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E-Enabling as a Technological Platform for Electoral Democracy in Uganda

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*E-Enabling,
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Online Political
Deliberation,
E-Activism,
E-Campaigning and
Online Political Chat
Rooms.*

Globally, failure to have active, effective, and full participation in elections makes democracy wishful thinking. Considering the ineffectiveness of traditional methods of political participation alone, online political participation (e-enabling), especially through the use of the internet and social media, comes in handy in a bid to have a fair and credible election. This study investigates how e-enabling can act as a technological platform for electoral democracy in Uganda. Specifically, the study aims to establish the relationship between e-enabling and electoral democracy among citizens in Uganda. Using the mixed methods, under a descriptive correlational survey, a sample of N=482 respondents were in the study. Based on Pearson's correlation coefficients, results reveal that e-enabling is significantly related to electoral democracy. Providing platforms like fair electoral policies and guidelines to enable people freely adopt and utilise the internet in elections through free social media, free or low-cost internet, good nationwide networks, minimising internet shutdowns so that all electoral stakeholders can freely express themselves and actively engage in all stages of the electoral process with the utmost fairness, transparency and accountability will go a long way in having e-enabling as a technological platform for strengthening electoral democracy in Uganda.

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INTRODUCTION

World over, citizen participation in politics, leadership, and elections has become an issue of global concern for any country to flourish democratically (Sakue, 2017). According to Parry et al. (1992), democracy and citizen participation in politics are inseparable; every publication on political participation also talks about democracy (Parry et al., 1992, pp. 85), and the idea of political participation is at the centre of a democratic state (Simon et al., 2017; Kaase & Morsh, 1979). In addition, Verba and Nie (1972) affirm that where few people participate in decision-making, there is little and or no democracy, especially in elections and vice versa. Historically, the world has also witnessed a growing scholarly interest in political participation in both emerging and established or "old" democracies (et al., 2016). This has been partly due to a rise in political apathy and citizen disengagement from politics and public affairs, declining levels of civic engagement, low electoral turnout, eroding public confidence in the institutions of representative democracy, and other signs of public weariness, scepticism, cynicism and lack of trust in politicians and political parties among others under traditional modes of political participation which has limited the levels of civic engagement and political participation (Chistoborodov, 2018; Trechsel, 2007).

Similarly, in the post-industrial societies, citizens have become increasingly disengaged from the traditional channels of political participation (Skocpol & Fiorina, 2004; Dalton, 1998; Norris, 1999), leaving a gap that has recently been occupied by the use of the Internet to participate in elections (online political participation) either through social media, internet, and ICTs as an enabler for people to actively engage in elections, politics, and leadership (Ahmad et al., 2019). The adoption and

utilisation of the Internet in elections and politics have been seen in the US. For example, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project; have 55% of US adults using the Internet to be informed and get involved in the political processes in the 2008 Presidential Election (Yang & DeHart, 2016; Smith, 2011), which grew to 73% of adult internet users in the 2010 US midterm elections (Smith, 2011); and in the 2012 US Presidential elections where Barack Obama used internet for political donations and raised 690 million US dollars online out of the 1.1 billion US dollars and 500 million US dollars for his campaigns in 2008 while John McCain in 2000 also garnered 2.7 million US dollars within three days of winning the New Hampshire party primaries (Mason et al., 2012; Vannatta & Beyerbach, 2000).

While this internet use has existed and fully been embraced elsewhere, not so many studies have been done about the same, especially in Uganda. This is in regards to availability and accessibility to the internet use, social media and technology as a platform to enable citizens to engage in a fair, free, transparent, and credible election since most authors have focused on studying E-democracy, E-Government, Social media use alone etc. without much emphasis on how it can be utilised as a platform to enable citizens (E-Enabling) engage in fair elections.

Contextual Perspective

In Uganda, the use of the Internet, social media, and particularly, online blogs, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube videos has grown over time, with Facebook and WhatsApp being used by more than 60% of countries globally (Abrahamsen & Bareebe, 2021). For example, politicians and activists used them in 2007-2011 for the #Save Mabira forest campaign (E-Activism); in 2011, the Walk to Work political campaign (E-

Campaigns), the 2011 General elections; the 2016 General election campaign; in 2017 Kyaddondo East constituency By-Election led by and won by Hon. Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu (Bobi Wine) on June 29 2017; the 2017 Removal of the Age Limit campaign ('Togikwatako') that still had a Constitutional amendment made that removed the Presidential Age limit of below 35 years and above 75 years on December 20 2017; the 2018 Bugiri constituency By-Election won by Hon. Asuman Basaalirwa on July 28 2018; the 2018 Arua Municipality constituency By-Election campaigns won by Hon. Kassiano Wadri on August 15 2018; the 2020/2021 General Election; after the Electoral Commission had declared it to be a scientific/ digital election in a bid to follow the WHO social distancing COVID-19 reduction measures.

When the People Power Movement was formed in 2017, that later evolved as the National Unity Platform political party in 2020, it intensely utilised social media platforms in their campaigns in their bid for Presidency, Parliamentary and Local Government elections (Ntale & Ngoma, 2021). They made the new ICT platforms (social media) the core and integral part of their election campaign toolkits by live streaming their campaigns on Facebook and YouTube, sharing these videos on various WhatsApp groups that mobilised many young people to follow the political events and campaigns on a daily basis (Anguyo, 2021). This influenced the President of Uganda by September 2020, to join all platforms, including owning a Facebook page, Twitter account, YouTube, and Instagram page, which platforms he used to campaign and made him get closer to his grandchildren ('Bazukkulu') considering that over 70% of Uganda's population and voters are young people (Tukwasibwe & Musungu, 2022), who had enrolled on social media and were actively following the campaigns and political events of the country.

