

Democratizing bureaucracy: How can citizens demand accountability from unelected officials?

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Abstract: How can citizens demand better public services where resources are scarce and democratic representation is weak? A common strategy is to turn to unelected officials who implement policy. Yet, these officials are often overburdened and not formally answerable to citizens, creating a bureaucratic accountability gap. We explore citizen strategies to narrow this gap, combining qualitative research with a survey of personnel in a near census of administrative blocks in Jharkhand – one of India’s poorest states. We argue that different strategies advance different dimensions of bureaucratic responsiveness: narrative appeals evoke empathy and focus attention, while publicity activates reputational concerns and provokes action. We experimentally test our theory, finding citizen testimony increases officials’ attention, and the threat of social media exposure increases their willingness to act. The findings reveal the microfoundations of bureaucratic behavior, particularly the roles of emotion and reputation, while illuminating how ordinary citizens can demand accountability from unelected actors.

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Introduction

In a village in northern India, the public water pump was broken and, despite residents' complaints, no repairs had been made. A mother worried: "There is water in the well but it is infested with insects. We drink the same water, give it to our kids, and then fall sick. The nearest working hand pump we can fetch water from is far." In another village, residents worried their houses would not withstand the monsoon rains. Despite qualifying for a government housing program, construction on new homes was stalled and residents continued to live in makeshift structures. As a woman recounted: "Our entire settlement is in shambles. How can our families and kids live in such homes that might collapse anytime? Our houses are completely damaged and no one is trying to make any arrangements for us. No government is doing so."³

Experiences like these are common in settings around the globe where citizens face chronic shortages of basic services and poor policy implementation.⁴ Frontline public officials are critical gatekeepers to public resources, exercising discretion in interpreting rules and implementing policy.⁵ Accordingly, many citizens turn to bureaucratic agents when seeking fulfillment of rights and entitlements.⁶ The residents quoted above, for example, complained to appointed administrators responsible for ensuring water supply and implementing housing policy. Direct citizen-state engagements of this type have received growing attention as a means to build social accountability, expanding the non-electoral mechanisms through which citizens can monitor and make claims on public officials.⁷ These strategies are particularly important for those without political connections or where democratic representation is weak.⁸

Yet, it is unclear whether or why unelected public personnel would respond to claims from citizens to whom they are not directly or formally answerable. Most personnel are instead beholden to senior officials and politicians who appoint and monitor them, which aligns their interests and pulls their focus upwards within an organizational hierarchy. At the same time, frontline personnel are often faced with too many tasks and too few resources, and so are forced to ration their time and attention.⁹ The result, we argue, is a *bureaucratic accountability gap*: the government workers that many citizens rely on to solve critical problems often have little capacity or incentive to respond to their needs.

Can citizens narrow this gap to demand attention and action from appointed personnel? This article focuses in particular on marginalized citizens who often lack strong political and bureaucratic representation. Studying whether and how such citizens can exact accountability is a crucial undertaking in settings marked by entrenched inequality.

We begin by exploring the accountability gap, drawing on firsthand accounts from both officials and citizens to consider the constraints – bureaucratic overload and upwardly-aligned

³ Video Volunteers video archive, interviews in Jharkhand.

⁴ Goyal 2024; Grossman and Slough 2022; Pande 2020.

⁵ Lipsky 1980; Rich 2019; Mangla 2024; Purohit 2024; Honig 2024.

⁶ Gallagher, Kruks-Wisner, and Taylor 2024; Gaikwad and Thomas 2024.

⁷ Mansuri and Rao 2013; Palmer-Rubin, Tapia Reyes, Berliner, Erlich, and Bagozzi et al. forthcoming.

⁸ Fox 2015; Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg 2016.

⁹ Dasgupta and Kapur 2020; Zacka 2017.

incentives – that can inhibit responsiveness to citizens' claims. Cognizant of those constraints, we then theorize how citizens can directly demand accountability from frontline personnel. We argue that citizens can focus officials' attention by sharing testimony that elicits an emotional response, and can motivate bureaucratic action by publicizing their stories in ways that threaten officials' professional reputations. Media, particularly social media and mobile technologies, are powerful and increasingly accessible tools in this process. They enable citizens to tell their stories in a manner that generates empathy while simultaneously enabling citizens to publicize those stories.

Our multi-method study illustrates how this works in rural India, shedding new empirical light on the microfoundations of bureaucratic behavior in response to citizens' claims. Our research was developed in partnership with a community media organization that supports a national network of citizen journalists who use video to document and resolve local grievances. Our focus is on the Block Development Office, a frontline administrative office responsible for the implementation of a wide range of state and central government programs.¹⁰ The block office is a critical nodal point linking local and state governance, and is a common port of call for citizens attempting to solve problems. To date, however, block offices have been largely overlooked in studies of India's administrative state.¹¹ We draw on qualitative research in block offices and interviews with citizen journalists to illustrate the bureaucratic accountability gap and theorize the strategies citizens use to narrow it. We operationalize the theory by closely examining citizen journalists' use of video and social media to capture and share local testimony.

To test our theory, we fielded an in-person survey of 1293 personnel of varied ranks and designations in a near census (258/264) of block offices across Jharkhand – one of India's poorest states. This is, to our knowledge, one of the first multi-actor surveys of an administrative office in India and the only one of its kind at the block level. We developed two embedded experiments to measure officials' responses to citizens' demands. The first featured pairs of videos presenting information about problems in different ways. Officials were first assigned to discuss an issue (either broken drinking water pumps or poor quality housing, depending on their designation). They were then shown a video about that issue featuring either citizen testimony in which residents narrated the problem in their own words, or official data about the same problem presented in a way that emulates status quo modes of intra-government reporting. Consistent with our theory, we found videos featuring citizen testimony produced a more empathetic reaction from officials, who also paid greater attention to the videos. However, the same videos generated no significant change in officials' willingness to take action on the issues.

The screening was then followed by a second experiment in which officials heard different vignettes about citizen action on the same issues featured in the videos, one describing in-person collective action at the block office and the other describing efforts to publicize a problem by sharing the video on social media and with officials. Hearing the social media vignette led to greater perceived pressure to respond. This was driven by fears of

¹⁰ Blocks are administrative units comparable to a county in the United States.

¹¹ Notable exceptions include Purohit 2024 and Dasgupta and Kapur 2020.

angering senior officials, and prompted an increased willingness to send staff to investigate an issue.

Our findings reveal citizen-led pathways to accountability, even under highly constrained conditions where studies have suggested citizens have limited ability – without assistance from above – to exact responsiveness from appointed personnel.¹² At the same time, we show that different strategies are required to demand different dimensions of bureaucratic responsiveness: narrative appeals evoke empathy and focus attention, and publicity triggers reputational concerns and provokes action. From a policy perspective, this work provides new theory and rich empirical evidence on how small yet scalable interventions in social accountability, harnessing tools of digital media, can boost bureaucratic responsiveness.

Our theory and findings contribute significantly to the study of government accountability. Existing research has documented the burdens officials face and frequent gaps between policy and implementation. We extend this work to consider how such bureaucratic constraints shape strategies for citizen action, drawing on a unique combination of bureaucrat- and citizen-facing research. By highlighting the role of emotion in officials' everyday decision-making, we call attention to an overlooked dimension of bureaucratic behavior. This adds to an emerging body of work that seeks to understand bureaucrats as social actors who are driven by more than extrinsic incentives.¹³ At the same time, our findings contribute to a longstanding scholarship on the importance of professional reputation in motivating officials, by suggesting that ordinary citizens can shape how frontline officials are monitored and seen from above.

Our research calls attention to the bureaucracy as a critical though often overlooked site of democratic practice. The gap between citizens' interests and the responses of bureaucratic actors is a key barrier to realizing effective democracy, marked by the mobilizational capacity of citizens and by mechanisms that hold both elected and unelected representatives to account (Roberts 1989; Heller 2019). Unelected actors play a key role in governance at all levels – subnational, national, and supranational – and in the private delivery of services as well. We highlight a pathway for citizen-led efforts to demand responsiveness from them, and in turn, democratize bureaucracy.

The bureaucratic accountability gap

Securing the attention, time, and resources of bureaucrats can provide access to important government resources and keep policy implementation accountable to citizens. But doing so also challenging, requiring strategic effort from citizens. Two broad approaches exist. The first is indirect: citizens pursue a "long route" to accountability¹⁴ through elected representatives who oversee bureaucrats' budgets and postings.¹⁵ Citizens complain to

¹² Olken 2007; Raffler et al. 2020; Buntaine and Daniels 2020; Banerjee, Hanna, Kyle, Olken and Sumarto 2010.

¹³ Honig 2024; Mangla 2024; Kyle and Resnick 2019.

¹⁴ World Bank 2004.

¹⁵ Toral 2023; Gulzar & Pasquale 2017; Iyer & Mani 2012

politicians¹⁶ or work through political brokers¹⁷ to make demands on bureaucrats. However, this approach leaves little opportunity for marginalized citizens without political connections. There is, moreover, growing research that questions whether an electoral path is adequate for accountability, given voters may not reward politicians for public goods provision.¹⁸

The second approach involves a “short route”¹⁹ in which citizens directly monitor and engage appointed personnel, pursuing non-electoral pathways.²⁰ Citizen-led “social accountability” initiatives attempt to foster government responsiveness by creating spaces for community oversight, citizen reporting, and other venues for complaints and demand-making. Such initiatives have received billions in investment from governments and donors.²¹ But the record on this direct, bottom-up approach is uneven,²² revealing an “optimism-evidence” gap.²³ While some studies find an impact of citizen monitoring and grievance articulation,²⁴ many others suggest officials are not responsive to citizens’ claims or top-down monitoring is more effective.²⁵

A fundamental challenge to social accountability, we argue, is that officials themselves are constrained when responding to citizen demands. These bureaucratic constraints are undertheorized in citizen-centered accounts, which often presume a causal link from citizen to bureaucratic action.²⁶ We identify two, interlinked sets of constraints. First, with insufficient time and resources, often in understaffed settings, many officials operate under conditions of “bureaucratic overload.”²⁷ They are overwhelmed and cannot physically or cognitively process the deluge of requests they receive. As a result, they are forced to ration their time and attention, exercising discretion in deciding when, to what, and to whom to respond.²⁸ Second, frontline personnel are dependent on higher-level officials for their budgets, postings, and career advancement. Their attention is thus pulled “upward” by political and organizational

¹⁶ Bussell 2019; Gaikwad and Thomas 2024.

¹⁷ Stokes et al. 2013; Auerbach and Thachil 2023.

¹⁸ Goyal 2024.

¹⁹ World Bank 2004.

²⁰ Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006.

²¹ Mansuri and Rao 2013; Tsai, Morse, Toral, Lipovsek 2019.

²² Tsai et al. 2019; Fox 2015.

²³ Blair, Gottlieb, Nyhan, Paler, Argote, and Stainfield 2024.

²⁴ Björkman and Svensson 2009; Pandey, Goyal and Sundararaman 2009; Banerjee, Hanna, Kyle, Olken and Sumarto 2018.

²⁵ These mixed results highlight challenges of social accountability along a number of dimensions. Many interventions fail to induce citizen mobilization (Banerjee et al. 2010; Chong, De La O, Karlan, and Wantchekon 2015; Lieberman, Posner, and Tsai 2014; Dunning, Grossman, Humphreys, Hyde, McIntosh, and Nellis. 2019; Raffler et al. 2020). Even when citizens mobilize, efforts may be captured by local elites (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006), yield unreliable data (Buntaine and Daniels 2020), or lack formal mechanisms to connect citizen monitoring with top-down oversight (Olken 2007; Buntaine, Greenstone, He, Liu, Wang, and Zhang 2024; Buntaine and Daniels 2020). Even when bureaucrats are specifically tasked with responding to citizen complaints, such as in grievance redressal platforms, actual rates of responsiveness can remain low (Kumar, 2024).

²⁶ Tsai et al. 2019; Grossman and Slough 2022.

²⁷ Dasgupta and Kapur 2020.

