DEBATES
The Impact of Voter Knowledge Initiatives in Sierra Leone

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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

- **Ethnic composition**
  - Green: >30% Mende
  - Red: >30% Temne

- **Winning MP Party**
  - Red: APC
  - Green: PMDC
  - Black: SLPP
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

** = 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

** = 1%    * = 5%    + = 10%
Results: Type of Information

**General Political Knowledge**

- T1 - Debate: 0.20**
- T2 - Get to Know You: 0.09**
- T3 - Radio Summary: 0.16**

**Knowledge of Candidate Characteristics**

- T1 - Debate: 0.08**
- T2 - Get to Know You: 0.08**
- T3 - Radio Summary: 0.05**

**Knowledge of Candidate Policy Stances**

- T1 - Debate: 0.16**
- T2 - Get to Know You: 0.02
- T3 - Radio Summary: 0.12**
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