

Politicians' Complaint Response: E-Governance and Personal Relationships

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When do politicians respond to individuals' public service complaints? Technological solutions — termed e-governance — have been shown to help increase responsiveness in some developing nations where they serve to connect individuals, politicians, and bureaucrats for the first time. I argue that in country-contexts like India, where personal connections to bureaucrats and politicians are common, politicians are less responsive to complaints registered with e-governance systems than to complaints delivered via personal connections. Using data from public complaints, complaint responses, and field interviews in Delhi, I show that politicians are not responsive when complaints submitted to e-governance systems increase, but that they are responsive to complaints submitted to them through personal connections. This result suggests that the introduction of an e-governance system does not necessarily increase government performance. Politicians are incentivized to be more responsive to complaints registered directly with them because those complaints are more likely to generate electoral benefits.

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Public service delivery is one of the most fundamental functions of local government, but the provision of such services in developing nations is often sporadic and inconsistent. Politicians and bureaucrats face an enormous need for services in political systems frequently experiencing extreme resource constraints (e.g., Osah and Pade-Khene 2020). Within such systems, how do politicians respond to public service requests, complaints, and grievances?

An emerging body of research suggests that technological solutions called e-governance provide a way for individuals to record their public service complaints, enabling politicians to learn about critical issues in their constituencies and to respond quickly and effectively. Many governments — often with the help of non-governmental organizations and academic researchers — have set-up centralized systems where complaints are recorded and handled. What I call centralized complaint tracking systems (CCTS) are essentially databases with user interfaces wherein individuals can submit public service complaints, bureaucrats can address these complaints, and politicians can monitor the complaint resolution process, getting involved as needed. While complaint management has long existed in public administration (Tiwari 1975), new technology has facilitated integrated systems that allow users to track the status of a complaint more easily than in the past (Garg 2017; Sjoberg, Mellon and Peixoto 2017). Individuals typically access the CCTS via phone, using a mobile app or website, or in person at a government office and provide basic information about the complaint in order for it to be recorded (Callen et al. 2016; Lu and Johnson 2016). All manner of complaints about government services are centralized into a single, Internet-based system: individuals can request services ranging from getting a new street light, to reporting nuisance properties, to complaining about missed trash collection.

On the face of it, Internet-enabled complaint tracking systems are a major advance in politicians' ability to respond to public complaints (Sheryazdanova and Butterfield 2017). Yet, scholars focused on their implementation mostly in the African context tend to find that these programs are not successful long-term (Buntaine, Hunnicutt and Komakech 2020; Buntaine, Nielson and Skaggs 2019). One reason for this could be that, prior to the implementation of such systems, constituents had no way to field complaints to politicians (Grossman, Humphreys and Sacramone-Lutz 2014). Initial access using these systems improves short-term outcomes (Grossman, Platas and Rodden 2018), but is not sustainable (Grossman, Humphreys and Sacramone-Lutz 2020). Grossman, Humphreys and Sacramone-Lutz (2020, 3) conclude that the introduction of information and communication technology into the complaint management process "does not make nonresponsive politicians responsive" to public concerns (see also Dutil et al. 2008). These systems are an example of induced political participation, wherein governments promote participation in e-governance systems even though their commitment to improving government services is at best unclear and members of the public are often not convinced that such systems will be consistently utilized (Mansuri and Rao 2012; Wong and Welch 2004).

I look to India to explore another potential factor complicating CCTS implementation: existing relationships between individuals, bureaucrats, and politicians before the introduction of an e-governance system. Many developing nations have had existing state-society relationships long before such systems are implemented. Indeed, the correlation between engaged public participation in government and GDP per capita is 0.40, indicating that plenty of low-income

countries have high levels of public engagement.¹ In India, relationships between politicians and their constituents have been established and refined over many decades, and they are an example of a constituent-led — or bottom-up — form of government accountability (Berenschot 2010; Mansuri and Rao 2012). These relationships have developed organically, wherein the public creates systems to improve government functions, and often include the involvement of friends, acquaintances, and/or political brokers to help constituents reach politicians and bureaucrats (e.g., Auerbach 2020). As such, studying complaint response in India allows me to consider the impact of a CCTS where its introduction is not tied to the public and politicians establishing relationships for the first time.

In such a system, Indians have options when they have a complaint that they want to get resolved. They can choose to rely on their connections and take their complaint to a politician or bureaucrat whom they know either directly or indirectly and/or they can submit the complaint to the CCTS.² While using political or bureaucratic connections is efficient, a CCTS is more equitable for those without such connections. Politicians are similarly torn. They want to be responsive to individuals who contact them directly because these individuals (and perhaps others who know about the contact) will likely tie their decision to vote for the politician to their

¹ The correlation is between engaged society and GDP per capita using version 12 of the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem). Engaged society measures public input into policy changes and is the closest V-Dem measure to participation in grievance redressal.

