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Is Deliberation Equitable?

Evidence from Transcripts of Village Meetings
in South India

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Abstract

Deliberative decision-making processes are becoming increasingly important around the world to make important decisions about public and private goods allocation, but there is very little empirical evidence about how they actually work. In this paper the authors use data from India extracted from 131 transcripts of village meetings matched with data from household surveys conducted in the same villages prior to the meetings, to study whose preferences are reflected in the meetings. The meetings are constitutionally empowered to make decisions about public and private goods. The findings show that the more land a person owns, the

higher the likelihood her preference is mentioned in the meeting, the longer the amount of time spent discussing this preference, and the higher the likelihood that a decision to provide or repair this public or private good is taken. At the same time, the voices of disadvantaged castes, while not dominating the meeting, are also heard. By contrast, the preferences of Muslims are given less time. High village literacy and the presence of higher level officials during village meetings mitigate the power of the landed, but political reservations for low castes for the post of village president increase the power of the landed.

This paper—a product of the Poverty Team, Development Research Group—is part of a larger effort in the department to understand local government and citizen-based engagement in developing countries. Policy Research Working Papers are also posted on the Web at <http://econ.worldbank.org>. The author may be contacted at vrao@worldbank.org.

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Is Deliberation Equitable? Evidence from Transcripts of Village Meetings in South India*

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1 Introduction

A decision-making process is considered democratic if it results in an outcome that reflects the “will of the people”. Democracy’s central challenge is to discern this will, particularly among people with different preferred outcomes. The theory of democracy proposes, according to Jon Elster(1986), two solutions to this challenge. The first solution, the subject of social choice theory, aggregates preferences across individuals. In this view of the world individuals do not interact with each other, they simply express their preferences, as they would do in a market transaction. The main finding of social choice theory is a negative one: Arrow’s impossibility theorem states that a rule for aggregating individual preferences, satisfying a set of reasonable conditions, does not exist. The second solution to the democratic challenge is deliberation. Instead of aggregating preferences across individuals, the ideal deliberative process consists of discussions during which some individuals can be persuaded by others to change their preferences and at the end of which “unanimous preferences”(Elster, 1986, p. 112) emerge. To Elster, the distinction between the two decision making processes is akin to the distinction between "the market and the forum". In this paper we use data extracted from transcripts of village meetings, coupled with household surveys, to empirically explore the mechanism of deliberation. In particular, we look at the extent to which individual preferences for public goods are matched by discussion of public goods in the meetings.

There is a large literature on processes that aggregate individual preferences - particularly on voting behaviors, but the literature on deliberative processes is relatively sparse: Osborne, Rosenthal, and Turner(2000) study participation in meetings from a theoretical perspective. Their model assumes that individuals have favorite policies represented by a point in a multidimensional space, with valuations depending only on the Euclidean distance between the implemented

policy and their favored policy. This model predicts that only individuals with extreme positions participate in meetings. They assume that the outcome of the meeting is a function of the favorite policies of the participants and conclude that the outcome is likely to be random. Turner and Weninger(2005) do an empirical test of this theoretical model using data on the participation of firms in public regulatory meetings. They find that firms with preference for extreme rather than moderate policies are much more likely to attend. Besley, Pande, and Rao(2005a), using the same household level data from our paper, study the determinants of participation in village meetings. They find that women, illiterates, and the wealthy(in term of asset ownership) are less likely to attend the meetings but disadvantaged castes and the landless are more likely to attend. They also find that when village meetings are held, decisions become more equitable¹.

Some scholars (Dryzek and List 2003, List 2008) argue that social choice and deliberative democracy should not be viewed as antagonists because deliberation may in fact free social choice from the impossibility results by making individual preference more single peaked and hence amenable to aggregation by voting. List, Luskin, Fishkin and McLean(2006) find evidence for the effect of deliberation on preferences. They use data from deliberative polls, and measure individuals' preferences before and after the deliberation. Their results show that deliberation does indeed move preferences closer to single peakedness.

Deliberative processes have acquired particular importance in recent years, particularly in the developing world, because of the increasing emphasis placed on community-based decision making by policy makers(Mansuri and Rao 2004). Part of the reason for this emphasis is a belief that involving people to participate in decisions that affect their own lives will make development more "demand-

¹Also see Chaudhuri and Heller2003 for evidence on the highly positive impact of a campaign that empowered *gram sabhas* in the state of Kerala.

driven," and improve the quality of governance by increasing the proximity of decision-making processes to citizens and thus enhance transparency and accountability. This has led countries around the world to give increasing powers to local governments(Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006). Several scholars have expressed concern that in unequal societies this would subject village decisions to the risk of elite-capture (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000, Bardhan 2002), but there is not much evidence about how these processes actually work².

Much of what we know about the empirics of deliberative processes is from deliberative polls which are a set of methods developed by the political scientist James Fishkin and his colleagues where groups of randomly chosen individuals are gathered in groups to conduct discussions on particular subjects (<http://cdd.stanford.edu/>). The method has generated a wealth of information on deliberation, but it has the limitation that the deliberative processes studied are not a part of a regular and routine system of government but the result of an academic intervention within a constrained setting. Studies of deliberative systems of government are very rare and largely qualitative. Jane Mainsbridge's(1983) seminal ethnography of town meetings in Vermont provides rich insights into how deliberation works as a system of government and comes closest to an analysis of the kind we conduct in this paper. Her work outlines the complexity of the deliberative process but largely supports the idea that common interests facilitate deliberation, particularly in settings where citizens prefer to avoid adversarial discussions³. On the other hand, James Madison in the Federalist Papers (Federalist No. 10, 1787) famously cautioned that "a

²There is some evidence analyzing the match between the preferences of individuals and the outcomes of community-based decisions, a process known in that literature as "preference-targetting" (Mansuri and Rao 2004). Chattopadhaya and Duffo2004b examine the role of political reservations for women on the match between women's preferences and the decisions of gram panchayats, Rao and Ibanez2005 and Labonne and Chase2007 study the match between preferences of households and the outcomes of community-based decision making showing some elite dominance.

