Testing Legislator Responsiveness to Citizens and Firms in the Vietnamese National Assembly

Sector(s): Political Economy and Governance

Location: Vietnam

Sample: 470 National Assembly of Vietnam delegates

Initiative(s): Governance Initiative (GI)

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Research Papers: Testing Legislator Responsiveness to Citizens and Firms in Single-Party Regimes..., Experimentally Estimating Safety in Numbers in a Single-Party Legislature

Partner organization(s): Mekong Development Research Institute, Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Responsive governments have the ability to make laws and decisions that reflect their constituents' preferences. However, legislators may lack necessary information about constituents' opinions and may therefore be unable to meet their demands. Researchers measured whether providing targeted information about citizens' and firms' preferences to members of the Vietnamese National Assembly (VNA) increased legislators' responsiveness. VNA delegates who received information about their citizens' preferences were more prepared and likely to speak in debates; however, delegates did not appear to be responsive to information about local firms' preferences. In addition, delegates grew more responsive as other delegates received the same information.

Policy issue

Responsive governments are key to making laws and decisions that reflect their constituents' preferences and address their key concerns. Strengthening government responsiveness might be particularly challenging in authoritarian settings, where the desires of regime leaders typically prevail over constituents' interests. Despite limited electoral competition, governments in these settings might still be responsive to their constituents if civil servants are public spirited or if other government actors impose checks and balances on the legislature (for example, when local politicians are accountable to central politicians). Even in such cases, however, governments must first possess information about their constituents' preferences in order to act upon them. How can information about constituency preferences influence government responsiveness in an authoritarian context?

Context of the evaluation

The National Assembly of Vietnam (VNA) is the country's main national law-making body. The VNA's approximately 500 district-elected delegates serve five-year terms and convene biannually to consider draft legislation, which is generally introduced by ministries of the executive branch. While individual delegates cannot introduce new legislation, delegates can propose changes and critique bills during VNA meetings. Prior to debates, delegates have the opportunity to meet other delegates from different provinces in private caucuses to consolidate viewpoints, determine local priorities, and organize speaking opportunities for the debates themselves. While campaigning and opposition parties are forbidden, voters can select their representatives among the candidates nominated either by the central party or by local party representatives. In this study context, many legislators

expressed their interest in receiving information about their constituents' preferences and acting upon them.

Researchers in this study evaluated legislator responsiveness to constituent preferences about a proposed Vietnamese Law on Education (VLoE), which was debated by the legislative branch in May 2018. The VLoE addresses all aspects of the educational system from preschool through vocational and continuing education, affecting families as well as the business community.

Details of the intervention

In partnership with the Mekong Development Research Institute, the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Institute of Public Policy and Management (IPPM) within the National Economic University, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of targeted information about citizens and firms' preferences on legislator responsiveness.

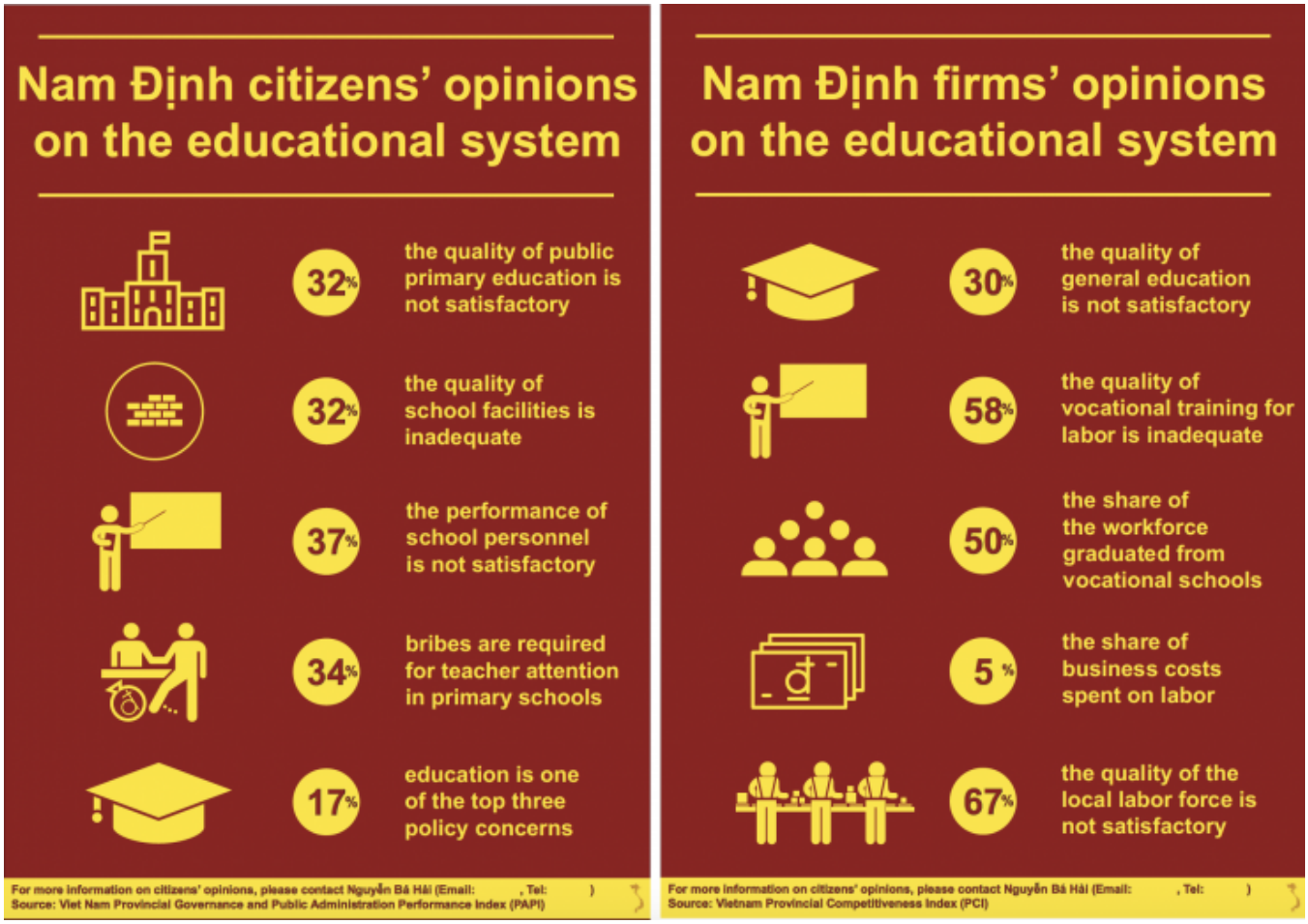
Researchers randomly assigned 470 VNA delegates to one of three groups. Two of these groups received printed infographics from the IPPM, an official government-funded research institute:

