



David Stasavage

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**The Role of Democracy in Uganda's Move to  
Universal Primary Education**

David Stasavage\*

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\* London School of Economics, [d.stasavage@lse.ac.uk](mailto:d.stasavage@lse.ac.uk). I would like to thank Jim Adams, Phil Keefer, Damoni Kitabire, John Mackinnon, Allister Moon, Ritva Reinikka, and three anonymous referees for helpful comments and suggestions.

### **abstract**

In recent years several democratically elected African governments have abolished primary school fees following pledges made during presidential election campaigns. Among these cases, Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) program, launched in 1997, has received particular attention, due to the massive increase in primary school enrollment, as well the sustained increase in public spending on education that it has entailed. This paper asks whether the Ugandan government's policies in this area can be explained by the prior establishment of competitive elections in 1996. It provides several reasons to believe that the move to UPE has indeed been linked to democratic politics, and that this outcome has depended on the salience of education as an issue, as well as on the public's access to information about UPE. As a result, recent Ugandan experience helps show why the establishment of competitive elections might prompt an African government to spend more on primary education. However, it also suggests why in many African countries, a democratic transition will have little effect on primary education provision.

Uganda's establishment of free universal primary education has been a dramatic example of an African government increasing spending on basic service provision. The announcement and implementation of the UPE program has resulted in the removal of primary school fees and a sizeable compensating increase in government spending on primary education. There has been a dramatic increase in primary school enrolment rates, albeit with problems involving shortages of teachers and materials. For observers of African political economy, recent experience in Uganda raises a fundamental question: why has the Ugandan government devoted increased resources to primary education when other African governments have so often failed to pursue this same goal?

In seeking an answer to the above question, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the Ugandan government's decision to abolish primary school fees was first announced as a manifesto commitment made during a presidential election campaign. Within a few months of his election in May 1996, President Museveni made good on this commitment by announcing that primary school fees would be abolished for four children in each Ugandan family. This apparent link between an election and a new education initiative suggests that electoral competition may be a powerful force in prompting African governments to deliver public services. It is noteworthy that leaders in Tanzania (2001), Kenya (2003), and Malawi (1994) have also recently announced the abolition of primary school fees following presidential elections. However, this brief evidence is far from sufficient to draw a swift conclusion about the link between democracy and education spending. Candidates in African election campaigns have often promised greater spending on primary education and then failed to deliver once elected. In some cases campaign promises have not been translated into policy, while in other instances, initial increases in education expenditures have not been sustained. As discussed below, this

has notably been the case with Malawi. The goal of this paper is to investigate Uganda's recent move to free universal primary education in a comparative context, in order to ask whether the success of the UPE program can be attributed to democratic politics, or alternatively, whether it can best be explained by other factors.

Though the focus of this paper is on the specific issue of primary education provision in Uganda, this subject also directly addresses broader debates about the effect of democracy on economic policy in African countries. With several years of hindsight since the African democracy movements of the early 1990s, it is possible to begin investigating whether electoral competition has prompted African leaders to become more accountable and to improve provision of basic services like health and education. Alternatively, in many, if not most cases, one may observe that the formal reestablishment of electoral democracy has had little impact on public service provision, because African incumbents face weak electoral challenges, because election outcomes can be rigged, or because African election campaigns focus on non-policy questions. Determining whether and when democracy has made a difference for policy is a crucial issue for African development.

It should be emphasized that while this paper builds an argument about the effect of electoral competition on primary education provision in Uganda, in doing so I make no claim that Uganda should be characterized as a 'full' democracy. I provide a discussion of the ways in which Uganda is not a full democracy, in particular involving restrictions on political parties, and I consider the effect of this rule on electoral competition. I also make no attempt here to pass judgment on the desirability of Uganda's system of 'no

party democracy'.<sup>1</sup> This is clearly an important issue, but it is not a debate that should preclude asking whether current democratic practice in Uganda, imperfect as it may be, has already had an impact on policy. In a sense, the fact that Ugandan democratic institutions are known to have shortcomings makes the central question of this paper even more interesting. Investigating the Ugandan experience may help us to identify when and why even imperfect democratic institutions will have an impact on government policies. Finally, this paper also makes no claim that Uganda's "big bang" approach to universal primary education has been an unambiguous success, or that it has necessarily been the optimal way to proceed. I seek instead to understand how electoral incentives have shaped Ugandan government policies, for better or for worse.

In the remainder of the paper, in the next section I first consider general propositions about democratic politics and government policy choices. I then turn to the Ugandan case, presenting the events leading to the announcement of the UPE initiative in 1996, while also discussing subsequent implementation. The subsequent section considers whether existing evidence shows that democratic politics can explain why UPE was announced and why it has been successfully implemented. Finally, I offer a conclusion that considers the broader implications of the Ugandan case.

## DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC SERVICE PROVISION

The most basic reason why democratic governments may provide services like education to a wider segment of the population than do autocrats involves the different incentives the two types of leaders face. For an autocrat who is interested in remaining in

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<sup>1</sup> This has been a primary objective in much recent work by political scientists on Uganda including Kasfir (1998), Carbone (2004, 2001), Ocitti (1996), Bratton and Lambright (2001), Furley (2000), and Ottemoeller (1998).

power, regardless of whether he or she is motivated strictly by material benefits or by some broader sense of what is 'good' for society, the primary threat to consider is that of being overthrown as a result of a coup, riots, or similar extra-constitutional action. As a result, autocrats must consider how the policies they choose will be received by those groups in society that can pose a credible threat of unrest. In democracies leaders must also frequently consider the risk of violent overthrow, but, in addition, they may need to be concerned about being voted out of office.<sup>2</sup> If the risk of being voted out of office is real, then one can expect democratically elected governments to choose policies that are designed to satisfy an electoral majority. Brown and Hunter (2003) argue that this may include ensuring that a broad segment of society benefits from public spending on basic services like primary education.<sup>3</sup> Lake and Baum (2001) argue that democratically elected governments have a stronger incentive than their authoritarian counterparts to provide basic services more generally. Such governments may also be more responsive to other basic citizen interests, such as eliminating famine (Sen, 1981).

While the incentives faced by leaders in autocratic and democratic systems may clearly differ, the precise effect of moving from autocracy to democracy will undoubtedly vary depending on the specific country and policy one is considering. In the case of autocratic African governments, work by Bates (1981) and Lipton (1977) suggested that during the 1960s and 1970s policies tended to be particularly unfavorable to the rural groups that made up the majority of citizens but which posed the least plausible political challenge to governments. Policies were instead targeted towards benefiting urban groups that could pose a more credible threat of political unrest. Others have argued that

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<sup>2</sup> See Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin (1999) for a recent review of elections and accountability.

<sup>3</sup> See also Brown and Hunter (1999) and Kaufman and Segura-Ubiergo (2001).

policies of African governments have been more specifically targeted at benefiting members of the state elite itself (van de Walle, 2001). As many African countries have begun to elect their leaders in contested elections, one can ask whether the situation may have changed. In particular, democratically elected African governments may have a greater incentive to take demands of both urban and rural groups into account when choosing policies. When it comes to public spending on education, African rural voters are likely to be particularly concerned about provision of primary education, both because levels of primary enrollment in rural areas lag below those in urban areas, and because primary education is most frequently the only level of formal education that rural dwellers receive.

The potential problem with applying such optimistic predictions to African governments is that observers of African democracies have devoted considerable energy to arguing that the (re)establishment of contested elections since 1989 *has not* triggered a dramatic change in terms of economic policy. Callaghy (1993) launched an early caution against the assumption that political reform in African countries would necessarily result in fundamental changes in economic policies. More recently, Jean-François Bayart (2000 p.225) has drawn an uncompromising conclusion about the effect of democracy, arguing that factors such as division of the opposition have created a situation where ‘the transition to multi-partyism was no more than a fig leaf hiding from the prudish view of the West the enhanced exercise of the *politique du ventre* by authoritarian regimes’. Claude Ake (1996) also emphasized how early hopes about the effect of African democracy were followed by more politics as usual. Van de Walle (2001) has arrived at a nuanced conclusion, arguing that democratization in Africa has not yet resulted in a fundamental shift in the types of political pressures that African leaders face, yet it may



nonetheless have initiated more long-term changes in the politics of economic decision making.<sup>4</sup>

There are a number of reasons why predictions about electoral competition leading to greater spending on primary education might not hold. First of all, public spending on education might be a secondary concern for voters when compared with other issues. If voting choices depend above all on positions with regard to constitutional questions, regional issues, or other economic policy choices, then candidates may gain little by promising increased education spending, and incumbents will know that they will not ultimately be judged on their performance in this area. Second, voters may lack information about government performance. This too would weaken incentives for elected officials to devote significant resources to education. Finally, even if voters are dissatisfied with incumbent performance with regard to education, they may be unconvinced that challengers would be any more effective in this regard.

Cross-country statistical evidence provides some support for the idea that African governments elected in multiparty contests tend to spend more on primary education. Controlling for a number of other determinants, African governments selected through competitive elections are estimated to spend 1.1% of GDP more on education when compared with unelected governments and 0.45% of GDP more on primary education (Stasavage, 2004). However, this overall result masks the fact that the experience of

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<sup>4</sup> While this paper focuses on democracy as a cause of education provision, it is also worth considering the reverse argument. Coren (2003) has recently shown that Ugandans with primary school education are more likely to have ‘democratic attitudes’ and are more likely to participate in democratic politics when compared with those who never attended primary school.

democratically elected African governments with education spending has been a heterogeneous one. While the average democratically elected African government has indeed spent more on primary education, this is hardly true of all democratically elected African governments. A quarter of the democratically elected African governments in the sample used in Stasavage (2004) have spent less than 1.5% of GDP on primary education each year. The goal of this case-study of Uganda is to attempt to identify the factors that might explain this variation within the group of African democracies. In other words, what determines whether a democratic transition leads to higher spending on primary education?

### **THE UPE INITIATIVE AND THE UGANDAN ELECTIONS OF 1996**

Recent debates about primary education funding in Uganda were initiated by a government appointed Education Policy Review Commission, which issued a report in 1989 that called for the universalization of primary education (UPE) by the year 2000. The Commission's recommendation, while non-binding, carried significant weight because of the association of a number of its members with Makerere University, Uganda's premier academic institution. The Ugandan government subsequently appointed a second committee, which in 1992 issued a Government White Paper on education that also recommended moving to UPE, although by a slightly later date of 2003. Despite this early initiation of policy discussions, as a recent Ugandan government report acknowledges, there was no immediate increase in government commitment to primary education during the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Uganda's Constituent Assembly in 1994 rejected a proposal that free primary education be established as a constitutional provision.

