# Candidate entry into local government

Katherine Casey

IGC

# Grant Report: Candidate Entry Into Local Government

## I.    Introduction

Many low-income countries struggle to improve both the technical competence and representativeness of their elected governments. This is particularly true in Sierra Leone, where government effectiveness ranks in the 10th percentile of the World Bank's index, and corruption is widespread (22nd percentile for rule of law). Political candidates tend to come from the socioeconomic elite, and the vast majority are men; for example, 89% of parliamentary candidates are male, and they tend to be much wealthier than the average voter (Casey, Kamara, and Meriggi 2021).

The problem has two main components: the willingness of high-quality individuals to step forward as candidates and the processes through which they are selected and eventually win elections. In partisan elections, political parties, as gatekeepers, play a crucial role in shaping the pool of potential candidates. Since it is almost impossible to win without party backing, the selection process and criteria used by parties are critical in determining who enters and succeeds in politics.

In the context of local elections in Sierra Leone, we then ask how high-quality potential aspirants can be identified, screened, encouraged to run, and brought under consideration by political parties? To answer this question, we used this grant to complete two objectives. First, we collected detailed information about the Local Councillors sitting in office before the Sierra Leone 2023 elections. This effort allowed us to properly describe the population that without any intervention manages to reach local elected office. Second, we piloted an intervention to identify popular and qualified individuals who were new to the political space but still were interested in running for local office. This intervention was later part of a large-scale RCT, however the analysis of that research project is still underway. In this document we only document how this grant helped us pilot the data-collection procedure used to implement our intervention.

Local elections in Sierra Leone are an ideal context to study this problem for several reasons. First, the barriers to entry are lower compared to national elections: running for office requires fewer resources, the positions are part-time (so candidates don't need to abandon their careers), and the eligibility criteria are minimal, with no formal education requirements. Second, the responsibilities of local councillors involve managing local development projects and overseeing ministry activities, areas where both human capital and voter alignment are important. Third, the current candidate pool leaves room for improvement, as over a third of local councillors have not completed high school, and only 17% are women. Finally, turnover in local government is high—only 12% of councillors elected in 2012 ran for re-election in 2018—leaving ample space for new entrants.

In these local elections we then try to create an intervention that directly addresses the role of parties as gatekeepers into the political area. We take this approach due to a combination of multiple factors. Parties face non-trivial information, logistical and resource challenges in identifying and recruiting competent, popular candidates in all 456 wards. Moreover, party leaders speak of misalignment between central party

officials (as principals) and the local-level party executives (as agents) whom they rely upon to screen aspirants. A sitting MP went so far as to describe these local delegates as "the most wicked members of our party," in reference to their responsiveness to money and status in a way that favours incumbents and established "big men," at the expense of younger, more competent aspirants. This potential misalignment in turn likely deters some high-quality potential aspirants from entering politics. The combination suggests scope to alleviate search and information frictions, while simultaneously widening the gatekeeping of parties to dimensions of competence and representation, in a way that creates space for new entrants into local politics.

## II.    Councillor Survey

The first step of our intervention was to establish a baseline profile of the characteristics of the 438 current[1] government officials in local councils. To achieve this, we followed a plan in three steps. We first used data from Casey, Meriggi, and Kamara (2021) to select characteristics of parliamentary candidates that positively predict the subsequent public spending of elected MPs, as verified by field audits.

Second, we selected variables from a screening instrument used in Casey, Glennerster, Miguel, and Voors (2023) to identify high-skill members of rural communities in Sierra Leone. These individuals were involved in drafting proposals for local infrastructure that were submitted to a district-level grants competition. We chose traits that positively correlate with the quality of the submitted proposals and the likelihood that their proposal was selected as a winning grant.

Third, during the piloting activity for this current research program, we put together all of these proxies for quality into a survey for all sitting Local Councillors. This comprehensive survey instrument collected key information on sitting incumbent local councillors, focusing on their human capital, demographics, and their professional and experience. We further verified our proxies for quality through checking their correlations with peer evaluations between councillors.

