

# DEBATES

## The Impact of Voter Knowledge Initiatives in Sierra Leone

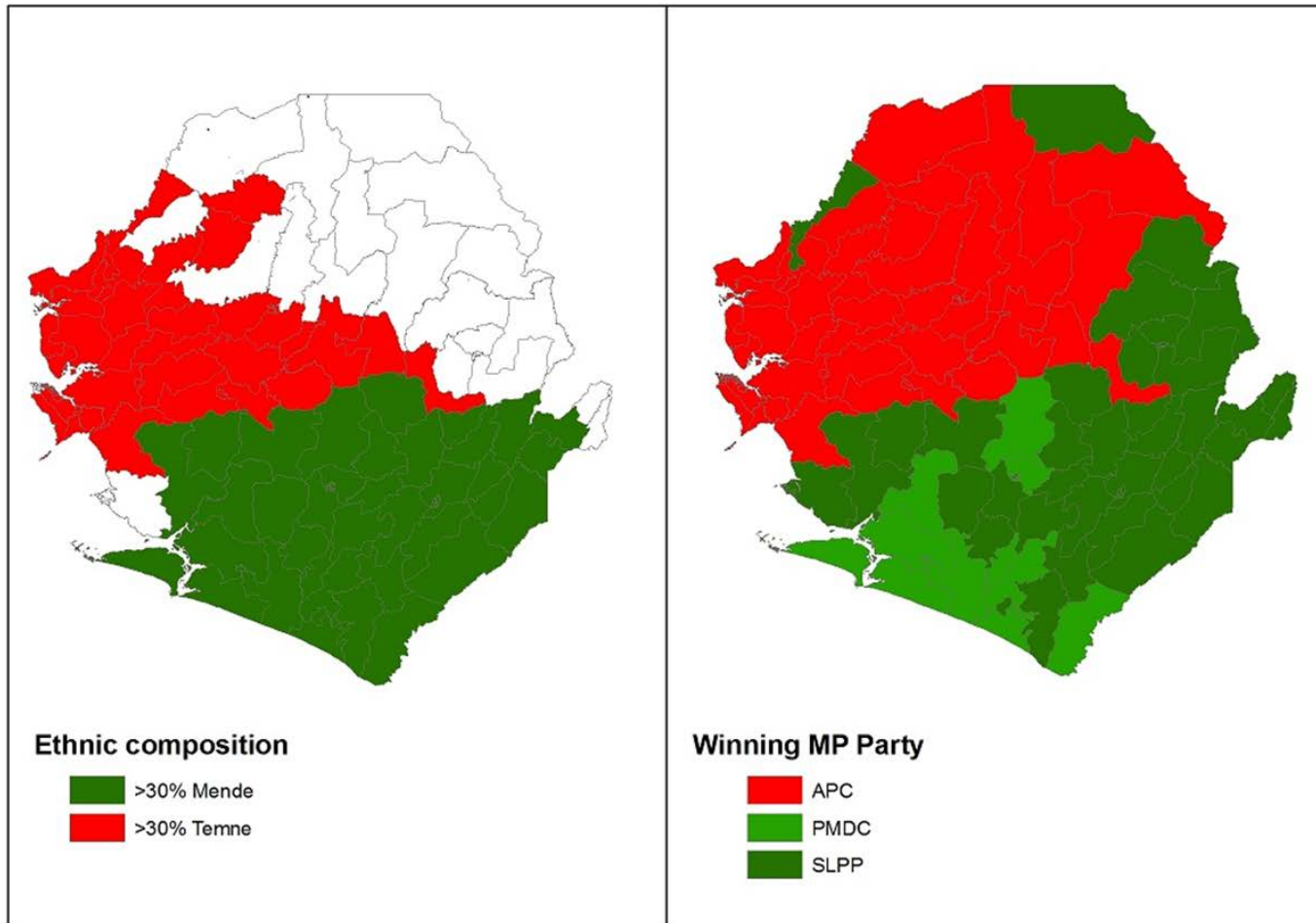
Ambrose James

Evaluation with Kelly Bidwell (IPA),  
Katherine Casey (Stanford GSB) and  
Rachel Glennerster (JPAL)

# Background: Elections and Voting Behaviour

- High voter turnout for national elections
  - National: 76%
  - Local: 39%
- Parties have less incentive to field their best candidate
  - Lack of information among voters about candidate quality
  - Strong association of ethnicity with political parties
    - National: 86% voted for party affiliated with own ethnicity
    - Local: 75% voted for party affiliated with tribe
  - Is greater cross ethnic voting at local level because voters have more information on candidates?