³Also see the Fung and Wright2003 edited volume that has several case-studies of deliberative decision making.

pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction." Similarly, Albert Hirschman(1976) has argued that deliberation may be manipulated by an "articulate minority". There is, however, a lack of credible evidence testing whether deliberative processes can result in domination by a faction (Fishkin and Lushkin (p. 294)).

In this paper we examine the mechanism of deliberation in Indian village governments. Our data consisting of transcripts of open village meetings, *gram sabhas*, empowered by the Indian constitution to make important decisions for the village, linked with household-level preferences, enable us to examine the relationship between individual preferences and the preferences that emerge during deliberations. We find that the preferences of the landed class are more likely to be mentioned in the meeting and are also taking up more time in the meetings. Equally important, the voices of disadvantaged castes, while not dominating the meeting, are also heard. The transcript data allow us to distinguish between officials' and villagers' talk, as well as between men's and women's talk. Using these partitions, we are able to more accurately pinpoint the source of these effects. We find that the land dominance effect does not stem from the officials favoring the landed in their talk but rather from the landed being more vocal among villagers. In addition, we find that the preferences of the disadvantaged castes are more likely to be mentioned in the officials' talk but not in the villagers' talk. Within villagers' talk we also notice that the preferences of Muslims are taking up less time, relative to the those of Hindus. This finding suggests that the Muslim minority, which does not benefit from the affirmative action measures offered to disadvantaged castes, is marginalized in these meetings. Another notable finding is that within women's talk the preferences of women take up more time. This finding is particularly important

in light of the measures taken by the Indian government to promote the political participation of women. In the transcripts we were also able to identify instances where decisions regarding the provision or maintenance of public goods were taken. Using these instances, we find that decisions, and in particular positive decisions, are more likely to be reached for the public goods preferred by the landed class. We want to emphasize that the evidence of inequities is restricted to the deliberative space of the village meetings. We do not have data about the policy outcomes that may follow these meetings, so we cannot say whether the inequities in deliberation translate into inequities in outcomes.

Having found that the preferences of the landed class are more likely to be mentioned and take up more time in the meeting, we also want to investigate whether any village level characteristics accentuate or mitigate this effect. Literacy has been shown to have a positive effect on the outcomes of local governance. For example, Besley, Pande and Rao(2005b) find that increased literacy reduces village leaders' opportunism. Our findings also show that literacy has a positive effect in that it mitigates the power of the landed in village meetings. Political reservations for women and disadvantaged castes have been also documented to play an important role in local governance. The evidence on the role of women's reservations is mixed. Chattopadhyay and Duflo(2004b) find that women leaders benefit their villages while providing the public goods preferred by women. Ban and Rao(2008a), on the other hand, find that women leaders do not influence the provision of public goods and that their performance is hampered by the presence of a large upper caste landowner faction. Chattopadhyay and Duflo(2004a), and Besley, Pande and Rao(2004b) find that reservations for disadvantaged castes yield benefits to the members of these castes in the village. In this paper, we find that reservations for women and disadvantaged castes exacerbate the power of the landed in village meetings. Finally, we examine the

role of upper level supervision in these meetings. We find that the presence of a powerful upper level bureaucrat, the Block Development Officer, mitigates the power of the landed in village meetings.

2 The Context: Village Government in South India

Article 243 of the Indian constitution empowers village councils (*gram panchayats* - henceforth GPs) elected every five years with the powers to prepare and implement plans for "economic development and social justice," it also mandates that a *gram sabha*, a deliberative body consisting of all individuals registered to vote within the gram panchayat's jurisdiction, will exercise such powers and functions as given it to it by the state legislature. In the South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where our data are from, the state legislatures have given the *gram sabhas* considerable powers. They are expected to prepare village plans, discuss budgets, select beneficiaries for government program, impose new taxes and modify old ones, and discuss "such other matters as may be prescribed." In effect these states have made *gram sabhas* the linchpin of village government and mandate that they should be held between two to four times a year, depending on the state. This power is somewhat tempered by the fact that GP budgets in most Indian states, with the exception of Kerala, have been low, and gram sabhas are not held as regularly as required by state law (Besley, Pande, and Rao 2005a). However, the rights granted to them by law to make decisions on public good allocation and beneficiary selection, which are central to village life, ensure that *gram sabhas* are a powerful, constitutionally mandated, deliberative space.

The average *gram sabha* lasts 86 minutes. They typically begin with a presentation by a village official - either the president or the village secretary,

after which the discussion is opened to the public. Occasionally an agenda is circulated in advance which directs the discussion towards certain subjects but, more usually, it is an open discussion where villagers bring up particular demands or grievances which are then responded to by a member of the council, or the village secretary - a local bureaucrat who assists the council. This call-response model is sometimes diverted by an extensive speech either by a council member or a villager on topics that can range from requests to comply with tax payments, to critiques of affirmative action, to a hagiography of the village council's tenure outlining its various accomplishments. The latter is more likely to occur when the *gram sabha* is held during an election year.

Local officials such as public works engineers are required to attend the *gram sabha* to answer technical questions and respond to concerns. Sometimes higher-level officials also attend. The most significant of these is the Block Development Officer (BDO) who is the administrative officer in charge of the Block (sub-district level administrative entity) where the GP is located. The BDO is a powerful person and his (it is almost always a him) presence can significantly alter the discourse of deliberation because he has the power to make things happen: allocate budgets and people to pressing needs, and to impose sanctions in case of improprieties. Article 243 also mandates political reservations for presidencies of councils and for council members seats. The proportion of seats reserved for underprivileged castes ("scheduled castes" and "backward castes") is allocated according to their proportion in the population, and a third of the seats are reserved for women⁴.

