

The Voting Machine:

The material culture of polling stations in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda

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Abstract:

Elections are characterised by different public performances of order that are enacted during campaigns and the bureaucratic processes of the polls. This paper explores a key element of the latter; namely, the material culture, and associated processes, of the polling station. It does so by looking at change and continuity in polling station practice in the post-colonial period in three African countries: Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. The analysis reveals how all three countries demonstrate significant variation in the way that leaders have conceptualised and used electoral processes, but all have nonetheless moved to very similar technologies and practices of voter identification and vote casting, which reveal significant continuities from late-colonial practice. More specifically, we argue that the colocation and technical combination of multiple items and processes have created the polling station – ideally, though not always in reality – as a bureaucratic machine, which helps to enact a particular relationship between the state and the individual citizen. In so doing, the polling station helps to create the state as a distinct entity and sphere of order, even as it creates the voter as the subject of that order. However, while polling stations are designed to produce an ideal of unmediated citizenship, practice and experience often subvert that ideal, and suggest that the state – instead of being a distinct sphere of impartial order – is profoundly entangled with society. As a result, while the polling station remains a powerful classroom, the lessons that it teaches are inconsistent and contested.

In comparative terms, one striking aspect of elections in Africa, as opposed to Europe, is the continuation of a very public electoral politics. At one level, the campaigns remain loud, visible and highly public. More specifically, they draw almost everyone into an active involvement in multiple events from large rallies and smaller meetings to processions, weddings and funerals. In these forums a wide range of people participate in a visible and vocal way in electoral politics, as – through song, dance, shouts, and questions – ordinary people make demands, and express their support or disapproval for candidates, policies, narratives and actions. In short, while power “may control the public address system ... crowds also have a voice, generally a murmur, at times a roar”.¹ This stands in stark contrast to the experience of the United Kingdom, where the introduction of open elections was followed by a decline in the intensity of public participation. Indeed, Frank O’Gorman and James Vernon have emphasised the fundamental irony that the widening of the franchise and the introduction of the secret ballot in the nineteenth century went hand in hand with declining public engagement in campaigns, which swiftly evolved a quieter and more privatized politics.² Although

¹ John Lonsdale, ‘Moral and Political Argument in Kenya’ in B. Berman, D. Eyoh, and W. Kymlicka (eds) *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2004), p. 76. Also see Angelique Haugerud, *The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993); and Gabrielle Lynch, *I say to you: Ethnic politics and the Kalenjin of Kenya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 225

² Frank O’Gorman, ‘Campaign rituals and ceremonies: the social meaning of elections in England 1780-1860’, *Past and Present*, 135 (1992), 79-115; James Vernon, *Politics and the People. A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993).

some scholars have questioned the timing of this change, there is a general consensus regarding the trend.³

However, while the public nature of electoral campaigns in Africa has gained much attention, there is another performance that has attracted less scholarship. This is the election as a moment of order enacted through voter registration, the nomination of candidates, the display and checking of registers, the vote itself, and the counting and announcement of results. What is distinctive about this multi-dimensional performance is that it exalts the list, the number, and the queue, as signs and conditions of an order that is meant to be produced by, and lie at the heart of, the modern state. Significantly, this order asserts an unmediated, equal citizenship: its focus is on the individual who is identified and therefore legible. In return for accepting that legibility, the voter is given a power of decision that is, emphatically, hers – and hers alone. The secrecy of the ballot is the assurance of that individual autonomy: casting the ballot seals a singular contract between state and individual, which both distinguishes the individual and locates them in the only collective identity which is recognized by this order – the mass of the voting citizenry.

Critically, the order manifested through the polling station often stands in conflict with that performed through the campaign. In the latter, attempts at mass mobilization by political parties involve multiple kinds of contracting and intermediacy: campaigns constantly urge voters to act not as individuals, nor as part of collectively singular citizenry, but as members of a family, a village, a religion, an ethnic group – promises are made to such groups, their grievances are kindled, their partisan aspirations nurtured. The campaigns conjure multiple identities and invite – or sometimes coerce – voters to see themselves in these terms.

As a result, while there are many aspects to any election – the interventions of the international community, elite political wrangling in backrooms and so forth – African elections continue to be characterised by an apparent distinction between two different types of order, visibly embodied in the juxtaposition between the informal, colourful and often unpredictable events of the campaign and the bureaucratic processes of the poll. To describe both of these as performances is not to suggest that they are somehow fake, or that the material stuff involved can be reduced to an assemblage of props. Rather, it is to take seriously the self-consciously public nature of the electoral process, and the affective power of this on the attitudes and behaviour of citizens. It is also to acknowledge the role of the material items drawn together in these performances, and the particular spaces that they define, in creating physical assemblages that can constrain or authorise behaviour – conditioning the possibilities of action for all involved, while imbuing these moments with significance.⁴

In the case of electoral processes, such performances often occur on a vast scale – as in the grand rally, or polling day – in which many people are both audience and participants; this is partly why they have such powerful affective consequences. At the same time, there is something very private and individual about the bureaucratic form of order, which might be expressed as a sign of fetishization – the ballot has itself come to be understood as possessed of a kind of agency or power, changing those who engage with it.⁵ Yet the magico-religious implications of that term may belie the

³ Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters. The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford: OUP, 2009)

⁴ For example see Catherine Cole, *Performing South Africa's truth commission: Stages of Transition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); J. Reinelt, and S. Rai, 'Introduction', and John Parkinson, 'Performing democracy: roles, stages, scripts' both in S. Rai and J. Reinelt (eds) *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

⁵ As is suggested in John and Jean Comaroff, 'Law and disorder in the postcolony: an introduction', in Jean and John Comaroff (eds), *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 1-56.

significance of the emphasis on techniques, procedures, ordering, numbers, and forms of science, which characterise the bureaucratic side of this performative dyad. Recent scholarship has demonstrated the power, and contradictions, of the state-building work of African bureaucracies, which assert an authoritative order that exalts literacy in general and the written rule in particular; and insist on a separation between official and personal, public and private.⁶ This is work whose techniques of power are listing and numbering, and whose ideal is the unambiguous ascription of individual identity. The affective power of these electoral techniques elsewhere in the world has been explained through a performative metaphor drawn from science, rather than drama: they are demonstrations of facts about the world, which show things incontrovertibly as they are, and so the bureaucratic processes of elections are ‘laboratories’, to use Bruno Latour’s term: they offer proof, made visible in numbers and authorised by technique.⁷

This paper explores the material culture, and associated processes, of the polling station – a key element of bureaucratic electoral processes. It does so by drawing on the experience of three countries: Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. All Anglophone, these states came to independence with Westminster-style elected institutions, and with roughly similar (though not identical) electoral systems in terms of the bureaucratic detail of process. Their subsequent electoral paths diverged significantly: Kenya has held regular elections since independence, although for a long period these were on a single party basis; Ghana and Uganda have both experienced military coups, periods of military rule – and periods of ‘no-party’ rule, in which the very logic of the secret ballot and direct elections on a universal franchise were rejected as ‘sham democracy’, unable to ensure true ‘popular power’.⁸ They are also varied in terms of current experience of democracy: Ghana is widely seen as a successful electoral democracy, Uganda as an example of electoral authoritarianism, and Kenya as somewhere in-between.⁹ Yet despite these divergent pasts and current differences in levels of political freedom, there are also important similarities in the contemporary materiality of the polling station, and the physical processes of polling across all three countries. More specifically, all three have moved to very similar technologies and practices of voter identification, and to the use of a single ballot paper, marked in secret and then placed publicly in a transparent box. In each case, this shows significant continuities from late-colonial practice, but also reveals the construction and imagination of a distinctive bureaucratic order. The colocation and technical combination of multiple items and processes have created the polling station – ideally, though not always in reality – as a bureaucratic machine, which helps enact a particular relationship between the state and the individual citizen.

