

Do Endorsements by Traditional Leaders Affect Vote Choice?

Sarah Brierley & George Kwaku Ofori

In Brief

- The Constitution of Ghana (1992) bans traditional leaders from engaging in “active party politics”. The Code of Royal Ethics, published by Ghana's House of Chiefs (2012) states that: “A chief should not make divisive statements either in public or to the media which will show his party political leaning” (3.1.5). Similarly, “A chief should not openly declare his support by word or deed for a particular political party” (3.1.6).
- A contentious issue since the return to multi-party rule has been the public endorsement of political candidates by some traditional leaders during election campaigns. Candidate endorsements by chiefs have become a regular feature of the campaign season. Indeed, during the country's December 2020 election, the Communication Director for the incumbent presidential candidate boasted that 95 percent of chiefs had endorsed the President's re-election bid while speaking at local durbars.
- This study assessed whether (and how) chiefs' endorsements have causal effects on vote choice in Ghana's December 2020 election. We used an experimental design and a panel-survey of 1,700 respondents. Further, we provide an initial test of the potential downstream effect of endorsements on chiefs' roles as independent conflict arbitrators and community mobilizers for development.
- The findings show that chiefs' endorsements

Overview of the research question and study design

- Key research questions: We test whether a traditional leader's public approval increased support for the endorsed candidate and which voters were influenced. Importantly, we also examine why endorsements have any effects. In addition, we consider potential effects that endorsements may have on chiefs' future roles as community mediators and mobilizers.
- Design: We randomly exposed individuals to news about their traditional leaders' endorsement of the incumbent presidential candidate. We define endorsements as explicit statements made by traditional leaders in support of a political candidate at public events during the election campaign. We restrict the study to endorsements made by chiefs for the incumbent presidential candidate – Nana Akuffo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party. Explicit public endorsement for the opposition candidate was rare. Our treatment was an audio message in the style of a news report, which contained the voice of both a news reporter and the chief. In all cases, respondents were matched with the voice of their own paramount chief.
- To measure the impact of these endorsements, we conducted a two-wave panel survey of voters ($N \approx 1,700$). The two surveys took place in the days before and a week after the December 2020 election. We compared the behavior of individuals who were randomly assigned to endorsement messages to those exposed to a placebo message.

affect vote choice: respondents who were exposed to an audio recording of their traditional leaders' message approving the incumbent were more likely to vote for him compared to those who did not hear it. The effect is confined to voters who were either non-copartisans of the endorsed candidate and respondents who held positive prior evaluations of the chief. We also find that the effect of endorsement messages is highest among non-copartisans who held positive evaluations of the chief. These results suggest that citizens' trust and assessments of chiefs' performance shape how they incorporate their endorsements into their electoral decisions. We do not find that chiefs' influence run through a coercive channel.

- In addition, our results demonstrate that chiefs' active endorsements do not significantly hurt their social positions, at least in the short term. Endorsements did not change individuals' overall willingness to contribute labour or resources to community help projects. Endorsements also do not change individual views about the chief's ability to resolve community conflicts. However, the treatment reduced the probability that opposition voters would send personal disputes to the leader, which raises concerns about equitable access to traditional justice system.

Policy motivation for research

- Within Ghana, public endorsements by chiefs generate much debate. Those concerned with the practice argue that endorsements violate the constitution (Gyampo 2009). Beyond the legal ramifications of endorsements, there is a concern that such pronouncements damage a chief's reputation and in the long-term harm their ability to promote local governance and development (Gyampo 2009; Boafo-Arthur 2003). The perception of chiefs as wise, and symbols of cohesion and unity can also be hurt through partisan engagements (Abotchie 2006; Ansah-Koi 1996). Through inciting partisan divides, citizens may desist a chief's call to contribute labor or in-kind support (or pay levies) towards collective projects in the future (Nugent 1996) or send their disputes to the leader (Addo-Fening 2008). In support of endorsements, others argue that they do not constitute engagement in active partisan politics, and that chiefs have a constitutional right to voice their political opinions.

- The Code of Royal Ethics is explicit in pronouncing endorsements as an activity that chiefs should avoid. However, to date, there have been no formal reprimands from the House of Chiefs to chiefs who publicly declare partisan support for a candidate.

Results

- Our study assessed a number of hypotheses that covered both the direct effect of the treatment (H1-2) the causal mechanism that drives the results (H3-8), and heterogeneous effects (H9-10). Table 1 presents an overview of the hypotheses and associated findings.

Hypothesis	Confirmed?	Results
H1: Turnout will be higher among individuals exposed to the endorsement	No	Turnout rates were similar (and very high) among control and treatment group. No treatment effect.
H2: Electoral support for the endorsed candidate will be higher among individuals exposed to the endorsement	Yes	In the full sample, electoral support for the endorsed candidate increased by 4.6 percentage points (pp) in Wave 1. However, there was no effect in Wave 2 (NB: see below for heterogenous effects).
H3: Those exposed to the endorsement will perceive the candidate as more likeable	Yes	In the full sample, those exposed to the treatment saw a 0.27-point increase ($p < 0.09$) in candidate likability on a 1-7 scale.
H4: Those exposed to the endorsement will perceive the candidate as more trustworthy	Yes	In the full sample, those exposed to the treatment saw a 0.27 -point increase ($p < 0.12$) in candidate trustworthiness on a 1-7 scale.
H5: Those exposed to the endorsement will perceive the candidate as more likely to deliver local development	Yes	In the full sample, those exposed to the treatment saw a 0.42 -point increase ($p < 0.01$) in expectation that the candidate will deliver development on a 1-7 scale.
H6: Those exposed to the endorsement will perceive the candidate as more likely to do well delivering national policies	No	No significant difference between treatment and control groups. No treatment effect.
H7: Voters may expect that the success of the endorsed candidate will put the traditional leader in a strategic position to bring private benefits to those living in the traditional area	Yes	In the full sample, those exposed to the treatment saw a 0.33 -point increase ($p < 0.07$) in expectation of receiving private benefits on a 1-7 scale.
H8: Chiefly endorsements may influence vote choice because voters fear negative reprisals for either themselves or for their community (H8).	No	No significant difference between treatment and control groups. No treatment effect.
H9: The effect of endorsements will be larger for voters who are undecided or not likely to vote for the endorsed candidate	Yes	The treatment effect on vote choice is significantly larger among non-co-partisans of the endorsed. The treatment effect is 7.9 pp in Wave 1, and 8.9 pp in Wave 2.
H10: The effect of endorsements will be larger for individuals who have higher pre -treatment evaluations of the chief	Yes	The treatment effect on vote choice is significantly larger among respondents who approve of the chief's performance. The treatment effect is 6.0 pp in Wave 1, and 4.0 pp in Wave 2.

Policy Recommendations

- This study provides causal evidence that exposure to chiefly endorsements affects individual voting behavior. As a result, endorsements can give an undue advantage to political candidates who are able to solicit public support from chiefs. As incumbent candidates are often better positioned than opposition candidates to induce chiefs to support them publicly, our results suggest that traditional leaders' endorsements are a form of incumbency advantage (De Kadt and Larreguy, 2018).
- Public institutions such as the National Commission for Civic Education, and civil society groups should reiterate both to politicians and campaign team members, as well as to chiefs, that endorsements violate the spirit of the constitution which bars chiefs from active partisan politics. Endorsements also violate the Code of Royal Ethics.

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Sarah Brierley

Assistant Professor. London School of Economics & Political Science (s.brierley@lse.ac.uk)

George K. Ofosu

[Assistant Professor]. London School of Economics & Political Science. (g.ofosu@lse.ac.uk)

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