis: Covid-19, a political crisis of legitimacy, and an economic crisis fuelled by both. They nevertheless went to the polls and voted to replace a government compromised by a legitimacy crisis. The pandemic, while creating a backdrop of fear and anxiety, did not derail their efforts to do so.

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