Using Deliberative Electoral Strategies to Overcome Clientelism in Benin

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Sector(s): Political Economy and Governance

Sample: 150 villages

Target group: Voters

Outcome of interest: Electoral participation

Intervention type: Community participation Community monitoring

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Partner organization(s): Institute of Empirical Research in Political Economy (IERPE), International Development Research Center (IDRC)

Town hall meetings in Benin reduced the ability of the most popular presidential candidate in that village to garner political support using clientelist tactics, and still appear to be effective for motivating people to attend the polls.

Policy issue

Politicians often promise to redistribute resources to local constituencies in order to win their votes, even when nationwide programs could be more effective for a country's development. "Clientelism," or transactions between politicians and select citizens in which material favors are offered in return for support at the polls, also reduces political competition as incumbent politicians can use the promise of special benefits to gain an advantage over challengers. In one of the most common forms of clientelism, national candidates grant money or government jobs to intermediaries, such as local political figures, in exchange for their help in securing votes.

Despite clientelism's potentially negative effects on development, previous studies have shown that clientelist political strategies are more effective at attracting voters than political campaigns that promise to deliver national public goods. Clientelist practices are thought to be a reflection of ethnically-driven politics which are common in new democracies where politicians and parties have not interacted long enough with voters to make promises of broad public good provision credible. Campaign strategies that increase the credibility of electoral promises may offer an alternative to clientelism that still garners strong public support. Similarly, if new strategies allow candidates to deliver their messages directly to voters, they will no longer need to provide special favors to intermediaries in exchange for mobilizing local support.

Context of the evaluation

Benin is considered one of the most successful cases of democratization in Africa. In 1990, the country's authoritarian regime collapsed after 18 years in power. A new constitution established a multiparty parliamentary system with one legislative assembly and a president elected by popular vote for up to two five-year terms.[1] To be elected president, a candidate must win more than

50 percent of the national vote. If no candidate wins a majority, a second round election is held between the two leading candidates to determine a victor.

In 2011, more than two decades after democratization, Benin ranked 31st in Africa in human development and 18th in economic governance, and attracted far less foreign investment than neighboring countries. The country's lack of economic progress may be due to its extremely clientelist political system, whose parties have been noted for the absence of any coherent programs or ideologies in their political platforms. Instead, they have been accused of relying on clientelist tactics to win supporters. In the lead-up to the 2011 election, an estimated $45 million was spent on gifts and payments, which were likely used to buy votes and grant favors.



Community members participate in a town hall.

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Details of the intervention

Researchers tested how the introduction of town hall meetings that provided information about political platforms and allowed attendees to debate proposals and give feedback affected the voting behavior and preferences of villagers. Separate studies were conducted during the first rounds of the 2006 and 2011 presidential elections. Conferences were held before each election to bring together candidates, academics, and other experts to develop policy recommendations to address Benin's most pressing challenges and build trust between the research team and candidates.

2006 Election: Three candidates for the presidency participated in the 2006 study. Candidates selected the districts (communes) in which they wanted to implement the town hall meetings, although no two candidates were allowed to hold meetings in the same district. Within each district, villages were randomly assigned to either receive the town hall meetings or to serve as a comparison.

In the villages selected to receive the town hall meetings, research staff gave a speech that outlined specific, nationwide policy proposals developed in the conference and allowed the 50 to 200 participants to openly debate the issues. Meetings were held twice a week for the three weeks leading up to the election, and 70 percent of the population in treated villages attended at least one meeting. Candidates were prohibited from distributing cash or gifts at the meetings.

In comparison villages, typical campaign events were carried out by party intermediaries. These events included rallies, where local political figures made predominantly targeted or clientelist electoral promises and distributed cash and gifts to supporters.

2011 Election: Three candidates for the presidency participated in the 2011 study. Thirty districts were randomly selected to participate in the study, and five villages were randomly selected from each district, with two chosen to receive town hall meetings and three to serve as a comparison. The town hall meetings were similar to those held in 2006, except that only two meetings were held in each village before the 2011 election. Typical rallies and cash handouts occurred in comparison villages.

Researchers used official election results to collect data on registration, voter turnout, and votes cast. They also conducted a survey after the 2006 election relating to voter behavior, attitudes, and beliefs, and conducted surveys before and after the 2011 election which collected demographic information, attendance at town hall meetings, and data on voter behavior and civic education.

Results and policy lessons

Voting Turnout: In 2006 voter turnout in villages that had town hall meetings was about as high as in villages with typical campaign rallies. In 2011, voter turnout in villages with town hall meetings organized by a candidate of the opposition coalition was 4.8 percentage points higher (from a base of 87.8 percent) than in comparison villages, representing an increase of 5.5 percent. Similarly, individuals living in villages where town hall meetings were held were about four percentage points more likely to vote than those who did not. The results showed that town hall meetings that provided information on candidates' platforms directly to voters were still effective at motivating voters to attend the polls.

Voting Behavior: In 2006, the dominant candidate (the top vote-getter) in villages with town hall meetings received a smaller share of the total votes as compared to the dominant candidates in villages with typical campaign rallies. Candidates that organized the town hall meetings saw a 13 percentage point reduction in their share of the vote when they were the dominant candidate in the village, but they increased their share by 17 percentage points when conducting town hall meetings in villages where they were not the leading candidate. This suggests that increased information and the opportunity to debate and give feedback on policies reduced the ability of the dominant candidate to garner support using clientelist tactics, and that information-based political strategies such as town hall meetings may be more effective than clientelism in areas outside of a candidate's stronghold.

In 2011, having a town hall meeting in a village did not have a significant effect on voting outcomes, but individuals who attended a meeting were 16 percentage points more likely to vote for the candidate that organized the meeting than those that did not attend.

1. Wantchekon, Leonard and Thomas Fujiwara. 2013. "Can Informed Public Deliberation Overcome Clientelism? Experimental Evidence from Benin." American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, Forthcoming. 2. Wanchekon, Leonard. 2011. "Deliberative Campaigns and Election Outcomes: Evidence from a Field Experiment." Working Paper, December 2011.

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1. "The World Factbook: Benin," Central Intelligence Agency, accessed April 25, 2013, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bn.html.