²⁸ Kumar 2024; Zacka 2017.

pressures that leave them beholden to the politicians and senior officials who appoint and monitor them.²⁹

From the perspective of citizens, these two sets of conditions combine to shape the bureaucratic accountability gap. Where officials are concerned about their professional reputations, they are likely to give their limited time and scarce resources to those who signal connections to higher level administrators or politicians (i.e. to citizens who can effectively pursue the “long route”). For citizens lacking connections or political influence, demanding accountability is thus highly challenging. Existing research suggests these barriers may be easier to overcome if officials share a sense of identity with residents or are concerned about their local standing.³⁰ In practice, however, frontline personnel may not be locally embedded. Many, particularly those serving large and diverse catchments, do not actually live or come from the communities they serve. Our focus is therefore on how citizens lacking both political connections and social relationships with bureaucrats can make their voices heard.

Narrowing the gap: citizen strategies for engaging unelected officials

We develop a theory of how citizens can demand responsiveness from public personnel by working within the constraints of the bureaucratic accountability gap. We begin by disaggregating different dimensions of responsiveness, which require different inputs from citizens and officials alike. We focus on the first two components of a citizen’s experience when approaching a bureaucratic office: whether they gain *attention* (their complaints are heard), and whether an official takes *action* (their complaints are prioritized). Simply being heard is an important outcome in a context where the poor feel ignored or neglected by the state.³¹ Having a claim acknowledged or receiving “an equal hearing”³² is critical to political equality and procedural justice more broadly.³³ Beyond attention, having an official take action of any type, such as referring the complaint to another office, providing advice, or sending staff to examine an issue, are steps towards solving a problem. In capacity-constrained settings, these steps – even when incomplete – are meaningful, signaling the prioritization of a need through the allocation of scarce resources and time.

As delineated in Table 1, we turn to each measure of responsiveness – attention and action – in turn, to consider the barriers that inhibit it and citizens’ strategies to circumvent those barriers. We then propose potential practices that citizens, including those who are not politically connected, could employ to realize those strategies.

²⁹ Gulzar & Pasquale 2017; Toral 2023.

³⁰ Bhavnani and Lee 2017; Paller 2019.

³¹Sanyal and Rao 2018.

³² Verba 2003, p 677.

³³ Tyler 2003; Beramendi, Besley, and Levi 2022.

Table 1. Strategies to circumvent barriers to bureaucratic responsiveness

Measure of responsiveness	Bureaucratic barriers	Citizen strategy	Citizen practice
Attention	Bureaucratic overload	Appealing to emotion, particularly empathy	Citizen testimony <i>Experimental operationalization:</i> video-based citizen testimony
Action	Bureaucratic overload, Upwardly aligned incentives	Activating reputational concerns	Publicity <i>Experimental operationalization:</i> social media publicity

When aiming to command officials' attention, citizens must contend with the fact that frontline personnel are deeply overloaded, creating capacity and cognitive constraints to responsiveness. While citizens themselves cannot ease these conditions, which reflect understaffing and insufficient investments in agencies, they can work within them. Citizens' complaints can increase the burden on officials and may often get lost in a sea of demands.³⁴ Citizens must therefore make their complaints in a manner that makes them stand out to gain and hold the focus of officials who are often simply overwhelmed.³⁵

We argue that an effective strategy for citizens to focus officials' attention is to appeal to their emotions. Bureaucrats' emotions are not often a focus in studies of accountability. Yet studies from psychology suggest they have a powerful role in decision-making – particularly for those faced with too many choices.³⁶ In particular, empathy – the ability to understand and share the feelings of others – can generate a desire to help and to alleviate the suffering of others.³⁷ A small but growing literature in public administration also calls attention to intrinsic sources of motivation for officials, including a sense of social mission and desire to help those they serve.³⁸ Together, these bodies of work suggest citizens can both generate and deploy emotion in bureaucratic environments where their voices otherwise go unheard.

Citizens can seek to provoke an empathetic response by drawing on their lived experiences, conveying them through personal testimony. By telling their stories through

³⁴ Buntaine and Daniels 2020.

³⁵ Zacka 2017.

³⁶ Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, and Kassam. 2015; Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, and White 2008.

³⁷ Glynn and Sen 2014; Jensen and Pedersen 2017; Clifford, Kirkland, and Simas 2019.

³⁸ Honig 2024; Kyle and Resnick 2018; Banuri and Keefer 2013.

firsthand narrative, citizens can humanize a complaint, convey their own emotions – e.g. sadness, fear, anger, frustration – and shape how officials react. A literature in psychology, for example, suggests that an individual’s emotions can be shifted by exposure to the emotions of others.³⁹ In one study, individuals exposed to news stories with first-person perspectives were more likely to recall stories than those who were not.⁴⁰ In another, students who heard oral histories exhibited greater engagement in United States history.⁴¹ Citizen testimony, in sum, may be a powerful tool through which to generate empathy and, in turn, harness the attention of officials.

Attention, however, does not imply action. Even if a frontline official hears citizens’ complaints, they are still overloaded with demands and so are unlikely to be able to allocate resources (e.g. staff time, funds, physical materials) to every problem that attracts their attention. Here, bureaucratic overload is coupled with a second barrier to responsiveness: upwardly-aligned professional incentives that make frontline officials worried about top-down oversight and their standing in the eyes of their seniors. Once again, there is little citizens themselves can do to shift this constraint, but they can work within it or even use it to their advantage.

An effective strategy for doing so relies on the fact that officials at *all* levels care about reputation. At the highest level, bureaucrats are concerned with institutional reputation, and so worry about whether the behavior of their staff will invite public scrutiny and criticism.⁴² In turn, lower-level officials, who are concerned about their professional reputations within an organization, will want to ensure no information about poor policy implementation or misbehavior reaches higher-ups. Citizens can therefore build upon the fact that frontline officials are deeply motivated by a desire to avoid both public and professional scrutiny.

We argue that publicity plays a key role in enabling marginalized citizens to credibly threaten the reputation of appointed officials or an institution as a whole. From a top-down perspective, media presence can hold agents accountable to their principals by generating valuable information about the agent’s performance.⁴³ From a bottom-up perspective, this suggests citizens can hold local agents accountable by generating this information themselves. Citizens can use media to share, or threaten to share, information about frontline bureaucratic agents with senior officials.⁴⁴

By publicly sharing their stories and complaints, citizens appeal to top-down mechanisms of oversight without the connections to politicians or higher-ups required by the “long route” to social accountability. In fact, even the political influence wielded by connected citizens may be insufficient in prompting officials into action, as information may not reach senior officials with the ability to punish frontline personnel.⁴⁵ Sharing problems publicly

³⁹ Hatfield et al. 1993, Keen 2006.

⁴⁰ Li and Lee 2019.

⁴¹ Haas 2019.

⁴² Carpenter 2010.

⁴³ Besley and Burgess 2001.

⁴⁴ Elrich, Berliner, Palmer-Rubin, and Bagozzi 2021; Peruzotti and Smulovitz 2006.

⁴⁵ Buntaine and Daniels 2020.

leaves open the potential for them to be seen by officials at any level while simultaneously threatening the reputation of the institution as a whole.

In sum, we identify two strategies citizens can use to capture officials' attention and prompt them into action, respectively: appealing to emotion and activating their reputational concerns. While citizens do so in many ways, two widely accessible practices to implement these strategies are relying on citizen testimony to convey their needs and further threatening to publicize the problems citizens face. In our experimental study, described below, we operationalize these practices through *video-based testimony* and *social media publicity*.

Study context and methods

We develop and test our theory in rural India, where central, state, and local governments have spearheaded ambitious welfare and development programs that have been unevenly implemented. We focus on the community development block (or more simply, the “block”) – the middle level in a three-tier system of rural administration present in most Indian states since the 1950s.⁴⁶ Block-level appointed personnel oversee the implementation of a wide range of state and central government programs, including policies related to rural development, poverty alleviation, education, and health. They are therefore gatekeepers in the distribution of resources and, from the perspective of rural citizens, one of the most visible sites of government.

To understand the functioning of the block, we combined qualitative interviews and observations with a large-n survey and embedded experiments. We carried out four months of qualitative research in and around block offices. Working with a small team of trained Research Associates,⁴⁷ we interviewed 53 block and district officials across three adjoining states: Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar.⁴⁸

To gain insights into citizens’ experiences with block officials, we partnered with Video Volunteers,⁴⁹ one of India’s leading community media organizations, which works with a national network of citizen journalists called Community Correspondents (CCs).⁵⁰ The CCs film deficiencies in the allocation of government resources in their communities and interview residents who recount problems in their own words. They combine video-making with in-person mobilization at government offices and publicizing videos on social media. Video Volunteers reports the CCs have a one in five success rate, in which they can directly trace the

⁴⁶ Purohit 2024.

⁴⁷ We worked with two Research Associates, one woman and one man, each fluent in local languages and with substantial prior field experience. Both received intensive in-person training in qualitative methods, interviewing, and shadowing.

⁴⁸ In preliminary research in November and December 2022, we conducted in-person interviews with 23 officials in three adjoining states: Jharkhand (5), Uttar Pradesh (11), and Bihar (7). We then carried out an additional 30 interviews with officials in Jharkhand in February and March 2023.

⁴⁹ Video Volunteers has over 20 years of experience assisting local citizen journalists. We have been collaborating with VV since 2017. For more on our research partnership and research ethics, see our study materials (anonymized for peer review) [here](#).

⁵⁰ The CCs are active in 19 states and 190 of India’s poorest districts. CCs are both trained and paid by VV, and VV tracks the screening of the CC-made videos and officials’ responses.

CCs' efforts to a documented impact (e.g. repair of a water source, delivery of delayed pensions, the staffing of a health clinic). We carried out in-person or phone interviews with 81 CCs with variable impact rates to learn about their strategies for approaching officials.

Following the invitation of senior state officials, we narrowed our focus to Jharkhand. Jharkhand is one of India's poorest states, and representative of other similarly resource-constrained settings in India's northern Hindi-speaking belt.⁵¹ We began with qualitative work – including shadowing both CCs and officials – in six blocks representing different geographical regions of the state. Our interviews and observations helped us to refine our understanding of the barriers to bureaucratic responsiveness and of citizens' attempts to overcome those barriers within the specific state context.

To systematically probe these dynamics, we designed and implemented a unique, all-state survey of block-level officials. We carried out surveys in 258 of Jharkhand's 264 block offices, excluding the 6 in which we had already carried out qualitative research and pilot surveys. In each block, we surveyed five actors, summarized in Table 2. This strategy gave us a multi-rank sample of 1293 officials who were a mix of "generalists" working on a wide range of programs and "specialists" who focus on our two issues of interest (housing and water). Our aim in constructing this sample was to capture a wide array of perspectives within the block office, looking beyond just the senior officials in charge to other actors that engage citizens.

The survey was fielded during Summer 2023 with support from senior officials in the Jharkhand Departments of Water and Sanitation and Rural Development – two of the key agencies that oversee the blocks. Surveys were completed in-person at the block offices. The total number of interviews by designation is shown in Table 1.⁵²

Table 2. Surveys completed with each type of official in 258 blocks in Jharkhand

Official	Responsibility	Type	Surveys completed
Block Development Officer	Senior official in charge of the office	Generalist (most senior)	241
Block Clerk	Fields citizen complaints	Generalist (lowest level)	241
Block Panchayati Raj Officer	Liaison to local elected village councils	Generalist (middle rank)	253
Block Coordinator Awas	Implementation of a rural housing program	Housing specialist	217

⁵¹ Jharkhand placed 15 out of 19 states ranked by Human Development Index based on India's most recently available census data, putting it alongside the country scores of Ghana and Cameroon, according to 2011 data from the UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/india/publications/undp-india-results-2011>.

⁵² Gaps between the number of surveys by designation and the block sample size (258) either represent vacant posts or an official with "multiple charges" who worked over more than one block. There are fewer interviews with Junior Engineers because these officers are frequently assigned to work in multiple blocks.

