



# Do local leaders know their voters? A test of guessability in India

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## ABSTRACT

Prominent theories of clientelism—the exchange of benefits for political support—depend on the assumption that politicians, through local agents immersed in local social networks, possess detailed information on voters’ political preferences prior to targeting. This article provides the first direct test of this assumption. It develops a behavioral measure, *guessability*, which gauges the ability of elected village leaders, who often function as brokers and prominent vote mobilizers, to correctly identify the partisan vote intentions of voters in their locality. It then develops a method to estimate *added informational value*, which compares the performance of local leaders to low-information benchmarks that capture guessability rates that can feasibly be achieved by outsiders. Original data from surveys of voters and elected village politicians across 96 village councils in Rajasthan, India indicate that while these village leaders out-perform low-information benchmarks with respect to co-partisans, they perform no better than this baseline vis-à-vis non-co-partisans.

## 1. Introduction

Research on clientelism—a contingent exchange of targeted benefits for political support—suggests that parties across the developing world condition the distribution of campaign handouts and access to particularistic state benefits and services on voters’ partisan preferences (Hicken, 2011). The efficiency of targeting strategies of this kind, however, depends on the assumption that parties, through local intermediaries (e.g., brokers), accurately observe the partisan vote intentions of voters in their localities prior to targeting, if not monitor their votes after the election (Stokes, 2005; Nichter, 2008; Gans-Morse et al., 2014). Studies in a wide range of developing world contexts assume that a variety of local actors who perform distributive and vote mobilization functions for higher-level politicians—e.g., party activists, elected village leaders, and ethnic elites—meet these steep informational demands (Stokes, 2005; Koter, 2013; Witsoe, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the extent to which local leaders can accurately observe voters’ partisan vote intentions, which I refer to as *guessability*, and whether they possess more accurate information on voters’ preferences than what higher-level politicians without access to local information can achieve has not been systematically examined.

While scholars have examined the pervasiveness of clientelistic

practices and the characteristics of beneficiaries in sophisticated ways,<sup>2</sup> research on local political agents’ (e.g., brokers’) knowledge of voters’ partisan preferences prior to targeting has received little attention. What is known is largely restricted to a small number of studies of Latin American party machines (e.g., Argentina, Paraguay) where competition is low, parties are well-organized, and voters widely doubt that the ballot is secret.<sup>3</sup> Although the assumption that brokers embedded in party machines possess accurate information on voters’ partisan vote preferences may be plausible in these less competitive settings,<sup>4</sup> this is less likely to be the case in many contexts where competitive elections, less organized parties, and a secret ballot make voters’ preferences more difficult to observe (See, e.g., Corstange, 2016; Gonzales-Octanos et al., 2012; Chauchard, 2018; Banerjee, 2014). Second, existing work primarily relies on qualitative and quantitative observations in a small number of localities (See, e.g., Auyero, 2001; Finan and Schechter, 2012). This work provides rich insights on party machines, however, small-n studies cannot precisely assess brokers’ knowledge of voters’ preferences in a broader context (e.g., rural Rajasthan). Third, despite a widespread view that local leaders provide higher-level politicians with informational advantages, scholars have not estimated the extent to which local leaders embedded in voters’ social networks have more accurate information on voters’ preferences than what could be

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to brokers as those who perform informational, distributive, and vote mobilization functions for higher-level politicians from outside the village. While the conventional depiction of brokers, rooted in the Latin American context, focuses on unelected leaders, these functions are performed by local leaders within and outside state institutions (See Mares and Young, 2016; Bohlken, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See Gonzales-Octanos et al., (2012); Finan and Schechter (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Respondents were asked to characterize their trust in elections on a 7-point scale in the 2010 Latin Barometer survey; only 33% and 32% rated Paraguay and Argentina as 5 or above respectively.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Finan and Schechter find that brokers know how voters voted approximately 80% of the time in Paraguay. Numerous datasets have coded Paraguay as an electoral autocracy (Morse, 2012).

achieved without them—using low-cost sources of information that do not require local information. Finally, existing work relies on brokers' self-reports of their knowledge and voters' impressions of this (See, e.g., Stokes et al., 2013). As my own interviews suggest, this is problematic because elected and unelected local leaders have incentive to exaggerate their capabilities and voters' perceptions may exaggerate local leaders' capacities as well.

This article presents a replicable method that directly measures the extent to which local leaders, often recruited as vote mobilizers to higher-level politicians, can correctly identify voters' partisan vote intentions (i.e., guessability), and develops a framework and empirical strategy to gauge their *added informational value* vis-à-vis higher-level politicians. First, I develop a large-scale cross-referenced survey measure of whether local leaders correctly identify the partisan vote intentions of sampled voters from their localities (i.e., guessability).<sup>5</sup> Second, I develop a framework and replicable empirical strategy that evaluates local leaders' performance on guessability relative to low-information benchmarks, which capture what can feasibly be achieved by informed outsiders (e.g., state politicians) with rudimentary knowledge of aggregate group-party linkages. By comparing guessability rates achieved by local leaders against low-information benchmarks that capture guessability rates that can be achieved by blunt guesses based on stereotypes of group-party linkages and simple public opinion polls, I provide a conservative test of the added informational value local leaders provide higher-level politicians in the aggregate and with respect to partisan groups (e.g., core supporters and swing voters) emphasized in different targeting strategies in the clientelism literature. Third, I examine variation in guessability relative to low-information benchmarks across local leader and voter characteristics that plausibly affect the extent to which local leaders can accurately identify voters' partisan vote intentions.

While my method can be applied to a wide range of local leaders and contexts,<sup>6</sup> I apply my research design to data from a unique cross-referenced survey of citizens and elected village leaders across 96 village councils (gram panchayats, GPs) in the north Indian state of Rajasthan. Rural Rajasthan, and India more broadly, is a compelling case to test the assumption that local leaders know the partisan vote intentions of voters in their localities because its features of pervasive poverty and inequality, low population density, and ethnic politics are viewed as conducive to clientelistic strategies (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; Wilkinson, 2007).

I focus my analysis on elected village council presidents, or sarpanch.<sup>7</sup> These leaders are immersed in local social networks; routinely engage in targeted distribution and informal brokerage in their capacity as local representatives and as brokers to higher-level politicians; and often serve as prominent vote mobilizers for higher-level politicians prior to contesting local elections, while in office, and as unelected leaders after the end of their term in office (Krishna, 2017; Kruks-Wisner, 2018).<sup>8</sup> While a wide range of local actors perform brokerage functions for state and national politicians in India—including unelected fixers (Manor, 2000), party activists (Auerbach, 2016), and elected local leaders (Witsoe 2012)—sarpanch comprise a prominent

category of local leaders involved in vote mobilization and local distribution in rural India. In fact, in lieu of the dense activist networks associated with urban areas (Auerbach, 2016), higher-level politicians in rural India have historically been compelled to outsource brokerage functions to prominent local leaders such as sarpanch (See Bohlken, 2016, p.16; Weiner, 1967).

Examining the added informational value of sarpanch provides a conservative test of the assumption that parties accurately observe voters' partisan preferences prior to campaign-time targeting. Sarpanch are likely to have extensive information on voters' preferences due to their frequent interactions with voters seeking state benefits and routine requests during and between elections.<sup>9</sup> As prominent leaders in the village with formal authority over distribution, sarpanch are also likely to have access to information on voters' political preferences provided by lower-level elected or unelected leaders in their local political networks.<sup>10</sup> Thus, whether my results for guessability reflect the personal efforts of sarpanch alone or a collective effort of sarpanch and subordinate leaders, guessability among sarpanch plausibly represents a relatively high level of information on voters' preferences relative to other types of local leaders in India.<sup>11</sup> Consistent with this interpretation, I find similar results for guessability among sarpanch and elected village council ward members, who represent nine percent as many voters as sarpanch; a later study that applies my method to a sample of prominent *unelected* brokers in Bihar finds similar aggregate results for guessability among unelected village leaders (Sircar and Chauchard, 2018). This article, thus, presents evidence from a hard case for testing the assumption that local leaders in India have accurate information on voters' partisan vote preferences and develops a method that makes it possible to systematically examine guessability across different types of local leaders and contexts.