² See Kruks-Wisner (2020) for an excellent, different approach to this topic focused on public perceptions of police grievance hearings and Bhattacharjee and Mysoor (2016) on education grievances.

complaint response. However, amid an overwhelming demand for services, many politicians also want to find some way to fairly distribute resources and that goal may be more likely to be achieved through a CCTS.

I argue that, in contexts like India with relatively strong existing public-politician relationships, these relationships are likely to continue after the introduction of a CCTS. The volume of complaints that individuals make with politicians and bureaucrats outside of the CCTS means that politicians choose to respond to those contacts because they are more likely to provide electoral benefits instead of responding to complaints registered with the CCTS. The CCTS is, therefore, largely sidelined, despite both individuals and politicians supporting its use. To test this Hypothesis, I gather new, geolocated data from Delhi's CCTS where I match public complaints to politician responsiveness measured by questions politicians raise to bureaucrats about public service issues. I do not find evidence that politicians respond to the total number of CCTS complaints by increasing question asking. I then use government meeting minutes and qualitative interviews to show that politicians are responsive to complaints delivered to them personally, implying that politicians prioritize responding to these complaints over those submitted to the CCTS. The results suggest that e-governance technology may not be a solution to increase politician responsiveness if individuals continue to complain to politicians and bureaucrats outside of the e-governance system. These findings may also help to explain why CCTS' lack long-term stability in Africa (e.g., WorldBank 2016). A CCTS facilitates an initial relationship between constituents and politicians, but both actors quickly realize that they are more likely to benefit by establishing personal connections with one another outside of the CCTS.

The Role of E-Governance

I consider politician responsiveness to individuals' complaints in developing nations where a CCTS is introduced into an environment with pre-existing relationships between individuals, bureaucrats, and politicians. In this context, resources are scarce, so politicians are not able to respond to all complaints. I first briefly describe how members of the public decide how to submit a complaint. I then use this as the basis for arguing that politicians are more likely to respond to complaints submitted via personal connections than to complaints submitted via the CCTS.

When people face a problem with public service delivery, their goal is to express their complaint in a way that will maximize the chances that the complaint is addressed. There are two primary complaint mechanisms: submitting a complaint to a bureaucrat or a politician using a personal connection or submitting a complaint via the CCTS. People with personal connections will use them to submit complaints. Personal connections include directly or indirectly knowing a politician or bureaucrat or operating through a brokered connection (Auerbach and Kruks-Wisner 2020; Auerbach and Thachil 2018; Kruks-Wisner 2020; Min 2015). There is nothing stopping a person who submits a complaint using a personal connection from submitting the same complaint using the CCTS, but personal connections create investment on the part of the politician or bureaucrat to respond (e.g., Jansson and Erlingsson 2014). People know that politicians are primarily seeking re-election and continued support for their political party, and so politicians want to be responsive to personal connections to claim credit for resolving the complaint in a way that hopefully encourages the complainant to support the politician. Those individuals without personal connections are left with the choice of submitting their complaint

using the CCTS or not submitting the complaint at all. The supplemental information (SI.3) describes more about how constituents select a complaint submission option.

Given these options for submitting complaints, how will politicians respond? Politicians respond to constituents' complaints because they hope that doing so will help their re-election chances (Banerjee et al. 2018; Bohlken 2019; De and Nag 2016). If a complainant is wealthy, then politicians have incentives to get their complaint addressed quickly in exchange for monetary or political support (Cavallo, Lynch and Scull 2014). Socially or economically disadvantaged individuals rely on politicians to facilitate public service delivery, so politicians can expect that doing so will help them politically (Anand 2012; Baud and Nainan 2008; Das 2009; de Wit 2009; Edelman and Mitra 2007; van Teeffelen and Baud 2011). Indeed, many politicians are interested in providing development funding and projects to disadvantaged areas under the promise from political brokers that residents of these areas will support them in the future. Politicians may reach out to neighborhood leaders of key areas where they want to increase electoral support and offer help directly.

These incentives suggest that politicians — absent any resource constraints — want to be responsive to all forms of public complaints, including those recorded on a CCTS (Bussell 2010, 2012). Indeed, Hanssen (2007) argues that politicians are *more* interested in becoming involved in the complaint resolution process when complaints are recorded on a CCTS. Accessing these systems provides politicians with information about the overall variety and the status of complaints that they can then use to make informed decisions (Haque 2002). Additionally, politicians can more easily take on a watchdog role by monitoring the bureaucracy and exposing issues when using a CCTS (Ahn and Bretschneider 2011; Raffler 2022).

In most developing contexts, resource constraints mean that the number of complaints far exceeds politician capacity (Dasgupta and Kapur 2020) such that politicians are forced to selectively respond to complaints. As a result, politicians must prioritize responding to complaints that will provide them with the most benefit at the least cost. I argue that benefit is measured primarily by the chance that responding to a complaint will garner the politician political support. Politicians are re-election seeking and so want to prioritize responding to complaints that will help their re-election chances or the chances of their political party (Bussell 2019, see also Crisp and Simoneau 2018; Papp 2020). In other words, politicians want to respond to complaints that facilitate credit claiming (Jackson 2008). Credit claiming in responding to complaints delivered via personal connections is unambiguous (e.g., Grossman and Slough 2022; Gulzar and Pasquale 2017). Since there is no way for a complaint delivered via a personal connection to be resolved without politician involvement, complainants know that the politician took action to resolve the complaint if it did indeed get addressed.

