

DEMOCRATIZING BUREAUCRACY

*How can citizens demand accountability from unelected officials?**

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Abstract

How can citizens demand better public services where resources are scarce and democratic representation is limited? A common strategy is to turn to unelected officials, who are critical gatekeepers in the distribution of resources and policy implementation. Yet these officials are not formally answerable to citizens and often work under heavy capacity constraints. We explore citizen-led efforts to demand accountability, combining qualitative research with a survey of public personnel in a near census of administrative blocks in Jharkhand—one of India’s poorest states. We theorize two potentially impactful strategies: using personal narratives to evoke empathy and publicity to activate officials’ reputational concerns. Embedded video and vignette experiments reveal that exposure to citizen testimony increases officials’ attention but does not lead to action, while threats of social media exposure increase their willingness to act. These findings illuminate how ordinary citizens can deploy different strategies to advance different dimensions of bureaucratic responsiveness.

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Introduction

In a village in northern India, the public water pump was broken, and despite residents' complaints, no repairs had been made. A mother recounted: "There is water in the well, but it is infested.... We drink the water, give it to our kids, and then fall sick. The nearest working public pump we can fetch water from is far." In another village, residents worried their houses would not withstand the monsoon rains. Despite qualifying for a government housing program, construction on new homes was stalled. A woman worried: "How can our families and kids live in homes that might collapse anytime? No one is making any arrangements for us." Residents of each village complained to appointed administrators, capturing and sharing their problems by video.¹

Grievances like these are common around the globe where citizens face poor-quality basic services.² Appointed personnel are critical gatekeepers, exercising discretion in interpreting rules and implementing policy.³ Many citizens, accordingly, turn to unelected actors when seeking access to services and entitlements.⁴ Citizen-bureaucrat interactions have received growing attention as a means to build "social accountability," with emphasis on the non-electoral mechanisms through which citizens can monitor public officials and participate in the policy

¹ Video Volunteers archive, Jharkhand.

² Goyal 2024; Grossman and Slough 2022; Pande 2020.

³ Lipsky 1980; Zacka 2017; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Mangla 2022; Honig 2024.

⁴ Gallagher, Kruks-Wisner, and Taylor 2024; Gaikwad and Thomas 2024.

implementation process.⁵ Research from South Asia,⁶ to Africa,⁷ Latin America,⁸ the United States,⁹ China,¹⁰ and beyond¹¹ explores the effectiveness of initiatives that task bureaucrats with responding to citizen complaints.

Yet the success of such efforts remains uneven.¹² In capacity-constrained environments, appointed officials are under resourced and overburdened, and so must ration their attention, time, and resources. Facing strong pressure to respond to supervisors and government hierarchies, they may deprioritize local demands, particularly from citizens without strong political or bureaucratic connections.

How can citizens navigate these constraints to demand accountability from unelected actors? We argue that citizens can activate officials' desire to respond by sharing personal testimony that humanizes and contextualizes their claims, provokes an emotional response, and focuses officials' attention. Yet citizen testimony may not be sufficient to elicit action among resource- and capacity-constrained public personnel. We further argue, therefore, that citizen mobilization can give "teeth" to voice¹³ by activating reputational concerns among officials and

⁵ Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006; Mansuri and Rao 2013; Fox 2015.

⁶ Kruks-Wisner 2022; Kumar 2024.

⁷ Björkman and Svensson 2009; Buntaine, Hunnicutt, and Komakech 2021; Matlala 2024.

⁸ Palmer-Rubin, Tapia Reyes, Berliner, Erlich, and Bagozzi 2025; Dipoppa and Grossman 2020.

⁹ Minkoff 2016; White and Trump 2018.

¹⁰ Distelhorst and Hou 2017.

¹¹ Hossain, Joshi, and Pande 2023.

¹² Fox 2015; Tsai, Morse, Toral, and Lipovsek 2019.

¹³ Fox 2015.

creating pressure to respond. Media, particularly social media and mobile technologies, are powerful and increasingly accessible tools with which to pursue these strategies.

Our multi-method study explores how this works in rural India. Our research was developed in partnership with a community media organization supporting a national network of citizen media content creators who use video to document and resolve local grievances. Our focus is the Block Development Office, an administrative unit responsible for implementation of a range of state and central government programs,¹⁴ and a common port of call for citizens attempting to solve problems.¹⁵ We draw on qualitative research in block offices and interviews with citizens content creators to illustrate the barriers that constrain bureaucratic responsiveness—and to theorize the strategies citizens can use to overcome those constraints.

To empirically test our theory, we fielded an in-person survey of 1,293 personnel of varied ranks and roles in a near census of block offices (258 of 264) across Jharkhand, one of India's poorest states. We embedded two experiments to measure officials' responses to citizens' demands, developed following close examination of citizen content creators' use of video and social media to capture and share local testimony. To create realistic and demanding benchmarks, our comparisons are not to "pure" controls of no information or no citizen action, but rather to alternative modes of information provision and strategies that could also plausibly build responsiveness. Citizen testimony is contrasted with a government-branded informational video presenting official statistics, and social-media publicity is contrasted with coordinated in-person mobilization at the block office.

¹⁴ Blocks are administrative units comparable to a county in the United States.

¹⁵ Purohit 2026; Dasgupta and Kapur 2020; Kruks-Wisner 2018.

The first experiment featured pairs of videos presenting information about citizens' problems (related to drinking water or housing) in different ways. The videos featured either citizen testimony in which residents narrated the issue in their own words, or government data about the same problem. While we found no significant differences in officials' willingness to act on the highlighted problem, the videos featuring citizen testimony produced a more empathetic reaction from officials, who also were more likely to ask follow-up questions. Testimony alone did not prompt officials into action, but it was more effective in capturing their attention than the presentation of official statistics on the same issue.

The screening was followed by a second experiment in which officials heard vignettes about citizen action on the same issues in the videos, with stories about either in-person mobilization or social-media efforts to publicize the problem. Hearing the social media vignette increased the perceived pressure officials felt to respond relative to hearing about citizens signing a petition and personally visiting the block office. This was driven by fears of angering senior officials should the video documenting local grievances reach them, and prompted greater willingness to send staff to investigate an issue.

Our findings reveal the potential for, but also limits to, citizen-led accountability under highly constrained conditions, where prior studies often highlight the inefficacy of bottom-up efforts to exact responsiveness from appointed personnel.¹⁶ Different strategies are required to demand different dimensions of responsiveness: narrative appeals can evoke empathy and focus attention, while publicizing those appeals can trigger reputational concerns and provoke action.

¹⁶ Olken 2007; Buntaine and Daniels 2020; Banerjee, Hanna, Kyle, Olken, and Sumarto 2018; Raffler, Posner, and Parkerson 2026.

By highlighting the role of emotion, we call attention to an overlooked dimension of bureaucratic behavior, building on an emerging body of work that understands public personnel as social actors driven by more than extrinsic incentives.¹⁷ At the same time, our findings contribute to longstanding scholarship on the importance of professional reputation by suggesting that ordinary citizens can shape how frontline officials are monitored and seen from above.

Our research also calls attention to the bureaucracy as a site of citizenship practice. While a vast literature on distributive politics explores electoral pathways to responsiveness, this neglects the fact that many of the key actors charged with meeting citizens' needs are unelected. Yet appointed administrators engage unevenly with citizens, reflecting and deepening social and material inequality.¹⁸ This makes bureaucratic offices a critical setting in which to examine the efficacy of citizens' claim-making strategies.

Citizens, bureaucrats, and accountability

In democratic and non-democratic contexts alike, it is often bureaucrats hired through appointment, meritocratic recruitment, or informal rules who are responsible for translating policy decisions into the water, housing, schools, and electricity that citizens rely on.¹⁹ From the perspective of an ordinary citizen, securing the attention and resources of the unelected individuals who make allocative decisions can therefore be fundamental to accessing important services and making policy implementation accountable.

¹⁷ Kyle and Resnick 2019; Mangla 2022; Honig 2024.

¹⁸ Peeters and Nieto-Morales 2021; Park 2022; Slough 2024.

¹⁹ Lipsky 1980; Brierley et al. 2023. In some cases, services are delivered by private providers operating with limited competition and minimal oversight, further weakening accountability (Galanti and Turri 2021).

Views differ on who holds unelected officials to account. A Weberian view of bureaucracy emphasizes bureaucratic autonomy from societal interests and political interference. Here, personnel in hierarchical organizations are accountable to senior bureaucrats and there is little scope for claim-making or petitioning by citizens.²⁰ A second view emphasizes the role of political oversight by elected representatives who oversee bureaucrats' careers and budgets.²¹ For citizens in democratic contexts, this suggests a "long route to accountability"²² through politicians²³ or political brokers²⁴ who make demands on bureaucrats. However, this approach leaves little opportunity for marginalized citizens without political connections, with even fewer prospects in non-democratic contexts.

Our research engages a third view, which maintains that public personnel charged with service delivery can be held directly accountable by the users of those services. In this view, citizens pursue a non-electoral "short route to accountability"²⁵ by monitoring and engaging appointed personnel. This can occur organically as citizens leverage social relationships and norms to influence officials,²⁶ or by design through created spaces for community oversight, citizen reporting, and other venues for complaints and demand-making. Such initiatives, which have been widely pursued across contexts as diverse as South Asia, Latin America, sub-Saharan

²⁰ Weber 1958; Evans and Rauch 1999.

²¹ Toral 2024; Gulzar and Pasquale 2017; Iyer and Mani 2012.

²² World Bank 2004.

²³ Bussell 2019; Gaikwad and Thomas 2026.

²⁴ Stokes et al. 2013; Auerbach and Thachil 2023.

²⁵ World Bank 2004.

²⁶ Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000; Tsai 2007; Hossain 2010; Paller 2019; Roelofs 2023.