In this context, the 2021 election campaign was a platform for key electoral stakeholders to embrace

online political participation in the form of e-enabling since by 2020; over 27% of the Ugandan population were active social media users amidst the 2018 over-the-top' tax (OTT) (Kronke, 2022). Some voters, citizens, political parties, and candidates embarked on and heavily relied on the internet and social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter for campaigns (E-Campaigns), Instagram and YouTube for political discussions (Online political deliberations), engage their candidates in political debates and online political chat rooms, and to demand fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness in the electoral process (E-Activism) in Uganda (Faucher, 2015). Therefore, online political discussions shaped the radio, TV, and print media (Sempijja & Brito, 2022). However, there is no empirical evidence about how e-enabling through the internet and technology can act as a technological platform to contribute towards a fair, free and transparent election (electoral democracy), thus the need for this study.

Conceptual Perspective

E-Enabling is one of the various forms of online political participation, therefore, it is important to first conceptualise it. Online Political Participation/ E-Participation refers to the citizen's online activities aimed at influencing political decisions (Van Deth, 2001). It is the technologically mediated, politically oriented interaction between leaders, citizens and other key electoral stakeholders. Sæbø *et al.* (2008) define it as the supporting democratic decision-making and transformation of participation in society's democratic consultations primarily through the use of the Internet and other information and communication technologies (Qi *et al.*, (2018). It also refers to a set of online activities influencing government actions and other individuals' political behaviours and reflecting an individual's interests and psychological involvement in politics (Bennet, 1998).

In this study, however, Online Political Participation means how an individual (women, youth, registered voters), public institutions (police, selected Ministries), selected civil society organisations and political party leaders actively engage in political issues through the use of Information Communication Technologies like internet inform of, e-enabling (Information), E-Engaging (Consultation) and E-Empowering (Active participation) (Aichholzer & Allhutter 2009). However, for this article, we shall only focus on E-Enabling.

E-Enabling

E-Enabling in this study refers to the extent to which citizens can access the internet and can get or access and engage with the relevant political information or policy issues and decisions online. It will be measured as the extent to which the use of (i) Online Political deliberations, (ii) E-Activism, (iii) E-Campaigning, and (iv) online political chat rooms can contribute towards a fair, transparent, inclusive, credible, and accountable election.

Online Political Deliberation

Online political deliberation therefore, refers to the use of ICTs and the Internet to support virtual, small, and large group political discussions allowing key political and electoral stakeholders to reflect on and discuss the electoral process and consideration of various electoral, political and policy issues. (Aichholzer & Allhutter, 2009).

E-Activism

E-activism is conceptualised as the process of utilisation of the Internet by either CSOs, NGOs or citizens or lawyers to advocate for change or transparency or positive change and consideration or even highlight the existence of or draw the government's attention to a given political, electoral, leadership, governance or policy issue (Aichholzer & Allhutter, 2009).

E-Campaigning

E-Campaigning refers to the process of utilising online platforms with the Internet, like social media, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube etc., to conduct a campaign for or against a given political, electoral, leadership, governance, or policy issue (Matthes, 2022). Political parties and candidates hold online political rallies and do campaigns through internet use. A political candidate may put up his or her manifesto on the Internet for the people to know what services he wants to offer them if voted into leadership, whereas an NGO can also hold an online campaign for voter education of the citizens, encouraging them to participate in the electoral process.

Online Political Chat Rooms

Online political chat rooms refer to where a chat session involving key electoral stakeholders like civil society organisations, political and public policy analysts, opinion leaders, political media influencers, non-governmental organisations, police, electoral commission officials, electoral candidates, and political parties takes place in real-time online utilising Internet either through Skype, Facebook, Twitter or You tube to provide information regarding election and politics, and allowing citizens participate in that process that contributes to the conduct of voter education to the citizens; that in turn leads to conduct of a fair, free, inclusive election (Simon et al., 2017).

Electoral Democracy

Electoral democracy, in this study, refers to the ability to conduct (i) voter education, (ii) electoral reform advocacy, (iii) election observation, (iv) having a competitive electoral process (political leadership accountability, political party independence and regulating electoral and campaign financing), (v) effective electoral justice and electoral dispute resolution (inclusive and impartial legal electoral framework & independent and professional electoral management body), and (vi) Individual & Media freedom availability

(accessibility to online media and internet, as key elements of the electoral process in order to have free, accountable, fair, inclusive, transparent, and credible elections (Ugbudian et al. 2021; & Orr, 2018).

Voter Education

Voter education in this study refers to the process that describes the dissemination of information, materials, and programs designed to inform voters about their political & electoral rights and responsibilities and detailed procedures of the voting process in a particular election. This information is about who is eligible to vote, where and how to register, how the voters can check the voter's register to ensure that their names have been included on the register, what type of elections are being held, where, when and how to vote, who the candidates are, and how to deal with the election complaints and disputes UPIMAC (2016).

Electoral Reform Advocacy

Electoral reform advocacy (ERA), as a key component of electoral democracy (ED), is conceptualised as the process of lobbying and pushing key electoral stakeholders to galvanise support towards having positive changes in the electoral laws and regulations to have citizen-centred and citizen-driven laws prioritising their participation in a fair, transparent and credible electoral process (Barrat, 2012).

Election Observation

Election Observation is conceptualised as the process of establishing election observers and monitors, accredited by the Electoral Commission in accordance with Section 161 [1] of the Electoral Commissions Act, as agents of local, national and International organisations (independent-minded people/election observers) to observe the entire electoral process to ensure credibility, transparency, independence, no bias, balanced coverage and also rule out any election malpractices that are against the national and international electoral management

guidelines in order to have a free, fair, credible, transparent election UPIMAC (2016).

Competitive Electoral Process

A competitive electoral process is conceptualised as a democratic electoral process that allows political leadership accountability, political party independence, and regulation of electoral and campaign financing in order to allow all stakeholders favourably participate in a reasonable electoral process. It is a process characterised by an election campaign period that allows all political parties, candidates, and voters to freely interact and sufficiently exchange the necessary information to enable voters to make an informed decision and have a pre-election evaluative choice in selecting a particular candidate or political party, to avoid choosing political leaders and government that prioritises their own interests over those of voters (Kayser & Peress, 2012).