Claiming credit for resolving a complaint submitted to the CCTS is more difficult. Bureaucrats may resolve CCTS complaints on their own, without politician involvement. Because of this, if a politician helps to resolve the complaint, the complainant is unsure whether the politician deserves credit or whether bureaucrats were singularly responsible. Further, the CCTS is an impersonal system that does not allow politicians to engage directly with constituents. Taken together, these factors mean that constituents are less likely to provide politicians with an electoral benefit when a complaint submitted to the CCTS is resolved compared to when a complaint is submitted directly via personal connections.

Politicians receive so many complaints that the time that they have to spend on any one complaint is limited (Bussell 2019). As such, complaints that are received in an easy-to-

understand way and that can be addressed quickly are easier for politicians to respond to than are other types of complaints. While the CCTS provides complaints in a standard format, politicians must log-in to an account with the CCTS, find complaints for their constituency, read them, and then follow the proper protocol of raising applicable complaints to bureaucrats. This process is more technically complex and may take more time than maintaining a list of complaints brought directly to the politician through personal connections. Such a list is easy to create and simple to send over to a bureaucrat with some regularity. Thus, while the CCTS does have some organizational advantages to creating a list of complaints delivered by personal connections, the cost of responding to complaints is not necessarily lower when using the CCTS.

The benefit of prioritizing responding to complaints submitted through personal connections is much higher than the CCTS and the cost is about the same or lower. This means that politicians will prioritize complaints submitted through personal connections first before addressing those submitted to the CCTS (Church 1973; de Wit 2009; Mohan, Cutrell and Parthasarathy 2013). Even if politicians want to re-direct all complaints into the CCTS in order to manage them more efficiently, existing public-politician relationships make this goal very difficult.

Hypothesis: Politicians will be less responsive to complaints using the centralized complaint tracking system than to complaints delivered to them through personal connections.

Complaint Management in India

I study public complaints in urban municipal governments. Large municipal governments in India — called Municipal Corporations (MCs) — are tasked with providing individuals with

basic public services (Datta 1995).³ One of the primary goals of a municipal corporation is to manage public service delivery. Elected representatives to the municipal corporation are called municipal corporators. Prior to the institution of a CCTS, municipal corporators were responsible for acting as an intermediary between constituents and bureaucrats in order to provide services. This role involved processing government paperwork as well as forwarding complaints to appropriate bureaucratic agencies (e.g., Berenschot 2010). Under this system, individuals established meaningful relationships with politicians, and politicians relied on their reputation for interfacing with the municipal bureaucracy to ensure re-election.

In 2011, members of the Indian parliament proposed a bill mandating that national, state, and local governments develop a process for individuals to report public service complaints.⁴ While the bill never passed, it represented the beginning of a push toward increasing transparency in government and the ability of the public to have their grievances redressed. As a result, many government departments, alongside state and municipal governments, began implementing centralized complaint tracking systems to address public grievances quickly and efficiently.

Surat and Rajkot are two municipal corporations in the state of Gujarat widely recognized for successfully implementing a well-functioning CCTS. In Surat, their CCTS system was

³ Respondents 2 and 3. 2019. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

Respondent 12. 2020. Interviewed by Author. Delhi. Interviews approved by the Institutional Review Board #201910066.

⁴ “The Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011,” Lok Sabha Bill No. 131 of 2011.

established in 2010 with a phone hotline and has since expanded to allow members of the public to report grievances by phone, text, through a complaint app, on a website, or in person. All information is centrally processed by Surat government staff through a complaint dashboard. Surat reports that 97% of complaints are resolved on average and that the longest complaint resolution time is about 5 days (Patel et al. 2021). Both Surat and Rajkot are some of the only municipal corporations to publish publicly available data on their complaint response (Bhatt 2021; Gohil 2021).

Even in these successful cases, the CCTS' can become overwhelmed with requests. For example, daily complaint data from Surat shows that the coronavirus pandemic prompted an exponential increase in the number of unresolved complaints, with pending complaints rising from a typical average of around 1,500 to more than 5,000 in December 2020. More importantly, Surat and Rajkot represent the best and most utilized CCTS' in India. State-level complaint data from January 2016 to November 2019 indicates that 18 (50%) of the 36 states and union territories in India addressed fewer than 50% of complaints received during this period (Bagga 2019). What is worse is that 14 states had more than 50% of unaddressed complaints reported to them at least a year prior. Clearly, CCTS' throughout India are failing to address complaints quickly, if at all.

I focus on complaints registered in Delhi, the capital of India and one of the world's largest urban areas. Municipal governance of the National Capital Territory of Delhi is split between five bodies: the New Delhi Municipal Council, which governs central Delhi; the Delhi Cantonment Board, which governs military areas; and the North, South, and East Delhi Municipal Corporations. Data for this study comes from the CCTS in the latter three bodies. The

three municipal corporations are responsible for local governance for the overwhelming majority of people living in Delhi.

