Information Dissemination Campaign and Voters' Behavior in the 2009 Municipal Elections in Mexico

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Économie Politique Gouvernance

Fieldwork: Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)

Location: Jalisco, Morelos, and Tabasco, Mexico

Sample: 450 treated voting precincts and 1,910 comparison precincts in 12 municipalities

Target group: Voters

Outcome of interest: Electoral participation Transparency and accountability Corruption and Leakages

Intervention type: Information

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0001973

Données: Download data (545 KB)

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Partner organization(s): Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)

Policy issue

It is widely held that access to information is a vital component of democracy building and government accountability. A recent World Bank report[1] champions information as "a tool to empower citizens in developing countries to hold their public agents accountable." Information flows, the report argues, not only enhance democratic participation but make democracy work for ordinary people." Meanwhile, scholars have found that correcting information asymmetries through the media promotes government responsiveness, diminishes the electoral success of corrupt incumbents, contains opportunistic behavior, and prevents widespread theft of public resources. Little is known, however, about the effect of information on voter behavior and voter choice. Does information about local governments' performance spark participation in local elections? Are more informed voters more likely to topple governments who govern badly?

Context of the evaluation

Despite optimistic views about fiscal decentralization in Mexico, local governments' performance has remained poor. In 2008, for example, more than 80 percent of municipal governments' resources were spent either on the bureaucracy or were unaccounted for.[2] While elections should enable voters to discipline their mayors, a single-term limit is imposed on all elected officials in Mexico, putting the mayor's immediate fate in the hands of the party and not the electorate. Further impeding voters' ability to

hold mayors accountable are widespread misconceptions about which public works and services municipal authorities are responsible for providing, as well as a lack of available information about the amount of money municipalities receive and how this money is spent. In an attempt to ensure greater municipal accountability, a 1999 constitutional reform established the Federal Auditor's Office (ASF). On a yearly basis, the ASF selects a sample of municipalities in each state to audit. The results of the audits are published in lengthy reports, which are made available online. Though public, these reports are rarely used by media or political parties in local campaigns because the release date of the reports is not aligned with the timing of elections.



Man protests in Mexico

Photo: Frontpage, Shutterstock.com

Details of the intervention

Researchers sought to assess the effects of information dissemination on participation in the 2009 municipal and congressional elections in Mexico. Approximately one week before Election Day, flyers with different kinds of information on municipal spending were delivered to all households within the boundaries of treated voting precincts. The first group received information about municipalities' overall spending; the second group received information about distribution of resources to the poor; and the third group received information about irregular, unauthorized, or unaccounted for spending. The comparison group did not receive any information. The information in the flyers was extracted from public reports issued by the Mexican Federal Auditor’s Office.

Results and policy lessons

Effects of Information about Spending on the Poor: When voters were exposed to information about low levels of spending on poor areas (25 percent or less of all available funds), turnout increased by 4 percentage points. In terms of the effects of this

information on incumbent party vote share, low levels of spending in poor areas corresponds to a 6 percentage points decrease in incumbents' vote share.

Effects of Information about Corruption: When voters were exposed to information about high levels of corruption, turnout decreased by 4 percentage points (because precincts in the control group turn out at a rate of 51 percent, the effect represents an 8 percent decrease in turnout). In addition, exposure to either medium or high levels of corruption is correlated with a significant decrease in the incumbent party's share of votes.

Effects of Information about Overall Spending: The effect of information about the share of available resources spent was small and statistically indistinguishable from zero, even after taking into account the level of spending. Information on overall spending also had no statistically significant effect on the share of votes for incumbents.

[1], Khemani, Stuti. 2007. Can Information Campaigns Overcome Political Obstacles to Serving the Poor? The Politics of Service Delivery in Democracies. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DEC/Resources/Khemani_CanInformationCampaignsOvercome.pdf .

[2] Chong, Alberto, Ana De La O, and Dean Karlan. 2010. Information Dissemination and Local Governments' Electoral Returns, Evidence from a Field Experiment in Mexico. Working Paper (March 27).

Chong, Alberto, Ana De La O, Dean Karlan, and Leonard Wantchekon. 2014. ‰ÛÏDoes Corruption Information Inspire the Fight or Quash the Hope? A Field Experiment in Mexico on Voter Turnout, Choice and Party Identification.‰Û Journal of Politics, Forthcoming.

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1. Khemani, Stuti. 2007. Can Information Campaigns Overcome Political Obstacles to Serving the Poor? *The Politics of Service Delivery in Democracies.* http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DEC/Resources/Khemani_CanInformationCampaignsOvercome.pdf