

Peasants into Democrats? Evaluating the impact of information on local governance in Mali

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The recent emergence of free and fair elections in many developing countries has frequently failed to produce the expected increase in government accountability. Inadequate information among voters is one of the root causes: for voters to discipline leaders at the ballot box, they must have a minimum level of information -- both about the candidates for whom they are voting and the democratic system in which they participate. Particularly in developing countries, this information is often lacking. We ask whether a particular kind of information is critically missing among poor voters: information about government capacity. If voters have misinformed beliefs about what government can and should do for them, they will not adequately hold governments accountable. With a large-scale randomized field experiment, our project rigorously addresses the question of whether and how providing information about government capacity affects voters and politicians.

The results of this study are of interest to donors, NGOs and policymakers facing the challenge of improving democratic accountability. Whether governments are engaged in corruption or fail to be responsive to citizen demands, a key barrier to progress is the inability of citizens to make informed decisions at the ballot box. Previous studies have shown that providing information to citizens is a relatively cheap and effective way of influencing whether and how they vote in elections. This project shows a new type of information is important to provide as part of such campaigns, in addition to information about politician performance. For citizens to adequately evaluate politicians, they need civic information about the responsibilities of government and the size of the budget. The experiment demonstrates that even a very brief civics course can effectively convey both types of information and generate significant impacts on the way people vote and on their engagement in civic activity.

- A relatively short civics course can be effective at changing voter behaviour and improving civic participation.

A village-level civics course of 2 to 3 3-hour sessions taught by informally trained local instructors produced a significant change in behaviour. Citizens were almost twice as likely to challenge local leadership at town hall meetings. In voting simulations, people were less likely to be swayed by a monetary gift in exchange for a vote and less likely to vote based on kinship or recommendations from the village chief.

- Civic information about government capacity is necessary but may not be sufficient; it had greater impacts when combined with information about government performance. Most outcomes were more strongly impacted by the longer civics course that provided *both* information about government capacity and information about actual government performance. One possible explanation is the effect of real performance information on dissatisfaction. There is some evidence that particularly in the villages that received information on actual government performance, people were more dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction with government may help explain increased levels of civic participation and changes in the way people vote.

- Politicians may respond negatively to information interventions, so appropriate precautions should be taken.

There is some evidence that the information intervention *decreased* the transparency of local government. In places that received the more intensive civics course, local governments held 40 percent fewer public meetings. Local leaders reported that they were less likely to campaign on transparency in the management of the budget in the next election, though this is not significant at conventional levels. If leaders feel threatened by the diffusion of information to voters, it is not surprising they react by protecting themselves from further scrutiny. These leaders may be more likely to get voted out in the long-term, but further research would be required to confirm this.

We implemented two versions of a civics course in 370 villages from 64 municipalities that were randomly selected from a sample of 95. The advantage of this strategy is that we can compare outcomes in the 64 places that received the intervention to the 31 places that did not and make robust inferences about the impacts of the course. In the first version of the course, villagers receive only information about government capacity and the contours of the local government system. Villagers in the second group receive additional information about how their local government is performing relative to others like it. Courses were conducted in the local language by a trained Malian instructor. Developed in collaboration with local agencies, course sessions struck a balance between prepared materials (pre-recorded audio and color posters) to ensure coherence across instructors, and interactive exercises (role plays and question and answer sessions) to maximize engagement and comprehension of participants.

Effects of the course are evaluated through an individual survey, a civic activity register, observations at a town hall meeting, and a politician survey. The individual survey assesses whether the intervention changed beliefs and expectations about government capacity and spurred dissatisfaction with government performance. Voting simulations administered during the survey assess potential changes in voting decisions. Change in civic participation is measured by asking detailed questions about recent activities and confirming this with local leaders. Willingness to challenge leadership is measured by observing village representatives at annual town hall meetings conducted by the German donor, GIZ. Politician surveys with an embedded list experiment aim to detect changes in how politicians interact with citizens and plan to conduct future political campaigns.

The robust results of this low-cost intervention imply that it is a promising candidate for scale-up and replication. Mali's communes are vast and often comprise many villages, so a scale-up of the project could be limited, at least initially, to intervening in one-half of villages per commune. Suggestive evidence implies that the course worked better when a majority of villages per commune were treated. If due to limited funds only some communes can be treated, evidence also suggests treatment works better in communes that are more politically competitive or do not have a majority party on the commune council. This type of intervention would be best replicated in countries where existing civic education is weak and where inequality is high, producing greater information asymmetries between voters and political elites. The course may be most useful in decentralized countries like Mali where multiple levels of government create confusion about who is responsible for what. Further, if countries are already conducting information campaigns, adding a civics component could be a very cost-effective strategy.

A terrific review of the effects of information on political behavior is Rohini Pande's 2011 article in the *Annual Review of Economics* entitled, "Can Informed Voters Enforce Better Governance? Experiments in Low-Income Democracies."

Supplementary materials

Figure 1: A village-level civics course led by a female instructor



Figure 2: The average price a poor-performing candidate would have to pay for a vote

