

My research lies at the intersection of political economy and development economics, with empirical focus on Sub-Saharan Africa. I work mostly in Sierra Leone, where I have forged partnerships in government 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. I pursue two broad lines of inquiry.

For democracy to work, each link in a chain of accountability that runs from voters through candidates to political parties must hold. My first line of inquiry takes a programmatic approach to understanding how each link can be strengthened, and behavior affected, by information provision. Two papers show how information enables voters to better select on candidate quality. *“Crossing Party Lines: The Effects of Information on Redistributive Politics”* (AER 2015) examines this in the context of ethnicity-based politics, which have pernicious effects on accountability when ethnic loyalties deliver the vote irrespective of candidate competence or performance. And *“Debates: Voting and Expenditure Responses to Political Communication”* (accepted, JPE) experimentally evaluates whether publicizing candidate debates could be part of the solution. What distinguishes my approach in both is directly linking enhancements to the information held by voters to the strategic response of parties and candidates, who reallocate campaign effort and expenditure towards more informed voters. The debates paper goes one step further, showing how a better informed electorate fosters accountability pressure over the public spending of elected officials, thereby tracing the effects of information all the way through to policy. On the strength of these results, our implementing partner raised funds to take debates to national scale in 2018, and we explore associated incentive and implementation challenges in *“Scaling Political Information Campaigns.”* A companion piece, *“Snap Judgments: Predicting Politician Competence from Photos,”* extends this logic to increasingly thin slices of information and finds evidence for meaningful inferences based on content as light as ballot photos.

Information also plays a role in the earlier stage of candidate selection, which in the U.S. is a direct vote primary, but in most countries is a nomination process controlled by party leaders. Which mechanism performs better is unclear: while voter control delivers representation, i.e. citizens get their most preferred candidate, it may come at the cost of selection on quality if they are poorly informed. To make progress, in *“An Experiment in Candidate Selection,”* we partnered with both major parties in Sierra Leone on an experiment that varied how much say voters, as opposed to party leaders, had in selecting candidates for the 2018 Parliamentary races. We find that more democratic primary selection procedures enhance representation, favor candidates with stronger records of public goods provision, and alter the allocation of payments from potential candidates to parties. Future research will explore how selection affects accountability, where we are currently collecting performance data on elected MPs chosen under different selection regimes.

My second line of inquiry confronts the fact that 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 criticized for ruling in an autocratic fashion that undermines economic development. A common response of the foreign aid community is to try to make them more democratic, especially via community driven development (CDD) projects that combine financial grants with participation requirements aimed at empowering marginalized groups. In *“Reshaping Institutions: Evidence on Aid Impacts Using a Preanalysis Plan”* (QJE 2012) we find that CDD enhances the stock and quality of public goods, but has no effect on a variety of institutional performance measures. We used a pre-analysis plan to bolster the credibility of our analysis, which we discuss, along with related strategies, in *“Promoting Transparency in Social Science Research”* (Science 2014). I find a similar pattern of results globally via meta-analysis in *“Radical Decentralization: Does Community-Driven Development Work?”* (ARE 2018), which underscores the difficulty of changing deeply rooted institutional practices. An alternative to such participatory development is to encourage communities to delegate to their most able members. We explore this idea in *“Skill versus Voice in Local Development”* where we find that 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 infrastructure grants, 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. Reforms to better leverage human capital apply more broadly to the challenge of recruiting and motivating state personnel, questions I plan to explore in future.