

A Service of



Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft Leibniz Information Centre for Economics

Ahmed, Firoz; Hodler, Roland; Islam, Asad

## Working Paper Responses to Bensch, Rose, Neubauer, Ankel-Peters, and Brodeur

I4R Discussion Paper Series, No. 217

**Provided in Cooperation with:** The Institute for Replication (I4R)

*Suggested Citation:* Ahmed, Firoz; Hodler, Roland; Islam, Asad (2025) : Responses to Bensch, Rose, Neubauer, Ankel-Peters, and Brodeur, I4R Discussion Paper Series, No. 217, Institute for Replication (I4R), s.l.

This Version is available at: https://hdl.handle.net/10419/314329

#### Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

#### Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.



# WWW.ECONSTOR.EU

# **INSTITUTE** for

No. 217 DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

# Responses to Bensch, Rose, Neubauer, Ankel-Peters, and Brodeur

Firoz Ahmed Roland Hodler Asad Islam

#### This paper responds to:

Bensch, G., J. Rose, F. Neubauer, J. Ankel-Peters, and A. Brodeur. 2025. Report on "Partisan effects of information campaigns in competitive authoritarian elections: evidence from Bangladesh" by Ahmed et al. (2024). *IAR Discussion Paper Series No. 216*. Institute for Replication.

**March 2025** 



# **I4R DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES**

I4R DP No. 217

# Responses to Bensch, Rose, Neubauer, Ankel-Peters, and Brodeur

Firoz Ahmed<sup>1,2</sup>, Roland Hodler<sup>3,4,5</sup>, Asad Islam<sup>6,7</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Technical University of Munich/Germany <sup>2</sup>Khulna University, Khulna/Bangladesh <sup>3</sup>University of St. Gallen/Switzerland <sup>4</sup>Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), London/Great Britain <sup>5</sup>CESifo, Munich/Germany <sup>6</sup>Monash University, Melbourne/Australia <sup>7</sup>Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), Cambridge/USA

#### March 2025

Any opinions in this paper are those of the author(s) and not those of the Institute for Replication (I4R). Research published in this series may include views on policy, but I4R takes no institutional policy positions.

I4R Discussion Papers are research papers of the Institute for Replication which are widely circulated to promote replications and metascientific work in the social sciences. Provided in cooperation with EconStor, a service of the <u>ZBW – Leibniz Information Centre for Economics</u>, and <u>RWI – Leibniz Institute for Economic Research</u>, I4R Discussion Papers are among others listed in RePEc (see IDEAS, EconPapers). Complete list of all I4R DPs - downloadable for free at the I4R website.

I4R Discussion Papers often represent preliminary work and are circulated to encourage discussion. Citation of such a paper should account for its provisional character. A revised version may be available directly from the author.

Editors								
Abel Brodeur University of Ottawa	Anna Dreber Stockholm Schoo	l of Economics	Jörg Ankel-Peters RWI – Leibniz Institute for Economic Research	h				
E-Mail: joerg.peters@rwi-essen.de RWI – Leibniz Institute for Econom	ic Research	Hohenzollernstraße 1-3 45128 Essen/Germany	<u>www.i4replication.c</u>	org				

# Short response to the reply by Bensch, Rose, Neubauer, Ankel-Peters, and Brodeur

Firoz Ahmed Roland Hodler\* Asad Islam

March 13, 2025

Bensch et al. (2025a) successfully reproduced all results of our article "Partisan effects of information campaigns in competitive authoritarian elections: Evidence from Bangladesh" (Ahmed et al., 2024) and made a few observations "that warrant further clarification." We provided a thorough response to these observations in Ahmed et al. (2025). In the meantime, Bensch et al. (2025b) have written a reply to our response, and they have submitted their report and their reply to the *Economic Journal*. We are currently preparing a detailed response to these two documents for submission to this journal. Therefore, we do not provide a full separate response to their reply. However, we would like to highlight that the comments in their reply fall into three broad categories:

- 1. Comments referring to allegations against other papers (Section 2)
- 2. New allegations that are neither substantiated, nor falsifiable (Section 3)
- 3. Comments repeating old comments addressed in our first response (Sections 4 and 5)

In our detailed response to Bensch et al. (2025a,b), we will explain why none of their substantiated comments undermines the validity of the experiment, the results, or the interpretation presented in Ahmed et al. (2024).