# Background: Elections and Voting Behaviour



# Background: Elections and Voting Behaviour

- Election Day (Nov 2012) exit polls in Control villages reveal that:
  - Only 28% of voters could name the Parliamentary candidates
  - 64% couldn't name a single MP job responsibility
  - 3% knew the amount of the MPs' constituency facilitation fund
  - 35% knew the proposed quota for women's representation in government and 17% knew the candidates' positions on the bill
  - 70% of voters have zero years of schooling, 31% have no radio
- In previous elections, citizens did not have enough information to hold officials to accountable

# Can information improve accountability?

- Can debates effectively convey information about political issues and candidates?
- Will information change how people vote, or do they only care about ethnicity?
- What information matters?
  - Policy preference and competence
  - Candidate quality- oratory skills and persuasion power
  - Personal characteristics
  - All of the above
- Will taking part in debates change how MPs behave once they are elected?

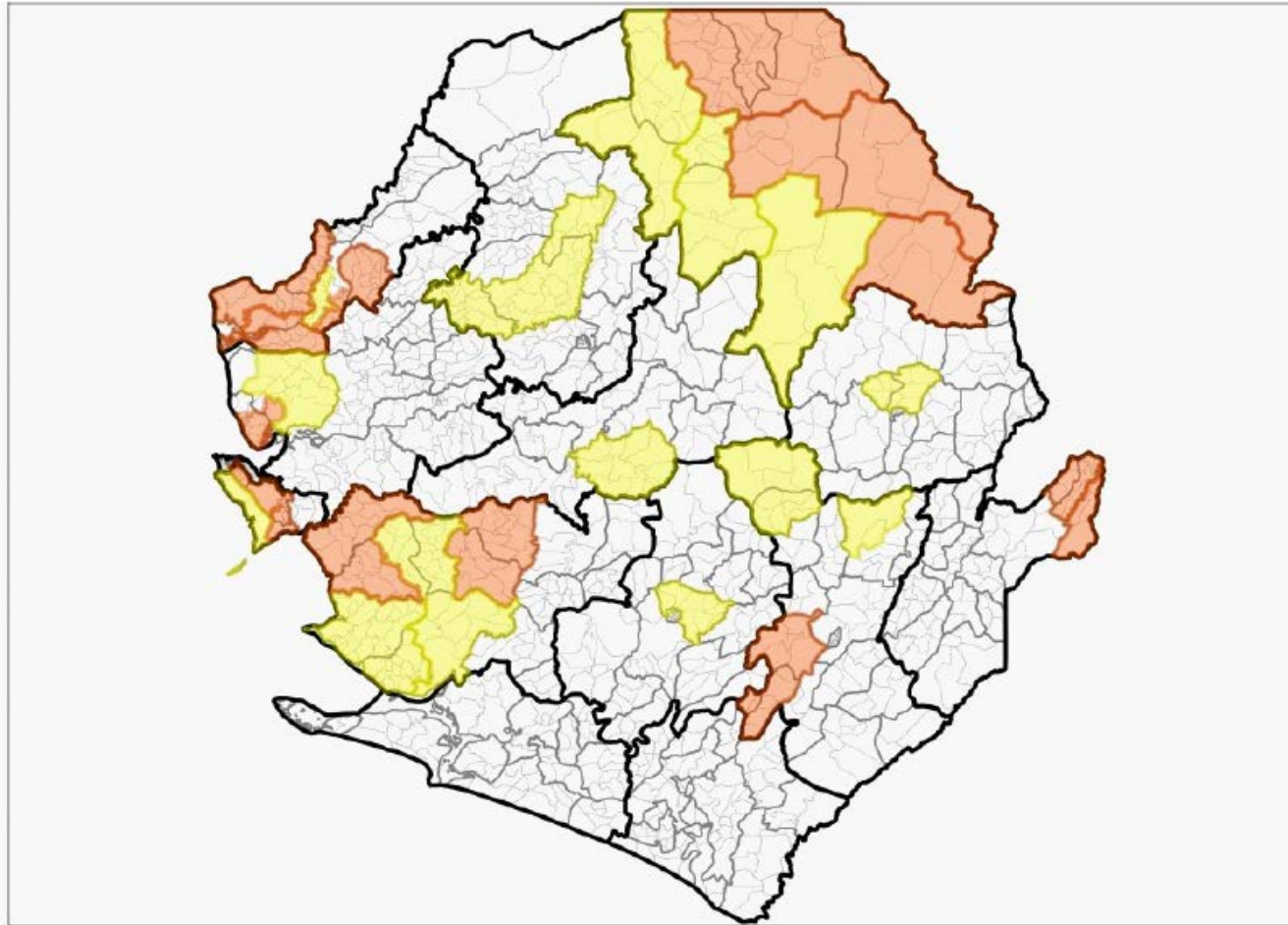
# Experiment: A Three-Pronged Approach

- Parties
  - Encouraged to nominate better quality candidates
    - Scorecards to each MP based on constituency surveys
    - Not covered in this presentation
- Voters
  - Debates
    - Information on candidate policies, personal characteristics and qualifications
- Candidates
  - Encouraged to invest more time and money in their constituency

