

Lessons from interventions to strengthen accountability mechanisms and improve voter inclusion

Political competition is a key pillar of democracy; in particular, elections can provide citizens with the opportunity to hold politicians accountable and shape the political environment. Electoral processes are expected to establish legitimate authorities consisting of accountable governments and officials. Voter mobilization and information campaigns are a focal point of political competition programs, and can contribute to political competition by helping voters to assess, among other things, candidates' qualifications or whether candidate priorities align with their own. However, common challenges for such campaigns can include motivating voters to process and act upon information about politicians' performance, or dealing with competing narratives from politicians. 3.4

To support evidence-informed political competition programming, USAID's Democracy, Rights and Governance (DRG) Center commissioned 3ie to develop an evidence gap map (EGM) to identify available evidence around political competition interventions and outcomes.⁵ The map includes a total of 194 studies: 192 impact evaluations (IEs) and two systematic reviews (SRs).

This brief derives from the political competition EGM. It describes how political competition was conceptualized and operationalized in the EGM and situates the topic of voter education campaigns within the overall political competition evidence base. The brief also highlights research findings and observations from 11 studies on interventions related to voter information, voter education and get-out-the-vote (GOTV), and outcomes related to the behavior of elected officials and voters.

The topic and studies were selected based on the availability of evidence, the priorities of the DRG Center, and the extent to which studies highlighted considerations for programming or research. The intended audience is DRG practitioners, with a focus on practical information and considerations to inform planning and implementation of DRG programming and research. Study findings are briefly summarized for interventions with implementation considerations. Findings related to other interventions evaluated in each study (i.e., for which the authors did not comment on implementation considerations) are not reported. The brief thus does not synthesize or quantify intervention effect sizes (as in an SR), nor does it replace the need for rigorous evaluation of DRG programming.

Key messages



For practitioners



- Among other factors, the timing and competitiveness of elections can influence whether accountability campaigns affect the behavior of voters or public officials and should be considered in intervention strategies.
- Income, education, religion, ethnicity, and perceptions about local democratic processes appear to play intermediary roles in voter education and/or registration campaigns. Understanding these factors is critical to designing equitable and relevant interventions.

For learning specialists, researchers, and commissioners of research



- Pre-analysis planning can help researchers to increase transparency while allowing flexibility for emergent inquiry.
- Machine-learning could help to estimate spillover effects from certain types of information campaigns, such as anti-corruption campaigns, which may influence local election strategies.

Conceptualizations

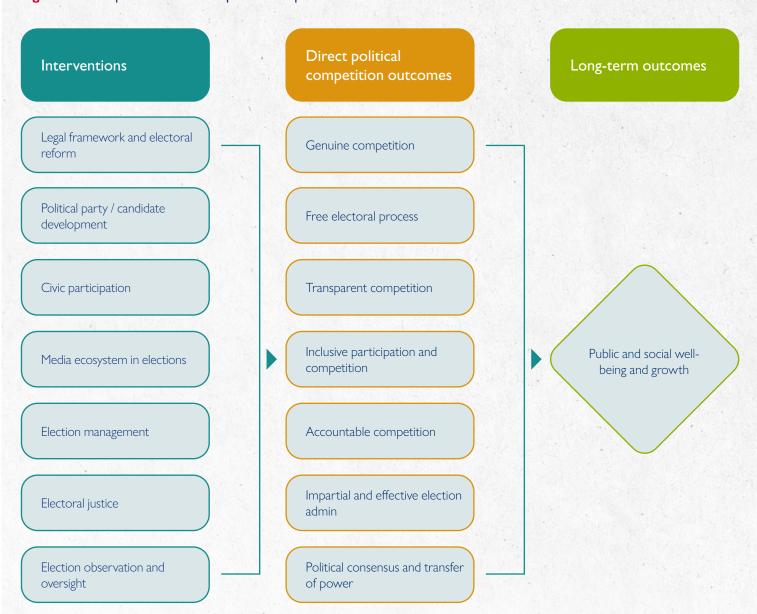
How we conceptualize political competition



We considered voter education and information programs within a broader framework of promoting political competition through the electoral cycle. The framework covered interventions that focus on "the struggle for state or political power" and that are directly linked to the concept of political participation, defined as "the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government." We focused on interventions that promote political competition in low- and middle-income countries and aim to achieve longer-term outcomes related to public and social well-being.