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[1] By current, we mean before our intervention on the 2023 election cycle, hence local councillors elected in 2018.

| Variable | N | Mean | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Years of Education | 438 | 12.79 | 6 | 14 |
| Literate | 438 | .97 | 0 | 1 |
| Number Score | 438 | 2.2 | 0 | 3 |
| Ravens Score | 437 | 3.88 | 0 | 8 |
| Digits Score | 438 | 3.43 | 0 | 8 |
| Daily Wage (USD) | 414 | 3.24 | 0 | 10.42 |
| Good Current Job | 438 | .53 | 0 | 1 |
| Past Good Job | 438 | .66 | 0 | 5 |
| Count of Dev Project Experiences | 438 | 1.07 | 0 | 5 |
| Count of Community Prokects | 438 | 1.42 | 0 | 5 |
| Count of Leadership Positions | 438 | 1.45 | 0 | 5 |
| Number of NGOs Known | 438 | .71 | 0 | 5 |
| Project Proposal Score | 438 | 3.77 | 0 | 8 |
| Current Managerial Job | 438 | .84 | 0 | 1 |
| Past Managerial Job | 438 | 1.05 | 0 | 5 |
| Transport Honest | 0 | . | . | . |

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Councillors' Quality

| Variable | N | Mean | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 438 | .82 | 0 | 1 |
| Age | 437 | 45.67 | 24 | 76 |
| Years of Education | 438 | 12.79 | 6 | 14 |
| Mende | 438 | .34 | 0 | 1 |
| Temne | 438 | .24 | 0 | 1 |
| Works in Education | 438 | .28 | 0 | 1 |
| Works on Business | 438 | .25 | 0 | 1 |
| Works on Farming | 438 | .23 | 0 | 1 |
| Daily Wage (USD) | 414 | 3.24 | 0 | 10.42 |
| From Chiefdom Ruling Family | 438 | .14 | 0 | 1 |
| Household Size | 437 | 9.7 | 1 | 23 |
| Asset Count | 438 | 10.66 | 3 | 18 |
| Freetown Trips Last Year | 396 | 4.94 | 0 | 24 |
| Traveled Outside SL | 438 | .58 | 0 | 1 |

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Councillors' Demographics

Several of the variables captured in the survey are closely tied to the overall quality of local councillors as shown in Table 1. Our approach combines multiple proxies for quality in terms of their education, skills, and experience, which directly influence their ability to effectively manage public responsibilities. For instance, councillors had an average of 12.8 years of education, with 96.8% being literate. Higher levels of education and literacy are critical for navigating the demands of local governance. Cognitive skills, assessed through the **Raven's Progressive Matrices Score**, a non-verbal test measuring abstract reasoning and fluid intelligence, averaged 3.88 out of 8 (Raven, 2000). Additionally, on the **Digits Span Score**, which measures working memory by recalling sequences of numbers, local councillors averaged 3.43 out of 8. These scores are important as they reflect councillors' capacity for problem-solving and logical reasoning, crucial attributes for effective governance (Wechsler, 1949). Moreover, other variables we use to proxy for quality, such as experience doing development and community work or the project

project proposal score stem from previous work done in this context which validates how these variables are important for development outcomes .

Demographically, we see in Table 2 that councillors were predominantly male (82%), with an average age of 45.7 years. In terms of ethnic representation, 33.8% were Mende and 23.7% were Temne. Additionally, 58.2% of the councillors had travelled outside Sierra Leone, and councillors had made an average of 4.94 trips to Freetown in the past year. Their average household size was 9.7 members, and 14.2% were from a chiefdom ruling family.

We compile measures from these three sources into a screening instrument. We use this instrument to i) rank community nominees on their technical merits as part of the treatment intervention, and ii) compare the merits of individuals in different pools (e.g., how do the nominees compare to SQ aspirants, and how do they compare to incumbent Councillors?).

