

Local Government Official Priorities and Responsiveness

Insights from citizen and local official surveys

By: Yale-LSE-GovLab team

Photo credit: EPA-EEE/Narendra Shrestha

Overview

In theory, decentralized political systems can better represent the views and needs of local constituents as local governments have more information on citizen preferences relative to higher-tier governments. Geographic proximity may also help citizens better hold their representatives accountable. In this brief, we ask how policy goals of elected politicians and appointed officials compare with citizen priorities. We use data from a national survey of local government officials (LPGS-3) conducted by our research team in March-April 2021 and a citizen survey (SNP) conducted by Kathmandu University, Interdisciplinary Analysts and Asia Foundation in Feb-March 2020.¹

Key Insights

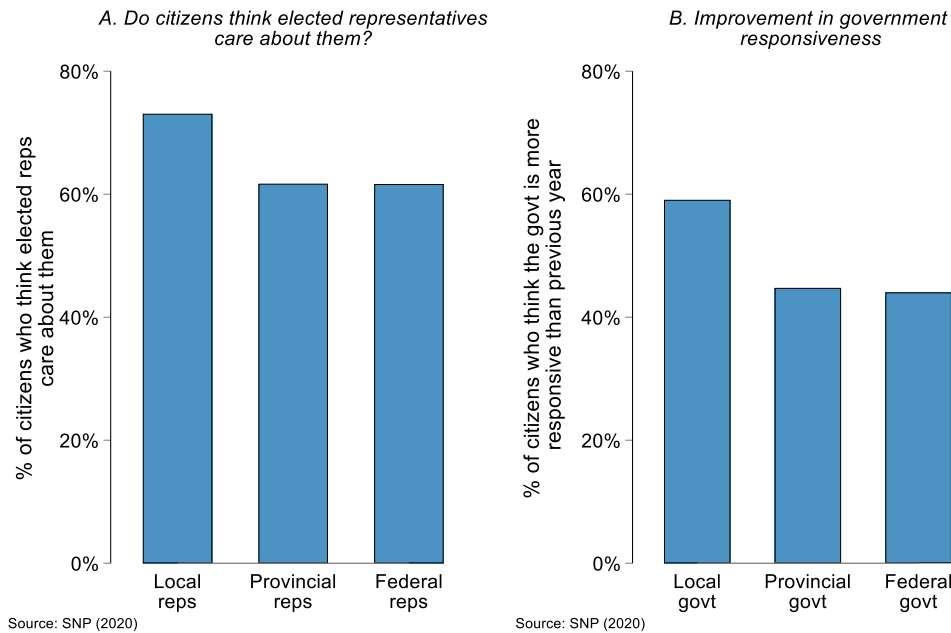
- Relative to federal and provincial representatives, citizens believe that local officials are more attentive and increasingly responsive to their needs.
- Comparing priorities across citizens and local officials yields two findings.
 - Citizens prioritize infrastructure and education, less so agriculture.
 - Both elected and appointed officials prioritize infrastructure, but only elected officials highly prioritize education.
- Local officials' priorities reflect objective indicators of community need. For example, policymakers in remote areas prioritize roads, while those in low literacy areas prioritize education.

¹A possible caveat to our findings is that part of the misalignment of policymakers' and citizens' preferences that we document might be due to the different timing of the survey.

Analysis

Citizens believe local representatives prioritize them more than higher representatives and perceive local government responsiveness as increasing more over time. Figure 1 shows that 73% of citizen respondents said local representatives cared about people like them, compared to 62% for provincial and federal representatives. Likewise, 59% of respondents perceive local government as becoming more responsive to people’s needs compared to previous year. Corresponding figures for provincial and federal governments were 45% and 44% respectively.