## References

- Ahmed, F., R. Hodler, and A. Islam (2024). Partisan effects of information campaigns in competitive authoritarian elections: Evidence from Bangladesh. *The Economic Journal* 134(660), 1303–1330.
- Ahmed, F., R. Hodler, and A. Islam (2025). Respone to Bensch, Rose, Neubauer, Ankel-Peters, and Brodeur. Technical report, Mimeo.
- Bensch, G., J. Rose, F. Neubauer, J. Ankel-Peters, and A. Brodeur (2025a). A comment on "Partisan effects of information campaigns in competitive authoritarian elections: evidence from Bangladesh" by Ahmed et al. (2024). Technical report, Institute for Replication.
- Bensch, G., J. Rose, F. Neubauer, J. Ankel-Peters, and A. Brodeur (2025b). A response to Ahmed et al. (2025). Technical report, Institute for Replication.

<sup>\*</sup>Corresponding author: Roland Hodler, Department of Economics, University of St.Gallen; CEPR; CESifo. Email: roland.hodler@unisg.ch.

# Response to Bensch, Rose, Neubauer, Ankel-Peters, and Brodeur

Firoz Ahmed Roland Hodler<sup>\*</sup> Asad Islam

February 27, 2025

#### Abstract

Bensch et al. (2025) successfully reproduce all results of our article "Partisan effects of information campaigns in competitive authoritarian elections: Evidence from Bangladesh" (Ahmed et al., 2024), but they raise some issues "that warrant further clarification."

- 1. They document that the village classification and the sampling strategy described in the published article are different and more refined than those described in the pre-analysis plan. This is correct and not uncommon in large field experiments. The relevant information has long been in the public domain (including during the refereeing process), and there is no reason to believe that these refinements could bias our results.
- 2. They conduct a novel empirical analysis, which is very different from our analyses, and see a pattern they find surprising. We highlight that their analysis is conceptually problematic given our sampling strategy and the level of randomization. We also explain why the resulting pattern is unsurprising.
- 3. They provide credible evidence that the map displaying the villages in our sample contains mistakes. We apologize for these mistakes but highlight that these mapping inaccuracies do not affect our results or our interpretation thereof.

We conclude that none of the issues raised by Bensch et al. (2025) undermines the validity of the experiment, the results, or the interpretation presented in Ahmed et al. (2024).

## 1 Introduction

We are grateful to Bensch et al. (2025) for their replication of our article "Partisan effects of information campaigns in competitive authoritarian elections: Evidence from Bangladesh" (Ahmed et al., 2024). They successfully reproduce all our results but raise some issues "that warrant further clarification" (p. 13).

Like in many projects in economics, we had a clear division of labor. Firoz Ahmed and Asad Islam were responsible for the RCT and the data collection in Bangladesh (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1313). Roland Hodler took the lead in analyzing the data and writing the paper. We jointly address the issues raised by Bensch et al. (2025) in the remainder of this response.

<sup>\*</sup>Corresponding author: Roland Hodler, Department of Economics, University of St.Gallen; CEPR; CESifo. Email: roland.hodler@unisg.ch.

### 2 Response to specific issues

#### 2.1 Differences between pre-analysis plan and published article

Bensch et al. (2025) document differences between the pre-analysis plan (Hodler and Islam, 2018) and the published article (Ahmed et al., 2024) with respect to our village classification and the sampling within villages. Our RCT involved a large data collection effort; Bensch et al. (2025) even call it an "impressive data collection effort" (p. 3). It is not uncommon in such cases to refine the initial strategy in the field. This is indeed what we did. First, we refined the strategy on how to classify villages without an unambiguous voting history as either government or opposition villages. This refined strategy is very clearly described in the published article (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1310). Second, we refined the strategy on how to sample individuals within villages. Rather than randomly selecting 35–40 individuals per village, we first identified a neighborhood that is known to be pro-government (pro-opposition) in each government (opposition) village and then randomly selected 40 individuals from this highly partian neighborhood. We did so to ensure that a large share of the individuals sampled in our government (opposition) villages are indeed government (opposition) supporters. This refined strategy is very clearly described in the published article (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1311). We cannot see how any of these two refinements could bias our results or invalidate our interpretation of these results.