Each municipal corporation is comprised of corporators who represent individual constituencies and are elected in single member district plurality elections every five years. Constituencies are grouped together into wards, with multiple corporators representing adjacent constituencies serving on a ward committee whose job is to manage public service requests within the ward (Shah and Bakore 2006).⁵ Corporators can also serve on corporation-level committees including a standing committee, the highest form of elected governance in the corporation.⁶

Individuals can choose to submit a complaint to the CCTS by using various mobile applications, by calling complaint hotlines, and by completing written forms. Each complaint is assigned an identification number that the complainant can use to check on the status of the complaint. Complaints submitted to the CCTS are recorded at the ward level (12 wards in Delhi). One reason for this is purely convenience: Delhi municipal corporations have established ward level offices (called Zonal Offices) to collect and process complaints for individuals in the constituencies that comprise a given ward. When individuals report a complaint, they are directed to their Zonal Office and, therefore, the complaint is registered at the ward level. Complaints are then assigned to a low-level bureaucrat to address with a deadline for examining

⁵ Many MCs operate with a ward committee for each constituency, but Delhi is set-up differently.

⁶ Respondents 2 and 3. 2019. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

Respondent 13. 2020. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

the complaint and taking corrective action (Marathe et al. 2016; Mohan, Cutrell and Parthasarathy 2013). However, a high percentage of complaints are closed without ever being resolved (Narayanan 2010). Municipal corporators' role in this system is to monitor the complaints in the CCTS submitted from their constituency and to raise those complaints that are not redressed promptly by asking questions of bureaucrats during municipal corporation committee meetings. Given the tendency of bureaucrats to close complaints without resolving them, there is a lot of room for corporators to facilitate public service delivery through the centralized complaint tracking system if they so choose.

I test my Hypothesis in this context in two steps. First, I determine whether corporators respond to complaints registered with the CCTS. The evidence shows that corporators are not responsive to such complaints. Then, I establish that corporators are responsive to complaints submitted to them through personal connections without going through the CCTS. Taken together, these results suggest that politicians are differentially responsive, in line with my theoretical expectations. Corporators respond to complaints submitted to them through connections, but I do not find evidence that corporators are responsive to complaints submitted to the CCTS.

Centralized Complaint Tracking System Responsiveness

I assess corporators' responsiveness to complaints registered with the CCTS using a unique dataset from Delhi on public complaints and municipal corporator performance, measured by the number of questions corporators ask during corporation meetings, from 2018 and 2019. These data were collected by a non-profit organization through the use of Right to Information Act requests. See SI.1 for details on the data collection.

Complaints

Public complaints from the CCTS are available for a one year period from April 2018 to April 2019. During this period 86,492 complaints were registered with Zonal Offices in the North, South, and East Delhi Municipal Corporations. The fact that there were so few complaints for a city with so many people (over 20 million) is evidence that individuals use the CCTS as an avenue of last resort. Complaints are relatively evenly distributed throughout Delhi, with most wards having between 8% and 10% of the total number of complaints.

Along with the ward where the complaint was recorded, the CCTS provides a description of the agency responsible for handling the complaint and a description of the complaint. There are 160 different complaint descriptions, and neither the descriptions nor the listed agencies match the agencies and descriptions provided in the database of corporator questions described below. I standardized the complaint descriptions into 15 categories so that complaints and questions can be linked based on the topic of the complaint or question. Complaints are not evenly distributed across topics: pest, Solid Waste Management (SWM), and drainage complaints are extremely common. Some topics like education, welfare, and environment received few complaints, though this is partially based on the way in which complaints were categorized --- complaints about garbage and waste were categorized as SWM not environment, for example. The most common complaint descriptions were for nuisance animals, dead animals, drainage, and garbage in the road.

The analysis relies on a sample of 51,161 complaints where the location of the complaint could be successfully geocoded to a corporators' constituency. As is clear from the tables in SI.3, the complaints successfully geocoded are not representative of all complaints. These complaints

come from systematically different wards, so including ward fixed effects in the empirical models will be necessary. Complaints successfully geocoded did not differ significantly in type compared to those complaints not geocoded. Of the fifteen complaint types, the difference in the proportion of complaints in a particular category never exceeded 2%. Hence, although the complaints are not geographically representative, they are representative in type. I aggregate complaints to the constituency-level for the main analysis.

Questions

I assess politician responsiveness to complaints lodged in the CCTS by examining the content of questions that corporators raise in public corporation meetings. Corporators are expected to raise complaints submitted to the centralized complaint tracking system by asking questions during public corporation meetings.⁷ Engaging with public complaints in this way is part of corporators' regular job duties and is their assigned role in responding to complaints registered with the CCTS. By raising complaints, corporators draw bureaucrats' attention to particular issues and hopefully spur action to resolve the complaint for the complainant.