In tracing this story, we draw on a substantial scholarship, running back to Guy Hermet’s argument in the 1970s that elections worked to transform ‘subjects’ into ‘respectful and disciplined citizens’.¹⁰

⁶ Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, ‘Studying the dynamics of African bureaucracies. An introduction to states at work’, in Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (eds), *States at Work. Dynamics of African Bureaucracies* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 3-32

⁷ This analytical model is pursued in, for example, Kimberley Coles, ‘Election day: The construction of democracy through technique’, *Cultural Anthropology* 19, 4 (2004), 551-580.

⁸ ‘Rawlings address envisages National Assembly’, Accra Domestic Service, 6 Mar. 1984: from Foreign Broadcast Information Service, FBIS MEA-85-047.

⁹ Lindsay Whitfield, ‘“Change for a better Ghana”: party competition, institutionalization and alternation in Ghana’s 2008 elections’, *African Affairs* 108, 433 (2009), 621-41; Angelo Izama and Michael Wilkerson, ‘Uganda: Museveni’s triumph and weakness’, *Journal of Democracy* 2 .3 (2011), pp. 64-78; Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis, ‘Democracy and its discontents: understanding Kenya’s 2013 elections’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8 1 (2014), pp. 2-24.

¹⁰ Guy Hermet, ‘State-controlled elections: a framework’, 15, in Guy Hermet, Richard Rose, Alain Rouquié (eds), *Elections Without Choice* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 1-18.

More recent work by Richard Banegas and others has developed the idea that through the electoral process the voter is 'enrolled as a citizen'; and becomes 'an autonomous individual as a political subject'.¹¹ According to this literature, the polling station is a central element in an ordering performance of bureaucratic governmentality, which renders the citizen supremely legible as an individual even as it offers her or him a (sometimes very limited) secret choice between candidates: in Peter Pels' words, the secret ballot 'combines learning about people with justifying state policy and disciplining state subjects'.¹² From the 1950s to the 1980s, voters were legible through their names; then photographs were added; now biometric data also fixes the voter's relationship to the state.

The polling station also creates the state as a distinct entity and sphere of order, even as it creates the voter as the subject of that order: that is, it does various kinds of bureaucratic work involved in state-building, and simultaneously offers an institutional framework, which helps shape behaviour, and an imaginative framework for seeing the state as separate from society.¹³ In this vein, Timothy Mitchell's discussion of the 'modern techniques that make the state appear to be a separate entity' – the ways in which a 'state effect' is formed – has emphasised the role of 'microphysical methods of order' such as identification, listing and queuing.¹⁴ The distinction that these processes create is productive, bestowing power on those who claim to operate in, or mediate with, the state. Elsewhere, Mitchell has also written on the importance of state-organized performances which 'enframe' people – that is, which casts people in particular relationships with the state, and to one another, and thus constrains their behaviour and shapes their ideas of the possible.¹⁵ The polling station is, and has been, imagined as a place where technologies combine to enframe the public, and so produce stateness: it is a voting machine, which shapes political subjectivities, simultaneously casting the voter as an individual, while rendering voters collectively as distinct from the state.

The significance of the state-building work done by the polling station – and the other bureaucratic processes of direct elections by secret ballot – is suggested by their persistence, and apparent triumph, in the face of attempts to radically reshape or abolish them. In the 1964 referendum in Nkrumah's Ghana, voters were bombarded with contradictory voter education messages, which told them both that 'Your vote is secret' and 'Remember to vote yes'.¹⁶ There was an explicit threat that those who voted 'no' would be known, and were traitors: the government press demanded an overwhelming 'Yes' vote as a demonstration of patriotic citizenship as part of an explicitly 'revolutionary' wider effort to eliminate the distinction between state and people: 'the people therefore become the government and the governed'.¹⁷ In the 1980s, self-consciously revolutionary movements in Ghana and Uganda again declared that the state was the instrument of the people, and was not separate from it – and eschewed direct elections and the secret ballot. Nkrumah's

¹¹ Richard Banegas, 'Commodification of the vote and political subjectivity in Africa: reflections based on the case of Benin', 181, in Romain Bertrand, Jean-Louis Briquet, Peter Pels, *Cultures of Voting. The Hidden History of the Secret Ballot* (London: Hurst, 2007), 180-96.

¹² Peter Pels, 'Imagining elections: modernity, mediation and the secret ballot in late-colonial Tanganyika', in Bertrand et al, *Cultures of Voting*, 100-113, at 107

¹³ Bierschenk and de Sardan, 'Studying the dynamics of African bureaucracies', 8-10.

¹⁴ Timothy Mitchell, 'The limits of the state: beyond statist approaches and their critics', 91-92, *American Political Science Review*, 85, 1 (1991), 77-96.

¹⁵ Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge, 1988)

¹⁶ 'You and the referendum': notices in *Ghanaian Times*, 14, 16 and 25 Jan. 1964, 3.

¹⁷ Editorial 'The people's democracy', *Ghanaian Times*, 10 Jan. 1964, 2; see also 'We are at war!', *Ghanaian Times*, 6 Jan. 1964, 1; 'Think on these', *Ghanaian Times*, 24 Jan. 1964, 2; Editorial 'A challenge to Ashanti and Volta', *Ghanaian Times*, 28 Jan. 1964; Cole, British High Commission Accra to Secretary of State, 24 Jan. 1964, United Kingdom National Archive (UKNA) DO 195/209.

regime was overthrown shortly after the 1964 referendum, in a coup that sought to re-establish the separation of the state through a bureaucratic order; both Ghana and Uganda returned to holding direct elections by secret ballot in the 1990s (in the Ugandan case, still under a no-party system until 2002).

While acknowledging the persistence of this apparent separation between state and society, and its ability to create power, we also argue that it is in constant danger of being revealed as a fiction. This is because the imagined categorical distinction conjured by bureaucratic order is consistently undermined by the behaviour of politicians, voters and officials. Significantly, people – not just voters, but officials and candidates, too – are embedded in alternative orders. These include the stuff of everyday life – livelihoods, access to health and education, the need for personal security and so forth – which all locate people in multiple informal networks of family, ethnicity or locality. In turn, the presence of these kinds of social ties shape the possibilities of action, and require certain types of behaviour, in a pervasive, quotidian and affective way. These alternative orders – one might say disorderly orders – flourish during election campaigns, when multiple contracts are made between candidates and voters, which revolve around collective identities as well as individual ties of family, or ethnicity. Thus, although polling stations are designed to produce an ideal of unmediated citizenship, practice and experience often subvert that ideal, and suggest that the state, far from being a distinct sphere of impartial order, is profoundly entangled with society. The consequence is that while the distinction between state and society remains productive of power, it is also inherently fragile.