# Experiment: Set Up

- Three Levels of randomisation
  - Debates hosted in 14 of the 28 most closely contested
  - “Road show” of debate screenings in 112 of 224 polling centres
    - plus 85 in satellite villages around treatment centres
    - approximately 19,000 individuals exposed
  - 2,600 individuals randomized into 6 treatment arms in another 40 polling centres

# Experiment: Set Up



 treatment

 comparison





# Treatment: Groups

- Individual-level treatments unpack the different types of information conveyed by the debates
  - Debate, viewed on tablet (N = 399)
  - Get to know you video: Candidate personality (402)
  - Radio report: Journalist summary of policy and qualifications (392)
  - Controls (1,000)

# Treatment: Debates

- Search for Common Ground hosted and filmed debates between Parliamentary candidates, with a standardized structure:
  - Moderator introduction
    - Explained roles of MPs
    - Size of constituency facilitation fund (US\$11k)
  - ‘Get to know you’ questions
    - Use to separate out voters response to policy vs. non policy information
  - First priority for government spending
    - Allows us to look at alignment in priorities between voter and candidate



# Treatment: Debates

- Constituency 63, Yilleh, Tonkolili



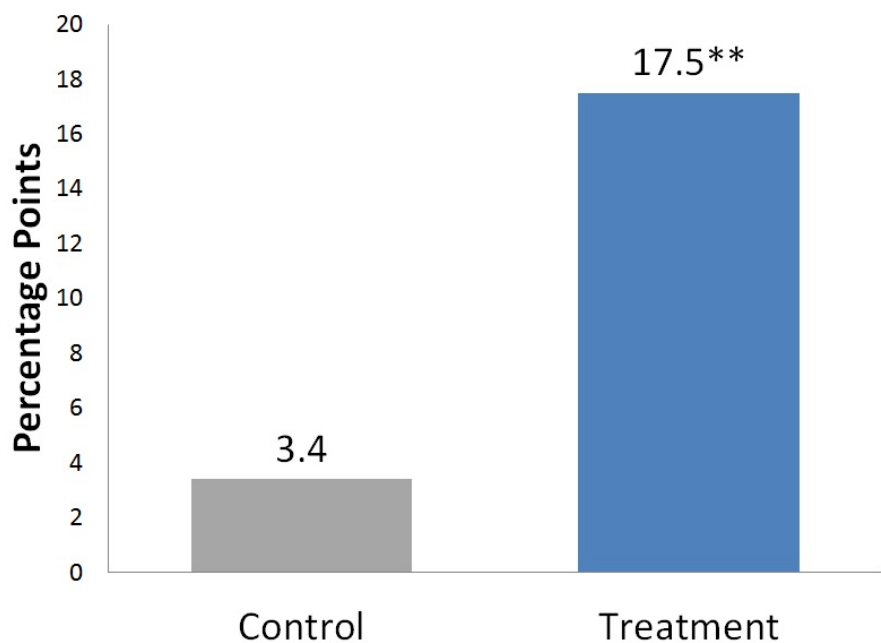
# Hypotheses

- Exposure to information expected to increase:
  - Political knowledge - of politics in general, candidates and policy stances
  - Policy alignment
  - Voter openness to other parties
  - Votes for the debate winner
  - Voting across ethnic-party lines
  - Secondary: turnout, perceived legitimacy, interest in politics
- MPs who have been part of the debate more likely to vote for gender equity bill and transparency of CFF, and spend CFF in constituency