My results are at odds with the view that local leaders immersed in village social networks have the extensive information on voters' vote preferences required for strategies of targeting non-core voters. While sarpanch provide added informational value in identifying the partisan vote intentions of their co-partisans, they perform no better than low information benchmarks that capture information about the party preferences of ethnic groups at the state level in the aggregate or with respect to non-partisan (swing) voters, and perform significantly worse than low-information benchmarks with respect to opposition supporters. My results are consistent with research which suggests that local leaders prioritize interactions with and distribution to members of their core partisan networks (Dunning and Nilekani, 2013; Stokes et al., 2013; Szwarcberg, 2015). My conclusions hold when I consider characteristics of local leaders that plausibly affect the ability of local leaders to correctly identify voters' partisan vote intentions such as party affiliation, political experience in the GP, whether the leader identifies as a party activist, contact with higher-level leaders, or whether sarpanch and voters belong to the same ethnic group—none of which has significant impact on guessability. In short, my results suggest that while local leaders meet the informational requirements of models of core targeting, higher-level politicians relying on low-cost information from stereotypes of group-party linkages or public opinion polls can match or out-perform local leaders seen as critical to the efficiency of vote buying strategies .

<sup>5</sup> Cross-referencing in this case involves asking sampled local politicians about voter survey respondents whom they overwhelmingly know personally.

<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing, my research design has been adopted in studies conducted in India and the Philippines on a variety of elected and unelected broker types (See, e.g., Ravanilla et al., 2017; Sircar and Chauchard, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> I also provide data on guessability for ward members who represent approximately 100 households (9% as many households as sarpanch). I show that guessability rates among sarpanch and ward members do not significantly differ.

<sup>8</sup> Krishna (2017, chapter 7) notes that fixers have increasingly entered local government in recent years due to increasingly lucrative options for rent-seeking that came with further devolution of policy implementation to local governments.

<sup>9</sup> Sarpanch reported to know 95% of voters personally in my survey. A survey of voters in Rajasthan showed approximately one-third of voters sought a benefit from the sarpanch directly (See Krusk-Wisner, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> It is plausible that sarpanch gain access to information on voters' preferences obtained by lower-level leaders in the village such as village council ward members and unelected fixers with whom they often interact.

<sup>11</sup> I do not directly measure guessability among unelected local leaders. While the relative performance of elected leaders and unelected fixers is an empirical question, my method makes it possible to examine this question directly.

## 2. Conceptualizing local leaders' added informational value

Research broadly assumes that local leaders, often employed as vote mobilizers (e.g., brokers), have access to more accurate information on voters' preferences than higher-level politicians from outside the locality. While higher-level politicians (and their staff) cannot observe the preferences or votes of individuals or small groups within a locality (See, e.g., Stokes et al., 2013), local leaders are expected to have detailed information on voters' preferences through their access to ethnic and political networks (Corstange, 2016; Calvo and Murillo, 2013), observations of voters' political activities, and other information only accessible to those living in the locality. Nonetheless, scholarship has not theorized or operationalized a baseline that captures the level of information on voters' partisan vote preferences available to higher-level politicians against which local leaders' informational advantages can be assessed. In this section, I develop a framework and simple empirical strategy for estimating added informational value, which tests for whether brokers' knowledge of voters' preference exceeds what higher-level politicians can feasibly achieve without the local information local leaders possess in the aggregate and with respect to the types of voters prioritized in prominent targeting strategies (e.g., core supporters, swing voters).

### 2.1. Conceptualizing added informational value

While there is a voluminous debate over whether parties target swing voters or their co-partisan supporters, this research does not establish a baseline that captures the information on voters' partisan vote preferences that higher-level politicians feasibly possess in lieu of local informants (e.g., brokers). I argue that higher-level politicians, at minimum, have access to information on the distribution of partisan vote preferences across politically relevant demographic groups (e.g., ethnicity, class) aggregated to the state or country level. This is likely to be the case because newspapers and other media publish results from election surveys that inform higher-level politicians' priors on the distribution of partisan preferences across ethnic groups in the aggregate. Moreover, politicians and their staff have strong incentives to monitor the local and regional press and consult prominent ethnic group leaders for information on voters' political leanings prior to an election campaign. In addition, politicians in India and other developing countries increasingly conduct internal public opinion polls to determine voters' partisan vote intentions, which often provide finer-grained information on group-party linkages in a state assembly constituency or parliamentary district.<sup>12</sup> In short, higher-level politicians hold reasonably informed priors on which groups are politically relevant at the state level, and which groups comprise core support groups for one of the major political parties (core groups) or hold more heterogeneous preferences (swing groups) at this level.<sup>13</sup> Against this low-information baseline, a local leader immersed in village social networks provides added informational value (on guessability) if he has more accurate information on voters' partisan vote intention than what higher-level politicians can achieve without local information.

<sup>12</sup> Informal qualitative interviews with state assembly representatives (MLAs), their aids, and district-level officials in the party organization broadly show that candidates and their staff have extensive knowledge of group voting patterns in their state and constituency (See Appendix G for details). For evidence on the rise of campaign polls designed to collect such information see: *The Guardian* (2/15/2017) < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/16/india-big-data-election-pollsters-target-age-caste-religion-uttar-pradesh> > .

<sup>13</sup> This means that outsiders (without access to local leaders) are likely to achieve high levels of guessability in contexts where ethnicity provides a reliable cue to partisan preferences overall or for specific groups.

### 2.2. Operationalizing added informational value: Low-information benchmarks

To operationalize local leaders' added informational value, I compare the performance of sarpanch on guessability to two types of low-information benchmarks. First, I develop a decision rule benchmark that captures the level of guessability that can be achieved by outsiders if they simply guess that all members of core ethnic groups (e.g., Muslims), which are strongly associated with a party (e.g., Congress Party) have vote intentions for that party, and guess the preferences of all others randomly (across major parties). This follows three steps. First, politically relevant ethnic groups in a setting can be identified by considering groups typically included in election analyses in that setting (See, e.g., Lodha, 2009). Second, I identify ethnic groups as core groups by calculating average differences in vote share across parties for each politically relevant group across the past two election cycles based on state assembly post-poll election surveys publicized in newspapers and other outlets at the time.<sup>14</sup> Although other cut-offs may be appropriate in other applications, I identify a group as core if differences among group members in partisan support toward a particular party is greater than 15%. Third, I apply the low-information decision rule described above to voter survey data from Rajasthan: a state with a two-party system. Local leaders' added informational value can then be determined by estimating the difference between local leaders' performance on guessability and the guessability rate that can be achieved by applying the low-information decision rule benchmark to the same voters.

As an alternative benchmark that is less conservative but does not require the selection of a cut-off for core groups, I compare observed guessability rates to the predictive performance of a simple multinomial model on partisan vote intentions (using my survey data) including indicators for politically relevant groups as independent variables. This benchmark makes it possible to establish whether a polling firm with minimal information on voters' demographic characteristics can better predict vote intentions than leaders immersed in voters' local social networks.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.3. Evaluating added informational value across targeting strategies

The literature on clientelism identifies targeting strategies that prioritize different types of voters (e.g., core, swing). I extend the approach described above to evaluate local leaders' added informational value with respect to the informational requirements of prominent targeting strategies since higher-level politicians may evaluate local leaders according to their ability to carry out such strategies.

Research on vote buying as a persuasive strategy posits that parties target electoral handouts to swing voters because they are most responsive to material inducements, and exclude opposition and core supporters whose vote preferences are unlikely to be changed by targeted benefits (See Stokes, 2005).<sup>16</sup> The efficiency of this strategy depends on the capacity of brokers to identify the partisan vote preferences of voters of all partisan types (core, swing, and opposition) before distribution (Gans-Morse et al., 2014), and often monitor their votes after the election.<sup>17</sup>

Core targeting strategies posit that parties, through local political agents, target benefits to voters located in their local partisan networks

<sup>14</sup> This provides a consistent picture of group-party linkages. I chose two elections to capture recent trends; replications of this approach could include a larger number of elections.