- *Party goals (comparison group):* Delegates received pre-existing information on the Vietnamese Communist Party goals for education policy.
- *Party goals + citizens' opinions infographic*: In addition to party circulars, delegates received an infographic that summarized citizens' opinions on the domestic educational system in their province.
- *Party goals + firms' opinions infographic*: In addition to party circulars, delegates received an infographic that summarized firms' opinions on the domestic educational system in their province.

IPPM shared these infographics by mail in May 2018, prior to the delegates' VNA meetings and floor debate on the new proposed law. To create the infographics, researchers collected citizens' and firms' opinions on education factors, such as infrastructure, personnel, and financial transparency, from annual nationwide surveys conducted by the Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) and the Vietnam Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI). The infographics tended to show that a large proportion of citizens and firms were dissatisfied with the quality of education in their province and were seeking policy improvements. In addition, the infographics made indirect reference to specific articles of the VLoE scheduled for debate in June 2018.

Researchers also randomly varied the proportion of delegates within each province that were exposed to either of the opinion infographics. This allowed researchers to determine whether delegates who received an opinion infographic shared this information with other delegates in the comparison group, as well as whether the effects of the opinion infographic were stronger when a higher share of delegates received them.

Researchers used surveys and debate transcripts to measure delegates' debate preparedness and participation. Researchers assessed whether delegates increased their responsiveness by measuring their willingness to speak in caucuses, debate floors, and query sessions with the Education minister, as well as the content of their speeches.



Sample infographics for citizens and firms.

Results and policy lessons

Researchers found that legislators who received information about their citizens' preferences were more prepared and likely to speak in debates. However, delegates were not more responsive when they received information about firms' preferences. In addition, delegates grew more responsive when other delegates in their province also received the same information. However, there is little evidence of delegates in the comparison group increasing their responsiveness when more of their peers received the infographics.

Debate preparedness: Delegates who had received information about citizens' preferences were 22.8 percentage points more likely to say they were prepared to debate, relative to the comparison group (a 47 percent increase relative to the comparison group). Conversely, delegates who received an infographic on local firms were no more likely to be prepared to debate than delegates who received no additional infographics on firms. In addition, researchers found that delegates who received an infographic on citizens' preferences were increasingly better prepared as the number of peers possessing the same information rose.

Debate participation: Delegates who received an infographic about citizen's preferences were between 10 and 14 percentage points more likely to speak in group caucuses, query sessions, or floor debates (between 25 and 45 percent increase relative to the comparison group). Again, delegates who received infographics on local firms were no more likely to speak across any of these settings. In addition, researchers found that delegates who received an infographic on citizens' preferences were increasingly more likely to speak in floor debates as the number of peers possessing the same information rose.

Content of speeches: Delegates who received the citizen infographics were 6.3 percentage points more likely to mention their home province and more likely to use words derived from the document in their remarks (e.g. “school fees”, “training quality”), which shows their interest in the information provided. Conversely, they appeared less likely to use words related to the administrative and organizational features of the VLoE (e.g. “school boards”, “ranking”). Delegates who were provided infographics on firms’ preferences appeared less than half as likely to use words from the infographics than those exposed to information on citizens’ preference.

Overall, these results suggest that legislative bodies – even in authoritarian settings – can respond to the preferences of citizens when they are given information about their opinions. This effect was stronger when the information was shared among other delegates.

Researchers are conducting a follow-up evaluation related to the new Vietnam Labor Code to further identify the reasons why delegates appear to be responsive to the information provided to them.

Todd, Jason Douglas, Edmund J. Malesky, Anh Tran, and Anh Le. “Testing Legislator Responsiveness to Citizens and Firms in Single-Party Regimes: A Field Experiment in the Vietnamese National Assembly,” *The Journal of Politics* (forthcoming, 2021).

Malesky, Edmund J., Jason Douglas Todd. “Experimentally Estimating Safety in Numbers in a Single-Party Legislature,” Working paper, 2020.