In making this argument the paper focuses on different aspects of the polling station and its material culture and experiential quality. The paper starts by discussing the use of polling stations as educational spaces where voters learn to become citizens. It then turns to the technical processes and innovations that seek to simultaneously enact a transformation of communities into individual voters, and to perform the capacity and modernity of the state administration. We then proceed to look at various efforts to present the polling station as a space that is neat, calm, subject to domestic and external scrutiny, and orderly. Finally, the paper discusses efforts to differentiate this space from that of the public campaigns, which the ordered ideal of the polling station is explicitly meant to exclude. In so doing, each section reveals some of the ways in which this bureaucratised ideal of the polling station is undermined – both unintentionally and purposefully – by shortcomings the nature of the electoral process and with the state's inability, or unwillingness, to ensure a full separation between the campaigns and the polls. As a result, elections often become a performance not of the emancipation of the state from society, but of the entanglement of the two.

Educational spaces

The directions to returning officers in advance of the 1956 elections in Gold Coast offered some straightforward advice on the location of polling stations: 'Generally, if a school is available, it should be used, otherwise Local Authority offices may be used or Native Court houses'.¹⁸ In this, as in so many ways, Gold Coast – Ghana – followed a pattern that had already been established in the metropole, and which was maintained elsewhere in the British empire; it set the model for subsequent electoral practice in late-colonial British Africa. Similarly, district commissioners discussing polling stations in advance of Uganda's 1958 elections agreed that 'schools would

¹⁸ *Directions to Returning Officers* (Accra: Minister of Local Government), 8 June 1956, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra (PRAAD), ADM 5/4/137

obviously be the most suitable buildings'. Government offices were also used for Kenya's first African elections in 1957, which involved a handful of constituencies and only a hundred thousand voters. Yet the emphasis soon switched: in 1963, administrative officers organizing elections were told that the 'type of polling station must depend on local conditions. Schools are very suitable and application is being made to the Ministry of Education for their use.'¹⁹

The use of schools as polling stations was convenient, but it also reflected and demonstrated the tutelary nature of the whole process of the secret ballot as it emerged in nineteenth century Europe, and as it developed in Africa in these last years of empire. Elections took the form of 'a campaign of political education', as more than one observer noted of the 1951 Gold Coast polls: people had to be taught how to vote, and why they should vote, and at the same time they also learned through voting.²⁰ An instructional pamphlet produced in late-colonial Kenya to help people 'Teach yourself citizenship' was devoted to the process of voting; such formal efforts at education went alongside the widespread use of teachers (and senior school students) as polling staff (and the dominance of teachers as candidates in late-colonial elections).²¹ As the British civil servant who organized the 1954 elections in the Gold Coast opined, 'school teachers are eminently qualified to perform' the role of polling staff. Similarly, following independence in Kenya officials felt that 'school teachers are indispensable as presiding or deputy presiding officers' (although in later years there was sometimes a contrary imperative to use civil servants, who did not have to be paid extra for election work).²² The polling station was, in every way, a place of education, and where schools were not available, or sufficient, any and all of the expanding building stock of the developmentalist state might be used, from community centres to clinics. We think of voter education as something that precedes elections, but these early administrative instructions are a useful reminder that voting by secret ballot itself has long been seen as an educational project of the nation-state. This was true also in India, where 'schools can be regarded as complex entities where face-to-face interactions are articulated with wider agendas – gradually reshaping selves, histories and communities within the frame of a homogenized nation.'²³

The physical association between schools and elections continued after independence. Polling stations are still often located in primary or secondary school classrooms, where these are available, so that voters cast their ballots before the blackboard, while teachers and senior school students have continued to serve as the lowest level of the electoral bureaucracy.²⁴ However, the demand for polling stations has always tended to outstrip the availability of schools and other government

¹⁹ Meeting of DCs to discuss arrangements for LegCo elections, 9 May 1958, Kabarole Archive ELE 366/1; Ministry of Social Services to all DCs, 30 Jan. 1963, KNA CC 1/35; list of polling stations for Acholi, 1961, in Uganda National Archives (UNA) Election 1 L/139/3; for the Kenya 1957 election polling stations, see Gazette Notice 512 of 1957, in KNA OP 1/320;

²⁰ 'Polling in Gold Coast starts today', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 Feb. 1951; see also 'Gold Coast road to vote', *The Observer*, 28 Jan. 1951.

²¹ For the initial dominance of teachers as candidates, see for example Robert Byrd, 'Characteristics of candidates for election in a country approaching independence: the case of Uganda', *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 7, 1 (1963), pp. 1-27

²² Canham, for PS Defence and External Affairs to PS Ministry of Education, 11 March 1954, PRAAD RG 3/5/336; PC Western to Supervisor of Elections, 11 May 1965, KNA DC KMG 2/1/77; .

²³ N. Yazgi, 'Stranded bodies of democracy: cases from the Indian Himalays', in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2005), 772-77

²⁴ For the continued use of teachers, see County Education Officer to DC Kilifi, 19 July 1967, KNA CB 1/10; list of polling staff in Sub-county chief, Poich to Returning Officer, Gulu, 8 Sep. 1980, Gulu District Records Box 529 ADM 6/ADES/IV/R/84; for the use of civil servants to save money (and consequent arguments over whether teachers were civil servants), see DC Kitui to all Heads of Department, 28 June 1965, KNA DC KTI 3/1/11 and DC Mombasa to PC, 18 Sep. 1974 and the correspondence between M Y Haji and Joseph Mwakio in, KNA CA 7/35

buildings and even churches have been (and still are) widely used.²⁵ In the 1990s, polling stations in Ghana and Uganda moved outdoors – so that all activities, including the casting of the ballot itself would be exposed to public scrutiny. Like the introduction of transparent plastic ballot boxes in the last decade, this move has been part of the pursuit of public secrecy, the oxymoronic essence of the secret ballot. In this vein, and explaining the move in a radio broadcast in 1994, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni outlined how:

Where [in the past] casting a ballot would be done in a voting booth where all types of electoral mischiefs could be committed, we have provided that voting be done in full view of the people but far enough [away] to ensure secrecy for the voter.²⁶

But even this open-air voting routinely retains a physical link to educational processes: the polling stations are often in the yards of primary schools, or in the public spaces next to government buildings. And education – 'enlightening the public on their role in the elections' has remained an integral aspect of the process.²⁷ Election officials and international agencies continue to devote energy and resources to schemes of voter education which combine practical instruction with an assertion of the values of good citizenship: 'Voting wisely and good behaviour – a must', as one educational publication put it.²⁸

The voting machine

A glance at the pictorial representations which feature largely in this educational material suggests significant continuities in the layout and logic of polling stations over the last sixty years – even as it reveals a constant process of technical innovation, pursued through the deployment of new material items. These images present the polling station as a device that extracts a person from a queue, turns him or her into an individual voter, and allows him or her to leave alone.²⁹ Each picture shows the line of voters at the entrance to the station, under the watchful eye of a uniformed officer. Once they gain entry to the space of the polling station – which is marked out by tape, and by the arrangement of chairs, tables and screens, if it is not indoors – the voters begin a process of individuation (often marked out by arrows in the pictures). This takes voters one by one, identifies each, marks him or her and then – in the climactic moment of the whole electoral process – provides some form of privacy (often minimal, as in the use of plastic basin for this purpose) for the moment of decision, before the voter casts her or his ballot. The process ends with the voter leaving the polling station alone.

