

Can Informed Voters Enforce Better Governance? Experiments in Low-Income Democracies

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Abstract

This article evaluates a body of recent work that uses field and natural experiments to answer the question of whether informed voters can enforce better governance. A common finding in the literature is that voter behavior is malleable and that information about the political process and politician performance improves electoral accountability. Limited availability of information thus provides one explanation for the persistence of low-quality politicians and the existence of identity politics and electoral malpractices in low-income democracies. Understanding how voters can gain access to credible sources of information and understanding how politicians react to improved information about their performance are promising avenues for future research.

1. WHY HAS DEMOCRACY NOT DELIVERED BETTER POLITICIANS?

Democratic forms of governance are by now commonplace in low-income countries, but the quality of their elected governments, as measured by corruption indicators and social sector performance, remains significantly worse than in high-income democracies (see, for instance, Mauro 1995, Hall & Jones 1999, UNDP 2002).¹ What explains this apparent voter unconcern with the quality of governance in poor countries?

One possibility, often described as the modernization hypothesis, is that low levels of education cause low-income countries to have more poorly functioning democracies (Lipset 1959). Almond & Verba (1963, p. 315), for instance, famously wrote, “The uneducated man or the man with limited education is a different political actor from the man who has achieved a higher level of education.” According to this view, higher levels of education improve a country’s civic culture and citizens’ ability to make rational electoral choices. Furthermore, by increasing income levels, education may indirectly raise the value of high-quality politicians for citizens (Lipset 1959). This view is supported by cross-country evidence that identifies a positive correlation between levels of education and the extent of democratization (Glaeser et al. 2007). However, more recent evidence suggests that this link may not be causal—after controlling for country fixed effects, changes in education levels across countries are not correlated with changes in democratic practices (Acemoglu et al. 2008). Others have explored the possibility that political and economic development are instead codetermined, potentially by a country’s institutions (Acemoglu et al. 2001).² According to this view, low levels of economic development will be accompanied by weak institutions. Elections, even if they occur, will be marred by electoral malpractices and will be largely captured by the ruling elite (see, for instance, Simpser 2008, Acemoglu et al. 2010). In this case, what others interpret as voter apathy reflects instead the lack of agency available to voters in low-income countries.

This review examines a third possibility—that a well-functioning democracy requires voters to be informed about the political process and politician actions. If low levels of economic development are accompanied by limited political knowledge among voters, then democracy will deliver worse politicians in low-income countries. Unlike the modernization hypothesis, this view suggests that policy interventions, such as audits and information campaigns, can increase electoral accountability. And, in contrast to the institutions view, it predicts that improvements in the information available to voters can directly reduce electoral malpractices.

Can data help us distinguish between these views? The past decade has witnessed significant progress in the use of modern econometric techniques, especially instrumental variable approaches, to identify the role of demographics, institutions, and information in explaining cross-country differences in the quality of government. However, the coarseness of available instruments has ultimately limited the ability of this literature to disentangle channels of influence and has led to an increased emphasis on the use of microdata-based

¹In 2008 the average (standardized) World Bank control of corruption score for democratic low-income and lower-middle-income countries was -0.64 , which was not far above the score for currently undemocratic countries of -0.94 , but was significantly below the average score of 1.31 in the high-income group. The government effectiveness scores for low- and lower-middle-income democracies (-0.67) and nondemocracies (-0.93) were similar, but the score for high-income democracies (1.36) was significantly higher [tabulations based on World Bank’s (2008) Governance Indicators data set combined with democracy data from the Polity IV Project].

²It is hypothesized that the choice of institutions, in turn, is determined by events that occur during critical historical junctures that cause large-scale institutional reform.

studies (Pande & Udry 2005, Acemoglu 2010). Such studies, which typically exploit within-country (exogenous) variation in institutional design, information flows, or educational attainment, help us differentiate among these views by providing more direct evidence on voter behavior and its malleability, or lack thereof.

Even with microdata, understanding what influences voter behavior poses unique challenges. Variations in observed voter choices usually reflect differences in the candidates for election and differences in what is known about them. How do we determine whether observed voter choices reflect the true underlying voter preferences or rather choices that are constrained by limited information about politician performance and/or qualifications? Here I review a recent experimental literature that addresses these challenges by inducing and exploiting random variation in the information available to voters while holding institutions and demographics constant.

A first set of papers in this literature evaluates the efficacy of directly providing voters information on incumbent performance and of exposing voters to politicians from groups underrepresented in politics (e.g., women). These papers find significant evidence that better-informed voters change their electoral behavior to select better performers.

A second set of papers in this literature evaluates a broader question: Can informing voters about the importance of politics and the potential costs of electoral malpractice and identity politics (in terms of subsequent policy outcomes) alter voter behavior? These papers find that areas that receive these information campaigns typically see significant increases in turnout and reductions in electoral malpractice.

These findings challenge simple modernization theories that suggest that voters in low-income countries care less about the quality of government. They also do not support the deterministic view that historical accidents define long-run political and economic outcomes in low-income countries. Rather, the weight of the evidence suggests that a lack of information prevents voters from using elections to effectively screen candidates and discipline incumbent behavior. Voters are quite willing to update their beliefs in response to new information, and the magnitude of estimated responses is typically large. It is possible that this last fact reflects greater returns to information provision when education levels are low.

These results suggest that public policies such as a mandatory provision of information about politicians may significantly improve governance in low-income countries (on this, also see Djankov et al. 2010). This evidence also opens up several avenues for future research. How can we create credible sources of information in low-income countries? How will politicians respond to improvements in voter information about their activities? An ongoing challenge for this research agenda is to disentangle the roles of motivation and information in influencing voter behavior. Does voter behavior respond to information because voters are now more knowledgeable or rather because the campaign, independent of any information it provided, succeeded in energizing voters? The answer to this last question is essential in determining the likely generalizability of the experimental findings.

The rest of the review is organized as follows. Section 2 describes how variations in voting behavior across rich and poor countries have led to different theories for the poorer performance of democracies in poor countries. Section 3 discusses how recent field experiments have sought to understand these differences through the lens of voter information. Section 4 summarizes the challenges afforded by the experimental evidence for existing theories and open questions for research.

