PART I

INFORMATION, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND A NEW APPROACH TO CUMULATIVE LEARNING

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Do Informational Campaigns Promote Electoral Accountability?

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1.1 INFORMATION AND POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Throughout the world, voters lack access to information about politicians, government performance, and public services. Consider some examples. In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, a recent survey found that 80 percent of parents with children in primary education were unaware of how their children's school fared in the latest round of national examinations, 39 percent did not know whether teachers at the school came to work, and 25 percent could not say whether the school had toilets.[1] Graft is ubiquitous in India: more than 65 percent of citizens report having paid a bribe to access public services over the past year. Yet dozens of anti-corruption activists have been murdered after legally requesting information under the country's Right to Information Act.[2] Deadly anti-government protests in Caracas in 2014 barely appeared on Venezuelans' television screens. State control of the media ensured that coverage was limited and sanitized. Restrictive laws meant that journalists who reported critically on the government could be fined and thrown in jail.[3] In many areas of the world, voters are in the dark about the state of their nations and the people who rule them.

Such knowledge deficits are problematic on both normative and instrumental grounds. According to classic political theory, an informed

[1] Croke (2012).
[2] Vidhi Doshi, "The brutal deaths of anti-corruption activists in India," *The Washington Post*, September 15, 2017.
[3] Fossett (2014).

electorate is vital to a well-functioning democracy.[4] In standard models, voters delegate responsibility for public administration to elected politicians. But representative democracy does not by itself guarantee good governance. For this to come about, voters need to be informed about the backgrounds of candidates running for public office – so that they can select those who are competent, honest, and committed to advancing voters' preferred policies. Incumbents, meanwhile, must be convinced that their actions are open to public scrutiny, and that poor performance and wrongdoing will be punished at the ballot box.[5] It stands to reason that without transparency and a steady flow of reliable information, the corridors of power are likely to be filled with "bad types" of politicians who face few incentives to perform their duties, and they may steal from the citizens they are supposed to serve.[6]

There is plenty of evidence that such misconduct indeed occurs. Legislators in many countries ply voters with side payments rather than better roads, schools, and health services. Corrupt leaders frequently offer no-bid contracts to friends, relatives, or campaign donors. A large literature documents the private returns that accrue to those holding public office, most notably in places where checks and balances are weak or absent.[7] Scholarly work on lobbying suggests that in contexts where access to information is unequally distributed, economic elites are better able to bend regulation and tax policy to their advantage.[8]

Civil society organizations, international donors, and democracy promotion activists have therefore seen transparency as a disinfectant and cure for what ails democracy. They have crafted programs to create more informed electorates.[9] These programs are motivated in part by the idea that political accountability in developing democracies is fundamentally

[4] Pitkin (1967); Dahl (1973); Dahl (1989, 338–339); Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin (1999); Brunetti and Weder (2003); Besley and Prat (2006); Malesky, Schuler, and Tran (2012); Bauhr and Grimes (2014).

[5] Amaryta Sen has famously argued that famine has rarely – if ever – occurred under democracy, chiefly because politicians "have to win elections and face public criticism" (Sen, 2001, 3).

[6] For theoretical discussion see, for instance, Fearon (1999); for recent evidence see Humphreys and Weinstein (2013), Grossman and Michelitch (2018).

[7] See, for instance, Fisman, Schulz, and Vig (2014).

[8] Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin (1999), Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland (2011).