Junior Engineer for Public Health	Technician focused on water	Water specialist	107
Block Program Officer Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme	Implements rural employment guarantee program	Water & Housing responsibilities	234
Total			1,293

In addition to questions about their day-to-day responsibilities and experiences with citizens, we embedded pre-registered video and vignette experiments within the survey.⁵³ These experiments, described in detail below, were created in partnership with Video Volunteers and reflect the practices the CCs most often employ when attempting to secure the responsive attention of block officials.

Citizens and the block in rural India

We developed the theory presented above through our qualitative interviews. This section presents evidence from the interviews and our surveys to illustrate how the bureaucratic accountability gap, and citizen strategies to circumvent it, work in practice.

We observe that block officials are overburdened, under-resourced, and feel substantial pressure to answer to higher-ups. Many report having insufficient resources to complete their tasks, with vacancies and understaffing being by far the most commonly reported reasons that officials feel they cannot work effectively (Figure 1). Seventy-two percent agreed they were “constantly overloaded and overworked” and said they were “tasked with an impossible amount of work.” As one official remarked, “Currently, no number of working hours is enough.”⁵⁴ Another Block Development Officer (BDO) explained his strategies for coping with the high workload, including outsourcing work to NGOs and ignoring “small things” like minor acts of corruption among the junior staff to keep the office working smoothly.⁵⁵

⁵³ The pre-analysis plan (anonymized for peer review) can be found [here](#).

⁵⁴ BDO in Uttar Pradesh, February 2023.

⁵⁵ BDO in Jharkhand, April 2023.

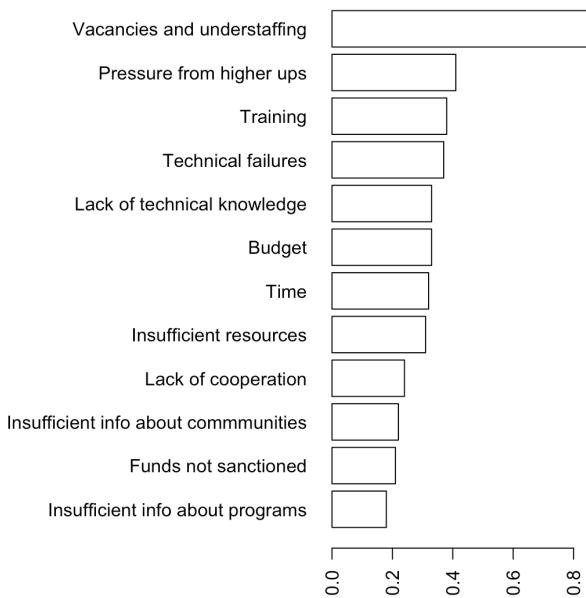


Figure 1. “Which of the following factors would you say also affect your ability to work effectively?” Multiple choice

Block officials are also constrained by the pressure they feel from higher-ups – the second most commonly cited barrier to effective work. One official, for example, described how state targets for program implementation are used to monitor the blocks, noting he found the approach “too task-focused and demotivational.”⁵⁶ This same dynamic extends through the block office itself, with clerks and lower-level personnel worrying about the oversight of the BDO. As stated by a clerk, “I do what the BDO tells me to do. This is my only job.”⁵⁷ It follows that, when asked to select the top two types of individuals to whom they feel accountable, officials in our sample overwhelmingly chose either the district (62%) or block officials (59%) to whom they directly report.

Fewer block officials express accountability to citizens, with just over 40% stating they feel “answerable” to citizens in their area. Most block officials are not embedded in local communities; about 5% of officials were born in the blocks where they work, and only 50% of officials report currently living in the blocks they serve. Officials have been working in their current blocks for only 2.44 years on average, and 54% report they expect to be transferred within the year. These trends diminish the prospects for developing the deep community ties that might be expected to generate local accountability.

Yet, block officials do spend considerable time receiving citizens’ complaints and meeting with them. On average, officials report that just under 300 citizens visit their office each week and that they spend about four hours per day engaging directly with citizens. Amid this constant stream of work, officials must decide which requests to prioritize. One BDO said,

⁵⁶ Revenue Sub-Inspector in Uttar Pradesh, November 2022.

⁵⁷ Head block office clerk in Jharkhand, March 2023

motioning to the large stack of papers on this desk, “I can’t get through all of these.”⁵⁸ Similarly, an officer responsible for implementing the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) reported that over 8,000 citizens in his block expected the 100 days of paid work for which they are eligible, and he routinely faces a dilemma regarding which laborers should be paid first given resource constraints. Citizens also know that amid so much backlog, their complaints can get lost. According to one CC who has closely observed these dynamics, work gets stalled because “clerks bury the file in the large stack.”⁵⁹

Despite these challenges, engaging block officials is important for citizens, particularly when seeking to resolve problems of great urgency or those that cannot be solved more locally. For many rural residents, the block is a relatively distant entity – both physically and figuratively. But it also represents a way to reach higher levels of administration for those who feel blocked at the local level. As a senior state official in Jharkhand reflected: “for ordinary citizens, the BDO is like god.... It is as close as many get to *sarkar* (the state).”⁶⁰ In an analysis of their national network, Video Volunteers found that block personnel were the most common officials cited by CCs as having “supported me in solving issues” – reported by 28.4 percent.⁶¹ Two other studies of claim-making practices in rural India similarly found that roughly 20 percent of citizens report directly contacting block officials.⁶²

To explore citizens’ strategies and practices to ensure their complaints are addressed when approaching the block, we draw directly on the experiences of the CCs, who collectively have amassed vast experiences in contacting block and other government officials. If one of the main barriers to responsiveness is the bureaucratic overload officials face, citizens must find a way, in the words of a VV staff member, to “cut through the noise.” The CCs’ central practice is to record videos of local problems including “face to camera” footage in which residents narrate the issue and its impact on their lives. The strategy is to prompt an emotional response, and seeing citizens’ faces, the CCs argue, helps officials to “focus.”⁶³ As one CC reported, when videos capture officials’ attention, they then “talk seriously” about completing the work. These accounts suggest that exposure to citizen testimony has the potential to make officials pay attention to complaints by making problems harder to ignore and by provoking an empathetic response.

Yet even if an official pays attention, a request may still be difficult to prioritize among many other demands. Here, CCs rely on the implicit threat a video represents once it is created: it might be publicized. As one reports, “One easy way to get things done is social media. My videos go viral because I share them on social media with groups of social workers and journalists, who circulate it further or tag officials on Facebook. In this way, I am able to

⁵⁸ BDO in Jharkhand, April 2023

⁵⁹ CC in Bihar, October 2022

⁶⁰ Author interview, Ranchi, Jharkhand, June 2023.

⁶¹ This was followed by 24.3 percent who reported receiving support from panchayat officials, and 21.6 percent who reported assistance from district officials. Just 4.8 percent reported assistance from a state Member of Legislative Assembly or Member of Parliament.

⁶² Kruks-Wisner 2018; Phillips and Prillaman 2024.

⁶³ CC in Bihar, October 2022

get the attention of the officials even without following up much.”⁶⁴ Another Community Correspondent believes that once officials see a video, they are pressured to work “to save their own reputations.”⁶⁵

Our interactions with officials support the CCs’ observations. When we shared a video filmed by a CC with a block official in Jharkhand, he felt any officer who saw the video would have to take action “because they are afraid of the video being spread on social media. If some senior officer sees the video then it could be disastrous for the local officers.”⁶⁶ Similarly, 73% of block survey respondents agreed (strongly or mostly) with the statement “social media makes officials’ jobs harder because it makes it easy to cast blame and create bad publicity.”

The CCs’ experiences suggest that videos featuring citizen testimony can be used to focus attention and generate empathy. When followed by action that carries the threat of publicity, citizens can also activate officials’ reputational concerns. These strategies are not unique to the CCs who, while in some respects particular to Video Volunteers as an organization, are representative of a broader class of actors in India and beyond seeking to hold public officials to account through direct citizen action.⁶⁷

Testimony + Publicity: Embedded experiments

Informed by the CCs’ strategies alongside broader theories of social accountability, we used video and vignette experiments to isolate the impact of citizen testimony and publicity on bureaucratic responsiveness.⁶⁸ We began by selecting two issues with high salience: broken water hand pumps and delays in construction under a central government housing program (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin, PMAY-G). The block has dedicated personnel for the implementation of PMAY-G, the Block Coordinator - Awas. While no block official is singularly responsible for water, it remains a key issue for the BDO, who coordinates with a network of “junior engineers” (technicians) from the Public Health and Engineering Department who are charged with maintaining water systems.

We assigned each official in our sample to one issue: housing or water. “Generalists” were randomly assigned to see a video related to either housing or water, while “specialists” saw the video on the issue relevant to them (Table 3).

Table 3. Issue assignment for experiments

Randomized	Broken handpumps	Delayed housing
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⁶⁴ CC in Madhya Pradesh, November 2022

⁶⁵ CC in Bihar, November 2022

⁶⁶ Block Panchayati Raj Officer in Jharkhand, February 2022

⁶⁷ Some of these, like the CCs, are embedded in civic organizations or government initiatives that facilitate and amplify citizen claim-making (Kruks-Wisner 2022), while others pursue more “organic” forms of citizen action not supported by an external organization (Mansuri and Rao 2014).

⁶⁸ The pre-analysis plan and other information on ethics, scripts, and dependent variables is available [here](#).

Generalists	Water specialist Junior Engineer Public Health	Housing specialist Block Coordinator Awas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Block development officer ■ Clerk ■ Block Coordinator (Panchayat) ■ Block Program Officer MGNREGS 		

Once an official was assigned to an issue, we sequentially embedded two experiments in the survey to test our hypotheses about the ability of citizens to capture officials' attention and generate action.

Capturing attention through empathy

Our first experiment varied whether officials were exposed to citizen testimony designed to elicit an emotional response and ultimately capture attention. We operationalize citizen testimony through video, which we see as a particularly useful medium because both auditory and visual components can offer emotional cues as citizens tell their stories. Screening a video while administering a survey also enabled us to directly observe the moment at which an official hears and sees complaints from citizens. We held the medium of video constant across all treatments, even those not featuring citizen testimony, because we were interested in isolating the effects of testimony rather than the technology by which it was delivered. While the CCs themselves typically screen their videos to officials in person, we also held the messenger constant by embedding the videos in the survey, where they were screened on tablets by trained enumerators. This enabled us to isolate the effects of the content delivered to officials, as opposed to who or how it was delivered.

The videos drew upon real footage from Video Volunteers' archive, made and publicly published by CCs in Jharkhand active in blocks not included in the survey sample.⁶⁹ This ensured the video footage looked and sounded real to officials, but the particular places and people were not recognizable to them.⁷⁰ The videos were of similar length (approximately three minutes) and about the same underlying issues. Each pair started with the same video montage of images (broken hand pumps or incomplete housing) with the same voiceover in Hindi (spoken by the same female narrator, selected for having a "neutral" accent) who described the problem following an identical script.⁷¹ Following that introduction, the videos diverged as follows.

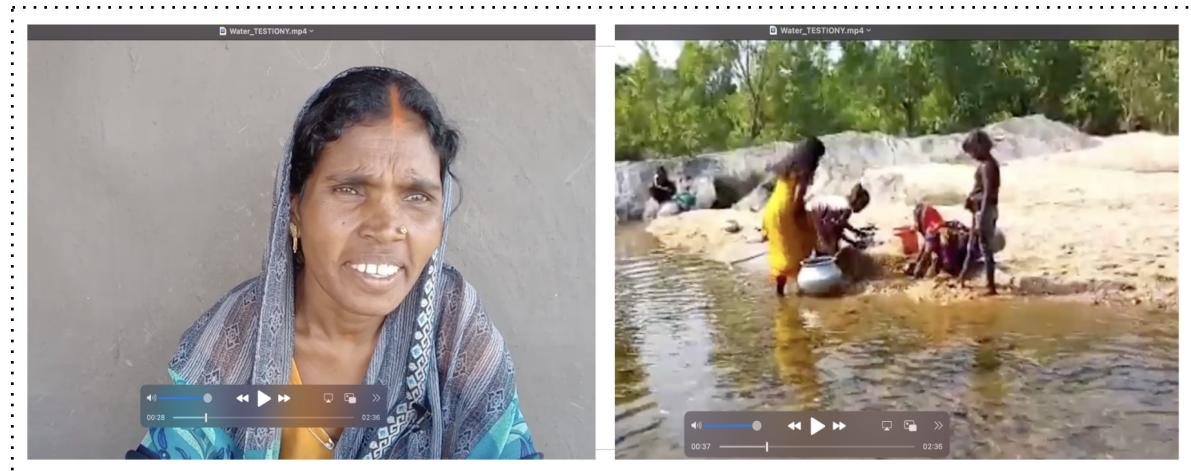
⁶⁹ This full archive is available on [YouTube](#).

