

The Impact of Information on Voter Knowledge and Engagement

Evidence from the 2012 Elections
in Sierra Leone



In brief

- *Search for Common Ground* (SFCG) produced debates covering local and national issues between two sitting MPs of the two main political parties, representing different constituencies in the same geographic district. The authors worked with SFCG to pilot the effect of debates on voter knowledge and engagement.
- Voter attendance was high and participants were visibly engaged. An analysis of pre- and post- surveys suggests that:
 - The percentage of voters able to name the MPs and parties of the MPs increased.
 - Basic political knowledge increased from an average of 3.3 to 4.4 correct out of 8 questions (in regard to MPs roles, local issues, and re-election plans)
 - Knowledge regarding policy stances of the MPs on four issues increased from 2.5 to 4.4 out of 8 questions.
- We will submit incumbent report cards to a sample of incumbent MPs and Local Councilors (LC) to the relevant nominating committees prior to the nomination process to analyze whether incumbents nomination rates are effected by report cards.
- An evaluation was conducted regarding parliamentary attendance and committee participation. Mean attendance is presence at 77 of 106 Parliament sittings and 57% attendance for committee meetings.
- A nationwide opinion poll was conducted in partnership with a major mobile network. The survey asked for opinions on sitting MPs, sitting LCs and political perceptions. Preliminary analysis suggests had that nearly half of respondents are dissatisfied with their MPs, with a slightly higher opinion of their LCs.

Pilot Debate Experience and Learning

“The pilot aimed to explore voter engagement, including ...the degree to which attendees absorbed and retained information about the candidates”

In mid-January, we worked with our NGO partner, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), to pilot the debates aspect of our research proposal. The pilot aimed to explore:

1. Voter engagement, including number of attendees, willingness to sit through a screening, the degree to which attendees absorbed and retained information about the candidates, and the representativeness of the audience sample.
2. The logistical feasibility of mobile video units, including cost, coverage and scalability.

As a quick overview of the pilot, SFCG hosted, filmed, and produced a debate covering local and national issues between two sitting Members of Parliament (one from each of the two main political parties, representing different constituencies in the same geographic district). An experienced SFCG moderator asked questions of the two participants in turn, allowing 2-3 minutes for a response. Questions were selected in advance by SFCG and their regional contacts, 3 to 4 from each theme: corruption, youth employment, and women’s rights. Importantly, they addressed both national and locally tailored policy issues. An example of a local issue was: “Kono is known for diamond mining around the world but the people complain that the district does not benefit commensurately in terms of uplifting their general development and welfare because of lack of transparency. Have you questioned their operations and how they contribute to the development of the district?” As an example of national issue, the moderator raised the current President’s initiative on free health care for children under 5 and lactating mothers, and asked how participants have sought to monitor implementation and help prevent eligible patients being asked for bribes. This initiative is a focus of considerable debate between the two main parties, with the opposition arguing that the policy is impractical. In the full implementation, questions will follow the same themes, with roughly one third relating to national issues and consistent across constituencies and two thirds focusing on local issues. This ratio reflects our pilot experience that participants had more well-defined and specific responses to local issues. The pilot also demonstrated:

1. The questions and interactive debate produced divergent policy positions by the MPs
2. The two MPs were enthusiastic about their participation: Hon. Torto concluded that he very much enjoyed speaking with Hon. Tondoneh on these important issues and that it will be helpful for his constituents to hear about his opinions and service record before the elections.

“The two MPs were enthusiastic about their participation”

SFCG then took the edited debate on a road show to two communities, one from each of the participating MPs’ home constituencies. IPA field teams helped coordinate audience recruitment and piloted the before/after screening surveys. The day prior to the screening, the IPA/SFCG field team spoke with community leaders to obtain the list of communities within the catchment area of the targeted polling center, and then visited these communities in person to publicize the screening. The 40 minute screenings were held just after sunset to enhance visibility of the video,

which was projected onto a large screen attached to the polling center building (a local court barrie or covered pavilion that is a public gathering space). Eight enumerators completed a 25 minute questionnaire with a selection of screening participants, each one interviewing one young man (18-35 years old), one young woman (18-35), one older man (35+) and one older woman (35+). Tracking down the same respondents after the screening for the follow-up survey was not difficult, with only 2 of 64 respondents replaced.