²⁵ For the predominance of schools, see for example Mbela, Supervisor of all DCs, 28 Apr. 1965, KNA DC KMG 2/1/77; DC Lamu to District Educational Officer, 5 Sep. 1974, KNA CA 7/35 the list in DC Taita to Supervisor of Elections, 16 Apr. 1974, KNA CA 7/34; 'Supervisor briefs poll officials', *The Standard*, 20 Aug. 1983, 2; for the use of chiefs' offices, community centres and other buildings see list for Kitui in 1965 in KNA DC KTI 3/1/11. For the continuation of this to the present, see for example

<http://www.ec.or.ug/sites/VoterCount/Voter%20COUNT%202015.pdf>.

²⁶ Speech on Radio Uganda, 28 Mar. 1994 Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)-AFR-94-059

²⁷ Editorial 'Education a must for civic education' [sic], *New Vision*, 15 Apr. 1996, 4

²⁸ 'Civil society voter education supplement', *Daily Graphic*, 3 Nov. 2000, 9; Editorial 'Countdown to elections', *People's Daily Graphic*, 26 Oct. 1992, 3; 'A guide to voters', *People's Daily Graphic*, 30 Oct. 1992, 5.

²⁹ The examples used here are taken from the 1961 Polling Officers' Handbook (Uganda), copy in UKNA FCO 141/18335; *Uganda Times*, 8 Dec. 1980; *Election Officials' Manual* (Electoral Commission Ghana: Accra, 1996); and recent posters produced by electoral commissions in Uganda and Kenya, available at <http://www.ec.or.ug/?q=content/where-and-how-vote>; <http://www.iebc.or.ke/index.php/careers/voter-education>.

The polling station, then, is not only a laboratory that produces facts; though it does, of course, produce numerical data which helps authorise power. It is also a bureaucratic machine that produces ordered citizens – or at least, it has been imagined as one, across these three countries and over almost sixty years. This machine is created by bringing together multiple technologies of bureaucracy, which authorise processes of individual transformation. While the basic design of the machine has remained consistent, there has been an almost constant innovation in the technologies that constitute it. Broadly speaking, these have successively focussed on two stages in the process. First, from the 1950s to the 1990s, the marking and casting of the ballot was repeatedly refined, the effect of which was to make the placing of the ballot in the box increasingly open. And, second, from around 2000, material innovation has switched to the identification of the voter as an individual, foregrounding digital technology.

Innovation around the ballot initially sought to address the twin problems of public secrecy and the inability of some voters to perform as ideal citizens should. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were persistent doubts about the ability of illiterates to mark ballot papers (doubts which might be seen as a proxy for a more general concern over their ability to understand the logic of the electoral process as a whole). Up to the present, election officials struggle with the challenge posed by blind, voters, or those suffering from other physical disability which make it impossible for them to understand, mark and deposit a ballot paper: how can they make a choice which is both public and secret? In late-colonial Gold Coast, Kenya and Uganda, administrators settled initially on what was sometimes called the ‘multi-box’ system to help illiterate voters.³⁰ Each voter was given one ballot paper; all ballot papers across the country were identical, and bore no mention of candidates’ names or symbols. Rather than marking the paper, the voter went into a screened room in the polling station, where no one could see them and there was one ballot box for each candidate, marked with a symbol. The voter put their single ballot paper in a single box, and left.³¹ The system did not allow voters with disabilities to vote unaided; they had to come with a relative, or confide their choice to a polling official.³² The multi-box system was also vulnerable to various forms and rumours of malpractice – because the actual ballot did not contain evidence of the way an individual had voted and the moment of voting was not public.³³ The symbols on ballot boxes could be switched by a voter, or an official; the slit on one or more ballot boxes might be blocked. And voters could go into the screened section, and put their ballot paper in their pocket rather than in a box and walk out with it. Once outside, they could sell the ballot paper to someone else, who would then go and cast it.

In Kenya, concerns over this led to the abandonment of the system in favour of a single box for the 1961 and 1963 elections (despite scepticism from some British observers as to whether illiterate voters could really use this system).³⁴ In this new system, a single ballot paper, printed with the name and party symbol of each candidate, was given to each voter (which made party symbols a

³⁰ In Gold Coast, the multi-box system was used for the primary elections, in an indirect system where most constituencies had a two-stage election; single ballot boxes and marked ballots were used in secondary elections, and in direct elections in urban areas: Gold Coast, ‘The Electoral (Legislative Assembly) Regulations, 1951’, copy in UKNA CO 96/823/1; Note for Secretary for African Affairs, 29 Oct. 1956, KNA OP 1/536.

³¹ In Gold Coast in 1951, where a single box was used, illiterate voters would ‘whisper’ their choice to a polling official, who marked the ballot for them: ‘Self-government parties successes on the Gold Coast’, *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Feb. 1951.

³² Secretary for African Affairs to ??, 4 Jan. 1957, KNA OP 1/536.

³³ Objections were raised to the system from the outset: Memo, ? to Chief Secretary, 6 Nov. 1956, KNA OP 1/536; Town Clerk, Kampala to Supervisor of Elections, 23 May 1960, UNA Elections 1 L/133; Uganda Cabinet Minute 33 (62) of 13 Mar. 1962, UKNA FCO 141/18335.

³⁴ DC Narok to PC Southern, 17 June 1961, KNA PC NGO 1/1/51.

matter of much importance, as these were the only guide for the illiterate voter); they would mark their preference with a cross and place the paper into a box in open view. But in Uganda, the multi-box system was used in 1961, 1962 and 1980; and in Ghana in all elections and referenda from 1954 to 1964. Multi-boxes were also introduced in Kenya (which had not previously used the system) for the 1969 elections – to be abandoned again after that, and never reintroduced.³⁵ In 1969 in Ghana, an elaborate hybrid system was developed in which voters were given one ballot paper for each candidate – marked with the party name and symbol – and an envelope; they were then guided into a screened room where they selected a single ballot paper, put this in an envelope, and disposed of all the other papers in a basin of acid.³⁶ The voter then emerged from the screened room and passed the envelope to a voting official, who felt it to make sure that there was one, and only one, paper in it and then placed it in the ballot box. The system was used again in the Union government referendum of 1978; then abandoned in the face of multiple stories that voters were smuggling out unused papers and using these to show how they had voted – or rather, not voted – in return for money.³⁷

