

Cultivating Voters' Perceptions and Women's Political Representation in Uganda

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Abstract

This study considers voter perceptions as resources women politicians cultivate. How women cultivate this resource is relatively understudied in Uganda. The study addresses the gap in the literature through a qualitative approach. Women Members of Parliament (MPs) representing the Northern Uganda districts of Kitgum, Pader, Oyam, Agago, and Gulu selected purposively completed individual in-depth interviews. Additionally, constituents in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) provided input with the help of a discussion guide. Findings reveal that voters' perceptions of women MPs are contextual; voter characteristics and expectations influence voters' impression of an individual. Irrespective of the seat type, women MPs cultivate votes through constituency service. However, women in reserved seats use humility, honesty, and motherliness to influence voters' perceptions. Compared to women in open seats, women in reserved seats are better at nurturing voter perceptions. A further revelation is that a reciprocal relationship exists between voters' perceptions of MPs and performance outcomes. The study suggests that voters' perceptions are an essential political resource as they provide a feedback loop for improved performance, better policies and the election of good leaders.

Keywords: Women MPs, affirmative action, voters' perceptions, electoral politics, northern Uganda

Introduction

Parliamentary representation is primarily descriptive, meaning replicating constituency demands in Parliament, and substantive, denoting acting on behalf of constituencies in legislation (Pitkin 1967:8-12). The extent of representatives' responsiveness to constituency interests affects and is affected by constituency perceptions (Clayton, Josefsson and Wang 2017:281). Performance affects perceptions, and voters elect representatives who meet their expectations. In turn MPs' desire to get elected influences them to meet voter expectations. The viability of a representative starts with constituents' perceptions of the representative's legislative behaviour (Helfer, Wäspi and Varone 2021: 167). A clear demonstration of the relationship between performance and perceptions is what Eisenhardt (1989:58), calls a principal-agent relationship. Representatives account to their voters through performance, and voters respond by punishing or rewarding the MP on the ballot.

Moreover, perceptions have an interdependent character where voters have the power to affect an election, while MPs shape voter perceptions. Voter perceptions are critical in shaping MPs' electability (NGO Forum 2017). Perceptions are an essential political resource for electoral success. Political resources are anything that influences a political decision, ranging from social or psychological factors, material, personal or group attributes, authority position, network connection or an action such as political participation (Wängnerud 2009:54; Yamokoski and Dubrow cited in Dubrow 2015:478). Perceptions, like other political resources, are described by their distributional nature, meaning that different individuals or groups acquire resources to varying degrees and are shaped by contextual factors (Dubrow 2015: 179). For example, perceptions about women MPs are fragile; women are more likely than men to be perceived negatively because politics is considered a domain for men. Also, women in reserved (affirmative action) seats are considered noncompetitive in the electoral process through the ranks (Goetz 2002:573; Muriaas and Wang 2012:317). Women, therefore, must devise strategies to cultivate positive perceptions. Women must be entrepreneurs by building their following.

This article explores how women in reserved and open seats cultivate perceptions and their significance for women's electability or re-electability. It begins with a brief background of women and parliamentary representation in Uganda since adopting affirmative action for political representation, followed by the methodology, findings and conclusions.

Background

Uganda is a liberal democracy, with elections occurring every five years. Uganda's electoral system has varied since its independence in 1962. The country had a multiparty system in the 1962 and 1980 elections, the only two democratic elections held after independence before the NRM era. Idi Amin ruled Uganda by decree from 1971 to 1979 and suspended Parliament. Later, from 1986 to 2005, Uganda had a one-party National Resistance Movement (NRM) system but returned to multiparty politics in 2006.

The dynamics in the electoral system have had consequences for women's political representation. The colonial period relegated women to the private sphere, forcing them out of the public life of which politics is a part (Ssewakiryanga 2014). Idi Amin's era threatened women's movements, and many collapsed (Kwesiga 2017:204). Women were limited to associations such as the Association of Married Women, reinforcing stereotypical feminine roles like home keeping and maintenance. In contrast, the NRM era brought women to decision-making by adopting the affirmative action policy for political representation. Women have been able to use the decision-making spaces to pass gender-friendly legislation.