⁷⁰ We chose not to provide footage from the blocks in which officers worked to avoid the potential for backlash or interfering with existing patterns of complaint-making and service delivery within a community. The videos were all introduced by enumerators as being from "not here in your area, but in another block."

⁷¹ The full text of the script of each video is available [here](#).

The treatment condition was a video featuring both footage of a problem in local context and face-to-camera footage of residents describing its impact on their lives.⁷² Following the attention-seeking strategy outlined in Table 1, we selected the testimony and footage with the aim of eliciting an empathetic response. For example, as one man explains, due to late payments under PMAY-G, he and his family have “been living in huts and *kutcha* houses.” As another woman explains, these *kutcha*, or impermanent, houses “might collapse at any time,” while footage shows rain water pouring in. In the case of broken handpumps, a citizen shares that to find water, members of the household have to “walk long distances” to fetch drinking water, often from streams, which are “polluted with trash,” with footage of women and children carrying water from a river. Each video featured two women and one man, and the footage was all drawn from villages with predominantly Adivasi (tribal) or Scheduled Caste residents. The speakers are (by speech and dress) identifiable as coming from traditionally marginalized communities.

The control condition featured an “official statistics” video that highlighted the same water- and housing-related problems, but without any citizen testimony or footage of residents. Instead, the video presented figures with government statistics on the issue in a manner designed to reflect how senior officials would likely describe the problem, emulating the status quo kinds of intra-government reports they typically receive. This presentation of official data, in addition to the placement of government program logos throughout the video, was intended to prime block officials to think about government targets for implementation.



⁷² Quotes from this video-based testimony were presented in the introduction to this paper.



Figure 2. Screenshots from water videos with video-based testimony frame (top row) and official statistics frame (bottom row)

The comparison was designed to hold constant that officials were primed to think about either water or housing, the basic information about the issue, and the medium through which it is delivered. We do not include a pure control without any video, nor a placebo video that provides no information about water or housing problems in Jharkhand. This is because we are interested in learning about how citizen voice affects responsiveness in light of the status quo, where officials receive a constant flow of information and are under intense organizational pressure. The comparison therefore offers a hard test of whether citizen testimony can shape responsiveness when competing with another condition that may activate officials' organizational and career concerns.

Officials were randomized into seeing either one of the video types (video-based testimony or official statistics) on the issue (water or housing) to which they were assigned. The randomization was stratified within issues and officer type. As pre-specified, we find balance on issue, officer type, official characteristics (e.g. gender, length of tenure) and block characteristics (Table A1, Appendix).

Measuring effects

Enumerators first introduced the videos based on a script that varied slightly depending on the issue and treatment. Officials then watched the videos, after which they were told to think about [if **video-based testimony**] the “people you saw in the video,” or [if **officials statistics**] “citizens facing the kinds of issues ... you saw in the video.” They were then told:

“I’d like you to imagine – just for the sake of example – [If **video-based testimony**: the people from the video]//[If **official statistics**: people facing those same problems] live here in your block, and they are requesting help from your office.”

These scripts served to call respondents' attention to their own locality, regardless of video type. Enumerators then observed officials' reactions and asked them a series of follow-up questions. Our pre-registered dependent variables are emotional responses, particularly

feelings of empathetic concern and taking the perspective of affected citizens, as well as attention paid to the video. We also examined the actions officials state they would take should citizens come to their office with the same problem, and the level of effort they think should be expended in responding. The answer choices for actions officials might take to resolve a problem represent those we observed officials taking in our qualitative fieldwork. These variables, measures, and summary statistics are presented in Table 4.⁷³

Table 4. Summary statistics: dependent variables for video-based testimony experiment

Dependent variable	Measures	Mean	SD
Attention	Maintained eye contact throughout video (enumerator observation, binary)	0.94	0.25
	Had a response when asked if something from the video stood out (binary)	1.00	0.05
	Asked a question (binary)	0.35	0.48
Emotional reaction	Felt sad (on a scale of 0-10)	7.88	2.63
	Felt angry (on a scale of 0-10)	5.88	3.81
	Felt frustrated (on a scale of 0-10)	3.80	3.81
	Able to name the emotions affected citizens might feel (binary)	0.96	0.20
	Personally knew individuals affected by similar problems (binary)	0.61	0.49
	Able to name the consequences for citizens if problem unresolved (binary)	0.78	0.41

⁷³ For the survey questions related to these variables, see our pre-registered study materials [here](#). In our pre-analysis plan, we also include measures of the “perceived value of citizen voice” and “sense of social mission.” We show effects on these measures in the appendix (Tables C3-C5).

Action (hypothetical)	Taking any action from the following list (binary): A. Listening to citizens and hearing them out B. Registering or recording their complaints C. Advising them on how to solve the problem themselves D. Advising them on where else to seek help E. Investigating and gathering more information on the problem F. Making a call or contacting someone on the citizens' behalf G. Trying to raise funds to assist with the problem	0.99	0.09
	Total number of responses from above list	2.88	1.45
Effort	Taking high effort action (choosing any of item E-G, binary)	0.72	0.77
	Perception of the appropriate level of effort expended to resolve (1-10)	9.08	1.82
	Would respond immediately (as opposed to “never” or “after dealing with other complaints,” binary)	0.86	0.35
	Time allocated to issue assessed through an allocation game where they are asked to spread 10 hours of working time over different issues	2.48	2.37

As pre-specified, for all the sets of dependent variables other than “Action,” we construct an mean effects index across the multiple measures by standardizing each variable within the set, taking the mean, and standardizing once again. While these indices should be viewed as the main outcomes of interest, we also report effects on index components separately to allow for the interpretation of effects.

We estimate the effects of the treatment condition on these dependent variables through an ordinary least squares regression, with heteroskedasticity-robust (HC2) standard errors:

$$\text{Equation 1: } Y = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Video}_{CT} + \Sigma \theta \text{Stratum} + \Sigma \theta \text{Stratum} \times \text{Video}_{CT}$$

Our coefficient of interest is β_1 , which measures the effect of seeing the video-based citizen testimony (Video_{CT}) relative to the official statistics video. Because randomization occurs in official type-issue type strata (10 strata in total), we include an interaction with the

treatment indicator and a centered indicator for these strata (*Stratum*), following Lin (2013). Effects should be interpreted as averages across the different block-level actors.⁷⁴

Results

Figure 3 shows both point estimates for the treatment effects and 95% confidence intervals estimated using the procedures described above.

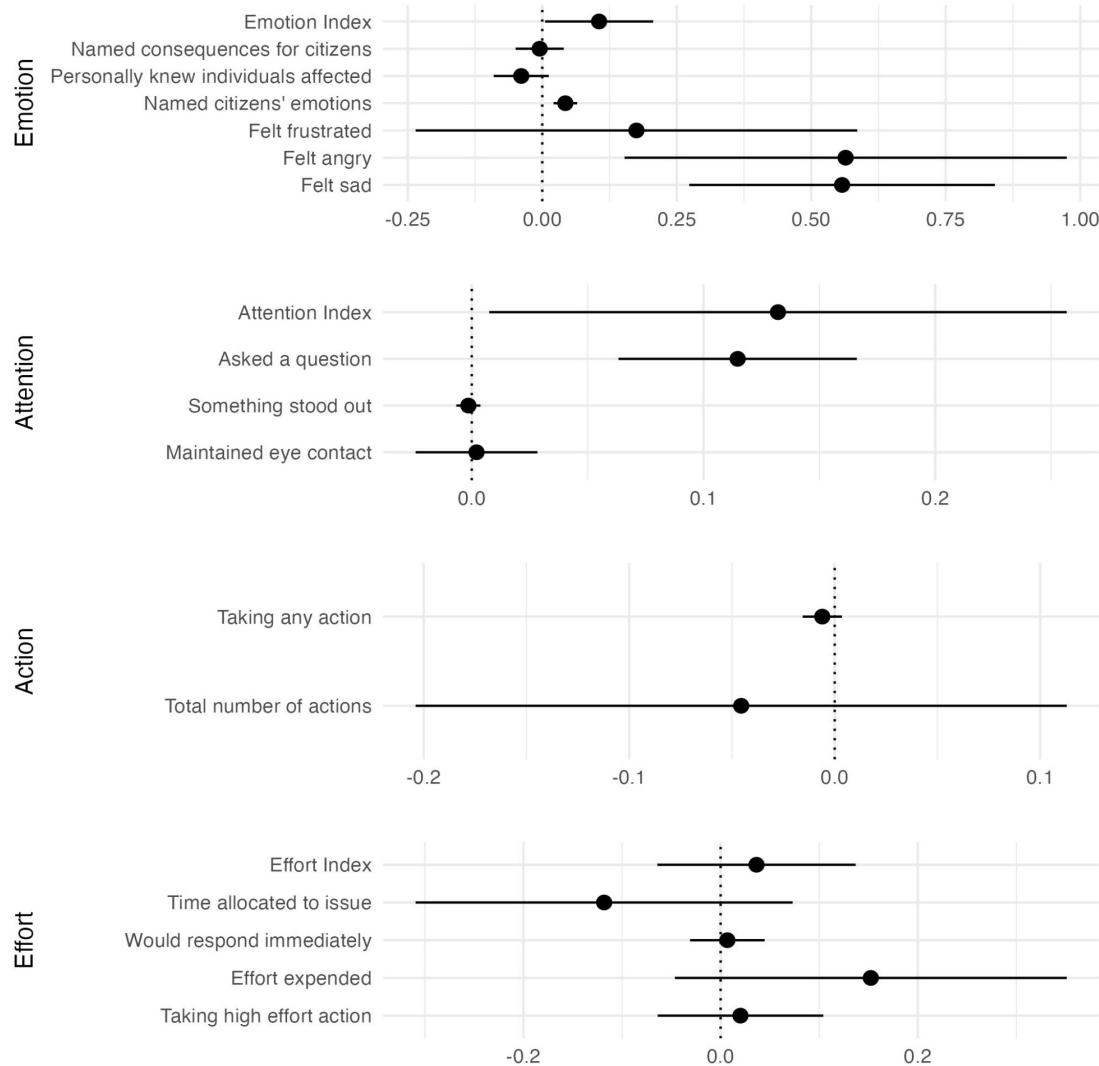


Figure 3. Effects of the video-based testimony treatment
(point estimates and 95% confidence intervals)

⁷⁴ Subgroup effects by official type are available in Figures E1-E2 (Appendix) and are discussed further below.

Figure 3 shows the testimony video generated a stronger emotional reaction among officials than the official statistics video, visible in a 0.105 standard deviation effect in the overall emotion index. Examining the index components indicates this was driven by feelings of sadness and anger upon seeing the video, with effect sizes of roughly a half point on a ten-point scale. Officials were also five percentage points more likely to be able to name the emotions that affected citizens likely face, suggesting the video-based testimony prompted officials to take citizens' perspectives. These results suggest the testimony effectively operationalized the strategy of prompting empathetic concern among officials.

In line with our theory, this empathetic reaction is accompanied by increased attention. The overall index for attention shows a 0.132 standard deviation effect. This effect was driven by officials being 11.5 percentage points more likely to ask a follow-up question about the problem, which we interpret as a strong behaviorally observable indicator of attention paid to the issue.