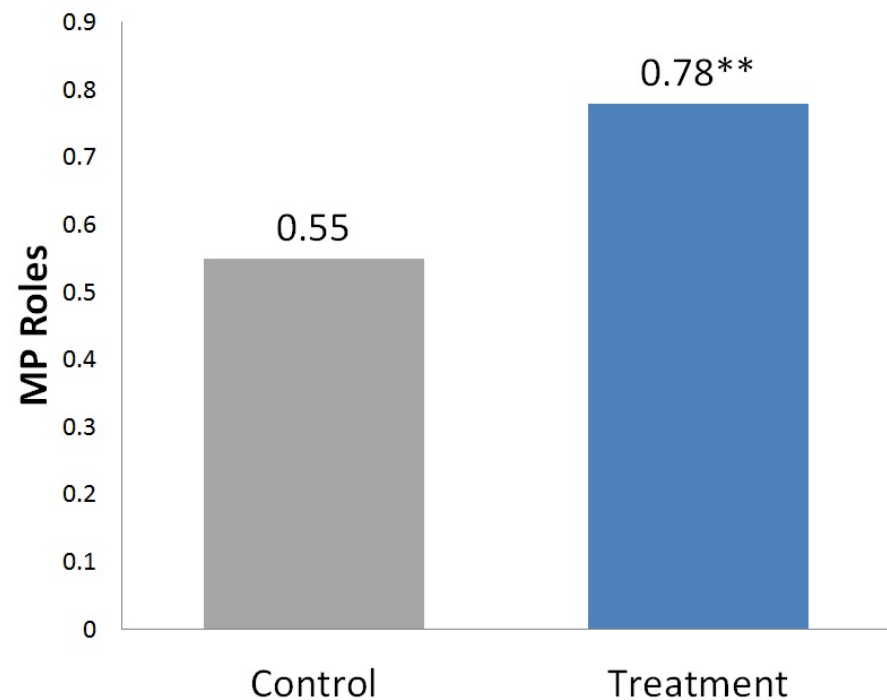
# Results: General Political Knowledge

- Mean effect across outcomes: 0.3\*\* SD

**Know amount of constituency facilitation fund**



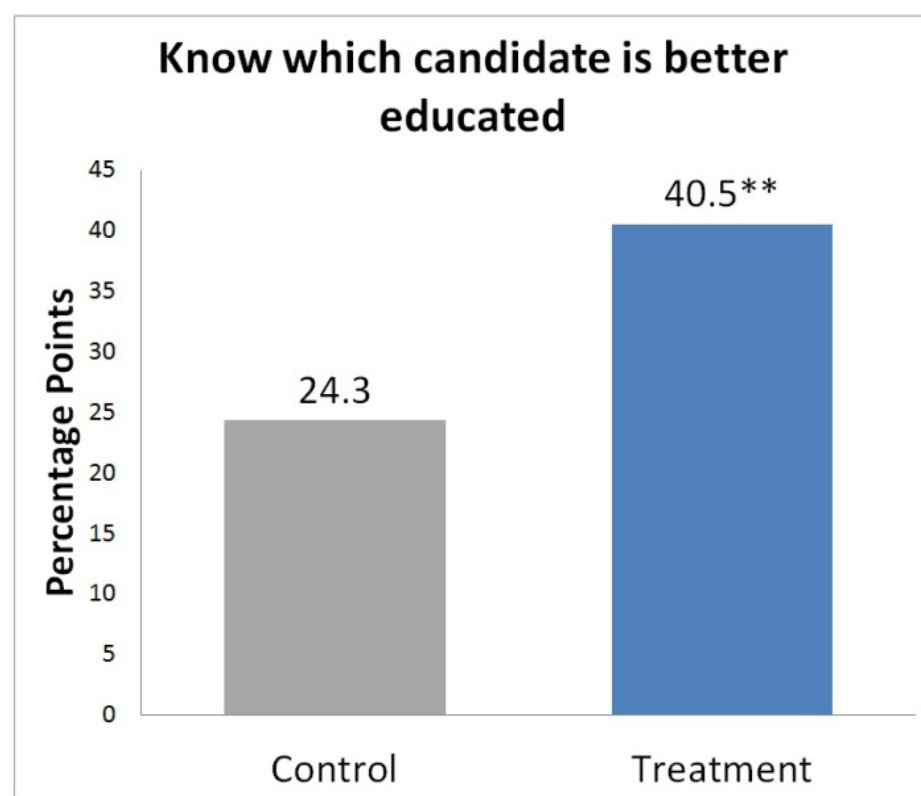
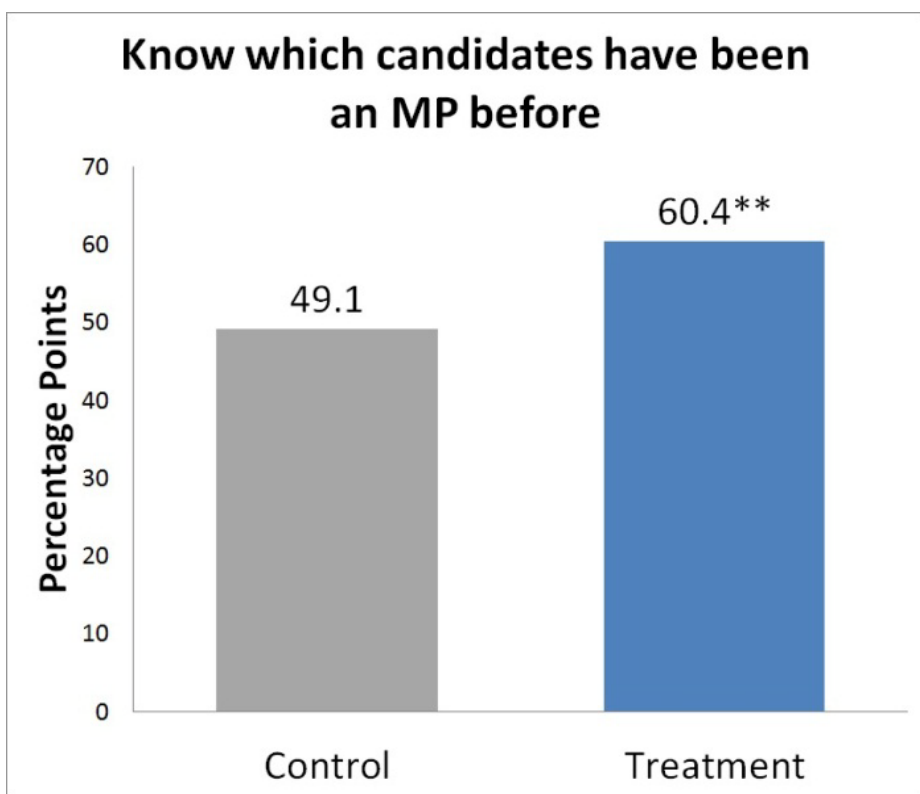
**Know MP job responsibilities**