⁴Previous research has demonstrated that reservations can alter the nature of decisions made by panchayats (Besley et al.2004b, Chattopadhyay and Duflo2004a 2004b).

3 Data and Methodology

In order to study *gram sabha* deliberations we bring together two different sources of information. In November 2001 we conducted a survey at the village and household level to study various aspects of GPs in South India employing a sampling methodology described in detail in the next section. One randomly chosen adult from every household in the sample was asked questions about the household's socioeconomic status, household structure, views and use of public services in the village, and access to targeted benefits from the government. The respondents were also asked to provide open-ended responses rank-ordering their preference for problems in the village that needed attention. The problems were elicited from the respondent and postcoded into broader categories. From this ordering we constructed an individual preference measure: defined as his or her first-ranked problem in the village.

Then from January to September 2003 we tape-recorded the proceedings of 38 *gram sabhas* in a sub-sample of the villages surveyed in the 2001 survey. This was supplemented by another round of 93 *gram sabha* recordings from October 2004 to February 2006 - where the 38 villages from 2003 were revisited along with an additional 55 villages, also selected from the original 2001 sample. Table 1 presents the meeting breakdown by round and state. Each transcript was divided into paragraphs, according to the natural pauses in speech. In the transcripts, all speakers were identified by position (official or villager) and gender⁵. A change in speaker automatically translates into a new paragraph, but a speaker can have more than one consecutive paragraph. For each paragraph the topics mentioned were recorded via two methods: First, topics were manually coded, by reading every transcript and noting the topics mentioned in each paragraph. Second, to ensure the replicability of our findings, we coded the

⁵Speaker caste is also identified in some transcripts.

topics by keyword searches⁶. The two methods yield very similar results, and in the paper we will base our results on the keyword-searched topics. In addition, we also identify whether a decision was taken in any paragraph, whether it was a decision for or against, and the topic of the decision. This identification of decisions was done manually. In the appendix we provide a couple of examples of decisions. Hence, we can partition the transcripts based on the hierarchical position of the speaker (official or villager), the gender⁷ of the speaker, and on whether the paragraph contains a decision (for or against). In Table 2 we present summaries for the occurrence and the fraction of lines dedicated to each of these partitions.

We define two measures for each topic: the occurrence of the topic, as a dummy variable, and the intensity of the topic. The intensity of the topic is defined as the ratio between the number of lines in the paragraphs in which the topic was mentioned and the total number of lines in the transcript. Furthermore, we apply the definitions of these measures to every partition. Hence, we have an occurrence and intensity measure for officials' talk, villagers' talk, women's talk, men's talk, any decision, decision for, and decision against⁸. In Table 3 we present the summaries of topic measures overall and for each partition.

As explained in more detail below, we match a household's preferences with the topics revealed in the *gram sabha* in the household's village. These matched topics are then studied both as indicators, and in their level of intensity, to understand the types of households who are more likely to have their preferences

⁶The list of keywords is available upon request.

⁷The gender of the speaker was not identified in 10% of the discussions, including one full transcript.

⁸For example, the occurrence measure for water in officials' talk equals 1 if water is a topic in a paragraph spoken by an official and 0 otherwise. The intensity measure for water in officials' talk equals the ratio between the number of lines in paragraphs spoken by an official on the topic of water divided by the total number of lines in the transcript. It is important to note that the denominator for the intensity measures is always the total number of lines in the transcript.

discussed in the *gram sabha*.

3.1 Sampling

The sample was selected from seven districts in the four South Indian states, two in Andhra Pradesh (AP) – Medak and Chithoor, three in Karnataka (KA) – Bidar, Kolar and Dakshin Kanada, two in Kerala (KE) – Kasargod and Palakkad, and two in Tamil Nadu (TN) – Dharmapuri and Coimbatore. Districts within states and blocks (sub-district level entities) within districts were purposively chosen to control for common histories and cultural similarities. The district and block sampling is less relevant for this paper and is described in more detail in Besley *et. al.* (2004a).

The blocks are divided into several GPs – each of which consist of between 1 and 6 villages depending on the state. From every sampled block in AP, KA and TN we randomly selected 3 of our 6 sampled GPs and conducted household interviews in all the sampled villages falling within these GPs. In Kerala we randomly selected 2 GPs in one block and one GP in the other block. Within sampled GPs we conducted household interviews in all sampled wards⁹. This results in a household sample that draws from 101 GPs with 259 villages. Twenty households were sampled at random from every selected village¹⁰, of which four always belonged to Scheduled Caste or Tribes (henceforth SC/ST – who benefit from affirmative action programs mandated by the Indian constitution). In addition to these randomly sampled households the president of the GP, and the ward members were also subjected to a household interview. This yielded a total number of 5445 households.

⁹In Kerala, wards are of approximately the same size as villages in the other three states.

¹⁰The survey team leader in every village walked the entire village to map it and identify total number of households. This was used to determine what fraction of households in the village were to be surveyed. The start point of the survey was randomly chosen, and after that every Xth household was surveyed such that the entire village was covered (going around the village in a clockwise fashion with $X = \text{Number of Households}/20$).

Due to budgetary limitations we omitted recording gram sabhas in Andhra Pradesh in round 1. In the other three states we randomly selected 4 blocks from Karnataka, 5 blocks from Kerala, and 6 blocks from Tamil Nadu, resulting in a total *gram sabha* sample of 38 villages. In round 2 we expanded the sample to include the state of Andhra Pradesh where we visited 18 villages in 6 blocks. In the other three states, in addition to the villages where we recorded gram sabhas in 2003 we sampled 10 more blocks resulting in an total sample of 131 gram sabhas in 97 villages. Out of these 131 visited gram sabhas, in 4 instances the village leaders did not allow the proceedings to be taped.

To explore the relationship between individual preferences and the topics discussed during the *gram sabha* we link the household data to the meeting transcript from the same village. In the villages where both rounds of meetings were recorded, each household is counted twice. Hence, our analysis is based on the subset of 2404 households located in villages where gram sabhas were recorded.