The survival of the multi-box (and of the multiple paper system in Ghana) was partly a result of a calculation that it advantaged one side of another. This was most obviously the case in Uganda in 1980, where one party's insistence on the use of this system suggests strongly that they expected to be able to rig the election by manipulating it.³⁸ But it also reflected the challenges faced by electoral management bodies. The multi-box system was easier and cheaper, since in its original form it meant that a single, simple, ballot paper could be used at every polling station, in every constituency – there was no need to print candidates' names, or party symbols, on the papers themselves. By the 1980s, the multi-box in particular had become the focus for fears of malpractice, the symbol of a state that was deeply partisan. It was also seen as somehow not modern, and the implication that the citizen-voter was unequal to the task of marking a ballot paper had become unacceptable. As a result, elections in all three countries came to use a single ballot box and to require the voter to mark a ballot paper (in Kenya from 1974, Ghana from 1979 and Uganda from 1994; in Ghana, the mark was made by thumbprint and inkpad, in Kenya and Uganda by pen). In both Kenya and Ghana, the change preceded the 'second liberation' of the early 1990s and international pressure for multi-partyism. And, in the Uganda, it was driven by local district officials who, concerned that illiterate voters were unable even to use a pen to make a mark, instructed their subordinates to 'embark on the process of educating the masses in how to hold the pen'.³⁹

The Kenyan move to the single-paper, single-box system was briefly interrupted by an experiment with queue-voting in which voters stood in line behind a picture of their preferred candidate. Entirely and intentionally non-secret, the system was used in elections in cooperative societies for years, but a proposal that it should be adopted for a parliamentary election in 1969 was mocked for its backwardness: "'We are not living in the Stone Age'", one MP was reported as saying.⁴⁰ But in 1988, as the Kenya's President tried to assert control over the one-party state, queue-voting was used in primaries to choose the party's parliamentary candidates: a decision variously explained as being made either 'because many voters cannot read or write' or as an assertion of a distinctively

³⁵ '10,000 poll staff "all set to go"', *Daily Nation*, 6 Nov. 1969, 1.

³⁶ Booklet 'How to vote', copy in UKNA FCO 65/83.

³⁷ 'How to vote on June n18', *Daily Graphic*, 18 May 1979, 7; Calder, British High Commission Accra to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 5 Mar. 1979, FCO 65/2177.

³⁸ Justin Willis, Gabrielle Lynch and Nic Cheeseman, 'A valid electoral exercise'? Uganda's 1980 elections and the observers' dilemma', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* [in press].

³⁹ DC Kwale to all Dos, 26 Sep. 1974, KNA CA 7/35.

⁴⁰ 'Primaries to be under secret ballot', *Daily Nation*, 1 Aug. 1969, 4.

African 'traditional democratic system'.⁴¹ The elections caused a storm of controversy, with widespread allegations of intimidation and rigging compounding the symbolic effect of this system in undermining the idea of a separation of state and society.⁴² As a result, queue-voting was abandoned in Kenya and has not been used again in the country to date.

The drive to make the ballot both secret and open took further physical form from the end of the 1990s. Previously ballot boxes in all three countries been made of wood or metal; apart from a widely-lamented tendency to rust, it was impossible to estimate how many votes had been cast.⁴³ With the return of multi-party elections, donor funding financed a move to plastic ballot boxes that – apart from being lighter than wood or metal ones – were transparent, so that all could see how full they were.⁴⁴ Again, the innovation was a performative response to the fear that elections might be seen as evidence of the state's entanglement with society, and its partiality, rather than of an enactment of bureaucratic order. In this way, it is telling that the Ghanaian Electoral Commission sought donor funding for transparent boxes in 1996, not because they believed that this would actually help to prevent rigging, but in order to restore opposition parties' confidence in the electoral process.⁴⁵

The colocation of technologies

For many years, the technology of identification remained relatively constant, though with some variation between countries. All used paper registers, compiled on typewriters, often printed with stencils. The Kalamazoo system, which offered a pre-computerized way to slowly build up a fully alphabetised list, was briefly tried in Uganda in the late 1950s; but more usually the lists were only partly alphabetised. Typists simply arranged lists in blocks by first letter of first name; or, within each alphabetical block, voters appeared in the order in which they had registered, identified by a number given at the time.⁴⁶ At the polling station, the process of linking the would-be voter to a name on the list could be a slow and laborious one, hampered by the typing errors or inconsistent spelling practices, which were common.⁴⁷ In Kenya, late-colonial protocol was to issue voters' cards with handwritten details when voters registered; this was maintained after independence, and a voter was required to produce his or her card in order to vote.⁴⁸ Sometimes voters sold or were bullied into giving them up to others, who would vote for them, as the systematic attempt to fix and

⁴¹ 'Observers to witness nominations', *The Standard*, 12 Feb. 1988, 3; 'Now Muli hits back at Ngei', *The Standard*, 26 Feb. 1988, 1; Editorial 'Final leg starts', *The Standard*, 23 Feb. 1988, 4.

⁴² 'Church speaks out on elections', *The Standard*, 19 Feb. 1988, 1; 'Ngengi blames election officials', *The Standard*, 25 Feb. 1988, 1.

⁴³ For the problem of rusting ballot boxes, see for example DC Kwale to PC Coast, 6 Feb. 1971, KNA CQ 11/2.

⁴⁴ First used in Uganda in 2006: 'Transparent ballot boxes to be used in polls', *Daily Monitor*, 13 Jan. 2006, p. 5; see photographs, p. 6 *Daily Monitor*, 24 Feb. 2006.

⁴⁵ Interview with Afari Gyan, Chair of the Electoral Commission of Ghana, Cambridge, UK, July 2012.

⁴⁶ Allen, Supervisor of Elections to Wraith, Supervisor of Elections, Nigeria, 11 Nov. 1959, UNA Elections L 119 Vol. 1. See also Supervisor of Elections, 'Registration of electors', nd 1962, KNA DC Lamu 2/2/12; Mbela, Supervisor of Elections to all DCs, 30 Mar. 1966, KNA DC KT 3/1/11; Supervisor of Elections to all DCs, 5 July 1967, KNA CB 1/10; Montgomery, Supervisor of Elections to all DCs, 19 Mar. 1974, KNA CA 7/34.

⁴⁷ Dennis Austin, *Politics in Ghana, 1946-60* (London/Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1970 (first 1964)) Supervisor of Elections to all DCs, 19 Dec. 1970, KNA CQ 11/2; '600 poll papers are withdrawn', *The Standard*, 27 Sep. 1983, 9.

