Reimagining Citizen-Government Interactions: An RCT Proposal for Digital Grievance Redressals in Odisha, India

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Abstract

In a democracy, there are two key aspects to political accountability: first, the ability of people to question the government, and second, documentation of answers from the government available to the general audience. In India, besides a few state-level attempts, the only national-level grievance redressal is the Right to Information Act[1]. The portal under the RTI Act requires payment for processing requests, has no feedback mechanism, and needs a significant amount of identifying information, making it inaccessible to a large part of the population. Moreover, the responses are provided through physical mail and email, neglecting any provision for public access. Other mediums at the state level have high opportunity costs: in-person submissions at Government offices and complete lack of anonymity. A potential solution is to make these discourses digitally public through a platform which is accessible, centralized, and public. Moreover, provide a pressure-free anonymous way to register grievances to facilitate accountability for governments. Opening up a channel to resolve information asymmetry between citizens and their local government through data and digitization. Voters need space to raise questions on everyday concerns, to build on action taken on them, and choose candidates that represent them better and have fulfilling outcomes. My hypothesis is that if citizens better understand the day-to-day progress of their local government, they would be empowered to make more informed voting decisions and hold their government accountable. Conversely, if local governments have contextual insights into what areas of a citizen's welfare require greater attention, they would be able to address these issues more efficiently.

Background

The story begins in 2022 in rural Odisha, in eastern India, where self-coined 'Hashtag warriors[2]' stormed Twitter for 12 minutes every day at noon to call attention to local issues. The campaign, called *12baje12minute[3],* highlights how Twitter emerged as the preferred digital platform in Odisha for grievance redressal since the outbreak of Covid-19. Built on the community-sourced

data, politicians and civil society can digital engagement to strengthen the roots of India's democracy and address the concerns that directly impact the people.

India has been celebrated for its successful organization of massive elections over the past 75 years. However, true democracy involves much more than just holding elections. The 'by the people' mentality that characterizes democracy is fading away. Recent incidents of farmer protests, the abrupt introduction of the CAA (Citizen Amendment Act, 2019)[4], and police-led attacks on university campuses raise doubts around whether citizens feel represented by elected officials or are losing trust in their government. This trend is not unique to India: a 2021 Ipsos survey[5] in 28 countries found that government officials and politicians are the least trusted people globally. The question is whether this mistrust is a result of a mere narrative or based on credible information about governments' failure to be accountable.

India has been labeled as an electoral autocracy[6] by Sweden-based V Dem Institute[7], a conclusion that is further validated by US-based non-profit Freedom House, which downgraded India from a 'free' to a 'partially free' democracy in 2021. It is difficult to measure the productivity of politicians in this system, and how accountable they are to their constituents. Every time an elected representative is charged with a criminal offense, it reduces the public's confidence in the quality of politicians elected to govern the country. According to a study, the share of criminal politicians in Lok Sabha elections was at 43% in 2019. Elected officials also often fail even the most fundamental duties, like attending parliamentary sessions and participating in debates. As per the Economist[8], the number of days per year that the national Parliament meets has fallen from more than 100 in the 1950s to 66 in the 2014-19 term. The United States Congress, by comparison, is typically in session for more than 160 days a year. With the recent case in the winter session of 2023, where 143 MPs from the opposition were suspended[9], a prominent Congress (opposition) MP Shashi Tharoor said, "Unfortunately, we have to start writing obituaries for parliamentary democracy in India."

Intervention

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grievances to facilitate accountability for governments. Opening up a channel to resolve information asymmetry between citizens and their local government through data and digitization. Voters need space to raise questions on everyday concerns, to build on action taken on their concerns, and choose candidates that represent them better and have fulfilling outcomes. We can visualize a national level digital platform beyond existing social media that allows citizens to raise tickets for local government bodies to be resolved with credible action. Creating a digital trail of information on the measurable impact generated through the representative's tenure would provide room for more strategic voting during elections and higher turnouts to elect more representative and high-quality politicians. Through a crowd sourcing mechanism there is space for higher accountability as local representation is under the eye of their voting group. For politicians, the portal acts as documentation of progress made on their goals, which they can cite for future elections. For budding politicians, this can be the space where they showcase community involvement and gather insights on true concerns. We have seen evidence of higher voter turnouts being linked with increased share of welfare spending in Brazil[10], which is a key challenge for growing economic disparity in India as well. Current research[11] has shown that political communication such as candidate debates can enhance political knowledge and participation of voters as well as government accountability. In the context of rural India, field experiments[12] have found that knowledge interventions such as political report cards[13], radio campaigns[14], and messenger applications[15] are effective instruments for holding politicians accountable.