Municipal corporators publicly ask questions in three main venues. First, corporators can speak during a municipal corporation general body meeting — the local government equivalent of a legislative assembly meeting. Second, each municipal corporator is a member of various corporation committees. These committees range in importance from the standing committee (the main corporation decision-making body) to committees for parks, language, and waste collection. Committees meet with varying frequency, providing differing opportunities to ask

⁷ Respondents 2 and 3. 2019. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

questions. Finally, each corporator is a member of a ward committee, where most constituency related business is meant to be discussed.⁸

In terms of question asking activity, corporators asked 19,501 questions during the one year period from April 2018 to April 2019, a ratio of one question for every five complaints. The general body meeting and standing committees dominate the dataset, each accounting for about 13% of questions asked. Beyond these two committees, ward committees are the most popular question-asking venue, accounting for 30% of the questions asked across all twelve ward committees.

Corporators' question asking frequency varied dramatically. For example, Shikha Roy (a standing committee member) asked the most overall questions (614), but she asked none of them in her ward committee. SI.4 presents the top question askers both overall and in ward committees and provides more details on corporator question asking.

Empirical Strategy

I analyze the relationship between complaints and questions at the constituency-level. I run several model specifications with the total number of complaints and questions in a constituency including a linear model with ward fixed effects and wild bootstrapped clustered standard errors by ward, a multilevel model with random effects by ward, and a Bayesian multilevel model with random effects by ward. These three modeling strategies are all appropriate ways to model hierarchical data (constituencies are part of wards), therefore, I am interested in identifying

⁸ Questions can be of different types, but 87.9% are classified as the same type — “raising an issue.”

consistent empirical patterns regardless of modeling strategy.⁹ Additionally, I run models for each of the fifteen different types of questions and complaints. I look at both all questions a corporator asked and just questions asked during ward committee meetings.

Each model contains control variables including an indicator for whether the particular corporator holds a caste reserved seat (minority group status) and the percentage of scheduled caste residents in each constituency (minority constituents). I also include controls for the corporator's gender, age, whether they have a college degree, if they are members of the BJP (one of the two major political parties in Delhi), the number of committees they are on, and whether they are on the standing committee. At the constituency level, I control for the margin of victory in the previous election and the population.

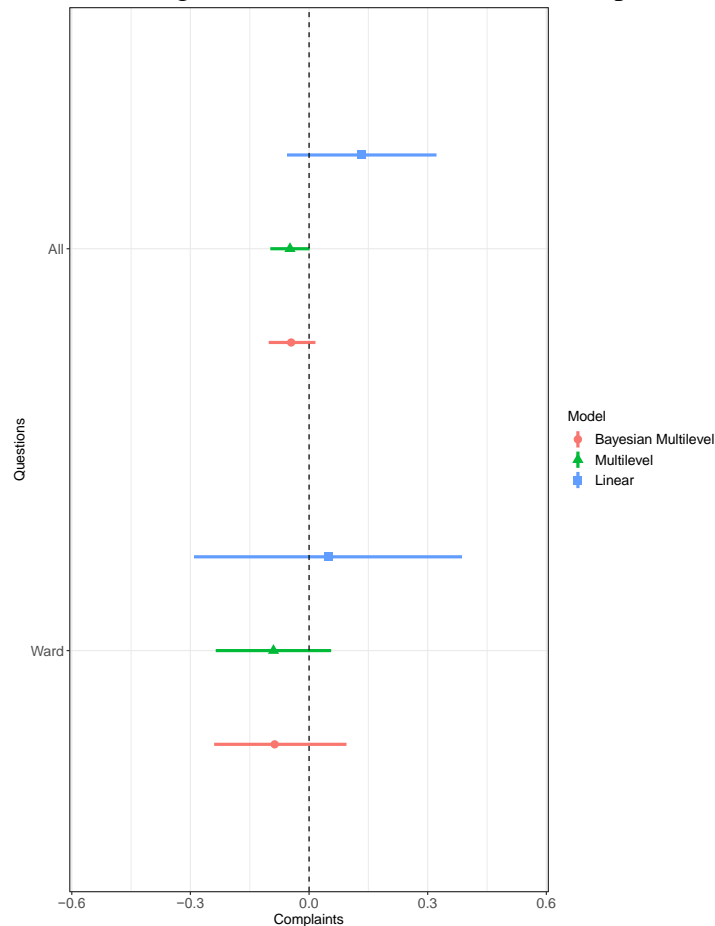
Results

Figure 1 displays point estimates broken down between all questions that corporators ask and just questions that corporators ask during ward committee meetings. Three model specifications are shown. Starting with the results at the top of the figure which use the dependent variable including all corporator questions, the linear model and Bayesian multilevel model point estimates are not different from zero. The point estimate for the maximum likelihood multilevel model is slightly negative, though substantively quite small. Therefore, for the models that include all questions, there is not a statistically significant relationship between questions and complaints. Moving to the bottom of Figure 1 and the dependent variable that includes just

⁹ See SI.1 for more details about the empirical strategy including the use of wild bootstrapped clustered standard errors, these three modeling strategies, and other technical details.

questions asked during ward committee meetings, none of the three model specifications are associated with a statistically significant relationship between questions and complaints. See SI.5 for full model specifications and robustness checks.

