

Evaluation Brief

The National Democratic Institute

Global Design, Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning

The Issue

VERTICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Elections are seminal moments in democratic accountability. However, in highly contentious contexts, disaffected citizens, especially youth, have little trust or motivation to engage in flawed elections. Moreover, they are susceptible to rising political polarization, which further undermines the power of vertical accountability.

THE DEMOCRACY CHALLENGE

Can participation in citizen policy debates — potentially combined with exposure to candidate debates — strengthen political accountability structures by reducing partisan tensions, increasing citizen policy knowledge and interest; strengthening a sense of political efficacy, and motivating political participation?

EVALUATION DESIGN

With funding from DRL and in partnership with academic researchers from Evidence in Governance And Politics (EGAP), NDI experimentally tested the impacts of citizen driven policy deliberations and debates during the Honduras 2021 elections



The Impact of Citizen Policy Deliberation & Debate During Contentious Elections

Experimental Evidence from the 2021 Honduras Elections

In a fragile political context, elections can be inflection points where political competition renews democratic accountability or further exacerbates identity politics and drives political polarization.

Across the globe, experiments in deliberative democracy have shown much promise in bridging differences, building solidarity and renewing democratic relationships between citizens and their representatives. Citizen assemblies, panels and juries have seen successes at local and national levels, generating new policy proposals, contributing to constitutional referenda, monitoring government performance and in some places establishing permanent deliberative bodies for policy making. Citizen deliberation, debates and democratic decision making are also touted as a healthy antidote to democratic erosion, mitigating political polarization, renewing trust in democratic institutions and diversifying citizen engagement in the democratic process. However, in contexts of prolonged political contention, flawed elections and weak vertical accountabilities, would citizen deliberations be sufficient to overcome deepening partisan animosity? Could citizen-driven policy debates increase a sense of political efficacy and drive political participation, despite a flawed electoral context? These were some of the driving questions NDI and its academic partner sought to answer during Honduras' 2021 presidential and parliamentary elections.

The Role of Perspective Taking:

Deliberation between diverse citizens is thought to engender perspective-taking. However, the mechanism remains unclear. Does deliberation create emotional and/or intellectual empathy through exposure to new ideas, contact with new people; or does it simply amplify empathy among citizens already pre-disposed toward social empathy? Do specific modes of deliberation, such as policy debates, bring about perspective-taking? Understanding the mechanisms within deliberative democracy that bring about perspective-taking is key to designing effective deliberative interventions.

Deliberative Democracy

For a democratic decision to be legitimate, it must be preceded by authentic deliberation, not merely the aggregation of preferences that occurs in voting

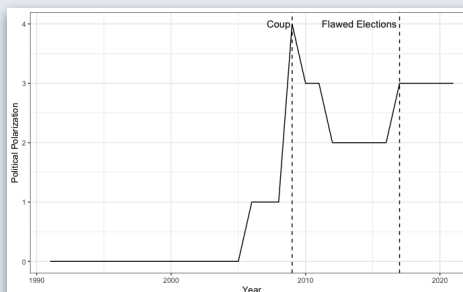
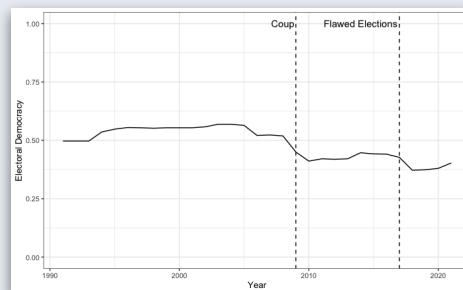
The Context

Honduras politics challenged by coups, constitutional crises and flawed elections.

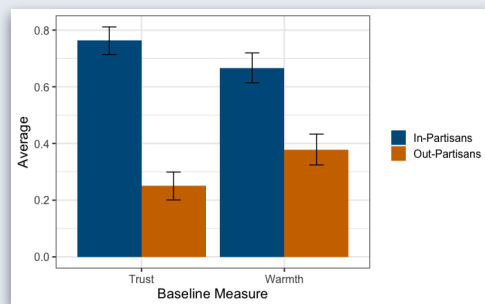


The 2020-2021 electoral process in Honduras took place in a context of weak rule of law and incomplete electoral reform. Before the elections, only 18 percent of Hondurans trusted electoral bodies, only 13 percent trusted political parties, and only 34.3 percent trusted elections. These residual doubts in the legitimacy of the 2021 elections increased political tensions and the possibility of violence. These attitudes were rooted in the antecedents of contentious general elections in 2017 when President Juan Orlando Hernández’ unexpectedly announced his reelection bid and last-minute electoral reforms to justify his decision. The foundation of these irregularities could be traced back to Honduras’ 2009 constitutional crisis that culminated in a coup d’etat.

