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DEBATES

The Impact of Voter Knowledge Initiatives in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Debates between candidates for public office have a rich historical tradition and remain an integral part of contemporary campaign strategy. There is, however, no definitive evidence of whether debates affect actual voting behavior. Limited media penetration implies that the effects of publicizing debates could be more pronounced, persistent and directly linked to electoral outcomes in the developing world. We experimentally manipulate citizen exposure to debates between Parliamentary candidates in Sierra Leone to measure their impacts on, and the interconnections between, voter behavior, campaign spending, and the performance of elected politicians. We find evidence of strong positive impacts on citizen political knowledge, policy alignment and votes cast on Election Day. We then document an endogenous response by participating candidates, who increased their campaign expenditures in communities where videotapes of the debates were screened in large public gatherings. A complementary series of individual treatment arms unpacks the different types of information delivered by the debates, and finds evidence that voters respond to both candidate charisma and “hard facts” about policy stance and professional qualifications. Lastly, we find longer term accountability effects on elected MPs, where participation in debates led to higher levels of constituency engagement and development expenditure during their first year in office.

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Debates: The Impact of Voter Knowledge Initiatives in Sierra Leone

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