

Do political debate programmes affect political participation? A case study from Nepal



Listening to a political debate programme influences political participation in Nepal

People who listen to *Sajha Sawal* (Common Questions), BBC Media Action's political debate radio programme in Nepal, are more likely to be politically active and to discuss politics. These are the findings of BBC Media Action's recent study, which spoke to 4,000 Nepali citizens to investigate whether exposure to a political debate programme could influence political participation. The answer turned out to be yes: the study found that listening to *Sajha Sawal* was significantly associated with an increase in political participation. How much a person was exposed to *Sajha Sawal* was also a factor; the greater the exposure, the greater the increase in political participation and discussion.

These findings contribute to a growing body of evidence suggesting that debate and discussion

programmes can have an impact on political participation and political discussion. Moreover, they demonstrate this in a developing country context.

What are political debate programmes?

Political debate programmes on radio or television present a range of different opinions to an audience, and sometimes give audience members the opportunity to participate. Unlike news media, which provide a one-way flow of information (a "monologic format"), discussion and debate programmes allow two-way communication (a "dialogic format"). These formats could be said to be a tool for supporting democratic discussion. (For more detail see the box on deliberative democracy inside.)

The relationship between mass media and political participation is complex, and a wealth of studies

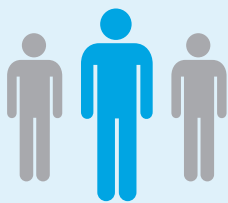
Sajha Sawal is broadcast in



on
163 radio
stations

live audiences of

16,000



1 in 3 adults
watched and listened
= 5.8M

show that exposure to mass media, generally defined as news media, is positively associated with different forms of political participation. However while there are many studies of news media, studies of debate and discussion programmes are much less common. Where they do exist, such studies tend to focus on talk radio and political campaign debates.

There is also a lack of evidence from developing countries; most evidence published in peer-reviewed academic journals comes from Europe and North America. To address both gaps, this study explored the relationship between people's exposure to *Sajha Sawal* and their political participation in Nepal.

How does *Sajha Sawal* work?

Sajha Sawal is a 45-minute radio and TV debate programme broadcast in Nepal since late 2007. Each week, different political leaders and government officials appear before a live audience to answer questions from the public. The programme is designed to foster political awareness and dialogue among Nepali citizens and to encourage them to engage in politics. Broadcast in 73 of Nepal's 75 districts on 163 radio stations, it is also shown on TV, and more than 16,000 people have joined *Sajha Sawal*'s live studio audience. Nearly one in three Nepali adults (aged 15–65 years) have listened to or watched the programme, which equates to 5.8 million viewers or listeners.

What is political participation?