Figure 3 also depicts the effects of the video treatment on the actions officials state they would hypothetically take in response to the issue shown in the video. We see no effect of the video-based testimony treatment on the total number of actions chosen, nor on the likelihood of an official choosing any action at all.⁷⁵ Similarly, we see no effect on the level of effort officials deemed appropriate in response.

Overall, the video experiment suggests that video-based testimony elicits an emotional reaction from officials and leads them to pay more attention to the issues presented. But as far as we can measure, video-based testimony on its own did not yield additional action over that generated by the official statistics control framing. These null effects could be the result of true constraints to responsiveness, but could also reflect ceiling effects due to social desirability bias, or the effectiveness of the official statistics control in also generating responsiveness.

Prompting action through reputational concerns

Our theory suggests that eliciting an emotional response, while important in capturing attention, may not be sufficient to prompt action unless citizens can also activate officials' reputational concerns, particularly with regard to the higher-level actors to whom they report. Publicizing problems – using increasingly accessible tools of digital media – is a key practice through which citizens can activate these concerns by provoking fear of organizational and political scrutiny. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that an official will prioritize their claims and needs.

We operationalize the publicity by focusing on social media in particular. Social media is particularly accessible to ordinary citizens, and has the potential to play a powerful role in enabling citizens to publicize their complaints⁷⁶ and prompt bureaucratic responsiveness.⁷⁷ Citizens can create professional reputational concerns for officials by threatening to share their

⁷⁵ Table C1 (Appendix) presents effects on each of the individual types of responses.

⁷⁶ Buntaine et al. 2024.

⁷⁷ Erlich, Berliner, Palmer-Rubin, and Bagozzi 2021.

complaints on platforms, like Facebook or Whatsapp, that have visibility beyond the broader community.

To investigate these dynamics, we employed a vignette directly after the video screening. Survey respondents were told a short story about affected citizens taking action to resolve the problem featured in the video they just saw. The treatment condition for these vignettes recounted social media activity by citizens intended to convey to officials that the problem at hand could be widely publicized, mentioning that citizens were sharing the video and working with a local media NGO.

The comparison condition was a story about in-person mobilization by a group of citizens visiting a block office – a localized activity less likely to be seen beyond the area surrounding the office. This in-person condition was designed to hold constant certain aspects of the information conveyed to officials – namely that affected citizens were taking action, indicating it holds some level of urgency. As in the video experiment, this creates a hard test of the impact of each kind of citizen action, since each is directly compared to the other rather than to a placebo or pure control.

To present the vignette, respondents were told, “Imagine again the video you just saw. This time, imagine residents who are facing those same kinds of issues have been...”

[if social media publicity] “...trying to raise awareness in the community about it. They worked with a local media NGO to draw attention to the issue by filming a video documenting the problem. They shared that video with their friends and neighbors and others in the area using WhatsApp, and they also sent the video to the BDO through WhatsApp. They are now asking for help in resolving the issue.

[if in-person mobilization] “...working together to try to solve the problem. They have held community meetings, and have hand written a petition asking government officials for help. Many members of the community signed that petition, or marked it with their thumbprints. The community then pooled their resources for a delegation of residents to travel to the block office. They are now asking for help in resolving the issue.

Officials were randomized into hearing either of the vignette conditions. Assignment was blocked within issue, officer type, and the video type assigned in the previous round of randomization. As in the video experiment, Table A2 (Appendix) shows officials who saw either type of vignette are similar across a number of variables.

Measuring effects

After hearing these vignettes, we measured effects on reputational concerns and hypothetical action. To measure different kinds of reputational effects, we included questions on the sources of pressure that officials might feel to respond – whether from people in the surrounding area or from senior officials. To test the theory that publicity affects officials’ professional (rather than local, or personal) reputational concerns, we also measured whether this pressure was driven by a fear that other people in the surrounding area would be angry about the issue, or that others in the area would be inspired by the mobilizing citizens and

emulate or support them. To measure action, we asked respondents to consider officials in the imagined block, and to reflect on how they think they would respond in the face of either in-person mobilization or social media publicity. These variables, measures, and summary statistics are presented in Table 5.⁷⁸

Table 5. Summary statistics: dependent variables for vignette experiment

Dependent variables	Measures	Mean	SD
Reputational concerns	Overall pressure felt to resolve problem (on a scale of 1-3)	2.03	0.80
	Think people in the surrounding local area would be angry about issue (binary)	0.25	0.43
	Think people in the surrounding local area would be inspired by the citizen mobilization (binary)	0.81	0.40
	Think senior officials would be angry about issue (binary)	0.28	0.45
	Think senior officials would be inspired by the citizen mobilization (binary)	0.77	0.42
Action	Likelihood of sending staff to look at a problem (scale of 1-3)	2.85	0.41
	Likelihood of sending contractor to look at problem (1-3)	2.41	0.75
	Likelihood of calling elected official about problem (1-3)	2.32	0.73
	Likelihood of fundraising to solve problem (1-3)	2.17	0.83

In line with our pre-analysis plan, for our dependent variable related to “Action,” we construct an index across the multiple measures by standardizing each variable within the set, taking the mean, and standardizing once again. We also report effects on index components separately to allow the interpretation of effects.

We estimate the effects of the vignettes on our outcomes and mechanisms of interest through an ordinary least squares regression, with heteroskedasticity-robust (HC2) standard errors:

$$\text{Equation 2: } Y = \alpha + \beta_1 Vignette_{SMP} + \Sigma \theta Stratum + \Sigma \theta Stratum \times Vignette_{SMP}$$

⁷⁸ For the survey questions related to these variables, see our pre-analysis plan [here](#). In our pre-analysis plan, we also include a measure of the “perceived value of citizen voice.” We show effects on this measure in the appendix (Tables C3-C5).

Our coefficient of interest is β_1 , which measures the effect of hearing the social media publicity vignette ($Vignette_{SMP}$) relative to the in-person mobilization vignette. Because randomization occurs in Official type-Issue type-Video type strata (20 strata in total), we include an interaction with the treatment indicator and a centered indicator for these strata (*Stratum*). Effects should be interpreted as averages across the multiple types of actors, while subgroup effects are discussed below.

Results

Figure 4 shows that hearing the social media publicity treatment significantly increases officials' overall perceived pressure to respond to the issue (a 0.27 treatment effect on a 3-point scale). This is driven by the fact that they are seven percentage points more likely to be worried that senior officials would be angry if they hear of the issue. Importantly, while the social media publicity vignette also indicates that videos may be shared with community members, we find no treatment effects on worries that citizens would be angry. In other words, the social media publicity treatment appears to be generating pressure to respond by activating *professional* reputational concerns with particular regard to senior officials. This is consistent with our theory and interviews, in which officials expressed a fear of videos reaching higher levels.

Figure 4 also shows that hearing the social media publicity treatment increases the index of overall action by 0.099 standard deviations – a result with a 0.06 p-value. This effect is driven by officials being more likely to report that they would send their staff to examine an issue. As shown in Table 4, this is the most likely action taken by officials in response to either video type, suggesting it is the most relevant initial action taken when investigating an issue.

Together, the results from this second experiment suggest the reputational concerns triggered by a fear of angering senior officials motivate action. Both in-person mobilization and social media publicity can carry reputational costs for officials but, as presented in our vignettes, one is locally-bounded while the other suggests the potential of viral information that could reach the broader public and higher levels of government.

Discussion

Our fieldwork highlighted real-world constraints upon block officials in responding to citizens, and strategies through which they might be overcome. Our experiments, while necessarily stylized, were designed to explore the effectiveness of those strategies. The video experiment shows that exposure to direct testimony from citizens can provoke empathetic responses and focus attention. Yet we also find, at least in our experimental context, that empathy and attention are insufficient to generate bureaucratic *action* to resolve an issue – particularly when compared to other frames that might prime accountability to higher levels of government. Barriers to action are overcome when citizens activate officials' reputational concerns. Threats of social media publicity provoke concerns about higher-level oversight – specifically over angering senior officials.

There are, however, features of our experimental design that prevent us from detecting the full effects of citizen testimony. Given social desirability bias, the lack of true constraints on reported action, and the fact that our comparison groups are not pure controls but other forms of issue presentation or mobilization that might also generate responsiveness, it is likely we observe ceiling effects for our main outcomes of interest. Additionally, our use of hypothetical scenarios may not evoke the same emotional or reputational responses as real-life situations, potentially diminishing the effectiveness of our treatments. Yet despite a design that

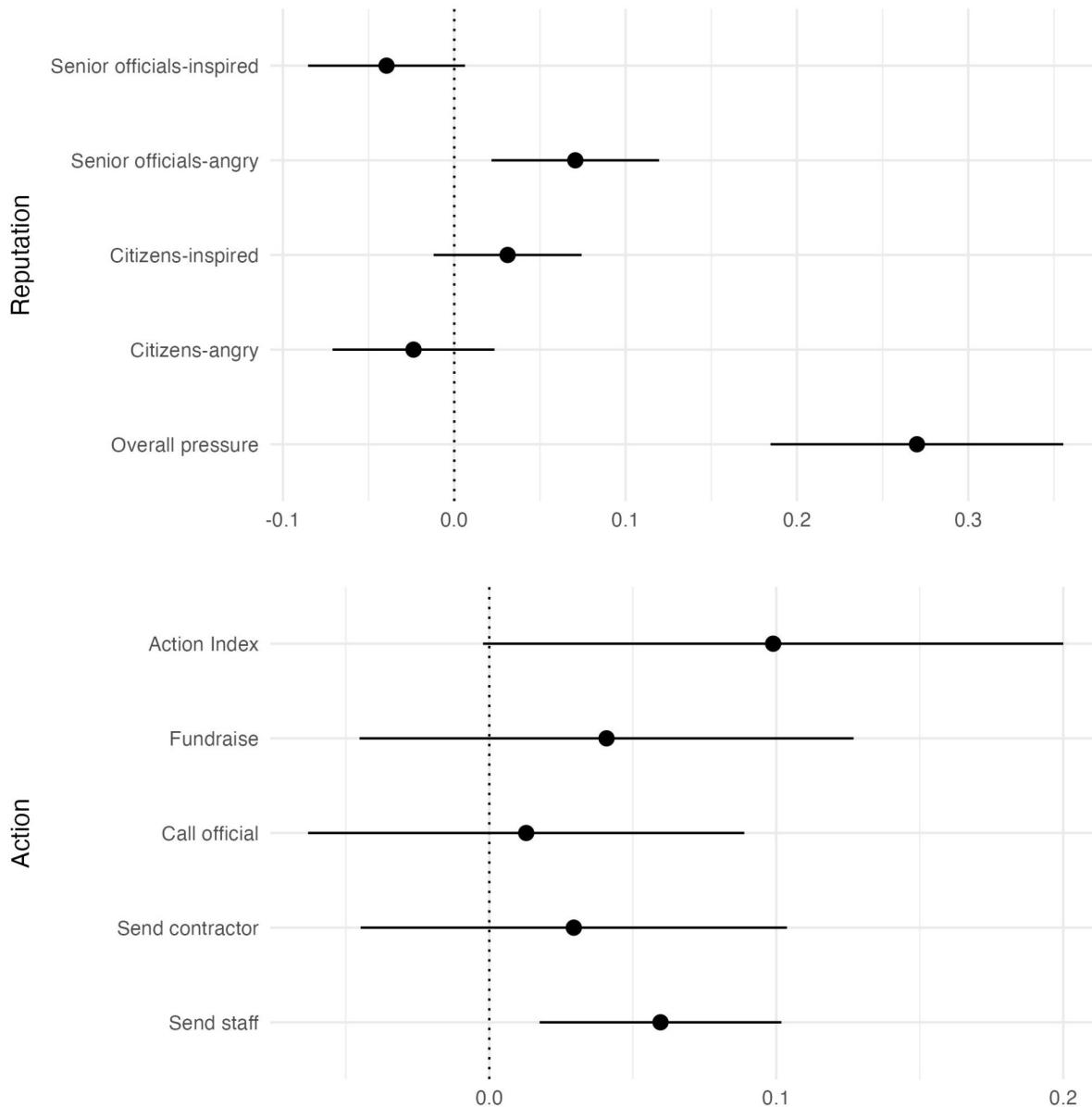


Figure 4. Effects of the social media publicity treatment
(point estimates and 95% confidence intervals)

potentially biases against the treatments, we see evidence of citizen testimony's emotional and (when digitally shared) reputational effects.

