Power of Language:

The Impact of Multilingual Recognition on Political

Participation among Linguistic Minorities

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Abstract

This study investigates whether symbolic inclusion can promote political participation among linguistic minorities. Leveraging Zimbabwe's 2013 multilingual policy as a quasi-experimental setting, we examine the effects of the official recognition of minority languages on political participation and its underlying mechanisms. Using a difference-in-differences model, we find that the policy increased voter turnout among linguistic minorities by approximately 10 percentage points, with particularly strong effects observed among rural residents and women. Mechanism analysis suggests that this behavioral change was not driven by increased feelings of social inclusion, but rather by improved perceptions of democracy and political freedom, which enhanced the perceived legitimacy of electoral participation. These findings underscore the potential of symbolic inclusion policies—such as multilingual reforms—to strengthen institutional connectivity and foster democratic engagement among historically marginalized groups.

Key words: nation building; ethnic minority; language

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1 Introduction

In ethnically and linguistically diverse societies, the management of linguistic plurality has long been viewed as a central challenge to nation-building (Rohner and Zhuravskaya, 2024). A dominant strand of earlier literature has portrayed linguistic fragmentation as an impediment to social cohesion and institutional development, advocating the consolidation of language use around a single national language as a necessary condition for effective state formation and national identity construction (Ansolabehere and Puy, 2022; Blanc and Kubo, 2024). Although linguistic diversity was often equated with disunity and political instability (Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005a; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005b), recent studies have shifted the analytical focus from the existence of diversity itself to the institutional arrangements that manage it.

The prior literature emphasizes that the consequences of linguistic diversity depend critically on the degree of connectivity within a society—that is, the extent to which individuals across linguistic groups are linked through communicative, institutional, and civic networks (Alcalde-Unzu et al., 2022). When such connectivity is weak or absent, linguistic minority groups may experience symbolic exclusion and limited access to state institutions. In this context, symbolic forms of inclusion that improve connectivity may alter how these groups engage with the political system. However, empirical evidence on whether and how such policies influence political behavior remains limited.

The primary objective of this study is to examine whether the symbolic inclusion of linguistic minority groups can influence political behavior and to explore the mechanisms through which such effects may arise. As a case of symbolic inclusion, we analyze Zimbabwe's multilingual policy implemented through the 2013 constitutional reform, which granted official recognition to 13 additional minority languages as national languages. This reform constitutes a rare example of a nationwide, state-led initiative to incorporate marginalized linguistic groups into the political community through formal institutional change. By leveraging the implementation of this reform as a quasi-experimental setting, we evaluate whether the policy led to changes in political participation and democratic attitudes among linguistic minorities relative to majority-language speakers.

To estimate the causal effects of symbolic inclusion on political behavior, we implement a difference-in-differences (DID) design that compares changes in outcomes for linguistic minorities relative to majority-language speakers before and after the 2013 constitutional reform. Drawing on repeated cross-sectional data from six rounds of Afrobarometer surveys conducted between 2009 and 2022, we assess both behavioral outcomes (i.e., voting) and attitudinal shifts, such as perceptions of democracy and political freedom. Our analysis reveals that the multilingual policy led to a significant increase in voting behavior among linguistic minorities—approximately 10 percentage points—effectively closing the pre-existing participation gap with majority-language speakers. At the same time, we observe a decline in engagement with individual political actors, suggesting a shift from informal, actor-based channels of access toward more institutionalized forms of political participation.

To understand the mechanisms underlying this behavioral shift, we examine changes in democratic attitudes and perceptions of social inclusion. The results suggest that the primary channel operates through enhanced perceptions of democracy and political freedom, rather than through a stronger sense of national belonging or fairness. In particular, linguistic minorities expressed greater satisfaction with democracy and stronger perceptions of freedom in the post-reform period. These perceptual shifts appear to have reinforced trust in political institutions and increased the perceived legitimacy of formal participation. We also find that the effects were especially pronounced among women and rural residents within linguistic minority communities—groups that have historically faced compounded forms of marginalization—highlighting the mobilizing potential of symbolic inclusion when institutional recognition aligns with broader patterns of exclusion.

This study contributes to the literature on linguistic diversity and nation-building. In multilingual and multiethnic societies, linguistic heterogeneity is often seen as an obstacle to the efficient provision of public goods and coordinated political action, thereby undermining state effectiveness (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005). As a result, state-building efforts have frequently moved toward linguistic unification, aiming to create a shared cultural and linguistic foundation (Ansolabehere and Puy, 2022). However, for linguistic minorities, such convergence often entails substantial assimilation costs (Rohner and Zhuravskaya, 2024). Such policies can function as exclusionary mechanisms, potentially generating inefficiencies in the process of nation-building by alienating minority populations from the political system.

An alternative approach emphasizes accommodation over assimilation. Multilingual policies that recognize and incorporate linguistic diversity may serve as explicit signals that minority groups are legitimate members of the national community. Such symbolic gestures can reshape minority-state relations, even if they come at the expense of administrative uniformity. Evidence from South Africa, for example, suggests that recognizing cultural diversity increased support for multiculturalism and raised the uptake of mother-tongue instruction in primary education (Hara, 2023). Building on this perspective, this study offers new empirical evidence on how symbolic inclusion through multilingual policy affects political behavior among linguistic minorities, and sheds light on the mechanisms through which such effects materialize.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature on minority rights and social inclusion. A growing body of research has documented the persistence of ethnic discrimination and prejudice against minority groups in both developed (Alan et al., 2023; Burgess and Greaves, 2013; Laouénan and Rathelot, 2022) and developing countries (Arceo-Gomez and Campos-Vazquez, 2014; Siddique et al., 2023). In response, several studies have increasingly emphasized policy-based approaches to fostering inclusion and reducing exclusionary practices (Aneja and Ritadhi, 2022; Anesi, 2012; Sharif, 2011). Building on this literature, the present study offers a novel perspective by examining how a symbolic, recognition-based policy—namely, multilingual inclusion—can influence political behavior among

marginalized groups. This approach complements existing work by linking institutional recognition to behavioral outcomes, thereby highlighting a mechanism through which minority inclusion may be advanced in practice.