2. DO VOTERS BEHAVE DIFFERENTLY IN RICH AND POOR COUNTRIES?

Cross-country differences in the quality of elected government are accompanied by significant differences in voter behavior between rich and poor countries. A key marker of political participation in democracies is voter turnout. In rich countries, income and literacy rates positively predict turnout. Using data on 324 national lower-house elections that occurred in high- and middle-income countries between 1972 and 1995, Blais & Dobrynska (1998) found that turnout increased by 16 percentage points when illiteracy declined from 85% to 12% (the sample average). Similarly, turnout increased by 13 percentage points when gross national product per capita increased from a low of \$163 to the average of \$7,614 in the sample.

The cross-country correlation between education and turnout is paralleled by a positive correlation between years of schooling and propensity to vote in the microdata for rich countries. For the United States, the classic survey data study by Wolfinger & Rosenstone (1980) showed that citizens with a college degree were 38% more likely to vote than people with fewer than five years of schooling. The effects for income were weaker. Twenty years later, a large-scale two-stage survey of voluntary activity of the American public reported similar correlations (Brady et al. 1995). Reviewing the empirical evidence for rich countries, Lijphart (1997) showed that class bias (higher turnout for voters with higher income, greater wealth, and better education) exists for most rich democracies, although the effect is often smaller relative to the United States.³

If political participation improves the quality of government (Glaeser et al. 2007), then this evidence suggests that countries with more educated populations, which are usually also richer countries, will have better governments. However, an important piece of evidence against this view is the much weaker link between education and political participation across low-income countries. Electoral turnout data from 109 democratic countries show that, although the average for high-income countries is 68.7%, it is only 5.5 percentage points higher than the average for the low- and lower-middle-income group.⁴ Similarly, a pooled cross-section regression using data for presidential and legislative elections from Latin America between 1980 and 2000 shows no significant correlation between literacy and voter turnout (Fornos et al. 2004).⁵

Within-country evidence relating education and voter turnout is also more mixed for low- and middle-income countries. World Values Survey data (for 13 low- and lower-middle-income countries) show a positive correlation between education and voting—the probability that an individual with complete primary education votes is 28 percentage points higher than that of an individual with no formal education. In contrast, Afrobarometer survey data for 16 African countries suggest that college-educated individuals are 12 percentage points less likely to vote than those with no formal education (R. Pande, author's tabulations).

³Combining data for seven European countries and Canada, Powell (1986) found that the turnout among college-educated workers is 10% higher than for those with primary education.

⁴The average turnout was 65.6%, with a standard deviation of 14.5%, maximum of 95.17% (Australia), and minimum of 28.3% (Haiti). These calculations are based on the most recently available turnout data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (<http://www.idea.int>).

⁵Although income per capita in these data is positively associated with turnout, this correlation is not robust to the inclusion of controls.

Why does lower education fail to systematically predict lower political participation in low-income countries? And how does this relate to the quality of governance in these countries?

A first possibility is that voters in low-income settings exhibit greater preferences for private transfers or clientelism. Huntington & Nelson (1976) famously described the nature of such clientelistic relationships in poor democracies: “In traditional societies, patron-client relations provide a means for the vertical mobilization of lower-status individuals by established elites. . . . The introduction of competitive elections gives the client one additional resource—the vote—which he can use to repay his patron for other benefits.” If the poor and less educated value clientelistic policies more, and such policies are more common in low-income settings, then this may explain why the less educated participate at higher rates in low-income societies.

The impact of clientelism on participation by the less educated may be complimented by electoral malpractice. Some of the most famous evidence on how the poor and less educated are more susceptible to vote buying comes from the era of urban machines in the United States. Drawing a comparison between new nations such as Malaysia and the Philippines and the urban political machines in U.S. cities, Scott (1969) argued that the most fundamental quality shared by the mass clientele of the machines was poverty.⁶

More recently, Brusco et al. (2004) and Stokes (2005) showed that machine politics in Argentina target the poor. Blaydes (2006) reported similar evidence for Egypt, showing that illiterates turned out at more than twice and sometimes at three times the rate of literates in the 2000 and 2005 parliamentary and 2005 presidential elections. She argued that this turnout difference reflects greater vote buying among the poor. Finan & Schecter (2010) argued that vote buying is more prevalent among individuals who are more willing to engage in reciprocal behavior. Using survey and experimental data from Paraguay, they documented higher vote buying among the less educated.

The link between vote buying and turnout, however, could also go the other way. Some electoral malpractices increase turnout, whereas some do not. In situations in which vote buying is not feasible or the secret ballot makes it difficult to know actual voting behavior, parties may seek instead to intimidate poor and less educated voters and prevent them from voting (Cox & Kousser 1981, Bratton 2008) or may use electoral violence. Wilkinson (2004) argued that town-level electoral incentives account for the locations of Hindu-Muslim outbreaks of violence in India and that state-level electoral incentives explain the timing and location of state-government use of police force to prevent riots.

In sum, this set of arguments suggests that voter preferences and institutions rather than education per se determine political participation and governance outcomes in low-income settings. In this review, we discuss a recent body of experimental evidence that lends support to an alternative hypothesis. Although education can play a role in predicting governance, we hypothesize that the relevant channel is not participation but rather

⁶He cited Banfield & Wilson (1966) who emphasized that “almost without exception, the lower the average income and the fewer years of schooling in a ward, the more dependable the ward’s allegiance to the machine.” For the United States, Nichter (2008) provided several examples of turnout buying in the 2004 U.S. elections. For instance, five Democratic Party operatives in East St. Louis were convicted in federal court for offering cigarettes, beer, medicine, and \$5 to \$10 rewards to increase turnout of the poor. One party official pleaded guilty and testified that operatives offered individuals rewards “because if you didn’t give them anything, then they wouldn’t come out.”

political knowledge or information (for evidence on the link between education and political knowledge, see Milligan et al. 2004).⁷

One justification for why political information among citizens predicts governance outcomes is provided by the political agency literature (Barro 1970, Ferejohn 1986, Persson et al. 1997, Besley 2006). Models in this literature characterize political behavior as a principal-agent problem, in which voters are the principals who seek to control the actions of the agents they elect—the politicians. Politicians vary in honesty. Although honest politicians implement the policy favored by voters, dishonest politicians can obtain rents by implementing the policy not favored by the voters. More informed voters are better able to use elections to screen and discipline politicians. Hence, electoral accountability is increasing in voter information.