Additionally, women's constitutional recognition and acceptance in decision-making gave them confidence in the government's goodwill, prompting them to rally behind the government in return (Tamale 1999:104). As a result, women's relationship with the NRM government has been transactional. The NRM government has been criticised for exploiting affirmative action to achieve political ends and not promoting the genuine emancipation of women, for instance, by using women as a vote bank to achieve political victory (Ottemoeller 1999:98; Goetz 2002:560).

The lessons from Uganda's history have shaped the country's political and electoral terrain. As a result, Uganda's democracy has improved compared to the previous regimes. First, the NRM government introduced an independent electoral commission to manage elections as part of its commitment to ensuring democracy. Further, the NRM government legalised the electoral commission under Article 60 of the 1995 constitution of the Republic of Uganda. The electoral commission is mandated to provide free and fair elections, organise elections and referenda

according to the principles of democracy, demarcate constituencies, declare results, handle election complaints and conduct civic education. In addition, the Electoral Commission defines eligibility for electoral office, voting, and the geographical area of representation. In practice, however, democratic principles fall short. The political environment remains unfriendly to women (UWONET 2016:65). Candidates in opposition continue to suffer the effects of party dominance (Gibb, 2016:93). Also, the militarisation of politics continues to threaten women's political ambitions (Goetz 2002: 156). Hence, there is criticism that Uganda's democracy under the NRM is pseudo.

There are three categories of contenders for parliamentary office: candidates vying for the open seats, the reserved seats and special interest seats (the Youth, Elderly, Persons with Disabilities, Workers, and Uganda Peoples Defence Forces). The interest groups represent specific constituencies different from those of the other MPs as provided for by Article 78 (1a) and (1b) and Article 32 (1) of the 1995 constitution of the Republic of Uganda—an electoral college of members in the same group votes for the special interest seats. Candidates vying for the open seats are either male or female from diverse political backgrounds; they represent single constituencies and are voted by universal suffrage. Women contenders in reserved seats compete in an all-female contest, represent the whole district and are voted by women and men. MPs in Uganda are voted through a past-the-post system or majoritarian vote, in which the winner takes all in separate elections.

The electoral process in Uganda follows a sequence of pre-nomination, nomination, campaign and voting and has consequences for women's electoral outcomes. Conducting women-only contests under the reserved seats and women versus men contests under the open seats creates a two-tier system for legislators (Bauer 2012:375; Goetz cited in Muriaas & Wang 2012:317). Consequently, there is a perception that women in reserved seats are inferior to members in non-reserved seats (Bauer 2012:381). There is a perception that elections for women in the reserved seats are less competitive than those in the open seat, based on the assumption that competing against men requires extra muscle on women's side. Yet, studies have disputed the simplification of women's elections, noting that, like other MPs, women parliamentarians gain their seats through competition; the only difference is that they compete with women and prioritise women's concerns in electoral campaigns (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 2009:24; O'Brien 2012:58).

The constituencies of women on reserved seats are the entire districts, while MPs in open seats represent smaller counties. Even with the sub-division of formerly large counties and districts to create new districts, the constituencies of women on reserved seats have remained larger (MP Gulu & Kitgum 2021). Although some constituents consider these dynamics when evaluating women in reserved seats, many ignore these complexities, resulting in a negative perception of the performance levels of women MPs in reserved seats relative to MPs in open seats. The MPs in open seats are the primary representatives by the electoral and constitutional design, making women MPs in affirmative seats secondary representatives. Tamale (1999:178) points out the subordinate position of women in the reserved seats; for instance, they must consult open-seat MPs to implement activities in the constituencies to avoid a collision. The definition of constituency representation demeans women on reserved seats by affecting their independence, performance, and perceptions of them. Revising the implementation of reserved seats could address the reserved seat type ambiguities. Article 78 (2) of the constitution calls for reviewing the representation of special interest groups every five years, but this is not done, thereby sustaining the negativity towards affirmative action seats.