Political Leadership Electoral Accountability

Political leadership electoral accountability, as a key component of a competitive electoral process under electoral democracy, is the citizens' ability and responsibility to compel public officials, to be responsive to issues of government policies, public expenditure, popular needs of the people, and their political and electoral promises, pledges and mandate within the entire pre-electoral period, E-electoral period, and post-electoral period and campaigns in the electoral process (Goetz et al., 2001).

Political Party Independence

Political party independence, as a key component of a competitive electoral process under electoral democracy, refers to the ability of all political parties to freely operate in a political dispensation without interference from the party or government in power (Kamp, 2016). It involves the availability of fair competition, the availability of independent sources of funding for their party activities, the right

of equal opportunity to secure an election win and equal representation without any intervention.

Electoral and Campaign Financing

Electoral and campaign financing, as a key component of a competitive electoral process under electoral democracy, is conceptualised as the process of regulating the use of money in electoral politics throughout the entire electoral process (before elections, during voting/ elections and after elections/post-electoral period) in order to avoid commercialisation or monetisation of politics so as to provide equal respect for all political parties, candidates, and political players, and allow all political parties have an equal voice to be heard speak about the electoral injustice in a bid to have a fair electoral process and enhance the competitiveness of elections (Muguzi & Kafuuma, 2020).

Effective Electoral Justice and Electoral Dispute Resolution

Effective electoral justice and electoral dispute resolution as a component of electoral democracy in this study, is conceptualised as the presence of appropriate, effective & independent election conflict resolution mechanisms like the competent, independent, professional, timely and impartial Judiciary, Electoral Tribunal, or administrative body to handle election disputes & complaints (Sjogren, 2022).

An Inclusive and Impartial Legal Electoral Framework

An inclusive and impartial legal electoral framework is one of the key concepts under effective electoral justice and dispute resolution required for electoral democracy. It can be conceptualised as the availability and presence of impartial and non- discriminatory local, national legal framework and international and regional instruments, laws, and electoral guidelines guiding the conduct of elections that work on all people, citizens, and political parties.

These are also followed and include guidelines for all candidates and key electoral stakeholders like media, CSOs, EC, political parties, security agencies like police, and political parties in power, without any form of discrimination but rather observing equality and prioritising citizens' ideas, needs, and inputs in the electoral process.

Independent Electoral Management Body/ Electoral Commission

Independent Electoral Management Body, one of the key concepts under effective electoral justice and dispute resolution required for Electoral Democracy, is conceptualised as having an independently appointed, autonomously operating, and independently funded Electoral Management body like Electoral Commission (Goldzweig and Meyer-Resende, 2020). This should be a legally constituted institution to organise, supervise and conduct free, fair, transparent, inclusive, impartial, unbiased, independent, and credible elections with unquestionable processes and outcomes of an electoral process. The outcome if this electoral process does not lead to contestations, allegations, counter-allegations or electoral conflicts after thorough handling of pre-electoral period (campaigns, voter registration, distribution of PVCs, demarcation of polling areas, accreditation of election observers, voter education), Election period (voting/polling, counting of votes, and announcement of results) and post-electoral period (handling electoral petitions and complaints to deliver effective electoral justice, electoral reforms and continuous voter education).

Individual and Media Freedom Availability

Individual and Media freedom Availability is conceptualised as the ability of individuals, like citizens/voters and traditional and social media journalists, to independently exercise their watchdog role by holding government and political leaders or authorities accountable for their actions, but not using it as a propagandist vessel for the

government at the expense of the voter (Ledoux & Llamazares, 2021).

Media freedoms are the ability of citizens to easily and cheaply access the internet and also freely express their political opinions on both traditional and social media. It also involves the ability of traditional media (radio, TV, Newspapers) to host any politician or political talk show and freely talk about the scores and ills of the government in power without fear or favour or even write about them openly and freely to hold government responsive and accountable for their actions. It also involves the ability of the media house to relay campaign messages, manifestos and actions of any candidate or political party without any form of intimidation or threat of closure from the state (Kwaku, 2018). It includes accessibility to online media and the internet.

Accessibility to Online media and the Internet

Accessibility to Online media and the Internet one of the concepts under Individual and Media freedom availability required for electoral democracy is the ability of citizens and all key electoral stakeholders to freely and comfortably access the Internet with a high volume of cheap, rapid, encouraging, understandable, political and democratic knowledge and information to be produced and consumed to facilitate their participation in a democratic election throughout the entire electoral process (Karakaya et al., 2005). This could be political information about voter education, political parties, political candidates, District Local Governments, sometimes to engage in voter education to their members, E-campaigns, E-policies, E-decisions, E-polls, E-panels, and E-political deliberation with the people in the communities or voters and to their agents.

Statement of the Problem

For any country to have democracy, it must conduct free, fair, credible, inclusive, accountable, and transparent elections in general (Sakue, 2017) and observe electoral democracy in particular, which most countries especially emerging democracies,

have not yet thoroughly done (Helmut *et al.*, (2018), Madueke *et al.* (2018), & Kwaku, (2018). This case is similar to that of Uganda's democracy. In particular, Kwaku (2018) notes that conducting free and fair elections, as the key tool for Electoral Democracy, makes politicians act in the interest of voters, become accountable and promote democracy and good governance. He also observed that 83% of the youth, women, men, PWDs, and public institutions staff have not only failed to hold their leaders accountable because they do not participate in free and fair elections but have also failed to engage in a competitive electoral process where all candidates can freely campaign and speak to the electorate.

This has been coupled with the continuous lack of voter education in the electoral cycle but also a denial of the Electoral Commission's approval of election observers to observe the election, and worsened by the government and Parliament's failure to pass electoral reforms that would facilitate a free, fair, credible, and transparent election. In emerging or infant democracies like Uganda, electoral democracy provides a direct relationship between voters and leaders if online political engagement platforms are provided in pursuit of free, fair, and credible elections.

