

Efficacy of "Town Hall" Meetings in Electoral Democracy: Theory and Evidence from Indian Village Councils

Sabyasachi Das,
ISI Delhi

Date: 17.06.2015, Venue: SR-1 @ 2.30PM

Abstract

Deliberative institutions, such as "Town Hall" meetings, have persisted over centuries in many countries around the world. Yet our understanding about their relevance in electoral democracies is extremely limited. This paper, for the first time, provides both a theoretical framework to analyze the "Town Hall" meetings, and compelling empirical evidence to show their importance and mechanism of influence in affecting public good provision. The empirical analysis is set in a context where the deliberative institution operates at a scale unprecedented in history, namely the context of local public meetings (*gram sabha*) in India's 250,000 village councils. The model endogenizes the meeting attendance of voting groups with different preferences; meeting helps the voters to probabilistically constrain the elected policymaker's choice of policy ex-post. Equilibrium meeting attendance rates of groups are characterized under policymakers with different group identities. The characterization result is sharp enough to rule out other possible mechanisms, such as information aggregation, or auditing of policymaker's effort. I find that presence of meetings can help the voters elect a more able policymaker. The empirical tests of the predictions exploit the randomized reservation of the election for village-chair (*Pradhan*) positions for women. Consistent with my theory, I find that among villages where women are a minority, the meeting attendance rates of *both* men and women are higher in women reserved villages than unreserved ones, while among villages where women are a majority they are lower. I also find that an increase in the relative meeting attendance of women shifts the relative provision of local public goods towards the ones preferred relatively more by them (sanitation and health). This result shows that the ability of discriminated groups such as women to directly affect policy, in presence of "Town Hall" meetings, is underestimated if we only focus on their representation in electoral politics.

Speaker Profile

Prof. Das recently joined ISI Delhi. He completed his Ph.D. in Economics at Yale. His blog is here: <https://dassabyasachi.wordpress.com/>