<sup>15</sup> This provides a lower bound on the accuracy of polling as more sophisticated analyses of political polling data should exceed the accuracy of this benchmark.

<sup>16</sup> Swing voters are defined as those who are indifferent or weakly opposed to the broker's party.

<sup>17</sup> I do not test the monitoring assumption directly here, however this is a particularly strong assumption where the ballot is secret; even work in machine contexts with weaker electoral integrity suggests vote monitoring is unfeasible. See, for example, Lawson and Greene (2014).

whom they are likely to know well (Cox and McCubbins, 1986; Calvo and Murillo, 2013). Moreover, given voters' knowledge of leaders' targeting biases toward co-partisans, voters have strong incentives to reveal their shared partisan preferences to local leaders (Dunning and Nilekani, 2013; Schneider, 2018). If local leaders provide added informational value on this strategy, they should be able to identify co-partisans more accurately than low-information benchmarks that capture information available to outsiders.

Finally, research on distributive politics suggests that parties often condition the distribution of private benefits on voters' group identities (See Chandra 2004). Local leaders provide added informational value (on guessability) for group-targeting strategies if they have more accurate information at the group-level than what can be achieved by low-information benchmarks available to outsiders based on aggregate patterns. While this may not be relevant in contexts where ethnic groups are extremely polarized across parties in what resembles an ethnic census (Ferree, 2006), local leaders may provide added informational value to state and national politicians in settings where group-party linkages vary across localities (See Gingerich and Medina, 2013; Rueda, 2017).

Applying the added informational value approach to the informational requirements of prominent targeting strategies yields the following hypotheses:

**H1.** Local leaders out-perform low-information benchmarks with respect to voters from politically relevant ethnic groups (Ethnic Group Targeting Strategy).

**H2.** Local leaders out-perform low-information benchmarks with respect to core (co-partisan) and non-core (opposition, swing) voter types (Vote Buying Strategy)

**H3.** Local leaders out-perform low-information benchmarks with respect to co-partisans only (Core Targeting Strategy).

### 3. Research design

#### 3.1. The survey

To test the above hypotheses, I designed a cross-referenced survey that includes face-to-face interviews with 959 heads of household and elected village council presidents (sarpanch) and ward members in 96 village councils (gram panchayats, GPs) in relatively poor and politically competitive sub-districts (blocks) across Rajasthan.<sup>18</sup> I sampled politically competitive areas to ensure that my study captures a context where electoral uncertainty is non-trivial, and guessability is therefore relevant and likely to be valued by local and higher-level leaders.<sup>19</sup> I sampled poor villages to increase the chance that targeted benefits

<sup>18</sup> I obtained a sample of 959 household heads (i.e. citizens), 95 sarpanch, and 89 ward (council) members. I restricted sampling to blocks with average margins of victors of 15% or less and below poverty line rates of 20% or more. Since GP election data is not available in Rajasthan, I collected data on GP competitiveness from interviews with BJP and Congress Party block presidents. Voter survey respondents were randomly sampled using the voters list. See Appendix A for descriptive statistics and Appendix C for details on sampling and elite interviews.

<sup>19</sup> Note that it is difficult to interpret results on guessability in uncompetitive contexts where one party is dominant because local leaders can achieve high performance on guessability by guessing that all respondents support the dominant party without knowledge of individual voters' preferences. Along with fitting the generally competitive nature of elections in Rajasthan (The median margin of victory in the most recent 2018 state assembly elections was 9.5% for example), this sampling approach captures a setting where performance on non-core voters can decisively impact electoral outcomes. That said, future research should examine whether local leaders can accurately distinguish supporters from non-core voters in less competitive settings.

would be salient. Predominantly male heads of household—the most visible voters in village political life—were sampled to ensure that my results for guessability are conservative.<sup>20</sup> Surveys were fielded in early 2013, nine months before Rajasthan's state assembly elections, to capture information that local leaders have on voters' partisan preferences before election campaign distribution.<sup>21</sup> While state assembly candidate names were not yet announced at the time, partisan vote preferences in my survey and a state assembly pre-poll survey conducted six months later by Lokniti, a national survey firm in Delhi, similarly show a strong BJP advantage over Congress.<sup>22</sup>

#### 3.2. Measuring guessability

To address the concern of response bias in brokers' self-reported responses on their knowledge of voters' preferences, I develop a cross-referenced measure of guessability that directly tests the ability of local leaders to identify voters' preferences. Respondents in the voter survey reported (by secret ballot) the party they would support if an election were held tomorrow.<sup>23</sup> The next day, sarpanch and village council members were shown a sheet of 10 photographs of sampled voters—including information provided in the electoral roles: name, age, father's name, and house number—and asked to guess their partisan vote preferences. My decision to measure guessability for a random sample of voters in poor villages—rather than only voters who are targeted—follows from the assumptions of models in the vote buying literature, which suggest that brokers' knowledge of the vote intentions of voters in the local population makes it possible for them to decide which individuals to target with material benefits and which to exclude (See, e.g., Gans-Morse et al., 2014). Guessability is a measure of whether local leaders' guesses match voters' self-reported responses on the (secret ballot) partisan vote intentions survey instrument.<sup>24</sup> To ensure that my estimates of errors in guessability are conservative (i.e., that guessability is conservatively high), I analyze guessability with several restrictions described in Appendix E.

#### 3.3. The case of elected local leaders in rural India

I examine guessability with data from elected local leaders in poor villages in Rajasthan, a rural state in North India.<sup>25</sup> Rural India, and

<sup>20</sup> Males are most likely to participate in local political life, and according to the National Social Survey (2007/2008), male rural-to-rural migration is only 5 percent across India. This means that my sample likely over-reports guessability rates relative to a broader sample frame that represents women who often change villages due to marriage (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Elected local leaders in India are in frequent and routine contact with their constituents and have numerous opportunities to identify voters' partisan preferences, and incentives to do so in the context of routine distribution and other activities during an election year. Moreover, given the sensitivity of the cross-referenced survey, conducting such a study closer to the start of the campaign would have likely resulted in low levels of cooperation by local leaders.

<sup>22</sup> The October 2013 Lokniti pre-poll survey, which asked the same partisan vote intentions question to a representative sample of Rajasthan voters (also before candidate names were released), shows an 18% margin for the BJP compared to 11% in my poorer, competitive sample. See Lokniti, "Rajasthan 2013 Pre-Poll Survey Report," available at: [http://www.lokniti.org/pdfs\\_dataunit/Questionairs/rajasthan-prepoll-2013-survey-findings.pdf](http://www.lokniti.org/pdfs_dataunit/Questionairs/rajasthan-prepoll-2013-survey-findings.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> I measure vote intentions with a secret ballot survey instrument previously fielded in parliamentary and state election post-poll surveys conducted in Rajasthan by Lokniti, a national survey organization in India. See Appendix D for the instrument.

<sup>24</sup> Since candidates had not yet been announced, guessability measures partisan vote preferences rather than candidate preferences.

<sup>25</sup> Estimates based on consumption data from the 2004-5 National Sample Survey show that Rajasthan has a 19 percent rural poverty rate—modestly below the 22.5 percent average for the 17 most populous Indian states (Dev and Ravi, 2007).

Rajasthan specifically, represents a context of competitive clientelism where existing theory would expect guessability to be high.<sup>26</sup> First, Rajasthan's politics is characterized as patronage-based (Chandra, 2004; Keefer and Khemani, 2004), and vote buying is so pervasive that candidates often refer to it as a necessity for any viable candidate in India (Chauchard, 2018). Beyond election campaigns, targeted state benefits and services are widely viewed to be politically targeted at the local level. Research shows that village council presidents (i.e., sarpanch) have influence over which citizens to include as beneficiaries to government programs, which requests for help in accessing state services to answer, and which government forms (e.g., land titles) to sign—and condition access to these benefits and services on voters' political characteristics (Chauchard, 2017; Schneider, 2018).

