

Accountability within the Machine: A Proposal for a Pilot Study on Brokered Politics in Yucatan, Mexico

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Abstract

How are political brokers held accountable to politicians? Prominent recent theories of clientelism posit that a core problem for the operation of political machines is the difficulty that politicians have in monitoring broker performance. Political brokers are valuable because of their close ties to voters, but these relationships are inherently difficult to observe. We propose to pilot a field experiment in Yucatan state in Mexico, where we will deliver reliable information on broker standing in their community to politicians. We hypothesize that this information will induce politicians to increase monitoring of political intermediaries and incentivize brokers to exert greater effort. In sum, we will test whether increased information can enhance accountability of brokers to political machines.

Interactions with political intermediaries or brokers are a key feature of political life for a large proportion of citizens in democracies around the world. Brokers have been subject to rich ethnographic studies, but quantitative studies that directly study these actors are scant. In this research proposal, we propose a design to study a central aspect of clientelism: the chains of accountability that link brokers and political machines. Specifically, we propose to study how politicians sanction and incentivize political intermediaries by providing information to elected officials on broker’s standing in their local community.

This experiment would take place in the state of Yucatan in Mexico, a setting where clientelistic forms of mobilization are common. We take advantage of the existence of “comisarios” or “community representatives” which are officially recognized representatives which almost invariably function as political intermediaries between small communities and elected mayors. We leverage the rich survey data collected from citizens and brokers by Rizzo (2017) in 2016 to characterize how these figures are perceived by the residents they serve, as well as explore how these representatives perceive their own role in the life of the community. We propose building upon this existing survey data by reinterviewing the brokers that are the subject of this study, as well surveying the elected mayors that they frequently serve. This survey data, along with the experimental research design, will provide an unusual fine grained look into the micro-dynamics of brokered politics.

Ideally, we’d also survey citizens again, but unfortunately we don’t have the budget for this at the moment.

1 Theoretical Framework

Studies of clientelism or machine politics have long recognized the central importance of political intermediaries or *brokers* (Auyero 2001; Stokes 2005). These figures are the “street level bureaucrats” of clientelistic parties as they are the primary interface between voters and the party structure. Clientelistic parties depend on intermediaries for crucial work of electoral mobilization, distribution of particularistic goods, and fostering the relationships with voters necessary to effectively garner votes.

From the perspective of politicians, the most effective brokers are those who earn the loyalty and respect of the community in which they are embedded. This loyalty is earned from repeated interactions with the broker in the course of resolving community problems, bringing needed government benefits to residents, and facilitating collective action among community members to produce public goods. When Argentine brokers were asked to identify the most important factor in evaluating brokers in the Stokes et al. (2013, 124) survey, typical responses were “closeness to the people” and “presence with the people, listening to the people”.

The respect commanded by the broker is, of course, only useful to par-

ties in so far as it allows politicians to more efficiently generate votes during elections or facilitate governance in the electoral off season (Zarazaga 2014). Respected and informed brokers might be able to buy votes from citizens at a “discount” rate and some may be able to command votes on the basis of their prestige alone. Their knowledge about citizen preferences will help politicians better target voters, but also resolve local conflicts and even assist in service delivery (Krishna 2011; Read 2012). In sum, the strength of an intermediary’s ties to the community is the chief quality of interest when politicians assess the utility of employing any particular broker.

A challenge for politicians seeking to employ brokers is that this quality is difficult to observe (Stokes et al. 2013). Intermediaries have strong incentives to lie or exaggerate their popularity in their communities to gain access to more resources. Successful electoral mobilization may send a strong signal to higher level politicians on a broker’s mobilizational power (Larreguy 2013), but changes in their status over time may go undetected. A broker might shirk in their responsibilities or engage in excessive self-enrichment, thus losing credibility among citizens and sapping the party’s ability to mobilize votes on the next election day. This informational gap or “agency loss” is especially acute in between elections when there are no readily available metrics of broker performance for politicians to use to update their assessments.¹

The implications of this understanding of clientelistic networks is that politicians should be very interested in and responsive to information about brokers’ mobilizational capacity and network strength. If they detect that an aligned broker has poor standing in the community, they may demand greater effort from the broker or even replace her. For shirking brokers whose livelihoods depend on remaining in good standing with the party, increased transparency of their community standing should lead to greater effort at preserving or increasing their ability to command votes on election day. In other words, increased information can enhance accountability of the broker to the machine. This research design proposes an experiment to test this basic hypothesis.

