

Democratic Institutions, Participation, and Service Provision

1 Introduction

SDG 16 calls for states to “ensure responsive, inclusive, and participatory decision making at all levels.” We take this to mean that citizens should participate in decision making and that this participation should be meaningful in that it should have substantive effects.

This means not just that citizens take part in democratic decision making but that their participation makes a difference and is not undone by electoral fraud, vote buying or elite capture of the political process during and after elections. A growing experimental literature in this area has evaluated the impact of interventions aimed at promoting citizens’ participation in elections and in communities’ decision-making, strengthening the collective action of communities, and empowering citizens vis à vis their governments via the dissemination of information and offering training opportunities.

A rapid survey of the evidence follows (for a more complete discussion see eg Mansuri and Rao (2012)):

- the evidence strongly suggests that increasing participation in democratic processes can produce a legitimacy bonus.
- there is less evidence linking interventions to service provision or the quality of governance. The scant studies that estimate such effect suggest that these interventions are less effective than anticipated.
- there is very little evidence supporting the idea the CDR and related programs are effective at altering local norms. This work suggests that interventions should seek to harness local governance capacity rather than seeking to change it.

2 The Key Questions

We focus on key questions that emanate from the micro level literature:

1. How to strengthen elections in young democracies?
2. How to improve citizen-politician linkages?
3. How to improve citizens’ input into the policy-making processes?
4. How to improve service provision via social accountability?

3 Interventions and outcomes

| Problem | Possible Interventions | Experimental Evidence |
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| 2.1 Democratic Institutions | | |
| How to strengthen participation in elections? | Non-partisan information and awareness campaigns (working of elections, secrecy of the vote, and the value of voting)—special focus on women. | In Pakistan, women in treatment group participated at higher rates compared to control. Large geographical spillovers among women (Gine and Mansuri 2011). |
| | SMS-based information and GOTV campaign, SMS hotline for electoral misconduct, and the distribution of a free newspaper. | In Mozambique, positive effects on voter turnout. Incumbent benefits the most from increased participation. Newspapers increased the probability that people send a text message to the president-elect (Aker, Collier, and Vicente 2013). |
| | Non-partisan information on candidate qualifications and performance | In India and Uganda, interventions had little effect on voters and politicians' behaviour (Banerjee et al. 2014, Humphreys and Weinstein 2012). |
| How to curb vote-buying? | Informational campaign against vote buying and voting in good conscience. | In São Tomé and Príncipe, the intervention diminished the impact of vote buying on voters' choices, but the campaign reduced turnout and favoured the incumbent (Vicente 2014). |
| How to curb electoral fraud? | International and national observers in selected voting precincts monitoring registration to voter rolls and election day. | In Ghana, irregularities decrease in observed sites, but fraud is displaced geographically (Ichino and Schundeln 2012) |
| 2.2 Citizen-Politician Linkages | | |
| Improving Citizen-Politician Linkages | Improving citizen's communication to politicians via communication technologies (ICT) | In Uganda, ICT can help marginalized populations to communicate with politicians (Grossman, Humphreys and Sacramone-Lutz 2014); however politicians unresponsive and engagement does not operate at scale (Grossman, Humphreys and Sacramone-Lutz 2015) |
| Improving Citizen's Input into Policy Making Processes | Nationwide experiment in democratic deliberation with randomly assign discussion leaders | In São Tomé and Príncipe, the identity of leaders had large effects on the outcomes of the deliberation (Humphreys, Masters, and Sandbu 2006). |
| 2.3 Service Provision | | |
| Improving service provision via social accountability | Representative-based meetings, and direct election-based plebiscites to in the planning of development projects | In Indonesia, plebiscites increased satisfaction with, knowledge of, and willingness to contribute to CDD project. Interventions had little effects on the selection or location of projects (Olken 2010) |
| | Community Development Reconstruction program | In Liberia, treatment communities report an increased sense of political and social |

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| | efficacy, greater faith in local leaders and the value of democratic processes, and higher levels of community activity. CDR communities also contributed significantly more in the public goods game (Fearon, Humphreys and Weinstein 2015) |
| Information campaign, report cards, training --focus on education and health service provision | Both in India and in Kenya, studies find no effects on service provision (Banerjee et al. 2008; Lieberman et al. 2014, Sheely 2015). Only training improved reading skills. In Uganda, treatment communities are more involved in monitoring health providers, which appear to exert higher effort to serve the community (Björkman and Svensson 2009) |

4 Priorities for discussion

This is an area where experimental evidence has begun to accumulate in a systematic and productive way. Thanks to this research program, we can identify a group of interventions, which are effective in strengthening democratic institutions and promoting participation. Yet, experimental findings have also highlighted important bottlenecks in the pathway from inclusive and participatory decision making to responsive governments. Moreover, some of the studies point to the possibility that participation in democratic processes primarily produces a legitimacy boost, even if service provision or the quality of government remains unchanged. Therefore, it is important to continue exploring how to strengthen the link between citizens and governments, as well as how to potentiate citizens' voice with the aim of promoting more responsive governments.

Possible areas of future interventions:

1. One possible reason behind the weak effects of CDD on service provision may be that agenda setting or other powers are still controlled by local politicians/elites. For example, in Olken (2010), plebiscites allowed citizens to influence the location of public goods, not the selection of projects themselves. Similarly, local politicians could have controlled the deliberation and aggregation of preferences in community meetings. Possible interventions that are not well understood including formal designation of **checks and balances** in local participatory process.
2. If the institutional framework produces the bottlenecks in service provision, citizens' participation on its own will likely not be sufficient to promote responsiveness. Future interventions could aim to **create linkages** across the political system, for example by communicating the results of community deliberations and service providers' response to other branches of government, other offices in the bureaucracy, or political parties. The question is to assess whether this information in the hands of different relevant political and bureaucratic offices helps create coalitions to pressure local service providers.
3. More generally, keeping in mind the aim of SDG 16, it would be useful to assess whether interventions have **long-lasting effects**, which would involve the design of multi-year interventions and follow up data collection efforts.

5 References

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