

# Small Groups Can Put Big Pressure on Politicians

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In a rural Brazilian community, the water pump remained broken for months. Residents of a similar community, ten kilometers down the road, have a different experience. When their water pump breaks, they contact the city councilor, who gets it fixed. Alicia Dailey Cooperman's new APSR article shows what sets these communities apart: if residents vote as a united group, they can pressure local politicians to deliver better public services, such as a functioning water pump.

To secure re-election, local politicians require community support. In some communities, groups of residents can coordinate their vote and vote as a united group. These groups can make or break a politician's career: if politicians deliver on their promises, they will likely have the support of a large vote base at once. If not, the group can shift their support to a more promising candidate.

The author studies how these group efforts play out in rural communities across Ceará, a state in Northeastern Brazil. Some communities in Ceará have access to much-needed public services, but others do not. These public services include streetlights, access to clean water, and paved roads. She studies where and when communities vote as united groups using different data sources such as original household survey data from 120 communities in Ceará, election data, public records, and over a hundred interviews with residents, election officials, and city council staffers.

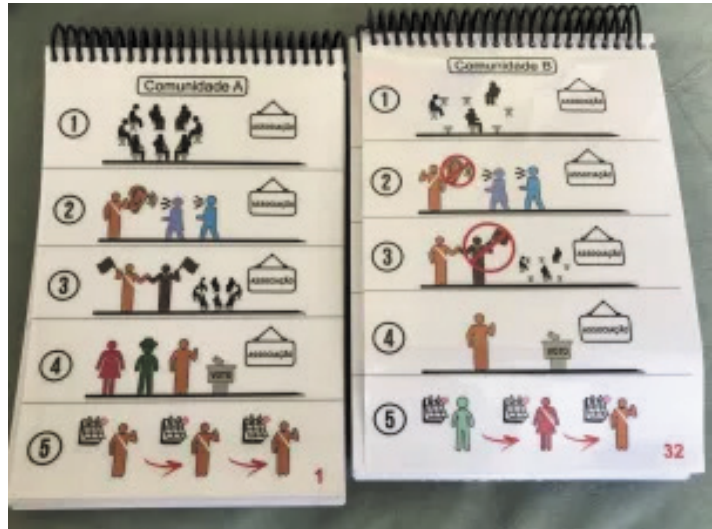
She finds that community members can hold politicians accountable for (not) delivering public services. Comparing community characteristics and election data, the author shows that public services improve in communities where residents vote as a united group at one polling station. During interviews, residents provided examples of some enhanced services, including new wells, waste collection, and paved roads. Secure water access, an important public service in drought prone Ceará, also improved for community association members in communities

where residents voted as a united group at one polling station.

But there are two caveats. First, communities need to be able to coordinate their vote. The author demonstrates that voting as a united group is more common in communities with high trust. Community members acknowledge this



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too. When asked which community type was more likely to vote as a united group, respondents most often pointed to community types where there was high participation in community associations (versus low participation) and where leaders were responsive to community members (versus unresponsive).

Another important point is that politicians must be able to observe community members voting together as a group. This is why communities can only hold politicians accountable if they vote as a united group at one polling station. The author shows that voting as a united group is more common in communities where residents vote at the same polling station. This makes it easier for local politicians to figure out that people in that community vote together as a united group.

This study shows that small groups can be powerful. They can put big pressure on politicians to provide essential public services, especially if they coordinate their actions through community associations. This is even true in Northeastern Brazil, where many communities are marginalized, and politicians sometimes buy people's votes. However, this type of pressure can also lead to inequality between communities, since some can use this strategy, but others cannot. The author's conclusions challenge a conventional belief in political science that politicians shape group voting. ■

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