Africa, and China,²⁷ have received billions in investment from governments and donors.²⁸ These initiatives reflect an understanding—increasingly codified in law, e.g., the right to information,²⁹ public services legislation,³⁰ and grievance redressal mechanisms³¹—that bureaucrats are obliged to meet citizens’ needs with regard to legally mandated goods and services.

Yet even when supported by law, the record on the effectiveness of this bottom-up approach is uneven.³² While some studies find an impact of citizen monitoring and grievance articulation,³³ many others suggest officials are not responsive to citizens’ claims or find that top-down monitoring is more effective.³⁴ A fundamental challenge is that officials themselves are constrained in their ability to respond.³⁵ With insufficient time, resources, and staff, many

²⁷ Buntaine et al. 2021; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Hossain et al. 2024; Palmer-Rubin et al. 2025.

²⁸ Tsai et al. 2019.

²⁹ Dunning et al. 2019; Jha 2023.

³⁰ Hossain et al. 2023.

³¹ Robinson 2012.

³² Fox 2015; Tsai et al. 2019.

³³ Björkman and Svensson 2009; Pandey, Goyal, and Sundararaman 2009; Banerjee, Hanna, Kyle, Olken, and Sumarto 2018.

³⁴ Interventions may fail to induce citizen mobilization (Banerjee et al. 2010; Lieberman, Posner, and Tsai 2014; Chong, De La O, Karlan, and Wantchekon 2015; Dunning, Grossman, Humphreys, Hyde, McIntosh, and Nellis 2019; Raffler et al. 2026). Even when citizens mobilize, efforts may be captured by local elites (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006), yield data that is unreliable (Buntaine and Daniels 2020) or unaligned with bureaucratic decision-making (Buntaine et al. 2021) or lack mechanisms to connect citizen monitoring with top-down oversight (Olken 2007; Buntaine and Daniels 2020; Buntaine, Greenstone, He, Liu, Wang, and Zhang 2024).

³⁵ Tsai et al. 2019; Grossman and Slough 2022.

simply cannot physically or cognitively process all the requests they receive.³⁶ As a result, they exercise discretion in deciding when and to whom to respond.³⁷ Frontline personnel are also dependent on senior officials for their budgets, postings, and career advancement.³⁸ They are therefore likely to give their limited time and scarce resources to those connected to higher-level administrators or politicians (i.e., to citizens who can effectively pursue the “long route” to accountability).

For citizens lacking such connections, demanding accountability is highly challenging. Existing research suggests that barriers to accountability may be easier to overcome if officials share a sense of identity with residents or are concerned about their local social standing.³⁹ In practice, however, personnel may not be locally embedded. Many, particularly those serving large and diverse catchments, do not actually live in or come from the communities they serve. Our focus is therefore on how citizens lacking both political connections and social relationships with bureaucrats can make their voices heard.

Theorizing citizen strategies for engaging unelected officials

We begin by disaggregating dimensions of responsiveness, which we define broadly as officials’ willingness to both hear and act on citizens’ claims. We focus on the first two components of a citizen’s experience when approaching a bureaucratic office: whether they gain *attention* (their

³⁶ Dasgupta and Kapur 2020.

³⁷ Kumar 2025a; Zacka 2017.

³⁸ Gulzar and Pasquale 2017; Toral 2023.

³⁹ Bhavnani and Lee 2018; Paller 2019; Tsai 2007.

complaints are heard), and whether an official takes *action* (their complaints are prioritized).⁴⁰ Simply being heard is important in a context where the poor are regularly ignored or silenced by the state,⁴¹ and having a claim acknowledged can be critical to citizens' assessments of procedural justice more broadly.⁴² Recent scholarship, moreover, suggests that being able to approach and communicate with officials, even if they do not consistently act on their behalf, is central to citizens' perceptions of accountability.⁴³ Beyond attention, having an official take action of any kind, such as referring the complaint to another office, providing advice, or sending staff to examine an issue, are steps towards solving a problem. In capacity-constrained settings, these steps—even when incomplete—are meaningful, signaling the prioritization of a need through the allocation of scarce resources and time.

When seeking attention and action, citizens must contend with the fact that frontline personnel are often overburdened. While citizens cannot directly ease these conditions, which reflect understaffing and insufficient investments in public agencies, they can work within them to make their complaints stand out and to hold the attention of officials who are often overwhelmed.

⁴⁰ In our Pre-Analysis Plan (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026a), we focused on hypothetical actions and effort by officials in response to citizens' problems, and designated "attention" (interest) and emotion as secondary outcomes related to mechanisms. Through subsequent fieldwork, including interviews with both officials and citizens, our understanding has evolved; while we still see attention as a mechanism enabling action (a complaint must be heard before it can be addressed), we also see attention as a dimension of responsiveness in its own right.

⁴¹ Sanyal and Rao 2018.

⁴² Tyler 2003; Beramendi, Besley, and Levi 2024.

⁴³ Roelofs 2023.

We posit that citizens can activate officials' desire to assist by sharing personal narratives that contextualize and humanize their needs. This can provoke an emotional response and have a focusing effect; in an environment filled with competing demands, officials may be more likely to pay attention to personal stories that evoke empathy.

Bureaucrats' emotions are not often a focus in studies of accountability. Yet research from psychology suggests they play a powerful role in decision-making—particularly for those faced with many choices.⁴⁴ In particular, empathy—the ability to understand and share the feelings of others—can generate a desire to help and to alleviate suffering.⁴⁵ This desire may be particularly strong among bureaucrats who are intrinsically motivated by a sense of social mission and commitment to those they serve.⁴⁶ Some research has emphasized strategic dimensions to empathy. For example, research from China suggests that officials may use empathetic listening to gain information from citizens and convey it to higher-ups,⁴⁷ while other work suggests that empathy reflects a performative attempt to appear sympathetic in the eyes of others.⁴⁸ Without discounting these possibilities, we conceptualize empathy primarily as a non-strategic, emotional reaction that provokes perspective-taking: the ability to see a condition from another's vantage point.

⁴⁴ Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, and White 2008; Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, and Kassam 2015.

⁴⁵ Glynn and Sen 2015; Jensen and Pedersen 2017; Clifford, Kirkland, and Simas 2019.

⁴⁶ Banuri and Keefer 2013; Kyle and Resnick 2019; Honig 2024.

⁴⁷ Truex 2016.

⁴⁸ Ward and Shingler 2016.

By telling their stories through firsthand narrative, citizens can convey their own emotions – e.g., sadness, fear, anger, frustration. Drawing on psychology, we suggest that officials’ emotions can be shifted by exposure to the emotions of others.⁴⁹ In one study, for example, individuals exposed to news stories with first-person perspectives were more likely to recall stories.⁵⁰ Research from the U.S. further finds that sharing personal narratives can reduce exclusionary attitudes.⁵¹

Empathy and attention, we suggest, are key mechanisms in increasing officials’ willingness to act to resolve citizens’ problems. But whether they actually act also depends on the constraints they face. Even if a frontline official hears citizens’ complaints and wants to respond, they are likely to be inundated with demands. We therefore examine a second set of strategies that aim to link citizens’ complaints to public pressure and the scrutiny of senior officials. A key mechanism here is that officials at all levels care about reputation. At the highest level, bureaucrats are concerned with institutional reputation and so worry about whether the behavior of their staff will invite criticism.⁵² In turn, lower-level officials, who are concerned about their professional standing, want to ensure that no information about poor policy implementation or misbehavior reaches higher-ups. Citizens can therefore build on the fact that frontline officials are motivated by a desire to avoid both public and professional scrutiny.

⁴⁹ Keen 2006.

⁵⁰ Li and Lee 2019.

⁵¹ Kalla and Broockman 2020.

⁵² Carpenter 2010; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016.

Publicity can play a key role in enabling marginalized citizens to credibly threaten the reputation of appointed officials or an institution as a whole. From a top-down perspective, media presence can hold agents accountable to their principals by generating valuable information about the agent's performance.⁵³ From a bottom-up perspective, this suggests citizens may be able to hold local agents accountable by generating this information themselves. Citizens can use media to share, or threaten to share, information about frontline bureaucratic agents with senior officials.⁵⁴ By publicizing their stories and complaints, citizens can appeal to mechanisms of oversight without the connections to politicians required by the "long route" to accountability.

In sum, we theorize two strategies citizens might use to capture officials' attention and prompt action: appealing to emotions and activating reputational concerns. While citizens may do so in many ways, widely accessible practices involve relying on personal testimony to convey their needs and threatening to publicize the problems they face.

Study context and methods

We develop and test our theory in rural India, where central, state, and local governments have spearheaded ambitious but unevenly implemented welfare programs. We focus on the community development block (the "block"), the middle in a three-tier system of rural administration present in most Indian states since the 1950s. Block-level personnel oversee the implementation of state and central government programs, including policies related to rural

⁵³ Besley and Burgess 2001.

⁵⁴ Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006; Erlich et al. 2021.

development, poverty alleviation, education, and health. They are gatekeepers in the distribution of resources and, from the perspective of rural citizens, one of the most visible faces of government. Until recently, however, block offices have been largely overlooked in studies of India's administrative state.⁵⁵

To understand the functioning of the block, we combined qualitative interviews and observations with a large-n survey and embedded experiments. We carried out four months of qualitative research in and around block offices. Working with a small team of trained Research Associates,⁵⁶ we interviewed 53 block and district officials across three states in India's resource-constrained Hindi-speaking belt: Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar.⁵⁷

To gain insights into citizens' experiences with block officials, we partnered with Video Volunteers,⁵⁸ one of India's leading community media organizations, which works with a national network of citizen media content creators (CCs).⁵⁹ The CCs film deficiencies in

⁵⁵ Recent studies at the block level include Purohit 2026, Gulzar and Pasquale 2017, and Dasgupta and Kapur 2020.

⁵⁶ We worked with two Research Associates, one woman and one man, fluent in local languages. Both received in-person training in qualitative methods and interviewing.

