

GI Updated Research Agenda

Introduction

The Governance Initiative research agenda is summarized by the [Review Paper \(Executive Summary\)](#), which outlines open questions in political economy and governance across three thematic areas: political participation, corruption and leakages, and state capacity. Applicants to GI's Requests for Proposals are asked to demonstrate how their research will respond to open questions in the Review Paper—which GI periodically updates to include new studies and to reflect how the field is evolving.¹

GI currently sees two major trends reshaping governance and hence the direction of frontier research. First, digital technologies and social media are changing both how governments deliver services and how citizens access information, form political preferences (sometimes polarized ones), and organize collective action. GI's 2020 revision of the Review Paper incorporated initial insights on this issue. Second, and relatedly, the rise of electoral autocracies brings new relevance to the study of political rights and democratic institutions, including the media and the judiciary. Together, these trends suggest a need for research on institutional and informational interventions that can support civil society, civic freedoms, political empowerment of women and marginalized groups, open government, democratic governance, digital democracy, and media freedom.

The core research questions that animate the Governance Initiative can also shed light on other pressing policy concerns, from mitigating and adapting to climate change to ensuring that women are able to make their voices heard politically. What defines the quality of policy implementation is an important cross-cutting theme. Within GI's framework, GI will give particular consideration to high-quality research proposals that respond to these and other international development policy priorities.

Below is a snapshot of the open questions in the Governance Initiative Review Paper, highlighting how they can shed light on these priority policy issues.

Increasing citizen participation, political empowerment, & accountability

Over the last 13 years, GI has funded research on an evolving set of questions on political participation, furnishing evidence on the impact of providing voters with better information about politicians on electoral accountability, ways of strengthening the representation of women and underrepresented groups in politics, and the impact of civil society monitoring on government service provision. In recent years, this research has also touched on providing politicians with better information on voter preferences, encouraging high-quality politicians to run for office, and understanding the incentives of media institutions to supply political information. Increasingly, research supported by GI has explored the spread of information through networks, both online and offline, including the role of social media in quickly spreading information and misinformation and organizing political participation.

¹ In 2020, the Review Paper was updated to include new content on social networks, decentralization, and state capacity, reflecting research gaps in these areas.

These lines of inquiry—on the institutions that inform citizens, aggregate their preferences, and translate these preferences into policy outcomes—are relevant to pressing challenges today: many countries around the world are experiencing democratic backsliding: the erosion of political rights and civil liberties, even as countries may continue to hold elections. Research on these questions, as well as on the media and the judiciary, can offer key insights to ensure that citizens’ voices are heard. Equally relevant is research on identifying and removing barriers to women’s political participation, including by expanding women’s social networks outside their households and challenging norms that constrain women’s political participation. Finally, research on political economy and governance is key to unlocking progress on climate change, by shedding light on the incentives faced by politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens.

Applicants are invited to refer to the full set of research questions included in the Review Paper; illustrative research questions include:

Institutional design

- What is the impact of different institutional arrangements in influencing the political voice afforded to different citizen groups, and what are their implications for policy outcomes?
- What interventions are effective in countering vote-buying and voter intimidation, and what are the strategic responses of political actors to these initiatives?

Voter information & preference formation

- What are the best ways to inform voters to elicit a change in their behavior or attitudes toward corruption, gender, ethnicity, or politician under-performance?
- What is the influence of technology and social media on citizens’ political participation, electoral outcomes, and ability to monitor the government?
- What are the most effective strategies to minimize the spread and impacts of misinformation in low- and middle-income countries?
- What factors drive ideological and affective polarization? How does polarization shape how citizens form political beliefs, evaluate the performance of politicians, and hold government officials accountable? What interventions are effective in countering it? Does polarization of citizens’ political preferences lead to affective polarization on climate change?

Politician selection & incentives

- How can more committed or qualified candidates be encouraged to stand for elections?
- How can the incentives of politicians and civil servants be aligned in favor of climate change policies?

Political participation of marginalized groups

- Through what channels do beliefs, institutions, or policies drive gender exclusion in the political and policy process? How do norms, as informal institutions, shape and constrain women’s political participation?

- If the right to vote is necessary but not sufficient to ensure that marginalized groups' preferences are translated into policy, what policies and institutional arrangements can bring marginalized groups into the political process?
- How does improving the political women's representation of women and marginalized groups in politics affect service provision, citizen outcomes, and beliefs and aspirations regarding women's participation?