2 Context

Local administration in Yucatan state is organized into municipalities headed by a mayor (*Presidente Municipal*), who is elected to a three year term. Historically, mayors were not eligible for re-election but a recent reform has

1. Of course, politicians may create tools or institutional structures to improve their ability to monitor broker behavior between elections. Stokes et al. (2013, 127) cite examples of party leaders in Argentina and Venezuela using sophisticated databases to track broker performance.

allowed mayors to stand for a second term starting in the 2018 elections.

Outside of the municipal seat, voters also choose community representatives (*comisarios*) which are officials selected outside the formal electoral system and have a quasi-official representative role. While the law stipulates that these community representatives must be elected, it does not specify precisely how they are to be elected, nor under what institutional parameters, with the exception that the election must occur shortly after the mayor takes office. As a result, the selection process of these representatives varies widely, ranging from formal elections with secret ballot to informal consultative processes. In practice, the newly elected mayor has a major influence on selection of these representatives. In some cases, the mayor *de facto* appoints the official. In most cases, however, local residents purposely choose a representative who has a good relationship with the mayor, as the representative acts as an intermediary between the community and municipal government, so a good relationship is critical for their effectiveness as a broker. In a small number of the cases, the community representative is an important political figure in their own right and are consequently less dependent on the mayor's favor for their position.

The official role of the community representative is vague², but in practice they generally function as intermediaries between the localities and the mayor. They help distribute social assistance programs and channel citizen demands to their local government. Given the importance of their political connection to the mayor, the allocation of social assistance programs and the meeting of citizen demands is often carried out according to a clientelistic or partisan logic to serve the political goals of the governing party. Because they are from the community, they are well positioned to generate the fine grained information on voter demands and preferences that are a critical part of any clientelistic machine. The role of the representative in clientelistic networks is supported by survey evidence. 85% of respondents in a sample of localities (described in more detail below) said that the community representative was an active member of a party and 65% stated that she carried out her duties in a particularistic and selective manner. When read a description of a political broker, about 44% of respondents said their community representative fit that category.³

2. According to the law governing the structure of municipalities in Yucatan, *comisarios* are tasked with "providing public services" and helping the municipal government "guarantee peace, security, and public order".

3. Respondents were read the following vignette:

Mariel is a person very well known in XX. She is an active member of a political party, but does not formally work in the government. Due to her contacts with the government, Mariel finds out about government benefits that come to the community. When they come, she only helps those who she wants to help. She is very active the whole year, but especially during electoral cam-

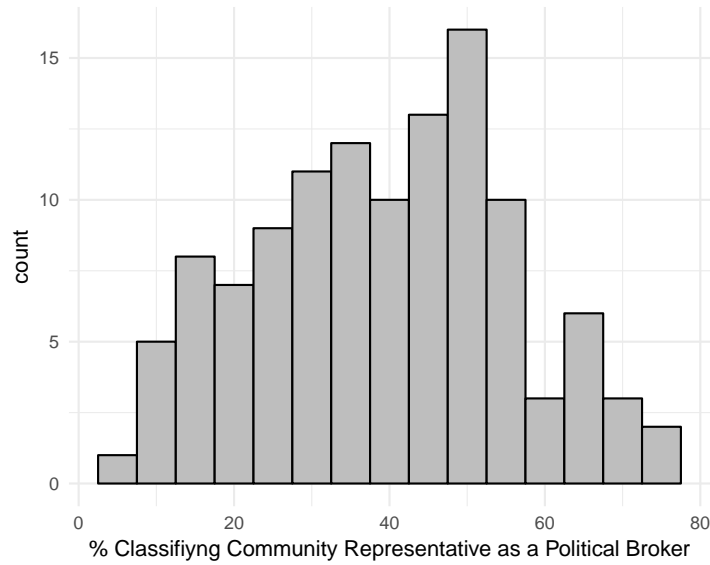


Figure 1: Variation in the Percent of Sampled Residents Classifying their Community Representative as a Political Broker

