



Annual Review of Political Science

Government Responsiveness in Developing Countries

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Annu. Rev. Political Sci. 2022. 25:5.1–5.23

The *Annual Review of Political Science* is online at polisci.annualreviews.org

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-112501>

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Keywords

responsiveness, political accountability, public goods provision, bureaucracy, constituency service

Abstract

When and how do governments deliver public goods and services in response to citizen preferences? We review the current literature on government responsiveness, with a focus on public goods and service delivery in developing countries. We identify three types of actors that are commonly present in these accounts: politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens. Much of this literature examines interactions between dyads of these actors. The study of electoral accountability and constituency services emphasizes relationships between citizens (or voters) and politicians. Studies of bureaucratic incentives and political oversight of bureaucrats emphasize interactions between politicians and bureaucrats. Finally, studies of bureaucratic embeddedness and citizen oversight of bureaucrats elaborate the interactions between bureaucrats and citizens. We argue that an emerging literature that considers interactions between all three types of actors provides rich theoretical and empirical terrain for developing our understanding of responsiveness and accountability in low- and middle-income countries and beyond.



INTRODUCTION

When do governments deliver outputs that are responsive to citizen preferences? This question motivates a large body of literature in many contexts spanning different regime types, levels of development, and political institutions. In this review, we focus on recent developments in the study of government responsiveness in low- and middle-income countries.¹ While our empirical focus is circumscribed by national levels of economic development, many of the strategic interactions we highlight are relevant beyond these contexts.

Following Manin et al. (1999, p. 9), we characterize a government as responsive if it “adopts policies that are signaled as preferred by citizens.” Consistent with this definition, we examine the conditions under which citizen preferences—as signaled by polls or by individual and/or collective actions—are reflected in policy making. We also stress the importance of policy implementation. In settings with more limited bureaucratic or state capacity, how policies are implemented can impact a government’s ability or incentives to respond to citizen preferences.

While definitional accounts of responsiveness focus on the government and citizens, we find it useful—building on Kosack & Fung’s (2014) influential framework that distinguishes between long and short routes of accountability—to disaggregate the government into two types of actors: politicians and bureaucrats. We therefore focus our discussion of government responsiveness on three classes of actors: (a) politicians, who make policies and allocate budgets to shape government outputs; (b) citizens, the primary recipients of these outputs (generally public goods or services), who collectively select politicians where elections are held regularly; and (c) bureaucrats, whom politicians hire and/or supervise to produce public goods and services. Our discussions of bureaucrats concentrate on the low- and mid-level bureaucrats tasked with implementing—but not making—policy.² These actors include both service administrators and frontline service providers, often called street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980). We do not differentiate among actors within each class (politicians, citizens, and bureaucrats), though we recognize that in some settings doing so would generate additional insights.

We base our discussion of responsiveness on common strategic interactions between politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens. With few exceptions, studies have assessed subsets of these actors by elaborating the dyadic relationships between politicians and citizens (voters), politicians and bureaucrats, or bureaucrats and citizens. We therefore organize our review of the existing literature around these three dyads of actors. While this scholarship has generated important insights, as described below, we argue that incorporating all three actors in a single framework can help improve theory and reconcile conflicting empirical findings. We propose a three-actor framework that will enable a fertile future research agenda, with substantial room for theoretical and empirical development. We demonstrate the utility of this approach with a discussion of recent studies that integrate all three actors, and we discuss the associated opportunities and challenges.

We focus on the processes and interactions through which politicians and/or bureaucrats are more likely to implement policies congruent with citizen preferences. A necessary preliminary question is therefore “What policies do citizens prefer?” While we do not thoroughly review the literature on public opinion, which seeks to measure citizen preferences, many of the studies we describe assume that citizens prioritize public (or club) goods and services, including (among others) health care, education, security, roads, water, sanitation, electricity, and social services.

¹We categorize countries as low-, middle-, or high-income according to the World Bank’s classification, which is based on a measure of per capita gross national income.

²Much of the US-based bureaucratic politics literature instead emphasizes policy-making bureaucrats, who generally include the top echelons of bureaucrats (see Gailmard & Patty 2012 for a review of this literature).



These preferences are especially salient in low- and middle-income countries for at least two reasons. First, political parties in many developing countries do not differentiate themselves programmatically (Bleck & Van de Walle 2013). When politics is less ideological, the distribution of public goods and services across space and groups is arguably more important to citizens. Second, when the government provision of services is more circumscribed, as is the case in many developing countries, citizens are more likely to prioritize improving basic service provision (such as access to clean water).

Like much of the literature that we review, the present article assumes that citizens prefer better (or more) public goods and services. We support this assumption with survey data from Afrobarometer, Arab Barometer, Asian Barometer, and the Latin American Public Opinion Project's AmericasBarometer on citizen preferences. Since citizens have little reason to desire worse or fewer services, we focus on the salience of these preferences by categorizing (generally) open-ended responses to survey items soliciting citizens' "most important issue." For each respondent, we code a binary variable that takes a value of 1 if the citizen mentions a public service or public good, and 0 otherwise. We are interested in the proportion of citizens that name one of these goods or services as their most important issue(s). **Figure 1** depicts the distribution of this variable across subnational units (districts, municipalities, etc.) in each country in our sample.

Figure 1 shows that sizable shares—in some cases even a majority—of the population in many countries cite these issues, particularly in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. The rate is lower in East Asia, where the Asian Barometer sample includes several high-income countries such as Taiwan, Japan, and Korea. There is considerable heterogeneity in preferences not only across but also within countries, as reflected by the density plots for each country. Notably, in many countries, substantial numbers of respondents also reported manifestations of bad governance (e.g., corruption) as their top-priority issue. In the average low- or middle-income country in our sample, 33% of respondents cited public goods/services as their single most important issue, while 16% cited poor governance. In theory, bad governance adversely affects public service delivery outputs (Beekman et al. 2014).

There are other good reasons besides citizen preferences to focus on government's success at delivering public services. These include a normative concern—following Sen (1999)—about human development, which is arguably connected to both economic and political development.

This review abstracts from some bodies of work that broadly relate to responsiveness. In-depth issues of representation are beyond its scope, including evolving work on the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation (Wängnerud 2009). Nor do we review some aspects of distributive politics—for example, whether politicians allocate goods to their core constituents or swing voters, as well as the logic of their engagement with clientelistic practices. Two recent reviews (Golden & Min 2013, Hicken & Nathan 2020) thoroughly cover the electoral returns to politicians of different distributive strategies. Finally, government performance may improve if higher-quality citizens choose to run for office in the first place. We do not, however, discuss the growing literature on candidate selection, since it was reviewed recently by Gulzar (2021). In the following sections, we highlight key arguments and findings about each of the three dyads of actors before concluding with our suggestions for further research.