However, in Uganda, there has continuously existed limited active citizen participation in elections either due to lack of timely dissemination of voter education messages translated into local languages that are easily understandable, lack of an independently operating Electoral Commission to handle the electoral process, limited resources for candidates to campaign the entire constituency and deploy polling agents on every polling station on voting day; delay of delivery of electoral materials to the polling stations during elections, state's prohibiting of the opposition candidates to appear on radio talk shows, hold rallies, meet and engage their campaigners and supporters; as well limited engagement in political debates and voting; all these issues that inhibited citizens from engaging in a

free, fair, transparent and credible election (Muguzi & Kafuuma, 2020). This therefore calls for the establishment, adoption, and utilisation of the internet/ social media inform of online political participation through e-enabling as an alternative technological platform for citizen participation in elections, politics, and democracy in Uganda (Electoral Democracy).

Dryzek (1990) as quoted in Escobar (2017), asserts that the lack of fair elections could be linked to citizens' failure to use ICT in political participation since only 13% of the citizens in Africa actively engage in online political discussions/ activities geared towards the attainment of electoral democracy due to either accessibility issues or lack of knowledge on how technology could be a link between them and also enhance electoral democracy (Wairagala & Ake, 2015). Therefore, having Ugandans directly participate in political activities, elections, and campaigns and influence policy actions can be more feasibly done with citizens' adoption of the Internet (Fischer, 2009).

Notably, Online Political Participation in Uganda has been adopted through the use of ICT since 81% of Ugandans own smart phones and can access the internet, and is progressively utilised in politics through citizen - citizen and citizen – political leaders through promoting human rights like the right to participate in civic affairs which could lead to Electoral Democracy. However, even with the existence of considerable enthusiasm and positivity about ICT's role in politics, its impact is still very low (Wakabi, 2015). This, in turn, has seen Uganda having a post-electoral period characterised by hierarchical rigidity, enormous political and democratic institutions that no longer function independently, low levels of political accountability, and failure to fully have freedom of expression, yet utilisation of the Internet could save us from this mess (Fischer, 2009).

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Uganda have always conducted voter education campaigns

and advocated for electoral reforms to happen, but have been suppressed by the government, have their accounts frozen, or even been completely closed, thereby suppressing the efforts to achieve fair elections (Sjogren, 2022).

Studies on E-democracy, E-politics and E-Participation have always been done in the developed world, for example, Mervis et al. (2013), Madueke et al. (2017), Kwaku (2018) and Sadiq et al. (2018). However, none has been done on Online Political Participation and electoral democracy, especially in Less Developed Countries like Uganda. This has made it imperative to conduct a study to establish whether the adoption and utilisation of the Internet to participate in politics could lead to a free and fair election (Electoral Democracy).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically assess the relationship between E – Enabling and electoral democracy in Uganda.

Specific Objective of the Study

The study specifically aims at studying how e-enabling can be utilised as a technological platform to contribute towards the conduct of a free, fair, credible, transparent, and inclusive election (Electoral Democracy) in Uganda.

LITERATURE REVIEW

E-Enabling as a Correlate of Electoral Democracy

Past studies relating to e-enabling and electoral democracy are many, (e.g., Sakue, 2017, Ugbudian, 2015, Braimah & Forson, 2023, Saiqa Sadiq et al., 2018, Strandberg, 2015, Coleman, 2022, Karakaya et al., 2007). For example, in their study, the Role of Social Media towards political accountability, Saiqa Sadiq et al. (2018) reported that e-enabling through the use of ICT/Internet, social media facilitates the freedom of expression as citizens can engage in online political deliberations, do E-

Activism and E-Campaigns thereby providing opportunities for direct political participation that in turn improve the electoral processes and increase political accountability, especially in emerging democracies and authoritarian regimes.

Therefore, this study asserts that the people who adopted social media and ICT could freely express themselves politically, then those that did not use it were able to hold their leaders more accountable than those that did not use it or those that did not use ICT for political actions and were able to improve the electoral process by having a competitive electoral process and advocating for electoral reforms than those. However, this study was not done in Low Developed Countries like Uganda, thereby warranting another study here in Uganda to establish whether the use of the internet, availability, and access to the internet with relevant political information online could promote freedom of expression that is vital for a fair and credible election.

Aichholzer and Allhutter (2009), in their empirical study on online forms of political participation and their impact on democracy at the Institute for Social Sciences, Business Studies and Technology (ISCTE), E-Participation tools were identified by type of engagement and role of ICT or level of participation whereby, e-enabling (information access online) was identified as one of the types of engagement that influence individual activism and collective activism as part of participation with a key impact on democracy.

Strandberg (2015) conducted a study on the 'Impact of the Internet use patterns on Political Engagement' where he focused on virtual, social, capital, and online deliberation in South Korea to test the impact of various or different internet patterns (E-Deliberation, E-Shopping on political engagement and E-Social Capital building). In this study, he found out that, E-Deliberation in the form of online discussions on public issues increases political engagement. It further confirms that the internet plays a very crucial role towards

invigorating protest politics plus alternative political movements, thus enhancing children's participation in politics and democracy. Strandberg also affirms that strengthening political efficiency and electronic deliberation is a cornerstone for citizens' participatory practices and democratic conduct (p. 44). However, the study was not done in African countries, East Africa or even in Uganda, thereby warranting another study in Uganda that specifically focuses on electoral democracy but not on democracy in general.

Norris (1999), in his analytical study on the impact of the Internet on political activism in 19 nations in a social survey in Europe, found a significant linear relationship between the use of the Internet and civic-oriented activities that caused oriented activism. He particularly notes that internet use develops and supports or promotes political activism (E-Activism), voting (E-voting), campaign-oriented participation forms, and activities that are civic-oriented and cause-oriented. He further notes that social movements and interest groups in the fight for democracy are strengthened by ICT use instead of conventional political participation channels like election campaigning and voting parties. However, this study does not highlight key challenges that surround the adoption of the Internet and the use of Online Political Participation as utilisation of e-enabling as a technological platform in a democracy that specifically relates to elections, thereby warranting another study.