We would like to emphasize that information about the differences between the pre-analysis plan and the more refined village classification and sampling strategies used in the field has long been in the public domain: the pre-analysis plan has been publicly available since December 2018 and, consequently, during the entire refereeing process at the *Economic Journal*, which involved thorough reports of four anonymous referees; and the published article describes our more refined strategies in detail.

Furthermore, Bensch et al. (2025) document differences in the descriptions of the village classification and sampling strategies between our working paper (Ahmed et al., 2020) and the published article. The descriptions in the published article are correct, and the results presented in the working paper are, of course, also based on these village classification and sampling strategies. There are various reasons for the differences in these descriptions. First, unlike the published article, the working paper was written in preparation for a submission as a short paper (with 6,000–7,000 words), which implies that information had to be condensed. Second, the descriptions of the village classification and sampling strategies also became longer in response to specific comments raised during the refereeing process at the *Economic Journal*. Finally, some differences may have been the result of our division of labor (see Section 1) and a less-than-perfect information flow within the team while working on the first draft. We apologize for the incomplete and potentially misleading descriptions of our village classification and sampling strategies in our working paper. It is important to highlight that these incomplete and potentially misleading descriptions of our our village classification and sampling strategies in our working paper. It is mortant to highlight that these incomplete and potentially misleading descriptions of our our village classification and sampling strategies in our working paper. It is mortant to highlight that these incomplete and potentially misleading descriptions of our no way affect the results presented in the published article or our interpretation thereof.

#### 2.2 Their empirical analysis

Bensch et al. (2025) present a novel empirical analysis and find the resulting pattern surprising. Their analysis is very different from all our analyses and conceptually problematic given our sampling strategy and the level of randomization. First, their analysis assumes that past voter partisanship in a village (or polling station) accurately reflects the partisanship of the sampled individuals from this village. This assumption is mistaken given that we deliberately sampled individuals from neighborhoods that were known to be highly partisan in order to create a group of neighborhoods/villages were a large share of the sampled individuals are government supporters and another group of neighborhoods/villages were a large share of the same of the sampled individuals are opposition supporters (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1311). Second, their analysis compares government and opposition villages that were assigned the same treatment. However, we randomized our treatments separately within the set of government villages and within the set of opposition villages. Therefore, it makes more sense to compare control and treatment groups within village types (as Ahmed et al., 2024) than to compare village types within control or treatment groups (as Bensch et al., 2025). Once one understands these conceptual issues and their implications, the resulting pattern is no longer surprising.

In the remainder of this section, we first replicate their empirical analysis. We then explain the two conceptual concerns in more detail. Finally, we discuss why the resulting pattern is unsurprising.

#### 2.2.1 Replicating their Figure 1

Bensch et al. (2025) present scatter plots showing how voter turnout, measured by ink marks and averaged across all the surveyed individuals within a village, varies in the vote gap. They describe the vote gap as "the average difference in vote shares at the village level between the government and main opposition party, averaged over the 2001 and 2008 elections" (Bensch et al., 2025, p. 5), which is a misunderstanding. These official election data are at the level of polling stations rather than villages, and most polling stations consist of multiple villages (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1309). Such a scatter plot can be produced for each combination of village type (government villages, which typically have a positive vote gap, and opposition village, which typically have a negative vote gap) and treatment group (control group, policy treatment group, and legitimacy treatment group). For each of these six combinations, Bensch et al. (2025) add the "predicted values from a regression of the outcome variable on a second-degree polynomial in the vote gap that uses a triangular kernel and a bandwidth of 50%" (p. 6). We further add 95% confidence intervals and show the results in six separate graphs in Figure A.<sup>1</sup>

Bensch et al. (2025) reduce these six graphs to three by combining government and opposition villages in one graph for each control or treatment group. Doing so leads to Figure B, which is identical to their Figure 1 (except the confidence intervals).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>We are grateful to Bensch et al. (2025) for sharing the STATA do files they used to produce their Figure 1. We use their code but replace the STATA command lpoly by lpolyci, so that we can add confidence intervals.

Figure A: Voter turnout of surveyed individuals in 2018 and average vote gap in the corresponding polling station in 2001/2008, separate results for each village type and control/treatment group



Notes: The figure present six scatter plots, one for each combination of village type (government or opposition village) and treatment group (control group, policy treatment group, or legitimacy treatment group). Turnout is the share of surveyed individuals with an ink mark after the 2018 election in a neighborhood/village. Vote gap is the difference in vote shares between the government and the main opposition party at the level of polling stations, averaged over the 2001 and 2008 elections. The lines show the predicted values from a regression of the outcome variable on a second-degree polynomial in the vote gap that uses a triangular kernel and a bandwidth of 50% (like Bensch et al., 2025), and the shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals (using the default setting of the STATA command lpolyci for standard error calculation).

