

Authors

Xavier Giné
World Bank

Researchers

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World Bank

Female Voter Empowerment through an Information Awareness Campaign

Editor's note: Xavier Giné is a Senior Economist at the World Bank. In our continuing series, he talks about research he presented at the Impact and Policy Conference.

Despite improvements in *de jure* rights to female political participation in emerging democracies, women are less likely than men to stand for public office and to participate as voters. Even when they do vote, women are less likely to exercise independence in candidate choice. Instead, women report voting in accordance with the preferences of the caste, clan or household head in contrast to men of all ages.

Although many factors affect the decision to vote, women in emerging democracies may face two distinct barriers. First, costs of participation may be too high. Traditions or cultural stereotypes may discourage the exercise of own preferences, mobility constraints may limit participation and, if there are expectations of voter intimidation or violence, personal security concerns may also loom larger among females. Second, women may have fewer or poorer sources of information about the significance of political participation or the balloting process, perhaps due in part to illiteracy and limited mobility. Lack of information may also reinforce stereotypes that further disengage women from public life. Related, because voting involves a civic duty, it is likely that voting behavior is influenced by the behavior of others, either because women obtain information from talking to other women or because voting is subject to peer pressure and social norms.

The study

The Marvi Rural Development Organization (MRDO) with the help of PPAF conducted a field experiment to test these ideas. The setting for the study was rural Pakistan where women still face significant barriers to effective political participation. An awareness campaign was conducted just before the 2008 national elections, after the voter registration period had ended. We divided villages into geographical clusters which were randomly assigned to receive the information or not. Within the group that received the information, a subset of households was also randomly assigned to receive a door-to-door awareness campaign.

The campaign was developed as a set of simple visual aids with two different messages: the importance of voting which focused on the relationship between the electoral process and policy, and the significance of secret balloting which explained the actual balloting process. Women received either the first message or both messages, allowing a test of whether knowledge about the voting process, including the fact that ballots are cast in an environment of secrecy, enhances female participation and independence in candidate choice.

Results

We find that turnout increases by about 12 percent for women who received the messages compared to women who did not, with somewhat larger effects for women exposed to both messages. More importantly, we find comparable turnout rates for the uninvolved close neighbors of women who received the information, indicating large geographical spillovers.

Given that about three clusters are mapped on average to a polling station, and that there are one to three polling stations per village, we complement the sample data with administrative data from all polling stations that served the study villages. We find that for every 10 women who received the messaging, (roughly 4 households), female turnout increases by about 9 additional votes. Once we take this externality into account, the cost of the intervention drops from US \$16.7 to about US \$2.2 per additional vote. In contrast, using the same administrative data we find no effect on male turnout, suggesting either that the provision of information on the electoral and balloting process is less salient for men or that men are simply not influenced by information provided to women.

In addition, treated women are significantly more likely to vote for the second most voted political party. Further, women in those same clusters who did not receive the information behave as if they had, confirming once more the importance of social interactions. Polling station data show that an increase of 10 percent in the share of treated women led to a decrease in the share of female votes for the winning party of 6 percent. These results suggest that the campaign could have influenced the share of votes at the constituency level and thus the policy agenda, had it been implemented at a larger scale.

Policy Implications

The results show that the campaign was least effective among women who had not voted in the past. As a result, more intensive interventions may be required for such women, including assistance with voter registration.

In general, while attitudes and social mores change slowly, the results suggest that information provision can empower women and provide a relatively cost effective mechanism for enhancing the participation of rural women in the democratic process.

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