## III.     Nominations Intervention

Our intervention, "Local Champions Initiative" was designed to address the information and logistical challenges political parties face in identifying high-quality candidates for local government elections. By generating curated lists of well-qualified individuals, the initiative aimed to widen the pool of aspirants considered for local office, while leaving the final selection in the hands of the parties.

The process of piloting to develop this intervention involved several steps. In our first version of our approach, we designed structured meetings with the help of our partner Talking Drum Studios. Through these meetings we wanted to elicit from communities who they believed were the ideal nominees that could run for local government. We wanted these meetings to reveal who was popular in their communities and who would be willing to participate in an open forum about their political intentions, which we saw as a prerequisite for contesting elected office.

We tried this community meeting approach in 2 locations during November of 2022, two in the district of Moyamba and two in the district of Port Loko. The overwhelming result from these pilots was that meetings allowed local elites to capture the nomination process such that many people (for example women) refused to participate and speak up. As a result, we decided to switch to a more data-intensive process based on private nominations.

After successfully piloting this private process in two more communities in both districts, we decided to proceed with this approach. The final version of this intervention unfolded in the following stages:

**1. Private Community Nominations:**

Field teams conducted private household visits across key communities in each ward. Enumerators explained the necessary skills and competencies required to be an effective Local Councillor and asked respondents to nominate up to five individuals from their ward who they believed would make strong candidates. To ensure gender inclusivity, respondents were also encouraged to list up to five female

candidates. Approximately 80 households in each ward were surveyed, focusing on the largest communities to capture local perspectives.

As part of the scale-up of this component, we successfully gathered nominations from a respondent sample of 15,803 households in 190 wards across the whole country but falling under District Councils (this implies, avoiding urban areas part of City Councils). In total we collected more than 50,000 names of nominees. The respondents doing these nominations successfully represented different types of citizens living in rural Sierra leone. We managed to get nominations from many women (41% out of the respondent sample) and from people who hold leadership positions within the communities we surveyed (35% out of the respondent sample).

**2. Technocratic Quality Screening:**

The top 10 nominees, based on the number of nominations, were screened using a detailed questionnaire that assessed their readiness for public office. This screening, based on public spending performance, proposal quality, and peer reviews, identified the highest-quality candidates. Importantly, these quality assessments were independent of the interest of these individuals to run for local office. This allowed us to understand who selects themselves into elected office conditional on being popular.

As part of the scale-up for this component, we successfully conducted the technocratic screening, using the same instrument applied in the Councillor Survey, in the same 190 wards where we hosted nominations. We conducted this Nominee Survey with 1609 respondents, so on average 8.5 respondents per ward.

## IV.    Results From Nominations

The Local Champions Initiative has successfully identified top nominees who are not only comparable to sitting councillors but, in many cases, demonstrate a broader range of skills and leadership potential, especially in critical areas related to local governance and project management.

|  | All | | | | Top | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | N | Mean | Min | Max | N | Mean | Min | Max |
| Years of Education | 1079 | 11.59 | 0 | 16 | 529 | 12.97 | 4 | 16 |
| Literate | 1079 | .81 | 0 | 1 | 529 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Number Score | 1079 | 1.91 | 0 | 3 | 529 | 2.15 | 0 | 3 |
| Ravens Score | 1079 | 2.72 | 0 | 9 | 529 | 3.66 | 0 | 9 |
| Digits Score | 1079 | 2.91 | 0 | 8 | 529 | 3.7 | 0 | 8 |
| Daily Wage (USD) | 1012 | 2.01 | 0 | 10.42 | 512 | 2.75 | 0 | 10.42 |
| Current Good Job | 1079 | .57 | 0 | 1 | 529 | .74 | 0 | 1 |
| Past Good Job | 1079 | .69 | 0 | 5 | 529 | 1.05 | 0 | 5 |
| Count of Dev Project Experiences | 1079 | .71 | 0 | 5 | 529 | 1.16 | 0 | 6 |
| Count of Community Prokects | 1079 | .96 | 0 | 5 | 529 | 1.27 | 0 | 5 |
| Count of Leadership Positions | 1079 | .98 | 0 | 6 | 529 | 1.29 | 0 | 7 |
| Number of NGOs Known | 1079 | .27 | 0 | 4 | 529 | .61 | 0 | 5 |
| Project Proposal Score | 1079 | 3.19 | 0 | 8 | 529 | 3.95 | 0 | 8 |
| Current Managerial Job | 1079 | .83 | 0 | 1 | 529 | .89 | 0 | 1 |
| Past Managerial Job | 1079 | .84 | 0 | 5 | 529 | 1.16 | 0 | 5 |
| Transport Honest | 1073 | 1.27 | 0 | 3 | 527 | 1.58 | 0 | 3 |

