Does the Perceived Feeling of Being Empowered in Decision-Making Influence Voting in Malawi?

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Abstract

In any democracy, voting is a legal and recommended means of electing leaders. However, people's perceptions regarding whether they are empowered in decision-making may affect their willingness to participate in a general election. This paper assesses community perceptions of them being empowered and whether this is associated with voting. We use multiple correspondence analysis to create an index that captures people's self-expression. The analysis uses a matching approach (propensity score and doubly robust estimators) to assess the relationship between the perception of self-expression and participation in voting. A probit model complements this by evaluating the robustness of the results to changes in the methodological analysis. The results show a positive association between self-expression and whether people voted in the previous general election in Malawi. Regarding policy, in order to avert voter apathy in general elections, it may be essential to improve people's self-expression in their communities. Future research should consider using longitudinal data to answer the research question at hand.

Keywords: Democratic dispensation, community perceptions, general election, voter apathy.

1. Introduction

Democracy is built on the tenets of empowerment (Dahlum and Knutsen, 2017; Desrues and Gobe, 2022). Empowerment enables people to share ideas, thereby enabling new solutions to problems that affect their daily lives. When people feel disempowered, they may withdraw from participating in daily life activities (Tokaji, 2015), including taking part in the democratic process because voting itself is a form of speech and expression (Derfner and Hebert, 2015). In this paper, we examine

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whether perceptions of people's empowerment to make decisions in a community are associated with voting in Malawi.

After the failed attempt of the 1960s, Malawi's democracy was reinstated following the collapse of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda's authoritarian regime 30 years ago (Dzimbiri, 1994; Kaunda, 1998; Newell, 1995). In 1992, the Pastoral Letter by the Catholic Bishops opened the pandora box as it propagated the need for government change, showing, among others, that there was no self-expression and, hence, no empowerment in the country. People felt that they were being suffocated by the government. This, in turn, resulted in the 1993 referendum, which led to the beginning of the democratic era that started in 1994 (Jere and Magezi, 2018; Mitchell, 2002). This formed a shift in philosophy, as now people believed there would be some self-expression and leaders would listen to them.

Currently, Malawi is said to be a partly free country – its political rights score is 29/40, and its civil liberties score is 37/60. These scores give Malawi a Global Freedom Index of 66/100 (Freedom House, 2024). Of interest is that even though political pluralism and participation seem to be better, there has been a puzzle regarding voting turnout. Voter apathy is on the rise (Chinsinga, 2006; Chunga, 2017); this was even manifested in the recent 2020 elections, where it was observed that 4,445,385 out of 6,859,570 (representing 64.8%) registered voters turned out to vote. This was lower than in 2019, when 5,105,983 Malawians voted in, representing 74.4% of registered voters. While the fear of catching COVID-19 contributed to the low 2020 voter turnout (Chirwa et al., 2022), it is also part of a broader trend of reduced voting rates as shown by the Afrobarometer[1] data in Figure 1. However, the general feeling among the electorate is dissatisfaction, as people feel that the elections do not truly reflect their empowerment.

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[1] Calculation based on: https://afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online
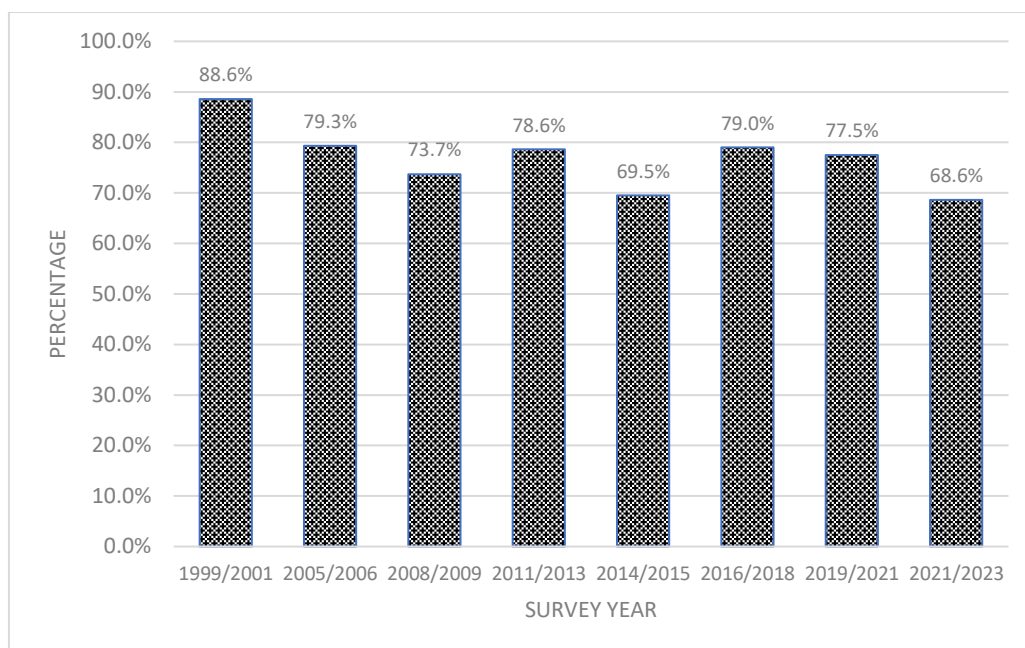
Figure 1: Trends in voting in Malawi