2   Conceptual Framework

This section outlines the conceptual framework linking multilingual policy to political behavior in ethnically and linguistically diverse societies. Earlier literature often viewed linguistic fragmentation as a core obstacle to nation-building, with the consolidation of language use around a dominant national language seen as essential to fostering social cohesion and state capacity (Angerer et al., 2016; Blanc and Kubo, 2024; John and Özgür, 2021). From this perspective, the persistence of multiple languages and ethnic divisions—particularly in the context of low-income countries—has been cited as a root cause of underdevelopment and political instability (Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005a).

More recent research has moved beyond this view by distinguishing between the existence of linguistic diversity and the institutional management of that diversity. Alcalde-Unzu et al. (2022), for example, theoretically emphasize the importance of connectivity—defined as the extent to which individuals across linguistic groups can communicate and interact. According to this framework, it is not diversity per se that undermines stability or growth, but rather the isolation of linguistic minorities from broader social, economic, and institutional networks. When minority communities lack access to meaningful intergroup contact and participation, the result can be persistent inefficiencies, exclusion, and heightened risks of conflict.

This theoretical perspective is supported by empirical studies showing that linguistic and geographic proximity enhances prospects for integration (Desmet et al., 2020). For example, Montalvo and Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2021) and Hodler et al. (2020) find that greater linguistic overlap and reduced physical isolation are associated with higher levels of political participation, social trust, and institutional stability. In addition, when minority groups are marginalized and face persistent inequalities, their levels of political participation—particularly voter turnout—tend to decline (Ackermann et al., 2024).

However, improving connectivity in practice remains a substantial challenge. Linguistic minorities are often geographically concentrated in remote areas, where opportunities for intergroup contact are structurally limited. While promoting a single national language might reduce linguistic distance and theoretically enhance communicative efficiency, such approaches may come at a cost. In particular, the suppression of minority languages in education can hinder human capital development and exacerbate existing inequalities by undermining access to culturally and linguistically relevant learning environments (Laitin and Ramachandran, 2022).

Given these trade-offs, institutional approaches that enhance connectivity—especially for

marginalized populations in peripheral regions—are essential. In this context, multilingual policies that formally recognize minority languages offer a more inclusive alternative. Rather than erasing linguistic diversity, such policies seek to integrate it within the national institutional framework. Official recognition of minority languages can reduce symbolic and communicative distance between the state and historically excluded communities, and signal that these groups are legitimate members of the political community. In fact, evidence from South Africa demonstrates that such symbolic inclusion can reshape political participation: Hara (2022) finds that multilingual media reforms after apartheid encouraged marginalized linguistic communities to engage in political behavior aligned with the promotion of national unity.

These signals may reshape how linguistic minorities perceive their place in the state, fostering a sense of recognition, legitimacy, and inclusion. In this way, political participation can be understood as a meaningful expression of social and institutional connectivity. When minority groups view the state as responsive and inclusive, they may be more inclined to engage with it not only economically or socially, but also politically. Hence, we hypothesize that multilingual policies, by signaling symbolic inclusion, encourage linguistic minorities to translate that recognition into tangible acts of political participation.

To elucidate how symbolic inclusion translates into political behavior, we examine two specific mechanisms that may mediate this relationship. The first is the improvement of democratic perceptions, which serves as a key dimension of institutional connectivity. When minority groups perceive that they are acknowledged and respected by the state and society—through the formal recognition of their language—they may come to view democratic institutions as more legitimate, inclusive, and responsive. This perceptual shift may restore a sense of connection to the political system from which they may have felt historically excluded.

In addition, enhanced perceptions of core democratic principles—such as political freedom and freedom of expression—help lower psychological barriers to participation, including fear of state repression or social marginalization. Prior research has shown that the removal of such constraints can significantly increase political engagement among minority groups (Bernini et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2017). In this way, multilingual policy functions not merely as symbolic recognition, but as a mechanism that rebuilds institutional connectivity by lowering perceived costs of participation and fostering a renewed willingness to engage.

Second, symbolic recognition may foster political participation by strengthening individuals' sense of social inclusion. When the state formally acknowledges a minority group's language, it affirms their legitimacy within the national community, potentially shifting identity from an exclusive focus on ethnic belonging toward a more inclusive sense of national citizenship. This transformation helps reduce the symbolic and social boundaries that have historically marginalized these communities. Strengthening national identity helps consolidate the link between minorities and state institutions, encouraging more

active engagement in civic and political life. As Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) argue, inclusionary signals can promote societal assimilation, which in turn lowers perceptions of threat and diminishes intergroup tensions. In this sense, multilingual policy acts as an institutional channel for integrating historically excluded groups into the normative and participatory fabric of the nation.

By isolating and empirically testing these pathways, this study aims to clarify the mechanisms through which symbolic inclusion influences political behavior. This framework allows us to position the case of Zimbabwe's 2013 multilingual policy as a quasi-experimental setting to examine the political effects of institutional recognition in a multiethnic society.