Tackling corruption & reducing leakages

Corruption, leakages, and inefficient program delivery can compromise the effectiveness of governments' development efforts. GI-funded researchers have made progress in identifying effective strategies to tackle corruption and to mitigate its impacts, including by modifying the incentive structures faced by bureaucrats, using technology to ensure that certain procedures are followed, and making government actions more transparent. However, there is a need for additional research, particularly given the cross-cutting nature of corruption, which spans politicians' malfeasance in office or during elections, frontline workers' shirking or absenteeism, and bureaucrats' acceptance of bribes. In addition, there remains scope for dedicated research to improve the measurement of corruption directly, rather than relying on biased perceptions, and assessing the welfare impacts of corruption empirically. Studies in all of the thematic areas outlined in this document—from those on reducing vote-buying to studies on increasing revenues raised by tax collectors—may also measure corruption outcomes. The full set of questions is included in the Review Paper; examples of open research questions include:

- How widespread is corruption and its impacts, and what interventions can donors pursue to tackle it?
- What interventions can limit vote-buying and strengthen the integrity of elections, and how do candidates and voters respond to these over the long-term?
- How do financial and non-financial incentives affect bureaucrats' performance and likelihood of engaging in corruption?
- How do e-governance technologies affect corruption?
- How can governments reduce corruption without also reducing program efficiency and beneficiary welfare? Is there a fundamental trade-off, and if so, can corruption crackdowns be optimized?
- How do program administrators weigh these tradeoffs—do they see reducing corruption or getting money out to beneficiaries as their primary imperative?
- How does corruption influence decision-making on environmental policies, and which reforms may make policymakers more accountable to domestic and international citizens who favor conservation?
- What is the extent of judicial corruption and how does it affect judicial legitimacy and economic performance?

Strengthening state capacity to raise revenue & deliver services

Research on state capacity has yielded valuable insights on how to strengthen the ability of the state to raise resources through taxation and to deploy those resources to effectively deliver policies and programs. This area spans research on collecting and spending tax revenue—where experimental research is increasingly able to offer insights not just on increasing tax compliance, but on setting tax policy— and on recruiting, incentivizing, and monitoring civil servants to ensure that they perform their jobs well, with minimal corruption.

These questions are particularly relevant as the debt burden faced by low-income countries is two-and-a-half times higher than it was ten years ago. Debt servicing leaves countries with fewer resources to provide public services and adapt to climate change, and efforts to increase tax revenues, including through increasing the tax base and improving the efficiency of tax administration, are lagging behind.² At the same time, the emergence of artificial intelligence and other new technologies also offer opportunities to streamline government processes and reduce leakages—but research is needed to better understand their impacts. The full set of research questions is included in the Review Paper; illustrative research questions in this area include:

State capacity & institutional design

- Can e-governance limit corruption and leakages by automating processes previously conducted by individuals with discretion?
- Can e-procurement improve the efficiency of government investment?
- How can technology and machine learning be leveraged to improve the capacity of the state to deliver goods and services and to be more responsive to citizens?
- How do perceptions of state effectiveness shape citizens' trust in and engagement with the state? How can mistrust in the state be redressed?
- How do we design new institutions—market, regulatory, governance—to act to mitigate climate change? How can governments design and enforce regulations to limit pollution and curb overuse of natural resources?

Performance of civil servants

- What are the possible selection and promotion criteria to improve the performance of civil servants and reduce their propensity to engage in corruption, shirking, and absenteeism?
- Can outcome-based incentives improve quality of service delivery? Does a narrow focus on incentivized outcomes reduce performance on other dimensions?
- Under what conditions does top-down monitoring improve bureaucratic performance and reduce corruption? Does providing the government with real-time data on its intermediaries' (civil servants) performance via audits or time-stamp technology improve outcomes?

²<https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2024/01/24/how-to-ease-rising-external-debt-service-presures-in-low-income-countries>

- How can community monitoring programs be designed to make them more effective in monitoring civil servants?

Judiciary

- Can improvements in the efficiency of courts reduce crime and fraud and encourage investment?
- What are the effects on conflict resolution of legal assistance in weakly institutionalized polities? How do these effects interact with traditional norms and customs?

Taxation

- What factors shape how governments choose when, how, and how much to tax?
- How can governments best reform existing tax systems and strategies to collect revenue?
- How can tax administrations obtain reliable information about the amount of taxes that are due? What is the optimal balance of “soft” information that tax collectors may have about taxpayers’ ability to pay and “hard” data, such as third-party reports?
- How can new technologies be leveraged to improve the state’s ability to assess and collect taxes? How do information technology and tax officials complement each other in determining tax capacity?