There are debates on the efficacy of women in reserved seats and whether these seats empower women. Theoretically, reserved seats, in the long run, would enable women to take on the open seats (Interparliamentary Union 2015). However, reserved seats in Uganda present a glass ceiling; from 1989 to the currently concluded 2021 elections, there has been stagnation and fluctuation in the number of women in open seats. Table 1 shows the trends of women in Parliament over the years.

Table 1: Women Elected Representatives in the Ugandan Parliament, 1989-2021

Year	Districts	Forum	AA	Open seat	Others	Women	Men	Total MP s	% Women	% Men
1989	39	NRC	39	2	9	50	230	280	18	82
1994	39	CA	39	8	3	50	236	286	17	83
1996	39	Parliament	39	8	4	51	225	276	19	81
2001	56	Parliament	56	3	6	75	230	304	24	76
2006	79	Parliament	79	14	1	100	219	319	31	69
2011	112	Parliament	112	11	8	131	244	375	35	65
2016	112	Parliament	112	18	9	139	289	428	33	67
2019	122	Parliament	122	20	9	148	295	452	34	66
2021	146	Parliament	146	16	13	175	354	529	33	67

Sources: Electoral Commission of the Republic of Uganda (2016); Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018); Madanda (2017); Muriaas & Wang (2012); Parliament of the Republic of Uganda (2018); Electoral Commission (2021)

Table 1 above shows women representatives elected to Parliament in reserved (AA), open, and special interest seats, excluding ex-officials from 1989 to 2021. The 2021 elections produced only 16 females in the open seats in the 11th Parliament, a reduction from 20 in the 10th Parliament. There has been a reduction rather than an increase, given that constituencies keep increasing as more districts emerge while MPs on open seats are not growing by the same number. The findings indicate that the introduction of reserved seats for women over the past 30 years increased women's participation in politics but has not brought dividends to celebrate the emancipation of women. The women MPs we have are a result of affirmative action; without it, the number of women would be much smaller. An explanation for the fewer women in the open seats is the stereotype and gendered perception that open seats are for men, as are opportunities presented for winning the seat, like the creation of new constituencies. The other reason is that parties discriminate against women in the open seats in the nomination stages of the political process (Individual Interviewee Oyam 2021). Although Uganda has been under a multiparty dispensation since 2006, political parties reinforce patriarchy because men continue to dominate party leadership positions, marginalise women in politics and government and suffocate women's ambition for political office (Ahikire 2009:2). Despite the challenges of political parties to women's political engagement, women must cultivate strategies of successfully transforming and working with parties to access political spaces and acquire political influence.

Methods of Data Collection

This study used a qualitative approach and a case study design. Data were analysed inductively using the thematic analysis method. The study compared women MPs' pathways, perceptions and performance on the reserved seats vs open seats in Uganda. Data collection took place between September 2020 and March 2021. In-depth Individual Interviews (IDI) were held with women MPs about their motives and experiences to parliamentary representation in the 10th Parliament. In addition, Focus Group Discussions with male and female voters focused on perceptions of women MPs and their performance. There were two types of FGDs: rural, characterised by a non-elite status and urban, with elite characteristics. Each comprised eight to ten members over 18 years, considered the legal voting age. They were selected purposively from each of the districts of Agago, Gulu, Kitgum, Pader and Oyam for discussion, which lasted for two hours.

Similarly, eight women MPs representing the same districts in the 10th Parliament were interviewed. Although the study was a case of the 10th Parliament, to trace the implication of perceptions for women's electability to the 11th Parliament, the study followed the same MPs to the 11th Parliament. Therefore, interviews were conducted before and after the elections to relate the voters' perceptions to electoral outcomes.

Voter Perceptions of Women Members of Parliament

Voters place high role expectations and moral demands on women parliamentarians, who must fulfil those expectations by working harder. For women MPs to gain acceptability and respect in political participation, they must shape voter perceptions. Perceptions of women members of the Parliament of Uganda vary because voters are not homogenous. Findings from in-depth interviews and focus groups established two classes of voters: rural non-elite and urban elite voter characteristics influence perceptions. To the rural voters, an MP who distributes financial and material items (like farming supplies) is a performer. This perception follows voter statements like how do we benefit materially or financially? Findings also show that constituents vote for MPs more engaged in popular emblematic roles in most circumstances. For example, voters noted, 'Our MPs are good; they sit with us. We share stories, attend burials, contribute to burial arrangements, and sort cereal together' (FGD, Gulu 2021).