Theoretical Review

This study was guided by the Blumler et al. (1964) User's Gratifications Theory quoted in Egodwu & Chuks-Nwosu (2015) and the Ludwig von Bertalanffy & Ross (1940) General Systems theory. The General Systems theory, as proposed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1940 and furthered by Ross in 1964, was applied in the study since electoral democracy entails elections as a combined process whose conduct, character and outcome cannot be disassociated from the interdependent and

interconnected processes (pre-electoral period, election day and post-electoral period) that make up the whole system (Sakue, 2017).

Bulmler et al. (1964) User's Gratifications theory stipulates that individuals or people have the power to determine how they use the media rather than placing individuals as passive media consumers. The theory argues that people or citizens choose or select what they want to do with the media, especially online or new media, instead of what the media does to people. In regards to this study, therefore, women, youth, public institutions, political leaders, and citizens would actively choose how to use the media, especially online media, to participate in political issues of their country by campaigning, posting political messages, reacting to government policies and decisions, engaging their candidates, political parties, and leaders in political talks online; thereby contributing to developing electoral democracy in their country (Madueke et al., 2017, & Qi et al., 2018).

The Ludwig von Bertalanffy & Ross (1940) General Systems theory stipulates that a system is a complex of different parts/ basics that work together as a whole to get results, and when one part is missing or a process is not followed, the whole system cannot work. This same case applies to elections; if any of voter education, election observation, electoral reform advocacy, competitive electoral process, effective electoral justice, and dispute resolution is missing, then the electoral process would not be complete because together, they constitute a fair election.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Philosophy

This study was based on positivist and interpretive epistemology, objective and subjective ontological philosophies, scientific methods, qualitative and quantitative paradigms, survey design, and correlational in nature.

Positivist and Interpretive epistemologies/ philosophies are used due to the need to gain insight into reality (ontology), views on truth and legitimate knowledge (epistemology) (Antwi & Hamza, 2015) as well as providing the philosophical background for deciding what kinds of knowledge are legitimate and adequate in relation to e-enabling. Epistemology also helped the researcher to recognise which research designs would work for a given set of objectives (Gray, 2004). The scientific method is used to systematise the knowledge generation process and quantification of e-enabling. Subjective experiences of the respondents, interviewing, and observing relativism was used in qualitative data (Scotland, 2012).

Research Design and Paradigm

A quantitative paradigm based on numerical (statistical) representation described and explained the phenomena that those observations reflected variables analysed with statistical procedures and measured with numbers (Sukamolson, 2010; Creswell, 2003), as well as for testing of hypothesis to establish the relationship between the variables (De lisle, 2011).

A survey design was used to cater for a large number of respondents and generalised statistics from data from individual cases (Bakkabulind et al., 2014). It was correlational since it investigated the association/ relationship between e-enabling (Online Political Participation) and electoral democracy in Uganda (Bakkabulind et al., 2014). It was correlational -cross-sectional because data was collected once from all the respondents that could respond to the entire research questions for the study.

Sample Size

An inclusive total sample of 472 respondents comprised 118 youth, 108 women, 80 registered voters (Men & PWDs), 80 CSO Staff, and 86 staff from public institutions adapted from Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) Table for determining the sample

size form a total population which is 170 Youth, 150 Women, 100 registered voters (Men, People Living with Disabilities), 100 CSO Staff and online media, and 110 staff from public institutions was utilised for this study considering the cost, time and other constraints.

Data Analysis

Statistical Packages for Social Sciences and reflexive thematic analysis were used for quantitative and qualitative data analysis, respectively. Reflexive thematic analysis analysed qualitative data because it could provide an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the respondents’ experiences and perspectives (Combs & Onwugbuzie, 2010). It was also flexible for the researcher to alternate, eliminate and add codes as they worked through the data, and it’s a collaborative

process that helped the researcher compile codes based on all the coders’ individual findings (Crosley, 2021).

RESULTS

E-Enabling as a Technological Platform for electoral democracy in Uganda

The study was set to establish the relationship between e-enabling and electoral democracy in Uganda. The descriptive statistics are presented in means and standard deviation (SD). The interpretation of means was guided by this scale: 5 – 4.3 interpreted as “Very High”, 4.2 – 3.5 interpreted as “High”, 3.4 – 2.7 interpreted as “Moderate”, 2.6 – 1.90 interpreted as “Low”, and 1.8 – 1.00 interpreted as “Very Low”. The results are shown in *Table 1* below.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of e-enabling as a construct of online political participation

E-Enabling	Mean	SD	Rank	Interpretation
Having the Internet enables me to voice out political and human rights violations and concerns in a democratic society.	4.23	2.52	1	High
The Internet enables me to easily access political information and raises my political knowledge on Presidential elections.	4.22	1.34	2	High
Utilising the Internet helps me & political candidates share political information, manifestos, and campaign message with voters.	4.10	1.04	3	High
The Internet helps me mobilise people to participate in politics & fighting for a given democratic cause.	4.07	1.11	4	High
Having ICT skills is a resource for me to participate in public policy, politics, and governance.	4.03	1.07	5	High
Cheaper access to the internet gives me an opportunity to politically engage the government and other electoral stake holders.	4.02	1.22	6	High
Listening to Presidential candidates on the radio and calling in helped me understand their manifestos and messages.	3.96	1.21	7	High
Internet accessibility enables me to participate in Presidential political debates & issues.	3.91	1.23	8	High
Conducting online Presidential campaigns enables me and the candidates to engage in a competitive electoral process.	3.74	1.28	9	High
Average	4.03			High

E-Enabling had four constructs, and these include (i) Online political deliberation, (ii) E-Activism, (iii) E-Campaigning, and (iv) Online Political Chat rooms. The results reveal that concerning the E-Enabling, sub construct one (E-Ena1) about whether

having internet enables them to voice out political and human rights violations and concerns in a democratic society; this was ranked the highest with mean = 4.23 and SD = 2.52. This implies that the majority of respondents believed that internet access

is a very good tool that enables them to voice out both political and human rights violations through internet-supported media such as social media.