3   Background and data

3.1   Background of constitutional reform

This study exploits Zimbabwe's 2013 constitutional reform—which granted official recognition to previously excluded minority languages—as a quasi-experimental setting. Zimbabwe is a multi-ethnic society comprising over twenty ethnic groups, though the vast majority of the population belongs to the Shona and Ndebele communities. According to UNICEF (2016), approximately 75% of the population speaks Shona and 17% speaks Ndebele. Prior to the reform, only three languages—English, Shona, and Ndebele, all associated with dominant groups—were recognized as national languages.

From 1987, Zimbabwe was ruled by President Robert Mugabe under an increasingly autocratic regime that eroded democratic institutions. The 2008 elections triggered an acute political crisis, marked by widespread violence and deep polarization between the ruling party and the opposition. In the aftermath, and under the mediation of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), the major political parties agreed to draft a new constitution to restore democratic governance, uphold the rule of law, and promote constitutional reform.

Adopted in 2013, the new constitution redefined Zimbabwe as a multilingual state by designating 13 additional minority languages as national languages, raising the total to 16 (we refer to this official recognition of minority languages as the multilingual policy).[1] Although framed in terms of linguistic equality and cultural diversity, the reform did not result from grassroots mobilization or demands for minority language rights. Instead, it reflected a top-down political compromise in response to the post-election crisis.

This institutional shift provides a valuable quasi-experimental setting to examine how the symbolic inclusion of minority identities—through language recognition—shapes democratic attitudes and

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[1] The 13 languages newly recognized as national languages under the 2013 constitution are Chewa, Chibarwe, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Shangani, Sign Language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda, and Xhosa.

political behavior. Our identification strategy relies on two features of the reform. First, although the policy was implemented nationwide, its relevance varied across individuals depending on whether they belonged to a group whose language was newly recognized, generating variation in treatment intensity based on individuals' linguistic backgrounds. Second, because the reform was initiated as part of a national political compromise rather than in response to local advocacy, the timing and content of the policy are plausibly exogenous to individual-level outcomes.

3.2　Data

This study uses individual-level repeated cross-sectional data from Afrobarometer to evaluate the effects of Zimbabwe's multilingual policy on political behavior and its mechanisms. Afrobarometer is a widely used public opinion survey platform that collects nationally representative data on political, economic, and social attitudes across more than 30 African countries. The analysis draws on six waves of data from Zimbabwe (Rounds 4 to 9), conducted in 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021, and 2022, yielding a total of 9,600 observations.[2] Summary statistics are presented in Appendix Table A1. Among respondents, 7.4% self-identify as belonging to linguistic minority groups.

3.3　Outcomes

The primary outcomes analyzed in this study focus on political behavior, which is captured through two dimensions: participation in political activities and institutional engagement with political actors.

First, political participation is measured using four indicators. The first is voting behavior in the most recent national election, coded as a binary variable equal to 1 if the respondent reported voting and 0 otherwise. The remaining three indicators reflect broader civic engagement: attendance at a community meeting, raising an issue, and participation in a protest. These are measured on 3- or 4-point scales, capturing the intensity of involvement. To ensure comparability across survey rounds and consistency in interpretation, these variables are standardized such that higher values indicate more active participation.[3]

The second dimension, institutional engagement, is measured by the frequency of contact with political actors. Specifically, we focus on interactions with four types of actors: members of parliament, local councilors, government officials, and traditional leaders. The item on contact with traditional leaders is unavailable in Round 5 (2012) and is therefore missing for that wave; however, it is included

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[2] Because detailed geographic information is not available for Afrobarometer rounds prior to Round 4, we restrict our analysis to data from Round 4 and later.

[3] As a robustness check, we also re-estimate the models using binary versions of the civic engagement variables (equal to 1 if any participation is reported, and 0 otherwise), and find that the results remain qualitatively unchanged.

in the analysis to capture interactions with informal political authorities in later rounds. Respondents reported how often they had contacted each actor, using a four-point scale. Similarly, these variables are standardized within each round before being used in the analysis.

Furthermore, to explore the mechanisms underlying changes in political behavior, we examine perceptions related to democracy, social inclusion, and trust in political actors. Perceptions of democracy are organized into three conceptual domains. The first domain, general democratic perceptions, includes three items that assess respondents' views on the extent of democracy in the country, satisfaction with how democracy functions, and support for democracy as a form of government. The second domain, perceptions of freedom, captures attitudes toward freedom of expression, freedom of political association, and freedom in voting. The third domain, perceptions of the rule of law, comprises two items measuring perceptions of legal accountability and legal equality.

To capture social inclusion, we employ three indicators. The first is national identity, which measures whether individuals primarily identify as Zimbabwean or with their ethnic group. The second is ethnic fairness, which captures perceptions of whether one's ethnic group is treated fairly within the country. The third is legal equality, which captures whether respondents believe that all citizens are treated equally under the law. In addition, we assessed political trust through respondents' reported confidence in five political actors or institutions: the ruling party, the opposition party, the president, the local government council, and traditional leaders. All items related to perceptions are measured on 3- to 5-point scales and are standardized consistently across survey rounds prior to analysis.