DYAD 1: POLITICIANS AND CITIZENS

When do politicians pursue policies or allocate resources in a way that coincides with their constituents' interests? How do citizens remedy gaps in state service provision through interactions with politicians? We review recent work on electoral accountability and constituency services in both democracies and (where applicable) autocracies.



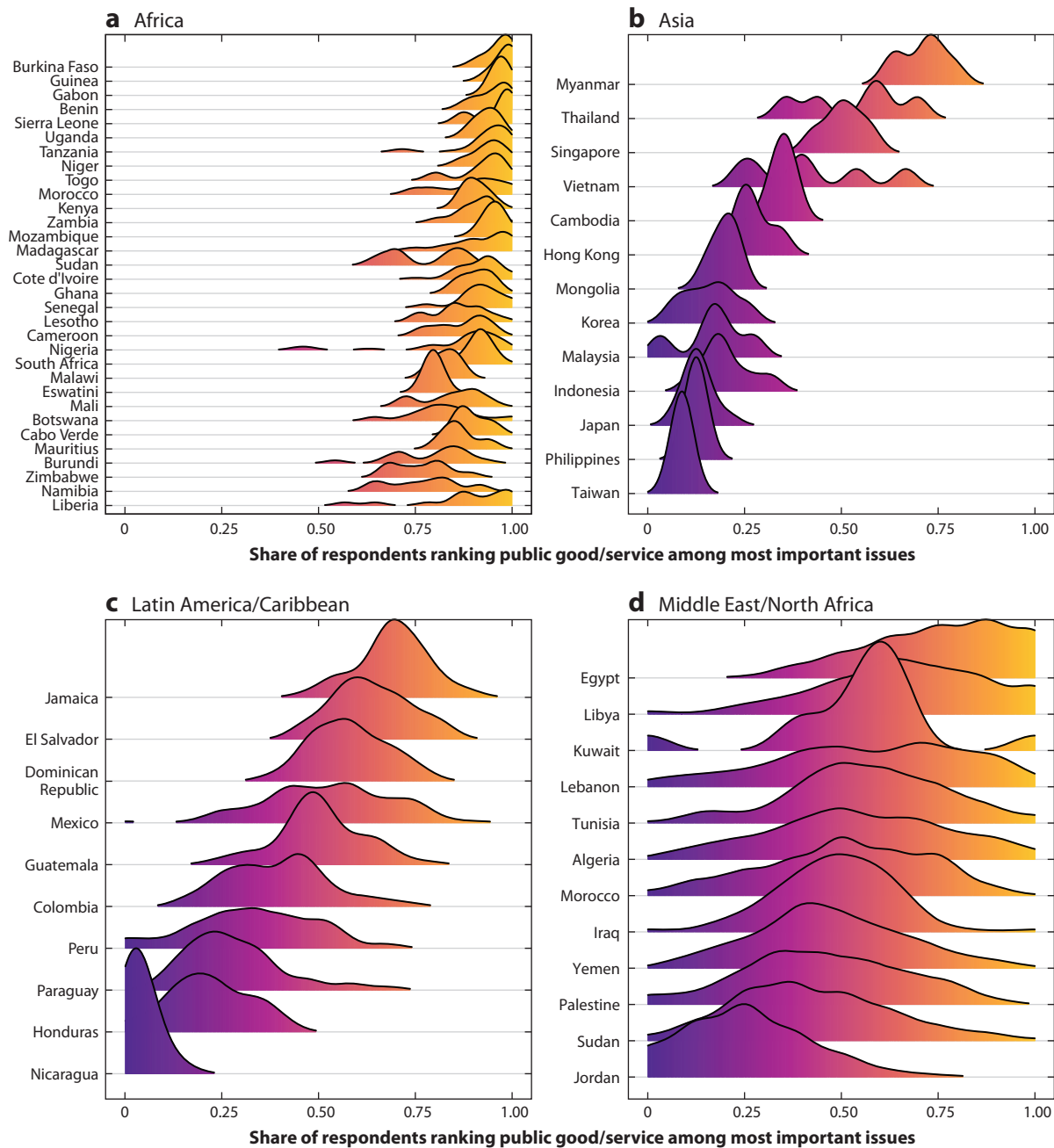


Figure 1

The salience of public goods and services as respondents' top issue. For each country, the density plot depicts variation in the proportion of citizens citing public goods/services across administrative units (i.e., municipalities or regions). Note that Afrobarometer (a) and Asian Barometer (b) elicit three issues, Latin American Public Opinion Project/AmericasBarometer (c) elicits one issue, and ArabBarometer (d) elicits two issues in select countries. Data sources: Afrobarometer Data, Round 6, 2016; the AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), 2018–2019; ArabBarometer Round V, 2018–2019; and Asian Barometer, Wave IV, 2014–2016.



Electoral Accountability

In developing countries, the link between curtailed public goods provision and politicians' corruption or malfeasance motivates many studies of electoral accountability. While policy responsiveness to citizen preferences is analytically distinct from the question of whether citizens can select or sanction politicians (Ashworth 2012), accountability pressures are thought to promote more responsive policy making (Ofosu 2019). The focus on electoral accountability raises an important question: Assuming that elections are relatively free and fair, under what conditions can voters use periodic elections to induce politicians to advance their (voters') interests?

According to seminal accountability models, elections give voters the opportunity to select better politicians or sanction politician malfeasance (Fearon 1999). The literature generally assumes that for (positive) selection or sanctioning of politicians, three conditions must be met: (a) voters must observe some credible signal of politician performance and (b) rationally update their beliefs (following Bayes's rule) based on this information, and (c) viable challengers must exist, enabling voters to credibly threaten to withdraw their support from underperforming incumbents.

Using a principal-agent framework, much of the recent literature on electoral accountability focuses on the problem of imperfect (or asymmetric) information, given the clear theoretical prediction about incumbents' and voters' behavior. When voters lack information on politicians' quality (i.e., their competence and effort) and candidates are unable to credibly commit to enhance citizens' welfare, voters may rationally rely on heuristics, such as candidates' ethnic markers, to inform their choice (Posner 2005). And while citizens have a general sense of the level and quality of the public services they receive, it is far from straightforward for them to use this knowledge to make inferences about the quality of their incumbent for two reasons. First, citizens have a hard time distinguishing between politicians' actions and outcomes given their uncertainty over the state of the world. Second, citizens generally require benchmarked information—i.e., how their district is performing compared to equivalent districts—to assess whether the public services they receive are adequate (Keefer & Khemani 2005).

A key goal of studies of the information-accountability nexus is therefore to test whether citizens use newly acquired incumbent performance information to inform their vote choice. Since the extent to which the electorate is informed could be a function of factors that also affect politicians' behavior, a growing body of work has focused on identifying exogenous variation in the information environment (e.g., Larreguy et al. 2020), and on how exogenously informing voters about politician performance (i.e., corruption, inputs, truancy, or policy outcomes) before an election influences their vote choice (e.g., Dunning et al. 2019).