3.2 Methodology

We measure the extent to which a villager’s preferences are matched by the topics. To this end, we construct two individual level variables, a match dummy (MD) and a match intensity (MI). Let $T_g = \{(t_{kg})\}$ the set of topics¹¹ mentioned at the meeting in village g , with each topic t_{kg} being occupying a fraction f_{kg} of the discussion. Let an individual i living in village of g have topic t_i as her first priority. Then the match dummy is defined as:

$$MD_{ig} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } t_i \in T_g \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

¹¹Note that all T_g are subsets of the universe of topics $U = \{\text{water, roads, electricity, housing, health, education, employment, agricultural, liquor}\}$.

and the match intensity is defined as:

$$MI_{ig} = \begin{cases} f_{ig} & \text{if } t_i \in T_g \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Table 6 presents the summaries of the match indicator and match intensity.

To estimate the effect of household and individual characteristics on preference match we use these two measures as dependent variables in ordinary least squares estimations:

$$MD_{ig} = \alpha_g + \sum_{t \in U} \gamma_t I(t_i = t) + \beta X_{ig} + \epsilon_{ig} \quad (1)$$

$$MI_{ig} = \alpha_g + \sum_{t \in U} \gamma_t I(t_i = t) + \beta X_{ig} + \epsilon_{ig} \quad (2)$$

Where α_g are village level fixed effects, γ_t are preference fixed effects, and X_{ig} is the matrix of individual and household level variables described in Table 3. It is important to note the two types of fixed effects that we use. First, by employing village level fixed effects we control for all village level characteristics that may affect both the individual characteristics and the preference match. Second, by employing preference fixed effects, we control for any unobserved characteristics specific to individuals who hold a given preference. To correct for correlation within a village, standard errors were clustered at the village level.

4 Results

In Table 2 we present the summaries of the different transcript partitions. Looking at the intensity column we find that officials' talk takes up 66 percent of the discussions, while villagers' talk takes up the remaining 34 percent. Men appear

to dominate, taking up 81 percent of the discussions. We also find that at least a decision is reached in 56 percent of the meetings, at least a for decision in 51 percent of the meetings, and at least an against decision in 17 percent of the meetings. The time dedicated to decisions is very brief as it only takes a couple of lines to say the decision. Given this brevity, in the following results we will focus only on the occurrence of decisions and not the time dedicated to them.

In Table 3 we present the summaries of *gram sabha* topic¹² measures overall, by speaker's position in the hierarchy, by speaker's gender, and by whether the paragraph contains a decision. From this table we take away that there are no systematic differences between the topics discussed by villagers and officials, or men and women. The rank-ordering of both the occurrence and intensity measures are nearly identical across the speaker type partitions. We also note that the ordering is nearly identical for the topics where decisions for and against were reached, the only striking difference being the decisions about roads.

Table 4 presents the summary statistics for the individual level variables, including preferences. We first look at whether individuals with different characteristics have significantly different preferences. Table 5 presents these findings. We observe that the amount of land owned leads to a large and significant difference in preferences. Large landowners are more likely to have a preference for roads and education, and less likely to have a preference for housing, in contrast with the landless villagers. Preferences also vary significantly across caste groups, but not across gender and age groups. The forward castes are more likely to have a preference for roads, as compared to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes(SCST). The backward castes (BC/OBC) are more likely to have a preference for water, as compared to the two other groups. Muslims are more likely to have a preference for water and less likely to have a prefer-

¹²There are topics discussed in the gram sabha that are not expressed as priorities by the households. The priority topics of the households, taken together, take up 53 percent of the meetings.

ence for roads than non-Muslims. Furthermore, politicians¹³ are more likely to have a preference for water and less likely to have a preference for roads than non-politicians.

Having reviewed the types of preferences expressed by individuals, we move on to analyzing how often these preferences are mentioned during village meetings. Table 6 presents the summary of preference matching. We observe that the average individual has a 90 percent chance of having her preference mentioned during the meetings. Furthermore, the average individual's priority takes up 21 percent of the discussion. Looking at the breakdown by type of speaker we observe officials are more likely than villagers to mention the average individual's preference. We can interpret this as officials being more substantive and egalitarian in their speech, while villagers' speech may possibly leave more room for competition between villagers for expressing their preferred topic. A similar comparison can be made between matching within men's and women's talk. The men, taking up the overwhelming majority of the discussions, are much more likely to mention the average individual's preference. As for decisions, the average individual has a 28 percent chance of having his preference decided on during the meeting. Furthermore, s/he has a 24 percent chance of receiving a decision for and a 9 percent chance of receiving a decision against¹⁴.

We now proceed with exploring the effect of individual characteristics on the likelihood of preference matching and match-intensity. Table 7 presents the results of the ordinary least squares estimation of (1) and (2). In column (1) the dependent variable is the match indicator. In column (2) the dependent variable is the match-intensity. The results show that in the unrestricted speech, having more land and being in a disadvantaged caste makes it more likely for one's preference to be mentioned. In addition, being a Muslim reduces the time

¹³Defined as current or former *Gram Panchayat* presidents or ward members.

¹⁴The for and against match likelihood add up to more than 28 percent, because it is possible for a topic to receive both a positive and a negative decision in the same meeting.

dedicated to discussing one's preference. Specifically, owning 10 more acres of land increases the owners match likelihood by 1 percent, and being part of the Scheduled Castes or Scheduled tribe increases one's match likelihood by 3 percent. Hence, the difference in match likelihood between an SC/ST and a Forward Caste¹⁵ is the same as the difference between a landless individual and a very large landowner owning 30 acres of land. These two effects imply that owning more land gives one a stronger voice in village meetings, but also that being afforded the benefits of affirmative action in the case of SC/STs helps in being heard. Being a Muslim reduces the time dedicated to one's preference by about 2 percent. This discrimination effect against Muslims is particularly important in the light of the SC/ST effect. It implies that a minority such as Muslims, that is not protected through affirmative action will have a hard time expressing their views in a deliberative space.