Source: calculated based on the Afrobarometer online analysis[2]

Even though Malawi's democracy seems to be maturing, there is a scarcity of studies linking self-expression to voting. Among the limited studies available, one examined the women's perceptions of their equal rights and their participation in voting. However, they established that even though there was a high perception that women should be offered the same rights, fewer women were voted into power because it was said that it was difficult to approach women. After all, they do not want to accept any constructive criticism (Chikapa, 2016).

This paper goes beyond the previous literature in several ways. Firstly, we use the recent data to understand the phenomenon. Secondly, we assess the factors contributing to the current phenomena. Lastly, cognizant of the fact that there may be reverse causality between voting and expression, we improve on causality by using a quasi-experimental method - propensity score matching, to control for the observable characteristics (Abadie and L'Hour, 2021; Abadie and Spiess, 2021; Caliendo and Kopeinig, 2008). This approach is more robust than those used in previous literature, as it mimics a natural experiment (Khandker et al., 2009). This paper is premised on the sociological and psychological theories of voting behaviour, which connotes that voters' psychological (perceptions) and sociological factors influence voting (Hohenthaner, 2009; Knoke, 1974).

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[2] https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/

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One of the most significant variables influencing people's voting decisions is the candidate's personal qualities. Personal commitment, interest, and feeling of citizenship are crucial factors in enhancing political involvement (Kurtbas, 2015). Election participation is higher among voters served by representatives who are both embedded in the communities they represent and have a similar social background (Poertner et al., 2015). Candidates with a strong reputation in the community and a reputation for having a captivating personality or other desirable qualities are always sought after by political parties (Ahmed et al., 2020). In addition, a stream of researchers has also found the significance of demographic and social variables in influencing voting behaviour, including religion, education, ethnicity, age, and so on (Chang and Kerr, 2017; Maina et al., 2021; Oyoru, 2023; Poertner et al., 2015; Saidi et al., 2021; Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019).

The age of an individual is a key determinant of voter turnout, with distinct voting patterns observed across different age groups (Poertner et al., 2015). Young voters tend to have lower voting turnout rates primarily because the costs of voting are highest for this population group (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019). In Kenya, citizens' education influences their ability and decision to vote for effective leaders in service delivery. An individual's level of education determines their political party preference and electoral choice (Marshal, 2015). Higher levels of education are generally associated with more liberal political orientations (Evans and Anderson, 2017).

Another important factor contributing to voting behaviour is wealth status. People with a greater income are often more inclined to vote and participate in politics than people with lower incomes (Poertner et al., 2015). Further, ethnicity also influences the voting decisions of prospective voters. In addition, ethnicity has been used as a determining factor in predicting winners of elections in Zimbabwe (Dewa 2019). In addition, the caste system has a significant impact on elections in Punjab, Pakistan, and many politicians only look to their caste groupings for support (Bashir and Khalid 2019). The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: it reviews the literature on voting behaviour, discusses the study methodology, presents results and discussions, and then concludes.

2. Voting Behaviour

Voter participation and turnout are pillars of democratic governance as they reflect the agency and engagement of citizens within a political system (Barton et al., 2014). In many developing countries, like Malawi, understanding various factors that influence voter turnout is very important as it fosters a more inclusive and participatory political environment. Many factors influence voter behaviour, including economic, demographic, psychological, social, political, and institutional (Turgeon and Blais, 2023).