Notably, we observe an effect of social media publicity on the pressure officials feel to respond, regardless of which video type the vignette follows (Tables D2-D3, Appendix).⁷⁹ While this might suggest it is fear of publicity alone driving responsiveness, our qualitative interviews with CCs caution against that interpretation. One, for example, explained: "with video it would be easy to capture the situation in which people were living, and ...the official would come to empathize. [The] scenes moved the officials to think about the difficulty people were facing."⁸⁰ Only once their attention is captured can the CCs then apply pressure, including "post[ing] the video in all my social groups like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and other media groups,"⁸¹ and telling the official "if he does not give me a hearing, I will approach higher officials to tell them about the problem and the lack of assistance."⁸² This suggests citizen voice plays an important role in accomplishing the first-order task of getting officials to focus on a particular need, which is an important precursor to any action that follows.

It is likely effects vary by an official's designation within the block office. We estimate these subgroup effects for attention and action in the video and vignette experiments, respectively, but are unable to detect significant differences, likely due to limited sample size (Figure E1, Appendix). To learn more about how effects might vary by official type, we measure subgroup effects conditional on other variables that might shape their incentives and ability to respond. Those with shorter tenures or higher expectations of being transferred, for example, might be more sensitive to higher-level reputational concerns.⁸³ Existing literature also suggests bureaucrats' career concerns are strongest in settings where political constituencies are aligned,⁸⁴ and that top-down monitoring is more likely in areas that fall under a single constituency.⁸⁵ We first test for these dynamics by examining those who do *not* expect to be transferred within the next year – among whom the effects of the vignette experiment on official pressure and action persist (Tables E11- E12, Appendix). We then assess whether effects hold among blocks that fall within constituencies not aligned with the state's ruling party at the time of research (the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, or JMM) or split between two parties. We find the social media publicity treatment still creates a sense of pressure to respond linked to worries of angering higher-level officials. We do not, however, detect effects on action taken (Tables E13-E14, Appendix). This may simply be a false negative, but it is also possible the strongest effects of the social media publicity vignette emerge from blocks in political constituencies aligned with the ruling party, where officials can both be more easily monitored and rewarded by the administration. The effects of citizen practices to capture

⁷⁹ Although the cross-randomized nature of our design technically allows us to estimate the interaction between video type and vignette type, our sample size leaves us unable to detect it (Table D1, Appendix). Detecting interaction effects could require sample sizes up to 16 times than needed to be able to detect the main effect. See a discussion [here](#).

⁸⁰ CC interview, Uttar Pradesh, September 2018.

⁸¹ CC interview, Uttar Pradesh, September 2018.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Iyer and Mani 2012.

⁸⁴ Velasco Rivera 2020.

⁸⁵ Gulzar and Pasquale 2017.

attention and action, in other words, may be interpreted differently by officials operating in different political contexts – dynamics that merit greater future research.

It is also possible that our results could be driven by officials of certain identities or backgrounds. A shared identity with citizens, for example, might increase the salience of the emotional mechanisms,⁸⁶ while those who are more locally embedded might be more concerned about local reputation.⁸⁷ However, subgroup analysis finds the effects of our treatments persist across differently situated officials. As the narrator's voice in our videos is identifiably female and the residents featured in the water and housing videos are identifiable as *Adivasis* (Scheduled Tribe, ST) or members of Scheduled Castes (SC), we measure effects of the video-based testimony treatment among male respondents (Tables E1-E2, Appendix) and among those who do *not* identify as ST (Tables E3-E4, Appendix) or SC (Tables E5-E6, Appendix). In all cases, we find there is still a measurable increase in empathy and attention. We similarly find that effects persist on emotion and attention (video experiment), pressure to respond (vignette experiment), and action (vignette experiment) among the respondents who do not live in the blocks they serve (Tables E7-E10, Appendix). While we do not rule out that there are important differences across officials,⁸⁸ the main effects of the citizen practices of testimony and publicity hold conditional on identity and embeddedness.

Our experiments tested particular video and social media based practices aimed at appealing to officials' emotions and triggering their reputational concerns. These practices require access to a smartphone or other device, reliable connection to the internet, the technical ability to create and disseminate content, and an online social network with whom to share. These technologies, skills, and networks are not equally available to all. Yet, as of 2021, almost 67% of rural India's population had access to a smartphone.⁸⁹ The CCs, like other social accountability actors supported and trained by NGOs, may be particularly well positioned to make and share videos. It is less clear whether individuals, without the support of such an organization, could employ the same techniques to the same effect. Yet, the experiences of recent training programs suggest technical skills for online engagement can be taught.⁹⁰ Thus, while we do not suggest these practices are universally accessible, there is reason to think they could be widely adopted.

There are, in addition, other practices through which citizens might aim to shape officials' emotional responses and reputational concerns. Video Volunteers offers one video-based model. But other forms of media (digital and traditional) as well as other platforms for grievance articulation can also provide citizens with the means to make demands on public officials. In the context of our experiment, social media publicity had a greater effect on responsiveness compared to in-person collective action, but this does not mean in-person

⁸⁶ Pepinsky et al. 2017; Tsai 2007.

⁸⁷ Paller 2019; Bhavnani and Lee 2017.

⁸⁸ We further investigate differences in engagement with citizens by official type and characteristics in a separate paper.

⁸⁹ Data from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2021, <https://asercentre.org/aser-2021/>.

⁹⁰ Video Volunteers, for example, has recently begun to offer free media training to local volunteers, and to date supports a network of more than 2500 individuals who engage in video-making to document local grievances. See, <https://www.videovolunteers.org/buland-bol-free-media-training/>.

action will not have an impact. Investigating the full array of strategies citizens employ – both in-person and online – is an agenda ripe for further research.

There are several scope conditions to consider when extending the theory beyond rural Jharkhand's block offices. First, for citizens to be able to demand responsiveness, they must target citizen-facing public agencies where there are spaces for direct contact with officials. The level at which this contact occurs shapes how officials respond; those who are more locally embedded, for example, might be more sensitive to local reputation, whereas those in middle-level institutions (like the block office) may be more driven by higher-level career concerns. Second, Jharkhand is a poor and capacity-constrained state. In better-resourced and less overburdened settings, citizens may have less need to activate the emotional and reputational drivers of bureaucratic responsiveness we have identified. Third, for the reputational mechanism to hold, personnel must face top-down pressure. Our theory is therefore conditional on the specific career trajectories and incentives public personnel face.

Conclusion

It has long been acknowledged that bureaucracies are vital arenas of citizen-state relations and distributive politics.⁹¹ By examining how citizens engage bureaucracies, we show they are also critical sites of democratic practice. Where electoral representation is weak or for those without connections to elected politicians, the bureaucracy is one of the few channels through which one can effectively express needs and demands. Effective democracy requires both active citizen participation and accountability of public officials.⁹² Efforts to democratize bureaucracy – to ensure the responsiveness of unelected officials to citizens' claims – are thus crucial to the broader project of democratic deepening, not only at the local level, but in all spheres where unelected actors implement policy and deliver services.

Such efforts require careful attention to the constraints upon bureaucrats, and to how citizens operate given those constraints. Through our interviews with officials in block offices, we learned about the barriers that inhibit their responsiveness to citizens. Through our qualitative observations and interviews with the CCs – a group of experienced claim-makers – we developed an understanding of the strategies citizens might employ to circumvent those barriers. We combined those two perspectives to develop and test a citizen-driven but bureaucrat-centered theory of accountability. In short: where overload and upwardly-aligned incentives inhibit bureaucratic responsiveness, narrative appeals from citizens' can focus attention, while threats of publicity can provoke action. We tested our theory in a survey of nearly 1300 block officials, through video experiments featuring citizen testimony and vignette experiments featuring social media publicity. Our findings demonstrate citizen-led pathways to bureaucratic responsiveness under conditions – politicized, hierarchical, and unequal – where they might seem least likely. Our experiments provide rare causal evidence of how small yet scalable interventions led by citizens – sharing testimony to evoke empathy, and publicizing stories to activate officials' professional concerns – can boost bureaucratic responsiveness.

⁹¹ Lipsky 1980; O'Donnell 1993.

⁹² Roberts 1989; Heller 2019.

Our study casts new light on long-debated theories of social accountability, which have generated mixed results and, at times, skepticism about whether citizens can directly influence bureaucratic behaviors. We argue that citizens can effectively demand responsiveness from unelected officials, and theorize and test two mechanisms through which this can occur: emotion and reputation. By putting emotions at the center of a study of bureaucratic behavior, we highlight a neglected dimension in studies of accountability: the role of empathy. Not all government officials are not simply uncaring, and their emotions can be swayed by citizens. Storytelling and citizens' ability to share their own narratives are therefore critical. At the same time, our study shows the limits to empathy – which can focus attention but may not be enough to move officials to action. Citizens also need to place pressure on officials. They can do so, we show, by triggering reputational concerns about their professional standing – most notably fear of angering senior officials. The effort to provoke empathy calls officials attention downward to the lived experiences of citizens, while the effort to trigger reputational concerns calls attention upwards to the scrutiny and oversight of senior bureaucrats and politicians. Citizens are central to both of these strategies, suggesting the need for multi-pronged action in the effort to capture attention and exact responsive action.

Our research also raises unanswered questions about the longitudinal and equity dynamics of citizen-led claim-making. It is possible, for example, that the narrative-sharing practices we have examined may be hard to process at scale, if officials become even more overwhelmed or over time desensitized to appeals from citizens. Alternatively, a groundswell of citizen voice might provoke changes in how public agencies receive, listen, and respond to citizens. Future research and continuing efforts by social accountability actors should focus on uncovering new practices to harness the strategies of appealing to emotion or triggering reputational concerns that are effective at scale and over time.

Effective citizen claim-making can both challenge and reinforce patterns of inequality.⁹³ In settings where officials are overburdened, time allocated to responding to citizens could potentially diminish time spent on other tasks or in meeting other needs. To the extent that it diminishes shirking or serving officials' private interests, increased responsiveness to citizens' claims might be unequivocally beneficial for a community. However, responsiveness to certain demands could crowd out demands from others. The equity implications depend on context, particularly whether the citizens approaching bureaucrats are otherwise underserved by the status quo. Video Volunteers and other social accountability organizations explicitly aim to serve marginalized citizens who have trouble making their voices heard. In the absence of such organizations, it is possible that more elite actors become the "squeaky wheels" who are heard at a cost to those who are less well-positioned to make claims. Yet, where access to claim-making is widespread, it represents a potential pathway to more responsive bureaucracies. Citizen-led efforts to build bureaucratic responsiveness, in sum, has the potential to deepen democracy by creating spaces in which to demand both distribution and recognition in the eyes of the state.

⁹³ Gallagher et al. 2024; Kumar, Forthcoming.

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Appendix A: Balance Tests

Following our pre-analysis plan, we conduct balance tests on the issue covered, official characteristics, and block characteristics. Because no variables are considered imbalanced at the 0.05 level, we do not control for any of these, nor do we test for whether balance occurs by chance.

Table A1. Balance table for video experiment

	Issue	Officer Type			Official characteristics				Block characteristics			
	Housing	Generalist	Water	Housing + water	Female	Lives in block	Born in block	Years of service	PESA ¹	Distance nearest town ²	JMM block ³	Split block ⁴
Intercept	0.543*** (0.000)	0.568*** (0.000)	0.083*** (0.000)	0.181*** (0.000)	0.110*** (0.012)	0.484*** (0.019)	0.049*** (0.009)	14.419*** (0.284)	0.417*** (0.020)	34.579*** (0.756)	0.371*** (0.019)	0.070*** (0.010)
Testimony	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.008 (0.017)	0.027 (0.026)	-0.007 (0.012)	-0.047 (0.405)	0.037 (0.027)	1.122 (1.031)	0.008 (0.027)	-0.012 (0.014)
N	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293	1291	1293	1269	1293	1293

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

¹ Predominantly tribal areas that are categorized as Scheduled Areas under the Indian Constitution come under the Panchayat Extension in Scheduled Area (PESA) Act, which makes provisions for tribal self-governance. The Act applies to 16 of 24 districts.

