

My work lies at the intersection of political economy and development economics, with an empirical focus on Sub-Saharan Africa. I pursue two broad lines of inquiry. First, for democracy to work, each link in a chain of accountability that runs from voters through candidates to political parties must hold. My research focuses on the role of information in this chain and shows how each link can be strengthened, and behavior affected, by the provision of information. Second, many new democracies are crafted onto existing institutions, specifically to systems of traditional chiefly authority, who retain control of public goods and services in rural areas. These chiefs are often criticized for ruling in an autocratic fashion that undermines economic development. I explore how the two institutions (the old and the new) can be fused together more effectively. Both research streams focus empirically on Sierra Leone, where I have forged partnerships in government and civil society over the past fifteen years that have enabled me to conduct a series of unique field experiments that influence policy and operate at national scale.

1. Information and Electoral Accountability

Elections are major events integral to the functioning of democracy. They are also expensive, requiring substantial funding from domestic governments and the support of international donors in poor countries. The United Nations Development Programme, for example, mobilized 3 billion dollars for elections over the past 15 years.ⁱ Despite its small size, Sierra Leone was the ninth largest recipient of these funds. Yet these investments, even when they succeed in fostering a free and fair election, often fail to deliver high performing public officials. Why?

To make progress on this puzzle, I start with voters and the premise that if they are poorly informed, they are unable to select candidates based on quality or performance in office. I then test whether fixing the information problems impeding voters is sufficient to induce a positive response from candidates and change their behavior in office. Finally, I explore the critical role that political parties play in determining who gets to run for office in the first place.

A leading concern is that ethnic- or caste-allegiances dominate politics in many developing countries and deliver the vote irrespective of the competence of individual candidates. One potential reason for such uncritical support is that high illiteracy rates and limited media leave citizens with little alternative information on which to base their vote. Information provision thus offers a defense against this low accountability equilibrium, an intuition I formalize and test empirically in [1] “***Crossing Party Lines: The Effects of Information on Redistributive Politics***” (*American Economic Review* 2015). I find that while ethnic allegiances are a powerful driver of vote choice in Sierra Leone, they are not immutable. In local elections, where voters have roughly twice as much information about candidates as in national elections, voting across ethnic-party lines increases by 11 percentage points (on a base of only 15 percent in national elections). Moreover, the richer information environment effectively expands the set of potentially competitive races—since sufficiently strong candidates can win outside their ethnic strongholds—and parties respond by spreading campaign resources across a broader range of races. This last link, showing how changes in voter behavior induce strategic responses by politicians and parties, is a key feature that distinguishes my work from others in the literature.

Given the benefits of even quite limited information detected in [1], a natural question is how to introduce richer sources of information. Candidate debates are one such source that is popular in wealthier countries, where debates have a strong history and remain integral to contemporary campaign strategy. Even in rich countries, however, there is little evidence that they affect the behavior of voters or politicians. In [2] “***Debates: Voting and Expenditure Responses to Political Communication***,” (with K. Bidwell and R. Glennerster, accepted by the *Journal of Political Economy*) we leverage experimental variation in Sierra Leone that exposed voters to

public screenings of videotaped debates. Our results show that debates build political knowledge in a way that changes how people vote, which induces candidates to invest more campaign effort and expenditure in informed communities, and fosters accountability pressure over public spending by elected officials. We parse the effects of information conveyed about policy versus charisma, and find that both are needed to change voter behavior. I extend this parsing to thinner slices of information in [3] “*Snap Judgments: Predicting Politician Competence from Photos*” and find evidence for meaningful inferences based on content as “light” as ballot photos. The debate results show how political communication can trigger a chain of events that begins with voters and ultimately influences policy.

On the strength of the evidence we produced in [2], our implementing partner was able to raise money to take debates to national scale in the 2018 election. In [4] “*Scaling Political Information Campaigns*,” Glennerster and I use this opportunity to evaluate a variety of associated challenges. We find that candidates face high coordinating costs and weak incentives to participate in initiatives that inform voters, but that these incentives adjust favorably with low cost dissemination guarantees (like paid radio airtime). Voters demonstrate reasonably high willingness to pay to access political information, and we find that the private sector can be profitably brought in to extend dissemination. Regarding broader impacts, at least three other debate experiments have been launched since our study (in Uganda, Ghana and Liberia).