\*\* = 1%   \* = 5%   + = 10%

# Results: Candidate Knowledge

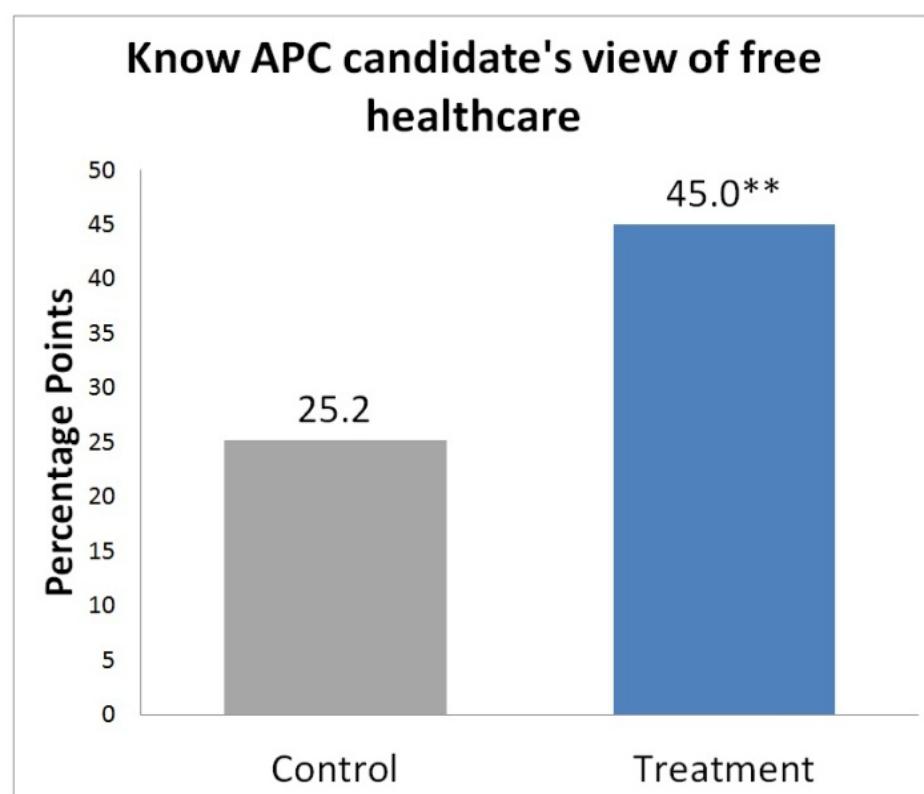
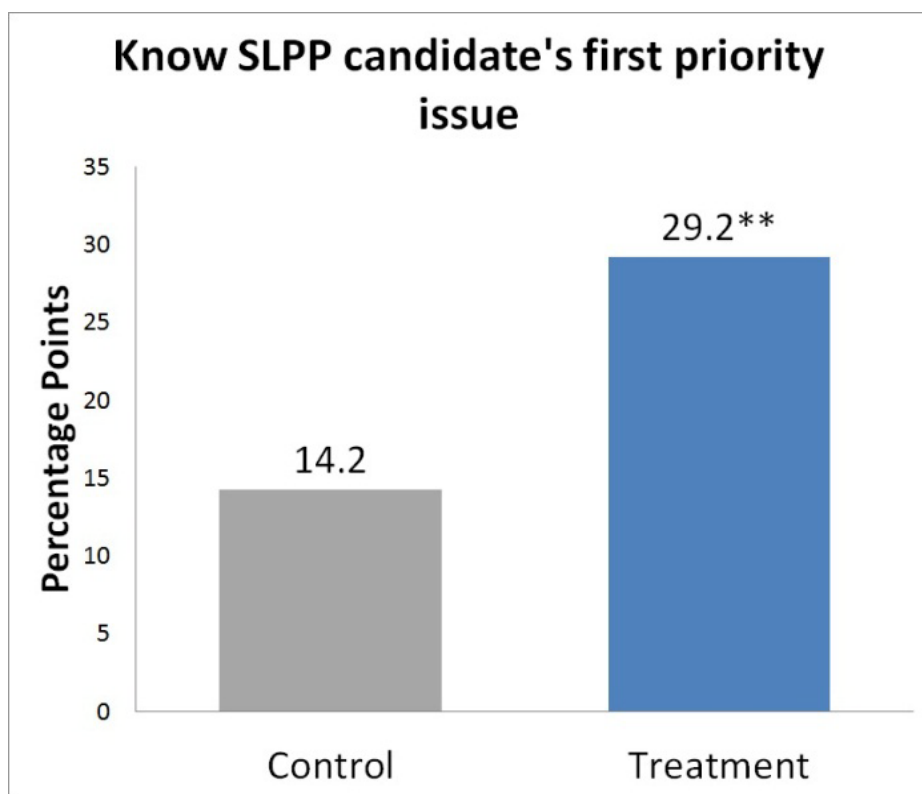
- Mean effect across all outcomes: 0.25\*\* SD



