

Authors

Renard Sexton
Princeton University

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

Renard Sexton*

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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.

*Postdoctoral Fellow, Nicholas Center, Princeton University; email: sexton@princeton.edu. The intervention was designed and implemented in collaboration with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and the Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPPEC), a member of the Propuesta Ciudadana network. I thank Maria-Luisa Zito, Giovanni Salvatore and Juan Manuel Rosendo-Aguirre of IPA for their research assistance, as well as Egleto Sosa and Gustavo Ariza of Propuesta Ciudadana, and gratefully acknowledge financial support for this research from the Germanium Initiative of the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at MIT. Thanks for helpful comments from Matthew Hall, Gema Star, Devin Christensen, Mike Fiedler, Mike Gilligan, Ricardo Inesi, Leticia de Leonardi, Mai Nguyen, Tim Pappalardo, Cyrus Scott, John Shapiro, and seminar participants at APSA, FELA and Pohnke. This research comes under IPA IRB Protocol no. 10006.

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