Figure 1: Predicting Questions Asked Based on Complaint Volume



Regression model point estimates for the relationship between complaints and questions with confidence intervals. Both all questions and only ward questions shown.

I examine the robustness of these results by running models with each type of complaint and question separately. It is possible that different types of complaints are more appropriately resolved using different mechanisms (Kramon and Posner 2013; Kumar, et al. 2022), and testing each type of complaint separately can help to determine if this is indeed the case. These results (shown in SI.5) largely confirm the non-statistically significant findings displayed here.

I also examined the possibility of heterogeneous effects based on the various control variables included in the analysis. The interactions between four control variables --- gender, population, number of committees, and education --- and the number of complaints were statistically significant. However, marginal effects plots for these variables indicate that there is little substantive effect on the number of questions asked as the control variable in the interaction changes (see SI.5).

In failing to reject the null hypothesis of no relationship between complaint volume and question asking it is possible that the quality of the data is sufficiently poor, that Delhi is a particularly anomalous case of society-politician relationships, or that examining a different time period might yield different results. Yet, as I show in the next section, amid this lack of responsiveness to CCTS complaints, corporators are responsive to complaints delivered to them via personal connections.

Connections and Responsiveness

To whom are corporators responding? The results thus far suggest that corporators are not particularly responsive to complaints registered in the CCTS. In order to fully test the Hypothesis, however, I need to show that corporators do respond to some kinds of complaints from members of the public, just not those submitted to the CCTS.

To do so, I rely on evidence gathered from primary sources and qualitative interviews. Primary source data consists of corporation meeting minutes from the South Delhi Municipal Corporation for the period from May to October 2012 (some of the only publicly available meeting minutes), alongside similar documents from other municipal corporations and municipal corporation committees. I also conducted a series of interviews with politicians, scholars, and

non-profit group leaders about how municipal corporators manage and respond to complaints. In the following section, I draw two main conclusions from these two sources of data. First, I find that municipal corporation complaints are addressed on two parallel tracks, one public and one private. Second, while public complaint response is highly choreographed and controlled by corporation leaders, thereby reducing opportunities for credit claiming, politicians have substantially more ability to respond to complaints brought to them in private using connections in a way that facilitates credit claiming. This means that individuals more frequently lean on their political connections for help redressing complaints and that politicians respond to such complaints substantially more frequently than they do complaints registered with the CCTS.

Even though corporators are told to respond to complaints registered in the CCTS by asking questions during corporation meetings, this process is strictly controlled and limited.¹⁰ As a result, corporators have relatively few opportunities to respond to complaints submitted to the CCTS. This logistical constraint also presents problems for corporators ability to make it known to the complainant and to their constituency as a whole that they responded to a complaint reported to the CCTS. When combined with the overwhelming number of complaints delivered, corporators have few incentives to try to be responsive to complaints submitted to the CCTS.

In Delhi, public complaint response during corporation meetings takes three forms. First, the agenda for some corporation meetings includes a so called “Question of the Month” from one corporator. These questions are submitted in writing in advance of the meeting and are directed toward bureaucrats. In only one of the eight meetings between May and October 2012 (October 10, 2012) were replies to the Question of the Month provided. Asking a Question of the Month,

¹⁰ Respondent 5. 2019. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

therefore, is not an effective way for a corporator to redress a complaint. The nature of this form of redressing a complaint means that at most one complaint from one corporator is redressed by the bureaucracy per corporation general body meeting, which happen once per month. This creates a large backlog of unredressed complaints for which corporators will have a difficult time claiming credit with constituents for resolving if simply raising the issue to a bureaucrat in a corporation meeting takes months.

Second, corporators can submit “Proposals Under Section 74,” which are similar in format to Questions of the Month. Section 74 refers to the part of the legislation governing the municipal corporation that provides notice of business in advance of meetings. In this case, corporators use these proposals to describe major policy issues that they want to be addressed, like unauthorized colonies or income taxes. These proposals sometimes were discussed in corporation meetings, but this was rare. Like the Question of the Month, few corporators submitted proposals, meaning that their ability to respond to complaints registered with the CCTS was limited. The format of these proposals discourages corporators from using them to redress CCTS complaints because Proposals Under Section 74 discuss major policy initiatives, not specific public service requests. Even if an entrepreneurial corporator combined complaints about a given topic into one Proposal Under Section 74 request, that corporator would have a difficult time articulating to the complainant exactly how their complaint was redressed by such a broad policy proposal. Hence, Proposals Under Section 74 are not effective tools for politicians to use to claim credit for redressing complaints.