A seminal paper by Ferraz & Finan (2008) leverages the randomized timing of federal audits of Brazilian municipal governments to examine the audits' impact on election outcomes. They find that, compared to municipalities audited after the election, the re-election prospects of incumbent mayors audited before the election decreased with the level of corruption detected. Goyal (2019) focuses on service delivery outcomes rather than malfeasance and does not find that Indian citizens used information on rural road improvements to inform their vote. Goyal argues that this null finding indicates that in some contexts, such as rural India where political and ethnic identities are intertwined, voters do not seek politician performance information. This is possible, although it would counter the core assumption of the accountability literature. It is also possible that voters did not use information about improved roads in their area because it was not benchmarked against road quality in other jurisdictions.

To increase researcher control over parameters of interest, such as the information source and content, several recent field experiments have assessed how information revelation before elections affects vote choice. Here too the evidence is mixed. On the one hand, voter turnout and vote



choice responded to corruption information in Mexico (Chong et al. 2015) and to information on politicians' inputs in India (Banerjee et al. 2020). On the other hand, a preregistered meta-analysis from seven coordinated field experiments in Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, India, Mexico, and Uganda reveals little evidence that good or bad news about incumbents' (relative) performance substantially affected voters' behavior (Dunning et al. 2019). A further meta-analysis of natural and field experiments similarly finds that the exposure of corruption had no effect on incumbent vote share (Incerti 2020).

Several explanations have been put forth to assess the mixed findings on how information revelation about politicians affects voters' selection of politicians. Some explanations question citizens' ability to update based on political information, while others seek to determine whether voters are information seekers. Other accounts focus instead on identifying the types of messages and messengers that are most likely to affect voter behavior. Finally, some focus on the type of voters that are most likely to respond to information on politician quality. Since citizens are not equally informed across settings, information may be most likely to affect voters' beliefs when the electorate is less informed.

Survey experiments may be the best way to determine whether voters are rational enough to use information to select politicians. Survey experiments on information and accountability typically provide respondents (analogous to voters) with information about a politician's actions or about the outcomes of her actions, which the respondents could use to evaluate the politician. In these experiments, voters tend to update substantially in the direction of the evidence, which is consistent with rational processing of the information (Incerti 2020, Bhandari et al. 2021). To the extent that survey experiments capture voter beliefs, as opposed to actions, the findings are consistent with rational voter responses to information about politician performance.

Several studies seek to identify the type of incumbent information that is most salient to voters (Adida et al. 2020, Bhandari et al. 2021). A related line of inquiry focuses instead on the importance of the information's source or dissemination mode, as opposed to its political content. For example, there is growing evidence that electoral debates broaden knowledge about politicians (Bowles & Larreguy 2019, Bidwell et al. 2020, Brierley et al. 2020), especially opposition leaders (Platas & Raffler 2021). Similarly, evidence is mounting—from Mexico (Larreguy et al. 2020), Brazil (Ferraz & Finan 2008, Varjao 2019), Sierra Leone (Casey 2015), Mozambique (Aker et al. 2017), and elsewhere—that robust (local) media markets can strengthen electoral accountability and facilitate voter sanctioning. The media's ability to support accountability processes may be due not only to its wide reach but also to the fact that it may support voter coordination (Larreguy et al. 2020).

Other studies examine the timing of information dissemination efforts. Grossman et al. (2021), for example, argue that politician performance information has a greater impact if it is shared early, regularly, and predictably throughout the electoral cycle. They find that the early dissemination of politically salient information affected the slate of candidates on the ballot by changing potential challengers' likelihood entering the race, incumbents' decisions about whether to run for re-election, and party leaders' nomination strategy.

Findings that the content, dissemination method, and timing of information can all be consequential highlight the importance of voters' information environment. While most studies simply assume that voters are uninformed, a prior question is why they are uninformed. If information provision would benefit a politician, why is it not provided in equilibrium? There are certainly technological and resource constraints on politicians' ability to disseminate a message. Incumbents, in particular, may also manipulate the message or its dissemination for political advantage, for instance by directly controlling media sources (Peisakhin & Rozenas 2018), manipulating media licensing (Boas & Hidalgo 2011), or spreading disinformation via social media (Badrinathan



2021). Understanding what information voters have access to (absent exogenous information provision) represents an important next step in the study of information and accountability.

Greater transparency can enhance accountability not only by improving voters' ability to select and sanction politicians but also by affecting incumbents' behavior while they are in office. In theory, if politicians' actions are not visible to voters, then politicians have weaker incentives to act in the interest of voters. Three recent studies—by Bobonis et al. (2016) in Puerto Rico, Grossman & Michelitch (2018) in Uganda, and Avis et al. (2018) in Brazil—find that increasing voter information in a way that is visible to politicians can reduce politicians' moral hazard, which is consistent with theories of accountability. We note that comparatively less attention has been devoted to exploring whether providing information to voters reduces shirking by politicians. This is an important avenue for future work.

Imperfect information is not the only barrier to electoral accountability. For example, clientelism (Hicken & Nathan 2020) and vote buying (Cruz et al. 2021) may distort performance-based voting. Indeed, the close focus on voter information (and, increasingly, misinformation) may lead us to miss at least two other manifestations of accountability, or the lack thereof. First, it may be difficult to attribute specific outcomes to politicians, in part because decentralization blurs lines of responsibility (Zarychta 2020) or because voters put undue weight on highly visible service outcomes, such as infrastructure projects (Harding 2015). Second, politicians' responsiveness to the public is likely (also) a function of the institutional environment, including campaign finance laws (Ruiz 2021) and the independence of electoral institutions that safeguard against electoral manipulation (Rozenas 2016, Rueda & Ruiz 2020).

In summary, there is growing evidence that voters can and do rationally use political performance information to inform voting decisions, but only under certain conditions. They are more likely to do so when the information is reliable, timely, and salient, and when the method of dissemination permits voter coordination. More research is therefore needed to understand why candidates, parties, civil society, or the media do not provide information to voters when it is advantageous for them to do so, and how these actors amplify or counter information. Relatedly, more research is needed to better understand incumbents' responses—for example, increasing vote buying or exerting more effort—to greater transparency regarding their performance. Additionally, distinguishing between voter *beliefs* about politicians' quality and their *vote choice* is likely to help reconcile the mixed findings on information and accountability.

Constituency Service

A growing literature considers citizens' leverage of more quotidian interactions with politicians to enhance government responsiveness. While constituency service has long been studied in the US context (Fenno 1978), such interactions between politicians and citizens may be particularly important in low-capacity states with thinner services or less professionalized bureaucracies.