\*\* = 1%   \* = 5%   + = 10%

# Result: Policy Knowledge

- Mean effect across all outcomes: 0.29\*\*\* SD



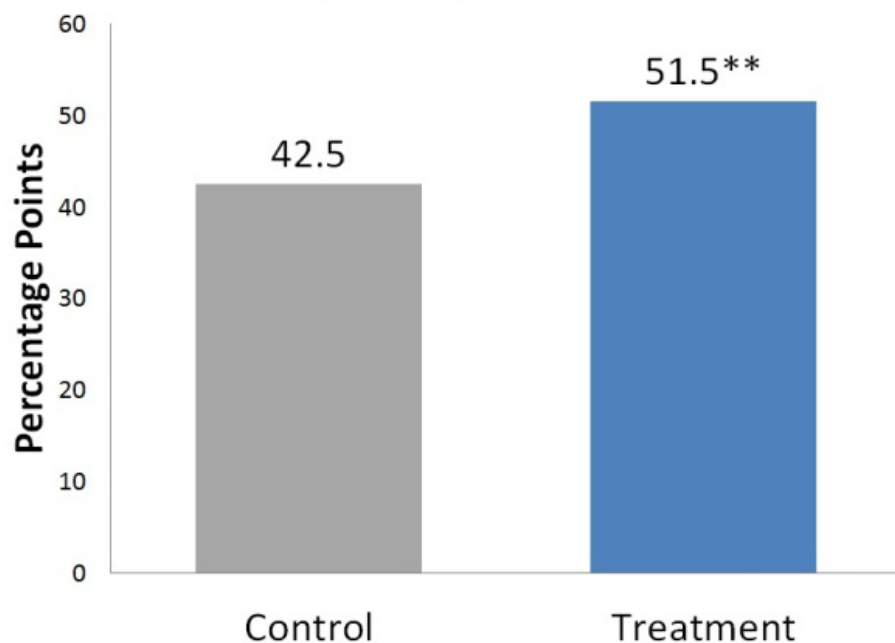
\*\* = 1%   \* = 5%   + = 10%



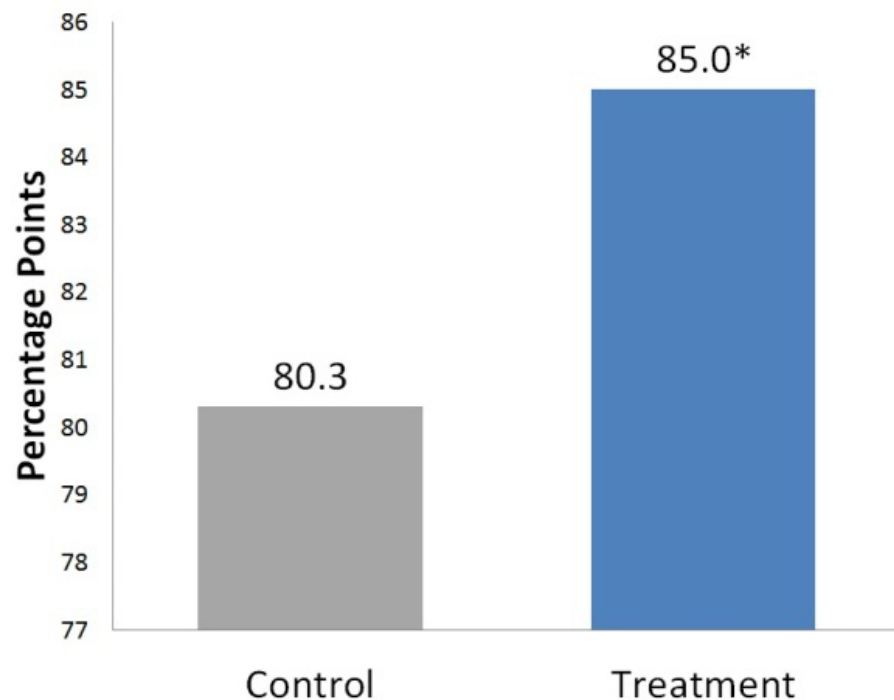
# Result: Voting Choices

- Mean effect on policy alignment: 0.11\*\* SD
- Mean effect on voting for the winner 0.08\* SD