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In the context of socioeconomic factors, income, education, and occupation play a significant role. Wealthier and educated citizens tend to prioritise different issues than those with lower income and educational levels (Leighley and Nagler, 2016), with the latter usually interested in civic matters such as voting. Also, the nature of one's job can influence their decisions to vote or not, as they tend to lean towards policies that influence their industries (Kulachai, 2023). For example, teachers and educators of the law are more enlightened on matters of voting and civic engagement and are, hence, more likely to participate in voting. Demographic factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, race, and religion play a significant role. For instance, while younger voters may focus on education and climate change issues, older voters may prioritise health care and pension (Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014). Additionally, female voters may prioritise policies that address social welfare, while men may prioritise policies that benefit the growth of the private sector. In the context of Africa, political mobilisation, voting and electoral competition are primarily influenced by religion and ethnicity (Abdulai, 2023).

Pertaining to psychological factors, voter behaviour is largely determined by party identification, political ideology, and perception of the candidate, which are beyond logic and reason (Myatt, 2015). Citizens who are fanatically attached to a political party are more likely to vote for it. This also applies to those who strongly believe in a certain political ideology, either left, right, or centre (Wade and Richardson, 2021). Perception of the candidate's personality, leadership qualities, and competence also influence voters. However, psychological factors are less likely to influence citizen's participation in voting. Social factors like family, peers, media, and information also shape voters' opinions and decisions to vote. Further, the political environment, such as election campaigns, issues of the day (economic crisis, social justice movements, national security), and incumbent performance, determine citizens' voting behaviour.

Institutional factors that affect voting behaviour include the electoral system, voting laws, and access to voting (Barton et al., 2014; Poertner et al., 2015). In the context of the electoral system, first-past-the-post, proportional representation, and mixed electoral systems have different impacts on party strategies and voter choices. Also, the laws governing the voting process and accessibility of the ballot have massive effects on voter turnout. However, this largely depends on citizens' awareness of the laws and how well they can articulate and use them.

Since the beginning of Multiparty democracy in 1994, Malawi has experienced fluctuating voting behaviour (Mbowela et al., 2014). In Malawi, there are a lot of factors that influence people's voting behaviour, one of which is civic and voter education. As witnessed by the 2000, 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2020 Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) election reports, civic and voter education has significantly influenced voter registration and turnout. For example, in the 2014 elections, out of a total population of about 16 million people with a projected 8 million prospective

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voters, close to 7.4 million eligible voters registered to vote, of whom about 5.2 million turned up at the polling centres on May 20th (Malawi Electoral Commission Tripartite Elections Report, 2014). It was reported that there was massive civic and voter education by the civil society, traditional leaders, religious leaders, the media and political parties, which enabled this turnout. However, there has not been enough literature that pinpoints whether or not this turnout is influenced by the perceived feeling of being empowered in decision-making, hence this study.

This paper is motivated by sociological and psychological theories of voting behaviour, which connote that voters' perceived perceptions (psychological) and sociological factors influence voting (Hohenthaner, 2009; Knoke, 1974). Psychological theories, particularly the Heuristics and Biases Theory, highlight the significance of party identification, which typically develops early in life and remains fairly consistent. Voters with strong loyalty to the party are likely to consistently support the same party, regardless of temporary issues or the characteristics of individual candidates. Hence, feeling empowered in decision-making is less likely to influence the likelihood of voting. Citizens are more likely to vote for any candidate the party frontloads because affiliation is more important to the party than a representative's behavioural or governance traits. This theory presents a deterministic approach to citizens' voting behaviour.

However, Sociological theories, particularly the Social Identity Theory, indicate that voters are strongly influenced by the social context in which they live. It suggests that individuals with similar socioeconomic status, education levels, and religious views are likely to vote in a similar manner. This implies that citizens who perceive themselves to be empowered in decision-making are likely to vote similarly in an election. The different levels and statuses of citizens will tend to stratify them regarding voting behaviour. Those on the margins of various forms of empowerment are likely to participate in voting.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data

The analysis utilises data from the Governance for Local Development (GLD) Project conducted by the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. The study employed the Local Governance Process Indicators (LGPI) Survey, carried out across five regions in Kenya, Zambia, and Malawi. Among these regions, three are capital cities (Nairobi, Lusaka, and Lilongwe), and two are border areas (Zambia's border with Malawi and Malawi's border with Zambia). In Malawi, the survey was conducted between September and November 2019. The University of Gothenburg managed data collection with the local partner, the Institute of Public Opinion (IPOR), based in Zomba, Malawi. In total, approximately 10,302 respondents participated in the survey.