Once we decompose the discussion by the position of the speaker in the village hierarchy, in Table 8, we see that the land effect arises from the domination of landowners' issues in the discourse of the villagers and not from a preferential treatment by village officials. Furthermore, in the villagers' speeches, the large landowners are not only more likely to have their priority mentioned, but that it takes up a larger fraction of the discussion. Specifically, owning 10 more acres of land increases the owners preference match likelihood by 2 percent and the match intensity by 0.6 percent. Decomposing the caste effect, we observe that the advantage of SCSTs is driven by an increased preference match likelihood within officials' talk, which is not paralleled in the villagers' talk. A possible interpretation of this effect, is that attention to the needs of the SCSTs is mandated via targeted programs and officials are trying to ensure that these programs are implemented. Being an SCST is associated with a 3 percent increase in match likelihood within officials speech, but this increased likelihood is

¹⁵Forward Caste is the omitted category.

not accompanied by an increased intensity. This may be seen as a sign that the attention to the SCST priorities is met only in form and does not affect their predominance in the deliberations.

In Table 9 we decompose the discussion by the gender of the speaker. The first notable result is that within women’s talk, the preferences of women take up more time (column (2)). This effect is particularly important in the light of the measures, such as political reservations, taken by the Indian government to promote the political participation of women. In a related paper, using the same transcript data, we have found that in villages where the position of Gram Panchayat president is reserved for women, women tend to talk more during the village meetings (Ban and Rao 2008b). This finding implies that affording voice to the women has real benefits for the women’s community. A similar result was found by Chattopadhyay and Duflo(2004b): in constituencies reserved for women the public goods investments reflect the preferences of women. The second notable (non)result is that within women’s talk, the effect of landownership disappears. This may be interpreted as women’s talk being insulated from the traditional power of the landed class. The effect of landownership is present within men’s talk, but only in the indicator equation. Another interesting result is the age effect within men’s talk. Older individuals are less likely to have their preferences mentioned when men are speaking.

In Table 10 we examine the effect of individual characteristics on the likelihood of a decision being reached with regards to one’s preferred topic. We find that again, owning more land increases the likelihood of having one’s preference decided upon. When we distinguish between for and against decision, we find that the land effect is driven by the for decisions. Specifically, owning 10 more acres of land increases the likelihood by 2.5 percent (2.7 percent within for decisions). This finding further emphasizes the power of the landed class in the

deliberative space. It implies that not only are voices of the landed stronger in the overall discussions, but are also stronger in the crucial, decision making stages of the discussions.

In the remaining part of the paper, we investigate whether our village level characteristics of interest, literacy, political reservations, and supervision, matter for the deliberative process. In particular, we look at whether these characteristics mitigate or exacerbate the effect of individual characteristics observed in our main results. To estimate this effect, we include in our regression an interaction¹⁶ term between the characteristic of interest and landownership. We focus on interactions with landownership as this is individual characteristic that is consistently associated with increased likelihood and intensity of match. We present the results in Table 11. First (columns (1) and (2)), we find that, compared with average literacy villages, in high literacy¹⁷ villages, the land domination effect is significantly reduced. In fact, in high literacy villages, large landowners are at a disadvantage in terms of both likelihood of preference match and match intensity. One interpretation of this is that high literacy "lubricates" deliberative interactions by allowing officials to raise issues that matter to a wide group of people and thus make discussions more inclusive. This finding is in line with numerous other findings that highlight the beneficial role of literacy on the functioning of local governance. For example, Besley, Pande and Rao(2005b), using the same village level data, find that increased literacy reduces village leaders' opportunism.

Next, we look at the effect of political reservations (columns (3) and (4)). The effect of these political reservation has been recently well documented. Chattopadhyay and Duflo(2004b) find that women achieve better outcomes than

¹⁶The regressions include village fixed effects, so the *level* of the institutional measure is absorbed in these fixed effects.

¹⁷Literacy has been classified by quartiles. Low literacy villages have literacy below 33 percent(1st quartile); average literacy - between 33 and 57 percent(2nd and 3rd quartile); high literacy - above 57 percent(4th quartile).

the unreserved (by and large male) presidents and that women invest in public goods that are preferred by women. In a separate paper (2004a) they find that SCST presidents invest in public goods preferred by SCSTs, a result that is also found by Besley, Pande, Rahman, and Rao(2004a). We find that women's, SC/ST, and other backward castes (OBC) reservations exacerbate the land dominance effect, in terms of the likelihood of match, and that SC/ST reservations also exacerbate the land dominance effect in terms of the intensity of match. In fact, we see that the land dominance effect is absent outside the reserved constituencies. We interpret these results as a sign that political reservation for castes weakens village leadership which, in turn, reduces the restraints on the large landowners. We have also tested the hypothesis that in women reserved or caste reserved constituencies, the women and the members of the lower castes are more likely to have their priorities mentioned. We have found no evidence of this¹⁸.

Finally, in columns (5) and (6) we look at the influence of the presence of the BDO in the meetings. We find that when this official attends the *gram sabha*, the land dominance effect is reduced. Specifically, while large landowners are still more likely to have their priorities mentioned, in the presence of the BDO the time spent discussing these priorities is significantly reduced. This underlies the disciplining role that higher level officials can play in the deliberative process. Furthermore, this result has a simple policy implication by showing a straightforward action that may be taken to reduce elite dominance¹⁹.

¹⁸These results are available upon request.

¹⁹It is possible that the presence of the BDO is endogenous, but the endogeneity is more likely due to village characteristics which are absorbed in the fixed effects.