The idea that a lack of information constrains electoral accountability is also consistent with the higher incidence of clientelism in low-income settings. For instance, using evidence from the introduction of conditional cash transfers for the poor in Mexico, De La O (2009) argued that voters use the incidence of clientelistic policies to learn about politician behavior. Villages that were randomly chosen for the program 21 months before the 2000 presidential election saw an increase in turnout of 7% and an increase in incumbent vote share of 16% as compared with villages that entered the program only six months prior to the election. She interpreted the fact that the amount of time lapsed since program entry predicted the extent of preference for an incumbent as suggesting that citizens who learned the most about the program changed their voting behavior the most.

Another important feature of politics in low-income settings is the prevalence of ethnic politics. Limited information about politician quality provides a rationale for this; ethnic networks provide informal insurance and enable information flows (Miguel & Gugerty 2005, Habyarimana et al. 2007). Furthermore, a politician's ethnic identity is often a good predictor of redistributive preferences (Pande 2004, Besley et al. 2007). All else being equal, both reasons will cause voters to favor politicians belonging to their own ethnicity, and this will provide the party that represents the majority ethnic group with an electoral advantage. This may, in turn, reduce elections to a mere counting of heads and lessen the role of elections as a source of accountability (Horowitz 1985). Consistent with this hypothesis, Norris & Mattes (2003) and Posner et al. (2010) reported a significant electoral advantage for the party representing the ethnic majority in sub-Saharan Africa.

Is political competition dominated by ethnic parties associated with the election of lower-quality politicians? Using measures of country-level ethnic politics from Freedom House country reports, Banerjee & Pande (2009) demonstrated a positive correlation between ethnic politics and country-level measures of political corruption. They used a two-dimensional model of politics to argue that forces that make a politician's ethnic identity more salient reduce voter emphasis on honesty, even though voters care about politician honesty *per se*. If low-quality politicians are useful to the party for other reasons (e.g., are good for campaign finance), then parties, in turn, will exploit the ethnic bias

⁷Strategic models of voting provide one reason for why information may be related to participation (Feddersen & Pesendorfer 1997). These models claim that if voters share identical preferences, then even with costless voting less informed voters will choose to delegate their vote to the more informed (and so abstain from voting). Improvements in information will be associated with higher turnout. Although there is some supportive evidence for this thesis from media studies in rich countries (Stromberg 2004, Gentzkow 2006, Snyder & Stromberg 2010), the responsiveness of voter turnout to priming exercises suggests that this is unlikely to provide the main explanation for turnout patterns in rich or poor countries.

among voters. As a result, low-quality politicians who help the party conduct activities such as fund-raising will persist in equilibrium. Banerjee & Pande (2009) provided empirical support for this thesis using panel data from a North Indian state. Although better knowledge about politician quality will strengthen voter incentives to not elect low-quality candidates, whether improvements in information will suffice to reduce ethnic preferences and improve governance outcomes is less clear.

The modernization hypothesis, for instance, would predict that ethnic networks and clientelist policies have high returns for the less educated voters in the developing world. It is only as countries become richer that the relevance of ethnic networks and publicly provided private goods is reduced (Lizzeri & Persico 2001). Hence improvements in information may do little to alter voter willingness to trade off politician identity for other dimensions of quality in low-income settings.

Alternatively, it may be that, holding everything else constant, lower levels of political information cause voters in poor countries to sell their vote more cheaply (in response to either preferred clientelism or explicit vote buying). In such situations, informational improvements will better align voter preferences and electoral outcomes. Media studies from low-income countries provide some support; increased media presence improves electoral accountability, as measured by government responsiveness to weather-related food shortages and calamities (Besley & Burgess 2002). Below I review the experimental evidence on how these trade-offs play out.

A different dimension of identity politics relates to gender. Women comprise a demographic group that both is educated less and exhibits significantly lower rates of political participation in poor countries. They are less likely to vote and to hold elected office.⁸

It may be that social norms are particularly binding in poor countries or that information may play a role; if party politicians believe that women make ineffective leaders and/or are disliked by voters, then they are unlikely to field women, and therefore neither parties nor citizens will learn about women's ability to lead. The limited presence of women in politics may worsen the quality of representation afforded by elected governments, particularly for female members of the electorate. Men and women typically exhibit different policy preferences, and in rich countries this translates into significant differences in voting patterns across genders (see, for instance, Edlund & Pande 2002, Edlund et al. 2005). For low-income countries, differences in male and female policy preferences have been linked to differences in the type of work they do (Chattopadhyay & Duflo 2004, Beaman et al. 2011). If women in poor countries are less likely to vote and be elected, then they will also have less policy influence. Against this background I review the experimental literature on information and voter behavior.

3. DO BETTER-INFORMED CITIZENS VOTE DIFFERENTLY? EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE

A recent body of literature exploits natural and field experiments that improve the information about politicians available to voters to identify the role of information in influencing voter behavior in low-income countries. This experimental literature is closely related

⁸Although the proportion of female parliamentarians at the national level has increased by 8% in the decade from 1998 to 2008, the current global average of 18.4% remains low. At mid-year 2009, only 17 heads of state or government were women (UN Women Canada 2010).

to an older political science literature, often described as the Get Out the Vote (GOTV) literature, which has used field experiments to understand the determinants of voter turnout in the United States. The GOTV literature, in general, concludes that personalized campaigning messages such as door-to-door canvassing and social pressure are effective methods of getting citizens to vote (Gerber & Green 2000). This literature places less emphasis on disentangling the role of mobilization from voter information in affecting turnout.

In contrast, studies in the development field have emphasized experimental designs and evaluation methods that allow researchers to identify the role of information in influencing voter choices. Here, I review papers that seek answers to two questions. First, how do voters react to information about politician performance? Second, does information about the importance of voting and how policy is made influence voter behavior? **Table 1** summarizes the basic experimental design and main results for all papers reviewed in this section.