3.2 Dependent variable

In the survey, respondents were asked to answer "yes (1)" or "no (0)" to the following questions:

(1) Do you think that people like you can have a say in what your Traditional Authority/Tribal Chief/Chief does?

(2) Do you think that people like you can have a say in what your village head/neighbourhood block leader/local elder does?

(3) Do you think that people like you can have a say in what your religious leader does?

(4) Do you think that people like you can have a say in what your member of parliament does?

(5) Do you think that people like you can have a say in what your local council member/member of county assembly does?

Based on these, we created a variable based on multiple correspondence analysis. A binary variable was also created where a value of 1 indicates those with the perception of more expression and 0 otherwise. All these variables were used in the analysis to ascertain if a change in the variable definition may change the results.

3.3 Independent variables

Our variables of interest are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Variable definitions

Variable	Definition of variable	Mean	Min	Max	t-value
Voted	1 if a candidate voted in previous general election and zero otherwise	72%	0	1	157.5
Marital status	1 if respondent is married and zero if not married	72%	0	1	157.1
Sex	1 if respondent is male and zero if not male	36%	0	1	74.2
location	1 if respondent dwells in urban and zero if border location	66%	0	1	137.9
Agegroup: 18-24	1 if respondent is in agegroup 18-24 , and zero if other age group	27%	0	1	60.7
Agegroup: 25-34	1 if respondent is in agegroup 25-34 , and zero if other age group	28%	0	1	61.1

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Agegroup: 35-44	1 if respondent is in agegroup 35-44 , and zero if other age group	20%	0	1	49.8
Agegroup: 45-54	1 if respondent is in agegroup 45-54 , and zero if other age group	11%	0	1	34.6
Agegroup: 55+	1 if respondent is in agegroup 55+ , and zero if other age group	14%	0	1	39.7
No education	1 if respondent has no education and zero otherwise	10%	0	1	33.6
Primary	1 if respondent has primary education and zero otherwise	60%	0	1	122.1
Secondary	1 if respondent has secondary education and zero otherwise	27%	0	1	59.5
Post secondary	1 if respondent has post secondary education and zero otherwise	3%	0	1	16.5
Wealth Quintile 1	1 if respondent is in Wealth Quintile 1 and zero otherwise	27%	0	1	59.7
Wealth Quintile 2	1 if respondent is in Wealth Quintile 2 and zero otherwise	14%	0	1	40.6
Wealth Quintile 3	1 if respondent is in Wealth Quintile 3 and zero otherwise	20%	0	1	50.1
Wealth Quintile 4	1 if respondent is in Wealth Quintile 4 and zero otherwise	24%	0	1	55.1
Wealth Quintile 5	1 if respondent is in Wealth Quintile 5 and zero otherwise	15%	0	1	41.2

4. Econometric analysis

The study first implements a probit regression method since the dependent variable is binary. However, to consider possible reverse causality between voting and self-expression, the study employs the Propensity Score Matching (PSM) technique to explain causality (Dehejia and Wahba, 1999; Gertler et al., 2011; Khandker et al., 2009). The PSM thus improves the econometric identification in the model. The propensity score is the probability of being assigned to a treatment group (those with no perception that leaders listen to them), conditional to the observed covariates (Austin, 2011). PMS can reduce confounding in observational research by creating two groups that are well balanced with respect to baseline characteristics (Polsky and Baiocchi, 2014; Schober and Vetter, 2020). In the model, let perception=1 represent

people who believe that leaders listen to them and 0 if otherwise. The effect of the treatment is then represented as TE_i for each individual as:

$$TE_i = Y_i(1) - Y_i(0) \tag{1}$$

The average treatment effect on the treated ($ATET$) can be estimated as follows:

$$ATET = E(TE_i|perception_i = 1, X_i) = E(Y_i(1)|perception_i = 1, X_i) - E(Y_i(0)|perception_i = 1, X_i) \tag{2}$$

The covariates include the sex of the respondent, age, education, employment, region, wealth status, residence and religion. To test the robustness of the matching method, various algorithms such as regression adjustment, inverse probability weighting, inverse probability weighting with regression adjustment nearest neighbour matching were adopted (Funk et al., 2011; Uysal, 2015). All of the analysis was performed in Stata 17.0.