⁴⁸ See for example 'You will be prosecuted, warns Njonjo', *Daily Nation*, 7 Nov. 1979, 1; 'Malpractices "will not affect poll results"', *The Standard*, 24 Sep. 1983, 3.

individualize identity was constantly subverted.⁴⁹ In Uganda, cards were not issued in early elections, but were in 1980, and thereafter, while in Ghana the late-colonial practice was to give the voter a counterpart section of the registration form, though they were not required to produce this to vote. In response to the buying and stealing of these forms, there were plans to issue photographic voters' cards in Ghana for the 1969 elections 'to double-check the identity of voters', but the cost and logistical challenges proved insurmountable. As a result, simple written counterparts were issued again and these were not required to vote.⁵⁰ In the 1990s these processes were reformed, first with the addition of a thumbprint, and then with a photograph. However, there continued to be uncertainty over whether the voter was actually required to produce the card to vote, and no firm policy was established as to whether voters needed a photographic card, or indeed any card at all, to cast their ballot.⁵¹

Meanwhile, word processing began to shift the possibilities of ordering lists in the 1990s when, for the first time, it became possible to produce fully alphabetised registers for each polling station – although errors of data entry and editing meant that finding voters' names could still be a challenge. More directly performative innovations in identification were driven partly by widespread rumours of impersonation – that is, fraudulent voting in which a person assumes the identity of a registered voter to cast a ballot – and multiple voting. They were driven also by commercial interests – and by the consistent urge, shared by officials and by politicians, to work new technologies into the disciplinary performance of elections. These material changes, evident since 2000, have taken slightly variant forms: the simplest being a printed photographic register (as in Uganda in 2006).⁵² But all have come to be fundamentally similar in that they now foreground electronic biometry, and combine the issuing of cards with the use of digital technologies and an electronic register; these are approaches which transfer the act of identification from a paper register to the body of the voter themselves, which must be scanned and verified. These technologies do not always work very well in a purely practical sense, and the paper register is always still a visible part of the process. But these constant innovations in technology locate elections in an emergent set of practices which foreground the individuating power of digital technologies in an imaginary of electoral modernity.⁵³

Significantly, none of these technologies operates in isolation. The work that is done by ballot boxes and paper registers or electronic voter identification devices is dependent on their deployment alongside many other things. The list of equipment issued to Presiding Officers in the Gold Coast in 1956 reminds us of this:

'The following is a check list of the materials required at a Polling Station:

1. Ballot boxes
2. Tables

⁴⁹ 'Voters card arrests', *The Standard*, 24 Sep. 1983, 1; 'Voters cheated on KANU cards', *The Standard*, 1 Feb. 1988, 1; Letter 'Let's ban electoral apathy', *Daily Nation*, 1 July 1997, 7.

⁵⁰ '140 buses now arrive', *Daily Graphic*, 3 Feb. 1969, 1; *Parts I and II of the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Electoral and Local Government Reform* (Accra: Government Printer, 1967); Lewis, British High Commission Accra to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 24 July 1969, UKNA FCO 65/91; 'Crabbe: keep duplicate copies', *Daily Graphic*, 13 Jan. 1969, 1.

⁵¹ *Election Officials' Manual*, 24.

⁵² 'How votes were stolen in 2001', *Daily Monitor*, 12 Feb. 2006, p. 1.

⁵³ Giulia Piccolino, 'Infrastructural state capacity for democratization? Voter registration and identification in Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana compared', *Democratization*, 23, 3 (2016), pp. 498-519; for innovations in biometric banking which have run alongside change at the polling station, see Keith Breckenridge, 'The world's first biometric money: Ghana's e-Zwich and the contemporary influence of South African biometrics', *Africa* 80, 4 (2010), pp. 642-662.

3. Chairs
4. Screens
5. Ballot papers
6. Official seal (for use with sealing wax)
7. Sealing wax
8. Candles (better than a match for melting sealing wax)
9. Matches
10. Copy of Register of Electors
11. Pencils (for marking the Register)
12. Indelible ink
13. India rubber
14. Pens
15. Ink
16. Blotting paper
17. Sheets of paper for notes, messages etc
18. Pro-forma for arrest of person charged with personation (Form X)
19. Tendered Votes list (Form Y) and envelope (Regulation 24 (1)(f))
20. Handing over certificate and envelope (Form Z)
21. Ballot Papers Account and Envelope (Form B)
22. Envelope for unused and spoilt ballot papers (Regulation 24 (1) (b))
23. Envelope for copy of Register of Electors (Regulation 24 (1)(b))
24. Envelope for counterfoils of used ballot papers (Regulation 24 (1)(e))
25. Posters in form EL/7 (Regulation 14(g))
26. Clock or watch
27. Spare envelopes of different sizes
28. Copies of any instructions issued
29. Red tape
30. Screwdriver (if wooden boxes are used)
31. Pressure lamps or Hurricane lanterns, with Kerosene
32. Brown paper (for parcelling items (19) to (24) inclusive)
33. String
34. A box, or boxes, for all the above mentioned items
35. Scotch tape.'

It is the accumulation, and technical combination, of paper, chairs, boxes, stamps, envelopes, string and all the other items on the list that creates the polling station.⁵⁴ Such lists of the required materials in polling station continued to be part of the preparation for elections now, as sixty years ago; detailing the methodical accumulation and distribution of the paraphernalia of bureaucracy.⁵⁵ What are sometimes called "polling kits" (often packed inside ballot boxes) containing smaller and rarer items (mainly seals, stamps, ink, tape) are put together, distributed, and added to chairs and tables which are found (mostly) in place, and configured into the voting machine.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Directions to Returning Officers* (Accra: Minister of Local Government), 8 June 1956, PRAAD ADM 5/4/137.

⁵⁵ For more examples of such lists: Government Printer to DC Toro, 30 Mar 1961, Kabarole District Archive, ELE 374 (88) 3; DC Kakamega to Supervisor of Elections, 8 July 1969, KNA DC KMG 2/15/1; for a modern example see *Election Officials' Manual*, 1996, 12.

⁵⁶ The term 'polling kit' can be found in for example 'Final report for the post-election self-evaluation implementation strategic workshop', 1996, in Gulu District Records, Box 529 File ADM 6; there is a photograph showing boxes of such material in p. 2 *Daily Monitor*, 23 Feb. 2006.

Keeping order

The representations of polling stations discussed above show them as neat, and calm; these technologies, and the associated processes, are intended to produce a space that is very much under control. The official in charge of each polling station is known – now, as in the late colonial period – as a ‘presiding officer’, and the instructions given to these officials have consistently emphasised order and control as key terms, and aims: ‘The Presiding officer shall keep order at the polling station’; ‘You are responsible for keeping order in your polling station’, ‘The Presiding Officer has complete control of the polling station’.⁵⁷ Presiding officers in Uganda in 1962 were told to ‘Be ready to show . . . a line all round the polling station building and about 20 yards from it; this will enclose the area over which you exercise control’.⁵⁸ Their instructions emphasised the need to turn those who came to the polling stations into obedient voters, drawing on the support of uniformed state functionaries:

In designing the polling station the aim should be to bring the electors through in a steady and orderly flow . . . In the first instance the voters have to be organized into queues outside the precincts of the polling station, and I suggest that this duty is best performed by others than the purely election officials, that is to say Chiefs, Sub-chiefs, Police and Tribal Police . . .

It will greatly assist the efficient conduct of polling if proper arrangements for dealing with voters outside the polling station are made. Someone should be on duty outside the polling station (perhaps a village chief) to ensure that the voters present enter the polling station in an orderly manner.⁵⁹

That the polling station should epitomise a bureaucratic order is fundamental: within the polling station, regulations routinely insisted that only the presiding officer should communicate with the elector.⁶⁰ It is this isolating, individuating order that enables and authorises the process of individualization and judgement, and instructions imagine this enabling process as smooth and trouble-free:

The elector is in due course brought within the precincts of the polling station and shows his card to the guide, who indicates to which part of the polling station he should proceed. He is shown into the polling station and goes up to the table where an officer is seated and he gives him his election card. The officer at the register reads out the name and number as he is required by law to do (this is to enable anyone to challenge his identity).⁶¹

The process is focussed on the enrolling of the citizen-voter. But we should remember that by their nature these instructions also enframe the staff of the polling station. The polling station requires citizenship of the voter; it requires the staff to be functionaries, cut loose from the citizens, and the

⁵⁷ Gold Coast ‘The Electoral Provisions (Assembly Elections) Regulations, 1954, PRAAD (Kumasi) ARG 6/24/5; *Instructions to Presiding Officers* (Accra: Minister of Local Government), 8 June 1956, PRAAD ADM 5/4/137; *Election Officials’ Manual*, 1996, 13. The phrase is taken, more or less word for word, from instructions devised for polling officials in England in the aftermath of the crucial electoral reforms of the later 19th century: Malcolm Crook and Tom Crook, ‘The advent of the secret ballot in Britain and France, 1789-1914: from public assembly to private comportment’, 466, *History* 92, 4 (2007), 449-71.