We designed the conceptual framework around seven intervention groups that cover the main aspects of the electoral cycle – from the legal frameworks that structure elections to oversight mechanisms that help to assess the integrity of electoral processes (Figure 1). The framework covers the key stakeholders of electoral cycles, including the government, the media and civil society. This brief focuses on civic participation as a political competition strategy within the third intervention group.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for political competition



Availability of evidence

Interventions and outcomes framework



We developed a framework with a list of intervention and outcome categories that are exhaustive and mutually exclusive and aim to represent the work of voters, candidates, and electoral bodies, among other electoral actors. The interactive online map provides the full list and definitions of the interventions and outcomes included in the EGM.

Examples of voter information, voter education, and GOTV activities summarized in the brief include disseminating information about candidates' priorities or performance to prospective voters, and voter registration campaigns.



Mapping the availability of voter information, education, and GOTV evidence



An EGM is a **visual representation** of completed and ongoing studies that quantify **changes** *attributable* **to a program, which are structured around a framework of interventions and outcomes.** The EGM thus represents an important sample of the available body of evidence that can inform USAID decision-making about where and how to invest resources for development.

The political competition EGM contains 194 unique studies, including 68 completed studies on voter information, voter education and GOTV published since 2006. The outcomes most commonly reported in these studies related to turnout and voting behavior (n = 54) and voter knowledge (n = 20).

The set of studies focused on voter information, voter education and GOTV were mainly conducted in Sub-Saharan

Africa (n = 31) and Latin America and the Caribbean (n = 18). The countries in which most studies were conducted included Brazil (n = 9) and India (n = 8), both electoral democracies following V-Dem's classification. 8

Over 80 per cent (n = 56) of completed studies evaluating voter information, voter education and GOTV interventions used experimental designs.

We did not identify high- or medium-confidence SRs on voter education. This brief is based on 11 primary studies, all of which are quantitative IEs. These evaluations studied voter education and information campaigns and reported outcomes related to accountability, politician performance, and voter behaviors.



For practitioners

Considerations for programming and implementation



Among other factors, the timing and competitiveness of elections can influence whether accountability campaigns affect the behavior of voters or public officials and should be considered in intervention strategies.

Adequately timing the dissemination of accountability information before elections could influence whether voters hold politicians accountable. One study explored mechanisms through which an anti-corruption program could affect mayors' re-election chances in Brazil.¹⁰ Municipalities were randomly chosen to be audited for their use of federal funds. Reports that documented corruption violations were released publicly, and transfers of federal funds could be reduced depending on the extent of violations.

The author reported that for audited municipalities, disseminating information relatively close to elections – at most eight months before – had a larger effect on incumbent mayors' re-election compared to other time points. Although voters might forget about corruption violations after eight months, the author speculated that if the information is disseminated 15 or more months before the election, voters may feel the effects of reduced transfers after corruption violations and could sanction mayors.

The study's findings suggest that timing of information campaigns, and enabling a balance between voters remembering corruption and having enough time to feel the effects of sanctions, could influence whether voters hold corrupt politicians accountable during elections.

The competitiveness of elections or MPs' actions may also influence whether accountability campaigns affect voter or politician behavior. In a study of a performance scorecard and information dissemination campaign about MPs in Uganda, the authors reported that the awareness campaigns did not translate into more accurate knowledge among citizens about their MPs' performance.4 In addition, the authors reported no evidence that the scorecards affected MPs' re-election chances. They hypothesized about the factors that may have contributed to these results. For example:

- The dissemination campaign may not have been effectively implemented to ensure that citizens retained knowledge about MPs' performance;
- MPs' actions, such as questioning or publicly speaking out against the scorecards, or influencing community workshops that disseminated information to voters, could have changed voter perceptions about the accuracy or relevance of information about MP performance;
- For MPs who won elections, voting margins were relatively large. As such, MPs who anticipated less competitive elections may have felt less motivated to change their behavior despite negative performance information;
- Effects on MP performance may be stronger when the information pertains to major corruption scandals instead of general performance; and/or
- MPs' re-election chances could have been more affected by personal ties to voters or resource levels than performance.



For practitioners

Among other factors, the timing and competitiveness of elections can influence whether accountability campaigns affect the behavior of voters or public officials and should be considered in intervention strategies.