5. Results

We first present the various voter perceptions across different characteristics, as outlined in Table 2. Notably, the belief in empowerment is primarily associated with age groups, gender, and education levels but not with wealth quintiles.

Table 2: Crosstabulation of voter perceptions by individual characteristics

	less belief No.	less belief %	more belief No.	more belief %	Total No.	Chi-square	P
Agegroup: 18-24	1,390	52	1,286	48	2,676		
Agegroup: 25-34	1,343	50	1,358	50	2,701		
Agegroup: 35-44	942	48	1,037	52	1,979	15.17	0.000
Agegroup: 45-54	504	47	564	53	1,068		
Agegroup: 55+	710	52	645	48	1,355		

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Female	3,421	55	2,835	45	6,256		
Male	1,468	42	2,055	58	3,523	152.7	0.000
Marital Status							
Not married	1,413	51	1,362	49	2,775		
Married	3,476	50	3,528	50	7,004	1.32	0.250
Urban	1,615	49	1,707	51	3,322		
Border	3,274	51	3,183	49	6,457	3.83	0.050
No education	601	59	410	41	1,011		
Primary	3,054	52	2,851	48	5,905		
Secondary	1,128	43	1,470	57	2,598	98.7	0.000
Post-secondary	106	40	159	60	265		
Wealth quintile							
1	1,342	51	1,270	49	2,612		
2	689	49	721	51	1,410		
3	996	50	1,000	50	1,996	3.09	0.540
4	1,146	50	1,171	51	2,317		
5	716	50	728	50	1,444		
Total	4,889	50	4,890	50	9,779		

In addition to the above analysis, we conducted a crosstabulation analysis of the voting variable. Interestingly, voting is associated with all individual characteristics except for wealth status. For more detailed information, refer to Table 3.

Table 3: *Crosstabulations of voting across individual characteristics*

	Did not vote		Voted		Total		
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	Chi-square	P
Agegroup: 18-24	1,197	45	1,479	55	2,676		
Agegroup: 25-34	725	27	1,976	73	2,701		
Agegroup: 35-44	412	21	1,567	79	1,979		
Agegroup: 45-54	189	18	879	82	1,068	544.56	0.00
Agegroup: 55+	243	18	1,112	82	1,355		
Female	1,896	30	4,360	70	6,256	34.99	0.00

Male		870	25	2,653	75	3,523		
Not married		984	36	1,791	65	2,775		
Married		1,782	25	5,222	75	7,004	98.31	0.00
Urban		900	27	2,422	73	3,322		
Border		1,866	29	4,591	71	6,457	3.53	0.06
No education		256	25	755	75	1,011		
Primary		1,610	27	4,295	73	5,905	21.45	0.00
Secondary		818	32	1,780	69	2,598		
Post secondary		82	31	183	69	265		
Wealth quintile								
	1	728	28	1,884	72	2,612		
	2	392	28	1,018	72	1,410		
	3	565	28	1,431	72	1,996	1.04	0.90
	4	659	28	1,658	72	2,317		
	5	422	29	1,022	71	1,444		
Total		2,766	28	7,013	72	9,779		

We now take a regression analysis of the effect of the perceived perception of people's voices being honoured by authority and its association with voting. We present the marginal effects of the variables so that we can interpret them as a marginal percentage point association. Table 4 shows the findings.