[9] See, for example, the Voting Information Project in the United States (www.votinginfoproject.org), funded by Pew Charitable Trusts and Google, or International IDEA's democratic accountability efforts (Bjuremalm, Fernandez Gibaja, and Valladares Molleda, 2014).

constrained by a lack of information about government performance. Thus, increasing the supply of information should boost accountability and responsiveness.[10] To this end, numerous initiatives have sought to repackage and disseminate information obtained from government audits, publicly available administrative data, official records of politician behavior, and freedom of information requests.[11] For example, the Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE), a nonpartisan nongovernmental organization (NGO) operating in Uganda, assembles information about politicians' performance and distributes it to citizens. Google has established online platforms that compile information about candidates and local government quality, increasing voter access to information before elections in countries such as India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Taiwan.[12] A prominent donor group seeks to "expand the impact and scale of transparency, accountability and participation interventions" through the Transparency and Accountability Initiative.[13] The National Democratic Institute provided technical and financial assistance to more than 15,000 civic groups globally, partly in an effort to encourage "informed, organized, active and peaceful citizen participation."[14] Informational interventions are plentiful, with extensive support from public and private donors.

Despite their prevalence, we have little hard evidence that voter information campaigns work in practice. Moreover, the evidence that does exist paints a mixed picture. The release of audit reports disclosing information about corruption in Brazil significantly impacted voting behavior: incumbents in municipalities in which audits exposed a

[10] To be sure, such information is not always widely disseminated or easy to access. See, for example, Lagunes and Pocasangre (2019).

[11] A second group of initiatives has involved training communities to monitor public-sector providers, and/or educating citizens about the importance of legislative process or political parties, and how to mobilize for political change.

[12] See "Google launches 'Know your candidates tool' for Lok Sabha Elections 2014," *Financial Express*, New Delhi, April 8, 2014; "Google, YouTube launch websites for upcoming Taiwan municipality elections," *BBC Monitoring Media*, London, October 17, 2010; Kayleen Hong, "Google Launches Online Tools for India and Indonesia Elections," *The Next Web*, March 26, 2014; "Philippines: Google launches resource page for Philippine elections: Google.com.ph/elections," *Asia News Monitor*, Bangkok, May 3, 2013.

[13] See the Transparency and Accountability Initiative (www.transparency-initiative.org) and the related Transparency 4 Development research project (http://t4d.ash.harvard.edu/); also Kosack and Fung (2014).

[14] NDI Citizen Participation programming (www.ndi.org/what-we-do/citizen-participation).

greater-than-median number of infractions experienced a sizable decline in vote share at the next election.[15] In a similar vein, published report cards in India caused voters to punish poorly performing politicians and reward those who performed well.[16] Conversely, other studies from Uganda and Tanzania estimate informational interventions to have no effect on average.[17] An experiment in Mexico even found that disseminating corruption information had unintended negative consequences, depressing voter turnout.[18]

These inconclusive results are not wholly surprising. One can come up with several possible reasons why information might fail to move electorates. Voters may struggle to absorb new information that is delivered to them – perhaps owing to illiteracy, or the simple fact that parsing out the fine details of national accounts or abstruse legal judgments is hard, even for the most "sophisticated" voters.[19] Many citizens may find it irrational to pay attention to information about politics, even when it is made more accessible, particularly if they do not expect a critical mass of other voters to follow suit (a type of collective action failure).[20] Plausibly, too, information about politicians' performance may be overshadowed by other factors, such as copartisanship, a desire to see coethnics hold office, or clientelistic ties that make abandoning incumbents economically risky.[21] There is also the possibility that politicians attempt to offset the effects of transparency with increased persuasion – for example, by claiming credit for policy successes in which they played no part, or by redirecting effort into more visible but potentially less socially beneficial forms of action.[22]

In short, the impact of information on electoral accountability is unclear, giving rise to the empirical questions that animate this book. Do informational campaigns mounted in the lead-up to elections influence voter behavior and increase democratic accountability? Do voters act on information to sanction poor performers and reward politicians

[15] Ferraz and Finan (2008).
[16] See Banerjee et al. (2011).
[17] Lieberman, Posner, and Tsai (2014); Grossman and Michelitch (2018); Humphreys and Weinstein (2013).
[18] Chong et al. (2015).
[19] Achen and Bartels (2016: 14) survey a substantial body of literature showing that "most democratic citizens are uninterested in politics, poorly informed, and unwilling or unable to convey coherent policy preferences through 'issue voting'."
[20] Cox (1997); Olson (1965).
[21] Kasara (2007); Stokes et al. (2013).
[22] Voters could thus be better off with less access to information, as long as politicians know what voters know. See, for example, Murphy (2004) or Prat (2005).

who have a positive track record? And if they do, under what conditions are informational interventions more or less likely to be effective?