The subsequent political instability and tensions were exacerbated by the inability of Honduras’ weak institutions to



effectively manage and resolve electoral disputes. In 2020, political instability in Honduras was further shaken with the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic.



At the study’s baseline, the Honduras electorate was highly polarized, with strong attachments to co-partisans and extremely low levels of trust and warmth toward out-partisan groups.

The Programming

NDI’s intervention in Honduras was aimed at mitigating the political instability in Honduras by supporting the integrity of the elections. NDI’s intervention included supporting civil society networks to monitor the election and sponsoring a presidential candidate

debate on policy priorities to strengthen electoral accountability. NDI DRL-supported program sought to increase the effectiveness of civil society to promote the integrity and legitimacy of the electoral process in Honduras. NDI worked with different civil society

coalitions, providing technical and financial assistance to: 1) facilitate collective action to connect quality-of-life priorities to the electoral process; 2) conduct election monitoring activities throughout the 2020-2021 electoral period; 3) organize candidate debates; and 4)

support civil society to design a campaign strategy to inform voters through debates, to disseminate observation findings, and to engage key political actors on pending electoral and political reforms to help achieve more transparent, pluralistic and equal elections.

The Experiment

Can participation in citizen policy deliberations and debates impact political tolerance, citizen demand for policy debates, and political participation?

Debates Intervention: In the run up to the 2021 presidential and parliamentary elections, Honduran citizens were randomly selected to participate in an online, anonymous deliberative group session to discuss and debate policy issues salient to the upcoming elections.

The group sessions mimicked deliberative democracy by having the groups review the issues and set the policy agenda for the debates. The pros and cons of the policy options were briefly presented, and participants were further randomized into pro or con debates teams, regardless of their own policy preferences.

Each team prepared arguments to advance their team's pro or con positions. Facilitated by a moderator, two rounds of debates were held, giving teams the chance to prepare and present a rejoinder to the opposing team and strengthen their policy arguments. A debrief was held, giving participants the opportunity to reflect on the policy arguments, the debate dynamics and their experience within the debates process.

The experiment tested three sets of hypotheses:

A. Political Tolerance Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Participation in the group sessions will reduce negative feelings (animus) toward supporters of other parties [or, if independents, supporters of any of the parties].

Hypothesis 2: Participation in the group sessions will reduce affective polarization among incumbent party and opposition party (alliance) supporters.

Debates

A process that involves formal discourse, discussion, and oral addresses on a particular topic or collection of topics, often with a moderator and an audience. In a debate, arguments are put forward for common opposing viewpoints

Hypothesis 3: Participation in the group sessions will become more tolerant of supporters of other parties [or, if independents, supporters of any of the parties].

B. Citizen Demand Hypotheses

Hypothesis 4: Participation in the group sessions will make participants more likely to view candidate debates as being important for democracy.

Hypothesis 5: Participation in the group sessions will make participants more likely to believe that candidates should debate (or should have debated).

Hypothesis 6: Participants in the group sessions will exhibit greater reductions in support for the candidates that chose not to participate in the presidential debates.

Hypothesis 7: Participation in the group sessions will make participants more supportive of citizen deliberative and participatory processes for policy making.

Hypothesis 8: Participation in the group sessions will enhance the legitimacy of deliberative processes among participants.