⁵⁷ In preliminary research in November and December 2022, we conducted in-person interviews with 23 officials in three states: Jharkhand (5), Uttar Pradesh (11), and Bihar (7). We then carried out an additional 30 interviews with officials in Jharkhand in February and March 2023.

⁵⁸ Video Volunteers has over 20 years of experience assisting local citizen media content creators. We have been collaborating with them since 2017. For more on our research partnership and research ethics, see our supplementary material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix G).

⁵⁹ The CCs are active in 19 states and 190 of India's poorest districts. CCs are both trained and paid by Video Volunteers, which tracks the production of the CC videos and officials' responses.

government services and interview residents who recount problems in their own words. They combine video-making with mobilization at government offices and publicizing videos on social media. We carried out in-person or phone interviews with 81 CCs to learn about their strategies for approaching officials.⁶⁰

At the invitation of senior state officials, we then narrowed our focus to Jharkhand, where we interviewed officials and shadowed CCs in six blocks. Jharkhand, which became a state in 2000 after splitting from Bihar, ranks 15 out of 19 states on a Human Development Index,⁶¹ with poverty rates (at 37%) that exceed the national average of 25%.⁶² Jharkhand also lags behind on indicators of governance, placing 19th out of 28 states in a recent ranking.⁶³ Just 19% of homes have water connections compared to 46% nationally, while 91% of residents practice open defecation compared to 60% nationally.⁶⁴ These levels of need and deficits in service provision make Jharkhand a critical case in which to examine bureaucratic responsiveness to citizens' claims.

To test our theory, we designed and implemented a unique survey of block-level officials. We carried out surveys in 258 of Jharkhand's 264 block offices, excluding the six in which we

⁶⁰ In prior research, we shadowed a group of 19 CCs, to gain in depth understanding of their work and strategies (Kruks-Wisner 2022).

⁶¹ This ranking is based on India's most recently available census data, putting it alongside the country scores of Ghana and Cameroon (UNDP 2013).

⁶² World Bank 2018.

⁶³ SKOCH Development Foundation 2024.

⁶⁴ World Bank 2018.

had carried out qualitative research and pilot surveys. In each block, we surveyed five actors, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Surveys completed with each type of official in 258 blocks in Jharkhand

Official	Responsibility	Surveys completed
Block Development Officer	Senior official in charge of the office	241
Block Clerk	Fields citizen complaints	241
Block Panchayati Raj Officer / Panchayat Coordinator	Liaison to local elected village councils	253
Block Coordinator Awas	Implementation of a rural housing program	217
Junior Engineer for Public Health	Technician focused on water	107
Block Program Officer Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme	Implements rural employment guarantee program (including water and housing-related responsibilities)	234
Total		1,293

This strategy gave us a multi-actor sample of 1,293 block officials, including the Block Development Officer (BDO), charged with the overall administration of the block; the clerk, an assistant to the BDO; the Panchayati Raj officer, liaison to the Gram Panchayats (elected village councils); the Block Awas coordinator, who administers government housing programs; and Junior Engineers for Public Health, charged with maintaining water infrastructure.⁶⁵ If any of

⁶⁵ Gaps between the number of surveys of officials by responsibility and block sample size (258) either represent vacant posts or an official with “multiple charges” in more than one block. There are fewer junior engineers because these officers are frequently assigned to work in multiple blocks.

these officials were not available, we selected the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) coordinator, who administers the central government’s work program and, within this, oversees both water- and housing-related work. Our aim in constructing this sample was to engage a wide array of perspectives within the block office, looking beyond just the senior officials in charge to other actors who engage citizens, while also capturing different degrees of specialization.

The survey was fielded in Summer 2023 with support from senior officials in the Jharkhand Departments of Water and Sanitation and Rural Development—key state agencies that oversee the blocks.⁶⁶ All surveys were completed in person at block offices, typically within the same workday to prevent officials from discussing their responses and reflections with each other. Survey enumerators introduced themselves as coming from a professional survey company that worked with the authors’ universities. There was no mention of Video Volunteers or any NGO, and the enumerators stressed their independence from the government.

In addition to questions about their day-to-day responsibilities and experiences with citizens, we embedded pre-registered video and vignette experiments within the survey.⁶⁷ These

⁶⁶ Senior state officials informed district officials of our survey over video conferences jointly hosted with the authors. During those video calls, we described the aims of the survey (“to learn more from government officials such as yourself, your day-to-day work, challenges and needs, and how citizens and officials interact”) but did not describe the survey questions or the experiments. District officials passed this information to block offices. Our survey coordinator then contacted block offices in advance, taking appointments to ensure officials would be present. While participants were therefore aware of the survey, they were not aware of its content and could not prepare answers in advance.

⁶⁷ For pre-registration materials, see Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026a.

experiments, described in detail below, were created in partnership with Video Volunteers and reflect the practices the CCs most often employ.

Citizens and the block in rural India

While for many rural residents the block office is both physically and figuratively a distant entity, it also represents one of the few points of access to government for those who feel neglected at a more local level. As a senior state official in Jharkhand reflected: “For ordinary citizens, the BDO is like God.... It is as close as many get to *sarkar* (the state).”⁶⁸

But approaching the block office is a costly undertaking. A Jharkhand block serves an average population of 150,000 over a large and frequently remote area. Most citizens must travel long distances, investing time, money and potentially losing wages or other income in order to visit the block. Nonetheless, our qualitative observations recorded a wide range of citizens present at block offices, including elites (e.g., local business or landowners, or local elected leaders), brokers and fixers, but also ordinary men and women from diverse backgrounds, including the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).⁶⁹

This reflects the centrality of the block to rural citizens' claim-making repertoires, particularly when facing urgent problems or issues that cannot be solved more locally. In an analysis of their national network, Video Volunteers found that block personnel were the most

⁶⁸ Author interview, Ranchi, Jharkhand, June 2023.

⁶⁹ Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are groups recognized in the Indian constitution as among the most socially and economically disadvantaged. SCs refer to those historically referred to as Dalit or “untouchable,” at the bottom of the caste system. STs refer to those from indigenous (Adivasi) communities.

cited by CCs as having “supported me in solving issues”—reported by 28.4 percent.⁷⁰ Two other studies of claim-making in rural India have similarly found that roughly 20 percent of citizens report directly contacting block officials.⁷¹ While by no means a majority, these numbers are significant – particularly given the distance and costs often involved. The fact that citizens visit the block reveals an implicit sense of entitlement. Reflecting on this, for example, a CC in Jharkhand noted: “They come to the office for their rights, and as an officer it is his duty to listen to them.”⁷²

The view from the block office

For officials, the obligation to respond to citizens is formalized in law. The Jharkhand “Right to Guarantee of Service” Act (2011)⁷³ provides a framework for the timely delivery of specified public services, with the stated aim of holding public servants accountable for delays or failures to provide services. Officials are also required to attend regular *janata darbar* (public hearings) and administrative camps. These laws and practices may not be consistently or strongly enforced, but they nonetheless create a *de jure* expectation of responsiveness.

Many officials, by their own accounts, do see responding to citizens as an essential part of their job. Citizen visits take up considerable amounts of their time. In our survey, block

⁷⁰ This was followed by 24.3 percent who reported receiving support from panchayat (village level) officials, and 21.6 percent who reported assistance from district officials. Just 4.8 percent reported assistance from a state Member of Legislative Assembly or Member of Parliament.

⁷¹ Kruks-Wisner 2018; Phillips and Prillaman 2024.

⁷² CC interview, August 14, 2018.

⁷³ In Hindi, this is the Jharkhand Rajya Sewa Dene ki Guarantee Adhiniyam.

officials reported that just under 300 citizens visit their office each week on average, and that they spend about four hours per day engaging directly with citizens. When asked in our survey to select the top actors to whom they feel accountable, “citizens from the area” was a frequent response (Figure 1), selected by over 40%.

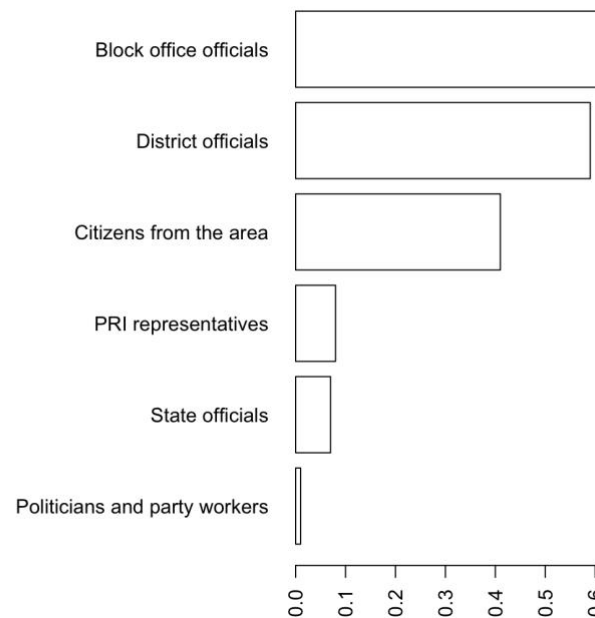


Figure 1. “To whom do you feel most accountable?”
(Respondents pick top two)

Yet it is also clear that officials must balance accountability to citizens with a strong sense of answerability to more senior officials, especially district officials who sit above the block (cited by 59%). This hierarchy extends through the block office itself, with clerks and lower-level personnel answering to the BDO (62%). As stated by a clerk, “I do what the BDO tells me to do. This is my only job.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Block office clerk in Jharkhand, March 2023.

If higher-level officials are pushing lower-level personnel to engage local citizens, this might enable greater responsiveness. But hierarchy can also be constraining, calling attention upwards and diverting energy from the local level. One official, for example, described how top-down state targets for program implementation are used to monitor the blocks, noting that he found the approach “too task-focused and demotivational,” making it hard to adapt to local ground realities.⁷⁵ Over 40% of our sample cited “pressure from higher ups” as a barrier to effective work (Figure 2).

