

## Voters' Campaigns *Knowledge is Power*

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*Despite recent progress in promoting transparency in government, citizens still face considerable challenges in accessing information about candidate qualifications and the responsibilities and performances of their legislators. Information campaigns which promote voting based on performance, rather than ethnic solidarity, reduces caste based voting. Providing objective report cards further allows better performing incumbents to enjoy electoral gains.*

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*Field Partners:* Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS), Sarathi Development Foundation



### Policy Issue

Transparency is valuable to democratic governments because it provides citizens, who have the best understanding of their own needs and preferences, with information on how officials are working to meet those needs. Citizens can use this information to reward better performing incumbents, put pressure on their legislators, promote a more efficient allocation of goods and reduce the opportunities for corruption. However, obtaining information on the responsibilities or performances of their elected officials is not easy. Possibly because of the lack of such information, politics in many parts of the country, and particularly in rural areas, is often based on caste and religious ties rather than on politicians' performance. But transparency in Indian politics is increasing, and in 2005 the government passed the Right to Information Act, which guaranteed citizens the right to access almost any information that the government held. In addition, politicians now have to file affidavits before elections.

### Context

Survey data from rural Uttar Pradesh and slum-dwellers in Delhi suggests that citizens' poor understanding of government functions significantly impacts their lives. For instance, in Delhi slums politicians are frequently able to make false promises or threats—saying, for example, that only their party can save a given slum from demolition, when in fact the slum was never scheduled to be demolished. More broadly, little

information exists on elected representative responsibilities or the resources they have, so an average citizen has no way to know that their representative *could* be using discretionary money to improve water infrastructure, let alone whether they are *actually* doing so.

### Description of Program

J-PAL researchers, together with local NGOs, evaluated multiple pre-election voter education campaigns (PEVACs). A first campaign (conducted with Sarathi) in Uttar Pradesh during the 2007 election examined how voters in rural Uttar Pradesh would respond to messages urging them to not vote on caste lines but to vote for development. This campaign was conducted in villages using puppet shows and posters – see Figure 1 for an example of the poster.



*Villagers listen to campaign messages.*

A second campaign was implemented during the Delhi 2008 election by Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS), a Delhi-based NGO which promotes transparency and good governance.

In this campaign, SNS produced “report cards” on each of the 70 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in Delhi, and published them in the Hindustan newspaper. This newspaper was provided (for free) to slum dwellers in a random sample of polling stations. The report card included information on a candidate’s attendance at legislative sessions, how many questions they asked, their work in committees, and how they spent their MLA development fund. The report cards also included information on a candidate’s education, criminal history, and asset holdings. An example of the report card is in Figure 2.

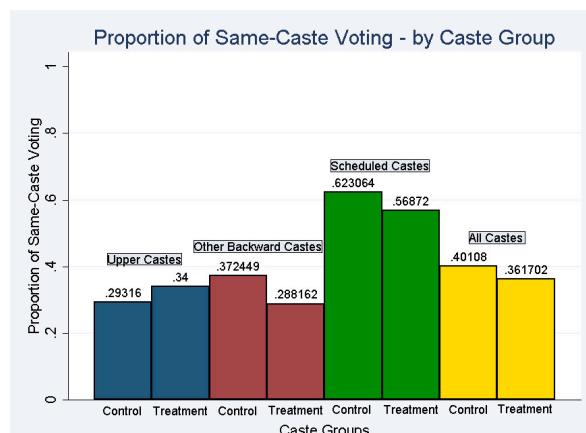
### Results

(1) In rural UP, the message that people should not simply vote along caste lines significantly changed voter behavior. First, voter turnout increased. Further, survey data collected by CSDS showed that the likelihood that an individual would vote for the party which represented their caste decreased from 57% to 52% in villages which received this campaign.

Finally, this reduction in caste-based voting was also accompanied by a reduction in the vote share of candidates facing heinous criminal charges.

(2) The report card intervention had important effects. Voting patterns made it clear that the poor do have distinct preferences for representatives who

focus on issues that are important for them. Exit surveys helped researchers gather information on what issues were most important to voters in different areas, and the overwhelming favorites were price rises and local development. Actual voting patterns tracked these preferences. In areas where price rises were a major issue, candidates who formed committees to monitor the price of rationed foods got a significant boost. In areas where local development was a priority, however, incumbents who spent more of their discretionary funds in slums increased their voter share.



### Additional Readings:

(available on [www.povertyactionlab.org](http://www.povertyactionlab.org))

Abhijit Banerjee, Donald Green, Jennifer Green, Rohini Pande: “Can Voters be Primed to Choose Better Legislators? Evidence from Voter Campaigns in India.” *Working Paper*, 2009.



Figure 1. Information Poster against Caste Based Voting (left)

Figure 2. Politician Report Card (translated from Hindi)