1.2 THE METAKETA INITIATIVE: A NEW APPROACH TO CUMULATIVE LEARNING

Policymakers, practitioners, and academics have zeroed in on transparency as a key source of political accountability. Yet, research on the impact of informational campaigns suffers from challenges that afflict many – and perhaps most – empirical research agendas in the social sciences. Three obstacles stand out: study sparsity, study heterogeneity, and selective reporting.

Studies on a given topic are usually sparse. Researchers are professionally rewarded for innovative, high-impact studies; by contrast, prizes and promotions rarely go to those who replicate existing findings. This means that second or third evaluations of a specific intervention are rarely proposed and seldom funded. Policymakers and practitioners are often left to rely on a single study in reaching programming decisions.

Even where multiple studies do exist, study heterogeneity can make it hard to draw firm conclusions about the effects of particular interventions. Differences in measurement strategies across studies act as a barrier to systematic meta-analysis – without which it is nearly impossible to evaluate whether disparate results are driven by contextual differences or study-specific distinctions.

A further set of problems springs from selective reporting: above all, failure to publish null findings. This pernicious practice is common to most areas of scientific inquiry. It motivates researchers to go "fishing" for statistically significant results in individual studies; it prevents the comprehensive assessment of evidence; and it jeopardizes our ability to learn about policies that do not work. Taken together, these features of social science threaten the reliability of whole bodies of literature on particular topics.

To address these concerns, we introduce a new model for producing research that seeks to counter several barriers to knowledge accumulation. It does so by increasing coordination among otherwise independent researchers.[23] The findings we present in this book stem from the inaugural project of the Metaketa Initiative, created by the Evidence

[23] We are conscious that many of the core components of this model exist already. The contribution of our initiative is to bring together these ideas and best practices under one umbrella.

in Governance and Politics (EGAP) network. "Metaketa" is a Basque word meaning "accumulation." The Initiative is designed to encourage replication, increase harmonization between studies such that meaningful aggregation is possible, and foster commitment to design and reporting standards that guard against selective reporting and publication bias. Its overarching goal is to promote cumulative learning in the social sciences.

The heart of the approach involves commissioning and implementing clusters of coordinated field experiments that are carried out in diverse settings yet center on a single research question – one that should be of interest to academic and practitioner audiences alike. Within a Metaketa round, we collectively select studies that teams design and implement in different locations, but which share a similar, coordinated intervention or treatment arm. This arm is used to test a theory agreed on by all participating researchers in advance. To preserve innovation and researcher incentives, and to compare the common treatment arm to alternatives, studies also include other study-specific treatment arms that focus on complementary interventions or modifications of the common arm. In this manner, each study contributes to both replication (through the common arm) and innovation (through the alternative arm). To protect against publication bias, the Metaketa model emphasizes integrated publication of all study results, regardless of the statistical significance of any individual study or the average effect across all studies. Studies also adhere to best design and reporting standards, including preregistered specification of key tests and third-party replication of data analyses.

Through coordination and harmonization across different teams conducting similar research in diverse contexts, our initiative seeks to fund studies, the data from which are intended to be analyzed jointly in the same theoretical and measurement framework. We use meta-analysis to estimate the average impacts of interventions across these multiple settings. The data also permit systematic assessment of contextual heterogeneity of any effects.