Voter information campaigns operate over a fixed pool of candidates, which limits their impact on accountability if all candidates are low quality, and raises the question of who picks the candidates and how. In the U.S., candidates are chosen by voters via primaries; yet in the vast majority of democracies, they are appointed by party leaders; and there is little work on how these distinct design choices affect the selectivity and accountability of the electoral system overall. In perhaps our most ambitious partnership to date, we worked with both major political parties in Sierra Leone to vary how much say ordinary voters, as opposed to party leaders, had in selecting candidates for the 2018 Parliamentary races. In [5] “*An Experiment in Candidate Selection*” (with A. Kamara and N. Meriggi), we find that more democratic primary selection methods have positive effects on representation, favor candidates with stronger records of providing public goods, and alter financial payments from candidates to party officials. To the extent that past provision of public goods predicts future provision, these results are cautiously optimistic. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first analysis to exploit experimental variation in how parties select candidates. More broadly, the influence of parties extends well beyond Election Day, and I plan to study, both theoretically and empirically, how parties affect who leads and who works for the state, how productive they are, and how accountable government is to citizens.

2. *Reforming Local Institutions*

In many new democracies, elected officials rule alongside traditional authorities who control land, justice and local public goods in rural areas. These authorities are often criticized for being autocratic and unaccountable. A common response of the international aid community is to try to make them more inclusive and democratic, especially via community driven development (CDD) projects (the World Bank dedicates 5 to 10 percent of its global portfolio to CDD, with over \$17 billion in active investmentsⁱⁱ). In [6] “*Reshaping Institutions: Evidence on Aid Impacts Using a Preanalysis Plan*” (with Glennerster and E. Miguel, *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 2012) we exploit the random assignment of a CDD project in Sierra Leone, which combines financial grants with participation requirements aimed at empowering marginalized groups in local decision-making. We develop novel empirical measures based on observation of villagers engaged in concrete opportunities for collective action and deliberation. After four years of implementation,

we find strong positive impacts on the stock and quality of local public goods, but no evidence of effects on a wide variety of institutional performance and inclusion measures. We used a pre-analysis plan to bolster the credibility of our analysis, which we discuss, along with related strategies, in [7] “*Promoting Transparency in Social Science Research*” (with many co-authors, *Science* 2014). This experience sparked my contributions to broader discussions about tools to improve the rigor and replicability of applied research, an area that is rapidly advancing.

The mixed results regarding the efficacy of CDD in Sierra Leone led me to synthesize experimental evidence from around the globe. Meta-analysis in [8] “*Radical Decentralization: Does Community-Driven Development Work?*” (*Annual Review of Economics* 2018) suggests that CDD delivers public goods and modest economic returns at low cost in many difficult environments. There is little aggregate evidence, however, that CDD transforms local decision-making or empowers the poor in an enduring way. Part of this failure may be because some constraints believed important—like insufficient social capital—appear not to bind. Others, like exclusive local institutions, are a problem, but not one that CDD remedies. These results underscore the difficulty of changing deeply rooted institutional practices, and started me thinking about an alternative: instead of asking everyone to participate in local development, which is rather technical in nature, why not encourage communities to delegate to their most able members?

To explore this idea, in [9] “*Skill versus Voice in Local Development*” (with Glennerster, Miguel and M. Voors) we revisit the original study communities from [6] over a decade after the CDD program launched. Our data suggest that traditional chiefs fail to delegate and fully leverage the human capital that is present in their communities, even when it is clearly in their interest to do so. Encouragingly, in a real-world competition for local infrastructure grants, we find that a low-cost test to identify skilled technocrats and a public “nudge” to delegate project management to them, leads to large gains in competition outcomes. While we find null long-run results of CDD on performance in the grants competition, we do find strong persistence of the public infrastructure investments made 10 years prior. This long time horizon is rare for institutional experiments, yet particularly important given how slowly institutions evolve. Methodologically, we compare estimates to expert forecasts in policy and academia, which we elicited before analyzing the data. Reforms to better leverage human capital apply more broadly to the challenge of recruiting, motivating and retaining productive state personnel, questions I plan to explore in future.

3. Teaching

I co-developed a new MBA course on firm strategy vis-à-vis governments in emerging markets. The class delves into political risk, operations in uncertain regulatory environments, and aligning incentives with business partners under weak judiciaries. I co-wrote a case on government expropriation, “*Repsol and YPF: A Perfect Marriage?*,” and developed transferable materials for sessions covering: i) regulatory strategy for mobile payments in Africa; ii) political factors determining domestic and Chinese investment in Zambian copper; and iii) understanding the FCPA via an exercise leveraging students’ professional experiences. The latter is an example of creative pedagogical methods, as I complement lectures and cases with in-class simulations, structured debates, and live polling. My skill in presentation has led to high enrollments (192 students in 3 sections this spring), and strong evaluations that emphasize a high-energy and inclusive class environment, consistently placing me in the top 20% of the faculty distribution. I advise several PhD and MBA students pursuing independent research.

ⁱ UNDP (2019): “Funding Analysis of UNDP Electoral Assistance 2004-2018,” internal memorandum.

ⁱⁱ Independent Evaluation Group (2017): https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/Data/reports/lp_genderincdd_01272017.pdf