² Village-level averages taken from the 2011 Census and averaged at the block level. Information for 5 blocks is missing in the census. We have dropped these blocks from this balance test.

³ We placed blocks in ACs by asking District Program Officers (DPO) of MGNREGA. To cross-check their data, we approached the District Election Officers. In cases where the DPOs were not able to provide accurate information about block to AC mapping we directly contacted the Block Program Officers of MGNREGA or the Block Development Officer within the blocks for the AC mapping.

⁴ Whether the block lies in multiple assembly constituencies controlled by more than one party based on the same electoral data as described in note 3.

Table A2. Balance table for vignette experiment

	Issue	Officer Type			Official characteristics				Block characteristics			
	Housing	Generalist	Water	Housing + water	Female	Lives in block	Born in block	Years of service	PESA ¹	Distance nearest town ²	JMM block ³	Split block ⁴

Intercept	0.543***	0.568***	0.083***	0.181***	0.097***	0.499***	0.041***	14.334***	0.440***	35.171***	0.363***	0.067***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.011)	(0.018)	(0.008)	(0.290)	(0.019)	(0.731)	(0.019)	(0.010)
Digital Mobilization	0.000	0.000	0.000+	0.000	0.018	-0.003	0.010	0.139	-0.007	-0.097	0.026	-0.005
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.017)	(0.026)	(0.012)	(0.408)	(0.028)	(1.026)	(0.027)	(0.014)
N	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293	1291	1293	1269	1293	1293

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

¹Predominantly tribal areas that are categorized as Scheduled Areas under the Indian Constitution come under the Panchayat Extension in Scheduled Area (PESA) Act, which makes provisions for tribal self-governance. The Act applies to 16 of 24 districts.

²Village-level averages taken from the 2011 Census and averaged at the block level. Information for 5 blocks is missing in the census. We have dropped these blocks from this balance test.

³We placed blocks in ACs by asking District Program Officers (DPO) of MGNREGA. To cross-check their data, we approached the District Election Officers. In cases where the DPOs were not able to provide accurate information about block to AC mapping we directly contacted the Block Program Officers of MGNREGA or the Block Development Officer within the blocks for the AC mapping.

⁴Whether the block lies in multiple assembly constituencies controlled by more than one party based on the same electoral data as described in note 3.

Appendix B: Regressions for treatment effects

Table B1. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Emotional Reaction

	Index components						
	Emotion Index	Felt sad	Felt angry	Felt frustrated	Named citizens' emotions	Personally knew individuals affected	Named consequences for citizens
Intercept (Control mean)	-0.053	7.595***	5.595***	3.713***	0.936***	0.626***	0.783***
	(0.038)	(0.104)	(0.149)	(0.148)	(0.010)	(0.018)	(0.016)
Testimony Treatment	0.106*	0.557***	0.564**	0.175	0.043***	-0.039	-0.005
	(0.051)	(0.145)	(0.209)	(0.209)	(0.011)	(0.026)	(0.023)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293

R2	0.062	0.036	0.039	0.037	0.040	0.090	0.031
All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001							

Table B2. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Attention

	Interest Index	Maintained eye contact	Something stood out	Asked a question
Intercept (Control mean)	-0.067+ (0.039)	0.935*** (0.010)	0.998*** (0.002)	0.292*** (0.018)
Testimony Treatment	0.132* (0.064)	0.002 (0.013)	-0.001 (0.003)	0.115*** (0.026)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293	1293	1293
R2	0.035	0.051	0.015	0.037

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table B3. Effects of Testimony treatment on the hypothetical action.

	Total number of responses	Taking any action
Intercept (Control mean)	2.906*** (0.057)	0.995*** (0.003)
Testimony Treatment	-0.046 (0.081)	-0.006 (0.005)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293
R2	0.019	0.013

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table B4. Effects of Testimony treatment on hypothetical effort taken in response to a video

	Effort Index	Taking high effort action	Effort expended (1-10)	Would respond immediately	Time allocated
Intercept (Control mean)	-0.019 (0.038)	0.712*** (0.031)	8.998*** (0.076)	0.855*** (0.014)	2.542*** (0.069)
Testimony Treatment	0.036	0.020	0.152	0.007	-0.118

	(0.051)	(0.043)	(0.101)	(0.019)	(0.097)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293
R2	0.131	0.021	0.016	0.027	0.459

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table B5. Treatment effects of digital mobilization vignette on officials' pressure to respond to a problem

	Overall pressure	Citizens-angry	Citizens-inspired	Senior officials-angry	Senior officials-inspired
Intercept (In-person action mean)	1.896*** (0.032)	0.263*** (0.017)	0.790*** (0.016)	0.247*** (0.017)	0.792*** (0.016)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.270*** (0.044)	-0.024 (0.024)	0.031 (0.022)	0.071** (0.025)	-0.040+ (0.023)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293
R2	0.079	0.036	0.033	0.041	0.033

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table B6. Treatment effects of digital mobilization vignette on hypothetical action

	Send staff	Send contractor	Call official	Fundraise	Action Index
Intercept (Control mean)	2.821*** (0.017)	2.396*** (0.028)	2.317*** (0.028)	2.147*** (0.033)	-0.051 (0.039)
Digital Action Treatment	0.060** (0.022)	0.029 (0.039)	0.013 (0.040)	0.041 (0.046)	0.099+ (0.054)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293
R2	0.052	0.123	0.051	0.050	0.057

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Appendix C: Additional outcomes

Here we present effects for each of the individual hypothetical responses an official can take in response to the videos they see. These are not pre-registered.

Table C1. Treatment effects on individual possible responses in video experiment

	Listen	Register	Advise-solve themselves	Advise-seek help	Investigate	Call someone	Fundraise
Intercept (Control mean)	0.840*** (0.014)	0.439*** (0.020)	0.325*** (0.018)	0.595*** (0.019)	0.441*** (0.019)	0.205*** (0.016)	0.066*** (0.010)
Testimony Treatment	-0.003 (0.020)	0.029 (0.028)	-0.055* (0.025)	-0.024 (0.027)	0.027 (0.028)	-0.010 (0.022)	0.007 (0.014)
Num.Obs.	1287	1287	1287	1287	1287	1287	1287
R2	0.020	0.019	0.037	0.030	0.034	0.023	0.020

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

In our pre-analysis plan, we include additional outcomes for both the video and vignette experiment. We report summary statistics and effects on these variables here.

Table C2. Summary statistics for additional pre-specified measures

Dependent variable	Measures	Mean	SD	Video or vignette experiment?
Perceived value of citizen voice	The importance an official assigns within their work to “taking action to help resolve citizens’ grievances (1-10)	9.09	1.96	Video
	Would share video with others, including new staff, senior officers, or community members (binary)	0.95	0.21	Video
	The importance an official assigns within their work to “listening to citizens,” (1-10)	9.07	1.94	Video
	Whether officials provide phone numbers to receive community-generated video content over WhatsApp (binary)	0.85	0.35	Both
	Express interest in collaboration with through scanning QR code to sign up (binary)	0.50	0.50	Both
Sense of social mission	Felt “motivated-inspired to try to make a positive difference” (on a scale of 0-10)	8.15	2.55	Video
	Whether officials agreed that “it’s important to try to go the extra mile whenever we can to help people, even if it means going above and beyond our formal duties” (binary)	0.17	0.37	Video

Table C3. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Perceived Value of Citizen Voice

	Value of Voice Index	Would share video	Importance of listening (1-10)	Importance of taking action	Gave WhatsApp number	Scanned code for collaboration
Intercept (Control mean)	0.001 (0.039)	0.942*** (0.009)	9.139*** (0.075)	9.144*** (0.073)	0.852*** (0.014)	0.495*** (0.020)

Testimony Treatment	-0.003	0.024*	-0.136	-0.109	0.006	0.017
	(0.056)	(0.012)	(0.108)	(0.107)	(0.019)	(0.028)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293
R2	0.031	0.026	0.022	0.042	0.032	0.030

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table C4: Effects of Testimony Treatment on Sense of Social Mission

	Social Mission Index	Felt motivated	Said going extra mile is important
Intercept (Control mean)	0.005	8.153***	0.167***
	(0.039)	(0.098)	(0.015)
Testimony Treatment	-0.012	-0.014	-0.004
	(0.054)	(0.142)	(0.021)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293	1293
R2	0.031	0.019	0.023

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table C5. Treatment effects of digital mobilization vignette on behavioral measures of the perceived value of citizen voice

	Gave WhatsApp number	Scanned code for collaboration
Intercept (In-person action mean)	0.842***	0.528***
	(0.014)	(0.020)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.026	-0.050+
	(0.019)	(0.028)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293
R2	0.046	0.049

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Appendix D: Video X Vignette interactions

Table D1. Effect of digital mobilization vignette on action, interaction with video type

	Action Index	Send staff	Send contractor	Call official	Fundraise
Intercept (Control mean)	-0.126 (0.138)	2.797*** (0.060)	2.450*** (0.087)	2.291*** (0.102)	2.010*** (0.124)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.185 (0.189)	-0.003 (0.093)	0.162 (0.112)	-0.132 (0.146)	0.352* (0.173)
Testimony Video	0.148 (0.257)	0.048 (0.115)	-0.107 (0.164)	0.052 (0.189)	0.271 (0.235)
Digital Mobilization X Testimony Video	-0.170 (0.357)	0.123 (0.173)	-0.261 (0.215)	0.287 (0.275)	-0.613+ (0.330)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293
R2	0.057	0.052	0.123	0.051	0.050
All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001					

Table D2. Effect of digital mobilization vignette on action, conditional on seeing a testimony video

	Action Index	Send staff	Send contractor	Call official	Fundraise
Intercept (Control mean)	-0.035 (0.054)	2.823*** (0.025)	2.395*** (0.040)	2.328*** (0.039)	2.174*** (0.046)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.042 (0.076)	0.066* (0.032)	0.015 (0.056)	0.004 (0.056)	-0.039 (0.065)
Num.Obs.	655	638	655	655	655
R2	0.041	0.044	0.101	0.050	0.040
All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001					

Table D3. Effect of digital mobilization vignette on action, conditional on seeing an information video

	Action Index	Send staff	Send contractor	Call official	Fundraise
Intercept (Control mean)	-0.067 (0.056)	2.823*** (0.025)	2.397*** (0.039)	2.307*** (0.041)	2.120*** (0.046)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.158* (0.076)	0.066* (0.032)	0.044 (0.055)	0.022 (0.058)	0.123+ (0.064)
Num.Obs.	638	638	638	638	638
R2	0.072	0.044	0.146	0.051	0.059

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table D4. Effect of digital mobilization vignette on pressure, interaction with video type

	Overall pressure	Citizens-angry	Citizens-inspired	Politicians-angry	Politicians-inspired
Intercept (Control mean)	2.060*** (0.117)	0.288*** (0.060)	0.834*** (0.058)	0.235*** (0.052)	0.786*** (0.054)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.425** (0.163)	-0.024 (0.091)	0.028 (0.081)	0.093 (0.088)	-0.036 (0.085)
Testimony Video	-0.324 (0.216)	-0.050 (0.112)	-0.088 (0.110)	0.024 (0.097)	0.012 (0.101)
Digital Mobilization X Testimony Video	-0.305 (0.307)	0.000 (0.172)	0.007 (0.156)	-0.044 (0.167)	-0.008 (0.160)
Num.Obs.	1293	1293	1293	1293	1293
R2	0.079	0.036	0.033	0.041	0.033

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table D5. Effect of digital mobilization vignette on pressure, conditional on seeing a testimony video