Second, existing research suggests that performance on guessability is likely to be high in rural Rajasthan—a context of low population density, pervasive poverty, and stable populations where voters and leaders often interact. My sample of male household heads in poor villages captures this context particularly well.<sup>27</sup> More over, relative to other Indian states, Rajasthan has an institutionalized two-party system (Chhibber and Nooruddin, 2008),<sup>28</sup> and caste is a salient although imperfect predictor of partisanship (Lodha, 2009). This means that it should be less difficult to perform well on guessability in rural Rajasthan than is the case in less institutionalized and more volatile party systems where vote preferences are particularly difficult to predict (e.g., Tamil Nadu), or urban contexts where populations are less stable due to migration. In short, if the guessability assumption applies in competitive contexts with a secret ballot, we should expect sarpanch in Rajasthan to out-perform low-information benchmarks on guessability that do not capture local information.

Third, this study focuses on an important category of local leaders in rural India: directly elected village council presidents, or sarpanch.<sup>29</sup> Along with their formal powers as local representatives, sarpanch comprise an important category of brokers in India. First, sarpanch are active in election campaigns and frequently serve as local mobilizers for state politicians or higher-tier politicians in local government.<sup>30</sup> The central role that sarpanch play in political mobilization on behalf of state and other higher-level politicians was evident from my interviews with sub-district (block)-level party organizers and state legislators (MLAs) who were in frequent contact with co-partisan sarpanch as Rajasthan's state assembly elections were approaching. Second, despite an official ban on party symbols in GP elections, sarpanch in Rajasthan are known partisan actors with consistent partisan preferences.<sup>31</sup> Thus, sarpanch resemble partisan brokers in the clientelism literature more closely than non-partisan fixers with volatile partisan affiliations (Manor, 2000). Third, a defining feature of brokers is their immersion

in local social networks. Sarpanch in my data overwhelmingly (95%) knew their constituents personally, and are by far the most likely local leader to be contacted by citizens seeking state benefits and favors.<sup>32</sup> Fourth, while research on brokers has focused on unelected fixers (Krishna, 2011), prominent fixers have increasingly contested local elections. This means that sarpanch resemble a population of prominent fixers who leveraged their local influence to win local elections and are likely to resume brokerage activities after their term in office ends (Kruks-Wisner, 2018; Krishna, 2017).

#### 3.4. Comparison to low-information benchmarks

I estimate elected local leaders' added informational value on guessability by comparing their performance on guessability against low-information benchmarks that capture guessability rates that can be achieved by outsiders. As noted above, higher-level politicians can guess voters' preferences by employing a rule of thumb (i.e., decision rule) based on a voter's ethnic category and blunt knowledge on group-party linkages in the state overall, or by conducting public opinion polls prior to the election that include information on voters' demographic characteristics and vote preferences. To employ the decision rule benchmark described above in Rajasthan, I identify core groups as those with average margins of victory greater than 15% across post-poll surveys conducted by Lokniti after the two elections conducted prior to my survey in 2003 and 2008.<sup>33</sup> This approach identifies groups typically viewed as core groups in analyses of electoral politics in Rajasthan.<sup>34</sup> To estimate the information on vote intentions that higher-level politicians can obtain from public opinion polls, I compare brokers' performance on guessability to the percent of correct predictions of a minimal statistical (multinomial) model of voters' partisan vote intentions using data from my 2013 survey. To ensure that this benchmark is conservative, I only include indicators for politically relevant ethnic groups used to calculate the decision rule benchmark in this statistical model.<sup>35</sup> Comparison of the performance of sarpanch on guessability to this benchmark captures local leaders' added value over information that can be obtained from pre-election polls increasingly fielded by candidates and political parties. I refer to this benchmark as the demographic model benchmark. I focus on the decision rule benchmark described above because it is the more conservative benchmark and reflects my observations of how sarpanch made their guesses in practice.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. Results for guessability in the aggregate and across sub groups

The main results suggest that elected local leaders, who comprise an important category of brokers in rural India, provide added

<sup>26</sup> The incumbent party in Rajasthan had been displaced in closely contested state elections in each election cycle from 1991 to the time of the survey.

<sup>27</sup> Male household heads are typically the most visible and politically engaged member of a rural household.

<sup>28</sup> Chhibber and Nooruddin place Rajasthan in the bottom third of major states on their measure of electoral volatility.

<sup>29</sup> In my data, sarpanch represent 1,100 households (the entire GP of several village) on average (2001 Census of India). I also present data on directly elected ward members (who represent 100 households). I provide descriptive statistics on the sarpanch and ward member sample in Appendix A.

<sup>30</sup> To illustrate the role of sarpanch in campaigns, in survey questions on their political activities in the past 5 years, 92 percent of sarpanch reported that they campaigned for a state politician; 80 percent said they attended a campaign rally for a party or candidate; and 85 percent attended a party meeting. Moreover, 94% of voter survey respondents reported that the sarpanch supported a party candidate in the past 5 years.

<sup>31</sup> In my data, 84 of 91 (91%) of sarpanch who answered both vote preference questions (91 of 95 sampled sarpanch) reported consistent partisan preference for the 2008 vote recall and vote intention questions. Dunning and Nilekani (2013) similarly find that voters in Rajasthan correctly identified the partisan affiliation of their sarpanch 96% of the time.

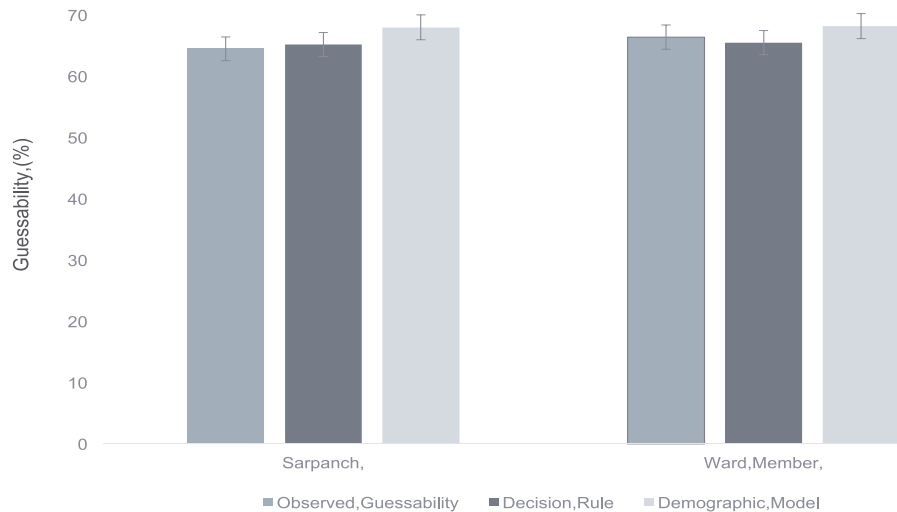
<sup>32</sup> Voters identified the sarpanch (or an ex-sarpanch) as the modal leader to contact to access a wide range of state services associated with brokerage. Similarly, Kruks-Wisner (2018) finds that citizens in Rajasthan are 45% more likely to contact GP representatives than unelected fixers.

<sup>33</sup> See Table F1 in the appendix for details on partisan vote margins.

<sup>34</sup> Politically relevant ethnic groups in Rajasthan include upper castes, other backward castes (excluding Jats and Gujjars), Jats, Gujjars, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and Muslims. I provide details on vote margins for these groups and implementation of the decision rule benchmark in Appendix F. When I consider a 20% cut-off for core groups (instead of 15%) sarpanch (and ward members) perform slightly better than the decision rule, however, this cut-off is inappropriate as scheduled castes—a traditional core group of the Congress Party—are coded as a swing group under this cut-off.

<sup>35</sup> More sophisticated vote models including a wider range of voter characteristics can achieve a higher level of accuracy on vote preferences.

<sup>36</sup> Local leaders often voiced their thought process in ways that fit the decision rule benchmark. Moreover, sarpanch guessed third parties for 7 of 806 voters in the restricted samples; 2 of these were correct. Thus, the 2-party focus fits behavior on guessability in this setting.



