

Concept note: A field experiment to identify the effects of information on political behavior

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Very preliminary: please do not circulate or cite. Comments welcome:
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1 Motivation

It has been well-established in the theoretical literature that information has important effects on political behavior (Ferejohn 1986; Besley 2006). Many of the empirical studies suggest that information has positive effects on voter behavior and can improve the performance of politicians (Besley and Burgess 2002; Ferraz and Finan 2008). Studies of information effects on citizen behavior in the US, however, show that very little information is needed to induce voters to act as if they were well-informed (Lupia 1994; Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1990; Fiorina and Shepsle 1990; Chappell and Keech 1990). The type of information that can motivate particular political behavior remains ambiguous and the channels through which information achieves its effects have not been established.

Preliminary analyses of data from Mali, suggest that information has a significant and positive correlation with public goods provision. Given data limitations, however, the direction of this relationship has not been well-identified and the type of information that is doing the work is unclear. While it is plausible that the effect of information is working through the mechanism of increasing expectations, further research is necessary. Because improving expectations may be less costly and less contentious than improving information about government performance, such a research agenda would be fruitful for countries and development organizations interested in better democratic accountability in poor settings.

2 Theory

See Section 2, Hypothesis 1 of “Is democracy working? Determinants of local government performance (failure) in Mali,” (Gottlieb 2010).

3 Methodology

To test the hypothesis that information is a constraint to improved accountability in local governance, I propose a randomized field experiment. The experiment not only attempts to quantify the effect of information on certain types of political behavior, but also tries to isolate the type of information that can have such an effect.

The intervention

In a randomly selected group of treatment communes, I will carry out an information dissemination campaign that attempts to raise citizen expectations. The information disseminated will include:

1. The responsibilities of local government vis à vis the central government, i.e. its role in public goods provision, in dispute resolution, and other forms of administration of land and civil services
2. The average annual budget of a rural commune with examples of important line items such as the amount budgeted for particular public goods projects
3. Avenues of recourse other than the commune government if dissatisfied with performance
4. Average annual tax collection rates and amounts accompanied by information about the exchange between citizens and government, i.e. higher taxes should translate into higher public goods provision

Information will be disseminated in the following ways:

1. Open and well-advertised public meetings
2. Conversations with traditional community leaders
3. Publicly posted information
4. Door to door visits in a random sample of households

Information dissemination programs of this sort are not new. Banerjee et al. (2002) evaluate the impact of a property rights policy in West Bengal and show that it had significant effects on the efficiency of agricultural production. The government sent representatives from village to village spreading the word about the change in policy. Though the policy had a different aim, the mechanism of information dissemination at the village level worked to change people's behavior to be more in line with legal regulations. Furthermore, information dissemination campaigns for the purpose of improving governance are being implemented in developing countries by a range of governments, donors, and NGOs. There has been little rigorous evaluation of such programs to date.

Evaluation strategy

The evaluation strategy will have two components, an assessment of changes in voter expectations and information and an assessment of changes in government performance.

1. In the random sample of treatment and control communes, I will conduct baseline surveys of a randomly selected group of voters. The survey will be designed to produce baseline data about 1) the ways in which Malians condition their decisions about voting, 2) their expectations of local government responsibility/capacity, and 3) the information they have regarding local government performance. These data will provide evidence about the extent to which Malian voters have low expectations of redistribution.
2. Again, in both the treatment and control communes, I will conduct assessments of government performance. In previous field work, I found that it was relatively easy to get information about local government budgets and activities from the council's secretariat and tax collector. These staff are civil servants and not elected by the commune so they were more willing to share information about political activity than councilmembers may have been. Through interviews with local government staff, I will obtain information on the following:
 - (a) the number of times the council met in the previous six months,
 - (b) the types of issues discussed at these meetings,
 - (c) the openness of these meetings,
 - (d) the extent of participation in the meetings from the local community
 - (e) government expenditures
 - (f) progress on key local development projects
 - (g) tax revenues and other sources of revenue from central government transfers
 - (h) rates of tax collection

Approximately six months after the intervention has been completed, I will return to the treatment and control communes to conduct a follow-up voter survey that asks the same questions as the baseline survey, but of a different random sample of voters. I will also conduct a final government assessment that retrieves updated information on the information collected in the baseline.

I expect that I will be able to detect some change in the way that governments spend money because of a particular feature of local government revenue. The ANICT is a para-statal organization in Mali that is responsible for transferring funds specifically for annual development projects to each commune. The amount of the transfer is determined by a specified formula that is contingent on observable factors such as the commune's poverty level and its distance to major cities. Each commune is eligible to receive a pre-designated amount of project

funds every year, but must make a feasible project proposal to acquire these funds. By limiting my selection of treatment and control communes to those that have a similar timeline for receiving funds and similar project proposals (for example clinic construction or school renovation), I can make reasonable comparisons among these communes on the following performance indicators: ratio of funds expended to funds allocated, competitiveness of procurement and contracting, responsiveness of commune to ANICT, and timeliness of project implementation.

References

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