⁵⁸ *Handbook for Presiding Officers* (Kampala: Government, printer, 1962); for other examples see DC Kitui to all presiding officers, 5 Aug. 1965, KNA DC KTI 3/1/11; ‘Parliamentary and Presidential Elections Regulations, 1969’, KNA 342.676207.

⁵⁹ Wilkinson, Supervisor of Elections to all DCs, 22 Apr 1963 KNA CC 1/35.

⁶⁰ ‘Presidential and Parliamentary Elections Regulations, 1969’, KNA 342.676207 KEN.

⁶¹ Wilkinson, Supervisor of Elections to all DCs, 22 Apr 1963 KNA CC 1/35

layout and rituals of the polling station, from days of training to the swearing of oaths, are intended to separate the staff from the voting citizen: a 'mock poll' for staff in Kenya in 1979 culminated in the staff being reminded of the importance of 'efficiency and impartiality'.⁶² The polling station creates its staff as bureaucrats, changing the possibilities of action for them.⁶³ In late-colonial elections, the staff were set apart from voters by personal clothing choices which advertised their claims to educational status as well as by the physical arrangements of the station: photographs from the 1950s and 1960s routinely contrast the polling clerk in shirt, trousers and shoes, seated behind the desk, with the standing lines of voters in cloth.⁶⁴ In more recent decades, election staff have been issued with shirts or tabards which advertise their role.

The desire to perform bureaucratic order has been a powerful force for these functionaries; they, like the voters, have often been reminded of an international gaze which requires them to perform an orderly election, and in recent years that sense of scrutiny has been heightened by the physical presence of international monitors and local observers, and the burgeoning supply of training and educational material supplied by international organizations which promote democracy. Polling station officials, as noted, have not usually been civil servants – they have not had the particular training or technical examinations that shape the vocational bureaucrat. Yet they derive authority from the list, the desk, and the rubber stamp, and this collocation of material – together with an awareness of an external gaze – also disciplines them, and requires bureaucratic behaviour.⁶⁵ It also disciplines the higher officials – those who are not in the polling station, but who are responsible for the creation and running of this very visible, performative phenomenon. The bureaucratic record of elections across the three countries over the last six decades is largely hidden, but the fragments that are available are revealing. Repeatedly, functionaries have thrown time, energy and resources into the production of this order, with sometimes frantic last minute attempts to identify possible polling stations, to demand orderly behaviour from electoral staff, and to requisition vehicles to carry materials and staff to the site of some remote polling station – even when it was apparent that the overall results of the election were not in doubt.⁶⁶ And others are also enframed by the particular arrangement of physical items and space in the polling station; the agents of candidates were not oathed, but they were required to sit in a particular space and owed their status to a bureaucratic order which required them to produce letters of appointment.

The particular order of the polling station claims to extract all those involved from the surrounding world: it has made and divided them, at least notionally, into citizens and functionaries, temporarily freed from the ties of family, clan, or ethnicity; from employer or landlord; from church or mosque.

⁶² 'Officials take part in mock poll', *Daily Nation*, 6 Nov. 1979, 4.

⁶³ For oaths, see for example section 10 of the 'Parliamentary and Presidential Elections Regulations, 1969', for Kenya: copy in KNA 342.676207 KEN; also Shabaila, DOH to DC, 4 Dec. 1969, KNA DC KMG 2/16/11

⁶⁴ See for example the photograph of the 1956 Gold Coast elections at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_National_Archives_UK_-_CO_1069-53-74-1-001.jpg.

⁶⁵ For the vocational formation of bureaucrats, see Bierschenk and de Sardan, 'Studying the dynamics of African bureaucracies', pp. 12-13.

⁶⁶ The late-colonial archive offers much evidence of official efforts to create polling stations, and make them function, see for example DC Kwale to Supervisor of Elections, 8 April 1963, and DC MSA to Forestry Officer Kwale, 30 Mar 1963, KNA CC 1/35; the archival record for the post-colonial period is much more limited, but where available it shows a continuing administrative concern with this: Supervisor of Elections to all DCs and PC Nairobi, 7 Sep. 1974, KNA CA 7/35; the earnest tone of the 'Report of the proceedings of a post-election evaluation survey' from Uganda in 1996 is striking (Gulu District Records, Box 529 ADM 6; see also Returning Officer Gulu to Rector, Major Seminary, Alokolu, 21 June 1996, Gulu District Records Box 529 CAO/G/ADM/6; District Registrar, Gulu, 'Report for the months of February, March and April 2006, Gulu District Records, Box 627 CR 225/3.

These processes can constrain power: attempts by authoritarian states to introduce alternative forms of voting which do not offer secrecy, or do not aspire to involve the whole adult population and so require less bureaucratic work – by queuing, or by a show of hands and delegated systems like that introduced in Uganda in the late 1980s – have met with resistance, and have not endured. But the secrecy of the ballot also produces power, through disciplining the voter.

Alternative orders

The imagined sphere of bureaucratic order is only one part of the electoral process, and it derives much of its distinctive power from opposition to another part of the process: the campaign. Campaigns have used some of the same material resources as polling stations: paper, uniforms and cars matter here, too. But they are used in very different ways: to print posters, and leaflets; to assert and claim loyalty, to capture public space by broadcasting music or slogans, and ferrying supporters to rallies and polling station. Since the 1950s, candidates and their agents have pursued multiple different kinds of activity that produce an order – or orders – which are not bureaucratic. They pursue a politics which is sometimes loud, usually colourful, often disputatious and sometimes physically violent. They meet with small groups of voters, organized by multiple intermediaries – local elders, religious leaders, small business groups, market associations, youth clubs – and they address meetings and rallies, some big and some small. As they do so, candidates – and voters – are constantly contracting, making and extracting promises and undertakings. Candidates, or their agents, routinely give gifts of money or commodities in these meetings, often through the intermediaries who arrange them. In these meetings, voters are routinely acting as part of groups, making deals that are mediated by brokers, and/or by some sense of collectivity that is not that of the individual citizen. The campaign, therefore, evokes quite different political subjectivities to that of the disciplined individual citizen.

