

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 struggle to extend their reach into rural communities, as decentralized service provision often confronts capacity constraints and clashes with existing traditional authorities. These chiefs are often criticized for ruling in an autocratic fashion that undermines local economic development. I explore how the two institutions (the old and the new) can be fused together more effectively. Empirical work for both research streams focuses primarily on Sierra Leone, where I have forged partnerships in government and civil society that have enabled me to conduct a series of novel field experiments that influence policy and operate at national scale.

Since being awarded tenure, I have published three articles in economics (in the *American Economic Review*, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, and *Economic Journal*), one in political science (in the *Journal of Politics*), produced a new working paper, and launched new field experiments in Sierra Leone and Zambia.

1. Information and Electoral Accountability

Elections are major events that are integral to the functioning of democracy. They are also expensive, requiring substantial funding from domestic governments and the support of international donors in low income countries. 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 improve the behavior of elected officials. 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 allegiances dominate politics and deliver the vote irrespective of the competence of individual candidates. One explanation for this is that high rates of illiteracy and limited media leave citizens with little alternative information on which to base their vote. If so, information provision offers a path out of this low accountability equilibrium, an intuition I formalize and test in [1] “***Crossing Party Lines: The Effects of Information on Redistributive Politics***” (*American Economic Review* 2015). I find that in local elections, where voters have roughly twice as much information about candidates as in national races, voting across ethnic-party lines increases substantially. Moreover, the richer information environment 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, 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, *Journal of Political Economy* 2020) we leverage experimental variation in Sierra Leone that exposed voters to public screenings

of 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 newly informed communities, and fosters accountability pressure over the public spending of elected officials. We parse the effects of information conveyed about policy versus charisma, and find that both influence voter evaluation of candidates. I extend this parsing to thinner slices of information in [3] “*Snap Judgments: Predicting Politician Competence from Photos*” (*Journal of Politics* 2022) 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 produced in [2], our implementing partner was able to raise funds to scale up debates in the 2018 election. In [4] “*The Incentives to (Not) Debate in Low Information Races*,” R. Glennerster and I use this opportunity to evaluate a variety of associated challenges. We find that candidates have weak individual incentives, and face high coordinating costs, to participate in debates, but that these incentives adjust favorably with the introduction of a guaranteed public dissemination platform (like prepaid radio broadcasts). Voters demonstrate reasonably high willingness to pay to access debates, and we find that the private sector can be profitably brought in to amplify their dissemination. As to broader impacts, at least three other debate experiments have been launched since our study (in Uganda, Ghana and Liberia).

Voter information campaigns can take us only so far if all candidates on offer are low quality, which raises the question of who picks the candidates and how. In the U.S., voters choose candidates via primaries; yet in the vast majority of democracies, party leaders appoint candidates with little public consultation. Not much is known about 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, *American Economic Review* 2021), we find that more democratic primary selection methods have positive effects on representation and favor candidates with stronger records of providing public goods. To the extent that past provision of public goods predicts future provision, these results are cautiously optimistic.

We have a new set of field experiments underway that tackle the question of how to get high human capital, high integrity citizens to put themselves forward for consideration as political candidates in the first place. We study an intervention that identifies, screens, and encourages high quality potential candidates to enter politics; and then shares information about these aspirants with political parties, in the lead up to Sierra Leone’s next local elections (scheduled for June 2023). We further embed a sub-experiment focused on increasing female representation in politics.

2. Decentralization and 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 currently maintains \$42.6 billion in active CDD investments across 93 countries¹). 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 find strong

positive impacts on the stock and quality of local public goods, but no evidence of effects on a variety of novel measures we developed to measure institutional performance and inclusion. 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.

Given the observed difficulty of changing deeply rooted institutional practices, an alternative strategy is to move away from broad based participation and focus instead on encouraging delegation to the most able community members. We explore this idea in [9] “**Skill versus Voice in Local Development**” (with R. Glennerster, E. Miguel and M. Voors, *Review of Economics and Statistics* 2021). Our data shows that, in the status quo, traditional chiefs fail to delegate and thus do not 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.

Since CDD appears effective in delivering local infrastructure in the short run, and at low cost, knowing how these investments fare over time sheds light on the thorny issue of aid sustainability. To investigate the durability of CDD investments, we revisited the original study communities from [6] more than a decade after the program launched. In [10] “**Long-run Effects of Aid: Forecasts and Evidence from Sierra Leone**” (with R. Glennerster, E. Miguel and M. Voors, conditionally accepted at *The Economic Journal*) we estimate large persistent gains in local public goods and market activity, and modest positive long run effects on institutions, which are impressive given the challenging operating environment. Methodologically, we compare our empirical estimates to the forecasts of experts from Sierra Leone and abroad, working in policy and academia, and find that local policymakers are overly optimistic about CDD’s effectiveness.

In a new partnership launched with the Government of Zambia, we are experimenting with strategies to accelerate “top-down” decentralization of public infrastructure provision from central to district government, accompanied by performance audit safeguards to mitigate potential leakage from corruption and low capacity. A complementary set of “bottom-up” interventions focuses on building technical capacity and enhancing representation at the most local tier of government.

3. Teaching

The global version of the Strategy Beyond Markets MBA course that I co-developed continues to grow in size (237 students enrolled last winter) and popularity (I was selected as a finalist for the MBA Distinguished Teaching Award in 2021). I recently had the opportunity to contribute to the GSB’s adaptation to the COVID-19 crisis, serving on a committee that helped faculty transition successfully to online instruction, and then equip classrooms and train faculty to support hybrid instruction, all geared towards ensuring that the student learning experience remained of the highest possible quality.

ⁱ Source: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/communitydrivendevelopment#2>