

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HEALTH EPIDEMICS: EVIDENCE FROM THE EBOLA OUTBREAK

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ABSTRACT. Health epidemics represent a unique test of governmental accountability. Compared to other disasters, the way the government responds is crucial to stop the contagion and limit the ultimate costs to citizens. However, political motives may distort the allocation of governmental resources. In this paper, I study the response of the Liberian government to the 2014 West Africa Ebola outbreak, and the subsequent effects on citizens' voting behavior and political perceptions. I combine proprietary data on Ebola cases, novel surveys, and publicly available data on the government's relief effort and post-outbreak Senatorial election. I first provide evidence of limited governmental response before the arrival of foreign aid, in contrast to improved assistance after aid was provided. I then build a spatio-temporal epidemiological model to estimate the ex-ante optimal allocation of relief effort. I find that the government misallocated resources towards swing villages. Voters in turn reacted to the differential response: the incumbent party lost political support in areas hit in the first part of the epidemic, while it did not lose votes in areas hit in the second part and in swing villages. I conclude by discussing the costs to citizens of the political misallocation of resources. The findings provide novel evidence on the presence of strategic electoral motives in the allocation of resources in health epidemics.

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