The Effect of Information on Politician Selection in Sierra Leone

Researchers:

Katherine Casey

Abou Bakarr Kamara

Sector(s): Political Economy and Governance

Fieldwork: Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)

Location: Sierra Leone

Sample: 92 party-races

Initiative(s): Governance Initiative (GI)

AEA RCT registration number: 2485

Dados: openICPSR

Partner organization(s): Political Parties Registration Commission of Sierra Leone (PPRC), The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), National Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone, All People's Congress Party (APC), Search for Common Ground (SFCG), International Growth Center (IGC), Economic Development and Institutions Initiative

Despite large investments in elections globally, questions remain about whether officials are truly representing their constituents. Researchers partnered with the two major political parties in Sierra Leone and conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of providing reliable information on potential candidates' qualifications and sharing voter preferences with party officials during Parliamentary elections. More democratic selection procedures increased the likelihood that parties chose the candidate most preferred by voters by 23.9 percentage points, and favored candidates who had a stronger record of providing public goods.

Policy issue

Elections are large public investments. For example, the United Nations Development Program, the largest international donor in the electoral space, spent over three billion dollars in support of elections in low income countries over the past 15 years (UNDP 2019). Whether these investments result in representative and competent elected politicians depends on how candidates are selected.

The vast majority of democracies rely on party officials to appoint or nominate candidates. While party leaders may be better informed about candidate qualifications, they may value traits - such as party loyalty or willingness to pay for the nomination - which are at odds with what citizens value most or are unrelated to performance in office. However, voters may not have the information they need to identify the best candidate. There is limited evidence about how countries resolve these tradeoffs between poorly informed citizens and more informed officials who may value different traits in candidates, since political leaders are typically reluctant to vary how they choose candidates. Are voters or party officials better positioned to select candidates? Could a more democratic primary selection process, one that provides reliable information to voters on aspirant qualifications and seeks input from these voters, lead to the election of more representative political leaders with strong qualifications and performance?

Context of the evaluation

Sierra Leone's Parliament is comprised of 132 constituencies, each of which elects one Member of Parliament (MP) to represent approximately 40,000 local residents in the national government. Voting patterns tend to reflect historic relationships between ethnic groups and the two major political parties—the All People's Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP).

While the APC and SLPP differ in how they select candidates to compete in the general election, they are similar in that ordinary party members, and the voting public more generally, do not directly participate or formally vote in either party's primary selection process.

Previous research suggests that elected MPs underperform. For example, in one study, that examined MP spending, only 36 percent of discretionary public funds controlled by MPs could be verified as being spent on projects to develop their constituency. [1] Additionally, MPs on average made only four public statements during more than 50 sittings of Parliament, and held only one meeting with their constituents during their first year in office.

Voters, party officials, and potential candidates exhibited different levels of education and wealth. Voters in this study had on average completed five years of education, 43 percent of them had no formal schooling, and only four percent had been to university. Potential candidates, by contrast, had completed over 15 years of education on average, none lacked formal schooling, and 80 percent had been to university. Party officials sit in between the two, with 12 years of education on average, five percent without schooling, and 34 percent with some university. In terms of wealth, voters owned fewer assets, and were much less likely to have a formal bank account than party officials or potential aspirants. Elections are male-dominated: 80 percent of party officials and 90 percent of aspirants were male, compared to 47 percent of registered voters.



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Details of the intervention

Researchers partnered with Sierra Leone's two major political parties and conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of greater citizen voice and informative debates between aspirants during primary party conventions on the quality of elected leaders. Of the 132 MP constituencies in the country, 46 were randomly assigned to one of two groups.

- *Comparison:* Status quo; Parties chose among potential candidates in a given constituency through recommendations from party officials, with no direct input from voters.
- *Party Convention and Voter Report:* The intervention contained two components: 1) During a local party convention, aspiring candidates presented their qualifications and debated each other on policy issues in front of an audience of party officials, party members, and local residents. These town-hall style debates were moderated by Search for Common Ground (SFCG), a trusted nonpartisan media presence in the country, and broadcasted on independent local radio stations over subsequent days. 2) A few days after the convention, the research team polled registered voters on which potential candidate they would like the party to select to run in the general election and shared this information in a one-page report with party leadership. Ultimately, though, the party leadership decided who to select as the candidate and was not bound by voter preferences.

Researchers conducted detailed in-person interviews with potential candidates and collected data from voters and party officials in both intervention and comparison races to measure the effects of the new selection method on key outcomes, including representation, quality of elected officials, and financial contributions by candidates to parties.

Results and policy lessons

Having party conventions and voter reports improved voter representation, led to the selection of candidates with stronger records of providing public goods, and had no effect on average contributions that candidates made to political parties.

Representation:

The party convention and voter report intervention increased the rate at which party officials selected the voters' first choice aspirant by 23.9 percentage points, a 61 percent increase in representation from a base of 39.1 percent in the status quo group. This suggests that parties responded to the information provided via the conventions and voter reports by picking a different candidate than they would have otherwise for 11 races. However, this effect was concentrated in safe and weak seats, where competition in the general elections was expected to be low.

Both voters and party officials preferred candidates who exhibit conscientiousness (measured by a behavioral indicator of how carefully they handled a financial reimbursement) and who had a strong record of providing local public goods, such as road or classroom construction. However, under the status quo, party officials frequently failed to select the most locally popular candidates. Ninety percent of local party officials believed that voters shared their first choice of candidates, when in reality preferences were only a match in 56 percent of cases.

Given high communication and transport costs, along with the lack of large-scale polling technology available in Sierra Leone, party officials seemed to be mainly constrained by a lack of information about voter preferences.

Selection on quality:

To determine whether the documented increase in representation helped parties choose higher quality candidates, researchers compared the characteristics of candidates ultimately sent to the general election across intervention race and status quo races. Candidates selected via the more democratic primary process on average had been involved in providing 24 percent more local public goods or other development projects in the previous three years compared to candidates selected via in the status quo process.

These results were likely due to voters learning about potential candidates through the party conventions and radio broadcasts; voter knowledge of aspirant qualifications in the intervention group increased by 42 percent on average compared to status quo races.

Financial contributions aspirants make to the party:

Financial contributions to secure the nomination were unlikely to explain differences between voter preferences and selected candidates. The results suggest that party leaders did not select the candidate who made the largest financial contribution, and there is no evidence that candidates bought off party officials to deviate from the voter reports.

The results of this study suggest that the status quo method of delegating candidate selection to party officials distorts choices away from voter preferences and that the primary selection stage plays an important role in providing valuable information; voters learn about candidate qualifications while party officials learn about voter preferences and respond by selecting different candidates. Since many subnational races occur in strongholds, where the local dominant party's candidate is chosen based on ethnic ties, the process of internal party selection is particularly important. Overall, more democratic selection methods can create value for voters by enhancing representation without sacrificing the expected performance of selected candidates.

Casey, Katherine, Abou Bakarr Kamara, Niccoló Meriggi. "An Experiment in Candidate Selection." Working Paper, January 2020.

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1. Bidwell, Kelly, Katherine Casey, and Rachel Glennerster. "Debates: Voting and Expenditure Responses to Political Communication." Stanford GSB Working Paper No. 3066, May 2018.