

A preface on the link between my paper on “Deliberative Inequality: A Text-As-Data Study of Tamil Nadu’s Village Assemblies,” and Hirschman’s work

- Vijayendra Rao, September 2017

This paper flows from two important themes in Hirschman’s work, the interplay between voice and exit (Hirschman 1970), and the centrality of paying attention to better implementation and adaptive learning in development interventions (Hirschman 1967).

The paper focusses on a remarkable institution – the gram sabha (village meeting) in rural India, which is the largest deliberative institution in human history. Gram sabhas are a part of the Indian system of village government (affecting over 800 million people). Indian village governments (gram panchayats) are democratic in two ways. Regular elections are held every 5-6 years to elect a village council and president, and regular gram sabhas are held up to four times a year which any village resident can attend. Gram Sabha have been tasked by the Indian constitution to be the body where important village decisions are made. In practice these include the ratification of beneficiaries of public programs, and the allocation of resources for public goods. But, gram sabhas are open forums where any topic can be raised so they also serve as a check and balance on the actions of the president and village council. Thus, they keep citizens in a regular process of dialogue with government officials. If elections allow the option of “exit” in government then deliberative forums, like gram sabhas that occur between elections, show how democracy can be deepened by facilitating a dialogue between voice and exit to improve the quality of government. This dialogue between voice and exit has the potential to improve the quality of implementation by forcing elected officials to be more responsive, and adapt to the changing needs of citizens. Thus, gram sabhas highlight the complementarity between voice, exit and adaptive implementation.

This paper is part of a larger body of work on gram sabhas that I have been engaged in for some time. It uses new text-as-data techniques to analyze transcripts from 100 gram sabhas from the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu to highlight two issues. First that creating effective deliberative institutions can activate voice and create more engaged citizens. Second, that voice is unequally distributed because of entrenched forms of gender inequality, and that this can be partially addressed by affirmative action.

References:

Hirschman, Albert O, 1967, *Development Projects Observed*, Brookings Institution, Washington DC

Hirschman, Albert O, 1970. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.