**Fig. 1.** Aggregate guessability relative to benchmarks. Fig. 1 shows observed guessability rates and guessability rates under the decision rule and demographic model low-information benchmarks. 95% confidence intervals show uncertainty.

informational value with respect to co-partisans (hypothesis 3) while they do not provide added informational value in the aggregate or with respect to non-co-partisan voters (hypothesis 2). Local leaders do not provide added informational value relative to low-information benchmarks in the aggregate and provide added informational value at the level of ethnic groups only for a small number of politically relevant caste groups (Hypothesis 1). I show that sarpanch do not identify the partisan vote preferences of co-ethnics significantly more accurately than those who belong to different ethnic groups in regression analysis in section 5.

#### 4.1. Guessability in the aggregate

Fig. 1 shows aggregate observed guessability rates for sarpanch and ward council members and guessability rates that can feasibly be achieved by outsiders using the decision rule and demographic model benchmarks. These results show that the guessability rates of local leaders match or are inferior to what can be achieved through low-information benchmarks that do not take local information into account. Sarpanch achieve an overall guessability rate of 64.5% on partisan vote intentions in the aggregate. If a sarpanch (or state politician) followed the low-information decision rule described above, he or she would achieve an aggregate guessability rate of 65.2%, which is statistically indistinguishable from the performance of sarpanch. The multinomial demographic model correctly predicts partisan vote intentions for 68% of sample voters, which is a significantly higher rate of guessability than what sarpanch achieved.<sup>37</sup>

To establish that results for guessability are not driven by the size of the sarpanch's constituency (i.e., the entire GP), I show that the aggregate guessability rate of GP council (ward) members, who represent 100 households on average, is statistically indistinguishable from that of sarpanch who represent 1,100 households on average. While ward members (compared to sarpanch) lack formal authority over distribution and are less prominent and less likely to participate in campaign activities than sarpanch,<sup>38</sup> they comprise a pool of elected local leaders

who are likely to perform brokerage activities for a smaller number of voters that more closely resembles the depiction of brokerage networks in other settings (e.g., Argentina).<sup>39</sup> Ward member achieve a guessability rate of 66.3% on vote intentions as compared to 64.5% for sarpanch. The decision rule and demographic model benchmarks applied to ward members achieve guessability rates of 65.5% and 68.2% respectively—which are both statistically indistinguishable from the rates achieved by ward members.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, while it is plausible that India's rotating systems of quotas, which requires candidates for sarpanch in a reserved GP to be female or members of marginal groups, may depress guessability rates among sarpanch, I show in Table A4 of the appendix that sarpanch and ward members from these categories (scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women) do not have significantly different guessability rates than those outside these categories.<sup>41</sup> This suggests that the guessability rates of sarpanch are not unusually low (compared to other leader types) due the number of voters in the GP or features of the quota system.

While Fig. 1 shows that sarpanch do not provide added informational value on guessability in the aggregate, observed guessability rates importantly exceed rates we would expect if sarpanch guessed voters' preferences blindly in ways that do not consider aggregate information on group-party linkages. The benchmark that captures the least information is pure random guessing; in Rajasthan's two-party system, this is equivalent to guessing voters' preferences with a coin flip between Rajasthan's two major parties—with a guessability rate of 50%. Aggregate guessability rates for sarpanch (64.5%) and ward members (66.6%) exceed pure random guessing.<sup>42</sup> Observed guessability rates also exceed rates that would be achieved if sarpanch blindly guessed that all voters: support the party the sarpanch feels closest to (49%); share the same vote intention as the sarpanch (42%), or all support the BJP given the anti-incumbency wave that was palpable at the time of the survey in 2013 (56%). In short, while sarpanch take

<sup>39</sup> See Auyero 2001, for example.

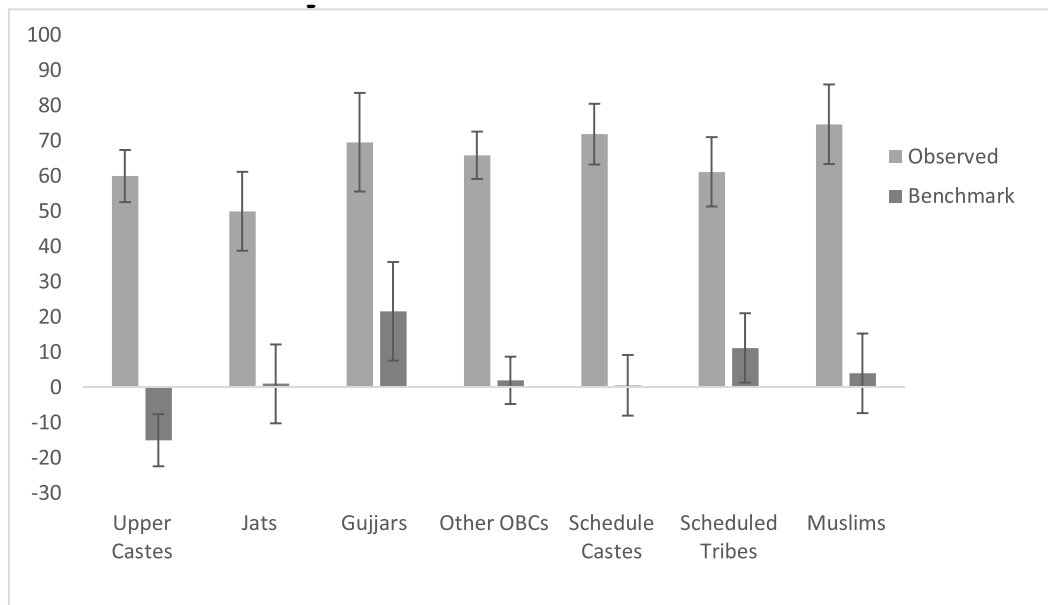
<sup>40</sup> See Appendix F for details on the calculation of ward member guessability.

<sup>41</sup> Note that female sarpanch were permitted to include their husbands in completing the guessability measure (if requested) to capture the level of information on voters' preferences available to female sarpanch in practice in rural Rajasthan—where a male family member is often the relevant political broker.

<sup>42</sup> Aggregated to the GP, 70 percent of sarpanch perform above the 50 percent random chance benchmark for vote intentions.

<sup>37</sup> Regression results from the multinomial model are provided in Table A5 of the appendix.

<sup>38</sup> See Table A3 of the appendix for descriptive statistics on ward members. On average, ward members are less partisan, report lower levels of contact with higher-level leaders, and are less likely to canvass for politicians.



**Fig. 2.** Guessability by ethnic group. Fig. 2 shows guessability rates for sub-groups of sampled voters from politically relevant ethnic groups in Rajasthan, and differences between guessability rates and the rate that is achieved by the more conservative decision rule benchmark. Errors reflect 95% confidence intervals.

relevant, easily available priors on voters' preferences into account in guessing partisan vote intentions, they do not provide added informational value in the aggregate when compared to what can be achieved by outsiders using a blunt decision rule based on demographic guessing, or a rudimentary analysis of group vote preferences from polling data.

#### 4.2. Guessability across ethnic groups

In both programmatic and non-programmatic settings, partisan vote preferences are likely to be correlated with group identity. In India, where partisan preferences among members of the same ethnic group are heterogeneous and vary across localities (See Dunning and Nilekani, 2013), local leaders may provide added informational value by observing the distribution of partisan preferences among ethnic groups in their locality more accurately than would be the case for outsiders relying on aggregate patterns of group-party linkages at the state level (Hypothesis 1).

I show the performance of sarpanch on guessability across politically relevant ethnic groups relative to what could be achieved with the decision rule benchmark in Fig. 2. Results show that sarpanch achieve guessability rates significantly higher than this low-information benchmark for two groups (scheduled tribes and Gujjars)<sup>43</sup>; the demographic model benchmark predicts vote preferences as well as or better than sarpanch for all ethnic groups. In short, while sarpanch may plausibly observe party-voter linkages of sub-castes—whose preferences may differ from the broad caste groups (e.g., upper castes) included in the two low-information benchmarks—evidence suggests that sarpanch in rural Rajasthan provide modest added informational value on guessability at the level of ethnic groups.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Gujjars are an Other Backward Caste (OBC) typically analyzed separately in research on Rajasthan politics. Ward members out-perform the decision rule and demographic model for three groups respectively. See Table F8 in the appendix.