4   Methodology

This study employs a DID model to estimate the impact of the official recognition of minority languages on political behavior among linguistic minorities. The policy intervention is defined as the implementation of Zimbabwe's multilingual policy under the 2013 constitution. In this setup, individuals from linguistic minority groups constitute the treatment group, while those from the linguistic majority serve as the control group. The following DID model is estimated:

$$Y_{irt} = \alpha + \beta_1 CT_t + \beta_2 Minority_{ir} + \beta_3 (CT_t \times Minority_{ir}) + \gamma X_{irt} + \rho_r + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{irt}, \tag{1}$$

where Y_{irt} represents the outcome of interest (i.e., political behavior and perceptions) for individual i in village r in year t. CT_t is a post-reform dummy variable that equals 1 for years after the implementation of the constitutional reform in 2013, and 0 otherwise. $Minority_i$ indicates linguistic minority dummy variable equal to 1 if individual i's first language is a minority language. X denotes a vector of control variables listed in Appendix Table A1. ρ_r and τ_t denote village fixed effects and year fixed effects, respectively. ε_{irt} is the error term.

In Equation (1), the key parameter of interest is the interaction term between the constitutional reform dummy and the minority language dummy, which identifies the effect of the official recognition of minority languages on linguistic minorities. If the policy enhanced political behavior and democratic perceptions among linguistic minorities, the coefficient on this interaction term, β_3, is expected to be positive.

In addition, the identifying assumption for the DID analysis is that, in the absence of the multilingual policy, political behavior among linguistic minority and majority groups would have followed parallel trends. To assess the plausibility of this assumption, we conduct an event study analysis that compares differential trends across groups in each survey wave relative to the year immediately preceding the reform (2012). In this framework, the absence of significant pre-treatment differences, particularly in 2009, would lend support to the parallel trends assumption and strengthen the validity of our identification strategy.

5   Results

5.1   Benchmark estimation

To assess the validity of the parallel trends assumption prior to conducting the DID estimation, we first examine the results of the event study. Figure 1 presents the estimated effects of the official recognition of minority languages on voting behavior in the most recent election, using the year immediately preceding the multilingual policy as the reference period. The coefficient for 2009 is –0.08, negative in sign and statistically insignificant, as indicated by the wide confidence interval. This finding supports the validity of the parallel trends assumption. In contrast, the estimated coefficients in the post-reform period remain consistently positive, although they are not statistically significant. This pattern suggests a potential upward shift in voting behavior among linguistic minorities following the reform.

Event study results for other outcomes related to political participation and institutional engagement are presented in Appendix Figure A1. As with voting behavior, the pre-reform coefficients for these outcomes show no statistically significant differences between minority and majority groups. These findings provide additional support for the plausibility of the parallel trends assumption.

Table 1 presents the DID estimates based on Equation (1) for four outcomes related to political participation. The results for voting behavior shown in Column (1) indicate that the interaction term between the multilingual policy dummy and the minority language dummy is positive and statistically significant for participation in voting in the most recent election. The estimated coefficient of 0.10 suggests that the official recognition of minority languages increased the likelihood of voting among linguistic minorities by approximately 10 percentage points.

In contrast, the policy appears to have had no significant impact on other forms of political participation. The estimated effects on attendance at a community meeting, participation in raising an

issue, and attendance at a protest (Columns 2 to 4) are small and statistically insignificant. These results indicate that the effect of multilingual policy was limited to formal electoral participation and did not extend to broader civic engagement.

We next examine whether the official recognition of minority languages affected institutional engagement with political actors. As shown in Table 2, all four indicators of institutional engagement yield negative coefficients, with statistically significant effects observed for contact with members of parliament (Column 1) and contact with government officials (Column 3). More specifically, following the constitutional reform, contact with members of parliament and government officials among linguistic minorities declined by 0.16 and 0.30 standard deviations, respectively.

5.2   Mechanisms

The findings of benchmark estimations indicate that the official recognition of minority languages promoted voting behavior among linguistic minorities. To understand the mechanisms behind the stimulation of political behavior, particularly only voting behavior among various forms of political participation, we next examine whether the multilingual policy influenced perceptions of democratic institutions, social inclusion, and political trust.

Table 3 presents the DID estimates for perceptions of democracy and freedom. In Column 1, the interaction term for extent of national democracy is positive and statistically significant, indicating that the multilingual policy increased this perception by 0.22 standard deviations. Similarly, satisfaction with democracy in Zimbabwe (Column 2) increased by 0.18 standard deviations, significant at the 10% level. In contrast, support for democracy as a preferred system of government (Column 3) shows a positive but statistically insignificant coefficient, indicating no meaningful change in regime preference. Overall, these results suggest that the official recognition of minority languages led linguistic minorities to perceive Zimbabwe as becoming more democratic, thereby enhancing their satisfaction with democratic governance.

For perceptions of freedom, all three shown in Columns 4 to 6 indicators show positive and statistically significant effects, with each effect exceeding 0.2 standard deviations. These findings suggest that the multilingual policy reinforced the perception among linguistic minorities that political freedoms—specifically, freedom of expression, freedom of political association, and freedom in voting—are formally granted and accessible to them within Zimbabwean society.

In the case of perceptions of social inclusion, the results, reported in Appendix Table A2, show no statistically significant effects. None of the three indicators—national identity, ethnic fairness, and legal equality—exhibits meaningful change, as the estimated coefficients are small in magnitude and not statistically significant. These findings suggest that the official recognition of minority languages did not substantially affect linguistic minorities' sense of national identity or their perceptions of fair and

equal treatment toward their ethnic group.

