Using Mobile Phones to Connect Politicians and Voters in Pakistan

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Sector(s): Political Economy and Governance

Location: Pakistan

Sample: 14,000 households

Initiative(s): Governance Initiative (GI)

Target group: Voters

Outcome of interest: Citizen satisfaction Electoral participation

Intervention type: Digital and mobile Information

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0002278

Partner organization(s): Peace and Justice Network Pakistan, VOTO Mobile

The presence of elections alone does not always mean that politicians are held accountable for their actions. Voters may lack information about politicians' actions, and politicians may lack information about voters' preferences. In Pakistan, researchers are evaluating the impact of using mobile phones to directly connect politicians with voters and give voters the opportunity to provide real-time feedback to their elected representatives.

Policy issue

The presence of elections alone does not always mean that politicians are held accountable for their actions.

In order to make informed choices, voters need not only accurate information about elected officials' performance, but also clear ideas about performance standards, the means and will to hold politicians accountable, and the belief that other voters will do so as well. Politicians, too, need access to real-time information about voters' preferences, and the ability to respond to those preferences in a timely fashion.

This problem is known in governance literature as "information asymmetry," and has been shown to lead to corruption in elected officials, waste and leakages in budget expenditures, and poor service delivery.[1],

In places with little opportunity for direct communication between voters and policymakers, the risk of information asymmetry is high, and the potential of elections to promote accountability is limited. How, then, can channels of communication be established to respond to both voters' and politicians' interests?

Context of the evaluation

The province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, is home to nearly 30 million people and is one of the least-developed provinces in Pakistan. Located in the northwest of the country, the province is home to 13 percent of Pakistan's population. In

2013, 83 percent of the population was rural, and 51 percent was illiterate.[2],

The provincial government, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly, is composed of 124 elected members. The Assembly is responsible for local legislation and managing the province's public budget. In 2013 and 2018, representatives from seven political parties were elected.

In Pakistan, mobile technology is widespread. 139 million Pakistanis were subscribed to a cellular service plan in March 2017, equivalent to 71 percent of the population.[3] This makes mobile technology a practical venue for connecting with Pakistani citizens. In a pilot project that preceded this study, 70 percent of households answered their mobile phone within two attempts to reach them.



A surveyor interviews a study participant.

Photo Credit: M. Golden

Details of the intervention

In partnership with Peace and Justice Network, a local civil society organization, and VOTO Mobile, a technology social enterprise, researchers are working with members of the Provincial Assembly to record voice messages to be delivered directly to citizens through automated mobile phone calls using interactive voice response (IVR). Households will be randomly assigned to participate in the following treatment groups:

Stage 1:

- Credit-claiming: Households receive a phone call with an automated message in which their local elected official acknowledges his or her role in a policy achievement.
- Credit-claiming + Survey: Same as above, with the addition of survey questions at the end of the message that recipients can respond to using their phone's keypad. The questions will ask recipients' opinions of upcoming decisions their elected official faces.

- No call: A comparison group will not receive any phone call.

The first-stage variation of calls is designed to enable researchers to identify the effects of any contact between citizens and politicians, and to compare those effects with effects of contact that engages citizens and provides them with voice. Following implementation of the first stage, researchers will relay information to elected officials of the aggregated results of the IVR responses by citizens.

Stage 2:

- Responsive feedback: Households receive a phone call with an automated message in which their elected official mentions the feedback received from citizens in Stage 1 and states his or her expected activities in response to that feedback.
- Generic feedback: Households receive a phone call with an automated message in which their elected official outlines his or her expected activities, with no mention of feedback from Stage 1.
- No call: A comparison group will not receive any phone call.

This second-stage variation of calls is designed to enable researchers to identify the effects of repeated contact with elected officials, and the effects of being heard and directly responded to.

Researchers will conduct household surveys before and after the calls take place, and will collect data from the July 2018 legislative elections. Researchers will examine whether being contacted by a legislator increases citizens' sense of efficacy, political attitudes, and subsequent participation in elections; and how citizen participation through expressing preferences affects politicians' behavior and government service delivery.

The results from this project have the potential to inform how politicians in Pakistan engage effectively with their constituents and how civil society organizations can promote low-cost accountability systems.

Results and policy lessons

Research is ongoing; results forthcoming.

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1. Bandiera, Oriana, Andrea Prat, and Tommaso Valletti. 2009. "Active and passive waste in government spending: Evidence from a policy experiment."*American Economic Review*99, no 4, 1278-1308; Chaudhury, Nazmul et al. 2006. "Missing in action: Teacher and health worker absence in developing countries,"*The Journal of Economic Perspectives*20, no. 1, 91-116; Ferraz, Claudio and Frederico Finan. 2011. "Electoral accountability and corruption: Evidence from the audits of local governments."*American Economic Review*101, no. 4, 1274-1311; Reinikka, Ritva and Jakob Svensson. 2004. "Local capture: Evidence from a central government transfer program in Uganda."*The Quarterly Journal of Economics*119, no. 2, 679-705.

2. World Bank. 2013. "Pakistan – Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Public Expenditure Review." Washington, DC. *https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/16034*.

3. Pakistan Telecommunications Authority. March 2017. Annual Cellular Subscribers, Total. http://urdu.pta.gov.pk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=269&Itemid=658.