The model is designed to maximize both internal and external validity, as far as practically possible. The fact that all studies are randomized controlled trials (RCTs) helps to bolster the credibility of causal conclusions for each individual study, and thus the aggregated study data. Regarding external validity, we selected studies in this initial application of the model through a competitive process designed to ensure that a sufficient number of high-quality researchers were interested in participating. This

means that study sites are not chosen at random. Nevertheless, we feel substantially more confident in the generalizability of conclusions drawn from multiple studies implemented in different settings than we would from any single study carried out in one setting.

The Metaketa Initiative was designed as a general approach to the problem of cumulative learning. In this book, we demonstrate proof of concept by applying it to the substantive issue of information and political accountability. Building on the foundation of Metaketa I, EGAP has begun to employ the model to study other issues as well.[24] We advocate its use and continued refinement in other areas where there is demand for cumulative evidence.

1.3 METAKETA I: APPLICATION

The purpose of this book is both to describe our approach and to present the findings from seven planned field experiments on information and electoral accountability. All experiments assess whether providing citizens with information about politicians affects voting behavior. We carried out the studies in developing democracies – that is, in places where we expect informational problems to be especially acute, and thus where remedial interventions could be especially worthwhile. Jointly, the experiments provide the most systematic and comprehensive evidence to date on the electoral impact of political information campaigns in developing countries.

The type of information administered to voters came in three varieties. In one set of studies, the interventions transmitted information about incumbents' performance in office: their legislative activity (Benin – Adida et al., Chapter 4) and the quality of local public services (Burkina Faso – Lierl and Holmlund, Chapter 8). Another study provided information about candidates' policy positions, as established in "Meet the Candidates" videos (Uganda 1 – Platas and Raffler, Chapter 6). A third cluster of studies informed voters about politicians' malfeasance: spending irregularities (Mexico – Arias et al., Chapter 5, and Uganda 2 – Buntaine et al., Chapter 7), corruption (Brazil – Boas et al., Chapter 9), and criminality (India – Sircar and Chauchard, Chapter 10, although this study was not completed due to implementation challenges). Information was disseminated privately to voters by flyer, text message, or

[24] See www.egap.org/metaketa.

video, depending on the study. It was always truthful, nonpartisan, and credibly sourced, with most teams collaborating with a local NGO that took the lead as the implementing partner. In each study, information was delivered no more than a month prior to an election.

Importantly, before the treatments were rolled out, teams measured voters' prior beliefs about the incumbent.[25] This information allows us to assess, for each voter, whether the information they were provided with came as good news – meaning the information was better than their prior beliefs about the politician – or as bad news – meaning the information fell short of their expectations. In endline surveys, teams measured two main outcomes: (a) whether the subject turned out to vote, and (b) whether they cast their vote for the incumbent (about whom the information had been provided). Teams also gathered data on moderators and mediators, allowing us to evaluate hypotheses about heterogeneous effects. Together with experimentally induced variation in the alternative arms in each study, these data allow us to investigate mechanisms that may lie behind the findings.

The intervention, theory, and measurement strategy were conceived and honed in multiple group coordination workshops. All Principal Investigators (PIs) helped to advance both the substantive research described in this book and the Metaketa model as a whole. Our registered meta-analysis pre-analysis plan (MPAP) – coauthored by the five members of the steering committee and all twenty-two of the PIs on the individual studies who participated in this initiative – reflects this shared vision.[26]

1.4 FINDINGS

Our findings are clear and robust. Despite the statistical power gained by pooling the results of the experiments, and despite what we believed to be the timely, relevant, and accessible nature of the information on candidate or party performance, the effects of the common interventions are largely null. Indeed, on average for the incumbent vote choice and turnout outcomes, we find no evidence of impact on the common

[25] One exception is the Mexico study which, as explained below, measured priors in a different manner due to budgetary constraints.

[26] See Dunning et al. (2015), reproduced in the book's Appendix. The PIs are the authors of the chapters in Part II of this book. The steering committee was composed of five of the volume's coeditors (Dunning, Grossman, Humphreys, Hyde, and McIntosh).