

Policing Politicians: Citizen Empowerment and Political Accountability in Uganda

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1 Research Motivation

Identifying the conditions under which citizens make demands of elected politicians—and the conditions under which politicians are in turn responsive to those demands—is a central concern to practitioners and researchers interested in governance and development. Relations of accountability are fundamental to the effective functioning of democratic institutions, yet the mere existence of democratic institutions does not guarantee that politicians are truly accountable to their citizens. In recent years there has been an important focus on the role that information might play in improving the quality of relations of accountability and multiple international and civil society organizations have started investing in interventions to increase the information available to voters on the actions taken by politicians.

However the effects of political transparency are not well understood. Political transparency may be critical to improving governance, but it is also possible that in some settings it has no effect or even adverse effects.

In this study we examined the effects of a major intervention that sought to strengthen parliamentary accountability through the creation and dissemination of a Parliamentary Scorecard. The initiative, led by the Africa Leadership Institute, and supported by multiple donors, sought to provide Ugandan voters with basic information on the activities of their representatives in Uganda's 8th parliament.

The core questions we address are:

1. Did knowledge of the scorecard make voters more likely to re-elect strong performers and replace weaker ones?
2. Did knowing that scorecards would be distributed in their constituency result in improved performance by MPs?

2 Policy Impact and Audience

These questions are of relevance to individuals and organizing working to improve governance outcomes in developing areas and particularly those focused on transparency and accountability, including both local NGOs and international actors.

3 Approach & Findings

To answer these questions we coupled the creation of the parliamentary scorecard with a series of randomized disseminations. The chief form of dissemination was through major workshops in MP constituencies in which the relative performance of MPs was debated by local leaders, including supporters and opponents of the MP. These workshops were held for a random subset of half of Uganda's MPs who were made aware of them about two years in advance—giving them time to improve their performance. In addition the information was disseminated to voters through household visits and flyer campaigns. The design has two key innovations. First, we focus on the actions of both voters and politicians, and the interactions between them; second we examine transparency in a true field setting. Uganda's parliamentary scorecard became an important and hotly debated part of the national political process, advocated by some and contested by others. Our results speak directly to the likely impact of transparency campaigns as implemented systematically and at scale as part of a contested electoral process.

What did we find? Although in many ways the intervention was successful (in terms of assembling and publishing data on parliamentary work on an unprecedented scale in the country and fostering lively debate among politicians and in the media) our study has revealed little to no evidence of improved accountability. We find no evidence that MPs altered their behavior in

anticipation of having to defend their records in front of their communities. Specifically we find only weak evidence that MPs sought to change their behavior to achieve better grades. Their lack of concern may have been justified. Despite the great attention in the capital, most constituents appear unaware of the scorecard and MP scores. Only one in eight voters claim to have heard of the scorecard and these know little of the scorecards content. Constituents in workshop areas were more likely to have heard of the scorecard than those elsewhere; however they were not in general better informed about MP performance and indeed on the constituency performance measure, they generally had beliefs that were *more* poorly aligned with the actual scorecard scores, reflecting perhaps the scope for politicians to use public debate to “reinterpret” scores to their advantage.

4 Implications

A preliminary conclusion from this experience is that the popular hypothesis that transparency leads more or less directly to improvements in performance is overly optimistic. In this case, valuable information was made available to voters, but it did not take wing. It may be that transparency will be more effective when delivered through stronger dissemination campaigns or in settings with more robust, and competitive accountability processes. Or it may simply be that the success of politicians depends on factors only weakly related to their performance, such as personalistic ties to their constituents and the political and financial resources at their disposal. Either way, the evidence from this intervention reveals limits of transparency as a tool for democratic accountability: in a political process with real outcomes at stake, MPs and their local intermediaries often contested the validity of the information contained in the parliamentary scorecard, muting or even undermining the impact of new information on voter attitudes and preferences. While voters may be willing to update their views when information is provided in a vacuum or with insufficient time for incumbents to respond, this experiment reveals that information revealed in a scaled-up intervention, as part of an on-going political process, may simply become a part of the political debate and one possibly manipulable factor in the complex calculation of voters.

5 Lessons for future transparency and accountability interventions

Our research points to two ways in which future election focused transparency and accountability campaigns may be strengthened: by providing more intense dissemination strategies and by focusing on items that have great salience to voters. Our negative results suggest also that other nonelectoral channels may be as effective as electoral channels, including for example sustained media coverage of the performance of individual politicians or accountability channels that work through parties and other pressure points.

6 Further Reading

We caution however that the implications we describe above should only be considered in the context of findings from multiple studies. The Uganda Scorecard is just one case and particular features of the case may not extend to other cases. Other related studies, completed or ongoing are starting to find a mixture of positive and negative effects for the effects of transparency on politician performance. These include:

- Abhijit V. Banerjee, Randeep Prasad and F. Lu. "Do Informed Voters Make Better Choices? Experimental Evidence from Urban India" Working Paper. <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/rpande/papers/Do%20Informed%20Voters%20Make%20Better%20Choices.pdf>
- Bjorkman, M., and J. Svensson (2009): Power to the People: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment on Community-Based Monitoring in Uganda," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124(2), 735-69.
- Chong, A., A. L. De La O, D. Karlan, and L. Wantchekon (2010) "Information Dissemination and Local Governments: Electoral Returns, Evidence from a Field Experiment in Mexico," Working Paper, Yale University.
- Malesky, EJ, PJ, Schuler and A Tran . The Adverse Effects of Sunshine: Evidence from a Field Experiment on Legislative Transparency in an Authoritarian Assembly. Working paper. http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1642659.