“Regarding voter engagement, attendance was high: roughly 150 adults attended the first screening, including nearly the entire population of the host village and 30 adults from surrounding villages”

Regarding voter engagement, attendance was high: roughly 150 adults attended the first screening, including nearly the entire population of the host village and 30 adults from surrounding villages, and 250 adults attended the second. Although there were somewhat more men than women present (perhaps 60-40) there were no cultural or practical barriers to women’s attendance. Participants were visibly engaged and enthusiastic, often cheering or booing the words of the politicians. Comparing the pre- and post-surveys suggests that attendees absorbed information relevant to voting, including:

- Name recognition: the percentage of respondents able to correctly give the name and party of the two participating MPs increased from 9% to 52%
- Basic political knowledge: mean scores on a quiz concerning MP roles, local issues and re-election plans increased from 3.3 to 4.4 correct out of 8 questions
- Policy stances: mean ability to correctly state each MP’s position on four issues increased from 2.5 to 4.4 out of 8.

Perhaps most striking is that respondents clearly identified a winner to the debate, and self- reported voting intentions shifted significantly toward that MP: 87% of respondents agreed that MP Tondoneh performed better overall during the debates, and his hypothetical vote share rose from 56% pre- to 79% post-debate screening. At the same time, the debate was not entirely damaging to the rival MP Torto as the overall 0-10 “likeability” ranking improved for *both* MPs: Torto’s mean score increased from 2.7 to 3.9, while Tondoneh’s increased from 4 to 7.6. (All results cited are significant at 95% confidence using paired t-tests.)

Incumbent Report Cards

In partnership with Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), we will submit incumbent report cards on a random sample of incumbent MPs and Local Councilors (LC) to the relevant nominating committees prior to the nomination process that begins in May 2012. The score cards will contain two types of information: objective performance data and public perception data. We will then analyze nomination results to compare overall nomination rates for incumbents on whom report cards were and were not sent, as well as relative nomination rates for incumbents who are performing well/poorly according to the performance and public opinion indicators included. The expected impact of providing this data to parties is complex: opinion poll data allows parties to align nomination decisions with voter preferences when information on these preferences is lacking, and objective performance information allows them to increase the quality of their nominees. Both functions serve to strengthen the long-term viability of the party.

In addition, the fear that performance records will be publicized and nominees face immediate criticism provides short-term incentive to select both the highest quality and most popular candidates. We will not be able to distinguish between these two mechanisms by which our report cards may influence selection.

Parliamentary Attendance Record Data

Our pilot activities evaluated a number of different potential performance measures and we decided to focus on attendance and committee participation. These measures have the following strengths:

- They are among the few indicators collected in official government records and thus not susceptible to charges of manipulation or errors by the research team.
- Attendance is a necessary first step toward fulfilling the politician's basic function of legislating and deciding policy.
- The importance of attendance is underscored by the Constitutional provision that excessive absence will lead to an MP being forced to vacate his/her seat.
- Attendance and committee participation are likely positively associated with effectiveness (or at minimum persistent absence is negatively correlated with efficacy).
- There is substantial variance across MPs in their attendance rates. In partnership with CGG, we have already collected data on attendance for the 106 sittings of Parliament plus committee meetings since November 2009. Mean attendance is presence at 77 of 106 sittings (or 73% with a SD of 15 sittings) and 57% for committee meetings (with a SD of 31 percentage points).

Opinion Poll Data

“We have also just completed a nationwide opinion poll in partnership with Airtel SL limited, a major private mobile network provider in Sierra Leone”

We have also just completed a nationwide opinion poll in partnership with Airtel SL limited, a major private mobile network provider in Sierra Leone. They gave us a directory of numbers selected from 100 tower location areas that we selected to provide the widest possible range of constituency coverage. From this directory, we selected approximately 75 numbers per tower with which to attempt contact. The survey consists of roughly 50 questions about basic demographic information, opinions on the sitting MP, opinions on the sitting LC, and general political perceptions. We succeeded in contacting 6595 people for phone surveys, and have sufficient representation in nearly all constituencies (roughly 105/112). Some preliminary analysis of the data shows that 48.5% of respondents say they are “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with their MPs; only 12.1% believed that their MP would not use any public funds for personal interest. While 61.6% of respondents said that their MP has visited the constituency at least once in the past year, only 37.1% of respondents wanted their MPs to be reelected. Respondents had a slightly higher opinion of their local councilors; just 41.2% were “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with their councilor, while 42.3% wanted their councilor to be reelected. We are currently cleaning and analyzing the data to produce a record of responses for individual constituencies. The questionnaire is included here as an annex.