#### 2.2.2 Conceptional concern 1: Selected partian neighborhoods vs polling stations

It seems that the underlying idea of Bensch et al. (2025) was that turnout at the village level should be systematically related to partisanship at the village level, which could be measured with the vote gap from past elections. However, neither turnout nor the vote gap are measured at the village level. First, the vote gap is measured at the level of polling stations, and most polling stations consist of multiple villages (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1309). Second, and more importantly, we did not randomly sample our respondents at the village level. Instead, "we selected a neighbourhood (*para*) in each village. This selection was non-random as we intended to target individuals in government and opposition strongholds. We used our village-level focusgroup discussions to learn about the neighbourhoods of government (opposition) villages with a particularly strong leaning towards the AL (BNP)" (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1311). We then Figure B: Voter turnout of surveyed individuals in 2018 and average vote gap in the corresponding polling station in 2001/2008, separate results for each control/treatment group





Notes: This figure corresponds to Figure 1 by Bensch et al. (2025). It presents three scatter plots, one per control or treatment group, thereby combining government villages (red) and opposition villages (blue). Turnout is the share of surveyed individuals with an ink mark after the 2018 election in a neighborhood/village. Vote gap is the difference in vote shares between the government and the main opposition party at the level of polling stations, averaged over the 2001 and 2008 elections. The lines show the predicted values from a regression of the outcome variable on a second-degree polynomial in the vote gap that uses a triangular kernel and a bandwidth of 50% (like Bensch et al., 2025), and the shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals (using the default setting of the STATA command lpolyci for standard error calculation). In each graph, separate predictions are run for government and opposition villages.

"selected 40 individuals from within each of these neighbourhoods" (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1311). The polling station-level vote gap is thus a poor proxy for the partisanship of the sampled individuals of such a highly partisan neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> This is why we deliberately refrained from analyzing how turnout (or any other outcome) varies in the polling station-level vote gap, but that is exactly what Bensch et al. (2025) do.

#### 2.2.3 Conceptional concern 2: Level of randomization

We randomized our treatments separately within the set of government villages and within the set of opposition villages (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1310–11). "We [then] run separate [balance] tests for government and opposition villages, as the random assignment of villages into control and treatment groups was done separately for each village type" (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1316).

 $<sup>^{2}</sup>$ A good proxy for the partisanship of the sampled individuals would be the vote gap in the selected highly partisan neighborhoods. These data, however, do not exist, and it was deemed to be too sensitive to ask our respondents about partisanship or vote choice (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1315).

Therefore, in our analyses, we focused on differences across control and treatment groups either within the sample of government villages or within the sample of opposition villages. Given this level of randomization, we deliberately refrained from any comparison between government and opposition villages within control or treatment groups, but that is what Bensch et al. (2025) do.

#### 2.2.4 The unsurprising pattern

Bensch et al. (2025) see a pattern in their Figure 1 that they find surprising: "For both treatments, voting remains constant within each village type, with an abrupt discontinuity at the vote gap of zero. This pattern is surprising for two reasons. First, partisanship strength would probably be expected to continuously mediate the strength of the effects in the treatment groups (as it is the case in the control group). Second, the abrupt discontinuity suggests that households in marginally government-leaning villages behave fundamentally differently from those in marginally opposition-leaning ones" (p. 6).

Their first point suggests that they had expected turnout to monotonically increase in the vote gap. Instead, we observe that the two variables are basically unrelated in all graphs in Figure A (which we confirm in Table A below). This is not surprising. Given that turnout is measured at the level of selected highly partisan neighborhoods, while the vote gap is measured at a much more aggregate level (see conceptual point 1), it is likely that the sampled individuals from two different government (opposition) neighborhoods/villages have very similar partisan preferences even if the voters in one of the two corresponding polling stations had much stronger pro-government (pro-opposition) preferences than the voters in the other polling station.