3.1. Does Learning About Politicians Matter?

How do voters learn about a politician's quality and policy preferences? A first line of research asks whether voters use campaigns to learn prospectively about politicians. A second line of research directly tests a key prediction of political agency models—does information about an incumbent's performance influence voter willingness to re-elect him? A third line of research asks whether voters use information about incumbent performance to update their priors about the effectiveness of leaders drawn from that group. I summarize the main findings below.

3.1.1. Do campaigns influence voters? In-person political campaigns gain prominence in environments with low media penetration and low levels of education. Election campaigns in low-income democracies are typically colorful affairs involving rallies, entertainment, and often explicit gift giving by parties. A first set of field experiments exploits randomized variation in the nature of political campaigns to examine how prospective policy promises made during campaigns influence voting behavior.

Wantchekon (2003) randomized the form of political campaigns during Benin's national election and examined whether voters favor clientelism per se and whether this, in turn, increases ethnic voting. The experiment was unique in that it involved campaigning by real presidential candidates competing in the national election.

The experiment was conducted in eight noncompetitive districts of Benin (four were incumbent dominated and four opposition dominated). In each district, two villages were randomly chosen for treatment, and in treatment villages the incumbent and challengers were assigned different campaign messages. Within a district, the incumbent was assigned a public good campaign in one treatment village and a clientelist campaign in the second village. The challenger was always assigned the opposite. Both campaigns focused on the same issues, which included education, health care, and development. However, the public good campaign stressed the issue as part of a national program (*project de societe*), whereas the clientelist campaign stressed the issue as a specific project to transfer government resources to the region. The clientelist message also highlighted the candidate's ethnic affiliation. Outcomes in a treatment village would be compared with the control in which

Table 1 Experimental design and main results for papers reviewed in Section 3

Paper	Country	Question(s)	Experimental design		Outcomes		
			Treatment	Experimental design	Turnout	Vote share	Vote buying
A. Learning about politicians							
Wantchekon (2003)	Benin	Do voters favor clientelistic policies over national public policies?	Treatment 1: clientelist campaign speech (specific promise to village or region) Treatment 2: public policy (nationally oriented message) Control: mixture of clientelist and campaign speech	Villages N = 24 Treatment 1: 8 Treatment 2: 8 Control: 8	Not evaluated	15-pp higher vote share with clientelist speech in South, and 17-pp higher vote share for opposition candidates; up to 24-pp lower vote share for public policy speeches in the North; women's vote share for public policy messages higher by as much as 38 pp for opposition candidates	Not evaluated
Wantchekon (2009)	Benin	Can deliberative campaigning make voters favor public policies over clientelism?	Treatment: policy platforms devised through expert consultation and amended in informed town hall meetings Control: mixture of targeted or clientelist promises and no town hall meeting	Villages N = 36? Treatment: 12 Control: 24	Turnout higher by 7.3 percentage points (pp) in villages exposed to programmatic campaigns ^a	6-pp increase in vote share of programmatic candidates ^b	Not evaluated
Ferraz & Finan (2008)	Brazil	Does information on incumbent performance increase electoral accountability?	Treatment: pre-election audits on incumbent corruption record Control: postelection audits	Municipalities N = 373 Treatment: 205 Control: 168	Not evaluated	7-pp lower re-election probability for incumbent who committed two corruption violations in municipalities with pre-election audit; 11 pp lower if radio station present in municipality	Not evaluated

(Continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Paper	Country	Question(s)	Experimental design	Outcomes			
Banerjee et al. (2010b)	India	Does information on incumbent performance increase electoral accountability?	Treatment: received pre-election report cards on incumbent performance and candidate qualifications Control: no report cards received	Slum polling stations N = 775 Treatment: 200 Control: 575	3.5-pp increase in turnout in treatment slums	5.7-pp decline in vote share for the incumbent who had a worse performance relative to other incumbent featured in the same newspaper	19-pp decline in vote buying
Chong et al. (2010)	Mexico	Does information on incumbent performance increase electoral accountability?	Treatment 1: information on municipalities' overall spending Treatment 2: information about distribution in poverty program Treatment 3: information on corruption	Precincts N = 150 for each treatment	No effect for treatments 1 and 2; reduced turnout where corruption was high for treatment 3 (11% drop if all spending was corrupted)	No effect for treatments 1 and 3; treatment 2 increased incumbent party share when incumbent spent more on the poor	
Bhavnani (2009)	India	Does having a woman leader improve future electoral prospects of female candidates?	Treatment: ward required to have female representative for one election cycle Control: ward never required to have female representative	Wards N = 118 Treatment: 37 Control: 81	Not evaluated	17.9-pp higher probability of woman winning in wards reserved in the previous election	Not evaluated
Beaman et al. (2009)	India	Does having a woman leader improve future electoral prospects of female candidates?	Treatment: village council required to have female leader for either one or two election cycles Control: village council never required to have female leader	Village councils (Gram Panchayat) N = 165 Treatment: Reserved once: 71 Reserved twice: 20 Control: 74	Not evaluated	3.7-pp higher probability that a woman stands for election and 5.8-pp higher probability of winning in village councils where leadership positions had been reserved for women in previous two elections	Not evaluated

(Continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Paper	Country	Question(s)	Experimental design	Outcomes
B. Learning about policy production function				
Collier & Vicente (2008)	Nigeria	Do grass-root antiviolence campaigns change voters' behavior and candidate choices?	Treatment: area exposed to antiviolence campaign during election Control: area not exposed to campaign during election	Neighborhoods and villages N = 24 Treatment: 12 Control: 12 Turnout 9% higher in districts with antiviolence campaigns 4-pp decline in vote share of candidate portrayed in the media as espousing instability in treatment areas Not evaluated
Gine & Mansuri (2010)	Pakistan	Is lack of information a barrier to political participation by women? Are there spillover effects in information campaigns?	Treatment 1: door-to-door campaign that informed women about the importance of electoral process for policy Treatment 2: treatment 1 combined with information emphasizing significance of secret balloting Control: no campaign	Geographical clusters within villages N = 64 Treatment: 43 Control: 21 12% increase in turnout; similar effects for treatments 1 and 2 Significant spillover effects: untreated women in treated clusters behave as treated women 8-pp decline in male knowledge about women's chosen candidates in treatment areas Not evaluated
Banerjee et al. (2010a)	India	Can voters be persuaded to not vote along ethnic lines? Can voters be persuaded to vote against corruption?	Caste treatment: vote for development not along ethnic lines Corruption treatment: vote against corruption Control: no village campaign	Village clusters Caste treatment N = 601 Treatment: 104 Control: 497 Corruption treatment N = 529 Treatment: 102 Control: 427 7.6% increase in turnout in caste treatment villages; no effect of corruption campaign 3.5-pp decline in incumbent vote share if incumbent vote faced heinous criminal charges; no effect of corruption campaign Not evaluated

^aTreatment effect on turnout was calculated using data collected at various voting booths from eight districts (eight treatment villages) involved in the experiment immediately after all the votes were counted.

