

Processes like public comment periods, where government agencies must solicit public input on draft policies, are said to produce new technical information (Yackee 2006; Nelson and Yackee 2012), political oversight opportunities (Balla 1998; Mccubbins and Schwartz 1984), and democratic legitimacy (Croley 2003; Rosenbloom 2003). These various goals are evident in the Proposed Recommendation on Public Engagement in Rulemaking from the Administrative Conference of the United States, which asserts that “The opportunity for public engagement is vital to the rulemaking process, permitting agencies to obtain more comprehensive information, enhance the legitimacy and accountability of their decisions, and enhance public support for their rules” (ACUS 2018).

Yet we know surprisingly little about the vast majority of public comments (i.e., those submitted by ordinary people as part of public pressure campaigns) and the impact this kind of input may play in policy-making. As Sant’Ambrogio and Staszewski (2018) conclude, “The ‘mass comments’ occasionally submitted in great volume in highly salient rulemakings are one of the more vexing challenges facing agencies in recent years. These comments are typically the result of orchestrated campaigns by advocacy groups to persuade members or other like-minded individuals to express support for or opposition to an agency’s proposed rule.”

Civic engagement includes writing to government officials, signing petitions, attending hearings, attending protests, or donating to a political campaign (Verba and Nie 1987). Activists frequently target agency policymaking with letter-writing campaigns, petitions, protests, and mobilizing people to attend hearings. Mass comment campaigns are known to drive significant participation of ordinary people in Environmental Protection Agency rulemaking Potter (2017); Balla et al. (2018). Cuéllar (2005), who examines public input on three rules, finds that ordinary people made up the majority of commenters demonstrating “demand among the mass public for a seat at the table in the regulatory process”. Moore (2017) finds that the number of public comments varies across agencies and policy processes. Does this variation matter for policy outcomes?

Existing research finds that commenters believe their comments matter and that (Yackee 2015), and a correlation between comments and rule change in certain small samples (Shapiro 2008), but the relationship between the scale of public participation and policy change remains largely untested.

In this paper, I introduce a large new dataset of millions of public comments on agency rules and assess

mass comment campaigns’ impact on the rulemaking processes and outcomes. To assess the relationship between mass public participation and rule change, I outline four potential mechanisms by which public input may influence bureaucratic decisions. I find evidence consistent with the observable implications of mass comment campaigns influencing policymaking through [non-null results] but no evidence that mass engagement affects rulemaking processes or outcomes through [null results].

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