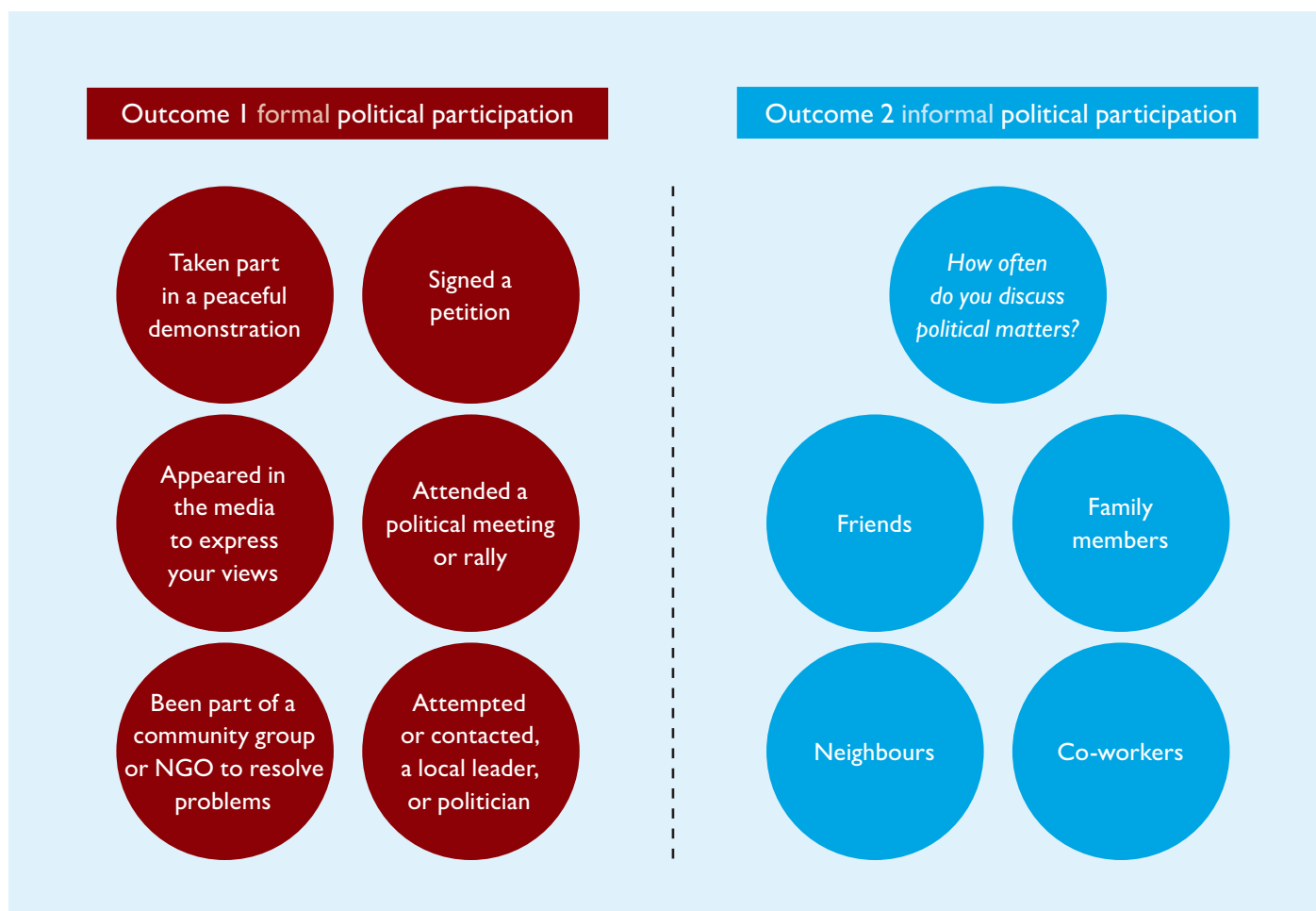
Political participation has been defined in many different ways in the current published literature. Definitions often include formal participation such as voting, seeking office, contacting public officials, petitioning and protesting. Informal participation may be defined as discussing politics with others, dialogues on political issues through traditional

and new media, and following political affairs in the media. In studies of political communication definitions tend to focus narrowly on formal participation.

BBC Media Action defines political participation as the extent to which individuals and groups within society are actively involved in the public sphere, political processes, debate and decision making. Political participation in this sense spans formal and informal political activity.

For the purposes of this study political participation included:

- Signing a petition
- Taking part in a peaceful demonstration
- Attending a political meeting or rally
- Contacting, or attempting to contact, a local leader or politician to express personal views
- Contacting or appearing in the media/a political programme to express personal views
- Being part of a community group or NGO to resolve problems in the local area
- Discussing political issues with others



“The more exposure to *Sajha Sawal*, the greater the level of participation and discussion.”

Deliberative democracy

The characteristics of political debate programmes echo the principles behind political theories of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy can be thought of as a system where citizens voluntarily and freely participate in discussions of public issues, share information about public affairs, talk about politics, form opinions and participate in political processes. In this system all members of society, especially marginalised groups, should have the opportunity to participate in shaping, influencing and criticising public opinion.

This has been argued to represent a focus within democracy from expanding voting rights to

expanding the public sphere to give everyone a voice. It focuses on supporting the process of communication and forming opinions that precedes more formal political engagement such as voting.