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<sup>5</sup> See Ministry of Education and Sports (1999).

Some authors, such as Foster and Mujimbi (2002), point to a July 1995 ‘Forum on Poverty’ as having been a critical moment when new support was gained for increased spending on primary education. It seems clear that this forum served as an opportunity for different donors to attempt to persuade the Ugandan government to devote greater resources toward poverty relief.<sup>6</sup> However, while several donors supported universal primary education as an objective, there are no indications that they directly suggested that Uganda adopt the approach of suddenly abolishing all schools fees at the primary level. There are also indications that by 1995 elements within President Museveni’s own National Resistance Movement had grown impatient with the Ugandan government’s strategy of attacking poverty via a traditional structural adjustment program. This domestic discontent may have been even more significant than donor pressure.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this pressure, even after the July 1995 forum President Museveni was clearly reluctant to commit to a primary education strategy that would involve a significant increase of public expenditures in this area. He instead continued to favor prioritizing road building and defense expenditure, based on the logic that road building would facilitate participation in the market economy, allowing Ugandans to earn income which could be used in part to pay school fees. Senior Ugandan officials from this period report that on some occasions Museveni was actually disparaging about suggestions that more public resources should be shifted to education, referring to education as the ‘non-productive’ sector of the economy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The World Bank’s ‘Uganda Strategy’ paper from 1997 (World Bank, 1997) provides evidence here.

<sup>7</sup> This is suggested by Foster and Mujimbi (2002) among others.

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with former Ugandan Ministry of Finance officials, December 2002.

Given his earlier opposition to the idea, President Museveni's decision in March of 1996 to make universal primary education part of his manifesto for the upcoming presidential election campaign represented a sharp break with existing policy. In a radio speech delivered on March 27<sup>th</sup>, Museveni promised that if re-elected, he would implement a plan giving four children per family access to free primary education (the plan would also apply to orphans).<sup>9</sup> This education promise was, however, just one part of an overall election manifesto that included pledges concerning liberalization of the economy, road building, defense, and renewed East African cooperation. In fact, improvement in education was listed as only the fifth of seven bullet points on the back of Museveni's published manifesto.<sup>10</sup>

Though free primary education was only one small part of President Museveni's initial election manifesto, during the course of the campaign it soon became clear that the promise to abolish school fees was striking a chord with the electorate. Ugandan officials from the period recall that several of Museveni's close advisors repeatedly sent messages to the Ministry of Finance after campaign meetings in order to emphasize how the UPE promise had been well received.<sup>11</sup> As a result of these campaign meetings, the President and his advisors began to give increasing emphasis to UPE as an issue. One former minister remarked that UPE in effect was an idea that was 'picked up along the way' during the campaign.<sup>12</sup> The UPE promise may have been particularly popular both

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<sup>9</sup> Radio Uganda, Kampala 27 March 1996, as reported by BBC Summary of World Broadcasts and Panafrican News Agency.

<sup>10</sup> See Yoweri Kaguta Museveni 'Tackling the Tasks Ahead: Election Manifesto', 1996

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with former Ugandan Ministry of Finance officials, December 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with former Ugandan minister, February 2003.

because of impatience with the slow pace of improvement in the primary school system under the NRM government and because in a rapidly growing Ugandan economy, the economic returns to primary education were much higher than would have otherwise been the case.<sup>13</sup>

The May 1996 elections were Uganda's first presidential elections since the military takeover by the National Resistance Movement. The elections were competitive in the sense that President Museveni faced a credible challenger named Paul Ssemogerere, who was the leader of the Democratic Party, in addition to a lesser known candidate, Kibirige Mohamed Mayanja. Ssemogerere was reputed to have been the true winner of the 1980 Ugandan presidential election that had been rigged by Milton Obote. Observers predicted that Museveni would be likely to hold onto power, but that this outcome was far from certain. According to one report, several foreign diplomats in Kampala predicted Museveni would win 60% of the vote, and a pre-election poll forecast a similar outcome.<sup>14</sup>

One further aspect of the Ugandan 1996 elections was that political parties were banned from officially supporting individual candidates. Under Uganda's 'no party' system, political parties were permitted, and multiple candidates could contest elections, but party organizations could not directly participate in the campaign. This restriction on party competition raises important questions about the extent to which Ugandan politics can be described as democratic. Uganda in 1996 would not meet the election-based

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<sup>13</sup> Appleton (2001b) provides evidence of a significant increase in economic returns to primary education in Uganda during the 1990s, associated with a takeoff in economic growth.