3 Research Design

The unit of randomization is the municipality, of which there are 50 eligible in our sample. The primary unit of measurement is the locality, which are small communities (median population of 955 residents) nested within municipalities. The informational basis for our treatment is data from the Rizzo (2017) survey, which sampled residents in 150 localities in the 69 municipalities (ranging between 1 and 8 localities per municipality).⁴

When multiple localities are available, we will select in each municipality the locality with the broker most frequently classified by local residents as closely connected to mayor’s party and who they perceive as engaging in political work on behalf of the mayor. The empirical distribution of how many respondents in each locality classify the mayor as a broker is depicted in Figure 1. By only choosing community representatives who many residents view as part of governing party’s political apparatus, we hope to avoid providing information about apolitical representatives who are not properly categorized as brokers.

A basic time-line of the project can be found in Figure 2.

paign seasons.

4. The Rizzo (2017) survey included 19 municipalities where only residents living in the municipal seat were sampled. Municipal seats do not have community representatives so are not eligible for our study.

Because we have data on several localities in most municipalities, we could provide information on multiple brokers per municipality. That, however, would introduce variation the number of brokers with performance metrics eligible to be delivered across so mayors. So for now we opt for the simpler approach of providing information on one broker per mayor.

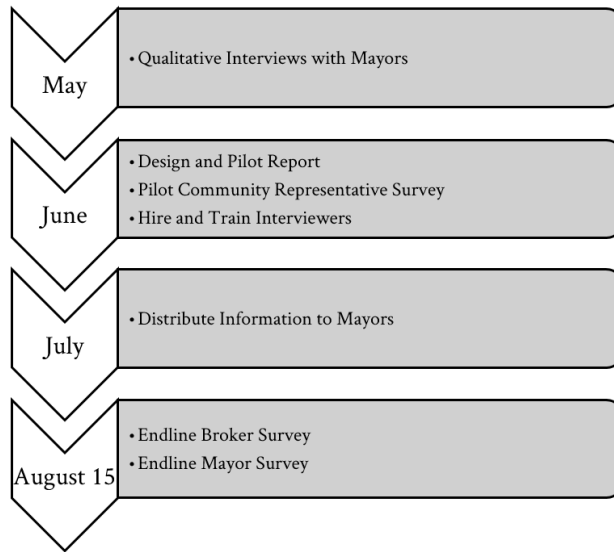


Figure 2: Timeline

3.1 Treatment

Our pilot intervention will randomly assign 25 mayors to the treatment condition and 25 to control. Treatment mayors will receive a personally-delivered report with sampled residents’ evaluations of their local broker. The report will detail voters’ views of their local broker on a variety of dimensions, including helpfulness, confidence, particularism, loyalty, and capacity to organize. The specific questions that measure voters evaluation of the brokers can be found in Table 1.

The data consists of interview data from 1,800 residents, with a minimum of 20 residents per locality. To construct performance measures, we will aggregate data to the locality-level. An example of this data is depicted in Figure 3, which shows variation in locality specific averages on respondents who give negative evaluations of the representative, respondents who report that they are not close at all to the representative, and respondents who have no confidence that the representative would help them make a government request. As evident in the figure, there is a great deal of variation across localities on these measures. Furthermore, the variables tend to be at least weakly correlated with each other, suggesting that they are capturing an underlying dimension of performance. While we will likely provide all question-specific averages to the mayor, we also will highlight an overall performance score that aggregates across all questions. By aggregating across measures, we hope to reduce measurement error and provide a more reliable indicator of community perceptions.

Even though we consider this to be a pilot, statistical power is still a real concern. If there were some way to randomize at the level of the locality, that would help, but within-municipality spillovers are likely. We do have reasonably good covariates to stratify on, which may help a bit.

At the risk of introducing a bundled treatment, we could also potentially include data on citizen’s views of the mayor.

Should we create an overall performance score using a data reduction technique? If so, how could we best communicate it?