***Table 4:** Marginal effects for the effect of perception on voting*

Variables	Female	Male	All sample
Agegroup:18-24 *(reference category)*	0.000	0.000	0.000
Agegroup: 25-34	0.176***	0.103***	0.160***
	(0.016)	(0.023)	(0.013)
Agegroup: 35-44	0.230***	0.173***	0.222***
	(0.017)	(0.024)	(0.014)
Agegroup: 45-54	0.274***	0.198***	0.259***
	(0.020)	(0.026)	(0.015)
Agegroup: 55+	0.286***	0.207***	0.272***
	(0.019)	(0.024)	(0.014)

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Marital Status	0.056***	0.124***	0.075***
	(0.013)	(0.017)	(0.010)
Location	-0.010	-0.033**	-0.018*
	(0.012)	(0.015)	(0.009)
No education *(reference category)*	0.000	0.000	0.000
Primary	0.051***	-0.020	0.032**
	(0.019)	(0.032)	(0.016)
Secondary	0.033	-0.004	0.027
	(0.022)	(0.033)	(0.018)
Post-secondary	0.004	-0.052	-0.013
	(0.049)	(0.046)	(0.032)
Wealth quintile 1 *(reference category)*	0.000	0.000	0.000
Wealth quintile 2	0.000	-0.006	-0.002
	(0.019)	(0.022)	(0.014)
Wealth quintile 3	-0.005	-0.003	-0.005
	(0.016)	(0.021)	(0.013)
Wealth quintile 4	-0.022	0.007	-0.012
	(0.016)	(0.020)	(0.012)
Wealth quintile 5	-0.022	-0.000	-0.015
	(0.018)	(0.022)	(0.014)
Perception quintile 1 *(reference category)*	0.000	0.000	0.000
Perception quintile 2	0.003	0.028	0.010
	(0.018)	(0.025)	(0.014)
Perception quintile 3	0.037**	0.043**	0.036***
	(0.017)	(0.022)	(0.013)
Perception quintile 4	0.024*	0.050***	0.032***
	(0.014)	(0.019)	(0.011)
Sex			0.049***
			(0.009)
N	6256	3523	9779

Standard errors in parentheses

$^{*} p < 0.10,\ ^{**} p < 0.05,\ ^{***} p < 0.01$

The findings indicate that an individual's perception of authorities honouring their opinion was associated with a higher likelihood that they would vote. Besides, as age increased, men were more likely to vote than women. Married people were also more likely to vote. The study established that men in rural areas were more likely to vote than men in urban areas. Further, the study found that males in general, were associated with a higher likelihood of voting. Women who attained primary school-level education were more likely to vote. However, education attainment insignificantly influenced men's likelihood of voting in Malawi. In terms of wealth quintile, wealthier women were less likely to vote than those who were poorer, but this variable had no significant impact on men's likelihood of voting.

Having identified the determinants of voting, we now undertake propensity score matching. Before we present the results, we undertake some diagnostics. We use both kernel density and box plots. The results show that the variables balanced perfectly. Furthermore, the kernel density distribution of the propensity scores shows that the overlap condition has been satisfied (Gertler et al., 2011; Hirano and Imbens, 2001; Khandker et al., 2009). The results of the test matching appear below. **Figure 2** shows the results in panels A and B.
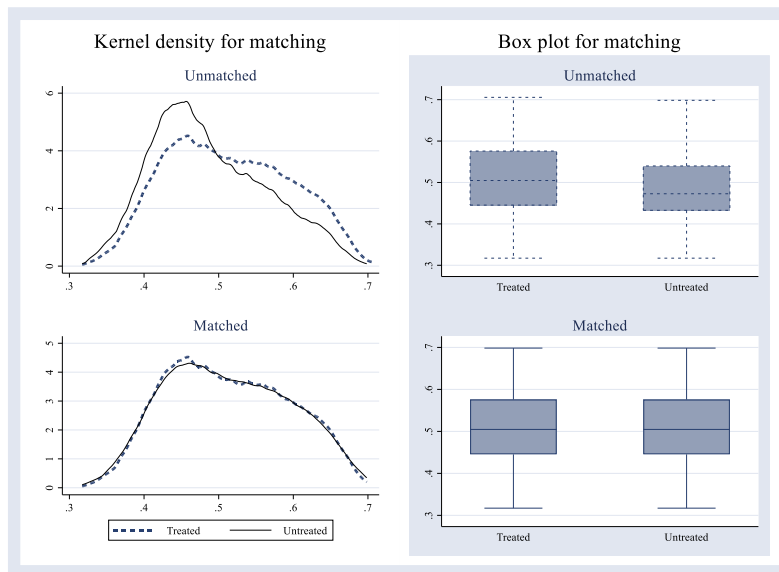

