

Voter education in Mali raises expectation of government performance

Recent *IGC* research by Jessica Gottlieb (Stanford University) examines whether improving citizen information about both the responsibilities of local government and how democratic accountability works can lead to changes in voter behaviour.

Information asymmetry between voters and governments is a key determinant of democratic failure. This is the underlying premise of new IGC-funded research by Jessica Gottlieb (Stanford University) which examines how improving voter expectations of local government capacity in Mali can increase government performance. The research finds that increasing the understanding of a citizen about what their government has the potential capacity to do leads to voting more likely to be based on performance, rather than as a result of kinship ties or gift-giving.



Gottlieb conducted a randomised field experiment in Mali, giving a civic education course to 370 villages in 64 randomly assigned municipalities. The course included information on the responsibilities of local government, with half of the villages also receiving information on relative government performance. A survey was then conducted in the 64 treated municipalities, as well as in a further 31 control municipalities.

Voting simulations showed that citizens who received the civic education course were more likely to vote based on performance, rather than as a result of kinship ties or gift-giving. The research also suggests that the information provided both raised expectations of local government and improved coordination between voters.

Mali is currently undergoing significant turmoil as a result of fighting between rebels from groups such as the Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the French military. To restore peace in Mali and to ensure that stable government is able to flourish, a solid foundation of democratic accountability with accompanying good citizen participation is needed.

While it is well understood that information about government performance improves accountability, not all information is created equal. For example, providing voters with information about corrupt political practices can lead to increased voter apathy, whereas citizens who are ill-informed about what their government could or ought to be doing as part of their job will have correspondingly low expectations of performance.



It is this important expectation of performance that Gottlieb investigates. She argues that “a different type of information is necessary to shift voter behaviour...information about the stakes or capacity of government as opposed to actual government activity.” This implies that voters who understand better how government works and what it is potentially capable of should be more likely to condition their vote on performance, thus also improving accountability.

Ideas for growth

Gottlieb’s research provides numerous implications for policy-making. First is the importance of providing information not only about the basic mechanisms of democracy, but more crucially, on what that democratically-elected government can and should provide to citizens. This information can, by increasing the importance of government in peoples’ lives, equip citizens with an understanding of how they can use democratic processes to improve public services. Such information would then be able to directly address the concern of approximately half the respondents to the most recent Afrobarometer survey that they do not see elections as capable of removing from office leaders who the people do not want.

Second, civic education appears to have increased the perceived importance of public services as opposed to private goods, such as gifts received in exchange for votes. A key factor in this shift in perception was the public nature of the civic education course. Essentially, individual citizens were more likely to change their voting behaviour when they expected that the rest of the community would also do the same. This implies that information about government performance and accountability may be best delivered publicly and with adequate opportunities for community discussion.

Third, Gottlieb found that those voters who had participated in the civic education course were, as part of their correspondingly higher expectations, significantly more likely to challenge their local government leadership at town hall meetings. This public demonstration of political engagement may have powerful cultural implications for an expectation of accountability across communities, particularly if young voters see this behaviour in action.

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