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Nominees' Quality

|  | All | | | | Top | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | N | Mean | Min | Max | N | Mean | Min | Max |
| Male | 1072 | .63 | 0 | 1 | 522 | .79 | 0 | 1 |
| Age | 1079 | 38.7 | 19 | 77 | 529 | 39.75 | 20 | 78 |
| Years of Education | 1079 | 11.59 | 0 | 16 | 529 | 12.97 | 4 | 16 |
| Mende | 1079 | .37 | 0 | 1 | 529 | .31 | 0 | 1 |
| Temne | 1079 | .25 | 0 | 1 | 529 | .26 | 0 | 1 |
| Works in Education | 1079 | .22 | 0 | 1 | 529 | .35 | 0 | 1 |
| Works in Business | 1079 | .22 | 0 | 1 | 529 | .19 | 0 | 1 |
| Works in Farming | 1079 | .34 | 0 | 1 | 529 | .25 | 0 | 1 |
| Daily Wage (USD) | 1012 | 2.01 | 0 | 10.42 | 512 | 2.75 | 0 | 10.42 |
| From Chiefdom Ruling Family | 1079 | .61 | 0 | 1 | 529 | .63 | 0 | 1 |
| Household Size | 1078 | 8.6 | 1 | 21 | 529 | 9.23 | 2 | 21 |
| Asset Count | 1079 | 8.13 | 1 | 18 | 529 | 9.3 | 2 | 19 |
| Freetown Trips Last Year | 1069 | 3.18 | 0 | 28 | 527 | 4.43 | 0 | 28 |
| Traveled Outside SL | 1079 | .43 | 0 | 1 | 529 | .49 | 0 | 1 height |

