

Overview

My research focuses on how politicians mediate access to state resources. Specifically, I study how corruption and criminal elements impede (or facilitate) public service delivery and how politicians' personal characteristics shape governance strategies in India. Over 40% of India's current Members of Parliament face an indictable criminal charge. This problem is particularly acute in the state of Bihar, where 59% of sitting legislators face charges. The election of criminal politicians is normatively worrying in its own right. For example, Shankar Singh contested the 2010 assembly seat in Rupauli, Bihar, while facing 22 criminal charges, 11 pertaining to attempted murder. However, little is known about how criminal politicians attract voters, structure their political networks and perform in office. Answers to these questions will help clarify a puzzling trend in Indian politics and contribute to our understanding of clientelism and targeted benefit delivery in lower-income democracies. In my dissertation, I demonstrate that criminal politicians underperform in office, providing fewer local infrastructure projects from India's largest anti-poverty program. Drawing from semi-structured interviews in Bihar, India, I argue instead that criminal politicians' have a comparative advantage in money, muscle and networks. These tools enable criminal politicians to form deep communal roots and coercive control of the local economy. In turn, criminal candidates invest heavily in personalized constituency service (e.g. face to face problem solving, supporting community events) delivering on dimensions outside of government services.

My dissertation represents the first study of how criminally accused politicians fare in relaying state resources to their constituents and helps clarify a puzzling and troubling trend in Indian politics. At the same time, I contribute to our understanding of clientelism, the delivery of anti-poverty programs, and why violent politicians win elections.

Dissertation Summary

Criminal politicians routinely win elections in India. My dissertation asks why? I contend that, given a context where access to state benefits are heavily mediated by politicians and middlemen, candidates need to prove their capacity to solve constituent problems and get work done prior to taking office. At the same time, if (legal) economic opportunities are limited and rule of law is weak, criminal candidates can gain advantages in funding and local network building to help win elections. Clean candidates, on the other hand, may face a trade-off between pursuing outside opportunities to afford election expenses and developing local bonafides. I argue that criminal politicians' monopolization of coercive force allows them to access a bigger pot of money from the local, illegal economy while simultaneously remaining embedded in the community and developing political networks. In turn, money and networks bolster criminals' capability to provide personalized problem solving across the constituency. This argument stresses the importance of the *source* and *use* of candidate wealth beyond buying party tickets and financing expensive electoral campaigns (Vaishnav 2017). For example, money pays for weddings and funerals or acts as a direct cash transfers to poorer constituents, helping to build a popular base long before campaigns take place. Given access to these clientelistic networks, voters may overlook poor performance in office and criminals checkered past.

My first empirical chapter shows that politicians' criminal background negatively influences service delivery. Specifically, I ask if criminal politicians improve or hinder the provision of India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS)? NREGS provides guaranteed jobs for local infrastructure improvement (e.g. roads and irrigation) and represents a huge portion of government spending.¹ Given its size, politicians are keen to exert control over NREGS distribution. Recent survey evidence suggests that voters think criminal politicians can "get things done" and are willing to vote for criminals if it means increased benefits (Vaishnav 2015). To measure criminality, I scraped self-disclosed affidavits listing 83,000 candidates criminal charges. I combine this data with detailed information on 20 million local, public NREGS projects mapped to legislative constituencies. Using a regression discontinuity design, I estimate the causal effect of criminality on benefit delivery in Indian state legislative assembly constituencies. Results indicate that criminal politicians complete 34% fewer NREGS infrastructure projects. In sum, my findings point to differential distributional strategies based on politicians' criminality and undermine a core argument for criminals continued electability.

In the subsequent empirical chapter, I build on the core vs. swing literature to investigate whether criminal or clean Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) reward their local voting strongholds with state resources. Specifically, I map the location of millions of welfare projects to micro-pockets of political support, estimated from the results of over 120,000 polling stations. This originally collected data is the first to link MLAs distributive strategies to sub-

¹In some states NREGS funds are 20 times the size of state legislators personal development funds (Gulzaar and Pasquale 2017).

constituency electoral support in India. By matching NREGS projects to polling station returns, I directly compare whether criminal or clean politicians are more efficient in rewarding their supporters. Theoretically, given criminal politicians' close communal ties, they should be better situated to understand, and then meet, constituents needs. Thus, despite delivering fewer NREGS projects overall, criminal politicians may be more effective at translating infrastructure projects to votes. To analyze the sizable dataset, I employ machine learning strategies that tie my hands and prevent over-fitting. Specifically, I regularize coefficients and build the model on a testing set before validating predictions on a hold-out set. Preliminary results show that MLAs target core areas. Results for differential distribution based on MLA criminality are forthcoming.

My final chapter provides an alternative explanation for criminal candidates' continued success. Based on 12 months of qualitative fieldwork (interviews with criminal and non-criminal politicians, local elites, voters and party-workers), I argue that criminal politicians cultivate superior communal bonafides by investing in *personalized constituency service*. This "social work," (as it was referred to by many interviewees) consists of face-to-face meetings, repeated village visits, empathizing with voters' problems and then having the power to solve them. I argue that criminal politicians are better positioned to invest in these forms of social work because they dominate the local, illegal and legal economy through coercive force. In turn, criminals can remain rooted in the community while still acquiring the necessary capital to credibly contest elections. One way politicians signal their communal credentials is by routinely showing up at weddings, often providing large cash gifts and enhancing the status of the wedding celebration (fieldwork and Rao 2001). Here, cash acts not as an instrument for vote buying but as a continuing lubricant of pre-existing social ties (Bjorkman 2014). Conversely, voters may discount the generosity of helicopter drops from candidates who primarily show up during campaigns, reasoning these politicians will be unavailable after votes are tallied. Thus, I expect criminal politicians to be electorally rewarded when given ample opportunities to remind voters of their continued communal ties.

As a proxy test for this argument, I exploit variation in the demand for weddings based on the Hindu wedding calendar. The Hindu religious period of *Chaturmas* runs roughly from July to October. Very few Hindu weddings take place at this time as it is devoted to austerity, fasting and penance (Gupte 1994). Since the timing of state elections is unrelated to the Hindu wedding calendar, campaigns running from July to October realize an exogenous decrease in the demand for candidates to pay dowry expenses and attend weddings. On the other hand, elections that take place during Hindu wedding season should provide more opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their community bonafides. With more wedding ceremonies, criminals can consistently remind voters of their strong community ties and deep pockets. In short, criminal politicians should see the largest boost in vote share for elections held in Hindu constituencies during wedding season. As a placebo test, I run the same analysis in majority Muslim constituencies and polling stations (i.e. areas which should not exhibit the same uptick in criminal politicians' electoral performance).

References

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