It also helps them in voicing out concerns associated with democratic society to a larger audience. The key informants engaged in the study also revealed that accessibility to the internet is considered by the citizens as a tool for conducting online activism or E-Activism to fight against societal injustices like human rights violations and abuses either within the election cycle or even after the election.

Having high results with mean = 4.23 and a standard deviation = 2.52) is further confirmation of the need to continuously uphold, promote and protect our freedom of speech and association as portrayed in Art. 29 of the 1995 Constitution of Uganda that provides that-“Every person shall have the right to, (a) freedom of speech and expression which shall include freedom of the press and the media, and (d) freedom to assemble and to demonstrate together with others peacefully and unarmed and to petition” (Government of Uganda, 1995).

Under sub construct 2 (E-Ena2), in terms of whether the *internet enables individuals to easily access political information and raises their political knowledge on elections*, this was ranked second within the e-enabling construct with mean = 4.22 and a standard deviation of = 1.34 interpreted as a high. Thereby implying and confirming that the internet facilitates easy access to political information and increases one’s political knowledge.

Sub construct three (E-Ena3) regarding whether utilising the internet helps study participants and political candidates in sharing political information, manifestos, and campaign messages with voters, was ranked third in the e-enabling construct with (mean = 4.10, SD = 1.04) interpreted as high. This implies that the internet is a powerful tool for spreading information and campaigning and as a sensitising tool to seevoters’ support during the election period. This is further confirmed by the

qualitative data responses from the key informants where Respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 – CSOs, assert that designing accessible online programs with instant information and strong security helps candidates share political information online.

Studies like Santana (2014), Ahmad et al. (2019), and Crespo Cuaresma & Oberdabernig (2014) confirm the findings above. Specifically, Crespo Cuaresma & Oberdabernig (2014) stipulates that “most countries have experienced a larger impact on their electoral manifestos, messages, and elections due to the proliferation of the Internet. For example, political parties and individual politicians have continuously utilised their social media accounts to disseminate political information, political manifestos, individual candidates’ manifesto for specific elections, and well-phrased electoral messages for social media users and the voters persuading citizens to vote for them as their preferred candidates/ party.

Sub construct 4 (E-Ena4) about *the Internet being helpful in mobilising individuals to participate in politics and fighting for a given democratic cause*, with (mean = 4.07, SD = 1.11) interpreted as high. This is further confirmed by Respondent 16- Public Institutions, who asserts that candidates can freely mobilise supporters and voters very fast to attend their rallies and campaigns and engage in their electoral activities as well as rally them towards fighting for a given democratic cause. Respondent 11 CSOs further agrees that the internet can easily be used by political candidates, political parties, and other electoral stakeholders to educate and sensitise their supporters and voters about elections in the entire electoral cycle to fight for a given democratic and noble cause.

Sub construct five (E-Ena5) about whether *having ICT skills acts as a huge resource for individuals to participate in public policy, politics, and governance*, was ranked fifth with (mean = 4.03, SD = 1.07) interpreted as high. Basic ICT skills are essential in improving communication and information sharing through visual and audio,

which are critical in meeting and informing the public, making recommendations or suggestions, and showing the position where an individual stands on a particular policy or law through internet use, as was commonly used during the COVID 19 pandemic in 2019/2020.

This is supported by Respondents 6, 9, and 11- Political leaders as well as Respondent 4- Political Leaders category, who assert that it is important to sensitise people or the community about internet use in elections such that they can have some basic minimum skills on how to use internet/ ICT to access information, compare it and use it to make an informed decision on the voting/ election day. This can best be done through educating them to understand how the use of the Internet contributes towards having a free and fair election.

Sub construct six (E-Ena6), concerning whether *cheaper access to the internet gives individuals the opportunity to engage government and other stakeholders*, was ranked 6th with (mean = 4.02, SD = 1.22) interpreted as high). This is confirmed by qualitative data where respondents, Respondent 2 Academia, and Respondent 1- Electoral Commission affirm that there is a need for government to reduce the price of data, tax on the internet, gadgets or internet-enabled devices as well as the general internet costs if Ugandans are to completely, fully, and actively embrace the use of the Internet in elections throughout the entire electoral cycle.

Sub construct seven (E-Ena7), regarding whether *listening to Presidential candidates on the radio and calling in help one understand their manifestos and messages*, was ranked 7th with (mean = 3.96, SD = 1.21) interpreted as high. This was followed by sub-construct 8 (E-Ena8) about whether *Internet accessibility enables me to participate in Presidential political debates & issues*, which had (mean = 2.91, SD = 1.23). The last ranked item in e-enabling construct sub-construct nine (E-Ena9) was concerned with whether *conducting online Presidential campaigns enables me and candidates*

to engage in a competitive electoral process, also had (mean = 3.74, SD = 1.28) interpreted as high.

Overall, the average level of e-enabling was high (mean = 4.03). This means that, in general, the level of E-Enabling, measured by its sub-constructs, was high. By implication, therefore, the results confirmed our hypothesis that the use of the internet as a technological platform to conduct online political deliberations, online activism, online campaigns, and online political chat rooms was important in contributing towards conducting/ attainment of a free, accountable, transparent, credible, and fair election (Electoral Democracy).

Relationship between e-enabling and Electoral Democracy

The objective was to establish the relationship between e-enabling and Electoral Democracy. To achieve this objective, the researcher carried out a correlation and regression analysis between e-enabling and Electoral Democracy. Results from correlation analysis are shown in Table 2 (Correlation Analysis), Table 3 (Simple Linear Regression Analysis), and the Multiple Regression Analysis of all constructs of e-enabling under Online Political Participation and electoral democracy are shown in Table 4. In addition to investigating the relationship between e-enabling and Electoral Democracy, the researcher investigated the relationship between all constructs of electoral democracy and E-Enabling. Results are shown in Table 2.