Polling station regulations assert the difference between these two kinds of order by excluding the material forms, as well as the behaviours, of the campaign from the vicinity of the polling station. Posters, music, badges, t-shirts are all banned and this contrast between the tumult and multiple contracting of the campaign and the singular order of the polling station is crucial to the state effect. But people's experience of the polling station, and – perhaps equally importantly – alternative narrative representations of its processes, very often run counter to the envisioned order of the polling station. In their behaviour at the polling station, and in how they talk about it, voters, functionaries, and candidates, may undermine or question the apparent categorical boundary between the order of the polling station and the alternative order of the campaign – even as they perform this distinction. In doing so, they subvert the technologies of elections to fashion their own subjectivities, as Romain Bertrand has argued.⁶⁷

The sparse, ordered space imagined by handbooks and voter education posters may seem very distant from the reality of voting: and this has been the case since the 1950s. The crowds outside may line up, but inside the polling station the process often goes awry, sometimes in small ways, sometimes more dramatically. Voters find that their names are not on the list, or that they have apparently already voted; they crowd the space, they argue over who may vote, or who has voted; blind or illiterate voters – or those who claim to be – require help from polling staff or (depending on the regulations) their chosen assistants. The marking of the ballot paper can become a public scrum,

⁶⁷ Romain Bertrand, Jean-Louis Briquet and Peter Pels, 'Introduction' 6 and 10, in Bertrand et al, *Cultures of Voting*, 1-15.

rather than private moment. Polling staff make mistakes – deliberately or not. They tick off the wrong names on the register, give the wrong number of ballot papers, or give papers that are already spoiled. The processes, quite simply, can go wrong. This may be because the equipment does not turn up. Alternatively, processed may be made to go wrong by staff, or voters, who do not obey the disciplining logic of the station and instead assert, or acknowledge, their claims on and debts to others. This is malpractice, formally; seen another way, it is a refusal to accept the logic of the autonomous state, and it reveals the distinct order of the state as a fiction. The educative lesson of the polling station may be that bureaucracy is capricious and unpredictable, and that both voters and polling staff, far from being enframed as individual citizens or as agents of an impartial state, remain deeply embedded in the alternative patterns of order that suffuse the world outside the polling station. An agonized awareness of this subversive lesson has occasionally been evident in the extravagant impossibility of some electoral instructions, such as that those used as polling staff should have no links to the local population.⁶⁸

Such counter-hegemonic lessons can be spread by stories, as well as by experience. Since the 1950s, a constantly circulating and accumulating body of often vivid stories of malpractice has – like the posters – focussed on the distinctive combination of technologies which makes the polling station. In the run-up to the elections in Uganda in 1962 (run on a multi-box system), stories abounded of long-handled tweezers used to extract votes from boxes. Grace Ibingira, an ally of Milton Obote in the Uganda People's Congress alleged that in the previous elections:

A voter casting his ballot for party X would hurriedly tamper with the ballot box for party Y either by turning it sideways to obscure the hole or by stuffing the hole with grass . . . or by pouring ink into the box to get the ballot papers spoilt.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, members of the Democratic Party – then, briefly, in power – told stories of ‘forged ballot papers, stamped with an imitation of the official stamp’ or of ‘an acid which, if poured into a ballot box, could burn all the ballot papers without trace’.⁷⁰ A few years later, the commission in Ghana appointed to look into electoral reform was offered a vivid catalogue of the abuse of electoral processes and technologies in the polling station:

voters were prevailed upon at the polling stations by the chiefs, the District Commissioners and local party officials with violence or threats of violence and of detention under the Preventive Detention Act to vote for the CPP. Opposition candidates, their agents and supporters were sometimes intimidated, assaulted or expelled from the polling stations by Workers Brigade or CPP officials or arrested by the police to prevent them from making use of their vote . . .

. . . ballot papers were dumped into the box allocated to the CPP candidates by polling staff and others sometimes without an attempt to reconcile the number of ballot papers so used with the total number of registered electors. . . . The apertures of the ballot boxes belonging to rival candidates were sometimes sealed to prevent their supporters from voting for them . . . In certain instances the symbols on the ballot boxes of rival candidates as well as the boxes were removed in the course of the elections. Sulphuric acid was also poured into the

⁶⁸ Supervisor of Elections to all DCs and PC Nairobi, 7 Sep. 1974; DC Kwale to all Dos, 26 Sep. 1974, both in KNA CA 7/35.

⁶⁹ Grace Ibingira, Opposition Office to Dreschfield, Commissioner on Special Duty, 26 Oct. 1961, UKNA FCO 141/18335.

⁷⁰ Extract from Minutes of 5th Cabinet meeting, 27 March 1962; Minute 109 (62) of Cabinet, 10 Apr. 1962, UKNA FCO 141/18335.

ballot boxes earmarked for the rival candidates in order to destroy the ballot boxes therein.⁷¹

Similar stories continue to circulate today across all three countries: of widespread double-voting and of people impersonating registered voters; of 'pre-ticked ballot papers'; of polling officials who spoil ballot papers with inky grease that they store on their hair; or who issue multiple ballot papers to individual voters.⁷² Again and again, these accounts of malpractice undermine the vision of ordered governmentality imagined in the posters, and insist that the voter is not an autonomous individual, and that state is not separate from society.

Conclusion

Voting, then, may produce a state effect; performing a distinction between bureaucratic order and alternative clientelistic or ethnic orders. But that effect is constantly challenged by voters and functionaries who – despite the multiple material technologies of order which set the polling station apart – reveal their entanglement with society. There are at least two sources of tension here. The first is that between the idea of the state as separate from and above society, its power authorised by that separation, and the reality of a state that is heavily – and in many cases problematically – embedded in society. The second tension lies between the notion of the voter as an individual citizen operating in isolation and the reality of elections in which group voting (religious, ethnic, communal) is widespread. It is the combination of these tensions that gives the voting machine of the polling station its paradoxical nature: it claims to create separate orders, yet fails to entirely do so.

The ideal of the polling station, and experience and the tales of malpractice, each become elements of a process which evokes an ideal of citizenship and stateness, while lamenting the failure to achieve that ideal: the state may appear as distinctive in its ability to assemble technologies of order, but it is by no means predictable, autonomous or transparent. Repeated elections may lead to 'increasing obedience to the rules of electoral "civility"', as Banegas has argued;⁷³ perhaps not least because media depictions which fetishise the ballot – the many photos of long queues standing in the sun, of ordinary people placing their folded paper into the ballot box – have bestowed an air of hyper-reality on elections. But this civility is not consistent, or all-pervasive, and the lessons learned in the polling station may not be those of responsible citizenship. The polling station, defined by technologies of bureaucratic order, is a powerful classroom – but the lessons which it teaches are not consistent, or uncontested.

⁷¹ *Parts I and II of the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Electoral and Local Government Reform* (Accra: Government Printer, 1967), 27-28; similar stories had been reported earlier: see 'Ghana will be truly free and happy', leaflet circulating in Accra in 1964, copy in UKNA DO 195/258.

⁷² 'How votes were stolen in 2001', *Daily Monitor*, 12 Feb 2006, p. 1 and 15 Feb. 2006, p. 5; Norbert Mao to Returning Officer, Gulu, 26 June 2001 and Alice Onok to Returning Officer Gulu, 17 June 1998, Gulu District Records Box 627 CR/D/225/2.

⁷³ Banegas, 'Commodification of the vote', 181 and 180.