In contrast, for many urban voters, a performing MP has moved motions, represented the people's interests, and overseen the implementation of government programs. 'Members are rated by the motions and bills they have moved and the number of times they have contributed in the plenary' (FGD, Kitgum 2021). Although some urban elite voters, in rare circumstances, uphold women for moving motions and paying attention to issues of national concern in the plenary, they criticise them for not going the extra mile to persuade the government to the implementation stages. Urban constituencies also say that parliamentarians prioritise party and community interests but fall below expectations in legislation. For example, a voter asserted: 'The 10th Parliament has been the worst, with less achievement than the previous parliaments. Its response to the COVID-19 pandemic was mediocre, and there was no national plan, and borrowing escalated' (FGD, Pader 2021). In the voters' views, the 10th Parliament has been primarily symbolic compared to other parliaments. 'Many rats cannot build a home', said one voter, noting the Parliament has many MPs who are not performing (FGD, Pader 2021).

Cultivating voters' perceptions is challenging due to the diversity of political views, individual experiences and differing voters' expectations. Therefore, women MPs need to clearly

understand voters' characteristics and unique needs to cultivate positive perceptions. The following discussion analyses how women cultivate perceptions of their political constituents.

Cultivating Perceptions: Similar or Different for Women MPs on Reserved and Open Seats

There are primary expectations of MPs' representative role, including legislating significant concerns and policy, focusing on constituency service and advocacy, representing their constituencies through showing interest in policy that affects constituents, and raising questions about concerns that pertain to particular constituents. Another expectation is attending local council meetings to get the public's views to channel to the executive for attention and redress (Kaduuli 2018:5). To meet the constituency presence condition, MPs must have a local functional office at the constituency for liaison purposes. The local office enables constituents to present grievances and concerns to the MP and executive without the MP's presence. Although most MPs have such an office, some MPs do not have a local office.

Even though voters value the presence of a local office, MPs' presence in the constituencies is appreciated the most; unfortunately, it is uncommon for MPs to spend time in the constituencies due to their many political engagements. According to field reports, most MPs do not attend local council meetings or participate in community activities. 'Both our MPs do not attend council meetings; they only do when it is beneficial to them and when they need the community's support' (FGDs, Oyam 2021). Most members of Parliament who return only to be voted back are ridiculed and are likely to be denied votes.

The visibility of a member of Parliament in the constituency is an essential aspect of effective representation. 'People will most probably vote for a leader who is always available and able to address their concerns' (UWONET 2016 P:19). In Gulu, Pader, and Kitgum, all representatives perceived as unavailable lost their seats in the 2021 elections. Although most women who kept in touch with constituencies were reelected, some, despite their excellent record, lost the 2021 elections. They attributed their failure to propaganda and blackmail in campaigns by opponents and male MPs they outshined in constituencies. What women MPs choose to do or not to do based on their mandate as representatives has consequences on voters' perceptions of them, either negatively or positively. It all depends on the characteristics and expectations of voters. Perceptions fundamentally influence electoral outcomes; MPs want to exploit their advantage for electoral success. Elections are unlikely to be successful if there is a disagreement between the opinions of voters and representatives (Shabad and Slomczynski 2011). Voters' perceptions usually correspond with the actions of the MP in question. As analysed subsequently, women's strategies of nurturing perceptions differ due to women's interests and contextual factors rather than seat type.

Presence in the Constituency

MPs' presence in the constituency is an avenue for cultivating and maintaining positive voter perceptions. The voters see women in the reserved seats as more available and approachable than women in the open seats despite representing large constituencies (FGD Oyam 2020; FGD Gulu, 2020; FGD Pader 2020). The women in reserved seats do a double representation of the district and individual constituencies—illustrating the ambiguous nature of the representation of constituencies by women MPs in reserved seats. Although dual representation poses a

disadvantage of duplication of roles and overwhelming responsibility, it ensures more popularity of women MPs in reserved seats within the districts relative to MPs representing single county constituencies.

