



[Home](#) » [Opinion](#) » [Online Views](#)

Understanding why people contest elections

If we want to increase political competition at the local level, simply asking people to consider contesting may be an effective policy

Last Published: Mon, Dec 18 2017. 05 01 AM IST

Saad Gulzar | Muhammad Yasir Khan

Enter email for newsletter

[Sign Up](#)

Get Notifications

[The economics of long-term return on assets](#)

[Influencing events for 2018](#)



People wanted their candidacy to be associated with a pro-social and pro-poor message. Photo: Reuters

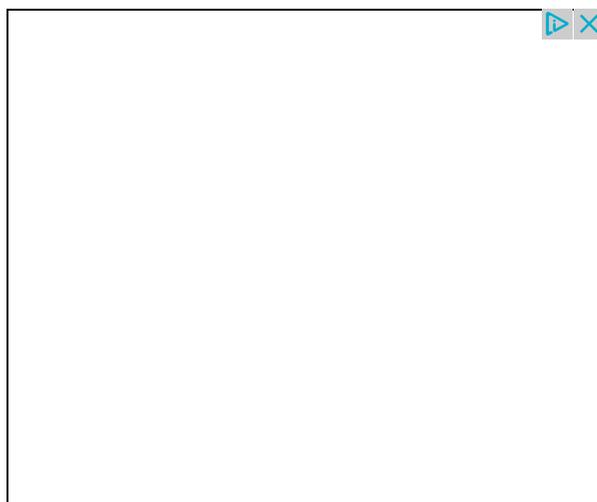
Under the landmark 18th amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan, the first-ever village council elections were held across the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province in May 2015. While previously citizens directly elected 125 members of the provincial assembly, they now elect more than 45,000 representatives across the province. In addition to looking after local service delivery, the village councils receive a small fund to undertake development work in their areas.

Who decides to contest these elections potentially shapes the very nature of representation, and what the government delivers to citizens. A common critique of decentralized systems is that local leaders have a great deal of control over budgets and decision making, and may use this power to capture resources intended for other beneficiaries.

One way to address this type of behaviour would be to encourage people who may be motivated to help the community to run for local political office. But evidence on the efficacy of encouraging people to run for office is thin. Further, there is limited understanding of the degree to which social dimensions of candidacy and personal benefits from office motivate people to run, and of whether these incentives determine a politician's performance once they are elected.

To explore these questions, we partnered with a local non-profit organization to carry out a door-to-door campaign in the Haripur and Abbottabad districts of KP. The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) and International Growth Centre (IGC) provided the funding.

We spoke to 9,300 randomly sampled people across 240 villages, provided them with simple information on the logistics of running, and asked them to consider entering the race for local office. Crucially, we implemented this canvassing exercise through a randomized controlled trial (RCT) so that we could precisely study the effects of asking people to run on their final decision.



Surprisingly, **we found that our simple conversations with people had a big effect on their decision to run**: In the control villages, where we did not carry out any activity, about 1 in 200 people ran for office. In contrast, when we had conversations with people, five times as many ran (5 in 200).

It turned out that if we wanted to increase political competition at the local level, simply asking people to consider contesting and providing them with basic information on how to do so could be an effective policy.

We then unpacked the process of candidacy by examining how others in society influence this decision. We studied this question by varying the kinds of appeals we made to people: In some villages, we highlighted how those who run may directly benefit from office—through enhanced respect, influence and connections; in others, we stressed how politics would enable winners to do good for their communities—for instance, by helping the poor through improved service delivery.

Neither of these appeals mattered when we made them in a meeting with a social

social benefits they can extract by running for office. What we found, however, is that the appeals had large and opposite effects when we made them in publicly organized meetings, where one's community members were also in attendance. Telling people to consider running to help *themselves* directly in public reduced their willingness to run for office, while asking them in public to consider running to help *others* in society almost doubled their willingness to run for office.

In other words, the appeals changed the decision to enter the race in the opposite direction when we delivered them in front of others in the village. This tells us something about the sociality of the candidacy decision—running for office to help oneself is seen as inappropriate in society.

One candidate told us that we had “dirtyed candidacy” by telling people that running would help them increase their influence in the area. Conversely, being seen as a social-minded person was desirable, and people wanted their candidacy to be associated with this pro-social and pro-poor message.

The decision to enter the race forged in this social setting had direct consequences for the performance of village councils. A year after the councils assume office, we returned to the field and documented the degree to which projects started by village councils matched the preferences of citizens. Councillors who ran more often as a result of receiving the social appeal in public, did a better job once they were in office—their choice of projects was closer to what citizens preferred, as verified through surveys with citizens.



Our study highlighted that social norms may affect who decides to run for local office. It is important to understand these because the decision to enter the race has direct consequences on improving policies for citizens. We showed that there are specific ways in which political competition at the local level may be increased to address concerns of

Saad Gulzar and Muhammad Yasir Khan are, respectively, assistant professor of political science at Stanford University and a PhD student at the University of California, Berkeley's Haas School of Business.

This is part of the Young Asian Writers series, a Mint initiative to bring young voices from different Asian countries to the fore.

First Published: Sun, Dec 17 2017. 11 30 PM IST

TOPICS:

LOCAL ELECTIONS

ELECTION CANDIDATES

KHYBER PAKHTUNKWA

PAKISTAN

POLITICAL COMPETITION

You May Like

Sponsored Links by Taboola

A Tragic End To A Great Year For Carrie Underwood

saucewalker.com

Golfers Are Replacing Their Lob Wedge with This All-New Club

Square Strike Wedge Golf

10 Most Perfectly Timed Photos

Livestly

Fire Up Your Workout with High-Performance Prints

Amazon Fashion

Remember Her? Take A Deep Breath Before You See What She Looks Like Now

Miss Penny Stocks

Bitcoin Expert: "Cryptocurrencies Are Exploding!"

Choose Yourself Financial, LLC

Get Notifications

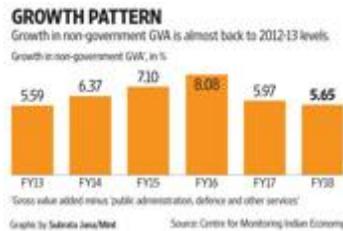
The economics of long-term return on assets

Influencing events for 2018

EDITOR'S PICKS »



Arun Jaitley's fifth Union Budget



A statistical boost to growth in Indian economy



2018: Year of resolution & recovery for public sector banks?