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Nominees' Demographic
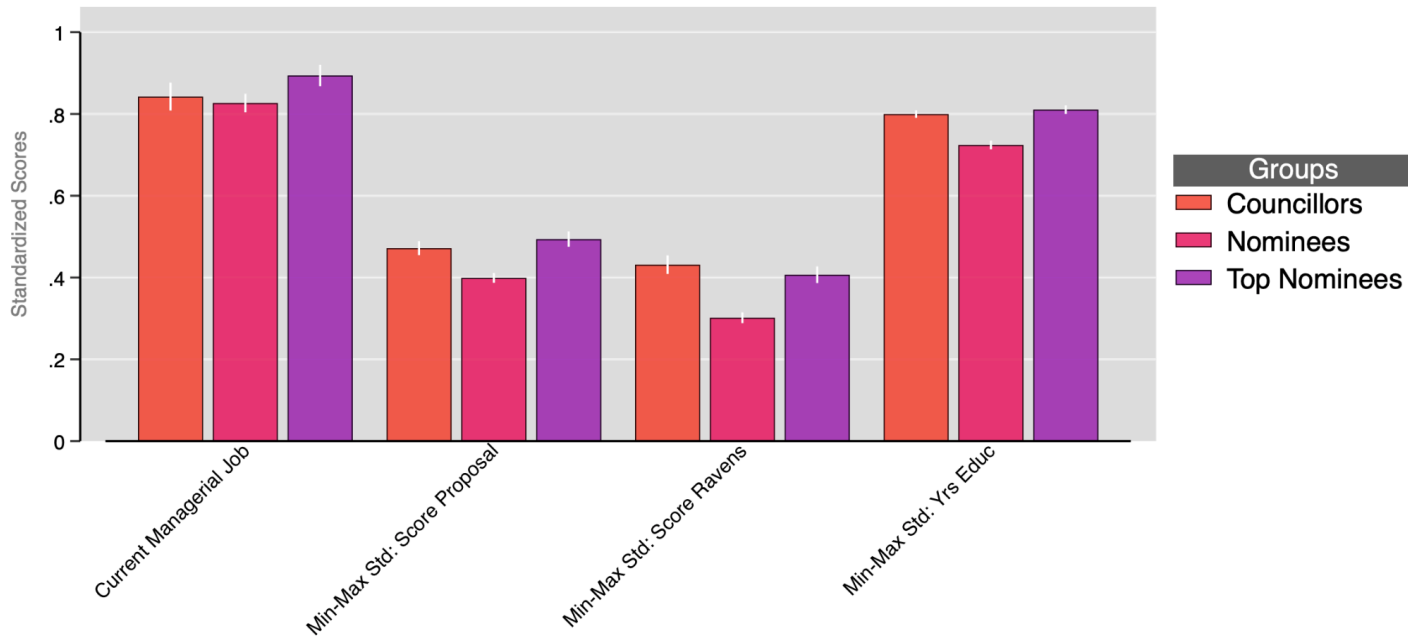
Comparison of Quality variables across Councillors, Nominees and Top Nominees

Note: 95% CIs Shown. All variables are Min-Max Std except 'Current Managerial Job'
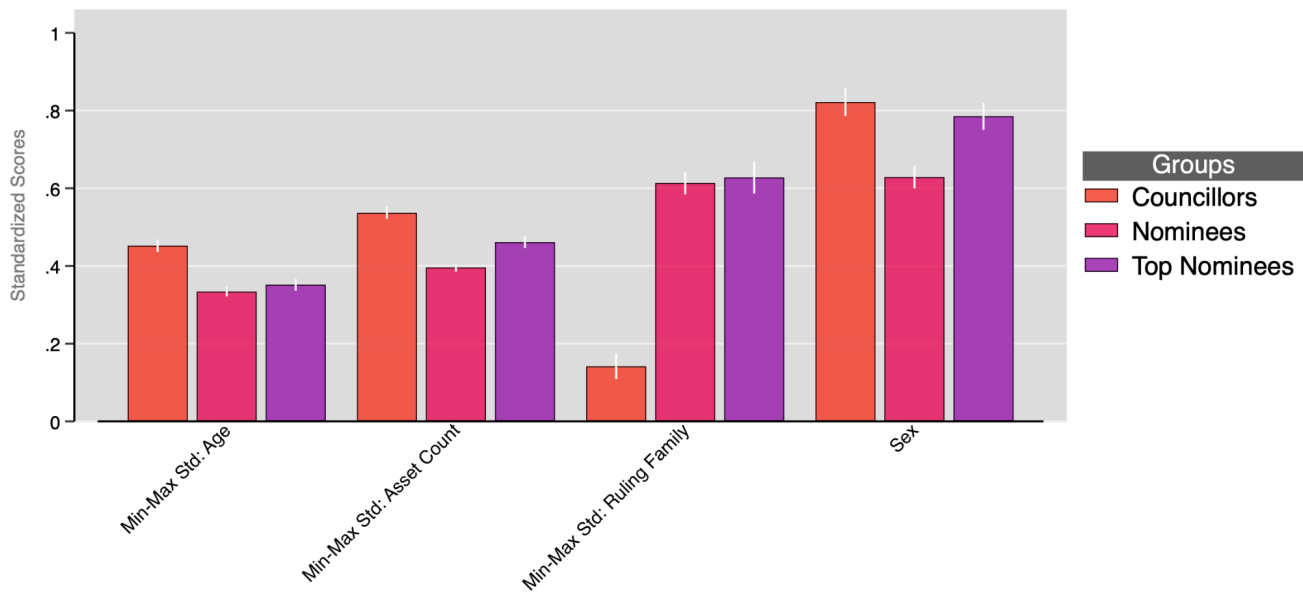