Recent work has used ethnography (Paller 2019) and a novel politician-shadowing research design (Bussell 2020) to demonstrate that constituency service constitutes a large portion of what politicians actually do and to shed light on what citizens ask for. Studies of government responsiveness in autocracies further suggest that constituency services are especially valuable when politicians' policy-making role is constrained or when weak (or nonexistent) electoral institutions limit electoral accountability (Distelhorst & Hou 2017, York 2020).

Notwithstanding the importance that politicians ascribe to constituency services, two key features of these services limit their ability to deliver public goods to the population. First, it is generally infeasible to scale service provision on the basis of contact between individual citizens and politicians (and party brokers) alone. In most settings, each politician has many constituents.



Second, evidence from multiple cases suggests that not all citizens are equally likely to request—or receive—constituency services. Even if such services were more scalable, this form of selection would likely yield unequal distributional outcomes.

Indeed, research on this type of interaction between politicians and voters suggests disadvantages associated with relying too heavily on constituency services to achieve responsive governance. As mentioned above, politicians are commonly, but not uniformly, differentially responsive to different (types of) constituents. These inequalities are often studied through audits or audit experiments. In line with evidence from the United States (e.g., Butler & Broockman 2011), McClendon (2016) finds that legislators in South Africa are more likely to respond to same-race constituents. Driscoll et al. (2018) similarly find class- and race-biased responses among most, though not all, parliamentary candidates in Brazil.

Variation in politicians' responses to constituents' requests for information or services may reflect their personal tastes or prejudices (McClendon 2016, Costa 2017, McAndrews et al. 2020). In some contexts, differential responsiveness instead arises from politicians' electoral incentives. Driscoll et al. (2018) find that Brazilian candidates for the national legislature, who are concerned about alienating likely voters, discriminated against lower-class constituents after (but not before) the elections. Gaikwad & Nellis (2020) find that urban politicians discriminate against domestic migrants in India. Pointing to migrants' lower propensity to vote in destination-area elections, they suggest a form of electorally motivated statistical discrimination as a mechanism. Yet, discrimination based on the prospect of turnout does not arise in all contexts (Bussell 2019). Understanding why and when we observe disparate responses by politicians—a promising avenue of future research—is important for understanding inequalities in government responsiveness.

Politicians are expected to provide constituency services to those who approach them. Yet, in many contexts, there are large inequalities in levels of political access. Understanding which citizens choose to request constituency services can help illuminate critical questions about the distributional implications of such services. Kruks-Wisner (2018) advances a theory of claim making based on citizens' aspirations and capabilities. She further demonstrates that citizens' aspirations and ability to request services are shaped by past experiences with the state. Grossman et al. (2017) and Auerbach & Kruks-Wisner (2020) similarly explain variation in citizens' requests or complaint making as a function of their sense of (external) efficacy. Other studies focus on citizens' social or relational—as opposed to individual—characteristics. Bussell (2019) suggests that citizens seek constituency services when they cannot access existing patronage networks, while Ferrali et al. (2020) demonstrates the importance of an individual's social ties when they are learning how to access politicians for constituency services.

Finally, we recognize that the growing availability of information and communication technologies (ICTs) can improve citizens' ability to request constituency services. Most notably, the use of widespread complaint systems (e.g., 311 lines or the FixMyStreet app) reduces the costs to citizens of filing a complaint or making a request. With the exception of Slough (2021b,c)—which conceptualizes complaint systems as a form of bureaucratic oversight—previous research treated such systems as interactions between citizens and politicians. Analyzing data from 311 lines (or the equivalent) permits analysis of the variation in politician responsiveness to the complaints reported using such systems. Two recent studies find that responsiveness—measured as how quickly complaints are remedied—increases in the lead-up to elections in New York City and San Francisco (Christensen & Ejdemyr 2020) and in the United Kingdom (Dipoppa & Grossman 2020). Dipoppa & Grossman (2020) further show an increase in citizen complaint making in the lead-up to elections that coincides with this increase in responsiveness.

Similar ICT complaint systems are increasingly available in some low- and middle-income countries. There is some evidence that such platforms can empower the most marginalized in



society (according to demographic classifications) and, in theory, reduce inequality in political access (Grossman et al. 2014). However, marginalized citizens were found to participate less than nonmarginalized citizens when the same complaint platform was brought to scale in Uganda. This can partly be explained by the challenge of reaching (and mobilizing) marginalized populations in the absence of personalized appeals (Grossman et al. 2020). More research is needed to explore who uses these services, and how usage can be encouraged, especially among more marginalized populations.

As ICT complaint systems continue to emerge in low- and middle-income settings, an important question is how politicians respond to the complaints they receive. Several recent studies find that politicians respond minimally, or often not at all, to citizens' messages (Grossman et al. 2018, Buntaine et al. 2021, Golden & Sonnet 2021). This may be because some citizen requests are not sufficiently actionable for politicians (Grossman et al. 2018) or because politicians are unwilling or unable to reply. Understanding both which citizens communicate with politicians using new ICTs and under what conditions (or to whom) politicians respond is necessary for disentangling the distributional implications of complaint systems at a micro level and exploring the conditions under which they may improve service delivery.

In summary, providing constituency services is an important aspect of politicians' job duties and citizens' expectations of politicians. However, there is growing evidence that constituency services are provided in ways that can deepen societal inequalities due to patterns of selection into seeking such services or politicians' differential treatment of citizens. Understanding the conditions under which new information technologies lower the barriers to accessing constituency services may offer lessons on how to reduce inequalities in political access. However, we still lack the theory and evidence to determine when such complaint, inquiry, and reporting systems yield sustained improvements in service delivery more broadly. Future scholarship should focus on *when* governments choose to adopt these systems and characterize variation in citizens' usage of, and politicians' response to, citizen complaints.

DYAD 2: POLITICIANS AND BUREAUCRATS

When exploring how citizen preferences for public goods or services map onto outputs, it is important to consider the role of bureaucrats in producing these public goods and services, as the actions of bureaucrats impact politicians' ability to be responsive to citizen preferences. Several studies in economics, political science, and public administration have investigated the relationships between politicians and bureaucrats. In this section, we review evidence related to politicians' ability to select bureaucrats and incentivize them to exert more effort. We first distinguish between patronage and civil service systems. We then consider smaller personnel policies or reforms designed to elicit bureaucratic effort or improve bureaucratic selection. Then, as in the case of the citizen–politician dyad, we assess the day-to-day interactions between politicians and bureaucrats, emphasizing the political oversight of bureaucrats.

Personnel Systems: Civil Service Versus Patronage

Classic studies of the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians focus on politicians' power to hire and fire bureaucrats. All governments face the challenge of recruiting high-skilled workers into public service and motivating them to perform their duties well.