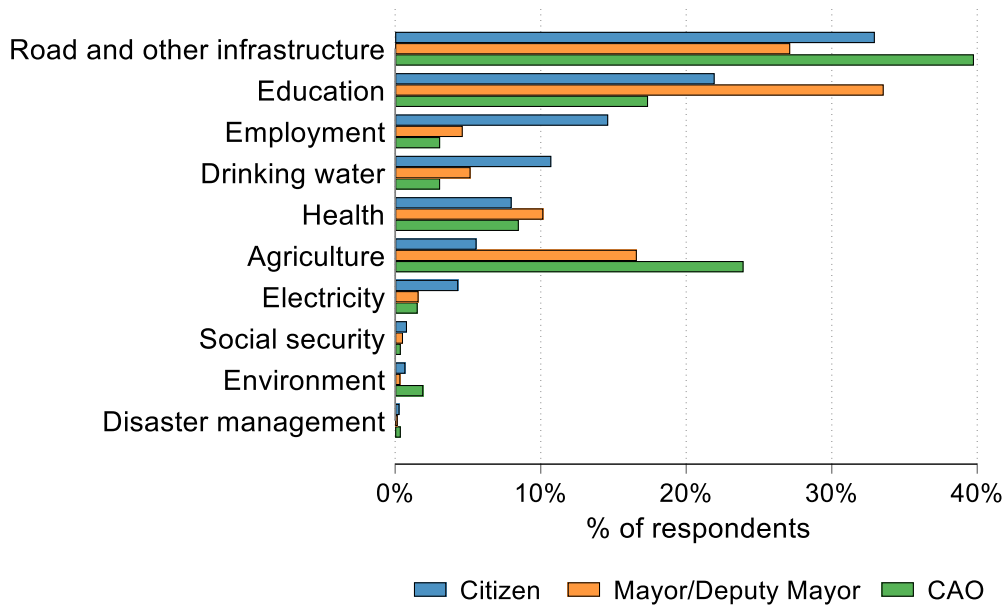
Figure 1. Citizens’ perceptions about the three tiers of government



Comparing across citizen and local official priorities, we report two findings.

- **Both citizens and local officials prioritize infrastructure and education, but citizens prioritize agriculture less than local officials.** Figure 1 shows that a plurality of citizens report road and other infrastructure as their first priority (33%), and education as their second priority (22%, similarly to local elected officials). However, citizens place significantly more weight on employment and drinking water, whereas local officials emphasize agriculture.
- **Within-local government differences in priorities are stark.** Figure 1 shows that elected officials (mayors and deputy mayors, 34%) are twice as likely as appointed officials (CAOs, 17%) to report education as main priority. Appointed officials (40%) are substantially more likely than elected officials (27%) to state road and other infrastructure as their main goal, and tend to prioritize agriculture (24%) over education.

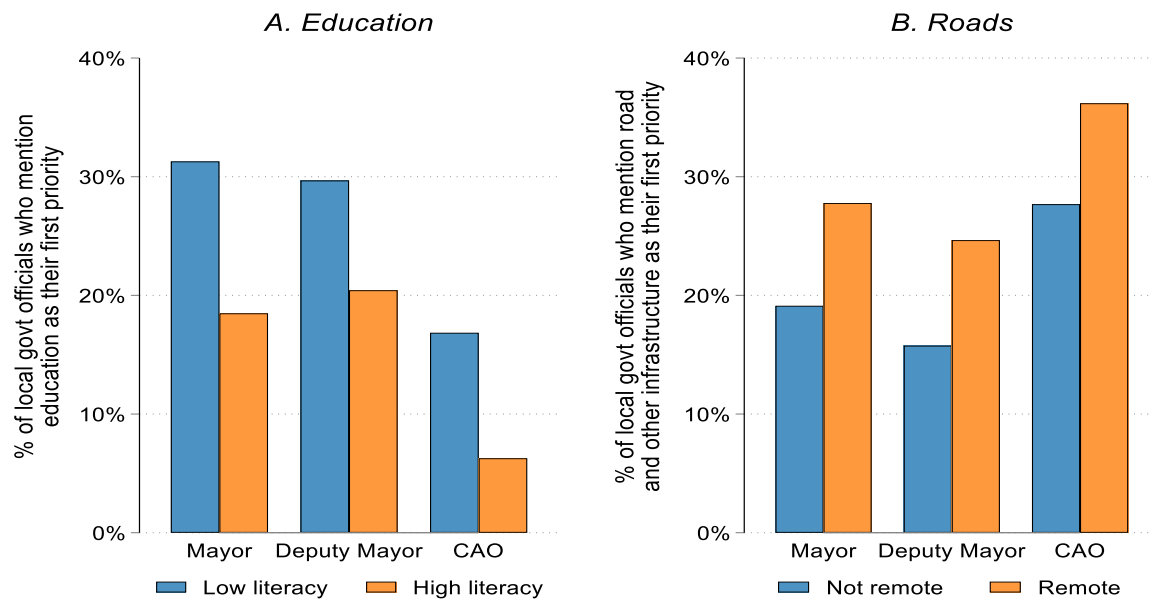
Figure 2. Priorities of local policymakers and citizens