5 Conclusion

This paper attempts to peer inside the black box of deliberative democracy. We use a unique dataset of transcripts of *gram sabhas* (village meetings) in South India to learn about the process of deliberation. These meetings are a part of the system of village government, held at regular intervals, and are empowered by the Indian constitution to make important decisions for the village. We find that powerful groups, such as large landowners exert an unduly large influence on the deliberative process, as their preferences are more likely to be mentioned and dominate the deliberations by taking up more time. This effect is a true dominance effect as it occurs in the villagers' discourse, and does not reflect preferential treatment from officials who attend the meeting. Our results also show that the needs of disadvantaged castes are also reflected in the deliberative process, but this occurs because these needs are mentioned by officials. We also find these effects are influenced by village heterogeneity; high literacy tempers the extent to which *gram sabhas* are dominated by landlords. Landlord domination is also reduced when the Block Development Officer - an important local official - attends the meetings. On the other hand, in villages where the presidency is reserved for lower castes, the discourse tends to be even more dominated by landowners suggesting that political reservations may produce weak leaders.

Thus, in this paper we examine the innards of the deliberative process by conducting an examination of the discourse of deliberation within *gram sabhas* in rural India. These meetings are among the most widespread deliberative spaces in regular and routine use within a system of government in human history. By matching proceedings within transcripts of *gram sabhas* with the preferences of villagers we are able to see whose voices are heard, whose priorities are mentioned, and how institutions affect deliberative dominance by elites.

While our results indicate that there are inequities in the deliberation process, it is important to keep in mind that we cannot say whether these inequities extend to actual outcomes - which is a subject for future work²⁰.

²⁰However, we have evidence that the topics of discussion in the gram sabha are related to subsequent public goods outcomes. We conducted village level facility surveys recording the quality of roads in the village in November 2001 and again in 2005. Using the transcript data from the first round, to limit the potential for reverse causality, we find that villages where discussion about roads dominate the gram sabha also experience a greater improvement in the quality of roads between 2001 and 2005. The quality of roads is measured on a scale from 1 to 6, 1 being a mud road and 6 being an asphalt road. The improvement in roads is measured as the fraction of roads, by length, that has moved upward in quality between 2001 and 2005. In estimating the relationship between discussion about roads and improvement we control for initial road quality, a wide range of village level variables, and block fixed effects. We also perform a falsification test, by estimating the relationship between discussions about water and road improvement, and we find no relationship. These findings are available upon request.

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Table 1: Breakdown by round and state

State	Round		Total
	1	2	
Andhra Pradesh	0	18	18
Karnataka	6	31	37
Kerala	15	15	30
Tamil Nadu	16	26	42
Total	37	90	127

Table 2: Summary of gram sabha partitions

Partition		Occurence	
		indicator	Intensity
1. Hierarchy	Village official	1	0.66 (0.22)
	Villager	0.96	0.34 (0.22)
2. Gender	Man	0.99	0.81 (0.22)
	Woman	0.69	0.09 (0.13)
3. Decision	Any decision	0.56	0.02 (0.04)
	Decision for	0.51	0.02 (0.04)
	Decision against	0.17	0.01 (0.02)

Note: 1) Standard deviations of intensity measures in parenthesis

2) For 10 percent of the discussions, the speaker's gender cannot be identified

Table 3: Summary of gram sabha topics

Topic	Overall Indicator Intensity	Hierarchy			Gender		Decision	
		Official Indicator Intensity	Villager Indicator Intensity	Man Indicator Intensity	Woman Indicator Intensity	Any Indicator Intensity	For Indicator Intensity	Against Indicator Intensity
Water	0.28 (0.16)	0.94 (0.16)	0.86 (0.10)	0.98 (0.16)	0.24 (0.16)	0.43 (0.04)	0.37 (0.33)	0.07 (0.07)
Roads	0.94 (0.15)	0.87 (0.14)	0.80 (0.09)	0.93 (0.15)	0.18 (0.15)	0.40 (0.04)	0.34 (0.09)	0.13 (0.02)
Education	0.83 (0.14)	0.70 (0.13)	0.63 (0.05)	0.80 (0.13)	0.10 (0.13)	0.35 (0.03)	0.09 (0.03)	0.02 (0.01)
Health	0.72 (0.09)	0.62 (0.07)	0.46 (0.02)	0.67 (0.10)	0.07 (0.10)	0.24 (0.02)	0.06 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Electricity	0.74 (0.11)	0.61 (0.11)	0.49 (0.03)	0.69 (0.11)	0.07 (0.11)	0.16 (0.02)	0.09 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)
Housing	0.69 (0.12)	0.60 (0.11)	0.50 (0.02)	0.65 (0.11)	0.06 (0.11)	0.25 (0.02)	0.06 (0.02)	0.00 (0.00)
Employment	0.19 (0.03)	0.13 (0.03)	0.07 (0.01)	0.14 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.06 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)
Agricultural	0.14 (0.03)	0.13 (0.03)	0.01 (0.09)	0.13 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.00)	0.03 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Liquor	0.03 (0.01)	0.01 (0.00)	0.03 (0.01)	0.02 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)

Note: Standard deviations, of intensity measures in parenthesis

Table 4: Household level summary

Variable	Mean (SD)
Land (acres)	2.26 (5.12)
Age	37.17 (12.59)
Literate	0.74
Woman	0.49
SC/ST	0.19
BC/OBC	0.45
Muslim	0.07
Politician	0.11
Priority	
Water	0.38
Roads	0.38
Electricity	0.07
Housing	0.07
Health	0.05
Employment	0.02
Education	0.01
Agricultural	0.01
Liquor	0.00
N	2488