C. Political Engagement Hypotheses

Hypothesis 9: Participation in the group sessions will increase participants' sense of political efficacy

a) Internal efficacy: increase their sense of their own capacities and knowledge

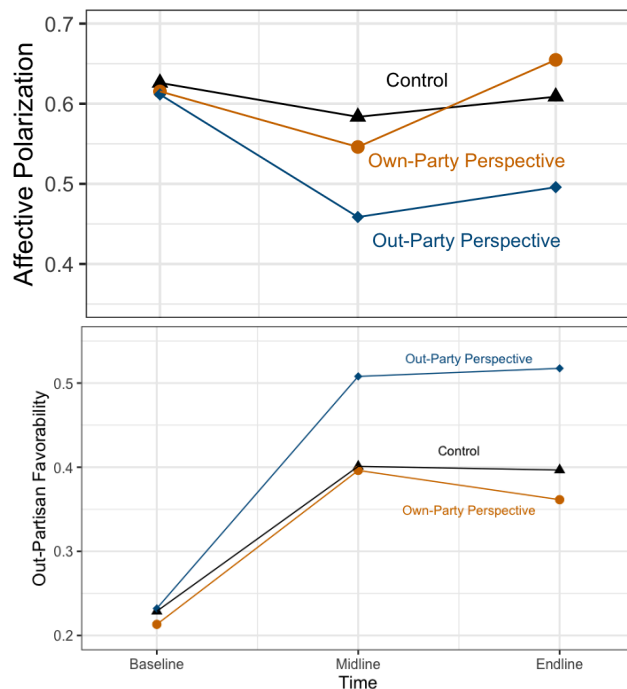
b) External efficacy: increase their sense of fellow citizens capacities and knowledge

Hypothesis 10: Participation in the group sessions will increase political engagement and participation.

Hypothesis 11: Participation in the group sessions will increase the likelihood that participants will change their own policy views.

The Findings

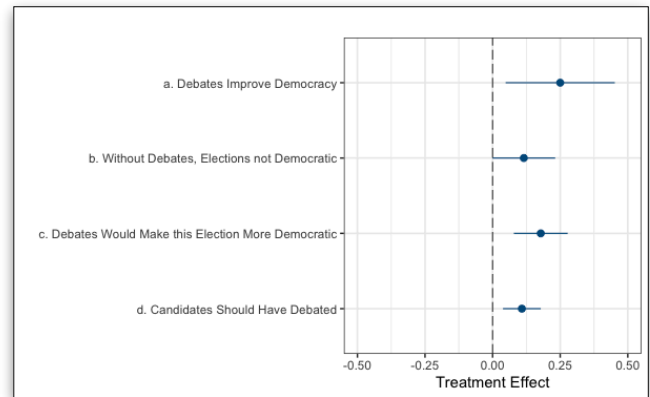
Citizen policy debates can mitigate partisan tensions, and change democratic norms and expectations. However, they may not impact political participation in a contentious context.



A. Debates and Political Tolerance

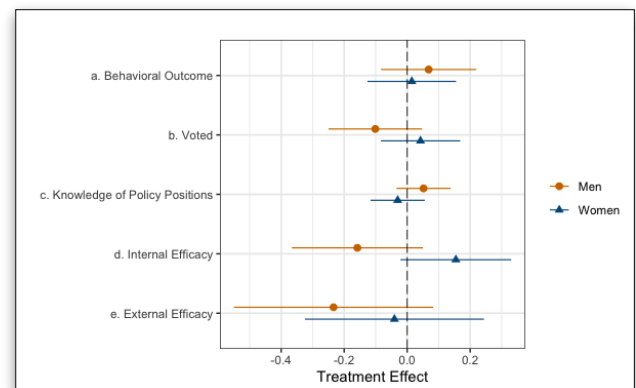
Among those participants who were randomly assigned to debate from an **Out-Party Perspective**, i.e., a policy position other than their own party’s perspective, there was a clear reduction in their affective polarization or animosity toward cross-partisans. Those assigned to debate from their **Own-Party Perspective** had a slight reduction in affective polarization immediately after the debate, but post-election those participants reverted to a slightly higher level of partisan animosity.

Similarly, participants who took the out-party policy perspectives during the debates had stronger feelings of warmth and trust toward cross-partisans — as measured on an **Out-Partisan Favorability Index** — than did the participants who took on their own party’s policy stance during the debates.



B. Democratic Norms and Expectations

Regardless of their policy positions during the debate simulation, the policy deliberation sessions strongly impacted participants’ beliefs that **debates improve democracy** and **debates make elections more democratic**. The intervention also increased their expectations that **candidates should hold policy debates** and **without candidate debates, elections are not democratic**.