<sup>44</sup> If sarpanch did observe fine-graining information on the distribution of partisan preferences among sub-castes, this would be reflected in the analysis of added informational in Fig. 2.

#### 4.3. Guessability Across Partisan Types

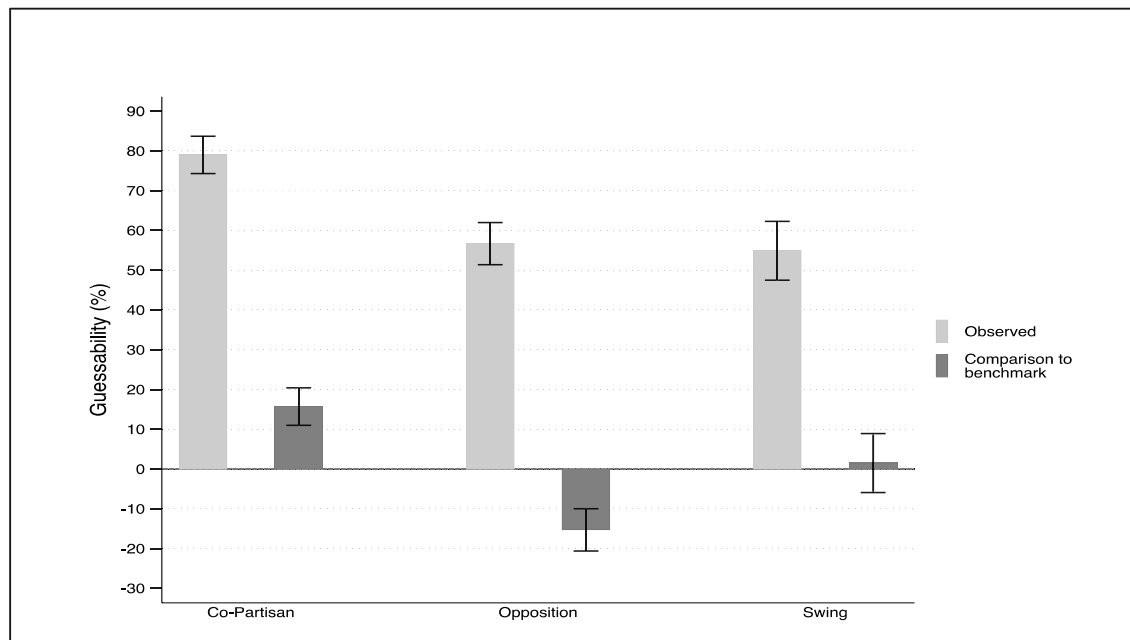
To test hypotheses 2 and 3, I examine whether sarpanch provide added informational value on guessability with respect to the partisan types of voters emphasized in swing and core targeting strategies. I identify core voters as those who feel closest to the partisan preference of their sarpanch;<sup>45</sup> opposition voters as those who feel closest to a party different than their sarpanch's party; and swing voters as those who do not feel close to any party (i.e. non-partisans). Contrary to the assumptions of vote buying models, I show in Fig. 3 that sarpanch match or under-perform what could be achieved by the more conservative decision rule benchmark with respect to non-core (i.e., swing, opposition) voters.<sup>46</sup> Sarpanch guessed the partisan vote preferences of partisans of an opposition party and non-partisans (swing voters) correctly 56.8 and 55 percent of the time respectively. The decision rule and demographic model benchmark out-perform sarpanch with respect to opposition party supporters by 15.3 and 24.7 percentage points respectively, and both benchmarks achieve statistically indistinguishable guessability rates from those of sarpanch with respect to swing voters. Contrary to the expectations of Hypothesis 2, this suggests that sarpanch, an important broker type in rural India, do not provide added informational value on guessability with respect to the partisan vote intentions of non-core voters.<sup>47</sup> Thus, local leaders in rural India do not meet the steep information requirements of a vote buying strategy that targets swing voters and excludes other voter types.

On the other hand, results show that sarpanch provide added informational value on guessability with respect to co-partisans (Hypothesis 3). Sarpanch correctly identify the vote intentions of 79.6 percent of co-partisan voters, which out-performs the decision rule and

<sup>45</sup> Since guessability for co-partisans and opposition supporters requires a measure of sarpanch partisanship, responses from four non-partisan sarpanch are not included in calculations of guessability for co-partisan and opposition supporters.

<sup>46</sup> Since India has a broadly non-ideological party system (See Chandra, 2004), I used partisan attachment rather than ideology to determine partisan types. The survey question is as follows: 'Do you feel close to any particular party? [If so] Which one?'

<sup>47</sup> I show in Appendix F9 that this is similarly the case for ward members.



**Fig. 3.** Guessability across partisan types. Fig. 3 shows the overall guessability rates across voter types (in light gray) and the difference between the rates of correct guesses of sarpanch and the rates we would expect by applying the low-information polling benchmark in dark gray. When the comparison to the benchmark is above zero, this means the sarpanch out-perform the benchmark and vice versa. 95% Confidence intervals show uncertainty.

demographic model benchmarks by 16.3 and 14.3 percentage points respectively. This is consistent with research which suggests that brokers prioritize integrating voters into local partisan networks rather than investing in monitoring the preferences or votes of non-core voters. That said, sarpanch incorrectly guessed that voters who intended to vote for the opposition party would vote for their party preference 48 percent of the time.<sup>48</sup> This suggests that brokers often exaggerate co-partisan support among non-core voters, but add informational value among those in their co-partisan networks.<sup>49</sup>

In summary, aggregate results show that sarpanch out-perform low-information benchmarks by leveraging information from their co-partisan networks, and otherwise rely on blunt stereotypes on group-party linkages available to outsiders. Although local leaders often make errors with respect to non-core voters, my results are consistent with the expectations of theories of core targeting.

## 5. Added informational value: Regression analysis

In this section, I show that my conclusions from the analysis above are robust to more nuanced statistical tests that take additional characteristics of voters and local leaders into account. I examine variation in added informational value, relative to the demographic model benchmark, across voter and sarpanch characteristics that plausibly explain variation in guessability.<sup>50</sup> Added informational value in this analysis is a measure of the difference between whether a sarpanch correctly guessed a voters' partisan vote intention (i.e., guessability) and an indicator variable for whether the baseline demographic (multinomial) model correctly classifies (predicts) that voter's self-reported

partisan vote intention. It takes a value of  $-1$ ,  $0$ , or  $1$  and is calculated:<sup>51</sup>

$$\text{Added Informational Value}_i = \text{Guessability Sarpanch}_i - \text{Correct Classification}_i$$

I estimate a model of added informational value on voter and sarpanch characteristics using ordinary least squares and clustered errors for GPs to capture the hierarchical structure of the data where one sarpanch guesses the vote intentions of all sampled voters in their GP. I compare results from this model to results from logit regressions on guessability, which include the same sarpanch and voter characteristics as independent variables and clustered standard errors.<sup>52</sup>

### 5.1. Measurement of independent variables

Existing theory suggests that three types of characteristics are likely to explain local leaders' (e.g., brokers') relative performance on guessability relative to low-information benchmarks: partisan and ethnic ties; locally observable cues to voters' partisan preferences from political participation; and measures of broker quality which capture competence and the incentives of sarpanch to perform core brokerage functions. I examine variation in added informational value using the psychological attachment measure of partisan preferences described above. I include indicators for co-partisans and opposition supporters with swing voters (i.e., non-partisans) as the reference category. Co-ethnicity is an indicator for shared self-reported group membership in politically relevant caste groups or Muslim religion (irrespective of caste). I measure variation in participation in public partisan activities

<sup>48</sup> Congress Party sarpanch guessed that 145 of 282 voters with BJP vote intentions would support the Congress Party if an election were held tomorrow; BJP sarpanch guessed 39 of 100 voters with Congress party vote preferences would vote for the BJP.