<sup>14</sup> See Ottemoeller (1998) p.100.

definition of democracy provided by Przeworski et al. (2000) who only classify as democratic those regimes in which multiple political parties compete during elections. They also exclude a regime from being a democracy unless there are indications that it is actually possible for an incumbent to lose an election. In practical terms, there is no doubt that the Ugandan ban on political parties deprived Paul Ssemogerere of the opportunity to use the Democratic Party organization for campaigning purposes, at the same time that President Museveni was able to use both the resources of incumbency and the resources of the National Resistance Movement to spur his campaign.<sup>15</sup>

While the ban on political parties engaging in election campaigning suggests that it would be an exaggeration to call Uganda a ‘full’ democracy, it would also be an exaggeration to argue that the election of 1996 was a meaningless contest with a pre-determined result. As already noted, while outside observers believed it likely that President Museveni would win, they by no means saw this as an inevitable result. Likewise, there is little evidence that the elections were tainted by voting irregularities or intimidation.<sup>16</sup> As will be argued below, we can also draw inferences from the fact that in private conversations subsequent to the 1996 election, President Museveni’s own advisors directly suggested that their strong electoral showing was attributable in part to the pledge to abolish primary school fees. It also seems important to note that when asked to classify their country’s political regime, the vast majority of Ugandans have suggested that their country is a democracy, even if only a minority believe it is a ‘full’

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<sup>15</sup> see the discussion in Carbone (2004, 2001), Ocitti (1996), and Ottemoeller (1998).

<sup>16</sup> Lindberg (2004) presents data on freedom and fairness of a number of recent African elections.

democracy.<sup>17</sup> Finally, it should be emphasized that the core argument of this paper can continue to hold even if Uganda's ban on political parties biased the election outcome in favor of President Museveni. What the argument does depend upon is demonstrating that there was a plausible electoral challenge in spite of any legal restrictions that tilted the electoral playing field. For an incumbent concerned about retaining office, a small but still significant risk of losing an election could still create incentives to make campaign promises that would increase the chance of victory.

During the weeks leading up to the 1996 vote, Paul Ssemogerere campaigned on a number of key issues. For one, he promised to restore full multi-party politics to Uganda. He also promised to negotiate with the rebel movement in northern Uganda, and he declared that if elected, he would grant greater autonomy to the Buganda region in the south of the country, which had historically been an independent kingdom. Ssemogerere also declared that he would match Museveni's promise to provide free primary education. He suggested the program could be funded with cuts in military spending.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that Ssemogerere's stance on this issue was taken in response to Museveni's original announcement and its subsequent popularity. In the end, President Museveni was reelected in May 1996 by a large margin. His 74.2 percent of the votes cast exceeded initial expectations, and the election was judged free and fair by international observers.

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<sup>17</sup> When asked 'Is Uganda a Democracy?' 7% of those polled said 'not a democracy', 25% classified it as a 'full democracy', 32% as a 'democracy, minor problems', and 32% as a 'democracy, major problems' (4% did not know or did not respond) (Bratton Lambright, and Sentamu, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Sam Gonza, All Africa Press Service, 14 May 1996. Hugh Nevill, Agence France Press, 4 May 1996.

Following his election victory, in December 1996 President Museveni announced the abolition of school fees for four children in every family, a program that would begin immediately in January 1997. In practice, the announced UPE policy based on four children per family has subsequently evolved into one where all children receive free primary schooling.<sup>19</sup> One of the main reasons for Museveni taking this dramatic step involved the general perception that the President had received such a high percentage of the vote precisely because he had made UPE a manifesto commitment. As one official subsequently reported, ‘State House [The President’s office] told us ‘look, we won the election because of the UPE pledge, so we have to come up with the money for it.’<sup>20</sup> Museveni’s initial statement about UPE stipulated that the Ugandan government would be responsible for provision of tuition fees, textbooks, construction of classrooms, teacher salaries and teacher training.<sup>21</sup> Parents would remain responsible for tuition in excess of four per family, for school lunches, for uniforms, and for exercise books, in addition to providing labor to construct new classrooms.

There is little doubt that since 1997 there has been a sustained shift of Ugandan public expenditures in favor of education, and in favor of primary schools in particular. Spending on education as a total share of government expenditures rose from an average of 20.2% in the three fiscal years preceding the UPE announcement to an average of

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<sup>19</sup> There appear to be several reasons for the policy becoming universal by default.

Families with fewer than four children have taken children of relatives to school. In addition, the luganda equivalent of ‘four children going to school free’ (abaana bana basome) was deliberately shifted to ‘abbaana bona basome’ meaning all children going to school free.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with former Ugandan finance ministry officials, December 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Radio Uganda report, December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1996. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts.



26.3% in the three years following the announcement.<sup>22</sup> In addition, an increasingly large share of the education budget has been devoted to primary schools. One prominent reason why this sustained increase was possible is that by 1996 the Ugandan government had already achieved macroeconomic stability, reinforced by a strong set of budgetary institutions.<sup>23</sup> However, while this helps explain how the Ugandan government found it possible to make resources available for primary education, the prior establishment of macroeconomic stability cannot explain why there was a such a dramatic shift in public spending priorities in 1996, from planned road-building towards primary education provision. In Uganda, total enrollment of students in primary schools has reportedly increased from 3.4 million in 1996 to 6.9 million in 2001.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the increase in enrollment has undoubtedly helped reduce inequalities in primary enrollment rates between Ugandan regions and between boys and girls (Appleton, 2001a).<sup>25</sup> Finally, it is

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<sup>22</sup> Data as reported by Bevan (2001). The figure referred to for government expenditures here represents wage, nonwage, and domestic development expenditures. It excludes externally financed development expenditures.

<sup>23</sup> See Bevan (2001) for a description.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Achieving EFA in Uganda: the Big Bang Approach’, World Bank, p.6.

