

Gareth Nellis

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Information, Accountability, and Cumulative Learning

Throughout the world, voters lack access to information about politicians, government performance, and public services. Efforts to remedy these informational deficits are numerous. Yet do informational campaigns influence voter behavior and increase democratic accountability? Through the first project of the Metaketa Initiative, sponsored by the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) research network, this book aims to address this substantive question and at the same time introduce a new model for cumulative learning that increases coordination among otherwise independent researcher teams. It presents the overall results (using meta-analysis) from six independently conducted but coordinated field experimental studies, the results from each individual study, and the findings from a related evaluation of whether practitioners utilize this information as expected. It also discusses lessons learned from EGAP's efforts to coordinate field experiments, increase replication of theoretically important studies across contexts, and increase the external validity of field experimental research.

Thad Dunning is Robson Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley.

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Advance praise: “This is a path-breaking book on multiple levels. It makes a major contribution to our understanding of how ineffective it is to provide voters [with] information and expect improvements in political accountability to result. It also offers a new way to undertake social scientific research that promises greater generalizability of results. Overall, this is one of the most important instances of a multi-project collaborative research initiative in the social sciences to have been conducted in decades.”

Miriam Golden, University of California, Los Angeles

Advance praise: “This book offers more than a multisite investigation of governance problems in the developing world. It represents a new model of research collaboration and transparency. Many social scientists adduce evidence selectively in an effort to tell an intriguing theoretical story. The authors of this book put spin aside and guide us through the entire process from theoretical inspiration to site selection to data collection. Their analysis of six parallel experiments is guided by plans set out before the results became known, which makes the findings especially convincing. This book will be remembered not simply as a piece of outstanding original scholarship but as a milestone in the credibility revolution that is unfolding in the social sciences.”

Donald P. Green, Burgess Professor of Political Science,
Columbia University, New York

Advance praise: “The Metaketa Initiative represents some of the best of what social science has to offer: rigorous research informed by deep contextual knowledge, focused on urgent questions about how democratic institutions work – and could work better. By employing the highest standards of research transparency and coordinating research across countries, researchers participating in the Metaketa Initiative also directly confronted core methodologic challenges in ways that break new ground. This book is a tremendous contribution to our common search for new and meaningful knowledge in the field of global development and governance.”

Ruth Levine, Director, Global Development and
Population Program, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Advance praise: “By coordinating multiple research teams working globally around a much-debated issue, the Metaketa project proves that the old internal validity versus external validity debate presents a false

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choice – and teaches us important lessons along the way. This ambitious book sets a new standard for research rigor, and in my view it belongs on the shelf of every social scientist.”

Edward Andrew Miguel, Oxfam Professor in Environmental and Resource Economics, Department of Economics, and Faculty Director of the Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA), University of California, Berkeley

Advance praise: “This pathbreaking and hugely important book presents and, in a series of illuminating empirical chapters, applies a new method for organizing field experimental research to increase the likelihood of knowledge accumulation from multiple studies. In doing so, it offers the most thoughtful and effective response to date to the challenge of cumulative learning in the field-based social sciences.”

Daniel N. Posner, James S. Coleman Professor of International Development, University of California, Los Angeles

Advance praise: “Though social science aspires to the production of generalizable insights, all of the incentives drive scholars toward project differentiation rather than knowledge cumulation. In this important book, Dunning and coauthors illuminate a different path. They introduce a major methodological innovation, the Metaketa, and apply it to one of the oldest questions in political science: the relationship between transparency and accountability. The book demonstrates powerfully how creativity and cumulation can coexist, and offers essential insights into how we can learn best from carefully designed research conducted across different contexts. A must-read for social scientists!”

Jeremy Weinstein, Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, and Professor of Political Science, Stanford University

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Information, Accountability, and Cumulative Learning

Lessons from Metaketa I

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on migrant integration and political accountability with an emphasis on experimental methods.

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Ethnic Quotas in Rural India (Cambridge University Press), combines qualitative work and a series of audio surveys to explore the impact of caste-based reservation policies on everyday intergroup relations in India's villages.

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Sub-Saharan Africa and Israel–Palestine. In his work, he uses a host of causal inference tools as well as text and social network analysis to address substantive questions regarding political behavior, economic development, and conflict processes. His work has appeared in the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, and *Journal of Politics*, among other journals.

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aimed at improving accountability, often through large-scale field experiments. Prior to joining Harvard, she spent a year at the Niehaus Center and the Center for Study of Democratic Politics at Princeton University. She holds a PhD in political science from Yale University.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book reports the results of a set of coordinated, large-scale field experiments on the relationship between informational interventions and political accountability. These studies, together with ancillary experiments and analyses reported in these pages, were planned and executed over several years by thirty-one researchers as part of the inaugural set of studies in the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) network’s “Metaketa Initiative.” We present in this book the substantive findings from this first group of studies, dubbed Metaketa I. We also introduce the Initiative’s novel research model, which aims to foster better cumulative learning through the planned integration of field experiments. Each of the authors of the individual chapters has contributed centrally to the development of this Metaketa approach, as well as to this volume’s substantive findings. Despite its appearance with Cambridge University Press as an “edited volume,” this book therefore sits uncomfortably in that category.

