

THE VOTER INTENTION-BEHAVIOUR GAP, PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR LIBYA'S ELECTION

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Abstract: Following the UN-mediated Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, Libya's first national elections since 2014 were announced. In advocating for early elections as a post-conflict solution to instability, policymakers have failed to consider the reality of electoral participation for citizens. In actuality, voting is a high-cost low-benefit. This paper evaluates the shortcomings and potential consequences of elections premised on voter intention data and policymaking that neglects the role of citizens as active participants in democratisation. Libya's socio-political and economic conditions are discussed as risk factors for voter apathy and political disengagement, which negatively impact voter turnout as citizens have little incentive to participate. The paper highlights the need for electoral preparations that go beyond voter intention and better understand the decision-making processes to mobilise Libya's electorate. Given the fast-approaching election day, a case is made for postponing elections for Libya's political planners to prioritise promoting voter turnout.

Introduction

A roadmap to Libya's national elections was agreed following the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in the hopes of ending a long period of instability. Since the announcement, preparations have centred on determining the constitutional framework, but stained by political jostling and accusations of corruption. As political commentators continue to voice concerns at the little legal progress achieved, a major challenge is missing from the conversation:¹ how to get Libya's voters to turn out on election day.

Of the 4.4 million eligible voters, some 2.8 million citizens have registered, and opinion polls would suggest people are seemingly optimistic about the prospects of elections bringing stability to Libya. Efforts to forecast the election report at least 58% of people nationally are likely to vote.² On the surface these responses align with the position held by policymakers: early elections provide post-conflict stability and public buy-in to the process is strong.³ In reality, voting is a high-cost low-benefit activity for citizens.

Generally, there are no consequences for not voting and people seldom believe their single vote makes difference. Even small costs act as deterrents and impact overall turnout. Yet, Libya's electoral preparations, without consideration of these propositions, presume people's *intention* to vote will translate to a representative and legitimate election. If political planners are to make a success of upcoming elections, they must recognise the pitfalls of intention-based election forecasts and better understand voters' decision-making processes.

1. *Intention-Behaviour Gap in Voting*

In many circumstances, reporting an intention is a strong predictor of performing the behaviour. Theoretically, the close relationship between intention and behaviour is determined by an individual's attitude, subjective norms, and perceived self-efficacy. However, evidence shows intention can fail to

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predict behaviour, including voting. Analyses of pre-election intention surveys show a proportion of those who say they will vote do not, and surprisingly, a similar proportion who say they will not vote, in fact do.⁴

Intention-based questions require individuals to self-report their intention to participate in the voting procedure. At the core of electoral forecasting is voters' explicitly declared intentions about their future behaviour. Although pollsters have long relied on such polls as a major component of electoral forecast calculations, the method is notoriously problematic and linked to several high-profile forecast failures, including the 2016 US Election and UK Brexit Referendum.⁵

One contributing factor to forecast failures is the likeliness of respondents over-reporting their willingness to vote, due to a strong incentive to offer a socially desirable response. This is particularly likely when self-reporting intentions over the phone or in person. Mode-of-interview effects may explain why phone interviews report 74% of Libyan respondents intend to participate in the election, while anonymous online surveys report a more modest 58%.⁶ Despite seemingly positive pre-election intention reports, social desirability and the psychological cost of ultimately voting are evident in Libya's voter registration figures.

Voter registration can capture people's best intention to engage in a democratic act. With post-Gadafi elections repeatedly upheld as the catalyst of democratic transition, voting is perceived as a highly prosocial but high-cost action. In comparison, registering to vote is a socially desirable low-cost act if behavioural obstacles are removed. This intention-behaviour gap was seen in Libya's 2014 Parliamentary Election where around half of the 3.8 million eligible voters registered and only 630,000 (18%) cast their vote.⁷

Global data reveals there are in fact individual costs to registering that correlate with registration laws. Countries in which the responsibility is on individuals (i.e., voluntary registration), show consistent patterns with respects to who does and does not register.⁸ Similarly, countries with compulsory registration show a higher election turnout associated with citizens understanding voting as their civic duty.⁹

To improve enrolment when it launched the voter registration update, Libya's High National Elections Commission (HNEC) attempted to remove behavioural barriers, by introducing online and SMS registration.¹⁰ While such methods aim to remove the inertia associated with in-person registration, of Libya's 2.8 million registered voters, less than 500, 000 are newly registered this year.¹¹

In an election year these figures point to hidden costs uncaptured by intention-based data and paint a sombre picture of political disengagement. Libyans sense little incentive to participate and a loss of agency in their country's transitional processes. With the election date looming, political planners must focus efforts on encouraging registered voters to cast their ballot. Doing so requires a greater understanding of the barriers to voting.