^bThe treatment effect on vote shares was calculated using electoral returns from eight districts. Three districts were not included because an accurate vote count on the election day could not be obtained, but vote share data obtained from the postelection survey show that the treatment effect was positive in two districts and negative in one district. The average treatment effect remains positive if the missing districts were included.

the candidates continued to use their typical campaign that combined elements of the clientelist and public goods campaign.

The evaluation was based on a comparison of survey outcomes across treatment and control villages. The paper does not report any effects of the campaign on turnout. The main finding is a significant and positive clientelist treatment effect as measured by candidate vote share. In addition, there is a significant and negative public policy effect on the incumbent candidate's vote share. Finally, women are more likely to vote in favor of the candidate providing the public policy message. As described in Table 1, the estimated effects are large.

Survey-based outcome measures often raise the concern of priming. On the one hand, the fact that the intervention took the form of an actual campaign in which voters in a treatment village were exposed to both clientelist and public good campaigns limits this concern. On the other hand, the relatively small sample size (eight treatment villages for each treatment) makes the heterogeneity analysis harder to interpret.

The paper's main finding is that voters respond positively to clientelistic campaign messages. However, does this finding inform us about voter preferences or rather the credibility of clientelistic versus public policy messages? In other words, what signal about politician quality were voters expected to extract from the treatment?

A follow-up experiment conducted during the first round of the 2006 presidential election sought to shed light on these questions. It examined whether the institutional form of campaigning influences the credibility of campaign promises and therefore voter responsiveness (Wantchekon 2009). The intervention occurred in two stages. In the first stage, a conference including party members and policy experts was held in which parties devised specific policy platforms. In the second stage, town hall meetings were held in a random sample of villages—during these meetings, parties described their platforms and amended them based on voter feedback.⁹ The typical meeting lasted between one and a half to two hours, and between six to ten meetings were conducted over two weeks in each village. In contrast, the control villages continued to receive the traditional election campaign in which the politician delivered a mixture of targeted and clientelist promises, typically during a festive rally in which cash and gifts were also distributed.

Survey results showed that villagers in treatment villages perceived election campaigns as more informative, especially about the policy process. This translated into increased turnout—the expert-led deliberative campaign increased turnout by an average of 7.3%. This is particularly striking given the lower incidence of vote buying in treatment villages. Results on candidate vote shares suggest positive effects of the campaign—the experimental candidates garnered 66.7% of the vote in the treatment villages, compared with 60.7% in the control villages (however, the statistical significance of the difference is unclear).

How likely is it that information, rather than motivation, drove the impact of the campaign? The author presented evidence that voters in treatment villages were better informed about the candidates and the problems facing the country. Yet it may still be that higher turnout largely reflects the motivational aspects of the campaign. It may also be that

⁹The town meetings opened with the party member giving a 15-minute speech on the problems facing the country and solutions suggested by the candidate. This was followed by an open debate during which issues were contextualized and proposals amended in light of voter feedback.

voters responded positively to politicians' willingness to engage in deliberation rather than to the message itself. Finally, the fact that vote buying was restricted (by design) in the experimental villages affords yet another explanation for why candidate vote shares were influenced.

The findings of these papers clearly demonstrate the responsiveness of voter behavior. However, they also underline real difficulties with interpreting the impact of treatments that seek to inform voters prospectively about leader behavior. In environments with limited policy commitment, the credibility of campaign promises is likely low. Hence, it is unclear whether differences in political campaigns should cause voters to update their priors and in which direction.

In contrast, papers that examine how voters use information on incumbent performance afford tighter tests of the information hypothesis. Such tests build on a key prediction of the political agency model—that voters should use retrospective voting to ensure electoral accountability. Recent papers provide experimental evidence that supports this prediction.

3.1.2. Do voters react to information about incumbent performance? In 2003, as part of an anticorruption program, Brazil's federal government began to select municipalities at random to audit their expenditures of federally transferred funds. Audit findings were made publicly available and disseminated to media sources. Using a data set of corruption constructed from the audit reports, Ferraz & Finan (2008) compared the electoral outcomes of municipalities audited before and after the 2004 elections, with the same levels of reported corruption.

The paper focuses on re-election rates for incumbent mayors. Among municipalities where two violations were reported, the audit policy reduced the incumbent's likelihood of re-election by 7 percentage points (or 17%) compared with the re-election rates in the control group of municipalities that only received the audit after the election. The effects increased to almost 14 percentage points in municipalities with three violations associated with corruption. These effects were more pronounced in municipalities where local radio was present to broadcast the information. Compared with municipalities audited after the elections, the audit policy decreased the likelihood of re-election by 11 percentage points among municipalities with one radio station and where two violations were reported. Radio exacerbates the audit effect when corruption is revealed and also promotes noncorrupt incumbents. When corruption was not found in a municipality with local radio, the audit actually increased the likelihood that the mayor was re-elected by 17 percentage points.

The role of incumbent performance in influencing her re-election prospects is also examined by Banerjee et al. (2010b). They conducted a field experiment that provided slum dwellers with report cards on councilor performance in the run-up to the Delhi municipal elections. Municipal councilors are elected from single-member jurisdictions using plurality rule and enjoy access to discretionary spending funds. Their main responsibilities include attending and addressing issues in the legislature and attending committees that provide oversight on service delivery.