The results reveal that there is a positive, statistically significant association between voter education and e-enabling with ($r = 0.402$, sig. = 0.00). This implies that as e-enabling is increasing, electoral democracy is also increasing, meaning that they move in the same direction. Also, the results reveal that e-enabling was found to be positively and statistically significantly associated with electoral reform advocacy ($r = 0.409$, sig. = 0.000), with electoral observation ($r = 0.376$, sig. = 0.000), Competitive electoral process ($r = 0.431$, sig. =

0.00), Electoral justice ($r = 0.376$, sig. = 0.000), press freedom ($r = 0.411$, sig. 0.000).

Table 2: Correlations between e-enabling and Electoral Democracy

Variables		E-Enabling
Voter Education	Pearson Correlation	.402**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	478
Electoral Reform Advocacy	Pearson Correlation	.409**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	478
Election Observation	Pearson Correlation	.376**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	479
Competitive Electoral Process	Pearson Correlation	.431**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	477
Effective Electoral justice and Dispute Resolution	Pearson Correlation	.376**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	479
Press Freedom Availability	Pearson Correlation	.411**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	479
Electoral Democracy	Pearson Correlation	.518**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	475

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Primary Data, 2021

These results imply e-enabling, and the constructs of electoral democracy move in the same direction. As e-enabling increases, electoral reform advocacy, electoral observation, Competitive electoral process, Electoral justice, and press freedom also increase. Overall, the relationship between e-enabling and electoral democracy was found to be positive, statistically significant ($r = 0.518$, sig. = 0.00). This implies increase in e-enabling is associated with an increase in electoral democracy in Uganda (See *Table 3*).

The results from simple regression analysis show that, based on standardised coefficients, the average

rate of change in electoral democracy for every unit increase in e-enabling was (beta = 0.518). This implies that for every unit increase in e-enabling increases electoral democracy by 0.518. This value is statistically different from 0 (or statistically significant) since ($t = 13.163$, p-value = 0.000) and the overall model is statistically significant ($F = 173.26$, p-value = 0.000). It also shows that the 26.7% (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.267$) of the variation in electoral democracy is explained by E-Enabling. These results imply that e-enabling significantly influences electoral democracy regardless of other factors (E-Engaging, and E-Empowering) by almost 30%.

Table 3: Multiple linear regression analysis of online political participation constructs and electoral democracy

Variables	Unstandardised Beta	Standardised Beta	t-values	Adjusted R ²	F-Value	p-values
Constant	2.69		13.16	0.267	173.26	0.000
E-Enabling	0.37	0.52				

Source: Primary Data, 2021.

The results from multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 4. Based on standardised beta coefficients, the results reveal that the average level of electoral democracy to a unit increase in e-enabling holding E-Engaging and E-Empowering was (beta = 0.135, sig. = 0.004 < 0.05). This shows that this coefficient is statistically significant ($t = 2.862$, sig = 0.004). This implies that the use of the Internet to engage in politics can contribute towards a free and fair election.

The results also reveal that the average rate of change in electoral democracy to unit change in E-Engaging was (beta = 0.139, $t = 2.755$, sig = 0.006 < 0.05), holding other factors constant. These results

also reveal that the E-Engaging is statistically significant in explaining Electoral Democracy. This implies that holding online engagements can contribute towards a free and fair election.

On the other hand, the average rate of change in the level of electoral democracy to a unit increase in E-Empowering was (beta = 0.479, $t = 10.061$, sig. = 0.000), holding other factors constant. The overall model was statistically significant with ($F = 133.387$, sig. = 0.000) in explaining Electoral Democracy. The variation in electoral democracy explained by Online Political Participation (E-Enabling, E-Engaging, and E-Empowerment) was 45.6% (adjusted $R^2 = 0.456$).

Table 4: Multiple linear regression analysis of online political participation constructs and electoral democracy

Variables	Unstandardised Beta	Standardised Beta	t-values	p-values	Adj. R ²	F-Value	p-values
Constant	2.35						
E-Enabling	0.10	0.135	2.862	0.004	0.456	133.387	0.000

Source: Primary Data, 2021

DISCUSSION

E-enabling online political participation through the internet and social media use is vital in providing a platform for the voters and electoral stakeholders to engage in the electoral process. The study found that e-enabling was significantly related to electoral democracy. Similar studies that have similar findings like those in this study have been found in Australia (Dubois et al., 2022), the UK (Stephan Heblich, 2021), Ethiopia (African Union, 2020), Uganda (Mathias Kamp, 2016), the UK (Council of Europe, 2017), and in USA (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2013). Specifically, the Council of Europe (2017) provides

that the ‘internet gives people unprecedented access to electoral information that enables them to engage in online political deliberations as they freely express their opinions, interact with candidates, and get actively involved in electoral campaigns’.

Other studies that have also provided strong positive evidence supporting a positive relationship between e-enabling and electoral democracy include Pakistan (Ahmad et al., 2019), in Nigeria (Centre for Democracy on Development, 2014), South Africa (Ojok & Acol, 2017), in the USA (Bimber et al., 2015), China (Debnath et al., 2017), Germany (Goldzweig et al., 2020), South Africa (Kanyinga,

2014), in Brussels (Dumbrava, 2021), and USA (Owen, 2019).

This is in tandem with Scholars or Authors like Gauja (2021) from Australia, Verba and Nie (1972) and Perry et al. (1992), where Gauja (2021), in regards to e-campaigning asserts that the “Internet has greatly changed the political interactions and discussions as well as way political groups and politicians conduct election campaigns who use it to conduct online campaigns and activism about different issues, the fight against human rights violations, that has kept them in touch with their constituents or voters and enabled them to influence government decisions (Ahmad et al., 2019).

The findings are also supported by studies from the USA, like Darell. M. West (2011) asserts that digital tools and social media use in elections, especially the 2008 US campaigns and elections, were key for voter mobilisation that, in turn, had an impact on the electoral voter turnout. Through the use of social media networking tools like Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, and Twitter, many candidates from the Democratic party and the Republican party raised funds, and other campaign resources, identified key staunch supporters, built electoral coalitions, and enabled more people to actively participate in the electoral process since they were closer to the process and electoral stakeholders through internet and social media.