C. Political Efficacy and Engagement

On average, the treatment did not have a strong impact on **participants’ knowledge of policy positions**. Nor did the treatment have an impact on participants’ sense of internal or external **political efficacy**, with the exception of women. The treatment did impact women participants’ sense of internal political efficacy more significantly than men. However, the treatment did not have an impact on **voting**, nor did it increase participants’ **political behavior**, as measured by their agreement to receive additional policy information from a national non-governmental organization.

Programmatic Takeaways

Requiring citizens to argue from policy perspectives other than their own reduces partisan animus. Citizen deliberations can also strengthen citizens' democratic norms and expectations. However, in a contentious political context, citizen deliberation may be limited in driving political participation.

Active Perspective-Taking Can Mitigate Partisan Tensions and Affective Polarization

The experiment found that citizen policy deliberations alone do not reduce political animus in contentious contexts. The evidence suggests that deliberative contact and interaction across partisan divides is not always sufficient for mitigating polarization. However, the experiment did demonstrate that citizen debates can create an opportunity for **intellectual empathy when partisans are required to argue from policy perspectives other than their own**. That is, active perspective-taking is the mechanism that drives the socio-political empathy necessary to reduce partisan animus, which includes: (i) assigning participants to deliberate with others on how best to justify a policy stance that is not their own; and (ii) actively defending their policy position in a debates forum. Most promising is that the reduction in political animus remained post-election among participants who actively took on out-party perspectives. These durable impacts have important implications for civic and voter education programs aimed at mobilizing active and informed citizens who can work together around common cause, despite contentious political contexts. During elections, when political competition is high, it is particularly important to frame political difference in terms of policy logic over socio-political identities. In this way an active perspective-taking component in civic education, voter mobilization and/or citizen debates programs may build resilience to populist appeals that negatively leverage partisan tensions.

Change in Democratic Norms and Expectations Strengthen Demand for Policy Debates

The experience of participating in policy deliberations and debates had a strong impact on participants' democratic norms and expectations, regardless of whether or not they took on the perspectives of cross-partisans. The experience not only strengthened their beliefs that **debates improve democracy and make elections more democratic**, but that **without candidate debates elections would not be democratic**. In this sense, citizen policy deliberations and debates — e.g. civic forums, youth debates, debates watch parties — before elections have the potential to strengthen demand for policy-driven political competition.

The Importance of Addressing Elite Behavioral Incentives

The experiment found that, despite the positive impacts of citizen deliberations and debates, participation in the intervention **did not increase a sense of political efficacy, either internal or external, nor did it increase political participation**. These results underscore how contentious politics and flawed elections continue to discourage political engagement, and point to the limitations of interventions focused solely on citizens. Electoral accountability also requires change in elite behavior to overcome citizens' political disaffection. This speaks to the importance of complementary program components to promote policy-based competition. Experimental evidence from Liberia suggest that political candidates, especially incumbents, may be incentivized to participate in candidate debates when they are aware of rising expectations for public policy debates. Additional experimental evidence from Ecuador suggests that political parties may be incentivized to move beyond public opinion polling to actually engaging their constituents in policy deliberations, if they believe their investment would result in increased membership and vote shares. The evidence from this experiment and others suggest the importance for practitioners to design complementary programming that leverage both sides of the vertical accountability equation.

Building a Body of Evidence for Democracy Assistance

The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. This study was made possible with funding from the US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor ([DRL](#)). NDI would like to thank Dr. Eric Kramon (GWU) for his partnership and pro bono contributions in designing and implementing this field experiment. In line with the highest ethical standards, this study was [pre-registered](#) (20211208AB) with the [Evidence in Governance And Politics](#) network, and received IRB approval from the George Washington University.



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NDI believes that evidence for how and why our programs work is key to supporting our democratic partners, capturing promising practice, and holding ourselves accountable for high quality democracy assistance programming overseas. In adherence with the highest professional and ethical standards, NDI believes that the best evaluation methods are those “best-suited” to answer the evaluation questions. Therefore, our methodologies range from randomized controlled trials (RCT) in partnership with leading academic researchers, to participatory evaluations in partnership with local democratic actors.

For more information on this or other evaluative research studies, please contact [Linda Stern, Director of G-DMEL at the National Democratic Institute](#)