The experiment was conducted in conjunction with a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that used India's Right to Information Act to obtain disclosures on legislator spending, committee attendance, and participation in the legislature. In addition, affidavits filed by candidates were used to obtain information on the education, assets, and criminal

charges for the incumbent and the two main challengers in each jurisdiction. These data were then summarized in a report card, and a leading Indian newspaper published two report cards per day in the run-up to the election.

The experimental evaluation occurred in 10 jurisdictions. In each jurisdiction, the full sample of slums was mapped, and 20 slums (each corresponding to a polling station) were randomly selected for treatment (giving a sample of 200 treatment and 575 control slums). The treatment had three phases. First, households received a door-to-door campaign in which they were informed about the legislator's responsibilities. Then each household in the treatment slum received a copy of the newspaper containing the report card for his and the neighboring jurisdiction (on the day of newspaper publication). Finally, a small focus group was conducted (one per polling station) in which an NGO member facilitated but did not lead the discussion on report cards. The design of the focus group, combined with the relatively low focus-group attendance, suggests that the intervention's primary impact occurred through slum dwellers reading and discussing report cards.

The intervention was evaluated using official electoral returns at the polling-station level. In examining the impact of performance, the evaluation considered two kinds of yardstick competitions. First, comparing the two incumbents featured in a single newspaper, was the relatively better-performing incumbent rewarded by voters? Second, do incumbent qualifications (relative to the challengers) matter?

The intervention was associated with a 3.5-percentage-point increase in average turnout in control slums. This increase in turnout was concentrated in jurisdictions where the incumbent performed poorly. The campaign effects on the incumbent vote share also varied with information. For the median-performing incumbent, the campaign had no impact on the vote share. However, for the best-performing incumbent, the treatment increased the vote share by 7 percentage points. Voters exhibited sophistication in interpreting qualification information. If the incumbent moved from being the best-qualified candidate (in terms of education, assets, and criminality) to the second-best candidate, then this reduced her vote share by 6.2 percentage points.

These Delhi elections were marked by a significant incidence of vote buying, which included plying voters with alcohol and offering them cash. To measure vote buying, observers sat in a random sample of treatment and control slums the night prior to the election and noted the incidence of different types of vote buying. Overall, the campaign caused a 19-percentage-point decline in vote buying through cash bribes. In this case, identifying the causal mechanism, however, is harder. Voters may have responded to better information by increasing the price at which they sell their votes. Alternatively, parties may be more wary of vote buying in areas that had an NGO campaign.

Finally, a recent paper from Mexico examined the impact of information about incumbent governments in a setting in which the incumbent cannot stand for re-election. Chong et al. (2010) implement three treatments in Mexico—the first group of precincts received information about municipalities' overall spending, the second group received information about the distribution of resources to the poor, and the third group received information about corruption. Because incumbents could not stand for re-election, voters could only use this information to infer likely party performance in the next term. The authors reported a significant decrease in voter turnout but no change in incumbent vote share in places with extensive corruption. In contrast, voters turn out at higher rates and provide more support for incumbent parties when they are exposed to information about high levels of government spending to the poor.

Taken together, these findings suggest that both vote shares and turnout are sensitive to information. The fact that turnout sometimes declines with information is not consistent with simple models of strategic voting and common values; in these models, the less informed abstain to let the more informed decide election results. One possibility is that voting is an expressive act but also a costly one. Information may either increase or decrease the anticipated benefit; hence the turnout effects per se may either increase or decrease with information. A model in which voters started with pessimistic beliefs about incumbents in India and optimistic beliefs about them in Mexico would explain the finding.

In the absence of term limits, the experimental evidence supports the basic premise of political agency models—voters in low-income countries use information to enforce electoral accountability. However, does the role of information extend to changing voter beliefs about which types of individuals make good leaders? The third strand of literature examines this question.

3.1.3. Do gender quotas influence subsequent voter choices? Voters may use the performance of an incumbent to correct mistaken priors about the leadership quality of other individuals who share incumbent attributes. Changing stereotypes about groups is most likely to occur when the leader belongs to a group that is underrepresented in politics, one such group being women. The increasing use of political affirmative action for women raises the possibility of quota-induced representation influencing voter beliefs about the effectiveness of women leaders and therefore their future electoral behavior. Two recent papers exploit natural experiments to examine this possibility.

Beaman et al. (2009) used random variation in mandated exposure to female leaders across village councils in the Indian state of West Bengal to examine whether exposure to female politicians influences voters' future behavior. In West Bengal villages, local decision making is undertaken by a village council that consists of a set of elected councilors. These councilors elect a chief councilor, or Pradhan. In every council election since 1998, one-third of councilor positions in each council and one-third of Pradhan positions across councils in a district have been randomly reserved for women. Only women can run for election to a reserved position.

The paper documents that women are effective leaders—relative to leaders elected from unreserved positions, they invest similar amounts in most public goods (and more in water) and are less likely to take bribes. Electoral data on unreserved councilor positions across all village councils in a West Bengal district show that, relative to councils that never had a reserved Pradhan, almost twice as many women stood for, and won, these positions in councils in which the Pradhan position had been reserved for women in the previous two elections. Data from a larger set of six West Bengal districts show similar gains for women contesting Pradhan elections in councils in which the Pradhan position is currently unreserved. In the May 2008 election, the share of female Pradhans was 11% in councils in which the Pradhan position had never been reserved and 18.5% in councils that were continuously reserved for a female Pradhan between 1998 and 2008. As incumbency rates are very low, this increase almost entirely resulted from new entrants. Being exposed to female leaders, therefore, makes villagers more willing to vote for women.

To directly examine whether the electoral gains were related to voters updating their beliefs about the effectiveness of female leaders, the paper presents two types of evidence—vignette and speech evidence, in which the gender of the leader described (or heard) was

randomly varied, and evidence from Implicit Association Tests, in which villager stereotypes regarding the association of women with domestic jobs and men with leadership jobs were investigated.

Speech and vignette data show that men living in villages that had never been reserved judged the hypothetical leader as significantly more effective when the leader's gender was experimentally manipulated to be male (rather than female). The evaluation gap disappears in currently or previously reserved villages. Similarly, Implicit Association Test-based measures of gender-occupation stereotypes show that exposure to female leaders (through reservation) increased the likelihood that male villagers associated women with leadership activities (as opposed to domestic activities). Thus, although deep preferences and social norms are difficult to erode, voter beliefs on effectiveness remain malleable and play a significant role in the voting decision.

