

Roads to corruption: on road-building contracts

Politicians are likely to dole out road-building contracts to people from their own caste and this could affect the quality of infrastructure, according to a new study. 'Building connections: Political corruption and road construction in India', which will be published in the March issue of the *Journal of Development Economics*, shows how political interference may be why India's largest rural connectivity scheme could have led to at least 497 "all-weather roads" being "built" only on paper, depriving 8.57 lakh villagers from connection to the road network.

Using statistical tools of regression discontinuity, which allows the quantification of 'interference' in datasets, researchers from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and Paris School of Economics linked corruption in road building under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana to the probability of contractors connected to local MLAs.

Strengthening rural road connectivity

Further, to establish a link with the local political ecosystem, researchers looked at road agreements signed after an election victory. They compared "close elections" — which suggest that both candidates could in theory have similar influence — in 2,632 constituencies across 24 States between 2001 and 2013. Would contractors with the same surnames as newly elected MLAs be more likely to bag road contracts, and, in some way, funnel money out of the programme and into the political system? There is an 83% increase in the share of roads allocated to contractors who have the same surname as the winning MLAs as compared to the level of matches found pre-election.

And consequently, does this apparent political affiliation affect the quality of work? Researchers matched the agreements of 88,000 rural roads built under the scheme since 2001 and cross-referenced that with village amenities listed in the 2011 Census to correlate whether these roads have been built. Using extrapolation models, the researchers found that the likelihood for an all-weather road missing goes up by 86% under these kinds of contracts, and has led to an additional 497 all-weather roads being present on paper but missing from the ground. Jacob N. Shapiro, professor at the Wilson School and the lead author of the paper, suggests that MLAs "game the system" by having connections within regional bureaucracy to tilt the favour to their preferred contractor.

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