In addition to presence in the constituency, women in reserved seats tend to show humility, honesty and patience and listen more to voters, which has earned them a reputation for being more motherly and closer to the voters. Furthermore, compared to women in the open seats, responses from FGDs show that women in reserved seats adopt a more consultative style with the voters.

The study established that constituency performance impacted voter perceptions and elections more than legislative performance. The negative perceptions of poor performance against one of the best legislators in the 10th Parliament explain the value attached to constituency availability. Similarly, in a different setting, voter preference and trust for MPs who focus more on the constituency, regardless of their effort to speak on the floor of Parliament, was established in Britain (McKay 2020:1). A legislator who does well at the plenary and poorly in the constituency hardly gets reelected. An evaluation of voter perception established a striking paradox: representatives doing the legislation are perceived as lesser performers and less popular with non-elite voters (FDGs Gulu 2021). One reason for this inclination is the limited civic awareness of the normative roles of MPs; voters receive little information about the proper roles of MPs, and the would-be information in the media is mostly inaccessible to the masses in rural communities. Overall, voters rate constituency performance highly because voters know what, how and where their MPs have performed contrary to the legislative roles played out in a distant place.

Implementation of Constituency Development Projects

Members of Parliament on both the reserved and open seats have development projects in their constituencies. Constituency expectations are one reason women concentrate on providing material and empowerment opportunities through their development projects. Even though MPs do this in the name of development, they are aware that these incentives have far-reaching effects on the perceptions of the majority of voters who live in poverty.

Voters perceive their individual economic needs as the primary obligation of MPs. Bearing in mind the needs of constituencies, women MPs distribute material items like saucepans, farm inputs, and African fabrics (*kitenge*); they provide financial assistance to savings groups, contribute to burial arrangements and provide educational materials to constituents. The inability or unwillingness to give these material items creates a worthless impression, affecting ballot choices. For example, a dissatisfied voter stated, 'I voted for my MP but never received anything back. Therefore, I will not vote for her' (FGD, Kitgum 2021). Poor socio-economic conditions and the failure of the government to implement existing legislation force voters to pursue short-term material gains.

Research has established that constituents care more about bread and butter issues than political ones (Tamale 1999:170). Consequently, irrespective of the seat, MPs recognise this need and focus on constituencies, not for the desire to perform their role but to build personal voting blocs (Tamale 1999; McKay 2020:2). MPs take advantage of voters' short-term and sometimes selfish interests at the expense of long-term goals. However, the urban elite ridicule political manipulation and material politics in the form of the distribution of money whenever MPs are in the constituency in exchange for votes of the largely uneducated and impoverished electorate.

Representation of women's concerns

Women MPs cultivate perceptions through the representation of women's concerns. However, women MPs in reserved seats are more devoted to women's issues than women in open seats. This is why women MPs, although not legally representatives of women, are considered MPs for women in practice. Women focus on women's issues because women form the most significant proportion of the population and, consequently, the main section of the grassroots voters' who, compared to middle-class women, turn up more to vote. The vote advantage is why MPs devote their energy and time to women's concerns to influence their perception of performance.

Voters perceive their individual economic needs as the primary obligation of MPs. Women MPs try to understand the constituents' needs; one respondent, a subsequent electoral winner, attributes her success to reading the minds and understanding the interests of her constituency, which is where her focus is (interview, Oyam South 2021). Due to the impact of the war, the Acholi sub-region faces land conflict challenges and has some of the highest levels of teenage pregnancy, an increased number of girls dropping out of school, gender-based violence, human rights abuses, and other issues. Women MPs whose political ideologies touch on these issues are perceived positively. In all the ten FGDs, two in each of the districts of Agago, Gulu, Kitgum, Pader and Oyam 2021, women MPs received recognition for bringing out important issues such as health, poverty, girl child education, gender-based violence, environmental concerns, and support for community rehabilitation, among others, in Parliament.