When politicians face few constraints in hiring bureaucrats, they may offer public jobs as a reward for support or loyalty. If these supporters' preferences are closer to those of the politician, the congruence of preferences between the politician and bureaucrat may limit ideological conflict



in policy making (Spenkuch et al. 2021). Moreover, if a politician can freely dismiss bureaucrats, prevent their promotion, or assign them to undesirable locations, bureaucrats may have greater incentives to exert effort. In addition, patronage may give bureaucrats access to material and non-material resources and may reduce politicians' monitoring costs due to higher levels of mutual trust (Toral 2021a).

Yet, giving politicians free range to hire, promote, demote, relocate, and fire bureaucrats comes with at least three types of costs. First, conditioning jobs on political support rather than expertise arguably reduces the bureaucracy's ability to handle the demands of complicated programs or services (Colonnelli et al. 2020) and can depress bureaucratic effort (Xu 2018). Second, political appointees generally have shorter time horizons, which may further limit the endogenous acquisition of bureaucratic expertise (Gailmard & Patty 2007). Further, higher-frequency (or a larger share of) government turnover can temporarily interrupt service delivery (Toral 2021b).

Studies have typically classified bureaucratic personnel systems as either (merit-based) civil service or patronage based. Civil service systems have (a) constraints on who may be hired as a bureaucrat (i.e., through the use of merit-based exams) and (b) limits on the removal of bureaucrats. Several studies focus on the adoption of civil service systems, which require politicians to relinquish some degree of control over the hiring and firing of bureaucrats (Geddes 1994).

Yet even countries with strong and enforced civil service protections generally have political appointees in high-level posts. In some civil service systems, politicians may adopt hiring practices—such as using contractors to fill public administration vacancies—to circumvent the insulating protections of the civil service (Pierskalla & Sacks 2020). Thus, in practice, most bureaucracies fall somewhere along a continuum between the two extremes.

How do attributes of the personnel system affect the delivery of public goods and services in developing countries? Again, the evidence is mixed. Dufflo et al. (2015) find that compared to permanent hires, contract teachers increased students' learning and test scores in Kenya. This, however, can reflect short-term gains. By contrast, consistent with other characterizations of Brazilian municipal governments as patronage laden (Colonnelli et al. 2020), Aktari et al. (2021) provide evidence that when Brazilian mayors were voted out, municipal schools experienced a higher turnover of teachers and headmasters, with an apparent reduction in test scores.

The structure of bureaucratic hiring may also influence how politicians choose to allocate funds to public goods and services. Using historical evidence from civil service reforms implemented in US states, Ujhelyi (2014) finds that relative to states without civil service systems, states that adopted civil service appropriated more funds to local governments, ostensibly to bypass reformed state bureaucracies. Civil service reforms may also discipline political budget cycles by constraining politicians' ability to expand public payrolls in preparation for elections. Bostashvili & Ujhelyi (2019) suggest that pre-election cycles of spending on infrastructure were eliminated after the adoption of civil service systems in US states. To the best of our knowledge, these dynamics have not been explored in the context of developing countries.

Personnel Policies Beyond Civil Service

Can reforms to personnel policies beyond civil service systems shape a bureaucracy's composition and public service outputs? The literature—which builds on a larger body of work on incentives in organizations (Ashraf & Bandiera 2018)—explores public sector remuneration schemes and various nonremunerative incentives that may affect bureaucratic quality via selection or effort.

Politicians can influence personnel policy by setting public sector wages and other (e.g., retirement) benefits in regular budgetary appropriations. Following Finan et al. (2017), three empirical patterns related to the public sector wage premium—the difference in average pay between the



public and private sectors—are of note. First, there is substantial cross-national variation in the public sector wage premium. Second, this premium decreases with per capita GDP: It is greatest in low-income countries. Third, within countries, the public sector premium decreases with education. We note that the logic of these political decisions remains undertheorized. In addition, it is hard to measure how public payrolls affect selection into the bureaucracy using macro-level data.

Dal Bó et al. (2013) conducted an experiment that involved randomizing the wages of Mexican community development agents. In line with theory, they find that higher wages increased the size and quality of the candidate pool. Similarly, highlighting career opportunities within the civil service increased the quality of recruits in a community health program in rural Zambia (Ashraf et al. 2020). A possible drawback of appealing to the extrinsic motivations of potential civil service candidates is a trade-off at the expense of intrinsic motivation. Here, the evidence is somewhat mixed. While Dal Bó et al. (2013) and Ashraf et al. (2020) detect no evidence of a trade-off between applicants' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, incentivized experiments in India by Hanna & Wang (2017) find that screening public servants based on ability may result in selecting individuals who are less prosocial.

Separately from interventions related to bureaucratic recruitment, changing bureaucrats' incentives—for instance, through pay-for-performance (P4P) programs—may induce them to work harder. Appealing to extrinsic motivations, these compensation schemes typically reward inputs (for example, the presence and conduct of public sector nurses and teachers). In addition to potentially eroding intrinsic motivation, a key concern is that P4P programs will lead bureaucrats to reallocate effort toward visible actions for which they are rewarded (Benabou & Tirole 2003). Existing evidence—from Rwanda (Leaver et al. 2021), China (Loyalka et al. 2019), and Uganda (Gilligan et al. 2021)—suggests that these concerns are not borne out and that P4P is a promising policy tool, at least in the education sector.

High-powered incentive schemes are not always feasible when pay scales are subject to strict civil service regulations with little room for performance pay. Khan et al. (2019) investigate an alternative incentive: whether performance-based postings to preferred jurisdictions can increase bureaucratic effort. They design a tournament mechanism in Pakistan in which tax collectors submitted their preferred assignments, and job postings were allocated on the basis of performance rank. This scheme dramatically increased the level of effort exerted: Tax collectors assigned to the tournament mechanism collected 30–41% more tax revenues than those in the control group. Future work could investigate using other (nonfinancial) incentives to increase civil servants' motivation, such as training (Banerjee et al. 2021) or increased managerial autonomy (Rasul & Rogger 2008), or using behavioral interventions—such as emphasizing the organizational mission (Khan 2021).

In summary, a bureaucracy's location on the continuum between a civil service system and a patronage system affects its delivery of public services and private benefits. However, wholesale reforms of bureaucracies are politically challenging [see Huber & Ting (2021), who theorize about politicians' incentives to implement civil service reforms]. Incremental personnel policies may also affect bureaucratic quality, bureaucrats' effort, or public service outputs. Compensation schemes, including both higher regular public sector wages and the use of higher-powered incentives when feasible, are tools through which politicians can seek to influence bureaucratic selection and effort. There is indeed growing evidence that personnel policies within civil service systems can affect bureaucrats' recruitment, effort expended, and outputs in ways that improve service delivery outcomes. Thus, studying how politicians decide whether to implement these schemes represents one important avenue for better incorporating politicians into the study of personnel policy and its consequences. To this end, the experimental studies we review generally involve collaboration



with a government partner. However, we know much less about when and why politicians pursue these types of personnel interventions or innovations outside the context of collaborative projects with researchers.

