

# Social media helped contribute to UPND gains in 2021 Zambia elections, analysis shows

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Social media helped contribute to the UPND's impressive victory in the 2021 Zambia elections, new analysis shows.

The party's online messaging resonated more with users compared to their rivals, helping to portray Hakainde Hichilema as an electorally viable alternative to President Edgar Lungu from the PF. Both parties invested heavily in [social media](#).

The study shows the election was not won online. Instead, social media helped to facilitate the flow of information across a heavily controlled media ecosystem in which face-to-face communication remained key.

While President Edgar Lungu and the PF were visible across the country, Hichilema and the UPND were largely invisible in everyday spaces, yet won with 59% of the popular vote in the presidential election and secured a parliamentary majority.

The research, carried out by Gabrielle Lynch from the University of Warwick and Elena Gadjanova from the University of Exeter, is published in the *Journal of Eastern African Studies*. They carried out 21 interviews with party officials, activists, journalists, civil society workers and academics between July 2021 and March 2022 via WhatsApp. They also used data from the 2017 and 2020 Afrobarometer surveys and a phone survey of 318 party officials and activists.

The study outlines how Lungu and the PF abused their position to try and control online content. Online political discussions were heavily

policed, and featured personal insults as well as harassment and cyber-bullying of women. There were hardly any substantive conversations about needs and policies, and groups were often focused on or dominated by elites.

PF respondents who took part in the research were more reliant on Facebook, and UPND respondents on WhatsApp. PF campaigners felt freer to discuss politics and to post propaganda for its candidates and against its opponents than their UPND counterparts, who in the face of a series of arrests and harassment of citizens for social media posts and the 2021 Cybercrimes and Cybersecurity Act, were wary of what they posted.

The PF had the power of the state behind them and used these powers to monitor and harass people online—with at least 18 people arrested for critical Facebook posts between 2019 and 2021—and temporarily shut down various social media platforms on election day. The PF employed a large communications team to troll and attack UPND candidates, activists, and supporters.

A sense of volunteering was stronger among UPND activists and this helped to ensure the use of social media worked to the party's advantage.

Dr. Gadjanova said, "The PF was visible and vocal online and had a largely consistent message in the run-up to the 2021 elections. However, this messaging failed to persuade a majority of voters and sat uncomfortably with people's lived realities of poor economic management.

"The UPND's reliance on WhatsApp helped to ensure that their messaging appeared more personal in its content and delivery. The UPND also benefited from the work of vocal civil society leaders and musicians, and more critical online newspapers, and their regular

exposure of PF abuses and scandals."

Professor Lynch said, "Social [media](#) provided a space in which ordinary [citizens](#) could display their frustrations with the PF and support for the UPND in ways that helped to foster a sense that Hichilema was an electorally viable alternative. These displays were rendered particularly significant by the inability of the UPND to organize conventional performances of support through large public rallies, and helped to overcome a perennial collective action problem of whether it is rational to cast one's individual [vote](#)."

**More information:** Gabrielle Lynch et al, Overcoming incumbency advantage: the importance of social media on- and offline in Zambia's 2021 elections, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/17531055.2023.2232241](#)

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