Figure 2: Variable balancing

Apart from the above, one crucial issue to address is whether there is common support. Figure 3 shows that there are enough observations that fall on common support. That is to say, between the treated and non-treated outcomes, there are individuals who have matched on their observable characteristics that can be compared (Austin, 2011).
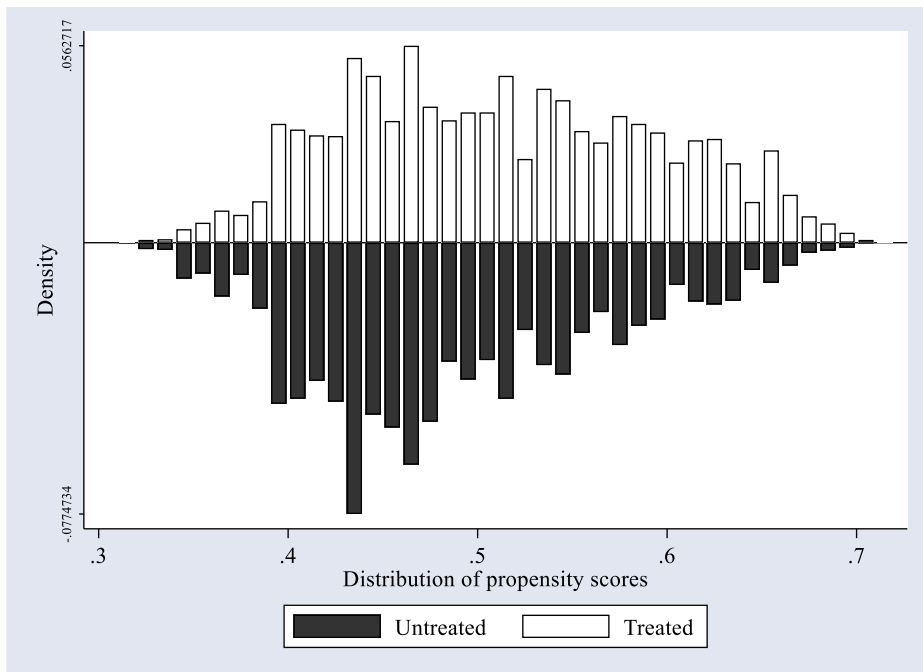
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Figure 3: Common support

Having certified that the PSM has satisfied the diagnostics, the next phase undertakes a robust analysis using the various matching algorithms presented to see if our results are robust to changes in the methodology and definition. Our results from the matching estimator in Table 5 suggest that more freedom of expression is associated with voting in the previous general election. People with more positive perceptions are more likely to have voted in the election. Still more, we found the results to be robust and valid. Being empowered increases the chance of voting by around two percentage points.

Table 5: Matching results for effect of self-expression perception on voting

	Propensity Score Match	Nearest neighbour-Match	Regression Adjusted	Inverse Probability Weighting	Inverse Probability with Regression Adjusted
Average Treatment Effect on the Treated	0.019** (0.010)	0.020** (0.009)	0.021** (0.009)	0.022** (0.009)	0.021** (0.009)

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Standard errors in parentheses

$^{*} p < 0.10,$ $^{**} p < 0.05,$ $^{***} p < 0.01$

It is also important to note that the results are robust to the change in the estimation methodology. The coefficient for all the matching results, including the doubly robust estimator, ranges around 0.20 and is significant at 5%. Furthermore, the standard errors are in the range of 0.009 and 0.010.

6. Discussion

For a democracy to survive, it is vital that people feel empowered. However, their feeling is a function of sociological and psychological factors. Feeling empowered may affect an individual's willingness to vote in a country. With that in mind, this paper provides new evidence from Malawi on the relationship between self-perceived expression and voting in a general election. The paper used secondary data from the GLD survey to undertake the analysis. The significant findings are as follows:

Firstly, about 70% of the population indicated that they had voted. The finding from the self-reported voting was almost similar to the actual turnout for elections in June, 2019-around 74%, as reported by the Malawi Electoral Commission (Malawi Electoral Commission, 2020). This appears to be higher than in other African countries such as Lesotho, where in 2020, only 37% turned up to vote (Mudau and 'Nyane, 2023). Even though the percentage of voting is high, it has declined since 1994, as alluded to in the introduction. The declining trends are global and raise concerns regarding the future of democracy (Mudau and 'Nyane, 2023; Solijonor, 2016).