2. Election risk factors

Libya's socio-political and economic climate presents numerous obstacles for voters. People are less likely to vote when public perception of political corruption increases. If they do vote, decreasing political trust is associated with preference for protest parties as a function of discontent.¹² Despite initial satisfaction with the UN process, perception of government corruption is persistently high and cited as a major contributor to unwillingness to vote.¹³ Whether suitable protest candidates emerge is unknown.

Among the candidates are several high-profile controversial figures. These include Seif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of the late dictator, head of the Libyan National Army General Khalifa Haftar, current interim prime minister Abdulhamid Dabaiba, and speaker of the House of Representatives Aguila Saleh. Each benefit from a pool of core supporters amidst accusations of corruption, political wrongdoing and war crimes. However, public opinion suggests no one candidate can unify the electorate.¹⁴

Even under mandatory voting conditions, negative campaigning that increases the salience of corruption accusations can reduce voter turnout.¹⁵ This is particularly likely in emerging democracies with a lack of confidence in government institutions. Negative campaigning involves increased information sharing of corruption allegations against a candidate. Counterintuitively, increased negative information sharing does little more than demobilise the electorate as citizens perceive reduced accountability for corrupt candidates.¹⁶

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Libya's elections are unfolding amidst a divisive political atmosphere and torrent of negative campaigning. For instance, legal action has been taken to prevent some candidates from running on the grounds their candidacy breaches electoral law. Elections depend on transparency and accountability, but negative rhetoric increases the risk of low voter turnout, and further erodes democratic governance and citizens' political efficacy.¹⁷ Parachuting elections into a post-conflict environment is a risky strategy that does not consider public perception as fundamental to democratisation.

Despite corruption allegations, Libya's controversial political figures do boast strong support-bases from which they secured their candidacy. Variations in responses to presidential race scenarios is telling of how people perceive different forms of corruption. For instance, in one race scenarios, 73% of respondents report they would vote for Dabaiba and 14% would vote for Hafter. In a race scenario involving Hafter and Fathi Bashagha, 20% would vote for the former, but 41% reported unwillingness to vote. While these reports reflect a national aggregate, a regional breakdown shows some homogeneity in preferences, with Dabaiba the leading candidate in the west, south and east.¹⁸

Individuals vote or abstain based on the nature of corruption allegations. Citizens are more likely to elect a candidate involved in welfare-increasing corruption from which they benefit but punish welfare-decreasing corruption.¹⁹ Dabaiba has strategically implemented welfare policies and garnered support amongst Libya's youth, despite allegations of political bribery and financial corruption.²⁰ In the east, the close race between Dabaiba and Hafter suggests those citizens who benefit from Hafter's security infrastructure may vote for him, irrespective of accusations of war crimes.

Economic downturn also negatively affects electoral participation. Voter apathy increases when individuals politically withdraw to meet their basic needs, particularly in countries with weak welfare protection.²¹ Libya's economy contracted by 31% in 2020, fuelled by oil blockades, conflict and the Covid-19 pandemic. While 2022 GDP forecasts are positive, they are contingent on successful elections.²² In addition, citizens report being unable to afford basic necessities.²³ This creates a catch-22 – citizens need to feel economically secure to politically participate, but prospects of economic stability are conditional on successful elections.

For Libyans, voting is a collective action problem. As a group, it is in the interests of voters to boycott elections involving corrupt candidates. As individuals, no one voter may have the incentive to punish a candidate from whom they benefit in times of instability. However, these individuals who see a cost in *not* voting are a fragmented minority. The remainder are politically disengaged unregistered, unwilling or undecided voters. As stakeholders continue to embolden Libya's political elite, they side-line public perception.

Discounting public perception and the electorate as agents of democracy dissuades citizens from voting, presenting a genuine risk to the legitimacy of elections. Pockets of popular support for candidates are not enough to secure elections. Yet, political planners forge ahead partially premised on intention-based public opinion. Policymakers must avoid a confirmation bias that rationalises elections on the grounds of willingness to vote data, without recognising unwilling or undecided voters, particularly in the wake of growing uncertainty surrounding Libya's election.

