

## Authors

Rachel Glennerster  
UK Department for International Development (DFID)

Katherine Casey  
Stanford University

Kelly Bidwell  
J-PAL Global

## DEBATES

The Impact of Voter Knowledge Initiatives in Sierra Leone

Kelly Bidwell  
J-PAL

Katherine Casey\*  
Stanford GSB

Rachel Glennerster  
J-PAL

June 19, 2015

### Abstract

Debates between candidates for public office have a rich historical tradition and remain an integral part of contemporary campaign strategy. There is, however, no definitive evidence of whether debates affect actual voting behavior. Limited media penetration implies that the effects of publicizing debates could be more pronounced, persistent and directly linked to electoral outcomes in the developing world. We experimentally manipulate citizen exposure to debates between Parliamentary candidates in Sierra Leone to measure their impacts on, and the interconnections between, voter behavior, campaign spending, and the performance of elected politicians. We find evidence of strong positive impacts on citizen political knowledge, policy alignment and votes cast on Election Day. We then document an endogenous response by participating candidates, who increased their campaign expenditures in communities where videotapes of the debates were screened in large public gatherings. A complementary series of individual treatment arms unpacks the different types of information delivered by the debates, and finds evidence that voters respond to both candidate charisma and “hard facts” about policy stance and professional qualifications. Lastly, we find longer term accountability effects on elected MPs, where participation in debates led to higher levels of constituency engagement and development expenditure during their first year in office.

\*Corresponding author: [kc25@stanford.edu](mailto:kc25@stanford.edu). This draft remains preliminary and incomplete. This research would not have been possible without the collaboration of Andrew James and Search for Common Ground, and Innovations for Poverty Action and their Freedom team. We are grateful to the National Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone and members of our expert panel for their collaboration. We are grateful for comments from Maggie Popp, Chris Basili and Francisco Tejada. We thank Allison Banerji, Fata Ezzah Guehi, Birk Erdasak, Abdou Karim, Agnes Lohi, Osman Nabe, Isaac Broderick, Katie Pary and Catherine Wright for excellent research assistance. Seminar participants at Bristol University, the Center for Effective Global Action, Experiments in Governance and Politics, International Growth Centre (IGC) Growth Week, Political Institutions and Economic Policy Conference at Princeton, Stanford GSB, University of British Columbia, University of California Berkeley, University of Michigan, Witterley and the Working Group on African Political Economy provided insightful comments. We gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Governance Initiative at J-PAL, IGC National Bureau of Economic Research and Stanford Institute for Innovation in Developing Economics. All errors are our own.

# Debates: The Impact of Voter Knowledge Initiatives in Sierra Leone

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