Reserved seats generate mandates for women to represent women, based on the justification of representation theory. Representation theory assumes that women are a constituent collective aiming to push as many women as possible to decision-making positions to represent women's concerns (Human Rights and Peace Centre and Kituo Cha Katiba 2016). Other studies also show that women's presence in parliament guarantees representing women's interests collectively, including shared values and experiences (Clayton, Josefsson, & Wang 2017:296). Therefore, women's numbers and presence in decision-making positions carry high constituent expectations of women as representatives.

However, women's constituency is sometimes challenged because women have different identities and experiences that are not shared (Celis et al.2008:5). Aligned with these findings is the assertion that descriptive representation, the mirror representation of women's interests, is not straightforward. There is evidence that some women do not focus on women's interests or gender equality (Wängnerud 2009:65). The reason is that women have differing interests, women are not homogenous, meaning they do not have unified interests (Ahikire, Musiimenta and Mwiine 2015:27).

Also, everyone votes for women MPs, which means they are not MPs of only women. This assertion was deep-rooted in individual interviews in which women MPs on reserved seats, on the one hand, affirmed that they were representatives of the whole district and not only women. On the other hand, they claim to be representatives of women, creating a paradox in representation. As a result, reserved seats have resulted in ambiguities about women's representation and lack of clarity about whom the women on the reserved seats should represent (Goetz 2002:558; Tamale 1999:78). The lack of precision concerning whom women represent affects voters' perceptions; in the interviews, women in reserved seats were said to be MPs for the women. Therefore, their response to women's concerns is impactful based on the label attached to women on reserved seats.

In contrast, women in open seats tend to align themselves with masculinity-related developments, such as fundraising for infrastructural development. This they do because they consider themselves directly involved with their constituencies' development. Comparatively,

women's concerns have a faster influence on voter perceptions than long-term public goods because women form the majority of voters. Interviews with women MPs revealed women's active involvement in the gender equality legislation passed on the floor of Parliament. Literature establishes that irrespective of the seat, most women MPs legislate women's issues by pursuing pro-women legislation (Clayton, Josefsson, & Wang 2016:284; Ahikire & Mwiine 2015:30). Women have achieved positive legislative outcomes, especially for gender-sensitive legislation through their caucus, under the Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association (UWOPA) (Johnson and Josefsson 2021:845). Women MPs unified their voices as members of UWOPA in legislation for gender-sensitive legislation, thus making it difficult to determine how specific categories of women parliamentarians perform in legislation.

However, voter ignorance limits the legislative function in shaping perceptions because most legislative processes and parliamentary work occur in committees, and voters do not access this information. Constituents' inability to follow the legislative procedures partly explains their lesser focus on the legislative roles of MPs. The analysis of legislative performance might explain why constituency performance is more effective in shaping voter perceptions.

Political party affiliation

Given the multiparty dispensation in Uganda since 2006, political party affiliation is a force to reckon with in electoral success. Political parties play an essential role in structuring national political processes, contestations, competitive electoral politics and the nomination of political leaders (Ahikire 2009:1). As such, women MPs cultivate perceptions through strategic affiliation to a party. Women MPs affiliate with a party because of the party's ideology or popularity in the region or for both reasons. Some women had to strategically belong to a party accepted in the constituency even when they did not necessarily agree with the party's ideology. Belonging to a party cherished in a given constituency is an assurance of getting elected.

The popularity of a party in a given location termed the 'political wave', shapes voters' perceptions and consequently determines how they vote. This study found a positive relationship between party affiliation and women's success in elections; for example, Oyam district, part of Lango, where the Uganda Peoples' Congress (UPC) is popular, elected two women MPs on the UPC ticket. The UPC is a strong party in Lango because the party founder, the late Milton Obote, a two-time president of the Republic of Uganda, hails from the same region. Similarly, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) also enjoys considerable popularity in the selected districts, and at least three women MPs were members of the FDC.

The feeling of deprivation and the need to improve service delivery and livelihoods became critical motivations for the people of the North to support the opposition parties. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) resulted in social, economic, and political development discrimination in post-conflict Northern Uganda (Dixon 2021:35). After the post-conflict reconstruction, the North has remained among the poorest regions in Uganda, with high average poverty rates (32.5%), second only to 35.7 % in Eastern Uganda (UBOS 2019:3). Other social problems, such as high levels of teenage pregnancy, girl-child school dropout rates, and gender-based violence, also characterise the North region.