In competitive or direct elections, transparency campaigns can motivate changes in politicians' behavior. One study in Pakistan evaluated an initiative that made legislators' income tax payments publicly available. 11 The extent to which legislators responded to their behavior being made public was dependent on the competitiveness of their elections or whether they were directly elected. Legislators whose previous election had close results between candidates were found to raise tax compliance after their previous tax payments were disclosed to the public. In addition, directly elected legislators were more likely to increase their compliance than legislators elected by their party. Information disclosure could motivate politicians facing competitive elections, or those who are directly elected, to change their behavior to ensure voter approval.

To support electoral competitiveness with transparency strategies, coordination with public officials from the ruling party may be needed.

Electoral competitiveness can affect how public officials seek to influence it. A study in Uganda examined an intervention that screened interviews with candidates from ruling and opposition parties running for office. The authors reported that the intervention increased voters' knowledge about opposition candidates and influenced their potential voting choices in favor of opposition candidates.

Relatively less information about opposition candidates was considered to be a possible contributing factor to continued support for the ruling party. This lack can reduce electoral competitiveness and make margins of victory for ruling political parties more comfortable. In Uganda, the ruling

party supported the intervention's goal to inform voters about all candidates. Support from the ruling party was deemed helpful and potentially counterintuitive to their own interests, considering the possible benefit to competing parties. However, the authors cautioned that in other contexts, ruling parties may resist similar efforts to inform the electorate about all candidates running for office.

Election competitiveness could also contribute to whether public screenings of candidate debates encourage politicians to engage with constituents. In a study of screenings of interparty candidate debates in Sierra Leone, the authors found that politicians who had participated in debates changed their behaviors during and

after the election:13

- During elections, politicians increased visits to voters, among other campaign investments. These effects were larger in competitive races and when candidates who were not in the lead showed better performance in the debates compared to those who previously led.
- Once in office, politicians held more meetings with constituents and spent more funds on development. However, they did not appear to change their parliamentary participation or advocacy for campaign priorities. The authors cautioned that these findings were tentative due to the small sample for the post-election portion of the study.
- The authors argued that debates could influence elections' competitiveness. However, the overall electoral competitiveness for political parties in the country was considered low. For example, some parties had maintained dominance due in part to ethnic ties.

Adapting information dissemination by considering context and costs

In the study of candidate debate screenings in Sierra Leone, the authors suggested that the cost of broadcasting debates can vary across urban and rural contexts, which can inform decisions about how to implement these programs cost-effectively.¹³ The study compared a relatively low fixed cost for producing videos of debates (about USD5,000 per constituency) to high marginal costs for using a mobile cinema to screen the debate in rural areas. While screening in urban areas may reach more people, using television or radio to disseminate the debates can be cost-effective based on media penetration by location. They suggested that if broadcasting debates by radio, holding them in a recording studio could capture live interactions among candidates that may be of interest to voters at a relatively low cost.

For practitioners

Income, education, religion and ethnicity, and perceptions about local democratic processes appear to play intermediary roles in voter education and registration campaigns. Understanding these factors is critical to designing equitable and relevant interventions.

Voters with relatively low incomes may be less motivated to vote following disclosure of corruption among candidates. In a study that shared information about politicians' and other elites' tax avoidance in Tanzania, the authors reported no effect from a neutral message and a reduction in vote intention from a message that emphasized the unfairness of evading taxes. 14 They also found that income levels were associated with participating voters' intention to vote.

Based on a negative effect on vote intention among voters of lower incomes, the authors speculated that this group may perceive themselves as less able to change politicians' corrupt practices or otherwise hold them accountable. They suggested that information about corruption across multiple parties could also reduce their confidence in public institutions, or that conditions will improve as a result of elections.

Education levels could influence voters' voting preferences but may also be less relevant to how voters absorb information from education campaigns. One study tested citizens' behavioral responses to an open-list voting system in Paraguay. 15 This system would allow voters to have greater influence over the selection of individual candidates compared to a closed-list system. The authors reported evidence that open lists may increase support for incumbent and potentially corrupt political parties, possibly driven by voters' education levels and spoken language.

For example, they found that even when presented with the opportunity, voters with relatively less education were less likely to indicate preferences for particular candidates compared to voters with more education. However, in a study of a voter education program in Senegal, the authors suggested that low education levels may not necessarily affect how voters process information.¹⁶ The authors reported that voters found information about politicians' performance over time helpful, regardless of education levels. This information

influenced beliefs and choices among those more likely to vote, or those who prioritized local projects.