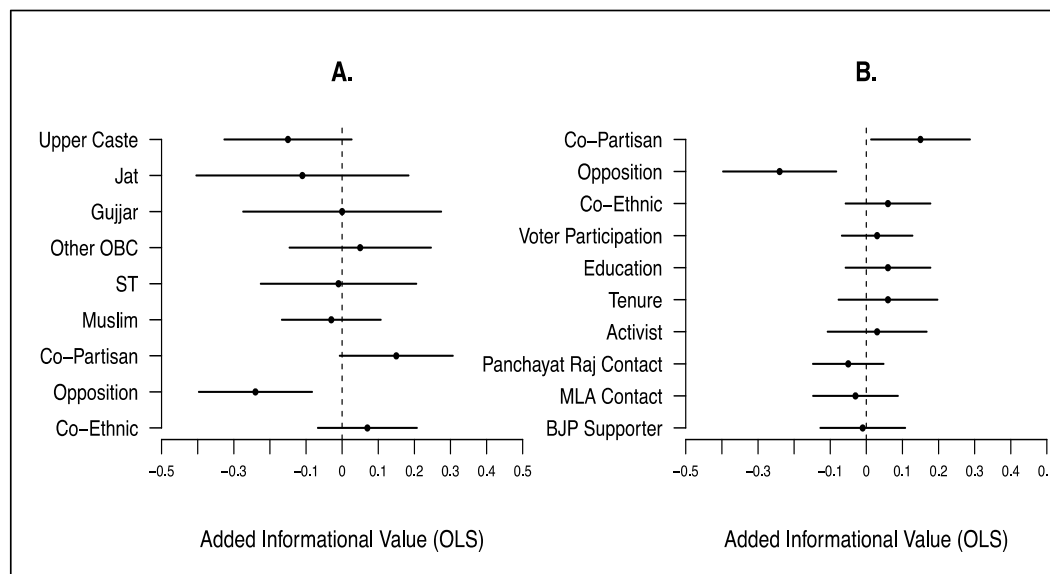
<sup>49</sup> This is consistent with research which suggests that activists exaggerate their persuasive capacities and the extent to which others agree with them. See, for example, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995).

<sup>50</sup> Details on variable coding are provided in Appendix D. Regression tables are provided in Appendix Table A6 through A7.

<sup>51</sup> Correct classification means that the largest predicted probability in the multinomial model is associate with the party the voter reported he would vote for if an election were held today. Positive values indicate that sarpanch guess vote preferences more accurately than the demographic model.

<sup>52</sup> Results on guessability are provided in Table A7 of the appendix. As in the above analysis, guessability is an indicator variable for whether self-reported vote intentions and the sarpanch's guess of a voter's partisan vote intentions match.





**Fig. 4.** Sarpanch added informational value. The left plot provides 95% confidence intervals from an OLS regression (with clustered standard errors) of added informational value including voter demographics (Other OBCs is the reference category), voter participation in partisan activities, and dyadic characteristics—comparing the accuracy of the demographic model benchmark to sarpanch guessability. The right plot provides 95% confidence intervals for a model of added value that includes sarpanch characteristics. All independent variables from the left plot are included in the regression but excluded for simplicity. Results from the full models are provide in [Table A6](#) in the appendix.

to capture a publicly observable cue to voters' partisan preferences that are visible to local leaders but not those outside the village.<sup>53</sup> Broker quality examines variation in educational attainment,<sup>54</sup> tenure in the GP, and interactions with higher-level politicians. I measure educational attainment of the sarpanch with a 14-point ordinal variable for years of education and divide by two standard deviations to capture large increases in education relative to zero (no schooling). I measure tenure in the gram panchayat as the number of terms a sarpanch served in the GP as sarpanch or ward member and divide by two standard deviations to capture large differences relative to zero (no political experience before becoming sarpanch).<sup>55</sup> I construct measures of connections to higher-level politicians with questions on the self-reported frequency of contact (in the past month) between sarpanch and the state legislator (MLA), representatives and presidents of the two upper tiers of local government (panchayat raj) in India: panchayat samiti (block-level) and zilla parishad (district level), and the block party president of the sarpanch's party—another important partisan leader in the block.<sup>56</sup> I create a separate measure for MLA contact that captures variation on the contact measure divided by two standard deviations to capture large differences from zero (no reported MLA contact). Panchayat Raj Contact is an additive measure of contact for all other leaders listed above divided by two standard deviations to capture large

differences from zero. Finally, I include an indicator for sarpanch who identified as party activists and an indicator for BJP support (among sarpanch) to test for differences between sarpanch aligned with the BJP and Congress Party.<sup>57</sup>

## 5.2. Do local leaders provide added informational value?

[Fig. 4](#) shows results from regressions on added informational value. The left plot (4A) shows results from an OLS regression of ethnic group indicators (included in the demographic benchmark model); indicators for partisan types (co-partisan and opposition supporter)<sup>58</sup>, and co-ethnicity vis-à-vis the sarpanch.<sup>59</sup> Consistent with the sub-group analysis above, results show that sarpanch add informational value among their co-partisans, but do not add informational value among non-co-partisans.<sup>60</sup> Regression results show that sarpanch out-perform the correct classification rate of the demographic model by 15 percentage points when guessing the preferences of co-partisans as compared to the baseline category of swing voters; however, they guess the vote intentions of opposition supporters correctly 24 percentage points less often than the demographic model. Sarpanch do not significantly out-perform this low-information benchmark for any ethnic group, and sarpanch do not vary on added informational value when co-ethnicity is considered.<sup>61</sup> These results hold in logit regressions on guessability provided in the appendix.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>53</sup> I create a composite participation index that includes binary questions on whether a respondent reported that he participated in one of four public political activities in the last 5 years: attending a rally, attending a party meeting, putting a party flag in front of their home, and canvassing for a candidate during an election campaign. I sum these activities and divide by two standard deviations to capture large differences in political participation relative to zero.

<sup>54</sup> Scholars view education as important for a variety of broker functions. See [Krishna 2011](#); [Auerbach and Thachil \(2018\)](#).

<sup>55</sup> I do not restrict this measure to tenure as sarpanch only because rotating quotas that change eligibility criteria reduce the number of terms one is eligible to contest as sarpanch.

<sup>56</sup> Responses vary along a 5-point scale from zero meetings in the last month to more than one weekly meeting. I also include self-reported contact with block-level party (organization) president from the sarpanch's party in the panchayat raj contact measure. This is an unelected but important higher-level partisan contact in the block.

<sup>57</sup> Note that I exclude 34 observations from four independent (non-partisan) sarpanch from regional analysis since opposition and core voters cannot be coded for these local leaders. Thus, BJP support compares BJP and Congress affiliated sarpanch.

<sup>58</sup> Non-partisans are the baseline category.

<sup>59</sup> Scheduled castes and Non-Partisan (swing) voters, which both have mean of zero on added value, are the reference categories for ethnic groups and partisan type respectively.

<sup>60</sup> The co-partisan effect is statistically significant at the 90% and 95% levels in the baseline and full models respectively.

<sup>61</sup> I also show in [Appendix Table A7](#) that guessability does not vary between co-ethnics and non-co-ethnics.

<sup>62</sup> I do not find an effect on opposition supporter in models on guessability because while the demographic model predicts the former more accurately than

In plot 4B, I present results from a model that includes a wider range of voter and local leader characteristics including voter participation in public partisan activities, local leader characteristics, and demographic variables from the prior model (not shown for simplicity of presentation) on added informational value. Results show that the general pattern for added informational value holds for co-partisans and opposition supporters when measures of broker quality and other relevant characteristics are considered. Second, sarpanch do not add informational value over a simple demographic model with respect to non-core voters who report to participate in numerous political activities that visibly reveal their partisan preferences to local leaders. Third, measures of broker quality—education, tenure in the GP, and contact with higher-level politicians—have no independent or joint effect on added informational value or guessability. Sarpanch who are BJP supporters (compared to Congress Party supporters) and party activists (compared to those who do not identify as party activists) do not significantly differ on added informational value or guessability.<sup>63</sup>

In short, sarpanch provide added informational value among their co-partisans. Sarpanch, with rare exception, match the performance of a low-information demographic model on vote intentions that can be easily replicated by polling firms in India and many other developing countries. Similarly, I do not find significant variation on guessability (irrespective of comparisons to benchmarks) when considering relevant voter and sarpanch characteristics. This suggests that a prominent category of local leaders involved in election campaigns for higher-level leaders do not meet the informational requirements of persuasive quid pro quo strategies.