Lastly, we assess the impact of the multilingual policy on political trust by examining changes in trust toward five categories of political actors (Table 4). Columns 1 and 2 show that trust in the ruling party increased by 0.18 standard deviations, while trust in the opposition party declined by 0.26 standard deviations—both effects are statistically significant. These results suggest that, following the implementation of multilingual policy, linguistic minorities became more trusting of the ruling party and simultaneously less trusting of the opposition. This divergence is further supported by the event study analysis in Figure 2, which shows a growing gap between trust in the ruling party (blue line) and the opposition party (red line) in 2014 and 2017—a contrast that was not evident prior to the policy implementation. In contrast, Columns 3 to 5 show no statistically significant changes in trust toward other political actors, such as president, local government council, and traditional leaders. These findings indicate that the effects of the multilingual policy on political trust were specific to partisan actors rather than political institutions more generally.

These findings suggest that the recognition of minority languages under the 2013 constitutional reform enhanced democratic attitudes among linguistic minorities, particularly by strengthening their perceptions of general democracy and political freedoms. This shift in perception may have encouraged individuals to express their political preferences through institutionalized channels—most notably voting—instead of relying on direct engagement with political actors. Rather than seeking representation through personalized appeals, linguistic minorities may have come to view elections as a more legitimate and effective channel for political expression. The symbolic inclusion signaled by the official recognition of their language likely fostered a greater sense of political belonging and trust in democratic institutions. As a result, individuals increasingly chose to participate through formal mechanisms, such as voting, and felt less compelled to engage in actor-based, individualized strategies of political access.

5.3 Heterogeneity

To further investigate the impact of the multilingual policy on voting behavior observed in Table 1, we examine heterogeneity across two key demographic characteristics: residential location (rural and urban) and gender (men and women). For both dimensions, we re-estimate Equation (1) separately by subgroup.

Table 5 reports the results, with Columns 1 and 2 presenting estimates for rural and urban respondents, respectively, and Columns 3 and 4 showing results by gender. In terms of residential location, the effect of language recognition is positive and statistically significant among rural respondents, with an estimated increase of 18 percentage points in voting behavior (Column 1). Among urban respondents, the coefficient is also positive (0.07) but not statistically significant (Column 2).

A similar pattern observed in the gender-stratified analysis. While the coefficient for male

respondents (Column 3) is positive but not statistically significant, the effect for female respondents (Column 4) is both positive and statistically significant. The coefficient for women indicates that voting behavior increased by 11 percentage points among female linguistic minorities. These results suggest that the effects of the multilingual policy are heterogeneous, with the official recognition of minority languages having a particularly strong mobilizing effect on voting among women living in rural areas.

6   Discussion

Overall, our findings show that the official recognition of minority languages significantly increased voting behavior among linguistic minorities. The mechanism analysis suggests that this effect stemmed less from a broad sense of social inclusion and more from a shift in how minorities perceived the political system. The policy appears to have enhanced perceptions of democracy and civil liberties, leading individuals to view the state as more open and responsive to their rights. These changes strengthened the perceived legitimacy of formal political processes and encouraged greater electoral participation. In this way, multilingual policy served not simply as a symbolic gesture, but as a means of reinforcing institutional connectivity between linguistic minorities and the state.

The magnitude of the policy's impact is also notable. In our study, the policy led to a 10-percentage-point increase in voting behavior among linguistic minorities. Prior to the policy, voter turnout among non-minority individuals averaged approximately 73% and remained unchanged after the policy. By contrast, turnout among linguistic minorities was lower at baseline, at 66%. The benchmark estimates suggest that the reform raised this figure to 76%, effectively closing the pre-existing 7-percentage-point gap between minority and non-minority groups.

The observed 10-percentage-point increase in voter turnout is not only statistically significant but also substantively meaningful when compared to existing evidence on electoral mobilization. A substantial body of prior research has documented various mechanisms that increase voter participation. For example, Gerber and Green (2000) find that face-to-face canvassing raises turnout by 8.7 to 12.8 percentage points, while Gonzales et al. (2022) report that compulsory voting laws increase turnout by approximately 8 percentage points. In the context of minority voters, previous studies emphasize the importance of reducing psychological and structural barriers to participation, such as fear of voting or voter suppression (Bernini et al., 2023; Cantoni, 2020; Jones et al., 2017). Infrastructure-based interventions, such as increasing the number of polling places, have been shown to raise minority turnout by 6.5 to 11 percentage points (Ang, 2019).

Our findings are broadly consistent with this literature. The multilingual policy, by formally recognizing the languages of historically marginalized communities, enhanced perceptions of democratic legitimacy and political freedoms—particularly the freedom to vote—among linguistic minorities. This perceptual shift likely alleviated latent fears of exclusion and increased confidence in the fairness of the electoral process, thereby encouraging participation through formal channels. Taken

together, these results suggest that symbolic recognition can be as powerful as more tangible institutional reforms: the 10-percentage-point increase in turnout observed in our study is comparable in magnitude to, and in some cases exceeds, the effects of the most prominent voter mobilization strategies documented in the literature.

In addition, the heterogeneous analysis shows that the multilingual policy had a particularly pronounced effect on voting behavior among two key subgroups of linguistic minorities: those residing in rural areas and minority-language-speaking women. These groups have generally faced structural and social exclusion (Henderson and Kriticos, 2018; Jayachandran, 2015), which may have historically limited their access to political information and formal participation opportunities. The salience of the policy may have been especially strong for these populations, as the recognition of their language marked a rare instance of state acknowledgment.

