

Authors

Guy Grossman
University of Pennsylvania

Kristin Michelitch
Vanderbilt University

Information Dissemination, Competitive Pressure, and Politician Performance between Elections: A Field Experiment in Uganda

GUY GROSSMAN University of Pennsylvania
KRISTIN MICHELITCH Vanderbilt University

Politicians shirk when their performance is obscure to constituents. We theorize that when politician performance information is disseminated early in the electoral term, politicians will subsequently improve their performance in anticipation of changes in citizens' evaluative criteria and possible challenger entry in the next election. However, politicians may only respond in constituencies where opposition has previously mounted. We test these predictions in partnership with a Ugandan civil society organization in a multiyear field experiment conducted in 20 district governments between the 2012 and 2016 elections. While the organization published yearly job duty performance scorecards for all incumbents, it disseminated the scorecards to constituents for randomly selected politicians. These dissemination efforts induced politicians to improve performance across a range of measures, but only in competitive constituencies. Service delivery was unaffected. We conclude that, conditional on electoral pressure, transparency can improve politicians' performance between elections but not outcomes outside of their control.

The more obscure their actions are to citizens, the weaker politicians' incentives are to perform their legally defined job duties (Przeworski, Sprague, and Martin 1999). Especially in low-income countries, civil society often lacks the capacity or freedom to monitor incumbents (Diamond 1994), and the media often misrepresents politicians' performance due to capture or partisan bias (Boas and Hidalgo 2014). Absent reliable information about incumbent performance, citizens resort to using noisy heuristics to inform their vote, such as clientelistic handouts (Kramer 2010), outcomes outside politicians' control (Healy and Malhotra 2013), and candidates' ascriptive characteristics (Carlsen 2015). Rather than focusing on performing their statutory job duties, politicians

tend to cater to such heuristics, generally to the detriment of citizen welfare (Fos and Shotts 2009).

In this study, we investigate the effects of a local civil society organization's (CSO's) multiyear initiative to improve the transparency of politicians' performance on their legally defined job duties to constituents. Drawing on seminal models of political accountability [e.g., Fearon (1999)] and challenger entry [e.g., Gordon, Huber, and Lands (2007)], we theorize that politicians will carry out their job duties more effectively when citizens receive a clear and reliable signal of their performance early in the term, if incumbents have reasons to believe such a signal can significantly affect their reelection prospects. In low-information environments, incumbents may anticipate that a nonpartisan CSO transparency initiative will be highly salient and substantially affect their reputation, thus "subsidizing" the cost of potential challengers' decisions to mount campaigns and improving citizens' ability to discipline. We thus expect that incumbents' fear of future electoral sanctioning is more likely to be heightened in competitive constituencies compared to safe seats. Alternatively, such a transparency initiative may improve politician performance through a fear of future social sanctioning, whereby local politicians are concerned about their "moral standing" — especially where they are embedded in social groups that overlap with their constituency (Tsal 2007).

We test these predictions in collaboration with ACCODE, a Ugandan CSO that produces annual scorecards on politicians' job duty performance, in a multiyear field experiment involving 408 politicians across 20 subnational (district) governments. Throughout the 2011–2016 term, scorecards for all incumbents were distributed annually to incumbents, district officials, and party representatives at the government headquarters. These activities are a relatively "weak dissemination," because performance information inappreciably reached constituents, if at all.

For a randomly selected subset of politicians, ACCODE further disseminated the scorecards directly

Guy Grossman is an Assistant Professor, University of Pennsylvania, 308 S. 37th Street Room 217, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6215 (guyg@wharton.upenn.edu).

Kristin Michelitch is an Assistant Professor, Vanderbilt University, Commons Center PMB1050, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203-0721 (kristin.michelitch@vanderbilt.edu).

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