Finally, five of the eight meetings between May and October 2012 contained an open discussion item on the agenda, sometimes called “short term questions” or “half hour debates.” During these sessions, a long list of corporators asked questions and aired grievances. These

sessions were highly controlled: the topic was determined in advance and discussion was moderated by party leaders. For example, this portion of the May 22, 2012 meeting started with corporators asking questions about the impact of illegal cooking on parking before abruptly transitioning to an extensive discussion of drain cleaning. During each of these discussions, many corporators spoke and aired both general and specific grievances. The structure of these discussions provides corporators with few opportunities to be responsive to complaints submitted to the CCTS because they cannot control the topic of the discussion.

The amount of effort required for a corporator to get a complaint redressed by one or more of these methods of question asking is high. Nevertheless, such effort might be worth it if it had a large and direct electoral payoff for the corporator. Unfortunately, the structure of question asking promotes vague questions asked a significant time after the initial complaint is recorded in the CCTS. Corporators are unlikely to be able to effectively use this type of question-asking behavior to claim credit for being responsive to complaints and further to help their re-election efforts. Second, municipal corporation meetings are poorly publicized, meaning that the chance that the original complainant hears that the corporator has redressed their complaint during a committee meeting is extremely low. Third, people submit complaints via personal connections when possible, meaning that complaints submitted to the CCTS are either duplicates of complaints already submitted via personal connections or are from individuals without personal connections. People who have personal connections are most likely to use them and not to submit a complaint exclusively to the CCTS because the CCTS is poorly designed and inefficient. Even people without personal connections to politicians or bureaucrats are eager to

find a way to submit a complaint via a personal connection because of the poor quality of the CCTS.¹¹

Instead of responding to complaints registered with the CCTS, corporators devote much of their time and energy to addressing complaints delivered to them through personal connections. These complaints include those from constituents with direct, indirect, and brokered connections (see SI.3). In fact, the corporator may be unaware of the exact connection the person presenting them with a complaint has to the original complainant. Extensive prior work has examined the ways in which politicians, bureaucrats, constituents, and brokers operate in an informal complaint redressal system (e.g., Auerbach 2020; Berenschot 2019), and the evidence presented here corroborates these findings. Indeed, the contribution of this article is to show that delivering complaints to a politician using connections remains a key way to redress grievances *even with the existence of an e-governance system*.

Berenschot (2010) paints a picture of a corporator as an all-purpose problem solver, processing government paperwork and pushing bureaucrats for help addressing public complaints. As many government functions have gone online, corporators' roles in processing paperwork have all but disappeared, but their complaint role remains.¹² Complainants choose to register their complaints with corporators because corporators have an established track record of resolving issues with public service delivery.¹³ Corporators build up this image by providing their contact information to constituents and asking them to contact them directly with

¹¹ See SI.3 for interview evidence to support these conclusions.

¹² Respondent 13. 2020. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

¹³ Respondents 2 and 3. 2019. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

complaints. Upon receiving such a complaint, corporators call bureaucrats and resolve the substance of the complaint without involving the CCTS.¹⁴

Corporators establish an informal method of complaint response outside of the centralized complaint tracking system. Often, several corporators meet privately to share information about complaints. Corporators advise one another on how to best redress complaints, and these networks sometimes involve passing the complaint around to a number of different corporators so that each can use his or her connections to benefit from the complaint redressal.¹⁵ In other cases, particular corporators serve as gatekeepers, where all complaints of a certain type are routed to a specific corporator who then determines whether the complaint will be sent to the bureaucracy and redressed.¹⁶ Influential individuals living in a constituency may also be consulted in order to determine how these individuals perceive the severity of the complaint and how they would like it to be addressed.¹⁷ Throughout this system, political brokers play a key role in linking members of the public who would otherwise not have connections to politicians (Berenschot 2019).

By establishing a complaint redressal system separate from the CCTS, corporators can exert much more control over the entire complaint redressal process. Thus, the corporator makes him or herself the critical player in delivering public services. The corporator's hope is that in

¹⁴ Respondents 2 and 3. 2019. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

¹⁵ Respondent 12. 2020. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

Respondent 13. 2020. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

¹⁶ Respondent 6. 2019. Interviewed by Author. Chennai.

¹⁷ Respondent 15. 2020. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

establishing themselves as a key provider of public services, complainants will recognize and reward good constituency service by supporting the corporator and the corporator's party in future elections. One particularly illustrative example of a corporator embodying this role involved public complaints about lack of green space in a particular constituency. The corporator could have chosen to forward the complaint to the bureaucracy where it most likely would not have been resolved. Alternatively, he could have forwarded the complaint to the corporation garden committee who might have studied the subject and recommended allocating money to build a new park in the ward. But instead of choosing either of these options, the corporator used money from donations to install a park without any authorization from the bureaucracy. As a result, the park was constructed where the complainant wanted it and the project was completed quickly. Importantly for the corporator, he could claim credit for the success of the entire project, down to the park benches bearing his name. In this case, both the public and the corporator benefited from ignoring the centralized complaint tracking system and communicating privately about the complaint.¹⁸

Taken together, these qualitative results suggest that corporators are responsive to complaints from members of the public when they are received through personal connections. Complaints entered into the CCTS are rarely responded to both because corporators are already overwhelmed with complaints registered with them through personal connections and because the structure of corporation meetings limits corporators' ability to effectively claim credit and generate electoral support from complainants who submit complaints to the CCTS. On balance,

¹⁸ Respondent 15. 2020. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

corporators' time is best spent responding to complaints from individuals with connections who are more likely to acknowledge and reward corporators' effort.