While owners of mobile phones who we reach are a select subset of the population, we have included 3 questions in our phone survey that were collected in a recent nationally representative household survey. We will compare responses to questions regarding name recognition, views of spending efficacy and visits to the local area to ensure that our phone surveys produce an ordinal ranking of MPs that is roughly in line with national opinion. Data will be analyzed for each individual constituency on which we have sufficient data and combined with that from official records to produce a comprehensive report card on individual incumbent performance. To maximize expected power we are thus covering the entire population of MPs for which we have data (roughly 105) plus at least 200 LCs, and will use pairwise stratification on our performance measures for treatment assignment.

Annex: Opinion Poll Questionnaire

A. Background Information

1. Cell Phone Number: _____
2. Tower Location under which Cell Number is listed: _____
3. Participant ID #: _____
4. Date of Call: _____
5. Time of Call: _____
6. Did the respondent pick up? Y, N
7. [Reading of Consent Script] Did the participant give verbal consent to respond to the poll? Y, N
8. Does the person seem mentally capable to conduct the survey? Y, N
9. Respondent Age: _____
10. Are you a citizen of Sierra Leone? Y, N
11. Respondent Sex: _____
12. Respondent Mother Tongue (Ethnicity): [Lookup List]
13. Respondent Occupation: [Lookup List]
14. Respondent Education: [Lookup List]
15. Do you hold any leadership positions within the community? If so, please list.
[Lookup List]
16. In which district are you ordinarily resident? [Lookup List]
17. In which chiefdom and section are you ordinarily resident? [Lookup List]

B. Poll- Members of Parliament

1. To which party does your elected MP (Member of Parliament) belong?
 - a. APC
 - b. SLPP
 - c. PMDC
 - d. Independent
 - e. Don't Know
 - f. Other (Write in Response)
2. What is the name of your elected MP (Member of Parliament)?
 - a. [Name of Elected Official given location]
 - b. Don't Know
 - c. Other write in response
3. In the past year, have you talked with your MP (Member of Parliament) or participated in any meeting organized by your MP?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't Know
 - d. Prefer Not to Answer

4. In the past year, of how many times are you aware that your MP has visited your constituency?
 - a. 0
 - b. 1-2
 - c. 3-5
 - d. 6 or more
 - e. Don't know
 - f. Prefer Not to Answer

5. Do you know of any projects the MP is doing or has done?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer Not to Answer

6. Do you believe that your MP listens to what people in your area say and what they need?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't know
 - d. Prefer Not to Answer

7. If your MP was given 500million SLL to complete a project in this area, do you believe he or she would spend all the money doing a good job in the project or would he or she cut some of the money?
 - a. Would do a great job and spend all of the money
 - b. Would do a good job but cut a little money
 - c. Would do a bad job and cut most of the money
 - d. Would just take all of the money
 - e. Don't know
 - f. Prefer Not to Answer

8. Please rate how satisfied you are with the overall performance of your current MP.
 - a. Very Dissatisfied
 - b. Dissatisfied
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Satisfied
 - e. Very Satisfied
 - f. Don't Know
 - g. Prefer Not to Answer

9. Would you like the current MP to remain in power?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. No preference
 - d. Don't know

e. Prefer not to Answer

10. Would you be more likely to support [current party] in the upcoming Parliamentary elections if a different candidate than the current MP was given the symbol?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't know
 - d. Prefer Not to Answer
11. Are you aware of any people in your community from [current party] who plan to challenge the MP for the [current party] symbol?
- a. No
 - b. Yes
 - c. Prefer Not to Answer
12. Are you aware of any people in your community from [opposition party] who plan to vie for the [opposition party] symbol?
- a. No
 - b. Yes
 - c. Prefer Not to Answer

C. Local Councilors

1. To which party does your elected Local Councilor belong?
- a. APC
 - b. SLPP
 - c. PMDC
 - d. Independent
 - e. Don't Know
2. What is the name of your elected Local Councilor?
- a. [Name of Elected Official given location]
 - b. Don't Know
3. In the past year, have you talked with your Local Councilor or participated in any meeting organized by your Local Councilor?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't Know
 - d. Prefer not to Answer
4. Is your Local Councilor usually living in your chiefdom?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't Know
 - d. Prefer Not to Answer
5. Do you know of any projects the Local Councilor is doing or has done?

- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer Not to Answer
6. Do you believe that your Local Councilor listens to what people in your area say and what they need?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't know
 - d. Prefer not to Answer
7. If your Local Councilor was given 500million SLL to complete a project in this area, do you believe he or she would spend all the money doing a good job in the project or would he or she cut some of the money?
- a. Would do a great job and spend all of the money
 - b. Would do a good job but cut a little money
 - c. Would do a bad job and cut most of the money
 - d. Would just take all of the money
 - e. Don't know
 - f. Prefer Not to Answer
8. Please rate how satisfied you are with the overall performance of your current Local Councilor.
- a. Very Dissatisfied
 - b. Dissatisfied
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Satisfied
 - e. Very Satisfied
 - f. Don't know
 - g. Prefer Not to answer
9. Would you like the current Local Councilor to remain in power?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. No preference
 - d. Don't know
 - e. Prefer Not to Answer
10. Would you be more likely to support [current party] in the upcoming Local Council elections if a different candidate than the current Local Councilor was given the symbol?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't know
11. Are you aware of any people in your community from [current party] who plan to challenge the Local Councilor for the [current party] symbol?
- a. No
 - b. Yes
 - c. Prefer Not to Answer

12. Are you aware of any people in your community from [opposition party] who plan to vie for the [opposition party] symbol for Local Councilor?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes
 - c. Prefer Not to Answer

13. Have you heard about the Ward development committees?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer not to answer

14. Have you personally talked with a member of the Ward Development Committee or participated in a meeting organized by the Ward Development Committee in the past year?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer not to answer

15. How many times are you aware that your Ward Development Committee has held a meeting in your community in the past year?
 - a. 0
 - b. 1-2
 - c. 3-5
 - d. 6-12
 - e. More than 12
 - f. Don't know
 - g. Prefer Not to Answer

D. General Voter Preference

1. In general, would you prefer a male or female candidate?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. No Preference
 - d. Don't Know
 - e. Prefer not to Answer

2. In general, would you prefer an older or younger candidate?
 - a. Older
 - b. Younger
 - c. No Preference
 - d. Don't Know
 - e. Prefer Not to Answer

3. Did you vote in the previous Parliamentary elections?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

- c. Prefer not to answer
4. Which political party did you support in the previous Parliamentary elections?
 - a. APC
 - b. SLPP
 - c. PMDC
 - d. Independent Candidate
 - e. Other
 - f. Don't know
 - g. Prefer Not to Answer

 5. Did you vote in the previous Local Council elections?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer Not to Answer

 6. Which political party did you support in the previous Local Council elections?
 - a. APC
 - b. SLPP
 - c. PMDC
 - d. Independent Candidate
 - e. Other
 - f. Don't know
 - g. Prefer not to answer

 7. I am going to read a list of options which describe your support of political parties. Please select the option which best describes you.
 - a. Strong APC supporter- Will definitely support APC in the upcoming elections
 - b. Moderate APC supporter- Will probably support APC in the upcoming elections, but would consider supporting an independent candidate or someone from a different party.
 - c. Strong SLPP supporter- Will definitely support SLPP in the upcoming elections
 - d. Moderate SLPP supporter- Will probably support SLPP in the upcoming elections, but would consider supporting an independent candidate or someone from a different party.
 - e. Strong PMDC supporter- Will definitely support PMDC in the upcoming elections
 - f. Moderate PMDC supporter- Will probably support PMDC in the upcoming elections, but would consider supporting an independent candidate or someone from a different party.
 - g. Independent or Undecided- Don't yet know which party or candidate I will support in the upcoming elections
 - h. Other
 - i. Prefer Not to Answer

About the authors

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