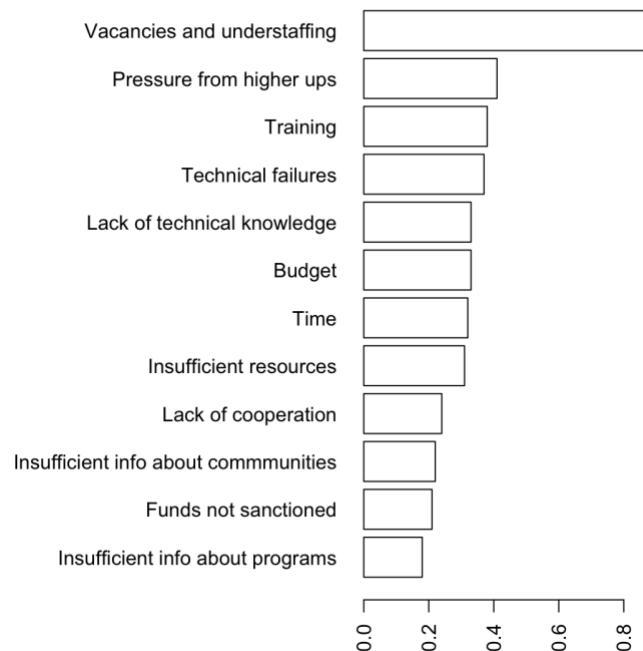


Figure 2. “Which of the following factors affect your ability to work effectively?”
(Multiple choice)

⁷⁵ Revenue Sub-Inspector in Uttar Pradesh, November 2022.

Even larger numbers (over 80%) noted vacancies and understaffing as a key barrier to effective work. Seventy-two percent agreed they were “constantly overburdened and overworked” and “tasked with an impossible amount of work.” As one official remarked, “No number of working hours is enough.”⁷⁶ Another, motioning to the large stack of papers on his desk, declared, “I can’t get through all of these.”⁷⁷

Amid this constant stream of work and competing pressures, officials must decide which requests to prioritize. A block officer responsible for implementing MGNREGS, for example, recounted how a limited budget to serve the over 8,000 citizens eligible for paid work means he routinely faces a dilemma regarding which laborers should be paid first.

Learning from active claim-makers

Citizens know that amid so much backlog, their complaints can get lost. According to one CC who has observed these dynamics, work gets stalled because “clerks bury the file in the large stack.”⁷⁸ To explore citizens’ strategies to avoid being ignored, we look to the CCs, who collectively have amassed extensive experiences in contacting block and other government officials. Their central practice is to record videos in which residents narrate problems and their impacts on their lives. The strategy, as articulated by CCs, is to prompt an emotional response, as

⁷⁶ BDO in Uttar Pradesh, February 2023.

⁷⁷ BDO in Jharkhand, April 2023.

⁷⁸ CC in Bihar, October 2022.

“seeing citizens’ faces” helps officials to “focus.”⁷⁹ As one CC reported, when videos capture officials’ attention, they then “talk seriously” about completing the work.

Yet even if citizen testimony captures an official’s attention, a request may still be difficult to prioritize among many other demands. Here, CCs rely on the implicit threat a video represents once it is created: it might be publicized. As a CC explained, “One easy way to get things done is social media. My videos go viral because I share them with groups of social workers and journalists, who circulate it further or tag officials on Facebook. In this way, I am able to get the attention of the officials even without following up much.”⁸⁰ Another CC noted that once officials see a video, they are pressured to work “to save their own reputations.”⁸¹

Our interactions with officials support the CCs’ observations. When we shared a video filmed by a CC with a block official in Jharkhand, he stated that any officer who saw the video would have to act “because they are afraid of the video being spread on social media. If some senior officer sees the video, then it could be disastrous for the local officers.”⁸² Officials do not need to be certain that videos will be seen by higher-level officials; the mere threat of this worries them. Indeed, 73% of block respondents agreed (strongly or mostly) that “social media makes officials’ jobs harder because it makes it easy to cast blame and create bad publicity.”

In short, the CCs’ experiences suggest that videos featuring citizen testimony can be used to focus attention and generate empathy. When followed by action that carries the threat of

⁷⁹ CC in Bihar, October 2022.

⁸⁰ CC in Madhya Pradesh, November 2022.

⁸¹ CC in Bihar, November 2022.

⁸² Block Panchayati Raj Officer in Jharkhand, February 2022.

publicity, citizens can also activate officials' reputational concerns. These strategies are not unique to the CCs, who, while in some respects particular to Video Volunteers, are representative of a broader class of actors in India and beyond seeking to hold public officials to account through direct citizen action.⁸³ Notably, an online ecosystem for citizen reporting is fast expanding across urban and rural India.⁸⁴

Empathy and Reputation: Embedded experiments

Informed by the CCs' strategies alongside broader theories of social accountability, we used video and vignette experiments to examine the impact of citizen testimony and publicity on bureaucratic responsiveness. We began by selecting two highly salient issues: broken water pumps and delays in construction under a central government housing program (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin, PMAY-G). The Block Coordinator Awas (Housing) is charged with implementation of PMAY-G. While no block official is singularly responsible for water, it remains a key issue for the BDO, who coordinates with a network of Public Health Engineering "junior engineers" charged with maintaining water systems.

⁸³ Some of these, like the CCs, are embedded in civic organizations or government initiatives that facilitate citizen claim-making, while others pursue more "organic" forms of citizen action not supported by an external organization (Mansuri and Rao 2013).

⁸⁴ Major platforms include WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook Reels, and – since 2019 – the PUBLIC app, which boasts more than 50 million users, and hosts crowdsourced videos on local news (Chandrasekaran 2021).

Table 2. Issue assignment for experiments

Randomized	Broken hand pumps	Delayed housing
Generalists ▪ Block development officer ▪ Clerk ▪ Block Officer / Coordinator (Panchayat) ▪ Block Program Officer MGNREGS	Water specialist Public Health Junior Engineer	Housing specialist Block Coordinator Awas

We assigned each official in our sample to one issue: housing or water. “Generalist” officials – who oversee a wide array of tasks and programs – were randomly assigned to see a video related to either one, while “specialists” saw the video on the issue relevant to them (Table 2).

Once an official was assigned to an issue, we sequentially embedded two experiments in the survey to test our hypotheses about the ability of citizens to capture officials’ attention and generate action.

Citizen testimony to elicit an empathetic response

Our first experiment varied whether officials were exposed to citizen testimony through video, which we see as a particularly useful medium because both auditory and visual components can offer emotional cues. Screening a video while administering the survey also enabled us to directly observe the moment at which an official hears and sees complaints from citizens. We held the medium of video constant because we were interested in isolating the effects of testimony rather than the technology by which it was delivered. We embedded the videos in the survey, where they were screened on tablets by trained enumerators (with no presence or mention of CCs). This enabled us to isolate the effects of the content rather than the messenger.

The videos drew upon real footage from Video Volunteers' archive, made and publicly published by CCs.⁸⁵ To avoid priming officials to think about the NGO, we chose not to feature the CCs; they were not present on screen, nor did they provide any voiceover. We selected footage from the blocks in which we had carried out qualitative and pilot work, but where we would not be administering the survey. This ensured the video footage looked and sounded real to officials, but the particular places and people were not recognizable to them. This was to avoid the possibility that officials would take real action in response to a video since, for ethical reasons, we did not wish our study to materially shift the allocation of resources.⁸⁶ Given this, our measures of action in response to a problem are hypothetical.

The videos were all approximately three minutes and addressed the same underlying issues. Each pair started with the same video montage of images (broken hand pumps or incomplete housing), with the same voiceover in Hindi (spoken by the same female narrator) who described the problem following an identical script.⁸⁷ Following that introduction, the videos diverged as follows.

The treatment was a "citizen testimony" video featuring footage of a problem in its local context and narratives from residents describing its impact on their lives.⁸⁸ For example, as

⁸⁵ This full archive is available on YouTube, at: <https://www.youtube.com/videovolunteers>.

⁸⁶ The videos were all introduced by enumerators as being from "not here in your area, but in another block." We chose not to provide footage from blocks in which survey respondents worked to avoid potential backlash or interfering with existing patterns of complaint-making and service delivery within a community.

⁸⁷ The full text of the script of each video is available in our pre-registered study material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026a).

⁸⁸ Quotes from this video-based testimony were presented in the introduction to this paper.

one man explained, due to late payments under PMAY-G, he and his family had “been living in huts and *kutchas* (makeshift) houses.” As another woman explained, these *kutchas* houses “might collapse at any time,” while footage showed rain pouring in. In the case of broken hand pumps, a citizen shared that to find water, members of the household must “walk long distances” to fetch drinking water, often from streams, which are “polluted with trash,” with footage of women and children carrying water from a river. Each video featured two women and one man, and the footage was drawn from villages with predominantly SC or ST residents. The speakers were identifiable by their speech and dress as members of traditionally marginalized communities, reflecting our interest in how those with the least economic and political standing might exact accountability.

The control condition featured an “official statistics” video that highlighted the same water- and housing-related issues, but without any citizen testimony or footage of residents. Instead, the video presented figures with government statistics on the issue. This presentation of official data, in addition to the placement of government logos throughout the video, was intended to prime block officials to think about government targets for implementation.