## 6. Discussion

This article develops a direct test of the assumption that parties, through local agents, accurately observe voters' partisan preferences prior to making campaign-time targeting decisions. My results demonstrate that elected village leaders—who often function as brokers to higher-level politicians—meet the informational requirements of a strategy of targeting voters within their local partisan networks, but do not meet the steeper informational requirements of vote buying strategies that require information on non-core voters—a substantively significant category of voters that comprise approximately 66% of voters in this study. My results are consistent with research in India and other settings which suggests that elected and unelected local leaders prioritize constructing and maintaining high-information local partisan networks and invest effort in targeting and mobilizing voters within these networks (Dunning and Nilekani, 2013; Szwarcberg, 2015; Auerbach and Thachil, 2018; See Stokes et al., 2013). If higher-level politicians prioritize core targeting, and expect local leaders to acquire extensive information on those in their partisan networks alone, my results may be interpreted as evidence that sarpanch provide substantial added informational value to higher-level politicians.

On the other hand, while the conventional wisdom in research on vote buying suggests that brokers are valued for their ability to accurately and efficiently target selective benefits conditional on voters' partisan vote preferences, my findings suggest that quid pro quo strategies that target non-co-partisan voters are likely to be inefficient in contexts such as India where the ballot is secret and party competition is intense. I find that local leaders do not provide added informational value with respect to non-core voters, and in line with the view that local leaders prioritize identifying the preferences of core voters over non-core voters, regression results show that measures of broker quality and voter participation have little effect on guessability among non-

core voters. Thus, local leaders with substantial skills and experience invest little effort in monitoring the preferences of non-core voters, even when local cues to voters' partisan preferences are available.<sup>64</sup> This suggests that parties in rural India and other competitive contexts are unlikely to meet the steep informational requirements of a vote buying strategy that efficiently targets swing voters if such a *targeted* strategy exists at all (See Chauchard 2018; Guardado and Wantchékon, 2018; Kramon 2016).

This has important implications for distribution and democracy. First, local leaders in contexts where there is a secret ballot and intense party competition are likely to prioritize targeting members of their core co-partisan networks with private benefits given the challenges of efficient targeting (See, e.g., Diaz-Cayeros et al., 2016). Second, parties in competitive democratic settings are likely to target non-core voters through strategies that do not require fine-grained information on voters' preferences or votes such as expanding quotas for public college to all members of a swing ethnic group (e.g., Jats) in the state; indiscriminate targeting in a locality as a strategy to signal responsiveness to a category of voters (e.g., the poor); or local public goods provision.<sup>65</sup> Such strategies are commonly pursued in India and other settings. This does not mean that parties will abandon the distribution of cash and other gifts during election campaigns—a tactic that is nearly ubiquitous in India and many other developing countries.<sup>66</sup> It does, however, imply that politicians must build and maintain political support through distributive strategies that do not rely on contingent exchange. Third, my results suggest that parties in India lack the capacity to fundamentally undermine democratic representation through vote buying in what has been referred to as “perverse accountability.”<sup>67</sup> Along with Rajasthan's history of anti-incumbency and robust competition, this attests to the view that elections in India are in the hands of voters. Consistent with my conclusions, Indian politicians have increasingly pursued public goods provision and entitlement programs aimed to garner support in a context where voters have the ability to hold their elected leaders accountable for their performance in office.

This article makes important contributions to the literature on clientelism with relevance beyond the specific characteristics of the data presented here. First, while my data focuses on elected village leaders in Rajasthan, my conclusions are likely to apply to unelected local leaders (e.g., fixers, brokers) more often featured in the clientelism literature (See Krishna, 2007; Manor, 2000; Auyero, 2001). I show that sarpanch achieve similar guessability rates to ward leaders who represent a small number of voters, and subsequent studies that apply my method find similar aggregate results for guessability among unelected local leaders in India (Sircar and Chauchard, 2018). Second, the distinction between elected leaders and prominent fixers in India has receded with the sharp rise of local government resources that came with the passage of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005 (Krishna, 2017). This means that while elected local leaders have state resources at their disposal, unlike unelected leaders, sarpanch are likely to perform brokerage functions as office holders and as prominent unelected leaders after they complete one term in office. To attest to this fact, I found that higher-level politicians frequently recruit sarpanch and prominent unelected leader such as ex-sarpanch as vote mobilizers.<sup>68</sup> That said,

<sup>64</sup> This interpretation is consistent with discussions with politicians who feel it necessary to cultivate relationships with as many local leaders as possible to gain access to voters in their local political networks (informal interviews with state legislators carried out by the author in Rajasthan (January 2013) and Karnataka 2011 (June–July 2011).

<sup>65</sup> Kramon, 2016; Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, Federico Estevez, and Beatriz Magaloni, *The Political Logic of Poverty Relief: Electoral strategies and social policy in Mexico*. Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>66</sup> See Chauchard 2018; Guardado and Wantchékon (2018); Kramon (2016).  
<sup>67</sup> Stokes (2005).

<sup>68</sup> Interviews with local leaders conducted by the author in Niwai block (Rajasthan), November–December 2012).

(footnote continued)

the latter, brokers guess both types at similar rates.

<sup>63</sup> *Party Activist* has a large, positive effect in the guessability regressions but does not achieve conventional levels of statistical significance.

future research is needed to understand patterns of guessability among the broad array of leader types that exist in India (e.g., caste leaders, party activists). The framework and method developed here makes such an examination possible.

My conclusions are also likely to apply to less competitive contexts. First, my results suggest that local leaders do not invest in identifying non-core voters' preferences in competitive areas. Local leaders affiliated with a dominant political party where competition is low should have even weaker incentives to identify non-core voters. This means that local leaders from the incumbent party in uncompetitive localities are likely to identify core voters relatively well, but to over-guess co-partisan support among non-supporters as I find in more competitive contexts. In fact, my conclusion that local leaders broadly prioritize mobilizing core constituencies is particularly likely in these settings. On the other hand, incentives to identify non-core voters among local leaders from opposition parties attempting to make inroads in low-competition constituencies are plausibly comparable to those in competitive contexts. My conclusions suggest that vote buying (rather than programmatic appeals) is unlikely to be an efficient or effective persuasive strategy for opposition parties in these settings.<sup>69</sup> This is however an empirical question for future research that can be advanced by the research design of this article.

Above all, this article establishes that local leaders observe vote intentions with substantial uncertainty despite their immersion in voters' social and political networks. While brokers may possess extensive information on voters' partisan vote intentions in some settings, this article demonstrates that this should be examined empirically rather than assumed—even in contexts where clientelism is understood to be feasible. Numerous opportunities for future research that examine variation in guessability across countries, political parties, leader types, and electoral contexts follow from the conclusions and method of this article. For example, does variation in guessability explain variation in the targeting strategies (clientelistic, programmatic) that parties pursue across space and time? Do traditional (ethnic) leaders provide added informational value for different types of voters than leaders with more heterogeneous support bases such as sarpanch, and how does this impact distributive outcomes? Do local leaders in contexts of strong local party organization (e.g., Argentina) exceed the guessability rates of their counterparts where parties are weakly organized? The answers to these and many other questions will advance the comparative literature on clientelism toward a more nuanced understanding of how the capacity of parties to know their voters shapes their distributive strategies in practice across the global south.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2019.102049>.

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<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Greene (2007) on the decline of the PRI in Mexico.

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