Bureaucratic Oversight by Politicians

Politicians can induce bureaucrats to increase their level of effort or to pursue the politicians' goals through monitoring and the associated threat of sanctions.³ The “bite” of oversight is likely a function of bureaucratic insulation from politicians, and we may expect its effect to be greatest where such insulation is more limited, often in low- and middle-income countries.

Programs and policies that increase politicians' monitoring of bureaucratic service providers suggest that this scrutiny may reduce corruption, increase effort, and ultimately promote better public service delivery. In a seminal study, Olken (2007) shows that top-down monitoring of bureaucrats reduced corruption in the execution of public works projects, though he argues that the mechanism was probably the threat of social sanctions against corrupt bureaucrats rather than a threat of legal actions. This and similar empirical findings are consistent with the idea that monitoring can bring bureaucratic behavior closer to the politician's ideal. These findings raise three important questions. First, what are the limits to politicians' oversight effectiveness? Second, under what conditions does political oversight yield better service provision than other outcomes (e.g., “kickbacks” to politicians, rent extraction, and negative selection into the bureaucracy)? Third, if monitoring is effective, why is it sometimes lacking?

Monitoring bureaucrats is generally assumed to be constrained by (a) time and monetary costs and (b) politicians' lower levels of expertise in specific policy areas. Recent experiments have directly manipulated these parameters. For example, Callen et al. (2020) and Dal Bó et al. (2021) show that mobile apps that reduced monitoring costs significantly reduced bureaucratic shirking of public health providers in Pakistan and of agriculture extension officers in Paraguay, respectively. Raffer (2020) examines a program designed to remedy disparities in politician and bureaucratic expertise by training Ugandan local councilors to monitor bureaucrats. She finds that such training increases monitoring effort and user satisfaction with service delivery, but only in constituencies controlled by the opposition party. This distinction between government- and opposition-controlled areas highlights the potential importance of politicians' objectives in influencing (a) when they choose to monitor bureaucrats and (b) the outcomes of this monitoring.

If monitoring impacts bureaucrats' behavior, what explains the variation in politicians' monitoring efforts? Gulzar & Pasquale (2017) argue, and find evidence in India, that politicians monitor bureaucrats to improve service delivery when they can claim credit for doing so. According to Raffer (2020), politicians are likely to monitor bureaucrats' performance as service providers only if they sufficiently value improvements in service delivery in their constituencies (which itself is a function of their district's competitiveness). Raffer contends that in ruling party stronghold areas, at least in the context of a dominant party regime, politicians fear that uncovering corruption will backfire, and thus they refrain from monitoring.

Collectively, these works suggest that political oversight of bureaucrats can change their behavior. Yet, monitoring an agent who is responsible for producing public goods can, in theory, either improve or worsen service delivery outcomes. Grossman & Hanlon (2014), for example, show formally that when an agent's opportunity costs are large enough, increased monitoring

³An emerging literature also examines the effects of oversight by horizontal accountability institutions such as courts or audit bodies (Wang 2021).



efforts can worsen the delivery of public goods by inducing high-skilled individuals to select out of public service. Pointing to a different mechanism, Brierley (2020) shows that politicians may use oversight authority to direct bureaucrats to extract rents.

Establishing a stronger evidence base regarding politician preferences for public goods provision is an important next step to understanding which forms of monitoring promote improved delivery of public goods and services. To the extent that service provision is a goal *because* citizens desire it, research considering how public service delivery enters politicians' objectives can provide greater clarity about the relationship between bureaucratic oversight and public goods and service outcomes.

In summary, while the recent literature has expanded our understanding of the effects of oversight, more work is needed to understand politicians' incentives and decisions about whether to create monitoring institutions. Recent theoretical and empirical scholarship rejects the idea that politicians always favor a more effective civil service. For example, Gottlieb (2020) argues that politicians' investments in bureaucratic capacity are endogenous to incumbents' electoral considerations. Other authors consider politicians' distributive considerations when designing oversight institutions (Slough 2021b). Finally, more work is needed on bureaucrats' strategic response to oversight. While much prior research assumes that additional monitoring increases the level of effort exerted, it may also cause (some) bureaucrats to transfer, or even exit the public sector (Grossman & Hanlon 2014). Future work should take these important considerations into account.

DYAD 3: BUREAUCRATS AND CITIZENS

In many settings, citizens' most common interface with the state occurs through routine interactions between citizens and frontline service providers. A growing literature focuses on bureaucratic responses to citizen requests for service and understanding when bureaucrats internalize citizen welfare to improve service provision.

When Do Bureaucrats Internalize Citizen Welfare?

An active recent literature explores two conditions under which frontline bureaucrats exert the necessary effort to deliver services to citizens. First, top-down oversight by politicians or bottom-up monitoring by citizens may induce bureaucrats—who are seeking promotion or retention—to internalize at least some citizen preferences related to service provision. Second, bureaucrats may prefer to serve some citizens over others, independent of oversight or citizen pressures. In this subsection we discuss recent work related to this second condition.

Much of the literature on bureaucratic bias, favoritism, and discrimination starts from assumptions about which citizens bureaucrats might wish to prioritize. For example, bureaucrats may mirror societal biases toward some (usually dominant) groups over others, or exhibit in-group favoritism, i.e., taste-based discrimination. The related emerging literature on bureaucratic embeddedness focuses on the consequences of bureaucrats' social environment.

Bureaucratic embeddedness refers to the social relationships that influence civil servants' preferences and behavior (Pepinsky et al. 2017, p. 258). The theoretical expectation is that, on average, bureaucrats are more likely to provide better services to those with whom they share identity markers. Xu (2021) shows that Indian districts with Indian (as opposed to British) district officers experienced fewer deaths during the flu pandemic of 1918 because they provided more relief to citizens, ostensibly a measure of bureaucratic effort. Embeddedness has been defined not only in terms of nationality, ethnicity, or race, but also based on home region. For example, Bhavnani



& Lee (2017) find that where Indian Administrative Service (IAS) bureaucrats serve in the state where they were born, local populations enjoy greater access to high school education.

Research has proposed at least three possible reasons why civil servants who are embedded in the communities they serve produce better policy outcomes (Pepinsky et al. 2017). First, bureaucrats may better serve coethnic/coregional citizens due to taste-based discrimination (Butler & Broockman 2011). Second, in-group members may be better equipped to socially sanction embedded bureaucrats who fail to sufficiently consider the welfare of the group they serve (Tsai 2007). Finally, it is possible that bureaucrats have lower information-gathering costs, superior local knowledge, or access to better technologies (including cultural cues) with which to serve in-group members (Evans 1995).

