



Criminal Politicians and Socioeconomic Development: Evidence from Rural India

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Abstract

Although it seems intuitively clear that candidate quality provides a critical pillar of democratic governance, the consequences of electing low-quality politicians remain unclear. Combining census data and election results, we conduct a regression discontinuity analysis to examine the socioeconomic effects of criminal politicians in India. We find that the election of state legislators with criminal charges can exacerbate household poverty in a village as household electrification and literacy rates both decrease when criminal candidates win close elections against non-criminal ones. In contrast, the presence of criminal politicians does not have a conclusive negative effect on the supply of local infrastructures, such as paved roads and power grids. These results highlight the importance of differentiating between different types of policy outcomes. Rent-seeking politicians will engage in local infrastructural projects, but they may pay little attention to these projects' contribution to poverty reduction.