We have collectively incurred many debts in developing this multiyear project. We would especially like to thank Clara Bicalho at WZB Berlin Social Science Center and Anirvan Chowdhury at the University of California, Berkeley for their crucial and brilliant work on the core meta-analysis reported in Chapter 11. Catlan Reardon, also at the University of California, Berkeley, did outstanding work in helping to bring the policy experiment described in Chapter 12 to fruition. Gareth Nellis was not initially a member of the steering committee, composed of the other coeditors, that launched the Metaketa Initiative. Yet, the other coeditors recognized that his contributions to conceptualization, analysis, and writing have been so fundamental that he should rightly appear as an editor of the volume.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our editor at Cambridge, John Haslam, for his continued interest in this project. We are very grateful to Erik Wibbels for organizing a book workshop at Duke University, where we received invaluable comments from our discussants: John Ahlquist, Pablo Beramendi, Dean Dulay, Scott Demarchi, Germán Feierherd, Zeren Li, Manoj Mohanan, Eddy Malesky, Lucy Martin, Elisa Maffioli, Melanie Manion, Mat McCubbins, Emily Rains, Diego Romero, Victoria Paniagua, Ngoc Phan, Jeremy Spater, Daniel Stegmüller, Kate Vyborny, and Erik Wibbels. We also thank attendees at seminars at Columbia University, the Department for International Development (DFID), EUI (IMBEDS), IBEI Barcelona, Oxford University, Stanford University's CDDRL, University College London, University of Bamberg, University of Barcelona, University of Essex, University of Gothenburg, University of Pennsylvania, University of Washington, Vanderbilt University, and WZB Berlin Social Science Center, as well as participants at an EGAP meeting at Vanderbilt University for their comments. We gratefully acknowledge fantastic support from Abigail Long and Matthew Lisiecki at Columbia University and Jaelyn Leaver at the University of California, Berkeley. Abby Long suggested the name “Metaketa,” a Basque (Euskara) word meaning “accumulation,” for the Initiative. (She had also proposed Yokuzuza, meaning the same thing in Zulu; however, we are glad to be talking today about Metaketas rather than Yokuzuzas.) We also thank Lily Medina for excellent assistance with Chapter 12. We are grateful to Georgiy Syunyaev and Jorge Mangonnet at Columbia University and Donghyun Danny Choi, Paul Connor, Elizabeth Herman, Nicholas Kuipers, Carlos Schmidt-Padilla, and Alex Stephenson at the University of California, Berkeley for their outstanding work as third-party replicators of the findings reported in Part II.

This first Metaketa was supported by an anonymous funder. That means that we do not know exactly the source of the funding, which we grant has a certain irony for research that focuses substantively and methodologically on transparency. Given our ethical commitments, we did obtain a statement from the funder about what it is not – specifically, that funding did not derive from donations from companies or from directors of companies listed as “Excluded from the Investment Universe” by the Norwegian government’s pension fund list. We are deeply grateful to our funder for taking risks to support innovative models of research to improve knowledge, and for providing specific insights, reflections, and wise guidance as we have navigated the many new issues that arose in developing the Metaketa Initiative.

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Most of all, we are grateful to the many world-class researchers who comprised seven research teams in six countries and who dedicated their talents to Metaketa I. One of the most rewarding aspects of this experience has been the chance to experience a very open and collaborative way of doing social science. We pay substantial attention in this book to describing the organizational and incentive structures that helped to facilitate the coordination of a large group of researchers, because we think these structures can help to make the Metaketa model a sustainable enterprise; and they also underpin ongoing projects within the Metaketa Initiative. Rather than these incentives, however, it was ultimately the desire to improve cumulative learning from social science research that motivated many researchers to contribute their time and insights generously and often selflessly to this Initiative. We hope that this volume helps to demonstrate the payoff – while also showing the limitations of our work and pointing the way towards future improvements.

Replication files for all analyses reported in this book, as well as the online appendix, are available at <https://github.com/egap/metaketa-i>. Our meta-preanalysis plan (MPAP) for Chapter 11 is available in the book's appendix, as well as at the EGAP design registry (<https://egap.org/registration/736>); pre-analysis plans for the individual studies in Part II are linked at <http://egap.org/metaketa/metaketa-information-and-accountability>. Readers can also assess the sensitivity of our meta-analysis results to various specification choices and to deviations from the pre-analysis plan, using an interactive online interface available at <http://egap.org/content/metaketa-i-shiny-app>.

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