**Voter aligned with candidate's priority issue**

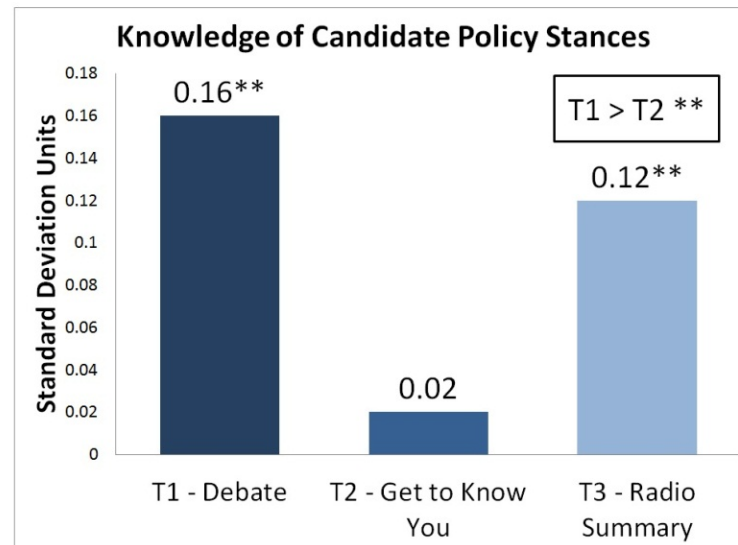
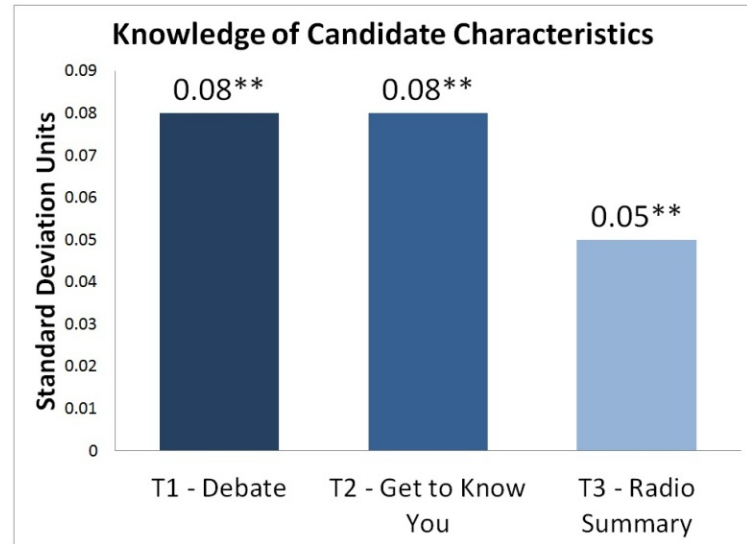
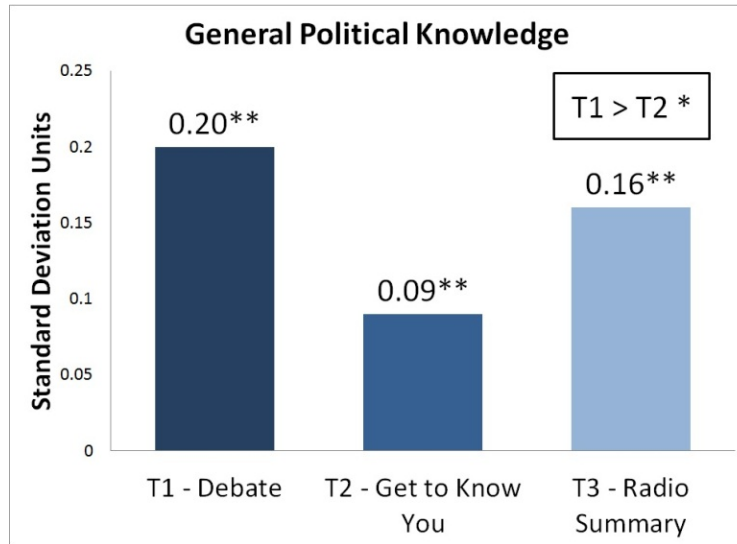