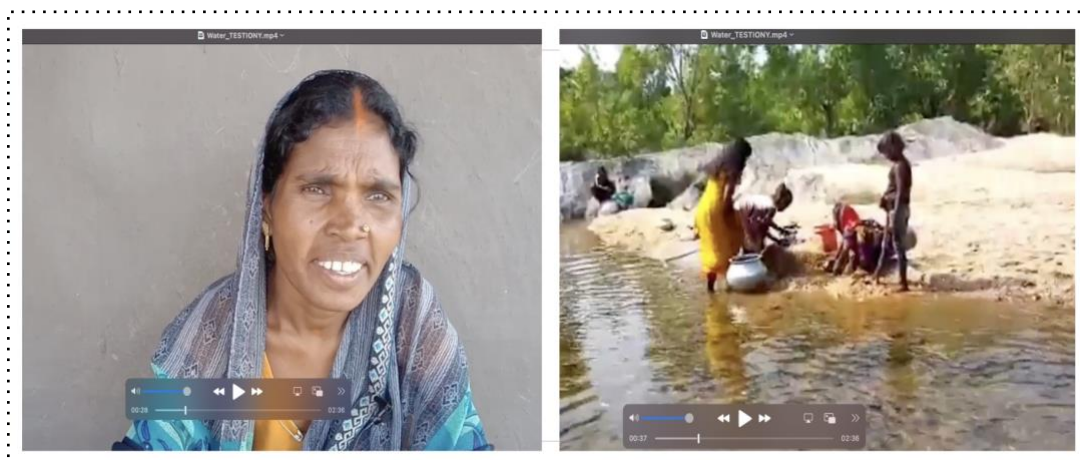




Figure 3. Screenshots from the water videos: citizen testimony frames (top row) and official statistics frames (bottom row)

The comparison was designed to hold constant the fact that officials were primed to think about either water or housing, the basic information about the problem, and the video medium through which it was delivered. We did not include a pure control without any video, nor a placebo video without information about water or housing problems. This is because we are interested in learning about how citizen testimony affects responsiveness considering the status quo, where officials receive a constant flow of information and are under organizational pressure. The comparison therefore offers a hard test of whether citizen testimony can shape responsiveness when competing with another condition that could also activate officials' organizational and career concerns.

Officials were randomized into seeing either one of the video types (citizen testimony or official statistics) on the issue (water or housing) to which they were assigned. The randomization was stratified within issue and officer type. As pre-specified, we test for and find

balance on issue, officer type, official characteristics (e.g., gender, length of tenure) and block characteristics.⁸⁹

Measuring effects

Enumerators first introduced the videos based on a script that varied slightly depending on the issue and treatment. Officials then watched the videos, during which enumerators observed officials' reactions. Afterwards, they were told:

“I’d like you to imagine— just for the sake of example— [If video-based testimony: the people from the video]/[If official statistics: people facing those same problems] live here in your block, and they are requesting help from your office.”

These scripts served to call respondents' attention to their own locality, regardless of video type. Enumerators then asked a series of follow-up questions. Our pre-registered dependent variables are the actions officials state they would hypothetically take should citizens come to their office with the same problem; the level of effort they think should be expended in responding; and their emotional responses, particularly feelings of empathetic concern and taking the perspective of affected citizens. We also included behavioral measures of attention paid to the video, such as whether officials maintained eye contact throughout (instead of looking at a watch or phone) and whether they asked follow-up questions. These variables and summary statistics are presented in Table 3.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Supplementary material Table A1 (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix A).

⁹⁰ For survey questions related to these variables, see our supplementary material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix H). In addition to these metrics of responsiveness, we also examine general attitudinal indices—perceived value of citizen voice, capturing beliefs about the importance of listening to and learning from citizens; and sense of

Table 3. Summary statistics: measures of responsiveness in video experiment

Dependent variables	Measures	Mean	SD
Action (hypothetical)	Taking any action from the following list (binary): A. Listening to citizens and hearing them out B. Registering or recording their complaints C. Advising them on how to solve the problem themselves D. Advising them on where else to seek help E. Investigating and gathering more information F. Making a call or contacting someone on citizens' behalf G. Trying to raise funds to assist with the problem	0.99	0.09
	Total number of responses from above list	2.88	1.45
Effort Index (hypothetical)	Taking high-effort action (choosing any of items E-G, binary)	0.72	0.77
	Perception of appropriate level of effort to resolve (1-10)	9.08	1.82
	Would respond immediately (binary)	0.86	0.35
	Time allocated to issue assessed through an allocation game where they were asked to spread 10 working hours over different issues	2.48	2.37
Emotional reaction Index (stated)	Felt sad (on a scale of 0-10)	7.88	2.63
	Felt angry (on a scale of 0-10)	5.88	3.81
	Felt frustrated (on a scale of 0-10)	3.80	3.81
	Able to name the emotions affected citizens might feel (binary)	0.96	0.20
	Personally knew individuals affected by similar problems (binary)	0.61	0.49
	Described consequences for citizens if unresolved (binary)	0.78	0.41
Attention Index (observed)	Maintained eye contact throughout video (binary)	0.94	0.25
	Had response when asked if something from video stood out (binary)	1.00	0.05
	Asked a question (binary)	0.35	0.48

social mission, capturing levels of public service motivation. Measures and results for these two indices, which are broader attitudinal constructs, are presented in supplementary material Appendix C.

As pre-specified, we examine the total number of hypothetical actions an official stated they would take. For all other sets of dependent variables, we construct an index across the multiple measures by standardizing each variable within the set, taking the mean, and standardizing once again. While these indices should be viewed as the main outcomes of interest, we also report effects on index components separately to allow for the interpretation of effects. Benjamini-Hochberg adjusted p-values for measures within families of dependent variables (e.g. for the components within the action, effort, attention, and emotion groups) correct for the possibility of false discoveries within each family, and are shown in Table B7.⁹¹

We estimate the effects of the treatment condition on these dependent variables through an ordinary least squares regression, with heteroskedasticity-robust (HC2) standard errors:

$$\text{Equation 1: } Y = \alpha + \beta \text{Video}_{CT} + \sum_1^n \theta_i \text{Stratum}_i + \sum_1^n \gamma_i \text{Stratum}_i \times \text{Video}_{CT}$$

Our coefficient of interest is β , which measures the effect of seeing the citizen testimony (Video_{CT}) relative to the official statistics video. Because randomization occurs in Official type-Issue type strata (10 strata in total), we include an interaction with the treatment indicator and a centered indicator for these strata (Stratum).⁹² Effects should be interpreted as weighted averages across the different strata.⁹³

⁹¹ Full regressions for treatment effects are presented in the supplementary material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix B).

⁹² Lin 2013.

⁹³ Subgroup effects by official type are presented in the supplementary material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix E, Figures E1-E2) and are discussed below.

Results

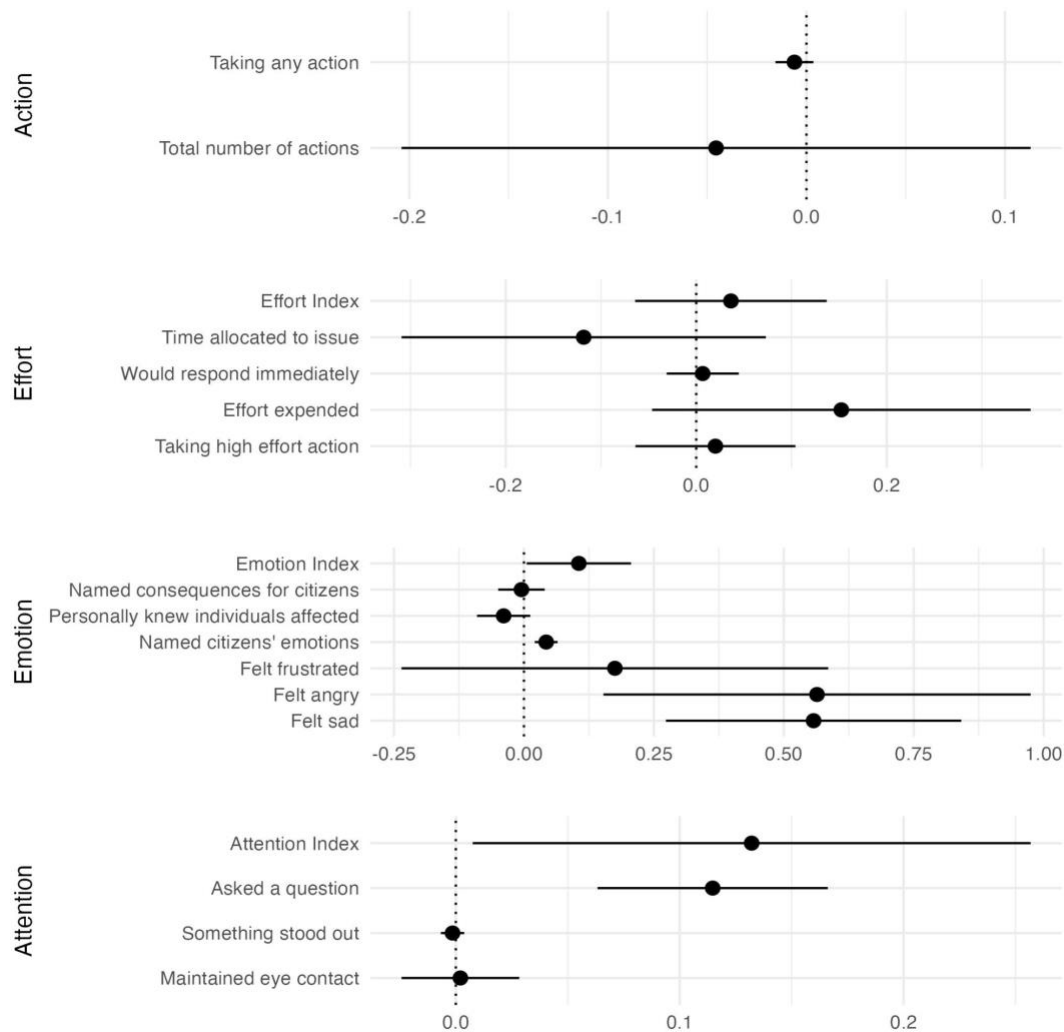
Figure 4 shows point estimates for the treatment effects and 95% confidence intervals. In contrast to our pre-registered hypotheses, there is no effect of citizen testimony when compared to the official statistics framing on the total number of actions officials say they would take in response to the issue, nor on the likelihood of an official choosing any action at all.⁹⁴ Similarly, we see no effect on the level of effort officials deemed appropriate in response.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, we do see evidence in support of our main theorized mechanism, namely that the citizen testimony video generated a stronger emotional reaction among officials than the official statistics video, visible in a 0.105 standard deviation effect in the overall emotion index. Examining the index components indicates this was driven by feelings of sadness and anger upon seeing the video, with effect sizes of roughly half a point on a ten-point scale. Officials were also five percentage points more likely to be able to name the emotions that affected citizens were likely to face, suggesting the video-based testimony prompted officials to take citizens' perspectives. These results suggest the citizen testimony treatment effectively operationalized the strategy of prompting empathetic concern among officials. Officials also paid more attention to the citizen testimony videos, with a 0.132 standard deviation effect on an index for attention. This was driven by officials being 11.5 percentage points more likely to ask a follow-up question

⁹⁴ Table C1 in the supplementary material presents effects on each of the individual types of responses (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix C).