Note: Standard deviations, of continuous measures, in parenthesis

Table 5: Priority detail

Priority	Total	Land			Age			Gender		Caste			Religion		Politician	
		0	(0, 4]	(4, 64]	[16, 30]	(30, 50]	(50, 89]	M	F	SC/ST	OBC	Forward	Hindu	Muslim	No	Yes
Water	0.38	0.40	0.38	0.34	0.37	0.40	0.38	0.38	0.35	0.41	0.37	0.37	0.51	0.38	0.45	
Roads	0.38	0.37	0.36	0.45	0.37	0.38	0.37	0.39	0.33	0.35	0.43	0.39	0.28	0.39	0.30	
Electricity	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.04	0.07	0.07	
Housing	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.03	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.17	0.05	0.04	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.05	
Health	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.04	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.06	
Employment	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02	
Education	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.03	
Agricultural	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	
Liquor	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
N	2488	1132	1001	355	897	1223	1258	1230	470	1114	904	2308	180	2221	267	
χ^2			0.000		0.279		0.018		0.000		0.000	0.000		0.015		

Note: 1) Cell values represent the fraction of households in the category that has mentioned the priority listed in the leftmost column

2) p-values of a Chi-squared test of the hypothesis that priorities are identically distributed across the categories, at the bottom

3) SC/ST : Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe, OBC: Other Backward Caste

Table 6: Summary of preference match

	Match indicator	Match intensity
Overall	0.90	0.21 (0.17)
Village official talk	0.82	0.14 (0.15)
Villager talk	0.74	0.07 (0.08)
Man talk	0.90	0.18 (0.16)
Woman talk	0.38	0.02 (0.04)
Any decision	0.28	-
Decision for	0.24	-
Decision against	0.09	-

Note: 1)Standard deviations of match intensity in parenthesis
2)Due to very reduced decision talk, described in Table 3, match intensity for decisions were not computed

Table 7: Preference match regression

	(1) Match indicator	(2) Match intensity
Land	0.00102* (0.00063)	0.00049 (0.00035)
Literate	0.00833 (0.00946)	0.00286 (0.00548)
Age	-0.00199 (0.00139)	-0.00093 (0.00070)
Age sq.	0.00002 (0.00002)	0.00001 (0.00001)
Woman	0.01254 (0.00843)	-0.00060 (0.00315)
SC/ST	0.03449** (0.01707)	-0.00451 (0.00657)
BC	0.01756 (0.01305)	0.00277 (0.00425)
Politician	0.00203 (0.01169)	-0.00177 (0.00504)
Muslim	-0.00659 (0.02385)	-0.02380** (0.00987)
Constant	0.90354*** (0.04258)	0.24474*** (0.03201)
Observations	2488	2488
Adj R-sq	0.572	0.564

1)Village, Priority and Round fixed effects included

2)Standard errors, clustered at village level, in parentheses

3)* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

4)The dependent variable in (1) equals 1 if the individual's priority is mentioned in the meeting, and 0 otherwise

5)The dependent variable in (2) equals the fraction of lines in the transcript dedicated to the individual's priority, if the priority is mentioned in the meeting, and 0 otherwise

6)The estimation is done by OLS, which in (1) implies a linear probability model

Table 8: Preference match regression, hierarchy partition

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Officials indicator	Officials intensity	Villagers indicator	Villagers intensity
Land	0.00046 (0.00111)	-0.00008 (0.00024)	0.00196*** (0.00074)	0.00057** (0.00023)
Literate	0.01789 (0.01150)	0.00075 (0.00394)	0.00379 (0.01129)	0.00211 (0.00347)
Age	-0.00118 (0.00144)	-0.00078 (0.00055)	-0.00092 (0.00217)	-0.00015 (0.00040)
Age sq.	0.00002 (0.00002)	0.00001* (0.00001)	0.00001 (0.00003)	0.00000 (0.00000)
Woman	0.00495 (0.00877)	-0.00106 (0.00261)	0.00999 (0.01013)	0.00046 (0.00179)
SC/ST	0.03000* (0.01731)	-0.00062 (0.00589)	0.00101 (0.01880)	-0.00389 (0.00344)
BC	0.02155* (0.01337)	0.00166 (0.00344)	-0.00819 (0.01319)	0.00111 (0.00216)
Politician	-0.00685 (0.01275)	-0.00412 (0.00422)	-0.00724 (0.01489)	0.00235 (0.00278)
Muslim	-0.00035 (0.02561)	-0.01066 (0.00782)	-0.03665** (0.01692)	-0.01314*** (0.00449)
Constant	0.80288*** (0.04611)	0.16959*** (0.02841)	0.60397*** (0.07440)	0.07515*** (0.01216)
Observations	2488	2488	2488	2488
Adj R-sq	0.611	0.607	0.564	0.589

1)Village, Priority and Round fixed effects included

2)Standard errors, clustered at village level, in parentheses

3)* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

4)The dependent variable in (1) and (3) equals 1 if the individual's priority is mentioned in the officials', and, respectively, villagers' talk, and 0 otherwise

5)The dependent variable in (2) and (4) equals the fraction of lines in the officials', and, respectively, villagers' talk dedicated to the individual's priority, if the priority is mentioned in the officials, and respectively, villager's talk and 0 otherwise

6)The estimation is done by OLS, which in (1) and (3) implies a linear probability model

Table 9: Preference match regression, gender partition

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Women indicator	Women intensity	Men indicator	Men intensity
Land	-0.00076 (0.00085)	-0.00005 (0.00007)	0.00133** (0.00066)	0.00050 (0.00034)
Literate	0.00568 (0.01395)	0.00213 (0.00174)	0.00914 (0.01135)	0.00223 (0.00481)
Age	-0.00020 (0.00187)	0.00015 (0.00018)	-0.00257* (0.00150)	-0.00118** (0.00058)
Age sq.	0.00000 (0.00002)	-0.00000 (0.00000)	0.00003* (0.00002)	0.00002** (0.00001)
Woman	0.00582 (0.01054)	0.00171* (0.00098)	0.00429 (0.00953)	-0.00309 (0.00292)
SC/ST	-0.02567 (0.02403)	-0.00181 (0.00165)	0.03615** (0.01687)	-0.00340 (0.00492)
BC	0.00522 (0.01315)	0.00062 (0.00095)	0.02203* (0.01299)	0.00511 (0.00398)
Politician	-0.01693 (0.01519)	0.00087 (0.00135)	0.00940 (0.01304)	-0.00277 (0.00520)
Muslim	-0.04285* (0.02710)	-0.00119 (0.00172)	-0.00835 (0.02358)	-0.02423** (0.00985)
Constant	0.33054*** (0.07660)	0.01040* (0.00656)	0.96643*** (0.05185)	0.24443*** (0.03148)
Observations	2394	2394	2394	2394
Adj R-sq	0.606	0.555	0.521	0.559

