Deliberative inequality: a text-as-data study of Tamil Nadu's village assemblies

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Date: 06.02.2019, Venue: C11 @ 11.30AM

Abstract

The resurgence of deliberative institutions in the developing world has prompted a renewed interest in the dynamics of citizen engagement. Using text-as-data methods on an original corpus of village assembly transcripts from rural Tamil Nadu, India, this paper opens the "black box" of deliberation to examine the gendered and status-based patterns of influence. Drawing on normative theories of deliberation, this analysis identifies a set of clear empirical standards for "good" deliberation, based on an individual's ability both to speak and be heard, and uses natural language processing methods to generate these measures. The study first shows that these assemblies are not mere "talking shop" for state officials to bluster and read banal announcements, but rather, provide opportunities for citizens to challenge their elected officials, demand transparency, and provide information about authentic local development needs. Second, the study finds that across multiple measures of deliberative influence, women are at a disadvantage relative to men; women are less likely to speak, set the agenda, and receive a relevant response from state officials. Finally, the paper shows that although quotas for women on village councils have little impact on the likelihood that they speak, they do improve the likelihood that female citizens are heard.

Speaker Profile

Vijayendra (Biju) Rao, a Lead Economist in the Development Research Group of the World Bank, works at the intersection of scholarship and practice. He integrates his training in economics with theories and methods from anthropology, sociology and political science to study the social, cultural, and political context of extreme poverty in developing countries. He leads the Social Observatory, an inter-disciplinary lab to improve the conversation between citizens and governments. His research, published in The American Economic Review, The Journal of Political Economy, The American Political Science Review, World Development and other journals, has spanned a variety of subjects dowries in India, domestic violence, the economics of sex work, public celebrations, community development, and deliberative democracy. He and Ghazala Mansuri co-authored *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?* which the Nobel Laureate Roger Myerson has described as "one of the most important books in development in recent years." His latest book (with Paromita Sanyal) is *Oral Democracy: Deliberation in Rural India* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). He was on the team of 2006 WDR on Equity and Development, and has co-edited *Culture and Public Action*, *History, Historians and Development Policy*, and, *Deliberation and Development*. He serves on the editorial boards of several journals and is a member of the Successful Societies Program at the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR).

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