However, embedded bureaucrats could have negative effects on service provision, for instance if their local ties make them an easier target for elites seeking to capture the bureaucracy. Xu et al. (2020) test for possible negative effects of location-based embeddedness in India. Using unique data on bureaucrats' performance assessments, they find that embedded IAS bureaucrats performed worse than comparable officers who were allocated to nonhome states. In particular, embedded bureaucrats were more corrupt, less pro-poor, and less able to withstand illegitimate political pressure.

More theoretical and empirical work is needed to better understand the conditions under which embeddedness can be productively harnessed to improve service provision, perhaps through the assignment of bureaucrats to jurisdictions. Further research is also needed to clarify the influence of embeddedness relative to other sources of bureaucratic discrimination against individual citizens or groups. For example, in a rare middle-income-context audit experiment, Slough (2021c) finds evidence of bureaucratic discrimination by citizen socioeconomic class, but not by shared region—the proxy for embeddedness.

If bureaucratic embeddedness affects government performance and public goods provision, more research is needed to understand how governments allocate civil servants across the country's territory. If bureaucrats are assigned to familiar environments, they could use their informational advantage to better adapt to local conditions. Yet, they could also exploit this informational advantage for private gain. How politicians balance these trade-offs—and why the location of bureaucrats' assignments affects their performance differently in different contexts—remains understudied.

In summary, while increasing attention has been devoted to bureaucratic embeddedness, we highlight the need to examine a wider range of mechanisms that may drive disparities in bureaucrats' treatment of citizens, including but not limited to embeddedness. Developing alternative theories of bureaucratic preferences over constituents can help design policies that reduce the inequalities generated by bureaucratic discrimination. Such work on bureaucratic preferences may also help clarify the conditions under which embeddedness promotes or hampers service provision.

Citizen Oversight of Frontline Bureaucrats

Due to the growing recognition of the difficulties that citizens face in holding politicians to account (discussed above), a natural question arises: Can citizens pressure service providers directly to improve service provision? In a short route to accountability, better service provision is achieved through various forms of collective action, individual appeals, or other ways of exerting social pressure on bureaucrats (Kosack & Fung 2014). A growing number of programs have recently sought to increase the individual or collective capacity to exert bottom-up pressure on frontline service providers to improve services. Evaluations of these programs have yielded mixed results. In this section, we review these studies and point out several problems with their underlying theoretical assumptions.



Björkman & Svensson (2009) study community-based monitoring of frontline healthcare providers in rural Uganda. The intervention provided community members with report cards on health service outputs and facilitated community health facility meetings designed to strengthen the collective monitoring of service providers. The authors find greater healthcare utilization and reductions in child mortality in treatment communities (villages). However, three recent studies replicated Björkman & Svensson's (2009) approach in three countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, and report mixed results (Raffler et al. 2020, Arkedis et al. 2021, Christensen et al. 2021).

One way to reconcile these conflicting results is to develop more careful theory. Across the replication experiments, utilization due to improved perceptions of healthcare providers—as opposed to collective action—seems most likely to be driving any observed effects. However, it is still possible that the *prospect* of collective action drives the behavior of healthcare providers, even if it never materializes. In addition, this variation in findings may be driven mechanically by differences in health outcomes at baseline (Raffler et al. 2020) or by the structure of the service provision market.

Consider, for example, related interventions that focus only on information provision absent the community monitoring (collective action) components. On the one hand, Lieberman et al. (2014) find no evidence that informing parents in Kenya about their children's (relative) reading and numeracy skills changed citizen behavior, school services, or school outputs. On the other hand, Andrabi et al. (2017) find that a campaign that disseminated report cards on public and private schools in Pakistan to parents increased test scores and enrollment. However, they find no evidence that the improvements in educational outcomes were generated by additional parental effort. Instead, the improvements in service provision came about after public schools reduced teachers' break time due to fears that parents would exit the public school system. While parents became better informed, information campaigns—even when they resulted in improved service delivery outcomes—did not facilitate individual or collective action.⁴ In short, the threat of exit, rather than voice, seems to have been consequential.

There is a danger, in our view, in equating interventions that aim to exogenously increase citizen oversight of frontline bureaucrats with endogenous forms of community oversight. It stands to reason that if individual or collective oversight could increase the efforts of frontline service providers, individuals and communities would have already adopted this strategy. Indeed, Tsai (2007) and others demonstrate that various types of meso-level social organizations can play a role in improving service provision. Equilibrium levels of service provision—however good or bad—may respond to endogenously adopted citizen oversight practices. Exogenous shocks to citizen oversight may not shed light on the role of endogenous practices.

Recall that community monitoring is a public good (with diffuse benefits and concentrated costs) that may be subject to classic collective action problems (Banerjee et al. 2010). In addition, there is a growing recognition of the power and status asymmetry that makes citizens reluctant to confront frontline service providers, due to both low efficacy (Lieberman & Zhou 2021) and a fear of retribution (Kaawa-Mafigiri & Walakira 2017). We therefore caution that exogenous increases in levels of community monitoring may subside when encouragement from central governments or development agencies is removed (Mansuri & Rao 2012; though see Björkman Nyqvist et al. 2017).

⁴We also note the possible negative effects of such information campaigns, including making schools more selective in their admission requirements, teaching to the tests, and strategically excluding weaker students from taking standardized tests (Cilliers et al. 2021).



Moving forward, we encourage researchers to directly measure the barriers that keep communities from increasing the oversight of frontline service providers short of external encouragement. We suggest further consideration of the measurable implications of citizen oversight. In principle, bureaucratic effort (and thus service provision) may be sustained by the mere prospect of citizen oversight where service provision is poor. [Slough (2021c) focuses on this type of forward-looking behavior by frontline service providers as a driver of the unequal treatment of citizens.] If this is the case, it is hard to make assertions about the efficacy of citizen oversight of service providers, especially if we do not directly observe instances of collective action or complaint (as in Andrabi et al. 2017). Therefore, a better way of measuring perceived oversight (from the bureaucrat's perspective) or oversight potential (by citizens) may be important for characterizing this short route to accountability. Describing these dynamics also generally requires clearly describing an equilibrium and its empirical implications.

THE PATH FORWARD

There is much to be learned from studies of the three dyads that we presented above. However, we contend that considering interactions among all three actors in a single framework represents an important frontier in the study of government responsiveness and accountability in developing settings and beyond. Like the empirical literature we survey, the theoretical literature has generally emphasized dyadic interactions. Theoretical models that incorporate politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens (voters) are relatively rare, though developing such models represents an active current research agenda.

For example, Fox & Jordan (2011), Yazaki (2018), and Li et al. (2020) introduce models of electoral accountability that incorporate bureaucrats. Recent theories of service provision have considered citizen attempts to access government services. Ting (2021) introduces a novel framework to investigate the dynamics of service provision—the extent of policy benefits, investment administrative capacity, and program durability—that incorporates politicians as policy makers (principals), bureaucrats as service providers (agents), and citizens as service seekers. Slough (2021b) considers both the adoption and implications of bureaucratic oversight institutions. Her model incorporates information on citizen complaints as an input that affects whether politicians can address bureaucrats' moral hazard problems. She finds that relying on citizen complaints as “fire alarms” can have divergent impacts on the state's ability to implement a service in a population that varies in its propensity to complain.