Secondly, the results of the determinant analysis indicated that the more people perceive that they can have a say in their communities, the more likely they are to vote. Along this dimension, the paper thus corroborates the psychological theory alluded to earlier (Hohenthaner, 2009), which points to a positive relationship between the perception of having a voice and voting. Furthermore, in accordance with previous literature, personal commitment, interest, and feeling of citizenship are crucial factors in enhancing political involvement (Kurtbas, 2015).

Thirdly, the above findings were coupled with the matching estimator results, which aimed at improving causality. The matching also shows a positive association between perceived self-expression and voting. The results were robust to changes in the estimation variable and the change in the definition of the self-expression variable. These findings align well with the sociological theory, which states that voting behaviour is contingent upon socioeconomic factors affecting the voter. In doing so, the findings also match the results of Ferree and Horowitz (2007). They found that the enthusiasm to vote among villagers in Xingsheng Township receded with the

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discovery that some problems, such as corruption and poor services, remained unsolved despite leadership changes (He, 2006).

Furthermore, while assessing the influence of media over the voting behaviour of electorates in Pakistan, Javaid and Elahi (2020) found that the majority of people in rural areas vote based on personality, while in urban areas, most people tend to vote based on performance and policy. In collaboration with the former, Engelman et al., (2022) found that wealth is positively related to voting. This positive relationship concurs with establishments by Kasara and Suryanarayan (2015), who argued that the potential tax exposure of the rich could be the reason for the positive relationship.

Having established the results, it is necessary that we interpret the findings. There is a possible channel through which we anticipate driving the people to vote even though, the voting behaviour in Malawi is said to follow kinship behaviour bound by ethnicity (the main ones being Mulhako wa Alhomwe, Mzimba Heritage Association, and Chewa Heritage Foundation) (Ferree and Horowitz, 2010) and regionality (Kayira et al., 2019).

These ethnic associations have the potential to be used for political mobilisation, especially when ethnic traditional authorities lack the capacity and autonomy to block the political manipulation of ethnic organisations (Ferree and Horowitz, 2010; Kayira et al., 2019). Voting on ethnic grounds suggests psychological connotations to voting where voters remain numb to political stimuli to change their voting tastes. It entails that voters are most likely to vote for a political party regardless of its performance in terms of policy or development. The situation of ethnic voting has also been observed in various places in Africa (Carlson, 2015; Ishiyama, 2012).

On a different note, the coming in of the United Transformation Movement (UTM) political party in 2020 suggests sociological voting connotations, in which case electorates voted for the party irrespective of region or ethnicity. The voters seemed to be inspired by the leader's charismatic qualities. So, that being the case, we may speculate that in a situation where people perceive that the leader in question enables free expression, they will engage themselves in voting, fearing that they may lose the candidate to others (Soyiyo, 2021). Furthermore, the various educational approaches to civil liberties, through initiatives such as the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) , and others, enabled people to understand their role in democratic dispensation.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to assess the effect of perceptions of empowerment on voting behavior in Malawi. Using data from a household survey, we found a positive relationship between feelings of empowerment and voter participation. Based on these

findings, we conclude that empowering individuals is crucial, as it is linked to higher voter turnout. This is particularly important for emerging democracies that face various challenges. A positive perception of empowerment may reduce voter apathy and encourage greater participation in the democratic process, enabling the election of leaders through legitimate means and strengthening the democratic framework.

Even though the findings are salient, the study is not without limitations. Our study only has used observable characteristics. We do not consider the unobservable, which may require the use of other methodological approaches, such as instrumental variables (Angrist and Pischke, 2008). There is a need to design longitudinal studies that may have to follow the same individuals over time to help understand the dynamic nature of the behaviour that may have to be confounded by the variable of interest. In order to provide room for people to be engaged more in democracy through voting, there is a need to allow more self-expression. There is a need to pay attention to public opinion as it has been established that the perception of self-expression is positively related to voting.

As mentioned in the methodology section, we measured perception based on self-recall, which may suffer from understatement. Apart from that, the matching estimators only explain causality based on observable characteristics. With that in mind, it may be good to think of a scale of measuring the same variables and also use other causal identification methods such as instrumental variables or even interrupted time series, which may address causality not just on observables. Therefore, we leave these limitations mentioned as areas for future research subject to data availability.

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