	Overall pressure	Citizens-angry	Citizens-inspired	Politicians-angry	Politicians-inspired
Intercept (Control mean)	1.890***	0.297***	0.763***	0.252***	0.787***

	(0.045)	(0.025)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.023)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.306*** (0.061)	-0.035 (0.035)	0.030 (0.032)	0.070* (0.035)	-0.034 (0.033)
Num.Obs.	655	655	655	655	655
R2	0.081	0.035	0.031	0.031	0.031
All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001					

Table D6. Effect of digital mobilization vignette on pressure, conditional on seeing an informational video

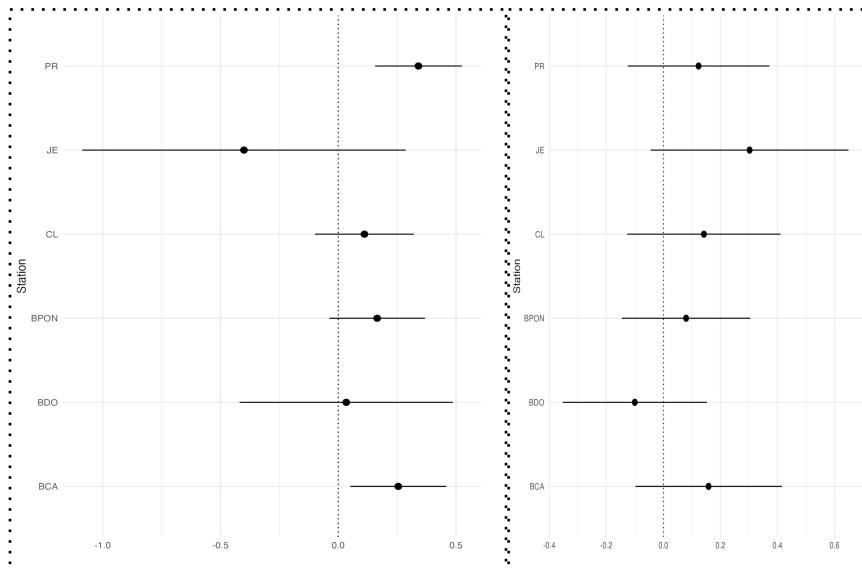
	Overall pressure	Citizens-angry	Citizens-inspired	Politicians-angry	Politicians-inspired
Intercept (Control mean)	1.902*** (0.046)	0.229*** (0.024)	0.818*** (0.022)	0.241*** (0.024)	0.796*** (0.023)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.233*** (0.062)	-0.013 (0.033)	0.032 (0.030)	0.071* (0.035)	-0.045 (0.033)
Num.Obs.	638	638	638	638	638
R2	0.077	0.030	0.023	0.051	0.036

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Appendix E: Subgroup effects

Effects by designation

Figure E1. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Attention Index (left) and Action Index (right), subgroup effects by designation



Note: block indicators removed, as blocking was done by station

Male respondents

Table E1. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Emotional Reaction, male respondents

	Felt sad	Felt angry	Felt frustrated	Named citizens' emotions	Personally knew individuals affected	Named consequences for citizens	Emotion Index
Intercept (Control mean)	7.565*** (0.110)	5.623*** (0.156)	3.677*** (0.157)	0.934*** (0.010)	0.619*** (0.020)	0.781*** (0.017)	-0.069+ (0.041)
Testimony Treatment	0.610*** (0.151)	0.574** (0.219)	0.188 (0.221)	0.045*** (0.012)	-0.040 (0.028)	-0.005 (0.024)	0.113* (0.055)
Num.Obs.	1156	1156	1156	1156	1156	1156	1156
R2	0.042	0.047	0.038	0.053	0.085	0.037	0.059

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table E2. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Attention, male respondents

	Maintained eye contact	Something stood out	Asked a question	Attention Index
Intercept (Control mean)	0.933***	1.000***	0.296***	-0.042

	(0.010)	(0.000)	(0.019)	(0.033)
Testimony Treatment	0.006 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.002)	0.112*** (0.028)	0.111+ (0.062)
Num.Obs.	1156	1156	1156	1156
R2	0.062	0.017	0.036	0.041
All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001				

Non-ST respondents

Table E3. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Emotional Reaction, Non-ST respondents

	Felt sad	Felt angry	Felt frustrated	Named citizens' emotions	Personally knew individuals affected	Named consequences for citizens	Emotion Index
Intercept (Control mean)	7.490*** (0.122)	5.670*** (0.169)	3.699*** (0.168)	0.929*** (0.011)	0.606*** (0.021)	0.793*** (0.018)	-0.074+ (0.044)
Testimony Treatment	0.556** (0.171)	0.488* (0.242)	0.032 (0.240)	0.048*** (0.013)	-0.057+ (0.030)	-0.009 (0.026)	0.072 (0.059)
Num.Obs.	979	979	979	979	979	979	979
R2	0.041	0.047	0.041	0.050	0.090	0.044	0.057
All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001							

Table E4. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Attention, Non-ST respondents

	Maintained eye contact	Something stood out	Asked a question	Attention Index
Intercept (Control mean)	0.927*** (0.012)	0.998*** (0.002)	0.289*** (0.020)	-0.096* (0.048)
Testimony Treatment	0.004 (0.016)	0.000 (0.003)	0.104*** (0.030)	0.145* (0.070)
Num.Obs.	979	979	979	979
R2	0.056	0.023	0.037	0.043
All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001				

Non-SC respondents

Table E5. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Emotional Reaction, Non-SC respondents

	Felt sad	Felt angry	Felt frustrated	Named citizens' emotions	Personally knew individuals affected	Named consequences for citizens	Emotion Index
Intercept (Control mean)	7.610*** (0.110)	5.573*** (0.161)	3.706*** (0.161)	0.940*** (0.010)	0.648*** (0.020)	0.786*** (0.017)	-0.025 (0.042)
Testimony Treatment	0.580*** (0.155)	0.550* (0.226)	0.249 (0.228)	0.034** (0.012)	-0.049+ (0.028)	-0.012 (0.025)	0.087 (0.056)
Num.Obs.	1100	1100	1100	1100	1100	1100	1100
R2	0.036	0.036	0.037	0.031	0.090	0.035	0.051

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table E6. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Attention, Non-SC respondents

	Maintained eye contact	Something stood out	Asked a question	Attention Index
Intercept (Control mean)	0.930*** (0.011)	0.998*** (0.002)	0.283*** (0.019)	-0.092* (0.044)
Testimony Treatment	0.001 (0.015)	-0.002 (0.003)	0.115*** (0.028)	0.125+ (0.072)
Num.Obs.	1100	1100	1100	1100
R2	0.071	0.017	0.043	0.043

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Non-embedded respondents (those who do not live in the block)

Table E7. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Emotional Reaction, non-embedded respondents

	Felt sad	Felt angry	Felt frustrated	Named citizens' emotions	Personally knew individuals affected	Named consequences for citizens	Emotion Index
Intercept (Control mean)	7.427*** (0.151)	5.300*** (0.213)	3.819*** (0.203)	0.935*** (0.013)	0.607*** (0.026)	0.780*** (0.023)	-0.077 (0.054)
Testimony Treatment	0.804*** (0.207)	0.948** (0.299)	0.320 (0.295)	0.050** (0.015)	-0.036 (0.037)	-0.033 (0.033)	0.138+ (0.075)

Num.Obs.	649	649	649	649	649	649	649
R2	0.078	0.060	0.052	0.055	0.117	0.050	0.069

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table E8. Effects of Testimony Treatment on Attention, non-embedded respondents

	Maintained eye contact	Something stood out	Asked a question	Attention Index
Intercept (Control mean)	0.942*** (0.013)	1.000*** (0.000)	0.282*** (0.025)	-0.039 (0.044)
Testimony Treatment	0.001 (0.019)	-0.003 (0.003)	0.135*** (0.037)	0.130 (0.086)
Num.Obs.	649	649	649	649
R2	0.053	0.025	0.055	0.043

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table E9. Treatment effects of digital mobilization vignette on officials' pressure to respond to a problem, non-embedded respondents

	Overall pressure	Citizens-angry	Citizens-inspired	Senior officials-angry	Senior officials-inspired
Intercept (Control mean)	1.924*** (0.045)	0.263*** (0.024)	0.776*** (0.023)	0.224*** (0.023)	0.804*** (0.022)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.296*** (0.060)	-0.006 (0.034)	0.037 (0.032)	0.069* (0.035)	-0.027 (0.032)
Num.Obs.	649	649	649	649	649
R2	0.112	0.076	0.063	0.076	0.055

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table E10. Treatment effects of hearing the digital mobilization vignette on action, non-embedded respondents

	Send staff	Send contractor	Call official	Fundraise	Action Index
Intercept (Control mean)	2.800***	2.412***	2.254***	2.146***	-0.098+

	(0.025)	(0.040)	(0.041)	(0.045)	(0.058)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.060+	-0.012	0.049	0.088	0.119
	(0.033)	(0.056)	(0.058)	(0.064)	(0.077)
Num.Obs.	649	649	649	649	649
R2	0.066	0.140	0.068	0.093	0.070

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Respondents who do not expect to be transferred in the next year

Table E11. Treatment effects of digital mobilization vignette on officials' pressure to respond to a problem, respondents not expecting transfer

	Send staff	Send contractor	Call official	Fundraise	Action Index
Intercept (Control mean)	2.866*** (0.024)	2.309*** (0.047)	2.293*** (0.050)	2.080*** (0.054)	-0.103+ (0.062)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	-0.004 (0.035)	0.063 (0.066)	0.005 (0.069)	0.148* (0.075)	0.107 (0.087)
Num.Obs.	479	479	479	479	479
R2	0.101	0.175	0.102	0.108	0.113

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table E12. Treatment effects of hearing the digital mobilization vignette on action, respondents not expecting transfer

	Overall pressure	Citizens-angry	Citizens-inspired	Senior officials-angry	Senior officials-inspired
Intercept (Control mean)	1.889*** (0.056)	0.258*** (0.029)	0.796*** (0.027)	0.246*** (0.030)	0.800*** (0.028)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.240** (0.075)	-0.029 (0.040)	0.033 (0.036)	0.050 (0.042)	-0.035 (0.039)
Num.Obs.	479	479	479	479	479
R2	0.095	0.090	0.078	0.075	0.090

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Respondents from blocks not aligned with the state-legislature ruling party (JMM)

We placed blocks in ACs by asking District Program Officers (DPO) of MGNREGA. To cross-check their data, we approached the District Election Officers. In cases where the DPOs were not able to provide accurate information about block to AC mapping we directly contacted the Block Program Officers of MGNREGA or the Block Development Officer within the blocks for the AC mapping.

Table E13. Treatment effects of digital mobilization vignette on officials' pressure to respond, blocks not aligned with the state ruling party (JMM)

	Overall pressure	Citizens-angry	Citizens-inspired	Senior officials-angry	Senior officials-inspired
Intercept (Control mean)	1.795*** (0.039)	0.243*** (0.021)	0.784*** (0.020)	0.203*** (0.020)	0.811*** (0.020)
Digital Mobilization Treatment	0.382*** (0.054)	-0.012 (0.030)	0.026 (0.029)	0.116*** (0.031)	-0.055+ (0.029)
Num.Obs.	807	807	807	807	807
R2	0.117	0.057	0.042	0.052	0.039

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table E14. Treatment effects of hearing the digital mobilization vignette on action, blocks not aligned with the state ruling party (JMM)

	Send staff	Send contractor	Call official	Fundraise	Responsiveness Index
Intercept (Control mean)	2.819*** (0.021)	2.387*** (0.035)	2.281*** (0.035)	2.137*** (0.041)	-0.082+ (0.047)
Digital Action Treatment	0.042 (0.029)	0.040 (0.050)	0.038 (0.050)	0.049 (0.058)	0.107 (0.067)
Num.Obs.	807	807	807	807	807
R2	0.077	0.135	0.084	0.069	0.088

All models include heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC2) standard errors. Following Lin (2013) we also include interactions between the treatment indicator and the centered block indicators. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001