In particular, the effect observed among linguistic minority women is meaningful in light of the persistent challenge of low female voter turnout in many developing countries, where promoting women's political participation is widely recognized as a critical policy goal (Bleck and Michelitch, 2018). Giné and Mansuri (2018), for example, find that providing information about the importance of voting increased turnout among women by 9 percentage points. In comparison, our results show an 11-percentage-point increase in voting among minority-language-speaking women following the implementation of the multilingual policy—highlighting the substantial and policy-relevant impact of symbolic inclusion. One possible explanation is that women are often more sensitive to perceived threats or uncertainty surrounding the electoral process, such as fear of violence or intimidation, and tend to respond more negatively than men under such conditions (Isaksson et al., 2014). By enhancing perceptions of democracy and political freedoms, the recognition of minority languages may have increased feelings of inclusion and safety among minority women, thereby fostering greater political participation.

7   Conclusion

This study examined the political implications of symbolic inclusion by evaluating the effects of Zimbabwe's 2013 constitutional reform, which granted official recognition to 13 minority languages. Using a difference-in-differences framework, we found that the recognition of minority languages significantly increased voting behavior among linguistic minorities by approximately 10 percentage points. In contrast, engagement with political actors declined following the policy's implementation. Mechanism analysis suggests that the multilingual policy enhanced democratic attitudes among linguistic minorities, particularly by improving perceptions of general democracy and political freedoms. This shift in perception translated into greater reliance on formal political channels, such as voting, and reduced dependence on informal, actor-based modes of access. In this way, the reform functioned as more than symbolic recognition—it helped restore institutional connectivity by reestablishing a sense

of political visibility and voice among historically marginalized groups.

Further analysis revealed substantial heterogeneity in the reform's effects. The increase in voter turnout was especially pronounced among minorities residing in rural areas and minority women. Given that low female voter turnout remains a persistent challenge in many developing countries, this finding underscores the potential for symbolic policies to meaningfully engage historically underrepresented groups.

Multilingual policies aimed at recognizing minority languages are not unique to Zimbabwe; similar initiatives have been implemented in countries such as Bolivia and Mali as part of broader efforts to promote the social inclusion of ethnic minority groups. Our findings suggest that multilingual policy can serve as a meaningful intervention to strengthen the connectivity between historically excluded minorities and the broader society. By enhancing democratic attitudes and increasing electoral participation, such policies hold the potential to deepen democratic inclusion. At the same time, however, it is important to consider the potential use as instruments of political strategy. Our findings on political trust reveal a growing divergence in attitudes toward political parties: following the policy, trust in the ruling party increased significantly among linguistic minorities, while trust in the opposition declined. This asymmetry raises the possibility that the ruling party leveraged the multilingual policy to strengthen its electoral position among minority populations, while framing the reform as inclusive.

These dynamics underscore a broader tension in symbolic reforms. While they can promote democratic engagement and foster a sense of political legitimacy, they may also be used selectively to serve partisan goals. Assessing whether such recognition results in the long-term advancement of minority rights and democratic consolidation—or instead reinforces existing power asymmetries— requires sustained empirical attention. Clarifying this distinction is essential to understanding the democratic value and potential risks of symbolic policies in multiethnic societies.