<sup>25</sup> It is also worth noting that rather than substituting for existing private spending, the evidence suggests that increased government spending on primary education in Uganda has been accompanied by a maintenance of private spending by families for books, supplies, and school uniforms. Ugandan household surveys suggest that families have spent an average of \$8 per primary school student per year, both before and after UPE. However, because of increased public funds the share of total primary education expenditures financed privately has dropped from 60% to 25%. Reported in “Achieving EFA in Uganda: the Big Bang Approach”, World Bank.

also worth noting that Uganda's UPE policy has been part of a broader effect on the part of the Ugandan government to more directly target poverty, most notably with the Poverty Eradication Action Plan announced in 1997. In terms of timing, though, the plan followed rather than preceded the UPE announcement.

The Ugandan experience provides a striking contrast with Malawi, another country whose government announced the abolition of primary school fees following a presidential election in 1994, but which subsequently failed to provide a sustained increase in public funding. The share of education expenditure in the Malawian recurrent budget increased from 10.5% in 1994/95 to 21% in 1997/98, but this figure subsequently declined to 16% in 1999/00.<sup>26</sup> This failure to sustain a shift in expenditures in Malawi can be attributed in part to the fact that Malawi has suffered from greater macroeconomic instability during the 1990s, but as I will argue below, it may also have been due to the way in which political support for Malawi's current president has been concentrated in a single region of the country.

While the above figures for enrollments and education spending in Uganda are impressive, it should be acknowledged that increases in spending in particular do not automatically imply a proportional improvement in delivery of services. Survey evidence indicates that during 1991-95 local primary schools in Uganda actually received only 20 percent, on average, of the grants they were due to receive from central government during this period. But as a result of several policy changes, and in particular a central

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<sup>26</sup> 'Malawi: Public Expenditures, Issues and Options', World Bank, Public Expenditure Review, September 2001.

government decision to publish full details of grants in newspapers, by 2001 local schools were receiving 80 percent of grants due.<sup>27</sup>

Even though public funding for primary education has increased dramatically, and a greater share of public grants appears to be reaching local primary schools, there remain concerns about the effect of UPE on school quality. A small-scale study by Otteby (1999) cited in Appleton (2001a) found in two districts that subsequent to UPE there were increased shortages of basic materials (chairs and desks) as well as dramatically increased pupil teacher ratios. A later study by the World Bank (2004) found that while the average pupil teacher ratio in Uganda before UPE stood at 40, in 1997 this figure ballooned to 72, but it later fell to 65 in 2002, and to 58 in 2001. The study by Otteby (1999) also found signs of a decline in average student performance after UPE, but Appleton (2001a) notes that this decline would be expected, given that the increase in student numbers due to UPE has involved a greater intake of poorer students and has been concentrated in disadvantaged rural schools.

One final important point regarding the development of Universal Primary Education in Uganda is that it has remained a topic of frequent political discussion. Even a brief survey of articles published in the last few years by major daily newspapers such as *The Monitor* and *The New Vision* shows that articles about implementation of UPE continue to appear with a high frequency. It is also significant that when President Museveni launched his re-election campaign in January 2001, he began by reminding voters about his government's achievements in the area of primary education, stating specifically that he had fulfilled his manifesto commitment from the 1996 election

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<sup>27</sup> See Reinikka and Svensson (2003,2004).

campaign.<sup>28</sup> In a campaign speech in March of 2001 the President once again stressed primary education as one of his government's chief accomplishments.<sup>29</sup> In the weeks leading up to the 2001 election, education remained a prominent issue as both President Museveni and several opposition candidates discussed extending free education provision to secondary schools.<sup>30</sup> It should also be acknowledged, however, that unlike Uganda's presidential election of 1996, the election of 2001 was marred by cases of political violence and intimidation, even if international observers still declared the election to be free and fair.

### **DID ELECTORAL COMPETITION MAKE THE DIFFERENCE?**

Uganda's UPE initiative was announced during a presidential election campaign, and primary education has remained a prominent issue in Ugandan political discussions ever since. This raises the question whether UPE has been achieved as a result of the revival of electoral competition in Uganda. The potential problem with any argument linking democratic politics and provision of primary education is that many African countries, and many developing countries more generally, have shifted from authoritarian rule to democracy in recent years without experiencing an increase in spending on primary education. Likewise, some democratically elected governments have announced and then implemented free primary education programs without providing a sustained increase in education expenditures. In what follows I argue that the effect of democracy on education spending is contingent on the salience of education relative to other issues in national politics, and on the availability of information about government policy. In

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<sup>28</sup> *The New Vision*, Kampala, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> *The New Vision*, Kampala, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> *The New Vision*, Kampala, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

Uganda both of these conditions have been satisfied. I also provide evidence to show that the Ugandan government's performance with regard to education has had a significant effect on Ugandan voter assessments of the Museveni government's overall performance. Finally, I consider the role that donors have played in Uganda's UPE program.

*Salience of education as an issue*

In order for election candidates to make promises regarding education spending, and to anticipate that they will be judged on whether these promises are fulfilled, education must be a salient issue for voters. In other words, when making voting decisions electors must not be exclusively influenced by other ethnic or regional considerations, or by other policy promises. In the Ugandan presidential election campaign of 1996, education was but one of several issues that might have swayed voters.