Experiment Design

This analysis led to the beginning of my work on building a citizen-government discourse platform in India, which features digital grievance redressal on a national scale. While designing the pilot as a Graduate Affiliate at the Centre for Democracy at UChicago, I concurrently designed an RCT proposal to validate the potential impact and effectiveness of this platform. Through our experiment, we focus on the two primary hypotheses stated above to address information asymmetry between citizens and their local government. Considering these citizen-government dynamics guides my research question: **Does the provision of digital grievance redressal to the government enhance accountability through a shift to welfare spending and strategic voting?**

This experiment is planned to be conducted in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha state in eastern India, which is among the largest in the state. The Mayurbhanj district has 26 Blocks, 3,966 Villages, and 404 Gram Panchayats, with a district sex ratio of 1,006 females for every 1,000 males and a literacy rate of 63.98%. Its present government is a national leader in e-government services, providing an ideal context for our experiment.

The key intervention is to provide access to the pilot of a new digital platform that I am currently developing, where citizens can anonymously raise issues/tickets to the local government body and offer ratings on their responses. This platform is intended to enable citizens to react to/comment on complaints, view government responses and ratings provided by other citizens, and connect to existing social media platforms to build network effects. The crowdsourced data from the platform will populate data visualizations within the application regarding the number of complaints successfully addressed by the local government body, which may inform future voting strategies. In the proposed experiment, we will conduct randomization within the 404 Gram Panchayats in the district. This random allocation will have a 1:1 ratio for the treatment and control groups, resulting in approximately 200 GPs in treatment versus 200 GPs in control. The treatment will involve intensive encouragement activities at the community (network effects) and individual levels (aiding citizens in installing and using the platform) for citizens and further guidance to the local panchayats to respond to grievances raised on the platforms. The control group will have placebo access to the platform with limited marketing and no responses to grievances raised.

At the GP level, we have four outcomes related to strategic voting and welfare responses. Under strategic responses, we look at the difference in trust perception of the local government and the decision-making process of voting for their Sarpanch (Gram Panchayat Head). This data will be collected through a randomly collected household survey in each GP. To avoid social desirability bias, we will offer a simple survey on digital devices which can be filled out by citizens without the enumerator observing their inputs. We expect that our trust and strategic voting data will inform the theory of change—that if citizens better understand the day-to-day progress of their local government, they will be empowered to make more informed voting decisions. Under welfare response, we will examine the Gram Panchayat's understanding of citizens' concerns in correlation with the grievance data collected from both control and treatment groups. The data will be

collected through a Gram Panchayat survey and compared with the data collected on the platform. We will also assess the improvement in the service delivery of five prime state-level government schemes in the domains of employment, health, and education. This data is collected by the state government for each GP and is also reflected in the budget allocation.

Moving Forward

The experiment is to be implemented with the beta version of the application which is under development and should be ready by June 2024. In the due time, we will be conducting power calculations for given outcomes through self-reported pilot data to determine the minimum detectable effect.

This digital platform would not come without challenges. While people are becoming more accepting of digital tools, deploying a national resource like this would require increased investment in digital literacy training. Digital platforms have also been used as tools of polarization[16], and any such models will have to be resilient against digital fraud and protect anonymity to allow freedom of expression. The Indian government would also have to invest more in its digital infrastructure, which lags behind compared to that of the private sector. One promising move in this direction is the Odisha government adopting a "5T model"[17] to ensure a tech-enabled governance reform system. The 5T guidelines—teamwork, technology, transparency, transformation, and time limit—mandate that the relevant government agency act on issues within 24 hours of a tweet. While anonymity is a need for the platform to provide equitable access without fear, we are working with the technology to make sure only credible profiles created through the Indian electoral ID can be registered. Given the vast disparity in digital literacy, user-friendly is a key priority, and we are looking in NLP (Natural Language Processing) for ease of filing complaints while also reducing the changes for unfavorable content on the platform.

The Odisha case study shows that there is space for innovation to build platforms in India that help citizens engage better with their local governments and develop trust in elected officials. We need to create, support, fund and mobilize such platforms that promote these informational channels for political discourse.

End Notes

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