However, many candidates who belong to the opposition are presumed to have no agenda. Their opponents in the ruling party continue to perceive their success as resulting from luck, usually attributed to the political wave in a given region. For example, in the 2016 elections, the FDC party was popular in the Northern region, while in the 2021 elections, the People Power Party was famous in the country's central region. It is widely thought that party affiliation rather than

candidates' merit drives electoral success. Nonetheless, an MP's electoral success in opposition signifies democracy since it reflects the electorate's choices, given that compared to the ruling party, they usually do not have the resources and the power to manipulate or even buy votes.

However, it is indisputable that some women and voters are driven by party ideology. The NRM's ideology of promoting peace and support for women's social, economic and political advancement is one reason for support by women, who constitute the majority of voters. Studies in Uganda established that MPs' loyalty to the ruling party and government influences voter perceptions of MPs (Goetz 2000:567; Clayton, Josefsson, & Wang 2016:281). The NRMs' introduction of affirmative action for women's political representation and the appointment of women as prime minister, vice president and speaker of Uganda's Parliament attests to the government's support for women. Women's inclusion is a landmark for women's political representation. NRMs' support of women's issues has earned the party women's support at the grassroots. Therefore, women MPs who affiliate to the NRM party for its ideology on women's concerns are likely to get the votes of the believers of the NRM ideology. Majority of women politicians are noted to affiliate with the NRM party for its supposed commitment to women's rights and political inclusion (Ahikire 2009:4).

Women's interest in the NRM is explained, as well, by factors other than ideology; compared to other parties, the NRM has more political power and institutional capacity to implement policies such as those aimed at addressing women's concerns (Ahikire 2009:4). Women MPs' narratives revealed that under the NRM, it is easier to lobby the government for community development projects more effectively than MPs in the opposition. Projects such as the Functional Adult Learning (FAL) program for Pader, a seed school, rehabilitation of hospitals and construction of roads and markets result from MPs affiliating with the NRM party. Additionally, compared to other parties, the ruling party has well-established institutional structures and resources that can spread to its members' constituencies (FGD, Pader 2021). The benefits of affiliating to the ruling party are one way MPs in the NRM nurture positive perceptions relative to those in opposition. Voters believe that NRM MPs are closer to the government and, therefore, are at an advantage regarding service delivery and resource allocation.

However, the downside of MPs in the ruling party is their loyalty to the party over constituency interests. Where there is a conflict between constituency and party interests, women MPs choose party interests (O'Brien, Franceschet, Krook, & Piscopo 2012:62). For example, the majority of women MPs in the ruling party acted contrary to the position of their constituents by voting for the constitutional amendment bill 102(b) to lift the president's age limit to the presidency for perpetuity. Voter responses exposed that female MPs who crossed to the ruling NRM party and those holding ministerial positions voted yes for the bill against constituents' positions. 'One MP who joined the NRM party from the opposition became less assertive and representative of the people, voters argue that MPs must follow their father' (FGD, Oyam 2021). The findings exemplify party versus constituency loyalty, given the history of women's political recruitment and the patronage system of government. The MPs in the NRM party maintain loyalty to their party because of the benefits, such as political appointments. Women MPs try to avoid scrutiny by the government, especially if constituency issues do not align with their party priorities.

The loss of MPs' loyalty to constituencies associated with MPs in the ruling party is partly why some voters prefer MPs in the opposition. The opposition MPs tend to be more vocal in the legislature and represent constituency views and preferences. Furthermore, constituents support the opposition to portray their dissatisfaction with the ruling party's leadership and ideology and

the hope that opposition leaders will change the status quo. Voters interested in seeing a change in the status quo tend to perceive MP contestants on an opposition party ticket positively.

On the contrary, some voters attribute the marginalisation of their constituencies to representatives in opposition parties. Voters argue that MPs in opposition do not have much privilege like the MPs in the ruling party to lobby the government for development. The other reason voters expose is attached to sabotage by MPs in opposition to the implementation of government programs. Every party wants to be seen as relevant, which sometimes results in positive or negative criticism of the ruling party. Usually, the criticism against the government and its programs results in tension between the government and the opposition. Some voters perceive criticism by the opposition as antagonistic and assume that their MPs going against government ideology and programs jeopardises the government's responsiveness to the needs of their community.