E-Activism under online political participation in the study was found to be associated with electoral democracy, just as seen in studies like Sweden (Gauja, 2016) and Scotland (Storck, 2011). A study from Sweden Gauja (2016) confirmed that protest movements like the Arab Springs, the #EuroMaiden revolution in Ukraine, the global #BlackLivesMatter, and the #NeverAgainMovement in the US, used social media through the internet to push for political change, just as well as mobilised people to participate in political discussions, convince others to vote, to take a stand on a given issue, show support for given causes and petition, and donate for

the success of elections in the electoral process. E-Activism, as found to be associated with a fair election in this study, was also seen in studies like in Scotland (Storck, 2011), which similarly asserted that activists use social media for collective political action and bargaining during elections. Nepal (Raof et al., 2013) perceives social media and the internet as a political tool for activism and political change, thereby corresponding with Ethiopia (Abdu et al., 2017), which confirms that Facebook use positively correlates with online political participation and a fair election.

E-Campaigning under e-enabling was also found to be associated with conducting a fair and credible election. Correspondingly, from Berlin, Germany, Bennet et al. (2019) found out that Digital/ E-Campaigning is a key tool to electoral success in the US and the world that enables politicians to have more accurate data, refined and a better understanding of their electorate. This is because the internet helped political parties profile their candidates, and send more precise electoral messages to voters that enable them to win elections after building massive voter relationship platforms on social media and mobile applications. These, in turn, become a political asset that provides political intelligence and political influence that powers democracy, ignites people’s cause, and rejuvenates their engagement in an inclusive electoral process with a large democratic infrastructure.

Online political chat rooms were also positively associated with the conduct of a fair, inclusive and credible election. Similar findings were also found in Tanzania (Ellisia et al., 2010) and in Brazil (Santana, 2014) that affirm that the use of digital social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and video sharing on YouTube encouraged the participation of voters online in elections like the 2014 Salvador Presidential campaign and election. This was also confirmed in the USA by Darell. M. West (2011) that emergence of the Internet use in mobilisation attracted new and key electoral stakeholders as participants in online

political discussions, that in turn led to an inclusive and credible election. Another London, 2015 Ipsos Opinion poll/ survey confirmed social media platforms give a voice to “71% of Britons, with 88% of those being between 18-34 years, people who would not have normally taken part in in the political debate and electoral process (Santana, 2014).

Whereas e-enabling in this study was positively associated with having a fair and credible election, a study in the USA (Yang & DeHart, 2016) also confirmed the association that political use of the Internet and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are positive predictors of online political participation with 73% of adult internet users in the USA 2010 midterm elections who got involved in elections online and political debates after receiving political news and information online (Pew Internet and American Life Project) while 65% of those social networking sites/ social media users visited those sites for political information and getting involved in the online political and electoral discussions and campaigns (E-Campaigning) (Smith, 2011).

E-Enabling was found to be associated with a fair and credible election (Electoral Democracy) in this study. For voters and other electoral stakeholders, the internet enables them easily access political information, which raises their political knowledge to engage in elections. Similar findings have also been found in the study from Canada the USA (Dubois et al., 2020), which support the findings by noting that social media serves as a source of information and is part of the political communication and mobilisation strategy that political parties, just other political actors deploy and integrate into their campaigns as they adapt to social and technological changes (Giasson et al., 2019).

They further affirm that political parties have used Digital technologies to access information as they engage in data-driven elections through micro-targeting as they embrace strategic use of resources

to design specifically targeted online electoral messages and communication and more individualised E-messages that directly communicate to key electoral stakeholders’ political interests and electoral needs that motivate them to actively engage in the electoral process (Bimber et al., 2015).

These not only increase the political party's visibility but also help them maintain public confidence among their support base through data-driven communication techniques and political data marketing after voter needs data collection as political parties and candidates run Hybrid campaigns that combine both traditional and online/new/ emerging media that has continuously proved to be an effective way to bypass traditional media filter and directly send electoral messages that communicate and address majority voters through platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp (Lesman et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study indicate that e-enabling can significantly act as a technological platform for conducting a free, fair, inclusive, accountable, and transparent election (Electoral Democracy) since there was a significant relationship between e-enabling (Online political deliberations, online political chat rooms, E-Activism, E-Campaigning) and electoral democracy among citizens in Uganda. Setting up an enabling environment for technology to thrive with the existence of a nation's widespread, unlimited, cheap, easily accessible internet network is vital for e-enabling to act as a technological platform for electoral democracy in Uganda.

Recommendations

Adoption and utilisation of the Internet during elections gives key electoral stakeholders like the political parties with limited resources a diverse platform to not only intensively participate in the electoral process but also present their agenda to the electorate, mobilise support base for their causes,

communicate and send their electoral messages to their voters, while reducing the cost of communicating with voters that would have been spent on the use of traditional media especially availability of free blogs on video sharing platforms like YouTube and social media (Council of Europe, 2017).

Having the government provide a widespread internet network coverage throughout the country, providing internet booths in every village with free internet/ Wi-Fi, reduction on the price of data, tax on the internet, gadgets or internet enabled devices, as well as the general internet costs, is very vital if Ugandans are to completely, fully, and actively embrace the use of the Internet in elections throughout the entire electoral cycle as a platform for a fair election.

There is a need to facilitate the development of mobile applications and internet-based electronic voting systems that have high data security and a good network that will allow citizens to have a wide range of voting options that encourage political participation. Government should stop the continuous internet black outs during the electoral process, especially voting and after elections, since it limits citizens from utilising the internet for voting, campaigning, election observation, and taking cases in courts of law; these processes automatically contribute towards freely engaging in a fair election (Uzedhe & Okhaifoh, 2019).

There is a need to sensitise people or the communities about internet use in elections such that they can have some basic minimum skills on how to use the internet/ ICT to access information, compare it and use it to make an informed decision on the voting/ election day and throughout the entire electoral process. This can best be done through educating them to understand how the use of the Internet contributes towards having a free and fair election.

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