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The Perverse Effects of Civic Education: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Peru

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Abstract

Past research suggests that improving citizen political knowledge and coordination can increase political participation and accountability and help channel grievances through democratic processes rather than conflict. A randomized field experiment in Peru demonstrates that civic education can sometimes have perverse effects on these outcomes. I find that civic education workshops reduce participation in the district's "participatory budgeting" process and increase support for protest as a tool for sanctioning politicians. Although the intervention increases the initiation of recalls for poor-performing mayors, these mayors respond to the recall threat by further reducing their effort. Taken together the evidence suggests that improved information and coordination of local elites is not sufficient to improve government performance where it has previous lagged.

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