At the core of deliberative democracy is public deliberation – a process in which participants have adequate speaking opportunities and engage in attentive listening or dialogue. Public deliberation in the context of media is known as “mediated deliberation”. Where the public cannot physically engage with leaders, the media facilitates public discussion and the other functions of a deliberative process.

Contributing to the evidence base

This research briefing summarises findings of a BBC Media Action research report, *Do political debate programmes influence political participation? A case study from Nepal*. To read more, and for information on the technical aspects of this research, please visit: www.bbc.co.uk/mediaction/publicationsandpress/research_debate_political_participation_nepal.html.

The Nepal study forms part of a wider research programme to inform and evaluate BBC Media Action governance projects.

Media and audience research: a key part of BBC Media Action’s work

BBC Media Action uses the power of media and communication to support people to shape their own lives. Working with broadcasters, governments, other organisations and donors, we provide information and stimulate positive change in the areas of governance, health, resilience and humanitarian response. The UK Department for International

Development (DFID) supports us to work with the media in 11 countries across Africa, the Middle East and Asia. This project will contribute to state-society relations and support the empowerment of individuals to hold their government to account.

In addition to building the capacity of local media, BBC Media Action has designed a combination of different broadcast formats to address the specific governance priority outcomes identified in each country. These include factual discussion and debate programmes, magazine shows and drama. Since 2005, BBC Media Action has made political debate programmes on radio and television in a range of developing countries – including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Kenya, Nepal and Palestinian Territories.

This multi-country programme of governance work provides an unprecedented opportunity to understand the impact of governance programming on individual-level outcomes in a range of political and social contexts. Through such cross-cultural comparative research BBC Media Action aims to contribute to the international development evidence base in the field of media, communications and governance.

Findings: listening to *Sajha Sawal* is associated with increased political participation and discussion

Exposure to the political debate radio programme *Sajha Sawal* in Nepal is significantly associated with an increase in political participation and discussion.¹ This conclusion is supported by the study's use of multiple regression analysis, a statistical technique that predicts values of a variable in relation to two or more other variables.

The analysis showed that programme exposure was not the only thing related to citizens' political participation and discussion – other characteristics were also linked to increased political participation and discussion.

These characteristics included:

For participation	For discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talk about politics with family, friends and co-workers• Feel they are free to act• Have an interest in politics• Have higher levels of political knowledge• Are literate• Are men	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have an interest in politics• Have higher levels of formal participation• Feel they are free to act• Have higher levels of political knowledge• Are men• Are older people

While these characteristics potentially distorted the relationship between programme exposure and political discussion and participation, the regression analysis controlled for the distorting effects.

The characteristics were entered into the analysis, and results showed that exposure to *Sajha Sawal* was still related to increased political participation.

Simply put: people who listened to *Sajha Sawal* participated in and talked about politics more.

Finally, it is not just whether people have been exposed to *Sajha Sawal* that is related to increased political participation and discussion, but how much they have been exposed. The more exposure to *Sajha Sawal*, the greater the increase in political participation and discussion.

Implications

No single radio or television debate programme will have an impact on political participation in isolation. The BBC Media Action approach to governance recognises that change is a complex process, and that pathways to change are often influenced by multiple factors outside the sphere of influence of a media intervention. Also, exposure to *Sajha Sawal* doesn't predict political participation and political discussion as well as some of other variables, such as interest in politics. This is to be expected.

Instead, this contributes to a growing body of evidence suggesting that debate and discussion programmes can have an impact on political participation and political discussion. These results are even more notable because the evidence comes from a developing country.

Acknowledgements

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Endnote

1. This study cannot prove that exposure to *Sajha Sawal* increased political participation and discussion, because it employs a cross-sectional design. This type of study observes all of a population, or a representative subset, at one specific point in time. However, the analysis does provide more confidence that exposure to *Sajha Sawal* leads to increased political participation and discussion. This is because multiple regression takes into account other characteristics (as described in the box on the Findings page) which removes their distorting effect. Following their removal, the effect of *Sajha Sawal* was still evident.



Front cover image:

A *Sajha Sawal* studio audience member asks a question

Photo credit: BBC Media Action

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