Question

1. Would you say that you are very close, somewhat close, a little close, or not close at all with the community representative?
2. Have you personally sought help, advice, or support from the community representative for a problem?
3. Has the community representative visited you to inform you about what's happening in your community?
4. Has the community representative convened a meeting with the community to discuss problems that affect residents?
5. Would you say that you feel the obligation to support the community representative in case he needs it?
6. Do you feel loyalty towards the community representative out of appreciation for his help? If so, how much?
7. Would you say that the community representative only helps his friends and family or does he help everybody equally?
8. How much confidence do you have that the community representative would help you in making a government request in the future?
9. In general, how good a job do you think the community representative has done?

Questions 3 and 4 are not really directly related to capacity to mobilize, so probably should be dropped.

Table 1: Community Representative Evaluation Questions

[Details on Aggregation Incomplete]

A municipality-specific report and presentation will be prepared and personally delivered to mayors in all municipalities. All reports will include basic information about citizen satisfaction and policy views, but treatment mayors will be given additional information about broker performance. To the extent possible, we will encourage our deliverers to engage in a discussion with the mayors about the information to encourage reflection and comprehension.

Variation in the content of the information introduces treatment heterogeneity. Given our limited power, we plan to benchmark all brokers to the best performing broker in our sample. In characterizing broker performance in this way, we hope to prime most mayors to view the information as negative, since all brokers (except the top performer) would fall short. The hope is that this approach would reduce the heterogeneity in how the information is actually understood.

We will hire a graphics designer to design an attractive and intuitive presentation of the information. To enhance comprehension of the data, we will provide comparative benchmarks for all our indicators. In addition,

Ideas on how to deliver the data are welcome. We could potentially have an NGO deliver the information, or representatives of the local university.

We will be piloting the content of the information extensively prior to launch with mayors outside our study. The hope is that this piloting will identify the information that the mayors find most relevant and what an appropriate benchmark would be. So we are still very open to ideas on how to characterize the information, especially whether we should try to frame the information as negative. Any thoughts on how best to handle the heterogeneity in information content is welcome.

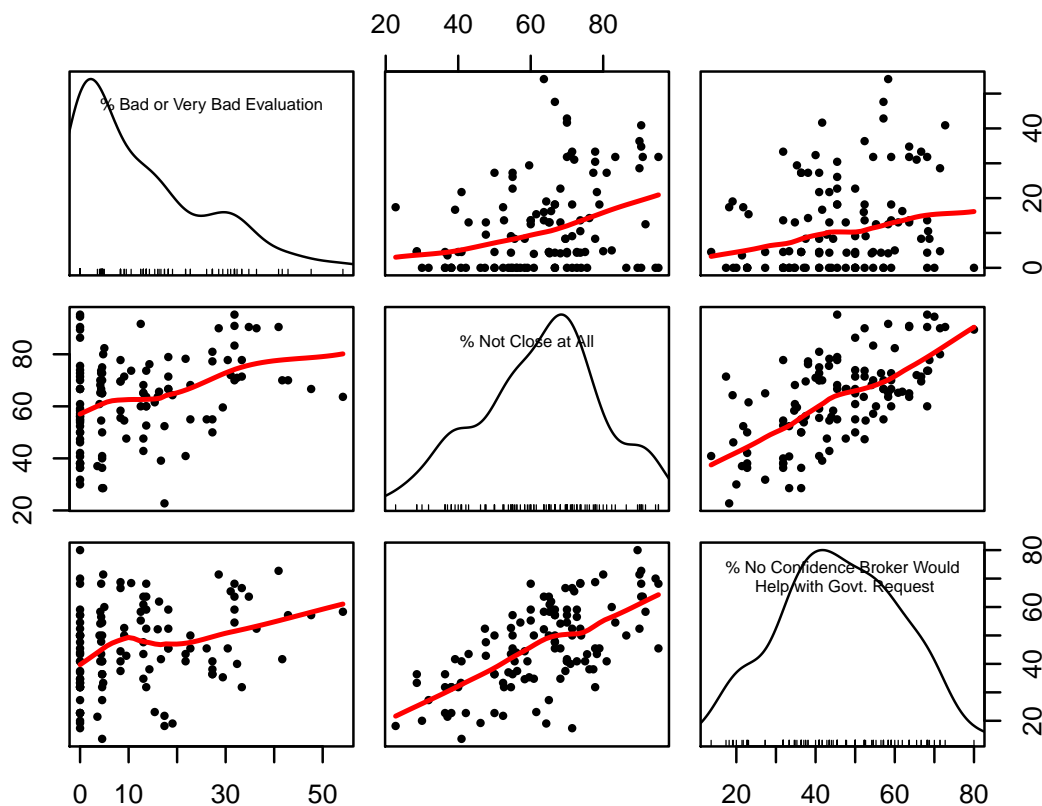


Figure 3: Performance Evaluation by Locality. Each panel shows the pairwise relationship between the two variables. Red lines are loess smoother estimates of the moving average. Density plots on the diagonal show the marginal distribution of each variable.