⁹⁵ Likewise, there is no significant change in officials' general attitudes toward citizens (in the "perceived value of citizen voice") or in their public service orientation ("sense of social mission"). Results pertaining to these two attitudinal indices are presented in supplementary material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix C, Tables C3-C5).

about the problem—a behaviorally observable indicator of attention paid to the issue.⁹⁶ After adjusting for multiple testing within outcome families, the substantive pattern of results remains unchanged (Table B7).⁹⁷



⁹⁶ To check whether these outcomes were influenced by demand effects from enumerators, our supplementary materials include models with enumerator fixed effects, which show similar results (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix F).

⁹⁷ Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix B.

Figure 4. Effects of the video-based testimony treatment

(Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals. Benjamini-Hochberg adjusted p-values for index components within families of dependent variables are shown in Table B7.)

Overall, the video experiment suggests that video-based citizen testimony elicits an emotional reaction from officials and helps to focus their attention relative to the presentation of government-branded data on the same issue. But as far as we can measure, citizen testimony did not yield additional willingness to act. These null effects on action could be the result of true constraints to responsiveness but could also reflect ceiling effects due to social desirability bias (particularly given the fact that our measures of action are hypothetical and impose no real costs). They may also reflect the effectiveness of the official statistics control, which could itself plausibly sharpen attention by activating organizational priorities and accountability pressures. Against that benchmark, citizen testimony increases attention over and above what an official-statistics framing can do. We see this increased attention not only as a potential precursor to action but also an important component of responsiveness itself in environments where officials' attention is pulled in multiple directions.

Publicity to activate reputational concerns

The results from the video experiment suggest that an emotional response, while important in capturing attention, may not be sufficient to prompt action unless citizens can generate pressure to act. Publicizing problems is a key practice through which citizens can activate reputational concerns, provoking fear of professional scrutiny. This, we theorized, might increase the likelihood that an official will prioritize their needs. Social media is particularly accessible to

ordinary citizens and can play a powerful role in enabling citizens to publicize their complaints⁹⁸ and prompt bureaucratic responsiveness.⁹⁹ Citizens can threaten to share their complaints on platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp, which have visibility beyond the broader community.

To investigate these dynamics, we employed a vignette directly after the video screening. Survey respondents were told a short story about affected citizens taking action to resolve the problem featured in the video they just saw. The treatment condition recounted social media activity, mentioning that citizens were sharing the video on WhatsApp and working with a local media NGO. This was intended to convey to officials that the problem at hand could be widely publicized.

The comparison condition was a story about in-person mobilization by a group of citizens visiting a block office – a localized activity less likely to be seen beyond the area immediately surrounding the office. This was designed to hold constant the fact that affected citizens were taking action, indicating the problem held some level of urgency. As in the video experiment, this creates a hard test of the impact of each kind of citizen action, since each is directly compared to the other rather than to a placebo or pure control.

While presenting the vignette, enumerators said “Imagine the video you just saw. This time, imagine residents facing those same kinds of issues have been...”

[if social media publicity] “...trying to raise awareness in the community about it. They worked with a local media NGO to draw attention to the issue by filming a video documenting the problem. They shared that video with their friends and neighbors and others in the area using WhatsApp, and they also sent the video to the BDO through WhatsApp. They are now asking for help in resolving the issue.”

⁹⁸ Buntaine et al. 2024.

⁹⁹ Erlich et al. 2021.

[if in-person mobilization] “...working together to try to solve the problem. They have held community meetings and have handwritten a petition asking government officials for help. Many members of the community signed that petition or marked it with their thumbprints. The community then pooled their resources for a delegation of residents to travel to the block office. They are now asking for help in resolving the issue.”

Officials were randomized to hear one of the two vignette conditions. Assignment was blocked within issue, officer type, and the video type assigned in the previous round of randomization. As in the video experiment, Table A2 in the supplementary material shows that officials who saw either type of vignette are balanced across prespecified variables.¹⁰⁰

Measuring effects

After hearing these vignettes, we measured effects on reputational concerns and hypothetical action. We included questions on the sources of pressure that officials might feel to respond – whether from people in the surrounding area or from senior officials. To test whether publicity affects officials’ broader professional or more localized reputational concerns, we measured whether perceived pressure was driven by a fear that people in the surrounding area would be angry about the issue or if they thought people would be inspired by the example of citizen mobilization.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Kruks-Wisner 2026b, Appendix A.

¹⁰¹ We also examined two behavioral measures of “perceived value of citizen voice.” To assess interest in hearing from citizens, officials were asked to provide their phone numbers to receive further community-generated video content via WhatsApp. They were then asked whether they would like to partner with the network of local social workers who produce that content, measured by whether they scanned a QR code to learn more. These measures are described and reported in the supplementary material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix C).

To measure bureaucratic action, we asked respondents to consider officials in the imagined block, and to reflect on how they think they would respond in the face of either in-person mobilization or social media publicity. These variables, measures, and summary statistics are presented in Table 4.¹⁰² In line with our pre-analysis plan, we construct an index for “Action” across multiple measures by standardizing each variable within the set, taking the mean, and standardizing once again. We also report effects on index components separately to allow the interpretation of effects. Because doing so creates a large number of hypothesis tests, Benjamini-Hochberg adjusted p-values for index components within families of dependent variables are shown in Table B7.

Table 4. Summary statistics: dependent variables for vignette experiment

Dependent variables	Measures	Mean	SD
Action Index	Likelihood of sending staff to look at the problem (scale of 1-3)	2.85	0.41
	Likelihood of sending a contractor to look at the problem (1-3)	2.41	0.75
	Likelihood of calling an elected official about the problem (1-3)	2.32	0.73
	Likelihood of fundraising to resolve the problem (1-3)	2.17	0.83
Reputational concerns	Overall pressure felt to resolve problem (on a scale of 1-3)	2.03	0.80
	Think people in the surrounding local area would be angry about issue (binary)	0.25	0.43
	Think people in the surrounding local area would be inspired by the citizen mobilization (binary)	0.81	0.40
	Think senior officials would be angry about the issue (binary)	0.28	0.45
	Think senior officials would be inspired by the citizen mobilization (binary)	0.77	0.42

¹⁰² For the survey questions related to these variables, see our supplementary material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix H).

We estimate the effects of the vignettes on our outcomes and mechanisms of interest through an ordinary least squares regression, with heteroskedasticity-robust (HC2) standard errors:

$$\text{Equation 2: } Y = \alpha + \beta Vignette_{SMP} + \sum_1^n \theta_i Stratum_i + \sum_1^n \gamma_i Stratum_i \times Vignette_{SMP}$$

Our coefficient of interest is β , which measures the effect of hearing the social media publicity vignette ($Vignette_{SMP}$) relative to the in-person mobilization vignette. Because randomization occurs in Official type-Issue type-Video type strata (20 strata in total), we include an interaction with the treatment indicator and a centered indicator for these strata ($Stratum$). Effects should be interpreted as averages across the multiple strata.

Results

The threat of social media publicity makes officials more likely to act relative to the threat of in-person collective action at the block office. This is a demanding benchmark, as coordinated in-person mobilization could also plausibly generate pressure and prompt responsiveness. We therefore interpret the vignette results as capturing what social-media publicity adds relative to a credible offline strategy, rather than relative to citizen inaction.