Discussion and Conclusion

In Delhi, where a centralized complaint tracking system was added to existing public-politician relationships, members of the public, politicians, and political brokers have incentives to continue expressing and solving complaints in private, without using the CCTS. As a result, politicians prioritize redressing complaints submitted to them personally which, given the volume of complaints, means politicians rarely have the time to respond to complaints submitted to the CCTS.

One solution to this problem is to focus on bureaucratic responses to public complaints. If bureaucrats acted on all complaints forwarded to them by politicians and all complaints submitted to the CCTS, public service delivery would improve, regardless of the method that a member of the public used to file a complaint. However, like politicians, bureaucrats face a capacity problem where the volume of complaints far outweighs their ability to address them. What is more, both members of the public and politicians exert pressure on bureaucrats to resolve the complaints that they bring to them directly. Should bureaucrats consistently ignore complaints from prominent members of the public or politicians, they risk being transferred to another position or location.¹⁹

One potentially appealing, but deeply problematic solution to this problem is to eliminate the informal, private path of complaining directly to bureaucrats or politicians and instead route

¹⁹ Respondent 12. 2020. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

all complaints through the CCTS. From a technical perspective, even if the bureaucracy lacked capacity to respond to all complaints, the bureaucracy could then prioritize complaints by importance regardless of how they were submitted. However, in proposing this as a solution, scholars should recognize that complaints are not handled in this way in wealthy, developed countries. In the United States, individuals with a public service delivery problem do tend to use the CCTS as a first step to resolve a complaint. But, if the complaint is not redressed quickly, individuals who know local politicians frequently ask them to intervene. Many complaints are resolved without escalating them to local politicians, but the bigger the complaint, the more likely that the bureaucracy will not resolve it without local politician involvement. Attempting to route all complaints through the CCTS also ignores the fact that complainants may not feel comfortable using the CCTS because of poor prior experiences, general government distrust, or systematic bureaucratic discrimination in how bureaucratic services are provided (Auerbach 2016; Auerbach and Kruks-Wisner 2020; Baud and Nainan 2008; Baldwin 2013; Berenschot 2011; Das and Chattopadhyay 2020).

Instead, this article suggests that politicians could diversify the ways in which they communicate with constituents to ensure that all constituents have information about how to submit complaints. Recent work where politicians use forms of Internet-enabled communication like e-mails and text messages may help to educate constituents on the complaint process and to establish relationships with them that can lead to improved delivery of public services and more accountability for politicians (Buntaine, Hunnicutt and Komakech 2020; Gaikwad and Nellis 2021; Grossman, Humphreys and Sacramone-Lutz 2020).

My empirical results focus on showing that politicians choose not to respond to CCTS complaints because there are few opportunities to claim credit for responding to such complaints

and to generate electoral support. It would be beneficial to examine which constituents use the CCTS to more fully assess whether constituents who submit complaints via the CCTS give any credit to elected corporators when and if their complaints are resolved. Unfortunately, it is not possible to describe the demographics of CCTS users. The Delhi CCTS system does not collect such characteristics, and to my knowledge, there are not surveys of members of the public who use the CCTS that include extensive demographic controls. One suggestive piece of evidence is that people who are socially and economically disadvantaged tend to choose to solve problems themselves — absent political connections — instead of going through the formal complaint resolution process (Chakraborty, Ahmad and Seth 2017).²⁰

Future work would do well to more clearly link complaints registered in the CCTS with corporator question-asking. In Delhi, I measure corporator responsiveness by correlating the volume of complaints and questions on the same topic. This is because neither complaints nor questions are specific enough to link one complaint directly with a question asked. Qualitative work could involve interviewing complainants about the complaint resolution process to try to discern whether certain complaints do spur corporator question-asking even though the volume of complaints largely does not. Additionally, studying e-governance complaint systems in other country-contexts may help to show the extent to which public-politician relationships dictate responsiveness to complaints submitted via a CCTS. The results of this study generalize to the large number of other countries with strong existing public-politician relationships before the introduction of a CCTS. It could be particularly interesting to examine contexts where the introduction of a CCTS provides one of the first opportunities for members of the public to

²⁰ Respondent 12. 2020. Interviewed by Author. Delhi.

engage directly with politicians and the bureaucracy to see whether public-politician relationships begin to form outside of the CCTS and indeed become the predominant way in which public service complaints are resolved. For now though, it is clear that introducing a centralized complaint tracking system — even in a context where individuals and politicians are comfortable making and responding to complaints — does not necessarily improve politician responsiveness. Thus, such systems should be implemented alongside broader public service reforms that increase capacity to redress public complaints (Mansuri and Rao 2012).

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