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Establishing Responsive Linkages between Politicians and Voters in Pakistan

Competitive elections are a prerequisite for democracy, but are not adequate for ensuring responsive government. Even elected politicians may lack the experience, capacity, or incentives to perform in office as their constituents would prefer, or to deliver the public services they would most desire.

Our paper reports findings from a pilot study conducted in January-February 2017 on political responsiveness in Pakistan. Research was carried out in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). We set up repeated communications between approximately 500 voters and one member of the state legislative assembly (or, alternatively, a district level civil servant) using Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology. This technology allows users to interact with a computer on their cell phones by responding to voice prompts using the keypad.

The experimental intervention had multiple steps: (1) a pre-treatment survey of a random sample of voters about political representation, trust in government, attitudes towards contestation and violence, and experiences with government service delivery; (2) a cell phone message to voters from either a politician or a bureaucrat about upcoming spending decisions, with (for some) a request for feedback; (3) aggregation and analysis of the feedback by the researchers; (4) dissemination of the feedback to the politician and to the bureaucrat; (5) dissemination of the feedback to voters, accompanied by a cell phone message from either the politician or the bureaucrat; (6) a post-treatment survey of a random sample of voters to gather information to assess whether the opportunity to provide and receive feedback to an official changed political attitudes. The project is designed as a multi-factorial randomized control trial.