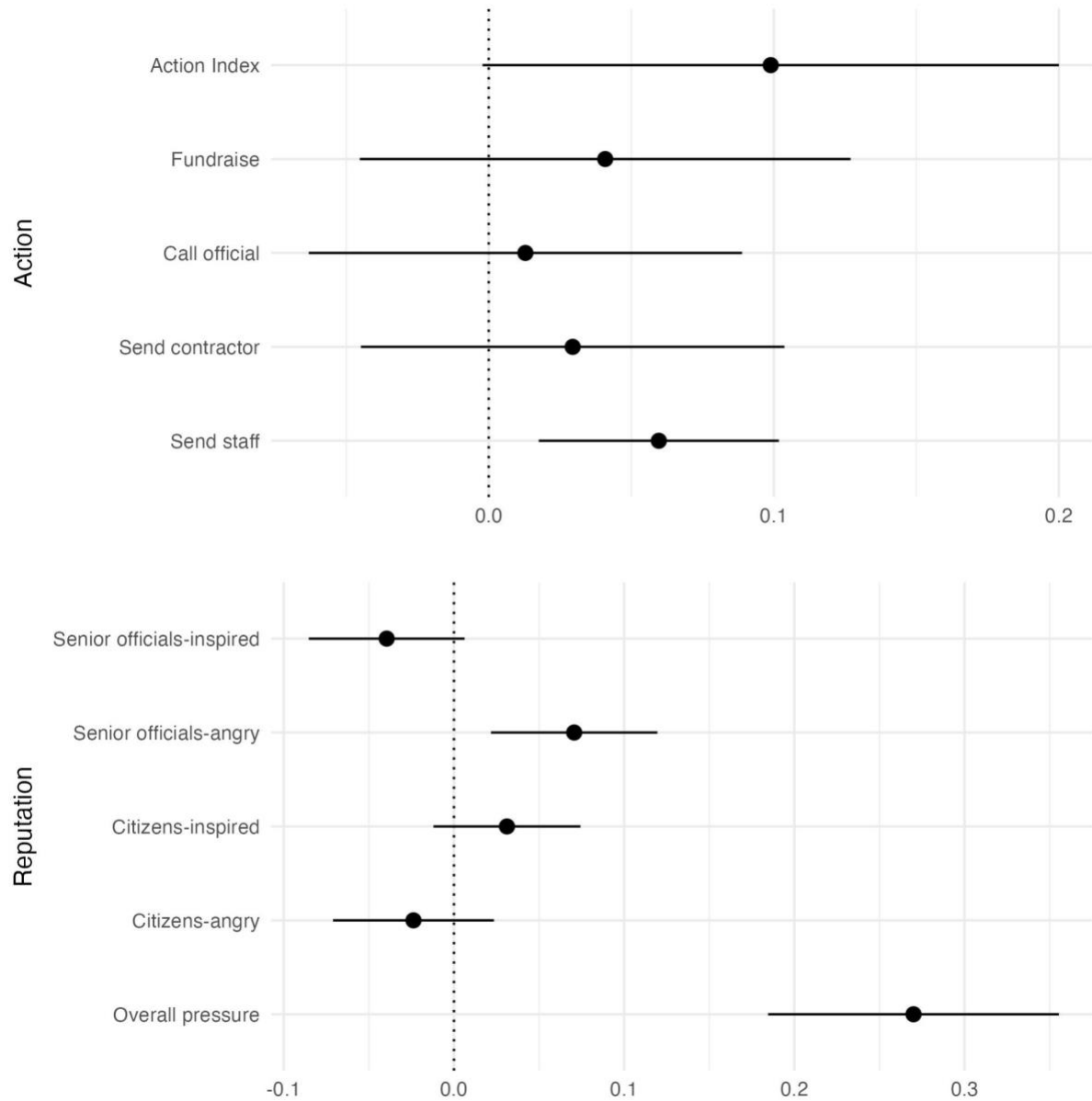


Figure 5. Effects of the social media publicity treatment
(Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals. Benjamini-Hochberg adjusted p-values for index components within families of dependent variables are shown in Table B7.)

Figure 5 shows that hearing the social media vignette increases the index of overall action by 0.099 standard deviations—a result with a 0.06 p-value. This is driven by officials being more likely to report that they would send their staff to examine an issue. In

line with the mechanisms we proposed, Figure 5 also shows that hearing the social media publicity treatment significantly increased overall perceived pressure to respond to the issue (a 0.27 treatment effect on a 3-point scale). This is driven by the fact that respondents who heard the social media vignette are seven percentage points more likely than those who heard the story of in-person mobilization to be worried that senior officials would be angry if they heard about the issue. Note that the question does not measure whether officials believe that senior officials will actually hear of the issue, but instead captures their worry over the possibility, thereby mirroring our qualitative observations that officials worry about the potential for media, and videos in particular, to be shared. Importantly, while the social media vignette also indicates that videos may be shared with community members, we find no treatment effects on worries that *citizens* would be angry. In other words, the treatment appears to be generating pressure to respond by activating professional reputational concerns with particular regard to senior officials. These results are robust to adjustments for multiple testing within outcome families (Table B7).¹⁰³ Together, the results from this second experiment suggest that reputational concerns triggered by a fear of angering senior officials can motivate bureaucratic action.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix B.

¹⁰⁴ Tellingly, we see null effects for the first measure of “perceived value of citizen voice”—willingness to provide a phone number to receive more community-generated content—and a *negative* effect on willingness to scan a QR code to learn more about partnering with community content creators. This further suggests that the observed shift in action is driven by perceived top-down pressure and reputational concerns, rather than by changes in officials’ underlying valuation of citizen engagement. Results are presented in the supplementary material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix C, Table C5). Having been primed to

We also prespecified analysis of interaction effects between the first and second experiments, as the citizen testimony treatment might be more effective in generating responsiveness when combined with citizen action of different types. Although the cross-randomized nature of our design technically allows us to estimate the interaction between video type and vignette type, our sample size leaves us unable to detect it.¹⁰⁵ Given our limited statistical power, we do not wish to interpret these results one way or the other. Further work is required to assess whether different ways of framing citizens' complaints affect the salience of citizen action or, conversely, whether citizen action of different kinds makes differently framed issues stand out more to officials.

Discussion

The video experiment shows that exposure to testimony from citizens can provoke empathetic responses and focus attention. Yet we also find, at least in our experimental context, that empathy and attention are insufficient to generate bureaucratic action—particularly when compared to other frames that might prime accountability to higher levels of government. Our vignette experiment suggests that some barriers to action may be overcome when citizens use social media to provoke concerns about higher-level pressure, specifically over angering senior officials. But even where publicity activates reputational concerns, it does not eliminate the

think about mobilized citizens sharing videos on social media, they may also be less inclined to want to partner with those same citizens.

¹⁰⁵ Results are presented in our supplementary material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix D). Detecting interaction effects could require sample sizes up to 16 times greater than needed to be able to detect the main effect. See the discussion in Gelman (2018).

deeper structural constraints that shape officials’ day-to-day actions and decisions. Our findings, therefore, should not be read as suggesting that citizen action broadly “solves” bureaucratic unresponsiveness. Rather, different citizen-led strategies appear to shift different dimensions of responsiveness in a manner that remains both limited and partial. The observed effects are nonetheless meaningful, precisely because they occur in a setting where bureaucratic attention is routinely pulled away from local citizens and toward senior administrators, compliance demands, and administrative targets. In such environments, even small, hard-won gains in attention—and even modest increases in action—can alter whether citizen claims are acknowledged, prioritized, and ultimately addressed.

Methodological limitations

There are features of our experimental design that may prevent us from detecting the full effects of citizen testimony. It is likely that we observe ceiling effects for our main outcomes of interest, given potential social desirability bias in responses,¹⁰⁶ the use of hypothetical scenarios, and the fact that our comparison groups are not pure controls but other forms of issue presentation or mobilization that might also generate responsiveness. Yet despite a design that biases against the treatments, we see evidence of citizen testimony’s emotional and (when digitally shared) reputational effects.

¹⁰⁶ While our consent module assured respondents that their responses would remain anonymous and private to the researchers, the fact that the survey was sanctioned by higher-level officials could have led some respondents to worry that higher-ups could learn about their survey responses. However, this worry should remain constant across the experimental conditions and is unlikely to drive the observed results.

The findings for the vignette experiment are particularly striking given that our measures for action are hypothetical and impose no real cost on the respondents. As noted, we chose not to include behavioral measures of action to avoid influencing officials' real allocation of time and resources. Future research, remaining cognizant of such ethical concerns, might employ behavioral measures such as allocation games,¹⁰⁷ or could examine past patterns of video documentation alongside real improvements in public service delivery.¹⁰⁸

Notably, we observe an effect of social media publicity on the pressure officials feel to respond, regardless of which video type the vignette follows (Tables D2-D3).¹⁰⁹ While this might suggest it is reputational concerns alone (and not empathy) driving responsiveness, our qualitative interviews with CCs caution against that interpretation. One CC, for example, explained: "With video it would be easy to capture the situation in which people were living, and ... the official would come to empathize. [The] scenes moved the officials to think about the difficulty people were facing."¹¹⁰ Only once their attention is captured can the CCs then apply pressure, including "post[ing] the video in all my social groups like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and other media groups,"¹¹¹ and telling the official "if he does not give me a hearing, I will approach higher officials to tell them about the problem and the lack of assistance."¹¹² This suggests that citizen testimony plays an important role in accomplishing the first-order task of

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Habyarimana et al. 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Planned future research includes the transcription and analysis of Video Volunteers' full video archive.

¹⁰⁹ Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix D.

¹¹⁰ CC interview, Uttar Pradesh, September 2018.

¹¹¹ CC interview, Uttar Pradesh, September 2018.

¹¹² CC interview, Uttar Pradesh, September 2018.

getting officials to focus on a particular need, which is an important precursor to any action that follows.

Variation by official type

The multi-actor nature of our study allows us to test our theory across types of block officials. At the same time, it is likely that effects vary given different roles and ranks, as well as different career paths and bureaucratic incentives. We estimate subgroup effects for attention and action in the video and vignette experiments (Figures E1-E2).¹¹³ While our relatively small sample size for each type of official means that we lack power, there are some suggestive patterns. The citizen testimony video had the strongest effect on officials charged with program implementation (the Panchayat coordinator and the Awas [housing] and NREGA officials) who, given their frequent interactions with citizens, may be more likely to empathize with them.¹¹⁴ The digital mobilization vignette, moreover, had a null effect among BDOs, with a negative point estimate. BDOs oversee but do not directly implement specific programs and so may not feel that citizen complaints directly threaten their professional reputations. As the most senior block officials, they are also more likely to be concerned with their standing in the eyes of senior district and state officials and so may perceive the local sharing of a video to be less of a threat to their reputations.

¹¹³ Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix E.

¹¹⁴ Local policy implementation, moreover, requires inputs and compliance from residents, and so may create greater incentives for collaborative engagement with citizens.

To examine how different career structures might affect responsiveness, we also measure subgroup effects on other variables that might shape bureaucratic incentives. It is possible, for example, that personnel with shorter tenures or higher expectations of being transferred might be more sensitive to higher-level reputational concerns.¹¹⁵ We test whether effects vary given differences in career horizons by examining those who do *not* expect to be transferred within the next year¹¹⁶—but find that the effects of the vignette experiment on official pressure and action persist (Tables E11- E12).¹¹⁷

Existing literature also suggests bureaucrats’ career concerns are strongest in settings where political constituencies are aligned,¹¹⁸ and that top-down monitoring is more likely in areas that fall under a single constituency.¹¹⁹ We therefore assess whether effects hold among blocks that fall within constituencies not aligned with the state’s ruling party at the time of research (the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, or JMM) or split between two parties. We find the social media publicity treatment still creates a sense of pressure to respond linked to worries of angering higher-level officials. We do not, however, detect effects on action taken (Tables E13- E14). This may simply be a false negative, but it is also possible that the strongest effects of the social media publicity vignette emerge from blocks in political constituencies aligned with the

¹¹⁵ Iyer and Mani 2012.