Corroborative evidence comes from Bhavnani (2009), who examined similar questions in an urban setting—municipal councilor elections in Mumbai. He found that the probability of a woman winning office conditional on the constituency being reserved for women in the previous election is approximately five times the probability of a woman winning office if the constituency had not been reserved for women. He finds suggestive evidence that an important channel was party officials learning that women can make effective leaders and can win elections.

3.2. Does Learning About the Importance of Voting Matter?

Similar to the U.S. GOTV literature, a second set of papers in the experimental literature on voter behavior has focused on nonpartisan information campaigns typically delivered by civil society organizations. Here again, a striking finding is the responsiveness of voter behavior. However, a key challenge faced by these papers is disentangling the role of motivation (or mobilization efforts) from learning in influencing voter behavior. I describe three papers and how their experimental design seeks to disentangle channels of influence.

3.2.1 Can behavior in conservative environments be changed? What constrains female political participation in low-income countries? One view is that low levels of education and limited female labor-force participation make them disinterested in the political process. Another view is that patriarchal systems constrain the political freedom women can enjoy. Both suggest a limited role for informational campaigns in increasing female participation in politics.

Evidence from a field experiment in rural Pakistan that informed female voters about the importance of politics provides evidence to the contrary (Gine & Mansuri 2010). Female literacy rates in the study areas were below 20%. The experiment was conducted in the two weeks prior to the 2008 national election. Randomization occurred at the level of geographic clusters within a village, and within treated clusters a random sample of households was randomly assigned to receive the awareness campaign via a door-to-door campaign. There were two treatment arms: one that focused on the relationship between electoral process and policy and one that included an additional module on the significance of secret ballots. Turnout increased by 12% for women in treatment clusters with similar sized effects in the two treatments.

The magnitude of the estimated effects is striking. In the United States, nonpartisan canvassing has been shown to raise the turnout rate by 7%–9%. Achieving even higher

effects among a population that, in general, faces significant constraints on mobility suggests that Pakistani women were quite willing to take the act of voting seriously. However, it is less clear whether these findings demonstrate that information matters over and above motivation.¹⁰

3.2.2. Can voters learn to coordinate actions? One of the more glaring examples of electoral malpractice is electoral violence. Can information about the importance of elections and enabling voters to coordinate actions (which may have been hindered by limited communication between voters) influence voter behavior and the incidence of electoral violence? Collier & Vicente (2008) examined these issues in the context of the 2007 Nigerian election, which was marred by significant violence—during the two days of the Nigerian election, over 300 citizens were killed. The field experiment featured a campaign against political violence conducted by a major international NGO, ActionAid, which specializes in community participatory development. The main campaign slogan was, “No to political violence! Vote against violent politicians.”

The field experiment spanned 24 census enumeration areas (each area had roughly 500 voters), of which half were randomly selected for treatment. The effectiveness of the campaign was measured in three ways—by a household survey, by citizen willingness to declare their preference for violence-free elections by mailing in a postcard, and by objective measures of political violence collected by observer journalists.

The campaign caused voters to report a 10% improvement in political freedom and an 11% decline in conflict within the local community. These improvements in citizen perception were accompanied by large but noisily estimated improvements in citizen willingness to directly take action as evidenced by their willingness to return the postcards. The campaign also led to self-reported increases in turnout; however, survey reports on voting may be subject to significant reporting bias.

3.2.3. Are voter preferences about politician quality malleable? Banerjee et al. (2010a) worked with an NGO in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh to evaluate the impact of two nonpartisan campaigns. Treatment villages for the two campaigns were drawn from the same set of jurisdictions. The first campaign encouraged villagers to not vote along caste lines and instead vote for the candidate who is best able to deliver development. The core campaign message was “Development issues affect everyone in your village, not just the members of one caste. Vote on development issues rather than along caste lines.” The second campaign encouraged villagers to not vote for corrupt campaigns and again exhorted villagers to vote for the candidate who will deliver development. Here, the campaign message was “Corrupt politicians steal money set aside for development funds and do nothing for you. Vote for clean politicians that care about your development needs.”

The campaign message was delivered in treatment villages by an NGO team using multiple methods, a prominent one being a puppet show. The paper uses a combination of survey and electoral data to evaluate the caste campaign and electoral data to evaluate the corruption campaign. The two campaigns had strikingly different effects, with the caste

¹⁰Even if it is motivation, we are unable to disentangle the role of pure persuasion from voters wishing to have their policy preferences implemented. (If political parties clearly differed in their policy priorities, then one possibility would have been to examine the impact of the campaign on vote shares.)

campaign significantly more effective. The caste campaign increased turnout by 7.6 percentage points, and the survey data show a 10-percentage-point decline in voting for the caste-preferred party.

However, one may worry that survey results reflected priming—voters in treatment villages report what they think surveyors want to hear. To address this concern, the authors examined whether the declines in caste-based voting are related to the quality of politicians. If the campaign caused voters to re-evaluate the trade-off between voting along caste lines and voting for a high-quality candidate, then declines in caste-preferred voting should be concentrated in groups for which the caste-preferred candidate is also of lower quality. To measure quality, the authors relied on criminal charges. A striking phenomenon of Indian politics has been the rise of criminals in politics (Golden & Tiwari 2009). The treatment effects are only present for caste-preferred candidates who face heinous charges. If most citizens vote along caste lines (in the absence of the treatment), then we would expect the incumbent to represent the majority caste in the jurisdiction. This would suggest that the patterns discerned in the survey data should be reflected in incumbent vote shares in the electoral data. Consistent with this, the paper finds that the caste treatment reduced the incumbent vote share when the incumbent faced heinous criminal charges.

In contrast, the corruption campaign largely left voter behavior unaffected. One interpretation of the differing results of the two campaigns is voters' ability to interpret the campaign message. They could easily relate to caste voting, and knowledge of criminal politicians was widespread. Hence the campaign caused voters to re-evaluate the trade-off between ethnic voting and criminality. In contrast, in an environment in which corruption is the norm, voters are unable to translate broad messages about fighting corruption into concrete action regarding for whom to vote. This interpretation is consistent with the earlier findings that voters react to specific information about incumbents' corruption records.