The extent to which citizens' religion or ethnicity may be stigmatized should be considered when implementing voter registration drives. In a study of a voter registration campaign targeting migrants in India, the authors reported that registration assistance increased migrant voter registration and election turnout. 17 They also found that education, religion and ethnicity could influence these effects. Participants who had primary education were more likely to register, while participants who were Muslim or from scheduled castes or scheduled tribes were less likely to register to vote.

The authors reported less variation across populations with regard to voter turnout, though participants from scheduled castes or scheduled tribes were less likely to vote. Based on discussions with community members, they suggested that local staff responsible for registering voters may have raised additional objections for these participants. The authors concluded that it is important for voter registration drives to ensure greater equality among populations.

In a study of a voter education campaign in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the authors suggested that such programs carried out in fragile democratic contexts should consider finding a balance between presenting current democratic challenges and not discouraging voters. 18 They reported that the campaign negatively affected voters' perceptions of democratic processes, though it positively affected participation in areas outside of elections and democratic orientations, such as political tolerance. They suggested that education programs could offer examples of the challenges that democracies may face, such as protracted improvements to institutional processes. A more nuanced presentation of general challenges in democracies and local governance challenges may help to convey a less discouraging picture for voters.



For learning specialists and researchers

Trade-offs between research transparency and iterative analyses

The study in Sierra Leone suggested that a balance between transparency and iterative analysis is important for complex interventions, but that conventional pre-analysis plans, which contribute to transparency, can also constrain valuable emergent analysis.¹³ The authors identified challenges to achieving transparency and flexibility in the economics discipline, such as complex study designs or insufficient resources.

To ensure transparency, they developed a pre-analysis plan for the analyses of multiple randomized evaluations of candidate debates. They also scheduled time in the research process to identify lessons learned and apply them to subsequent phases of the project. However, in their view, pre-analysis plans can lose their value as experiments become more complex, in part because they can constrain the ability to iteratively learn over time during the research process or make it more difficult for reviewers to match pre-analysis plans with final analyses. While they suggested that a system of "data gatekeepers" could further ensure that researchers do not extract patterns of findings that are not truly present in the data, they also noted that research budgets in the social sciences are not usually large enough to support this. To avoid constraining iterative analysis and learning, they suggested that pre-analysis plans could focus on specifying outcomes, outcome measures, and differences across subgroups.



Machine learning could help to capture spillover effects

Another study of the municipal auditing program in Brazil reported that mayors who were not audited, but were exposed to "nearby" corruption of mayors from the same political party, were found to be more likely to run for re-election with a different party, as a strategy to avoid losing. ¹⁹ The author estimated geographic spillover effects on mayors switching political parties after information was publicly disseminated about neighboring municipalities. He argued that the definition of "nearby" should not be restricted to bordering municipalities but could also include municipalities further away.

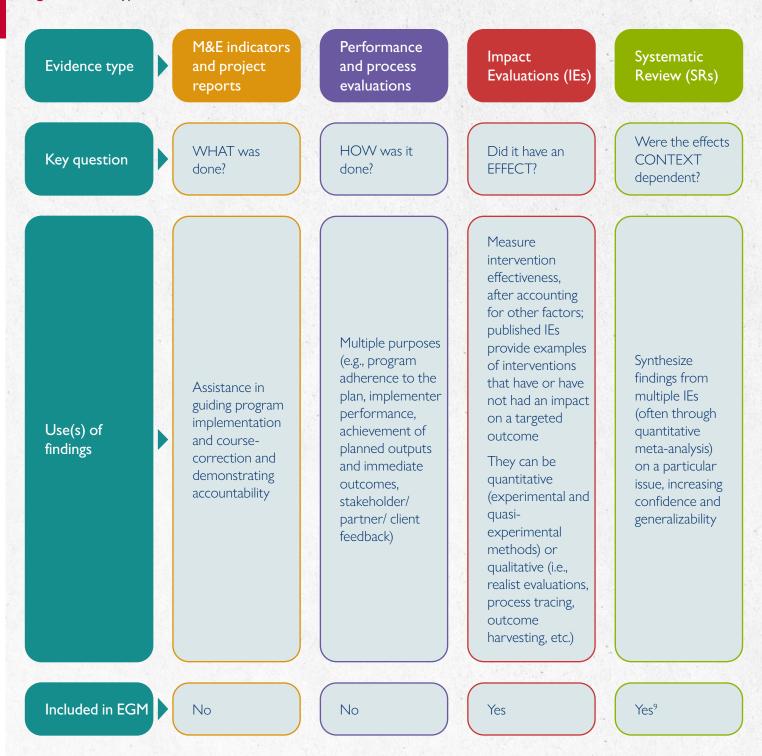
However, setting a plausible and justifiable range for the distance within which a neighboring municipality could be

