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Working with political parties to strengthen candidate selection processes in Sierra Leone



- In brief:**
- In much of the world, political party leaders select candidates to run in the general election with little direct input from voters.
 - This raises questions about representation and accountability: if given a say, would voters have chosen different candidates? Are selected candidates accountable to the voters they represent or the party leaders that select them?
 - This study worked with political parties in Sierra Leone to experiment with more democratic processes to select their candidates in the lead up to the 2018 Parliamentary elections.
 - Results suggest that the combination of local party conventions and voter opinion polling increased the amount of information held by both party leaders and voters, and increased the likelihood that locally popular candidates were given the chance to compete in the general election.

This project was funded by IGC Sierra Leone

Background

Broadly defined, democracy is meant to be a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. And yet, there is a foundational tension within democracies about the right balance of power between ordinary citizens and political elites. Citizens, on the one hand, likely know what they want from government, but may be poorly informed about how the government works. Party leaders, on the other, have political expertise, but may have policy views that are out of step with ordinary voters. One key area where this tension plays out is how to best allocate control between citizens and party leaders in selecting which candidates get to run in the general election.

In the United States, voters participate directly in selecting candidates via primary elections. In most of the rest of the world, however, candidates are appointed by party leaders. If party leaders have different preferences than voters, the appointment process raises questions about representation—would voters have chosen someone else?—and accountability—are candidates and elected officials accountable to the voters they represent or the party leaders that chose them? This is likely to be particularly worrisome in party strongholds, as it is almost given that whomever the leaders of the locally dominant party pick as their candidate will win the general election.

This study addresses these questions via a large scale randomised controlled trial implemented in partnership with the Government of Sierra Leone and its two major political parties in the lead up to the 2018 Parliamentary Elections. This brief focuses on how party conventions and the polling of voters can help political parties select popular candidates and strategies party executives could adopt to enhance voters' participation in the symbol awarding process.

Description of the initiative

This project was offered to all registered political parties by Sierra Leone's Political Party Registration Commission (PPRC)¹ as a way to enhance the internal democracy of political parties. The All People's Congress (APC) and Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) chose to participate and received implementation support from Search for Common Ground (SFCG)² and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA). The leadership of the parties were supportive throughout the process and regular meetings were held to update on progress.

The initiative was implemented in 46 constituencies (APC 23 and SLPP 23) spread across the country (see Annex A) and has two (2) components as follows:

1. Constituency-level party conventions or town hall meetings that feature informative debates among aspirants, which were attended by both party leaders and voters, and broadcast over local radio; and
2. Representative polling of voters about which potential candidate, or aspirant, they would like the party to award the symbol to compete for the local seat in the 2018 Parliamentary elections. This data was statistically aggregated and given to party leaders in one-page voter reports (see Annex B).

The combination of party conventions and voter reports provided the respective party leaderships with

¹ The Political Party Registration Commission was established by an Act of Parliament to among others register and supervise the conduct of political parties in accordance with the constitution.

² Search for Common Ground is a local non-governmental organisation set up strengthen the capacity of communities to participate in building a tolerant, inclusive society for sustainable peace.

rich information on the competencies of aspirants and a statistically robust measure of their popularity with local constituents to inform the symbol awarding process.

How the voter reports were generated

The voter reports were compiled based on in-person surveys with a representative sample of 100 voters in each of the constituencies. Sampling of voters proceeded in two stages:

1. We randomly selected 10 voter registration centers (VRCs) in each of the selected constituencies; and
2. Then randomly selected 10 voters per VRC from the National Electoral Commission's registry of voters, for a total of 100 voters per constituency. The sampling ensures that the voter reports are fully representative of the views of all registered voters in the constituency.

Survey teams interviewed voters, aspirants and party leaders both before and after the conventions and polling. This generated rich data on over 7,500 voters, 245 party leaders and 430 aspirants.

Preliminary results

While comprehensive analysis is ongoing, here follow a few descriptive results from preliminary data analysis.

1. **Who becomes a politician?** The data reveals strong positive selection into politics on education and wealth: while 43% of voters have never been to school, 80% of aspirants (or potential candidates) have some university schooling. And while only 11% of voters have a bank account, nearly all aspirants have one. Party leaders are situated in between the two, which suggests that they might play a valuable role in helping voters screen aspirants on their technical qualifications.
2. **Local information constraints:** Prior to the debates, party leaders were surveyed about their own first choice aspirant and whom they thought would win a popular vote. About 90% of party leaders assumed that their preferences will coincide with that of voters. This was incorrect as only 55% of presumed shared preferences coincided. Overall, leaders correctly guessed the local choice 52% of the time. In about 34% of races, not a single party leader surveyed correctly guessed the local choice. This clearly suggests there is room for polling to improve representation by alleviating information constraint.
3. **Voter learning:** surveyed voters in constituencies where party conventions were held and broadcast over local radio had more political knowledge than voters in control "politics as usual" races. They were more likely to know which aspirants were better educated, had more public office experience, and had been involved in more local development projects. This suggests that town hall meetings can be an effective tool for educating voters about the range of potential candidates they can choose from.
4. **Where do parties chose to experiment?** The political parties chose Parliamentary races from all around the country to participate in this experiment. Overall, they tended to select more races from their respective regional strongholds, which constitute 52% of the experimental sample, and fewer from very competitive areas (28%) or their weak holds (17%). This suggests that political parties preferred experimenting in their strongholds.

5. **Increased representation:** The combination of party conventions and voter polling enhanced the likelihood that the person local people wanted to represent them was selected to be the party's candidate in the general election. This increased representation, as captured by this measure, from 37% to 61%, for a sizeable 65 percent increase.

Preliminary policy conclusions

It is quite exciting to see that political parties in Sierra Leone were willing to experiment with more democratic selection methods to identify Parliamentary candidates. The new process built greater political knowledge for both party leaders and voters, and substantially increased representation as measured by the preferred choice of local voters progressing to the general election. This approach holds promise for future elections in Sierra Leone and elsewhere.

Annex A: Number of constituencies in the experimental sample

(Note that half received the intervention and half were part of the research control group.)

Region	District	No. of Constituencies	
		APC	SLPP
Eastern	Kailahun	4	4
	Kenema	2	5
	Kono	4	3
Northern	Bombali	3	0
	Falaba	3	0
	Koinadugu	3	0
	Tonkolili	3	4
North West	Kambia	3	0
	Karene	4	0
	Port Loko	3	0
Southern	Bo	2	6
	Bonthe	0	3
	Moyamba	2	3
	Pujehun	2	5
Western	Rural	4	3
	Urban	4	10
Total		46	46

Annex B: Sample of voter report (redacted to protect anonymity)

APC Voter Report: District Constituency

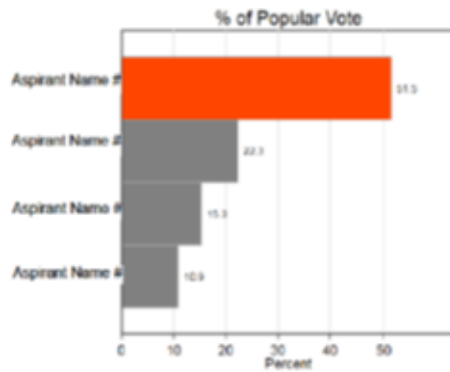
People's Choice

The first choice of voters in this constituency for the APC MP symbol is:

Aspirant Name 1 who has 51.46% of the popular vote.

This is based on polling results from a representative sample of 90 registered voters living near 10 different polling centers in this constituency.

Results Table: All Voters



Results Table: APC Supporters Only