our messengers will verbally explain the contents of the report and answer any questions the mayor may have.

4 Conditions for Broker Accountability

For performance information to influence broker behavior, many conditions must be in place. At a minimum, the information we provide must be understood and processed by the mayor. It must also be credible, new, and relevant. Moreover, once relevance and novelty of the information is established, the mayor must believe that her actions can influence broker behavior in a way that benefits the mayor's interests. Finally, the mayor must

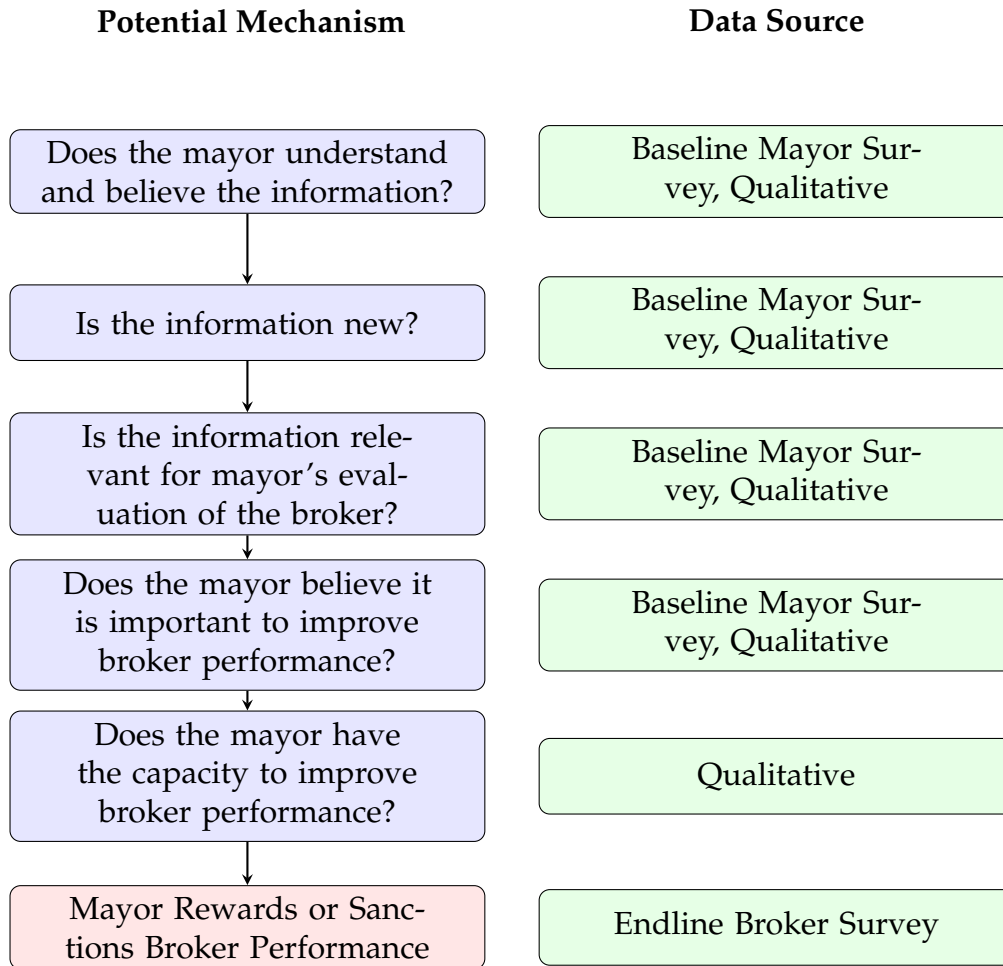


Figure 4: Conditions for Mayor-Broker Accountability

have means to take action. If any of these conditions are not satisfied, it is likely that information would have no effect on the ultimate outcome. We will provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence to test each link in the causal chain summarised in Figure 4.