¹¹⁶ Officials in our sample had worked in their current blocks for an average of 2.44 years; 54% reported they expect to be transferred within the year.

¹¹⁷ Tables presenting analysis of sub-group effects are in our supplementary material (Kruks-Wisner and Kumar 2026b, Appendix E).

¹¹⁸ Velasco Rivera 2020.

¹¹⁹ Gulzar and Pasquale 2017.

ruling party, where officials can be more easily monitored and rewarded by the administration. Citizen practices to capture attention and action, in other words, may be interpreted differently by officials operating in different political contexts—dynamics that merit further research.

It is also possible that our results could be driven by officials of certain social backgrounds. A shared identity with citizens, for example, might increase the salience of the emotional mechanisms,¹²⁰ while officials who are more locally embedded might be more concerned about local reputation.¹²¹ Yet subgroup analysis finds the effects of our treatments persist across officials with different social identities. As the narrator’s voice in our videos is identifiably female and the residents in the videos are identifiable as ST or SC, we measure effects of the citizen testimony treatment among male respondents (Tables E1-E2) and among those who do *not* identify as ST (Tables E3-E4) or SC (Tables E5-E6). In all cases, we find that there is still a measurable increase in empathy and attention. We similarly find that effects persist on emotion and attention (video experiment), pressure to respond (vignette experiment), and action (vignette experiment) among respondents who do not live in the blocks they serve (Tables E7-E10). Overall, these results suggest that our main findings are not solely driven by officials who are socially or physically embedded in the communities they serve.

In fact, given that the block office is a middle tier of administration, few officials may be truly locally embedded. As blocks are large, even officials who reside within them are unlikely to personally know or repeatedly interact with most citizens they meet. Accountability

¹²⁰ Pepinsky et al. 2017; Tsai 2007.

¹²¹ Paller 2019; Bhavnani and Lee 2018.

mechanisms such as shared local solidary groups¹²² or mutual recognition¹²³ may therefore be less salient in our setting. Other kinds of interactions, however, may still create “relational” ties between officials and citizens—fostering trust and communication—even without shared identity or residence.¹²⁴

Scope conditions

There are several scope conditions to consider when extending our study beyond Video Volunteers and the CCs. The CCs, upon whom we modeled the citizen practices we tested, may be particularly well positioned to make and share videos given their social networks, training, and access to technology. It is less clear whether individuals without the support of such an organization could employ the same techniques to the same effect. Yet, as of 2021, almost 67% of rural India’s population had access to a smartphone.¹²⁵ In addition, the experiences of recent training programs suggest technical skills for online engagement can be taught.¹²⁶ The success of market-based platforms without any NGO support, moreover, suggests that a wide range of

¹²² Tsai 2007.

¹²³ Paller 2019.

¹²⁴ Roelofs 2023; Honig, Krishnamurthy, and Sharma 2025.

¹²⁵ ASER Centre 2021.

¹²⁶ Video Volunteers, for example, has recently begun to offer free media training to local volunteers, and to date supports a network of more than 2,500 individuals who engage in video-making to document local grievances. See: <https://www.videovolunteers.org/buland-bol-free-media-training/>.

spaces for citizen reporting are emerging.¹²⁷ Thus, while we do not suggest these practices are universally accessible, there is reason to think they could be widely adopted. This, though, will depend on levels of digital connectivity and access.

Video and social-media practices require a smartphone or other device, a reliable internet connection, the technical ability to create and disseminate, and networks with whom to share. These technologies, skills, and networks may not be equally available to all, and officials may have assumed they were responding to particularly connected or savvy citizens given the use of video. In addition, the social media vignette specifically referred to a local NGO, which could have made fears of a video going viral appear more credible.¹²⁸ On the other hand, the videos in our experiments intentionally featured women and men from SC and ST communities, including those in remote areas. It is possible that respondents in our survey—consciously or unconsciously—took these identities into account when reacting to their testimony, which could have generated greater empathy given their marginalized status. Ultimately, citizen testimony that elicits an emotional response and citizen action that *credibly* threatens reputations may, in fact, be more effective if officials make some assumptions about the identities of the citizens involved.

Importantly, the practices for appealing to emotion and activating reputational concerns may evolve over time. It is possible, for example, that video sharing may be hard to process at scale if officials become overwhelmed or desensitized to citizen appeals and viral videos (which

¹²⁷ The for-profit PUBLIC app, for example, reports that it is acquiring over five million new users each month, with users spending between 20-30 minutes per day on the app (Chandrasekaran 2021).

¹²⁸ Grossman, Humphreys, and Sacramone-Lutz 2014.

could become just “noise”). Researchers and social accountability actors should focus on uncovering new practices that cut through the loudest noise and highest barriers in a given context, while examining how such practices work at scale and over time.

There are additional scope conditions when extending the theory beyond rural Jharkhand’s block offices. First, for citizens to demand responsiveness, they must target citizen-facing public agencies where there are spaces for direct contact with officials. Second, for the reputational mechanism to hold, personnel must face top-down pressure. Our theory is therefore conditional on the specific career trajectories and incentives public personnel face. Third, citizens must pose a credible threat to officials’ reputations; officials must believe that citizens can actually publicize their problems, either through social media or otherwise.

In addition, differences in administrative capacity and channels for local representation shape the feasibility and effectiveness of citizen strategies. Jharkhand, like the other sites of our qualitative research in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, shares key characteristics with other low-income Indian states, including high poverty rates, low human development, and constrained administrative capacity. These conditions create a heightened need for citizen claim-making. Jharkhand also lags in decentralization: the state did not hold its first local bodies election until ten years after its formation in 2000, and has since held only three rounds of rural Panchayati Raj elections—the last in 2022. Delays in local elections stem largely from the legal disputes and incomplete implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) (PESA) Act, a 1996 law intended to devolve authority to tribal-dominated Scheduled Areas, home to over 26% of Jharkhand’s population.¹²⁹ These conditions may make the forms of bureaucracy-centered

¹²⁹ Kindo 2025.

claim-making that we have examined—particularly through middle-level administrative institutions like the block office—especially salient in Jharkhand. In better-resourced settings with stronger administrative capacity, citizens might have less need to activate emotional and reputational drivers of bureaucratic responsiveness, while in places with more robust local representation, citizens may have less incentive to engage bureaucratic actors. In short, our theory and findings are likely most relevant where governance and representation are weak. Jharkhand is an illustrative case but is by no means unique in this regard, offering insight into similar settings in India and globally, in democratic and non-democratic contexts alike.

Conclusion

It has long been acknowledged that bureaucracies are vital arenas of distributive politics.¹³⁰ By examining how citizens engage bureaucracies, we show they are also critical sites for active citizenship practice, particularly where electoral representation is absent or weak or for those without connections to elected politicians. Drawing on interviews with block officials and experienced citizen claim-makers, as well as a survey of nearly 1,300 officials with video and vignette experiments, we find that narrative appeals can evoke empathy and focus attention, while publicity threats activate reputational concerns and provoke action. By centering the role of emotion, we highlight empathy as a neglected dimension of bureaucratic behavior. Yet while personal storytelling can humanize citizens' experiences, it is sufficient to overcome institutional constraints on action. Citizens must exert pressure, and can do so by activating reputational concerns, particularly the fear of displeasing senior bureaucrats.

¹³⁰ Lipsky 1980; O'Donnell 1993.

Together, these findings reveal the need for multipronged citizen strategies to elicit bureaucratic responsiveness. They also provide rare causal evidence of how small yet scalable interventions led by citizens might elicit accountability beyond the electoral arena. More broadly, our findings demonstrate the possibility for citizen-led pathways to bureaucratic responsiveness under conditions—politicized, hierarchical, and unequal—where they might seem least likely. At the same time, they highlight the limits of bottom-up accountability under severe administrative constraints. Citizen voice can move the needle, but it cannot close the accountability gap on its own.

Importantly, our findings also have implications for non-democratic settings, where citizens are even more beholden to unelected actors, illuminating potential pathways to “accountability without democracy”¹³¹ and nondemocratic constituency service.¹³² Emotion and empathy are distinctly human traits that cut across regime types, and officials in authoritarian contexts are also frequently concerned with their professional reputations among higher-ups.¹³³ Future research could consider constraints to bureaucratic responsiveness in such contexts and assess the effectiveness of the strategies we describe.

Effective citizen claim-making can fundamentally shape the quality of service delivery, both challenging and reinforcing patterns of inequality.¹³⁴ In settings where officials are overburdened, time allocated to responding to citizens could potentially diminish time spent on

¹³¹ Tsai 2007.

¹³² Distelhorst and Hou 2017.

¹³³ Guo 2009; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016.

¹³⁴ Gallagher et al. 2024; Kumar 2025b.

other tasks or in meeting other administrative needs. To the extent that increased responsiveness diminishes shirking or serving officials' private interests, citizens' claims might be unequivocally beneficial for a community. However, responsiveness to certain citizens' demands could crowd out others. The equity implications depend on context, particularly whether the citizens approaching bureaucrats are otherwise underserved by the status quo. Video Volunteers and other social accountability organizations explicitly aim to amplify marginalized voices. In the absence of such organizations, it is possible that more elite actors are heard at a cost to those less well-positioned to make claims. Yet where access to claim-making is widespread, citizen-led efforts may help to democratize bureaucracy by creating spaces in which to demand both distribution and recognition in the eyes of the state.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article can be found at: <https://>

Our pre-analysis plan and other pre-registered study materials can be found at:

<https://osf.io/gshfa/overview>.

Data

Replication data for this article can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/7NVGKB>

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