Women MPs campaign strategies

MPs use creative, impressive, persuasive campaign strategies to influence voter perceptions. They usually make promises to voters during campaigns that touch on the people's well-being. When promises align with voter expectations, they positively influence perceptions and the likelihood for the MP to be voted. One of the FGD participants declared that a woman MP who was serving her fourth term and on the open seat gave convincing speeches. It is vital to make voters believe and accept that what the MP says is credible and will positively change their lives. A good campaign is what voters usually refer to when deciding who is a good representative; most of the time, they support convincing women who eloquently articulate their ideologies. Women MPs attest to the importance of effective campaigns in their electoral success. However, it has also turned out that MPs, not just women, make beautiful promises during their campaigns and never fulfil them. MPs' failure to fulfil promises in the previous elections influences perceptions about the MP in the forthcoming elections. Elections are a process of mandate giving that should be reciprocated by fulfilling an assignment once in office through policy programs and legislation that meet the electorate's needs (Dahlberg 2009:15).

To give good speeches, MPs do much consultation at the constituency level; this has an additional advantage in affecting voter perceptions. Voters feel that they matter and their opinions matter if they are consulted. Women MPs have highlighted their keen attention to their constituencies' needs and talked about them in campaigns and Parliament. Many women have gone ahead to lobby the government to address those issues, for example, wildlife concerns, water challenges, girl child education and sanitary pads.

Finally, women's dress code is an avenue that women use to affect perceptions about them among voters; how women dress and present themselves accords with assumptions about their credibility for political office. Women's sexualised appearance affects perceptions about women as representatives. Voters are likely to depict female candidates wearing revealing attire as incompetent, less honest and trustworthy, and less electable (Smith *et al.* 2018:1). Women have tried to affect perceptions by going to campaigns wearing the traditional long gown 'gomesi', thought to be a decent dress that denotes respect. One woman MP noted that when she first campaigned, she had to borrow a gomesi from her sister-in-law (Individual Interview, Oyam 2021). Also, Tamale (1999:95) found women to wear traditional attire to appeal to the electorate. It is common for women to assume a feminine appearance to appeal to voters on essential occasions.

Cultivating Perceptions through Community Networks

Women MPs cultivate perceptions through community networks by mobilising leaders and people at all administrative levels, from the parish to village, sub-county and district. Mobilisers are the voice of the MPs in the lower levels, connecting MPs and the voters; they share the political agendas of the women MPs and inform the MPs about the constituents' needs. Community networks keep the MPs present in the minds of the voters. In addition, FGDs revealed that women in reserved seats are likelier to engage the youth than women MPs in open seats; this style builds synergy among the voters and directly affects elections. Women use the youth because the youth appeal to fellow youth who are the majority of voters. The youth also happen to be very influential mobilisers known to the people who could speak well of the candidate.

Mobilisers are enthusiastic about their role because they hope that when their candidates make it, they will equally support them in seeking leadership opportunities. Tamale (1999:165) noted it as a two-way advantage; the mobilisers can use their political capital as a platform to win their seats at the local levels.

Conclusion

This study concluded that although all women MPs cultivate perceptions, women in reserved seats are better cultivators. Furthermore, women cultivate perceptions based on voter characteristics and the location of the voters; rural constituencies perceive good performance as the ability of the MP to meet their immediate needs and availability in the community. While for elite/urban voters, the legislative performance of MPs matters more. One reason for rural voters to be persuaded by MPs who meet their needs is the deprived conditions they find themselves in and the fact they are not well informed about the legislative roles of MPs. Women MPs, irrespective of their seats, capitalise on community projects and the distribution of material items due to high levels of poverty afflicting communities, most of whom live in rural areas. Women MPs, hence, have cultivated perceptions based on what is essential for particular voters by meeting voter expectations. Thus, voter expectations condition the fundamental roles of representation, legislation and oversight. Meeting those expectations is the primary mode of cultivating the resource of positive voter perception.

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