3. *Non-/Undecided Voters, Uncertainty and Election Postponement*

Election reporting bias is present in headlines like 'nearly 60% plan to vote'.²⁴ Reframed as 'more than 40% intend not to vote' brings *non-voters* to the forefront of electoral planning, which is paramount to improving turnout. For instance, when pollsters failed to project 43% would not vote in the 2016 US election, observers pushed for holistic data-driven approaches to forecasting and turnout.²⁵ As a result, 2020 saw record voting numbers.²⁶

Libya has drastically declining turnout rates, down from 62% in the 2012 election, to 18% in 2014. Evidence suggests there are consistent factors associated with non-voters, including gender, age, education, political interest and perception of civic duty, which should be considered in electoral preparations. Instead of spinning intention-based data to drive through early election, Libya's policymakers should have identified non-voters and used the data to understand, engage with and represent these voters.

In addition, little is known about Libya's fraction of undecided voters. Psychologists know the value of distinguishing likely and undecided voters as an analytical tool and for targeted campaigns. However, early intention polls excluded the possibility of identifying undecided voters by forcing responses to fall within 'likely' or 'unlikely' categories.²⁷ A more recent poll of candidate preference (i.e., "If the election were tomorrow, who would you vote for?") reported 26% were undecided nationally. Similar figures were reported regionally.²⁸

In any election, voters face uncertainty. With the imminent elections likely to be postponed, Libyan's face greater political uncertainty. Fluctuations in public opinion are associated with lower voter turnout as a measure of political engagement.²⁹ This was witnessed in 2014 where hostile and uncertain conditions resulted in a contested outcome due to low turnout. Without an official announcement on any technical delay, there is a risk of greater fluctuations in public opinion, which will lower the perceived social utility gained from voting and negatively impact turnout.

Nonetheless, there is an argument for postponing elections during emergency situations. For instance, Nigeria's 2019 presidential election was postponed for one week following logistical and operational concerns. Bosnia's post-war 1996 election was postponed for three months due to technical delays.

For post-conflict stabilisation, the timing of elections is critical.³⁰ Postponing Libya's election may better secure legal frameworks and political institutions, but also offers the opportunity to reduce uncertainty and mobilise voters. To do so, policymakers must reaffirm the electorate as drivers of democratisation and international players as mediators.

4. Beyond Intention: The Case for Postponing Elections

Democracy is fundamentally linked to development: the basic tenet of development is people's participation in decision making processes affecting their lives. In reality, Libya's elections may be a case of improving development discourse, without grounded analysis of the obstacles to implementation. This article has argued voter intention is a weak link in Libya's election planning. Preparations should have encompassed strategies to mobilise voters that included 1) a better understanding of voters and barriers to voting, and 2) more accurate forecasting beyond voter intention.

The initial timeframe was premised on early elections providing post-conflict stability by fast-tracking a new system of democratic governance. This is at odds with democratisation as a long-term process of social and political development. Given Libya's limited voting history, previous poor turnout, and costly socio-political and economic conditions, there is a risk the legitimacy of elections will be contested due to low voter turnout. This could replicate the outcome of the 2014 election and reignite conflict.³¹

Political scientists argue elections should be postponed on the grounds of electoral integrity, including equality of participation. In established democracies, postponing elections risks institutional uncertainty and democratic breakdown. In Libya, political institutions are already fragile, and postponement may serve as an opportunity to steady the process by reinstating electoral mechanisms and mobilising voters. As mediator, the UN should assist with short-term conditions to facilitate elections and high voter turnout.³²

Doing so requires removing immediate voting barriers. In particular, access to polling stations must be secured. Polling stations must not be used as tools for groups to express their dissatisfaction. While many have collected their voter card, the HNEC must determine the impact of polling station closures and address incidents of stolen voter cards.³³ In addition, concerted efforts are needed

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to reduce negative campaigning and prevent election-related violence. While political campaigning is particularly negative in conflict-prone countries, monitoring and recording is thought to discourage inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech.³⁴

Libyans have little incentive to participate in upcoming elections. Socio-political, economic, and behavioural inertia, in conjunction with an electoral process that side-lines public perception and agency, results in voter disengagement. Securing elections requires policymakers to rectify the dissonance between their advocating for elections as a solution to instability, and citizens' perceptions of voting as a high-cost, low-benefit act. This may be achieved by postponing elections, so preparations not only determine legal frameworks, but also acknowledge the role of citizens in the country's transitional processes. At this stage, Libya's political planners must ensure as many registered voters turn out on election day. Beyond these elections, policymakers cannot presuppose public buy-in to political stabilisation strategies, or else they risk further marginalising an already disenfranchised population.

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