affected by a municipality's finding of corruption could be challenging. To address this issue, the study used a supervised machine learning approach. Based on audit reports to count corruption violations for audited municipalities, the author built regression models to estimate the effect of nearby corruption on party switching over incrementally larger geographic distances between an audited municipality and a given location.

The author defined "nearby municipalities" by selecting the models with the largest explanatory power and that minimized error estimates. He concluded that using a machine learning approach allowed modelling of spillover effects even if the pathways by which they function are unknown.

About the evidence

Figure 2: What types of evidence are included in this brief?



In effectiveness evidence from IEs and SRs, **negative findings are just as important** as positive ones because they help to refine our understanding of what works (or not, and why or why not). In addition, the **absence of effectiveness evidence does not mean an**

intervention should be avoided, but rather highlights the potential benefit of an IE, particularly if the intervention:

- is innovative.
- may be scaled up, or
- is being considered as a potential model for replication elsewhere.

Why evidence matters

Why is this important for practioners?



This brief (along with the associated EGM matrix and report) is designed to inform USAID practitioners' investments in interventions to support elections through voter education and information campaigns at multiple phases of the program cycle, including strategic planning, project design and implementation, activity design and implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

- Results will feed into the **technical evidence** base in the learning phase of USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) Framework.
- IE findings provide USAID practitioners with ideas about which interventions they may want to consider when developing a program design.

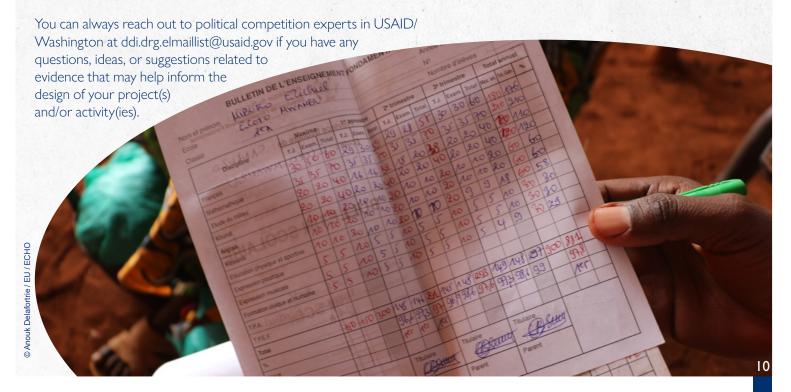
- Like IEs, SRs may include an explanation of relevant theories of change, which can be useful during the project and activity design stage.
- In SRs, the more consistent the findings are across contexts, the higher the likelihood that the approach may work in a new context.

We encourage practitioners to take a closer look at the Political Competition EGM online²⁰ to engage with the available evidence (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Using evidence in activity design

medium- or highconfidence SRs Review IEs for additional considerations, limitations, or ideas Are there any studies related to your intervention or program Consider whether it would If NC be useful to conduct an IE of your program

Review findings from



About the brief (i)



This brief draws on 11 IEs from the EGM intervention category voter information, voter education and GOTV campaigns, which measured outcomes related to behaviors by elected officials and voters. Reported findings and implementation considerations are illustrative and not based on systematic synthesis.

The studies on which this brief is based were identified through the political competition EGM.²⁰ The authors systematically searched for published and unpublished IEs and SRs through January 2022, then identified, mapped, and described the evidence base of interventions that promote

political competition through elections. The map contains two SRs and 192 IEs. The evidence's characteristics are described and mapped according to a framework of 28 interventions and 27 outcomes. The EGM can be viewed at https:// developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/politicalcompetition-through-elections-evidence-gap-map

This brief was authored by Lina Khan and Constanza Gonzalez Parrao. They are solely responsible for all content, errors, and omissions. It was designed and produced by Akarsh Gupta, Mallika Rao and Tanvi Lal.





The 11 IEs discussed in this brief are shown with an *.

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February 2023