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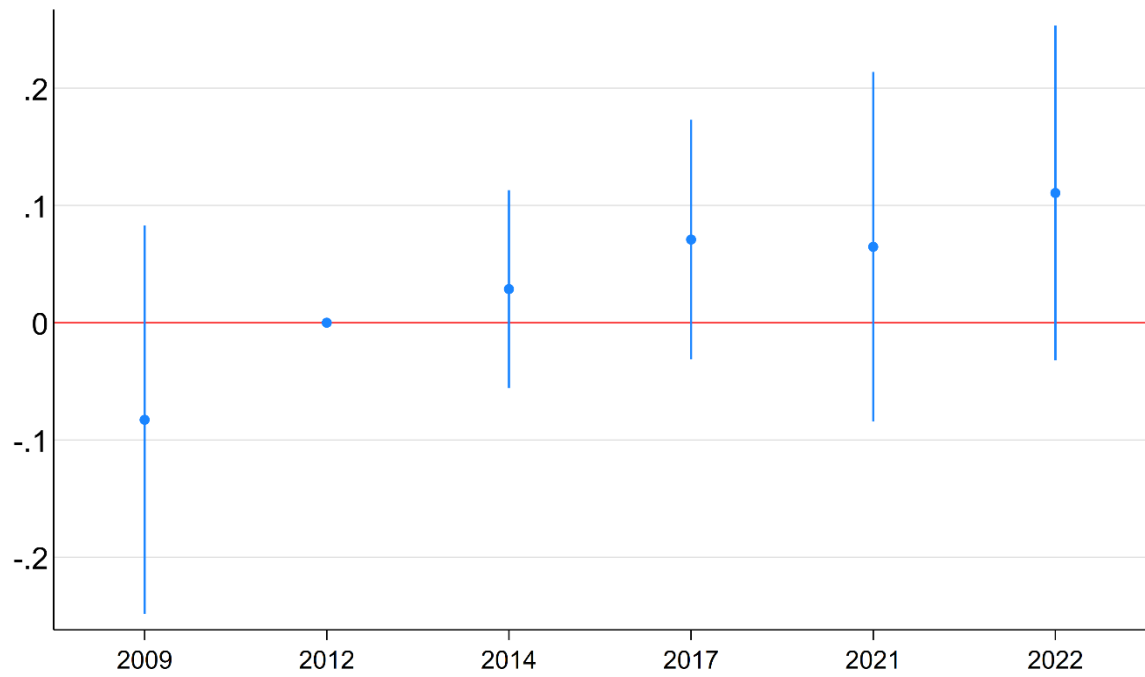
Figure 1: Estimated effects on participation in voting, by survey year (round). The figure shows point estimates with 90% confidence intervals. The horizontal axis represents survey rounds labeled by year, while the vertical axis displays regression coefficients.
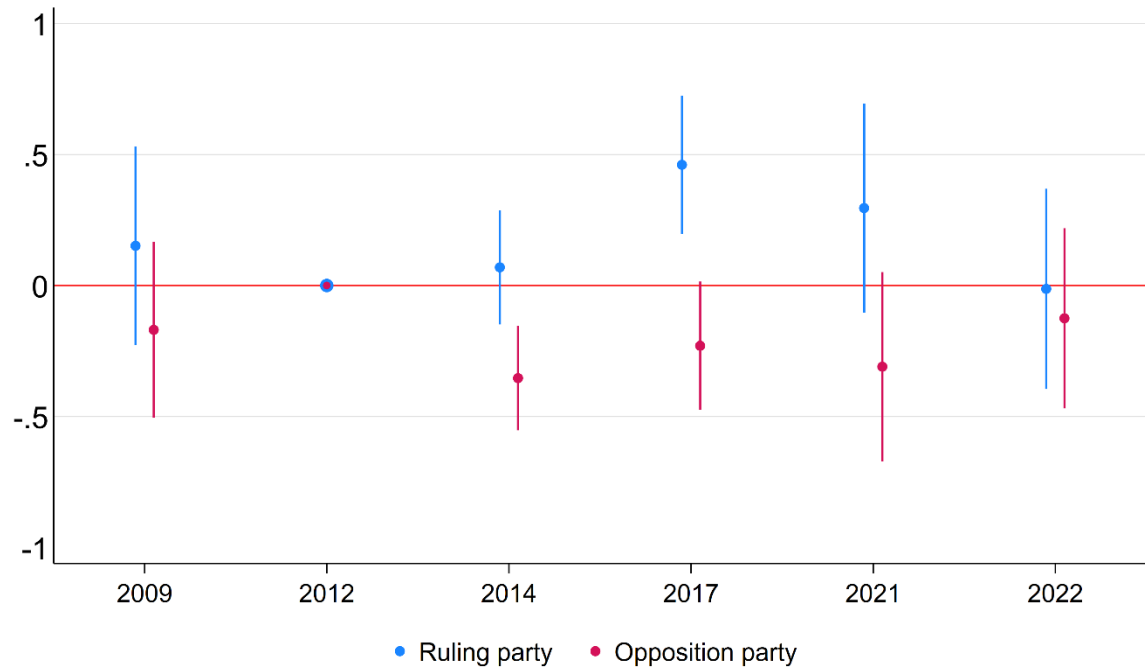
Figure 2: Estimated effects on trust in ruling and opposition parties, by survey round (year). The figure shows point estimates with 90% confidence intervals. The horizontal axis represents survey rounds labeled by year, while the vertical axis displays regression coefficients.

Table 1: Effects of official recognition of minority languages on political participation

		Participation in:		
	Voting	Local meeting	Raising an issue	Protest
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Multilingual Policy X Minority	0.104**	0.012	0.072	-0.010
	(0.041)	(0.085)	(0.092)	(0.095)
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Location FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observation	8,815	9,569	9,561	9,471

Note: The variable "Constitutional Reform X Minority" represents the interaction between a post-constitutional reform dummy and a minority group dummy. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Each dependent variable is standardized within each survey round. ***, **, and * indicate the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of statistical significance, respectively.

Table 2: Effects of official recognition of minority languages on institutional engagement

	Contact with:			
	Member of Parliament	Local councilor	Government agency	Traditional leader
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Multilingual Policy X Minority	-0.159*	-0.112	-0.296***	-0.181
	(0.094)	(0.092)	(0.094)	(0.132)
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Location FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observation	9,557	9,569	9,552	6,873

Note: The variable "Constitutional Reform X Minority" represents the interaction between a post-constitutional reform dummy and a minority group dummy. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Each dependent variable is standardized within each survey round. ***, **, and * indicate the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of statistical significance, respectively.

Table 3: Effects of official recognition of minority languages on perceptions of democracy and freedom

	Perceptions of Democracy			Perceptions of Freedom		
	Extent of national democracy	Democracy satisfaction	Support for democracy	Freedom of expression	Freedom of political association	Freedom in voting
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Multilingual Policy Ⅹ Minority	0.217**	0.177*	0.084	0.243**	0.222**	0.209**
	(0.101)	(0.100)	(0.100)	(0.097)	(0.094)	(0.106)
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Location FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observation	8,583	8,695	9,035	9,114	9,483	8,252

Note: The variable "Constitutional Reform Ⅹ Minority" represents the interaction between a post-constitutional reform dummy and a minority group dummy. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Each dependent variable is standardized within each survey round. ***, **, and * indicate the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of statistical significance, respectively.

Table 4: Effects of official recognition of minority languages on trust indicators

	Ruling party	Opposition party	President	Local government council	Traditional leader
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Multilingual Policy X Minority	0.179*	-0.255***	0.131	-0.032	-0.039
	(0.092)	(0.099)	(0.093)	(0.093)	(0.143)
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Location FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observation	9,178	8,795	9,064	9,236	6,306

Note: The variable "Constitutional Reform X Minority" represents the interaction between a post-constitutional reform dummy and a minority group dummy. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Each dependent variable is standardized within each survey round. * indicates the 10% level of statistical significance.

