

DEBATES

The Impacts of Voter Knowledge Initiatives in Sierra Leone

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Voters are poorly informed about politics in Sierra Leone

Election Day (Nov 2012) exit polls in control villages reveal that:

- Only 28% of voters could name the two Parliamentary candidates
- 64% could not 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

Research question: can giving voters information about candidates and policy facilitate more informed voting and greater accountability?

Can debates be part of the solution?

- Search for Common Ground hosted debates between Parliamentary candidates in 14 of the 28 most closely contested constituencies
- Videos of the debates were screened in a “road show” in 112 of 224 randomly selected polling centers leading up to the Election
- Questions covered family background, development priorities, and key national and local policy issues



Pre-analysis plan publicly registered before the exit polls were completed

Domain A, Voters: Exposure to debates is 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

Domain B, Candidates: Does debate publicity complement or substitute for campaign spending?

Debates had strong positive effects on political knowledge

	Mean for controls	Treatment effect	Standard error	Units
General Political Knowledge				
<i>Mean effect across all outcomes</i>	0.00	0.30**	(0.05)	standard deviation units
Know amount of constituency facilitation fund	3.4%	14.1**	(1.82)	percentage points
Know MP job responsibilities	0.55	0.23**	(0.07)	additional roles
Knowledge of Candidate Characteristics				
<i>Mean effect across all outcomes</i>	0.00	0.25**	(0.03)	standard deviation units
Know which candidates have been an MP before	49.10%	11.3**	(3.26)	percentage points
Know which candidate is better educated	24.3%	16.2**	(4.40)	percentage points
Know the name of the APC party candidate	44.6%	16.9**	(3.31)	percentage points
Knowledge of Candidate Policy Stances				
<i>Mean effect across all outcomes</i>	0.00	0.29**	(0.04)	standard deviation units
Know SLPP candidate's first priority issue	14.2%	15.0**	(2.80)	percentage points
Know APC candidate's view of free healthcare	25.2%	19.8**	(3.51)	percentage points
Know PMDC candidate's view on gender equity	24.4%	21.2**	(5.26)	percentage points
Number of observations = 5,415 voters surveyed in exit polls; t-tests are onesided, as specified in our PAP				

Debates had strong positive effects on vote choices

	Mean for controls	Treatment effect	Standard error	Units
Policy Alignment				
<i>Mean effect across all outcomes</i>	0.00	0.11**	(0.04)	standard deviation units
Voter aligned with candidate's priority issue	42.5%	9.0**	(3.14)	percentage points
Voter aligned with candidate's healthcare view	39.4%	9.2**	(3.47)	percentage points
Votes for the Candidate who Performed Best in the Debate				
<i>Mean effect across all outcomes</i>	0.00	0.08*	(0.04)	standard deviation units
Votes for audience's debate winner	80.3%	4.7*	(2.15)	percentage points
Votes across Party Lines				
<i>Mean effect across all outcomes</i>	0.00	-0.02	(0.03)	standard deviation units
Voter Openness to / Likeability of Candidates				
<i>Mean effect across all outcomes</i>	0.00	0.09*	(0.05)	standard deviation units
Interest in Politics				
<i>Mean effect across all outcomes</i>	0.00	0.06*	(0.04)	standard deviation units
No impacts on Turnout or Perceived Legitimacy, both of which were very high for controls (98% and 92%)				
Number of observations = 5,415 voters surveyed in exit polls; t-tests are onesided, as specified in our PAP				

Domain B: Candidate Response

- Candidates increased their campaign efforts in communities where screenings were held
- Gift giving, the value of gifts, and community visits increased by 0.10** (0.04) standard deviation units across all candidates

Survey Priming Effects

- The survey experience accounts for roughly 1/3 of the total effect on general political knowledge, with the other 2/3 due to the debate
- Being surveyed does not affect knowledge of candidates characteristics, policy, alignment nor voting choices

Which aspects of the debates do voters respond to?

We used individual-level treatments to unpack the different types of information conveyed by the debates:

- Debate, viewed on tablet
- Get to know you video: Candidate personality only
- Radio report: Journalist summary of policy stances and professional qualifications only

Research question: how much do voters care about personality, charisma and physical appearance, as compared to “hard facts” about policy stances and professional qualifications?

Debate impacts combine both persona and policy effects

Mean Effect by Hypothesis	T1 - Debate	T2 - Get to Know You	T3 - Radio Summary	Comparisons (2 sided tests)
General Political Knowledge	0.20** (0.04)	0.09** (0.04)	0.16** (0.04)	T1 > T2 *
Knowledge of Candidate Characteristics	0.08** (0.02)	0.08** (0.02)	0.05** (0.02)	---
Knowledge of Candidate Policy Stances	0.16** (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.12** (0.02)	T1 > T2 ** T3 > T2 **
Policy Alignment	0.08** (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	
Votes for the Candidate who Performed Best	0.06+ (0.04)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	T1 > T3 +
Voter Turnout	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	
No differential effects for Votes across Party Lines, Openness, Perceived Legitimacy or Interest in Politics				

All 3 inform voters about candidates and general politics; debates and radio inform about policy; only debates impact vote choice and alignment

Conclusion

- Voters acquired significant political knowledge from watching the debates, knowledge that persisted through Election Day and influenced their voting choices
- Debates have the potential to make political contests more competitive, which is likely why candidates responded with increased campaign effort
- Information conveyed by debates is comprehensive - including charisma, professional qualifications and policy stances - and the combination of factors is more powerful than each in isolation