Showing up is half the battle: Candidate strategy and vote choice in Pakistan
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In Pakistan, Members of Parliament (MPs)[1] spend most of their time interacting personally with or providing services to their constituents (Mehboob 2018). Successful MPs are those who attend public gatherings, such as the weddings and funerals of their constituents (Sabat and Shoaib 2019). In populous countries such as Pakistan where a given politician has between 500,000 and a million constituents, this strategy seems costly and inefficient (Cox 1987). Interacting with constituents seems even more puzzling given that the formal role of MPs is to pass legislation and actively participate in Parliament rather than directly service constituents. In my project, I explore which MPs choose to interact with their constituents and why. Do MPs spend their time interacting with high volumes of constituents or simply target the most influential people in their constituency? To understand why MPs spend the bulk of their time with constituents rather than performing their formal duties, I will study voter attitudes and expectations of their representatives.

Based on field interviews conducted in Karachi before Pakistan's 2018 National Election, I hypothesize that when MPs cannot or do not provide voters with public goods or services they interact with their constituents to provide intangible or psychic goods (e.g. social honor or prestige). Voters, in turn, value this interaction especially in cases where they have been conditioned to expect low rates of goods or services. In constituencies that are characterized by political, social, and economic inequality (Mohmand 2019), this can be done "efficiently", meaning that politicians can minimize time spent interacting with voters by targeting the most powerful or influential constituents. I plan to test my hypotheses using a mixed-methods approach including conducting interviews with voters and MPs as well as eventually collecting quantitative data via a survey of about 2000 respondents.

I am applying for the AIPS Short-Term Research Grant to fund a two-month-long trip to Karachi to conduct interviews that will inform my survey design. Spending time interviewing voters and politicians on this trip will help me design an "ethnographically informed" survey experiment that takes seriously the lived experiences of voters (Auerbach and Thachil 2018). The interviews will also provide qualitative evidence for my theory, which will augment future applications for survey funding. During my time in Pakistan, I will reach out to politicians' offices (I have been in contact with one MP's office so far) to gather information about how politicians spend their time. To deepen my understanding of MPs' incentive structures I hope to employ a new methodological approach of politician shadowing (Bussell 2020). Finally, I will interview voters to ascertain the value of interacting with MPs and whether and when this might influence vote choice. To help facilitate my research, I am in contact with Habib University to seek affiliation with them as a visiting scholar.

My project would contribute to our understanding of electoral politics in Pakistan. While existing work is heavily concentrated on traditional goods such as patronage, the project will challenge that notion by demonstrating when and why voters may respond to psychic goods. This would help sketch a more nuanced picture of the country's electoral landscape and build on prior work about patronage and politicians' time-use in other countries (Dasgupta and Kapur 2020, Bussell 2019).

Finally, and most importantly, this project will further our understanding of voter welfare in Pakistan: if it is the case that incumbent MPs can make up for providing few or no public goods by providing constituents with social honor through interaction, Pakistani voters might stay trapped in a cycle with poorly performing politicians and low rates of service provision. The findings from this research will have implications for how effective Pakistan's democracy is at holding politicians accountable and how to increase politician accountability.

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[1] Here, I am referring to both Members of the National Assembly (MNA) and Members of the Provincial Assembly (MPA).