1)Village, Priority and Round fixed effects included

2)Standard errors, clustered at village level, in parentheses

3)* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

4)The dependent variable in (1) and (3) equals 1 if the individual's priority is mentioned in the women's, and respectively, men's talk, and 0 otherwise

5)The dependent variable in (2) and (4) equals the fraction of lines in the women's, and, respectively, men's talk dedicated to the individual's priority, if the priority is mentioned in the women's, and, respectively, men's talk, and 0 otherwise

6)The estimation is done by OLS, which in (1) and (3) implies a linear probability model

Table 10: Preference match regression, decision

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Any, indicator	For, indicator	Against, indicator
Land	0.00255** (0.00127)	0.00270* (0.00142)	-0.00075 (0.00063)
Literate	-0.02809* (0.01487)	-0.01841 (0.01617)	-0.00456 (0.01016)
Age	-0.00204 (0.00195)	-0.00041 (0.00186)	-0.00148 (0.00130)
Age sq.	0.00002 (0.00002)	0.00001 (0.00002)	0.00002 (0.00002)
Woman	-0.00843 (0.01044)	-0.00842 (0.01008)	-0.00219 (0.00682)
SC/ST	-0.00878 (0.02016)	-0.01310 (0.01998)	-0.00179 (0.01105)
BC	0.00100 (0.01559)	0.00039 (0.01522)	0.00206 (0.00841)
Politician	0.02519 (0.01707)	0.02526 (0.01738)	0.00669 (0.00864)
Muslim	-0.03546 (0.02388)	-0.03916* (0.02260)	-0.00809 (0.01283)
Constant	0.45100*** (0.08253)	0.37042*** (0.07735)	0.12237** (0.05850)
Observations	2488	2488	2488
Adj R-sq	0.486	0.496	0.392

1)Village, Priority and Round fixed effects included

2)Standard errors, clustered at village level, in parentheses

3)* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

4)The dependent variable in (1) equals 1 if the individual's priority is mentioned in any decision, **for or against**, taken in the meeting, and 0 otherwise

5)The dependent variable in (2) equals 1 if the individual's priority is mentioned in a **for** decision taken in the meeting, and 0 otherwise

6)The dependent variable in (3) equals 1 if the individual's priority is mentioned in an **against** decision taken in the meeting, and 0 otherwise

7)The estimation is done by OLS, which implies a linear probability model

Table 11: Preference match regression, interactions

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Match indicator	Match intensity	Match indicator	Match intensity	Match indicator	Match intensity
Land	0.00103 (0.00090)	0.00084* (0.00044)	-0.00217 (0.00151)	-0.00040 (0.00051)	0.00106* (0.00065)	0.00068* (0.00035)
Land*Low lit.	0.00108 (0.00139)	-0.00015 (0.00081)				
Land*High lit.	-0.00733* (0.00433)	-0.00483*** (0.00131)				
Land*Woman res.			0.00491* (0.00255)	-0.00060 (0.00123)		
Land*SC/ST res.			0.00440** (0.00194)	0.00191** (0.00078)		
Land*OBC res.			0.00609*** (0.00198)	0.00128 (0.00125)		
BDO					-0.05157 (0.04147)	-0.11774* (0.07363)
Land*BDO					-0.00113 (0.00295)	-0.00496*** (0.00143)
Observations	2374	2374	2488	2488	2488	2488
Adj R-sq	0.580	0.584	0.573	0.564	0.573	0.580

1)Levels of explanatory from Table 7 variables included but not reported

2)Village, Priority and Round fixed effects included

3)Standard errors, clustered at village level, in parentheses

4)* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

5)The dependent variable in (1), (3), and (5) equals 1 if the individual's priority is mentioned in the meeting, and 0 otherwise

6)The dependent variable in (2), (4), and (6) equals the fraction of lines in the transcript dedicated to the individual's

priority, if the priority is mentioned in the meeting, and 0 otherwise

7)The estimation is done by OLS, which in (1), (3), and (5) implies a linear probability model

Annex: Examples of decisions

The following is an example of a for decision, regarding water, in a meeting in Andhra Pradesh. The second paragraph, spoken by the Gram Panchayat president - *Sarpanch* contains the decision:

Villager, BC, Male: There is only one water tank for the entire village. One more tank should be constructed.

Sarpanch, OC, Male: Government has sanctioned 3 lakhs for constructing the tank but the contractors have not started the work. We have discussed about this with higher officials and very soon this will be constructed. Also we have asked the government to allot a place for the cattle but they have not responded.

The following is an example of a for decision, regarding roads, in a meeting in Tamil Nadu. The second paragraph, spoken by the *gram sabha* secretary contains the decision:

Male (Mr. Anumanthappan, Villager, SC): Near the Mariamman temple present here that is around the temple street light facility should be provided. Also light facility must be provided within the temple. Path leading to the temple is also in a very worst condition. So I request the Panchayat that must also provide a good path for that.

Male (Mr. Chandrakumar, Grama Sabha Secretary, MBC): Through this Panchayat decision is being made that the street light facility and construction of roads in the places near the temple. I convey that to you people in this Grama Sabha meeting.

The following is an example of an against decision, regarding schools, in a meeting in Tamil Nadu. The second paragraph, spoken by the Gram Panchayat president contains the decision:

Santhakumari, Villager, OBC: Didn't paint the school building.

President: You yourself have to look after this. There is no fund in the Panchayat.