We argue that more widespread consideration of interactions among citizens, politicians, and bureaucrats in the empirical literature has the potential to: (a) illuminate new mechanisms underlying (un)responsive governance, (b) reconcile some conflicting findings, and (c) inform the design of policy interventions designed to increase responsiveness. Key to these potential contributions is a more explicit acknowledgment of the equilibrium implications of these three-actor interactions. By focusing on the behavior of a single actor—or, at most, a dyad of actors—much of the literature offers partial equilibrium findings. In essence, dyadic analysis does not consider how the omitted actor may respond, or how that response may be reflected in the observed data. The arguably more complete three-actor models of political accountability and service provision generally produce more ambiguous predictions and subtler implications for many of the core outcomes of interest than the two-actor models that inspire much of the empirical literature we examine. By failing to consider other actors' behavior, theory suggests that we risk mischaracterizing the mechanisms at work and misinterpreting the (commonly mixed) empirical findings. These issues could even lead to ill-advised policy prescriptions or interventions. We outline several recent approaches to this challenge and highlight the benefits of considering all three actors.



New Mechanisms

Martin & Raffler (2021) propose a new explanation for the widespread observation of limited voter updating on politician performance information provided by recent empirical studies of electoral accountability. These authors suggest that because of politicians' reliance on bureaucrats to get things done, public goods outputs are noisy signals, so voters have limited ability to update on a politician's type based on performance information. Martin & Raffler (2021) test their framework using a factorial survey experiment in Uganda that varied the signal of performance (good or bad roads), the bureaucrat's level of power, and information that attributed responsibility to politicians or bureaucrats. The authors find that respondents' attribution of responsibility to the politician for road quality (and, correspondingly, hypothetical voting behavior) was attenuated when citizens were told that bureaucrats were responsible for implementation. While the theory considers only voters as strategic actors, these findings suggest that citizens, politicians, and bureaucrats are able to consider the dynamics of this three-actor accountability relationship. This study interjects a new mechanism—voters' collective attribution of responsibility to politicians or bureaucrats—into a large accountability literature that has traditionally focused more narrowly on voter–politician relations.

Reconciling Conflicting Findings

Building on our understanding of bureaucrats' role in accountability relations between voters and politicians, Slough (2021a) argues that when politicians and bureaucrats coproduce public goods, bureaucratic quality conditions the efficiency of politicians' public goods investments and thus their ability to signal their type to voters. Unlike Martin & Raffler (2021), Slough argues that strategic politicians anticipate voters' ability to infer a politician's type from the public goods signal and allocate funds to public goods (as opposed to rents) accordingly. This model yields four distinct equilibria that present at different levels of bureaucratic quality and have different observable implications. For example, a conventional account in which good and bad politicians take different actions with respect to funding public goods—the focus of much of the electoral accountability literature—emerges only at moderately low levels of bureaucratic quality. Reanalyzing work on accountability and corruption in Brazil, Slough (2021a) derives multiple tests of the model's predictions. The evidence she finds is consistent with the idea that distinct equilibria exist at different levels of municipal bureaucratic quality. This evidence is inconsistent with standard accounts that do not consider the bureaucracy and with those that assume voters are uninformed. The study's finding of multiple equilibria helps reconcile mixed evidence regarding the effects of information and accountability.

New Policy Implications

Slough (2021c) revisits studies of bureaucratic discrimination in the provision of public services. In these studies, citizen complaints about poor service provision increase politicians' oversight of bureaucrats. Anticipating the possibility of such oversight, bureaucrats provide better service *ex ante* to the citizens who are most likely to complain. Slough tests this mechanism—relative to existing alternatives—using an audit experiment conducted on a sample of local bureaucrats administering Colombia's two largest social service programs. She finds that bureaucrats were more likely to provide information to middle- than to lower-class citizens and similarly favored residents over internal migrants. However, this bias was only present for tasks for which politician oversight was most likely and for the more politicized of the two programs. The key insight is that the *potential*



for politician oversight in response to citizen complaints drives at least some bureaucratic biases. Slough (2021c) suggests that empowering (more) citizens to complain at lower cost can improve service provision and reduce inequalities stemming from bureaucratic discrimination. This implication is distinct from suggestions raised in prior research to alter bureaucratic selection or to increase oversight in order to reduce such discrimination.

Reorienting the study of responsiveness toward these three-actor interactions creates new opportunities and challenges for empirical research design. Doing so may motivate researchers to collect additional data in the field through interviews, surveys, or participant observation of additional classes of actors. These observations may help clarify the structure of interactions among bureaucrats, politicians, and citizens, which would enrich our understanding of the strategic underpinnings of responsiveness. Empirically, these more complex interactions, along with the questions we pose for each dyad, may present new challenges for the causal identification–driven research designs employed in most of the studies we reference. We see the potential for complementarities between descriptive and causal inference to characterize the theorized interactions, through the clear characterization of each exercise. We also advocate establishing closer connections between applied theory and empirical research.

SUMMARY

In this article, we reviewed the current body of work on government responsiveness in low- and middle-income countries, focusing on theory and evidence that can help explain variation in the provision of public services across space and groups. Following much of the existing literature, we organized our review around three distinct dyadic relationships involving politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens. We then presented a rationale for considering interactions between all three actors in a single framework to better characterize the foundations of government responsiveness. This emphasis on three-actor interactions calls for a tighter link between theory and empirics. In particular, differentiating equilibrium from partial equilibrium implications is useful for both theory and policy. It arguably better characterizes the nature of these interactions and is also important for designing and assessing new (or modified) interventions designed to improve the delivery of public goods and services in accordance with citizen preferences.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Carolina Torreblanca for expert research assistance and Kelley Friel for outstanding copyediting. For excellent comments, we thank Antonella Bandiera, Miriam Golden, Saad Gulzar, Dongil Lee, Eddy Malesky, Franklin Oduro, Dan Posner, Pia Raffer, Nico Ravanilla, Cyrus Samii, Renard Sexton, Jake Shapiro, Linda Stern, Guillermo Toral, and Erin York. Data analyzed in this article were collected by the Asian Barometer Project (2013–2016), which was codirected by Professors Fu Hu and Yun-han Chu and received major funding support from Taiwan's Ministry of Education, Academia Sinica, and National Taiwan University. The Asian Barometer Project Office (<http://www.asianbarometer.org>) is solely responsible for the data distribution. The authors appreciate the assistance in providing data by the institutes and individuals aforementioned. The views expressed herein are the authors' own.



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