**Votes for audience's debate winner**



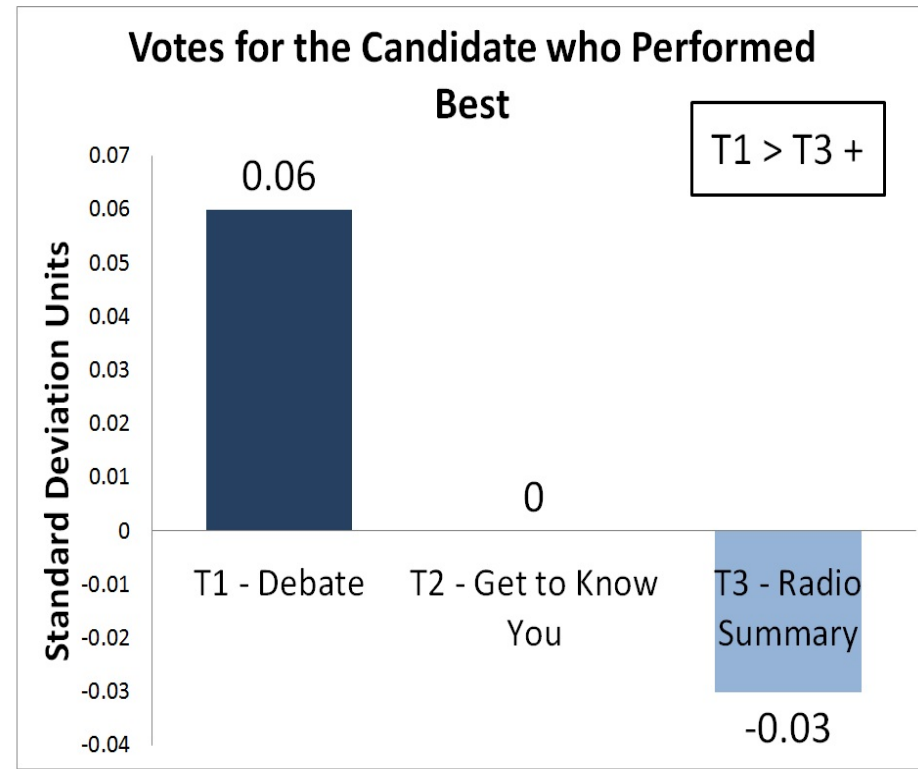
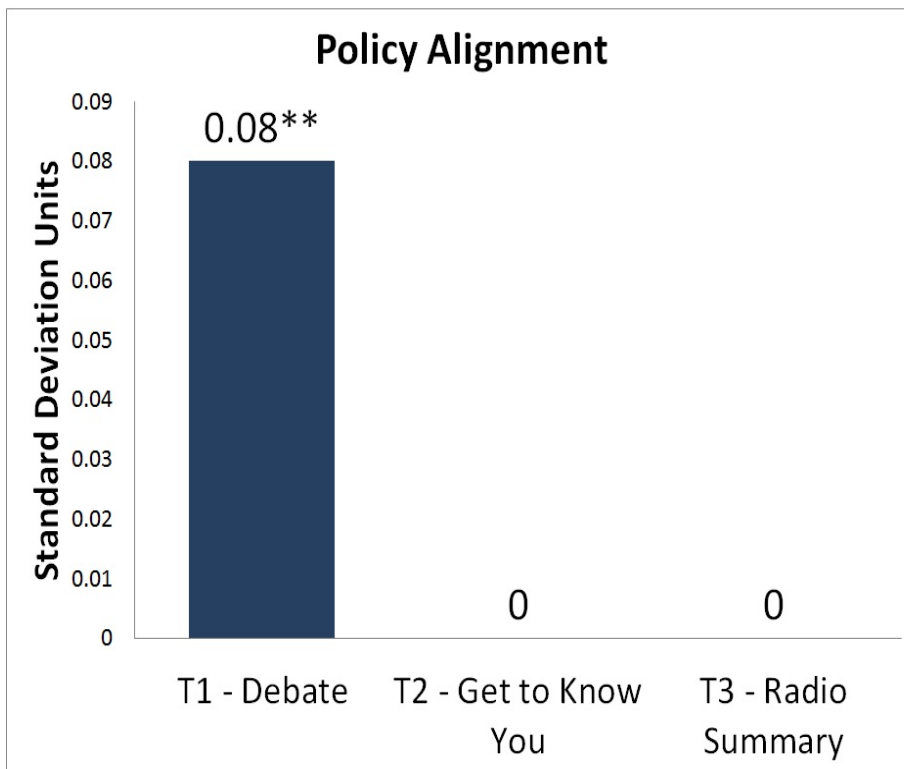
\*\* = 1%   \* = 5%   + = 10%

# Results: Type of Information



# Results: Policy Alignment and Voting

- Only debates have an impact on these outcomes



\*\* = 1%   \* = 5%   + = 10%

# Follow up work: MP behaviour

- Most candidates committed to
  - Support the gender equity bill
  - Support transparency of the CFF
- Candidates made commitments about how they will spend the CFF
- Will MPs who were part of the debates hold to these commitments?
- Following MPs from constituencies that were and were not part of the debates
  - How active are they in parliament
  - How will they vote when the gender equity bill and transparency of the CFF come up for a vote?
  - How much of CFF spending can be verified through on site inspections?

# Conclusion

- Voters acquired significant political knowledge from watching the debates
  - Knowledge persisted through Election Day
  - Influenced their voting choices
- Debates have the potential to make political contests more competitive
- Information conveyed by debates is comprehensive
  - including charisma, professional qualifications and policy stances
  - this combination is the only approach that changes voting

**THANK YOU**