



# RESEARCH IN BRIEF

*How election observation makes politicians more responsive to local priorities*



This research brief summarises an article by George Kwaku Ofosu, analysing the implications of his findings for election observers.

It was prepared by Susan Dodsworth, Lecturer at the University of Queensland's School of Political Science and International Studies.

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# HIGHLIGHTS



- Ofosu demonstrates that politicians make greater efforts to spend the funds allocated for local development in constituencies that experience more intense election observation. His research indicates that politicians work harder to earn votes when elections are harder to rig.
- The findings are based on experimental research completed during and after Ghana's 2012 election, in collaboration with the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO). Ofosu also draws on an analysis of how elected politicians spent constituency development funds from 2014 to 2016.
- These findings are important for election observers, demonstrating that their work can have a positive impact on the behaviour of elected representatives long after Election Day.
- To maximise that impact, politicians need to expect election observation, and observers should entrench that expectation.
- They can do so by increasing the visibility of planned observation activities (while maintaining the necessary secrecy around the details of those plans), and by ensuring that they have a strong physical presence at polling stations on Election Day.



## COVER & LEFT

Commonwealth observers to Ghana 2012 elections at a polling station in Accra in December 2012.

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## RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

Election observation is based on the premise that electoral integrity matters. It matters because vote-rigging erodes the relationship between citizens and their representatives. When elections are manipulated, it makes it harder for voters to choose representatives they believe in, and harder to sanction representatives when they fail to live up to expectations. As a result, those representatives have less incentive to respond to the preferences and priorities of their constituents.

Ofosu's study explores the empirical underpinnings of this rationale for election observation. He asks both **whether** and **how** election observation creates incentives for politicians to be more responsive to the needs of citizens. To do this, he examines two mechanisms through which election integrity might provide such incentives.

**Selection:** by increasing electoral integrity, observation allows constituents to vote for politicians who are more likely to respond to their needs.

**Sanction:** by increasing electoral integrity, observation motivates elected representatives to respond to their constituents by increasing the likelihood that poor performance in office will cost them votes in the next election.

Ultimately, Ofosu finds some evidence to support the impact of the second mechanism (sanction) but not the first (selection).



This research strengthens the empirical basis for one of the central tenets of election observation: the belief that politicians will work harder to earn the votes of citizens if elections are harder to manipulate.

## METHOD

This article is based on research conducted during – and after – Ghana's 2012 elections in collaboration with the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers; CODEO (Ghana's largest domestic election observation group). There were three main components to the research design:

- A field experiment that randomised the intensity of election observation in 60 constituencies during the 2012 election in four regions – Ashanti, Central, Volta and Western – to capture data from both party strongholds and competitive seats. This intensity varied from 30% to 50% or 80% of a fixed proportion (30%) of polling stations in each constituency.
- A survey of parliamentarians, which examined their experience and perception of election observation.
- A letter-based experiment, with a sample of randomly-selected representatives advised to expect intense monitoring of their constituency by observers in the next election.

To measure the responsiveness of politicians, Ofosu relied primarily on the proportion of constituency development funds that they spent. Prior research had already demonstrated that a surprising proportion of such funding goes unspent because its use takes effort, including compliance with a range of bureaucratic requirements.

## KEY FINDINGS

Ofosu's most notable finding is that politicians are more responsive to the needs of the electorate when they represent constituencies where election observation has been more intense – with observers present at a higher proportion of polling stations. Specifically, his statistical analysis indicates that politicians elected in intensely monitored constituencies spent, on average, 19 percentage points more of their constituency development funds than those elected from constituencies where the observation intensity was low. What's more, the difference in overall expenditure was driven, primarily, by higher levels of spending on public goods (such as local roads, schools, clinics, streetlights and bridges) rather than private goods (such as school fees, medical bills, business support, and house renovation).

The survey of parliamentarians and the letter-based experiment probed whether the two causal mechanisms – selection and sanction – might underpin this positive impact. On the whole, they provided evidence of the latter but not the former. The survey showed that most parliamentarians believed that election observation reduced the susceptibility of elections to manipulation. In addition, those from constituencies that had been intensely monitored in 2012 were more likely to say that they had experienced more observation in the past elections. In other words, their perception of the intensity of election observation was fairly accurate.

In the letter-based experiment, parliamentarians who received a letter (stating that they should expect intense observation in their constituency in the 2016 election) increased their spending by five percentage points, on average, compared with those who did not. In this case, there was some evidence of negative side-effects: sending letters appeared to trigger increases in spending on private goods as well as public ones, creating a risk that the intervention had, while increasing responsiveness, also reinforced clientelism.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR OBSERVERS

This research shows election observers that their work can have a positive impact on the behaviour of elected representatives well after Election Day. The spending increases detected by Ofosu in Ghana occurred between 2014 and 2016, several years after the election. As such, his research strengthens the empirical basis for one of the central tenets of election observation: the belief that politicians will work harder to earn the votes of citizens if elections are harder to manipulate.

There are however, some limits to Ofosu's work. His research design, for example, does not allow him test all the variables that might be at play. In addition, some aspects of his findings may not hold in other contexts. Most notably, Ghana has a first-past-the-post electoral system, with parliamentarians elected from single-member districts. This gives them a clear constituency to which they are expected to respond. However, in countries that employ some form of proportional representation, the lines of accountability between voters and their representatives tend to be less direct. As a result, elected representatives in such countries might respond to the expectation of observation – and the anticipated difficulty of electoral manipulation – in different ways.

The effect demonstrated by Ofosu appears to rest quite heavily on the expectations of politicians, which, in turn, appear to be shaped by the physical presence of observers at polling stations on Election Day. This has important implications for the future conduct of election observation.

First, observers should continue to aim for a reliable presence at elections over time. This would help to build a stable expectation of observation among politicians.

Second, there is value in making future plans visible to politicians well before the date of the election – especially incumbent parliamentarians. This may allow observers to increase the responsiveness of those parliamentarians even before the next election. Many observers already take steps to make their work visible – missions tend to engage with candidates, including incumbents, in the lead-up to the election. This could, however, be done earlier and more systematically. Inevitably, there would be limits on the level of detail that observers could provide, given that effective observation depends on some degree of secrecy (as well as the element of surprise). One key thing that should be communicated, however, is the idea that comprehensive plans for future observation efforts are already underway – while not revealing their precise details.

Finally, this research shows that the intensity of observers' physical presence at polling stations is important, as it helps to shape parliamentarians' expectations about the likelihood of observation in the future. This is significant, given the rising popularity of parallel-vote tabulations based on representative samples, which have, in some cases, allowed observers to scale back the number of polling stations at which they are present. Such statistical techniques are a valuable part of the election observation 'tool-box'. However, this research suggests that scaling-back the physical presence of observers on Election Day may undermine the extent to which greater electoral integrity translates to positive political outcomes in the longer term.



ELECTOR is the Election Observation Research Network, based at the University of Birmingham. ELECTOR aims to foster a constructive and mutually supportive relationship between civil society groups, election experts, and international and domestic observers, enabling those working at the coal face of election observation to shape the direction of new academic research. ELECTOR is funded by the Open Society European Policy Institute (OSEPI). More information about ELECTOR is available on the website: [www.elector.network](http://www.elector.network)



### CITATION

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Access the full version of the article on the author's website: <https://www.georgeofosu.com/publication/fairelectionsresp/>

info@elector.network

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