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Timeline
2012-2015

Sample Size
7,232 individuals in 125 sub-counties across 20 districts in Uganda

Research Implemented by IPA
Yes

The Impact of Personalized Text Messages on Participation in a Community Monitoring Program in Uganda

Abstract

Programs that allow citizens to contact their government representatives may help to improve the delivery of basic services, such as resources in schools and health clinics, in low-income countries. However, citizen participation in these programs is often low. IPA and researchers worked with an organization operating a program that allows citizens to send text messages directly to local councilors to test strategies that encouraged participation by including the citizen's name or a personalized message from their councilor. These strategies were effective at increasing participation rates and helped to close participation gaps rooted in gender and the political affiliation of councilors.

Policy Issue

Governments in low-income countries often fail to provide basic services, such as health, education, water, and infrastructure, to their citizens.[1] To address this failure, community monitoring programs try to help citizens hold their service providers directly accountable for providing these services, but studies have shown mixed results. The programs often experience low participation rates because they can carry significant costs for citizens in terms of time, money, and even social ties.[2] Recently, programs have emerged that allow citizens to contact public officials by text message. These may have several advantages over traditional community monitoring programs since they require a lower level of investment to

participate and encourage citizens to engage political officials with power directly. However, like their predecessors, many of these programs have relatively low participation rates. This may be in part because citizens have a low sense of "political efficacy": in other words, they do not believe that they have the ability to find a responsive audience for their concerns. Women often experience lower efficacy than men, ordinary citizens often experience lower efficacy than community leaders, and citizens represented by the opposition party often experience lower efficacy than those represented by the ruling party. This study evaluated a program that sought to mobilize citizen participation by explicitly addressing these concerns.

Context of the Evaluation

While Uganda has allowed multiparty elections since 2005, opposition activities are often repressed, and the country has weak democratic institutions. The government has a system of decentralized local councils that are meant to increase its responsiveness to citizens. However, in practice, these councils often fail to provide accountability to citizens—who, in turn, rarely engage with them. Combined with a history of colonialism and authoritarian rule following independence in 1962, this may explain why citizens in Uganda have relatively low levels of political participation and efficacy.

Attempts to improve public services often try to circumvent the government entirely, but with local councils controlling the bulk of resources for social programs, the scope of these attempts is limited. The Uganda-based NGO Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE) operated a text messaging program called "Get Involved!" that aimed to strengthen accountability and improve public services in the health and education sectors. The program used text messages to open a new channel of direct communication between local government councilors and citizens, which allowed citizens to report public services they find inadequate.

Details of the Intervention

In order to address the problem of low participation in text messaging programs, researchers worked with ACODE to incorporate two strategies aiming to increase citizens' sense of political efficacy into a weekly text message blast encouraging citizens to report service delivery failures in schools and health clinics. One, the *Citizen Name* strategy, added the citizen's name to the automated message. The other, the Councilor's Encouragement strategy, added an explicit encouragement from the citizen's elected representative, including the name of the representative, to use the program. ACODE trained government representatives to receive and respond to the messages and held community meetings to inform citizens about the program as well as national service delivery standards.

Researchers worked with IPA to carry out a randomized evaluation testing the effects of these political efficacy techniques on the likelihood that citizens would participate in the program. The 125 sub-counties in the evaluation were assigned to one of four groups:

- *Citizen Name*: Citizens in these sub-counties received messages promoting the program

with their name included.
- *Councilors' Encouragement*: Citizens in these sub-counties received messages promoting the program with an encouragement from their councilor.
- *Both Strategies:* Citizens in these sub-counties received messages with their names included and encouragement from their councilor.
- *Comparison:* Citizens in these sub-counties received the messages promoting the program, but without either additional encouragement.

This evaluation faced two implementation challenges. First, randomization in 59 sub-counties happened at the community meeting level instead of the sub-county level. Second, one of Uganda's cell phone providers briefly suspended access to the program. Researchers concluded that neither of these issues significantly affected the study's final results. For more information, please see the full paper.

The weekly message blasts lasted for six months.

Results and Policy Lessons

Overall, the program led to significant increases in the likelihood of citizens contacting their councilor at least once over its six-month course. 3.4 percent of comparison group participants used the service; *Citizen Name* increased the likelihood of participation by 3.4 percentage points, while *Councilors' Encouragement* led to a 1.4 percentage point increase.

While each individual strategy led to significant gains, *Both Strategies* (the two strategies in tandem) did not have significantly higher effects than one or the other of the individual strategies.

The program's impacts were mostly driven by gains for groups that are traditionally marginalized in the political process:

- *Citizen Name* and *Councilors' Encouragement* each closed a gender participation gap. In the comparison group, women were less likely to participate in the program than men. However, women who received either mobilization strategy were just as likely to participate as their male counterparts.
- While *Citizen Name* had no effect on participation for community leaders, it did have positive effects for ordinary villagers.
- In the comparison group, citizens were less likely to use the program when their councilor was a member of the opposition party. However, those who received *Councilors' Encouragement* were just as likely to participate as citizens represented by the ruling party.

The fact that the programs evaluated were especially effective at improving participation among traditionally marginalized people suggests that they may indeed spur increased participation by improving participants' sense of political efficacy.

Sources

[1] Chaudhury, Nazmul, Jeffrey Hammer, Michael Kremer, Karthik Muralidharan, and F. Halsey Rogers. 2006. "Missing in Action: Teacher and Health Worker Absence in Developing Countries." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 20 (1): 91-116, and Ross, Michael. 2006. "Is democracy good for the poor?" *American Journal of Political Science*, 50, 860-874.

[2] Blair, Graeme, Littman, Rebecca, & Paluck, Elizabeth Levy. 2015. "Inciting action against corruption in Nigeria." Unpublished manuscript.

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