

BOOK OUTLINE: “THE NEWS VOTERS USE: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ELECTORAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN MEXICO”

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Motivated by variable and often limited levels of electoral accountability in the Global South, this book project explores when elections promote good governance by analyzing citizen demand for and media production of politically-relevant local news. The strategic interplay between the short- and long-term factors affecting citizen demand for news and the incentives shaping the media’s supply of local news provides a holistic explanation for the types of indicators of government performance that shape voter efforts to hold municipal politicians to account in Mexico. Focusing on coverage of salient events like homicides and the release of reports documenting corruption, the results illustrate when and how news can shape accountability and incentives for good governance in a major democracy in the Global South.

I have been working on this project for the last few years, as completion was delayed by recently-concluded efforts to collect a vast corpus of online news stories—the final empirical task for the project. Around a third of the book is now written, and analysis for most parts of the book is complete. Once I write up the remaining chapters, the book will be structured as follows:

- Ch. 1 **Introduction.** I begin by laying out my research question, before then outlining the theoretical argument (and distinguishing it from prior work), motivating the selection of Mexican municipalities for in-depth quantitative case study, and describing the core empirical findings—and their broader implications.
- Ch. 2 **Theory.** I start by developing a formal theoretical framework that integrates demand for political news within networks of voters that vary in their incentives to be attentive to news and incentives for media outlets to produce politically-relevant local news, before examining the consequences for electoral accountability. On the demand side, I argue that voter demand for news is motivated by intrinsic interest in politics, which is partly produced by early-life experiences and vocational choices, as well as strategic incentives to signal political sophistication within social groups. On the supply side, media outlets choose the amount of local politically-relevant news to report to maximize their audience. Combined with a career concerns model where voters may or may not receive signals of incumbent party performance, I derive predictions for the demand and supply sides of information consumption, as well as voter beliefs and voting behavior in equilibrium. The following chapters tests these predictions.
- Ch. 3 **Empirical context.** This short chapter describes relevant features of Mexican municipalities. I provide an overview of the institutions of municipal government, citizen engagement with politics and news, media market structure, and the issues that define political debate. Of the three consistently most salient issues—crime, the economy, and corruption—the book focuses on crime and corruption. The chapter concludes by making the case for the broader relevance of the Mexican case.

- Ch. 4 **Voter demand for news.** I draw on experimental and quasi-experimental survey and Google Trends data to show that intrinsic interest—generated by education—and social pressures drive news consumption. I demonstrate that both motives increase news consumption before elections, and imply a simple typology of citizens defined by whether they persistently or transiently engage with politics.
- Ch. 5 **Media supply of news.** This chapter describes news coverage of homicides and malfeasance revelations. I further explore the determinants of such coverage by examining the role of persistent structure factors and temporal electoral incentives for media stations to serve different types of audience.
- Ch. 6 **News and voter beliefs.** This chapter leverages various sources of survey data, including some original data collected for this project, to examine how voters' issue concerns and confidence in incumbent politicians are affected by recent local homicides and the release of audit reports documenting incumbent malfeasance in office. The results show that citizen concerns about security respond primarily to recent homicides when they occur before elections, while the experimental provision of information about homicides and malfeasance causes voters—especially the least educated—to update their appraisals of their municipal governments.
- Ch. 7 **Electoral implications.** Bringing together the demand and supply side determinants of the voter news consumption equilibrium, and how voter beliefs respond to new information at the individual-level, this chapter presents the aggregate-level implications for election results. I show that local media coverage of homicide shocks and malfeasance revelations before elections significantly shape incumbent re-election prospects, while longer-term indicators of performance exert smaller effects—and primarily for the more educated voters that are persistently engaged.
- Ch. 8 **Consequences for political selection and citizen welfare.** This final empirical chapter explores the extent to which the electoral results described above influence the types of politicians elected and, ultimately, their performance in office. Leveraging a conjoint experiment, I show that receiving information about recent crime indicators reduces reliance on other—likely more informative—indicators of incumbent performance. Suggesting that this causes voters to select politicians less effectively, I find that politicians elected after pre-election homicides oversee worse economic outcomes.
- Ch. 9 **Conclusion.** The conclusion summarizes the core insights and findings, considers implications for democratic accountability in Mexico, and conducts exploratory empirical analyses that seek to generalize the findings to other contexts.