Comparison of Demographic variables across Councillors, Nominees and Top Nominees

Note: 95% CIs Shown. All variables are Min-Max Std except 'Current Managerial Job'

Demographically, top nominees tend to be younger, with an average age of 39.5 years compared to sitting councillors, whose average age is 44.8 years. This younger age profile is a promising indicator that the initiative is bringing fresh talent into the leadership pipeline.

However, significant gender disparities remain. Although 37% of nominees were female, only 21% of top nominees were women. This is a slight improvement from the current councillor pool, where only 18%

are female, emphasising the need for further progress toward achieving gender parity. Although this marks some progress, it highlights the ongoing need for further efforts to achieve gender parity, particularly as the selection process advances.

In terms of occupational diversity, top nominees closely resemble sitting councillors, which suggests the initiative has effectively identified candidates representative of local economies. Among sitting councillors, 27% work in education, 23% in business, and 24% in farming. This closely aligns with the top nominees, where 25% are in education, 22% in business, and 29% in farming. Such alignment highlights that the initiative has succeeded in maintaining representation from sectors critical to local economies and community life.

When comparing top nominees and sitting councillors in terms of their association with ruling families and asset count, a distinct pattern emerges. While sitting councillors, who represent the current rulers, generally have a lower asset count, only 16% of them come from ruling families. In contrast, 63% of top nominees, identified through quality screenings and recommended by others as the most qualified, belong to ruling families. These top nominees also tend to have a higher asset count compared to non-elite nominees. This suggests that despite being viewed as highly qualified based on skills and leadership potential, the influence of traditional elites and wealth still plays a significant role in determining who is seen as the best candidate for leadership. This raises concerns about whether political leadership is truly accessible to individuals outside of ruling families, even when the selection process emphasises qualifications.

On the quality front, top nominees stand out in terms of both cognitive and leadership skills. On average, both councillors and top nominees completed around 13 years of education. Similarly, the **Ravens Score**, which assesses problem-solving skills, is comparable among top nominees (3.66) compared to councillors (3.88). However, top nominees consistently outperform sitting councillors in several key areas. Notably, top nominees excel in project proposal skills, with an average score of 3.95, surpassing the 3.77 average for sitting councillors. This reflects that top nominees are better equipped to manage complex local development projects.

## V.    Conclusion

This report provides early insights into the Local Champions Initiative, an intervention aimed at encouraging high-integrity, high-capacity citizens to participate in the political candidate selection process. Overall, the Local Champions Initiative has successfully identified nominees who not only match sitting councillors in terms of sectoral representation but also surpass them in critical skills such as cognitive abilities and project management. However, the persistence of gender disparities and the overrepresentation of traditional elites in the pool of top nominees highlight areas for improvement.These preliminary findings point to areas where the nomination process can be made more inclusive.

That said, our full analysis is still in progress. The next phase of research will involve a detailed four-part analysis: i) descriptive analysis to assess whether the Local Champions Initiative met its intended objectives; ii) causal analysis of the intervention's impact on candidate entry into the aspirant pool; iii) causal analysis of party responsiveness to the intervention and its effect on selected candidates; and iv) an estimation of potential spillover effects across geographic areas. Only after completing this

comprehensive analysis will we have a fuller understanding of the impact of randomising this intervention and sharing candidate information with political parties. These final results will provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of the Local Champions Initiative and its broader implications for political representation and governance.

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