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IRIS Summer Fieldwork Award 2019

Technology, Elections, and Democracy in Africa

I received the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) Summer Fieldwork Award for Summer 2019. This funding enabled me to conduct dissertation fieldwork in Kenya from June – August 2019 for my dissertation project on the politics of technology use in elections. Remaining in Kenya over the summer after a period of fieldwork during the academic year was particularly important to continue building networks of contacts and to keep engaging with established relationships. I used the time in Kenya to continue conducting interviews and collecting other types of data for my dissertation.

My political science dissertation addresses how digital technology use influences democratic institutions and outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa. Technology use is changing the landscape of elections in Africa. Over the past fifteen years, two-thirds of African countries have introduced the use of digital voting systems in elections. I ask how the use of electoral technology affects the quality of elections in Kenya. Electoral technology use has the goals of conveying to voters that elections are free and fair, convincing losers to accept defeat, and solidifying trust in electoral institutions. For countries like Kenya with unstable electoral histories, technology is meant to bridge a deficit of political trust by reducing fraud, increasing transparency, and making elections more efficient to announce winners faster and with more certainty. This is important because how elections are run influences whether voters and parties accept election results, the incidence of electoral violence, and ultimately a country's democratic trajectory.

During this fellowship period, I was able to complete a substantial number of interviews for my dissertation. I conducted interviews with members of civil society organizations, political parties, Members of Parliament, the electoral commission, members of the judiciary, academics, and journalists. Additionally, summer funding enabled the continuity of conducting field research for 12 continuous months and made for a very productive summer. I was in Kenya during the 2018-2019 academic year, and continued fieldwork over the summer with support from IRIS.

Field research has been crucial to this project. In a new democracy like Kenya, it is critical to understand how technology use interacts with a history of electoral instability and political mistrust. My project focuses on the experiences of Kenyans, prioritizes local knowledge and experiences through interviews, and emphasizes understanding electoral technology use in the context of Kenyan political and electoral histories. I look forward to using the data collected using my IRIS funding as I work to complete my dissertation.

In addition to data collection, I was able to use and practice my Kiswahili language skills through a weekly class and through daily interactions in Nairobi. I began Kiswahili training through a FLAS fellowship and was grateful to continue learning on campus at UW and during my year of fieldwork in Kenya. In addition to language practice and progress, I was also able to make numerous connections with other political scientists and scholars who do research in Kenya. This has been valuable to gain feedback on my work and deepen my understanding of Kenyan politics. As well, I was able to access elections scholarship by Kenyan authors that is sometimes difficult to obtain outside of Kenya. This scholarship will bring valuable context to my own project. Being in Kenya also enabled me to be fully immersed in Kenyan politics. Dissertation fieldwork is costly for graduate students, and this type of funding is essential for

completing international research during graduate school. I am very grateful for the generous support from the Institute for Regional and International Studies. Asante sana!