For one, President Museveni and his challenger Paul Ssemogerere proposed different solutions for dealing with the armed rebellion in the North of the country, with Ssemogerere more inclined to negotiate and Museveni more favorable to a military solution. Several authors have suggested that Ssemogerere's conciliatory attitude explains why he did so well in northern areas during the final vote.<sup>31</sup> Some rebels apparently actively campaigned for Ssemogerere. It was also alleged during the campaign that Ssemogerere promised to bring the former President, Milton Obote, back from exile, an initiative which did much to generate support in the North but which caused great anxiety for people in other areas of Uganda where the army under Obote in the early 1980s had committed numerous atrocities against civilians.

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<sup>31</sup> See Ocitti (1996) for example, as well as Sam Gonza, All Africa Press Service, May 14, 1996.

The question of autonomy for the Buganda kingdom in southern Uganda was also an issue during the 1996 campaign. Paul Ssemogerere actively supported the idea of giving Buganda, his home region, a greater degree of legal autonomy. President Museveni had previously taken the step of restoring the monarchy in Buganda, but he was reluctant to make any more concrete moves to increase autonomy for this region.

Finally, the 1996 campaign also involved constitutional issues, and in particular the debate whether restraints on activity of political parties should be lifted. President Museveni advocated maintaining Uganda's 'no party democracy'. Paul Ssemogerere called for lifting the legal restrictions on parties. Support for full multipartyism was one reason that Ssemogerere formed a tactical alliance during the campaign with the Uganda Peoples Congress, the party of Uganda's former dictator, Milton Obote.

One common feature of the above three campaign issues – parties, the northern rebellion, and Buganda autonomy – is that they involved questions where voter opinion was split along regional lines. Support for negotiating with the northern rebellion was strongest in northern Uganda, advocates of Bugandan autonomy were most frequent in Buganda itself, and proponents of lifting restrictions on political parties were also more common in these two regions. To the extent these issues determined voting decisions, then we would expect support for President Museveni and Paul Ssemogerere to have split along regional lines. In fact, while there was a clear regional pattern to voting in the 1996 election, President Museveni's election victory, was not dependent on a single regional base of support. Museveni did receive over 90% of the vote in Uganda's western region, where he was most popular, and in contrast he received only 26% of votes in the North.<sup>32</sup> But, significantly, Museveni won 74% of the votes in Paul

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<sup>32</sup> based on data reported in *The New Vision*, May 13, 1996.

Ssemogerere's own home region (Central). Within this region, it was seen as particularly significant that Museveni won 55% of the vote in the town of Masaka in Buganda, which was thought to be a bellwether constituency.<sup>33</sup> Museveni also received 72% of the vote in Uganda's eastern region. We can conclude that while there was a clear regional pattern to Ugandan politics in 1996 (as has been true of the country's politics since independence), President Museveni nonetheless received significant support outside of his own regional base.

The fact that Museveni's victory was not dependent on support from a single region reinforces the argument that his promise of free primary education was a key determinant of his electoral success. As already noted, this fact was not lost on presidential advisors, who judged that the scope of the election victory was due in large part to the promise of free primary education. This also gave the Museveni government an incentive to deliver on this promise, to the extent it hoped to continue to hold office after any future election. While Paul Ssemogerere had made an attempt to match Museveni's promise of free primary education, there was apparently less confidence that he would be able to deliver on such a commitment. One reason for this skepticism may have been the fact that Ssemogerere had promised free primary education in response to Museveni's initial UPE announcement, rather than initiating the idea himself.

Recent electoral experience in Malawi provides a clear counter-example to Uganda, as the winning presidential candidate made universal primary education part of his manifesto, but voting was much more polarized along regional lines than was the case in Uganda in 1996. Under these conditions, it seems likely that the winner would have had an incentive to continue to cultivate a regional base of support, rather than to deliver

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<sup>33</sup> Hugh Nevill, Agence France Presse, Kampala, May 10<sup>th</sup> 1996.

on a national issue like universal primary education. While President Museveni and his advisors might reasonably conclude that they won the 1996 election on a mandate to deliver free primary education, in Malawi it was clear that voting was almost perfectly correlated with region.<sup>34</sup> In the 1994 presidential contest the election winner, Bakili Muluzi of the UDF party, won 78% in the South of the country but he received only 27.5% of the votes in Malawi's central region, and only 4.5% of the votes in the North. In contrast, the principal opposition candidate received 87.8% of the votes in the North but only 7.5% in the Centre and only 5.2% in the South (Wiseman, 2000). Voting in Malawi's subsequent presidential elections in 1999 remained equally polarized along regional lines.

### *Information*

The link between electoral competition and progress with primary education in Uganda has also depended critically upon information. When voters have better information about the performance of individual government officials with regard to education policies, then an incumbent government will logically face a greater incentive to deliver outcomes desired by constituents. Ugandans have had access to a number of different sources of information about implementation of the UPE initiative, and this information has made it possible for them to evaluate to what extent the government has made good on its election promises. For one, major national dailies, such as *The Monitor* and *The New Vision*, have continued to give very prominent coverage to UPE issues. The government has also made it a common practice to discuss progress in achieving UPE with relevant civic associations. In addition to making clear whether central government

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<sup>34</sup> See Chirwa (1998) and Posner (1995) for discussions of regionalism in Malawian politics.



has remained committed to UPE, one important informational initiative in Uganda has also helped keep the public informed about the extent to which local government authorities have delivered on primary education commitments. The Ugandan government now regularly publishes in newspapers the value of grants for primary education given to local authorities. As argued by Reinikka and Svensson (2003), this increased transparency may be one important reason why the extent to which such funds are siphoned off by corruption has been reduced in recent years.

