

The Impact of Voter Knowledge Initiatives in Sierra Leone

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POLICY ISSUE:

Transparent and accountable government institutions are thought to be more effective at delivering important social services such as education and healthcare. However, there is little consensus over how best to enhance these aspects of governance, particularly in places where conflict has recently caused breakdown in democratic institutions. Evidence from Brazil and India suggests that increased information about politician performance can result in lower vote shares for low-performing or corrupt representatives. There is also evidence that town hall meetings, where representatives meet directly with constituents, can increase voter knowledge, turnout and support for participating candidates. While many interventions have tested the efficacy of these strategies at increasing basic voter knowledge and access to candidates, little work has been done where democratic institutions are nascent and where public information is limited. In such settings reliable information on candidates may be limited or non-existent, and thus requires significant effort to collect,

compile and then convey such information to voters in a comprehensible manner. Debates may provide a feasible alternative which could work in many settings.

CONTEXT OF THE EVALUATION:

Sierra Leone's 2012 elections were hailed by international observers as generally peaceful, free, and fair. In previous elections voting patterns in Sierra Leone have been overwhelmingly based on pre-existing party affiliations. However, during the 2008 elections, people in Sierra Leone were more likely to vote against traditional party and ethnic affiliations in places where they had more information about candidates (for example, in local elections). Many election-related social programs focus on logistics and informing people about the importance of voting, but as Sierra Leoneans become more familiar with the democratic process there is also room to help people learn more about the different candidates among whom they will be choosing. The 2012 election presented an opportunity to test new electoral programs that could increase transparency, voter knowledge of candidates, and voter engagement.

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DETAILS OF THE INTERVENTION:

In the run-up to the November 2012 elections in Sierra Leone, implementing partner Search for Common Ground (SFCG) filmed debates between rival candidates for membership in parliament (MP). From a total of 264 polling centers, 112 were randomly assigned to receive community screenings of these debates, 40 received interventions that provided information to individual voters, and another 112 served as a comparison group.

Firstly, debates were shown at almost 200 community screenings in polling centers across Sierra Leone, where they were seen by an estimated 19,000 people. Surveys of voters before and after they watched these debates measured how their perception of candidates, their knowledge of candidate positions, and their voting intentions were altered.

In the 40 polling centers assigned to receive individually delivered information, individuals were allocated one of the following groups

1. Debate: Individuals were shown the exact same debate screened in polling centers on a personal handheld device.
2. Getting to Know You: Individuals were shown a “getting to know you” video of the same two candidates speaking informally about their hobbies and interests.
3. Radio Report: Individuals listened to a recording of an independent moderator or journalist summarizing the main policy positions articulated by the two candidates during the debates.
4. Thin Slice Evaluations: Individuals participated in a “lab” experiment where they were exposed to pairs of isolated images, voice recordings, and names of candidates from other constituencies across the country and asked to rate them along a variety of metrics, such as who they thought would be a better leader.
5. Comparison Group: Individuals were surveyed, but not shown any media.

Evaluating and comparing these groups will allow researchers to disentangle the effects of different kinds of information, such as policy positions, personal characteristics, or persuasive speeches, on voter behavior. On election day and the days following researchers administered a short exit survey to both comparison and treatment voters, assessing their knowledge about candidates, previous voting behavior, choices in the local and national election, and how they made their electoral choices

PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND POLICY LESSONS:

Preliminary results suggest that voters acquired significant political knowledge from watching the debates, knowledge that persisted over a number of weeks, and importantly, influenced their voting choices on Election Day. Analysis is ongoing but to date we find strong positive impacts of debates on voter knowledge – of politics in general, and of specific candidate characteristics and policy stances; a better

match between voter policy preferences and those of their selected candidate; greater voter openness to candidates from all parties; and increased vote shares for the candidates who performed the best in the debates. We further find that candidates responded to the road show by increasing their campaign effort, e.g. by giving more gifts and making more visits, in villages where screenings were held. By equipping voters with knowledge and influencing their voting choices, the debates thus further attracted greater campaign investment by candidates.

Results from the series of individual treatment arms which isolated the role of charisma from that of policy stance and professional qualifications suggest that voters respond to both personality and hard facts, but only the combination of the two delivered by the debates moved them into better policy alignment and triggered changes in actual voting choices. These preliminary results indicate that debates convey comprehensive information – including charisma, professional qualifications and policy stances – and the combination of factors appears more powerful than each in isolation.

In addition to the impacts on knowledge, this initiative demonstrates that debates are logistically feasible to host and disseminate, which opens up wide scope for similar interventions in future. Commissioners of the National Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone, who have been close consults on this project from its inception, responded positively to our early dissemination events. In a joint presentation during IGC Growth Week 2013, SFCG Country Director Ambrose James explained that SFCG had been using radio as a tool to promote governance and conflict resolution in Sierra Leone for quite some time, however their use of video had been limited. While the individual treatment arms suggest that video is more effective than audio alone, the radio report we tested was rather dry, and one could imagine a livelier radio program that captures a real time debate between candidates in the recording studio that might come closer to the impacts of the film screening. This kind of radio counterpart could reach much larger audiences at minimal cost. Together, we are planning additional pilot activities to explore how best to build upon these results and extend the impact of debates to mobilizing the public around the accountability of elected officials.