Sources: SNP (2020) and LPGS Round 3 (2021)

Finally, local official priorities reflect objective indicators of need in the community. Local officials are more likely to state education as their main policy goal in low literacy rate municipalities (see Figure 3A) and are more likely to state roads and other infrastructure as priority in remote municipalities (see Figure 3B).

Figure 3. Municipality need and policymaker priorities



Source: LPGS Round 3 (2021)

Source: LPGS Round 3 (2021)

Conclusion

A fundamental goal of decentralization is to bring politicians closer to the citizens they serve. If Nepal's nascent democracy is to deliver, an essential first step is that politicians share the priorities of their constituents. This note reports on a novel survey that elicits the policy priorities of 2,050 local politicians and chief bureaucrats from 745 out of 753 local governments in the country.

Citizens are gaining trust in their local governments. There is partial alignment of priorities between citizens and local officials. Upcoming elections provide one channel for citizens to communicate their priorities to politicians. Other local governance mechanisms and channels are critical to allow citizens to communicate needs to politicians, breaking down systems of patronage that might cause politicians to favor policies that are not aligned with the citizens they serve, and, especially, initiatives to create more diversity among politicians. Existing mechanisms, such as user committees, can be helpful for allocating appropriate project funds within once broader budgetary decisions are made.

Appendix

Measuring alignment of priorities

In order to measure the alignment of citizens' and government officials' preferences, in Figures 1 we combine data from two surveys.

Citizens' preferences are measured through *A Survey of the Nepali People in 2020* (SNP 2020), a citizen survey conducted by Kathmandu University, Interdisciplinary Analysts and Asia Foundation in February-March 2020. SNP 2020 was administered to a nationally representative sample of 7,060 respondents covering 383 municipalities. We measure respondents' policy preferences through their responses to the following question: "Below is the list of services that your municipality or rural municipality is supposed to provide. In your opinion, which service should get first priority from your local government?" We re-categorize these services (i.e., group multiple services into one) to arrive at eleven policy categories (including Others).

Government officials' preferences are instead measured through a survey with local government officials (LPGS-3) conducted by our research team in March-April 2021. A total of 661 mayors, 702 deputy mayors, and 687 CAOs from 745 municipalities participated in the survey. We measure their policy preferences through their responses to the following question: "Please list the three most important policy goals that you have for your municipality." This question was open-ended, but the responses of politicians were later categorized by our team in 19 distinguished categories, which are further re-categorized for easier comparability with SNP 2020. In this report we define the most important priority of officials as the category of the first priority that they mentioned in their response. Figure 1 reports the distribution of citizens' and government officials' preferences measured this way.

Remoteness data

The information on remoteness comes from Banick and Kawasoe (2019)², who use Geographic Information System (GIS)-based cost time model of travel to estimate several municipality-level travel time variables (e.g.,

² Banick, R. S., & Kawasoe, Y. (2019). Measuring Inequality of Access: Modeling Physical Remoteness in Nepal. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*, (8966).

average time taken to reach the district headquarters, average time taken to reach the nearest bank, and so on). Following Katz, Kling and Liebman (2007)³, we construct a remoteness index by calculating the average z-score over this family of travel time variables. We then define a municipality with above-median remoteness index value as a remote municipality.

Literacy data

Because municipality-level literacy data are not publicly available, we rely on district level literacy data. Districts with literacy rates above the median (66.2 per 100) are categorized as high literacy districts and remaining as low literacy districts.



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³ Kling, J. R., Liebman, J. B., & Katz, L. F. (2007). Experimental analysis of neighborhood effects. *Econometrica*, 75(1), 83-119.