Table 5: Heterogeneity in voting behavior

| | Area | | Gender | |
| | Rural | Urban | Men | Women |
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Multilingual Policy X Minority	0.180**	0.067	0.056	0.111*
	(0.091)	(0.045)	(0.057)	(0.062)
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Location FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observation	3,063	5,751	4,450	4,359

Note: The dependent variable is the participation in last election. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. ***, **, and * indicate the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of statistical significance, respectively.

Online Appendix

(Local meeting)   (Raising an issue)   (Protest)

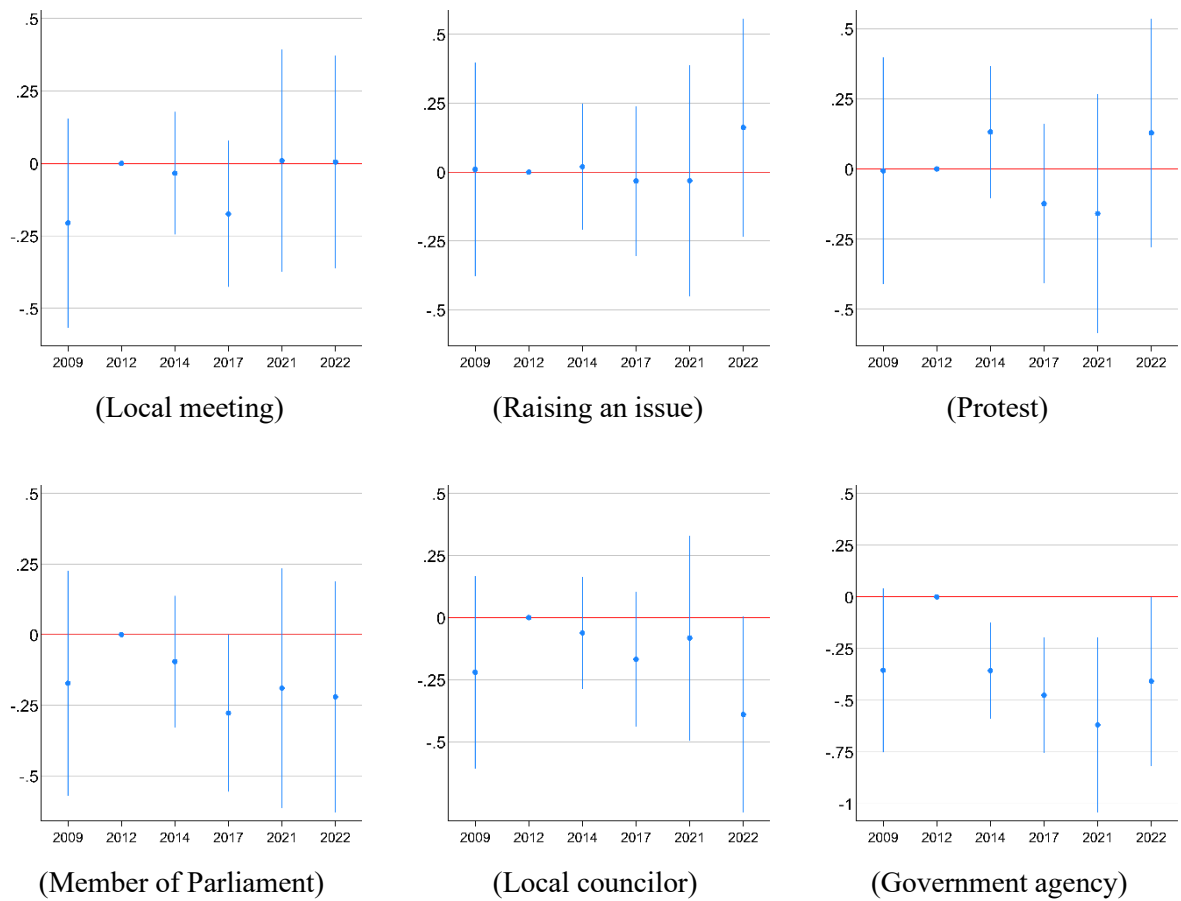(Member of Parliament)   (Local councilor)   (Government agency)

Figure A1: Estimated effects on political participation and institutional engagement outcomes, by survey year (round). The figure shows point estimates with 90% confidence intervals. The horizontal axis represents survey rounds labeled by year, while the vertical axis displays regression coefficients.

Table A1: Descriptive statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Minority group (1=Yes)	0.074	0.261	0	1
Urban residence (1 = Urban)	0.638	0.481	0	1
Age	38.48	15.54	18	103
Female (1=Female)	0.500	0.500	0	1
No formal education (1 = Yes)	0.147	0.354	0	1
Above post-secondary education (1 = Yes)	0.106	0.307	0	1
Unemployed (1 = Yes)	0.306	0.461	0	1
Christian (1 = Yes)	0.880	0.325	0	1
Muslim (1 = Yes)	0.004	0.067	0	1
Participation in the last election (1 = Voted)	0.732	0.443	0	1

Table A2: Effects of official recognition of minority languages on perceptions of social inclusion

	Perceptions of Social Inclusion		
	National identity	Ethnic fairness	Legal equality
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Multilingual Policy X Minority	-0.034	0.018	-0.003
	(0.094)	(0.091)	(0.096)
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Location FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observation	9,470	9,242	9,171

Note: The variable "Constitutional Reform X Minority" represents the interaction between a post-constitutional reform dummy and a minority group dummy. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Each dependent variable is standardized within each survey round. * indicates the 10% level of statistical significance.