Necessary Condition 1 Information about broker performance must be new.

Necessary Condition 2 Information about broker performance must be relevant to the mayor's political or policy goals.

Necessary Condition 3 The mayor must have the capacity to incentivize or sanction the broker.

If all the preceding conditions hold,

Hypothesis 1 Negative information should induce the mayor to take action to improve broker performance.

Hypothesis 2 The larger the gap between the broker's performance and the provided reference point, the higher the likelihood that the mayor will take action to improve broker performance.

Hypothesis 3 The more important the broker is to the political or policy goals of the mayor, the higher the likelihood that the mayor will take action to improve broker performance.

If mayors are interested and willing to act on performance measures of their locality representatives/brokers, and if the brokers' career interests depend on staying in the mayor's favor, we could argue that providing information about the machines' agents could ultimately influence broker's effort to perform and even to secure resources for their communities. Thus, as potential auxiliary hypotheses, we may obtain administrative data on social programs to examine whether treated brokers succeed in obtaining government benefits for their community.

5 Key Variables and Measurement

5.1 Independent Variables

- **treatment**: A binary variable indicating that information was delivered to the mayor of locality i .
- **performance**: A continuous measure of the intermediary's performance in locality i .
- **mayor_prior**: A survey-based measure of the mayor's perception of broker's performance.
- **performance_prior_gap**: A variable measuring the gap between the mayor's prior and the intermediary's performance.
- **copartisan**: Whether the mayor and intermediary belong to the same party.

5.2 Outcome Variables

Outcomes from Intermediary Survey

- **mayor_meet**: Number of times that the intermediary communicated with the mayor in the previous month.
- **govt_meet**: Number of times that the intermediary communicated official from the municipal government.

Theoretically, we should test heterogeneity by the gap between the prior and the performance measure. I worry that our measure of priors will be quite noisy, so we may want to use the absolute measure of performance. The other risk of directly measuring priors in the baseline is priming the mayors via our question.

Here we might use respondents' overall evaluation of the intermediary or any scale we develop using a data reduction technique.

- `mayor_relationship`: Intermediary’s self-reported assessment of closeness of the mayor.
- `citizen_help`: Number of citizens that the intermediary has reported assisting in obtaining a social service or dealing with a bureaucratic requirement in the previous week.
- `meeting`: Binary variable indicating that the intermediary organized a community meeting in the previous two weeks.
- `support_mayor`: Variable indicating whether the intermediary intends to support the mayor for re-election in 2018.
- `govt_resources`: Intermediary’s perception of the difficulty in extracting resources from the municipal government.

Outcomes from Administrative Data

- `social_programs`: Measure based on administrative data on number of applications for social programs that were submitted from residents of locality i after treatment assignment.

Outcomes from Post-Treatment Mayor Survey

- `broker_meet`: Number of times the mayor communicated with the intermediary in the previous month.
- `broker_relationship`: Mayor’s self-reported assessment of closeness to the broker.
- `mayor_posterior`: Mayor’s evaluation of the intermediary’s performance.

Demand effects could be a real problem for the survey of the mayor. Might not even be worth it.

Outcomes from Post-Treatment Bureaucrat Survey

- `bureaucrat_meet`: Number of times the bureaucrat communicated with the intermediary in the previous month.
- `bureaucrat_relationship`: Bureaucrat’s self-reported assessment of closeness to the broker.
- `bureaucrat_posterior`: Bureaucrat’s evaluation of the intermediary’s performance.

For a separate study, we are planning on surveying top level bureaucrats within the municipal administration. It is possible that in some municipalities, brokers will interact more with bureaucrats than the mayor himself. Our qualitative pre-testing will hopefully shed light on this.

5.3 Other Covariates

For blocking, we largely use data from our baseline broker survey conducted in 2016. These variables include self-reported brokerage effort in a variety of areas, evaluation of the mayor, experience, and previous interactions with politicians.

[Incomplete]

6 Analysis

[Incomplete]

7 Power Analysis

[Incomplete]

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