4. WHAT ARE AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH?

The experimental literature on voter behavior has drawn attention to the malleability of voter behavior and to the importance of information for good democratic practices. However, this literature also poses several challenges for future research. Here I discuss three challenges.

4.1. How Do Outcomes Change?

The experimental literature has largely focused on how voter campaigns and information disclosures influence electoral accountability. Underlying this is a presumption that voter activism will cause politicians to act more in voters' interest. However, one could imagine that voters have incentives to connive with local elected officials—greater information may increase the rents that some sets of voters (often described as the elite in the literature) can extract from elected officials without actually improving the quality of governance (Bardhan & Mookherjee 2000). Whether this dominates the anticorruption electoral impact of improved information remains an open question.

That said, some support for the view that information improves performance comes from observational studies that document a positive association between media presence and policy activism by elected governments (e.g., Besley & Burgess 2002). However, which

dimensions of politicians performance are influenced by greater electoral accountability and the channels of influence remain understudied.

One outcome for which there is evidence is corruption. Using a randomized experiment in the context of Indonesian village road projects, Olken (2007) found that government audits are effective in reducing corruption. Increasing the probability of audit from 4% to 100% reduced missing expenditures by 8 percentage points. Importantly, the effect of the audits was most pronounced for village heads who were up for re-election. This result suggests that anticipation of electoral accountability (here, the fact that villagers would get to know audit results) may lead to better performance. Nonexperimental evidence that corroborates this finding comes from Finan & Ferraz (2009). Relative to Brazilian mayors who faced a term limit, those who could stand for re-election misappropriated 27% fewer resources.

Finally, it is also worth noting that citizens may prefer democratic modes of service delivery, even when it leaves outcomes unaffected. For instance, Olken (2010) evaluated a field experiment in 49 Indonesian villages in which, as part of a development plan, each village proposed two infrastructure projects, a general project proposed by the village at large and a women's project proposed exclusively by women in the village. The political process through which the village chose the two projects was randomly assigned to either the plebiscite or representative meetings. Although election-based plebiscites substantially increased satisfaction among villagers, knowledge about the project, perceived benefits, and willingness to contribute, they had limited effects on project choice (and seemed to lead to elite capture of the project in the case of the women's project).

4.2. How Do Politicians Respond to Better-Informed Voters?

The field experiments reviewed vary voter information, holding other features of the political process constant. However, a general principle of political economy emphasized, for instance, in Acemoglu (2010) is that “large-scale shocks and policy interventions will create political economy responses from those who see their economic or political rents threatened or from those that see new options to increase these rents.”

One can imagine politicians reacting to anticipated increases in voter information in multiple ways; they may stop engaging in corruption, or they may simply change when and how they engage in such behavior. Bobonis & Fuentès (2009) examined the effect of disclosure of local government corruption practices on the longer-run performance of municipal governments in Puerto Rico. In Puerto Rico, the central government has established a systematic mechanism to conduct municipal government audits, which are then made publicly available and disseminated to media sources. As a result, politicians can anticipate when their constituency will be audited. The pre-election release of audit reports led to significant short-term reductions in municipal corruption levels and an increase in incumbent mayors' electoral accountability. However, municipal corruption levels in the subsequent term are higher in municipalities audited preceding the previous election, and these are concentrated among municipalities shown to have refrained from rent-seeking activities in the first audit. Such findings suggest an important need to understand how politicians react to anticipations of improved voter information and how the design of other political institutions may limit or exacerbate their ability to limit the impact of improvements in information.

4.3. Is There a Role for Mandatory Public Disclosures?

Finally, how should public policy seek to increase information available to voters in low-income democracies? In the short to medium run, relying on media may not suffice. Although low-income countries have witnessed significant changes in the nature and scales of media (UNDP 2002), many of them are far from having an independent media whose role is to provide citizens with objective information. For instance, using the freedom of press ratings published annually by Freedom House, we find that in 2008, only 20% of 92 low- and lower-middle-income countries had an independent media. Half of the sample had a partially free press, and in one-third the press was rated as not free. In contrast, in more than 80% of high-income countries, the press was rated to be independent. Equally, increases in political competition may not suffice—information transmission by political parties may simply not be credible.

One promising possibility is requiring public disclosures by elected officials and candidates for public office. Djankov et al. (2010) examined the relationship between disclosure rules and several measures of the quality of government, including corruption, using a new database of financial and business disclosure of members of the lower house of parliament (MPs) in 175 countries. They found that high- and upper-middle-income countries require disclosures and make them publicly available more often than the rest of the world. Moreover, these countries also have the highest disclosure scores, while low-income countries have the lowest disclosure scores. They also showed that public disclosure, as opposed to disclosure by MPs to the Congress, is associated with a better government. For instance, voluntary disclosures available to the public increase a country's government effectiveness score from the World Bank governance indicators by 0.242 points. However, whether governments in low-income democracies will have the incentives to implement such laws remains an open question.

5. CONCLUSION

This article reviews a fast-growing experimental literature on voter behavior in low-income countries. Because the set of experiments is reasonably large and the economic environments are sufficiently diverse, it is possible to identify robust patterns in the data. Voters in low-income settings are receptive to new information about politician performance and are willing to vote on the basis of this information. Evidence from the large-scale natural experiments, such as Ferraz & Finan (2008) and Beaman et al. (2009), suggests that politicians and parties are not able to completely undo the effect of new information (through disinformation campaigns or electoral malpractice). Thus changes in voting patterns translate into electoral penalties for worse performers.

Voter choices suggest a strong preference for high-quality noncorrupt politicians. Many scholars have puzzled over the difference between *de jure* and *de facto* institutions in low-income settings and have often suggested a limited scope for improvements in governance in countries with a history of extractive institutions. This body of evidence offers a more optimistic view—credible information can help voters influence the choice of politicians even in settings with weak institutions and electoral malpractice. As discussed in Section 4, understanding when and how voters are able to reduce the distance between the *de jure* and *de facto* institutions they face remains a fertile area for future research.

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