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Strengthening the accountability of politicians

Across much of the world, votes are often cast on the basis of regional ties, patronage politics, or simple bribery. In Freetown last week, politicians, civil society, academics, and media came together to discuss ways to make politicians more accountable and to encourage people to base their vote on policies and performance, rather than party loyalty and/or gifts. In the past few years, an increasing number of studies have suggested that voters in developing countries will respond to information about candidates and change their vote, rewarding high performing politicians and punishing poorly performing ones. This encouraging evidence on efforts to strengthen formal democracy has come from political systems as diverse as [Brazil](#), [India](#), [Benin](#), and now Sierra Leone and is in contrast to the rather discouraging evidence on external efforts to change the workings of more informal institutions which I blogged about in [the fall](#). While no study has yet linked the improvement in the workings of democracy to improved services for the poor on the ground, the hope is that by getting better politicians elected, and showing politicians that if they don't perform they will be punished at the polls, these voter education campaigns will translate into improved services.

It was particularly exciting at the Freetown event, hosted by the International Growth Centre, to have Amrita Johri from SNS here to explain their pioneering work informing voters of the qualities of political candidates in India. SNS used the Indian Right to Information Act to collect data on how incumbent politicians spent their discretionary funds, what committees the MPs were on and how active they were. They use this information to create score cards which are placed in local newspapers and disseminated through [meetings and street theater](#).

But many countries in Africa don't have the kind of detailed information that is available on MPs in India. Sierra Leone has just introduced a new Freedom of Information Act but this was not available during the 2012 election. Search for Common Ground therefore decided to videotape debates between MP candidates in 14 constituencies and screen these at randomly selected polling centres throughout the relevant constituencies. Exit polls conducted in treatment and comparison communities showed that the debates led to greater political knowledge (for example about the size of MPs Constituency Facilitation Fund), about candidates characteristics (eg candidate education), and candidate policy stance. Debates also led to a change in how people voted—with a 5% increase in the vote share for the candidate who won the debate. It also led to greater policy

alignment between voters and candidates. In other words, voters were more likely to vote for a candidate who shared the same policy preferences as themselves.

Dr Yusuf Bangura noted that the evidence from the US is that political debates tend to have little influence on how people vote. Why would it be different in Sierra Leone? One possible reason was that in the US, voters are bombarded with information about candidates and the marginal information gained from debates may be small. In contrast, in Sierra Leone, voters had few alternative sources of information on MPs. One interesting fact revealed in the discussion was how similar (and low) the level of knowledge was among voters in India and Sierra Leone.

Some of those at the workshop and in the media coverage of the event questioned whether a 5% swing was big enough to change much. After all, the majority of voters still voted along traditional party lines. The Honourable Isatu Kabia argued that a 5% swing was big and important and I agree with her. After all, if one debate screening late in the campaign in a system where there is little objective information to disseminate can have a net effect on vote shares of 5 percentage points, more continuous and more detailed information has the potential to have an even bigger impact. Hon. Kabia made the further important point that if potential candidates knew they would be rewarded for their objective performance, this would encourage good candidates to enter politics and this could have a profound effect on democracy.