#### *Assessments of Ugandan government performance*

One final piece of evidence suggesting a link between democratic politics and UPE comes from survey assessments of Ugandan government performance. If the argument that Uganda's UPE policy was in part driven by electoral considerations is to hold, then we should expect to observe that Ugandans have subsequently positively judged government performance in the area of education, as well as performance more generally. Data collected by the Afrobarometer project show that Ugandans believe President Museveni has performed very effectively as President, and when rating government performance, they are most satisfied with education policy.

During the June 2000 Afrobarometer survey in Uganda, 93% of respondents reported that they were either somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with Yoweri Museveni's overall performance as President. Even when taking into account the fact that the average response for presidential job satisfaction was relatively high across the

twelve countries surveyed by the project (64%), the Ugandan President's favorable rating seems exceptionally high.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to suggesting that an overwhelming majority of Ugandan voters view President Museveni's performance as being satisfactory, data from the Afrobarometer survey also provide a strong hint that this evaluation is directly linked to the Ugandan government's achievements in areas like education. As part of the survey, participants were asked how they thought their government was handling a series of different economic and social problems. Figure 1 reports the percentage of Ugandans who responded that their government was handling a particular issue 'fairly well' or 'very well', and it compares this rating with the average response for all twelve African countries surveyed. For each of the seven issues listed below, a higher percentage of Ugandans than the African average viewed their government's performance positively. However, health, crime, and education were the three issues with the largest gap between Ugandan government performance and average African performance.<sup>36</sup> These were also the three issues with the highest score in absolute terms. Eighty-seven percent of Ugandans reported that their government was handling education issues well while the average across the twelve African countries was 59%. This is a strong indication that President Museveni's popularity is closely linked to his having initiated and implemented

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<sup>35</sup> The median for the twelve country sample was also 64%. See Logan and Machado (2002).

<sup>36</sup> The reference to the government's success in reducing crime should be distinguished from the government's record in reducing insecurity due to the northern rebellion. The Afrobarometer survey did not ask specific questions about insecurity of this type.

Universal Primary Education.<sup>37</sup> Given the above ratings, it is not surprising that President Museveni chose to launch his 2001 presidential re-election campaign by reminding voters of his performance in this area.

(Figure 1 about here)

### *The role of donors*

Though the above evidence is consistent with the argument that electoral competition led to increased public funding for primary education, the role of donors in advocating and financing UPE should also be considered. Some might actually argue that the entire process has had more to do with donor intentions and donor finance than with the effect of electoral competition. This sub-section examines this argument and finds it insufficient. While donor finance has indeed been critical in funding UPE, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the 1996 promise to abolish schools fees was determined by donors. Likewise, even with increased donors funds, the UPE program has had a significant opportunity cost for the Ugandan government, limiting resources available for other spending items.

At the time of President Museveni's 1996 campaign promise to abolish schools fees, the World Bank was actually undecided about its preferred means of increasing primary school enrolments in Uganda. A World Bank report from this period noted that the issue of user charges in education were 'currently under discussion' and that decisions about education costs might best be left to the local level (World Bank, 1996).

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<sup>37</sup> See Logan and Machado (2002) and Bratton et al. (2000).

Though they supported the objective of achieving universal primary education, there is no evidence that the World Bank, or other donors for that matter, were advocating the immediate abolition of schools fees, and when President Museveni moved swiftly after his election to remove all fees, this came as a surprise to World Bank officials dealing with the Ugandan government.<sup>38</sup> The World Bank had previously approved a Primary Education and Teacher Development Project for Uganda in 1993 which provided support such as textbooks and teachers guides. Following Museveni's December 1996 announcement and the massive increase in primary school enrolments for 1997 that it triggered, the World Bank began preparing a new Education Sector Adjustment Credit that would provide a \$75 million grant for UPE together with a \$80 million IDA loan. Disbursements for the ESAC credit began in mid-1998 and ended in December 2000.<sup>39</sup> This credit also served as a catalyst for other donors to allocate funds to the UPE initiative.

Though there has been significant donor assistance for primary education in Uganda, there are two prominent reasons to suggest that the Ugandan government has nonetheless borne a significant cost in financing the program. First, donor finance for UPE was not immediately available, and as a result during the initial period after the abolition of schools fees in January 1997, the Ugandan government was forced to use its own resources to provide increased funding for primary education. Second, after UPE there has been no clear increase in the share of overall Ugandan government spending financed by external assistance. Figure 2 shows foreign assistance in terms of grants and loans as a share of total government spending between 1992 and 2002.<sup>40</sup> If UPE had

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<sup>38</sup> interviews with World Bank officials, Washington D.C., December 2002.

<sup>39</sup> see World Bank (2004) for a review of these two projects.

