

Do Research Findings Influence Policy?

Experimental Evidence from 2,145 Brazilian Municipalities*

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Abstract

This paper investigates if research findings cause political leaders to enact policy change. To do so we use new types of experiments to measure elected heads of governments' (i) demand for research and (ii) policy responses to supply of research. Collaborating with the National Confederation of Brazilian Municipalities gave us access to a sample of 2,145 municipalities and the agents—mayors—who control their policies. In one experiment, we find that mayors are willing to pay to learn the results of impact evaluations; update their posterior over the expected impact of a policy in their own municipality in the “correct” direction if informed of research findings; and pay more for types of studies that subsequently affect their beliefs more. They value larger-sample studies more, while not distinguishing on average between studies in rich or poor countries. In a second experiment, we find that providing mayors with research findings indicating positive, cost-effective impact of a simple policy (reminder-letters for tax enforcement) increases the probability that mayors implement the policy in their own municipality by 10 percentage points. In sum, this paper’s results provide the first direct evidence that political leaders who (know that they) have access to academic research translate research findings into policy change. Our estimates suggest that, when research has limited impact on policy practice, information frictions can be an important part of the explanation.

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