Their second point suggests that they had expected no discontinuity as the village type changes from opposition to government village at a vote gap of around zero. Instead, we observe clear discontinuities in Figure B, in particular in panels b and c. This is not surprising. First, given that turnout is measured at the level of selected highly partisan neighborhoods, while the vote gap is measured at a much more aggregate level (see conceptual point 1), it is likely that the sampled individuals from a government neighborhood/village and an opposition neighborhood/village have very different partisan preferences even if the difference in the partisanship between the respective polling stations were small. Moreover, such discontinuities could also result from the fact we cannot expect government and opposition villages to be balanced given the level of randomization (see conceptual point 2).

Moreover, the wording of Bensch et al. (2025) suggests that turnout is monotonically increasing in the vote gap in the sample of control villages, but not in the samples of policy and legitimacy treatment villages. When just looking at Figure A or B, it is not obvious to us whether turnout is indeed monotonically increasing in the vote gap in control villages. First, the predicted turnout in control government villages is basically constant for vote gaps from 0%– 80% (see Figure A, panel a). Second, while the predicted turnout increases in control opposition villages, the confidence interval is comparatively wide (see Figure A, panel d).

To go beyond eyeballing, we (linearly) regress turnout on the vote gap in all six samples used in Figure A. Table A shows that the estimated coefficients are all small in absolute values

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Vote gap	0.026	0.007	0.006	0.098	-0.030	0.008
	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.065)	(0.030)	(0.045)
	[0.199]	[0.711]	[0.761]	[0.138]	[0.312]	[0.867]
Village type	Government	Government	Government	Opposition	Opposition	Opposition
Group	Control	T-Policy	T-Legitimacy	Control	T-Policy	T-Legitimacy
Observations	52	51	51	48	50	50

Table A: Effect of average vote gap in polling station in 2001/2008 on voter turnout of surveyed individuals in 2018 within village types and control/treatment groups

Notes: OLS regressions for samples differing in village types and control/treatment groups. The dependent variables is turnout, which is the share of surveyed individuals with an ink mark after the 2018 election in a neighborhood/village. The explanatory variable is the vote gap, which is the difference in vote shares between the government and main opposition party at the level of polling stations, averaged over the 2001 and 2008 elections. All regressions include an intercept. Standard errors are reported in parentheses, and p-values in square brackets.

and not statistically significant at the 5% or even the 10% level. We conclude that turnout in the selected highly partian neighborhoods in 2018 and the vote gap in the corresponding polling station in 2001/2008 are unrelated in all six combinations of village types and control or treatment groups. As explained above, this is unsurprising.

### 2.3 Map displaying the villages in our sample

Bensch et al. (2025) provide credible evidence that the map displaying all the villages in our sample, along with their village type and treatment assignment, contains errors. We appreciate this information and sincerely apologize for these inaccuracies. We are currently investigating the issue and will provide a revised map in due course. However, we have not been able to do so within the limited time available to ensure that the Institute for Replication publishes our response at the same time as the report by Bensch et al. (2025). While errors should not occur when plotting data on a map, it is important to emphasize that these mapping inaccuracies do not affect our results or their interpretation.

# 3 Concluding remark

We are grateful to Bensch et al. (2025) for their successful reproduction of all our results and for suggesting issues that warrant further clarification. In this response, we have shown that these issues are either of no concern (see Sections 2.1 and 2.2) or minor and inconsequential (see Section 2.3). We conclude that none of the issues raised by Bensch et al. (2025) undermines the validity of the experiment, the results, or the interpretation presented in Ahmed et al. (2024).

## References

- Ahmed, F., R. Hodler, and A. Islam (2020). Voting or abstaining in "managed" elections? A field experiment in Bangladesh. *CEPR Discussion Paper DP14608*.
- Ahmed, F., R. Hodler, and A. Islam (2024). Partisan effects of information campaigns in competitive authoritarian elections: Evidence from Bangladesh. *The Economic Journal* 134(660), 1303–1330.
- Bensch, G., J. Rose, F. Neubauer, J. Ankel-Peters, and A. Brodeur (2025). A comment on "Partisan effects of information campaigns in competitive authoritarian elections: evidence from Bangladesh" by Ahmed et al. (2024). Technical report, Institute for Replication.
- Hodler, R. and A. Islam (2018). Voting or abstaining in "managed" elections? An RCT in Bangladesh. https://doi.org/10.1257/rct.3509-1.0. AEA RCT Registry.