<sup>40</sup> based on data provided in IMF (2003) and IMF (1999).

been an entirely donor financed initiative, one would have expected this figure to rise beginning in 1997, but one actually observes a slight decline in the ratio during the initial years of the UPE program. Further data also show that the overall level of external assistance to Uganda has not changed significantly since the beginning of the UPE program. Measured in constant 2001 US dollars, external assistance averaged \$643 million per year between 1990 and 1996 and \$679 million between 1997 and 2002.<sup>41</sup> This suggests that if donors have provided increased assistance to primary education in Uganda, then they may have done so by reallocating external assistance from other potential spending items.<sup>42</sup> As a result, there has been an opportunity cost for the Ugandan government in using donor funds for primary education rather than alternative projects.

(Figure 2 about here)

One final point about donor involvement is that the World Bank in particular, while championing the successes of the UPE program, has also highlighted the problems associated with Uganda's 'big bang' approach to achieving universal primary education. A recent report by the Bank's Operations Evaluations Department concluded that 'very rapid expansion of enrolment, even with appropriate increase in funding, is liable to disrupt efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of systems for delivering

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<sup>41</sup> based on OECD, Development Assistance Committee statistics.

<sup>42</sup> Though it might be possible to argue that the announcement of the UPE program allowed the Ugandan government to maintain Uganda's high level of foreign assistance.

inputs to schools and for monitoring the quality of learning processes and inputs.’ (World Bank, 2004, p.x)

### *Summary*

I have argued here that there are three principal reasons to believe that the success of the UPE initiative in Uganda has been closely linked to the re-establishment of electoral competition. First of all, education was a salient issue in the 1996 presidential elections, and unlike the recent presidential elections in Malawi, voting decisions were not exclusively determined by region. Second, since the announcement of December 1996, Ugandans have had access to a number of different sources of information about the implementation of UPE. Finally, survey data show quite clearly that Ugandans rate President Museveni’s performance in office highly, and in evaluating Ugandan government performance they have been particularly favorable to accomplishments in the area of education. In addition to the above, while it is certainly true that donor support has been critical to the implementation of the UPE program, there is little evidence that donor advocacy alone would have been sufficient to achieve this outcome without democratic politics.

### **CONCLUSION**

The announcement and successful implementation of the Universal Primary Education program in Uganda have been heavily influenced by democratic politics. To begin with, Uganda’s return to multi-candidate (if not multi-party) political competition in 1996 helped prompt the incumbent, Yoweri Museveni, to promise to abolish primary school fees. The emphasis on UPE became steadily more pronounced during the course of the 1996 campaign in response to positive public reactions. Subsequently, it was

widely perceived that President Museveni's strong performance in the election was in part attributable to his UPE manifesto commitment. This outcome was possible in Uganda because the presidential vote was not exclusively driven by regional divisions, as has been the case in recent African elections in countries like Malawi. Since 1996, democratic politics have also helped increase incentives for the Ugandan government to successfully implement UPE, because it has been perceived that government performance would be judged on this basis. There is strong survey evidence that Ugandan voters have evaluated their President's overall performance highly, and that the UPE program is one of the major reasons for this positive evaluation. In this context it is not surprising that President Museveni chose to begin his 2001 re-election campaign by reminding voters of his government's accomplishments with regard to primary education. In the end, recent Ugandan experience shows that electoral competition can prompt African governments to improve provision of basic public services, but it also shows that this outcome depends upon a number of factors – voting must not be divided exclusively on regional lines, voters must have access to information about government policy, and finally, candidates must choose to make public services part of their campaign strategy.

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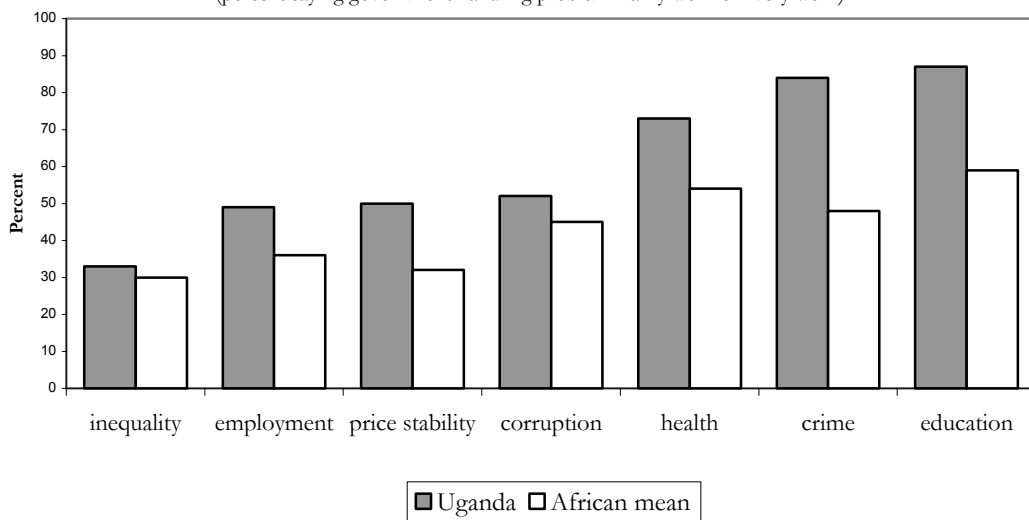


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**Figure 1: Satisfaction with Government Performance**  
(percent saying government handling problem "fairly well" or "very well")



**Source:** Afrobarometer project. See text for description.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Ugandan Government Spending Financed by External Assistance**

