Abstract:

This paper examines how mobile internet expansion affects political trust across varying distances from Sub-Saharan African capitals. We combine Afrobarometer geocoded individual-level data across 20 Sub-Saharan countries between 2011-2021, with high-resolution digital maps of mobile internet coverage from the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA). Our identification strategy employs two approaches. First, we estimate the effect of capital city distance on political trust using a border discontinuity design that exploits colonial boundaries - which became modern national borders - that arbitrarily divided historical ethnic homelands. These arbitrary divisions created quasi-random national affiliations in border regions, generating sharp variations in citizens’ distances from their respective national capital. This design enables us to compare individuals from the same ethnic group who, due to colonial boundaries, live at different distances from their capital cities. Second, we estimate the effect of internet coverage across varying distances from the capital city. We use an instrumental variable approach exploiting the lightning strike patterns. Areas with frequent lightning strikes have higher costs for internet infrastructure deployment and maintenance, while these weather patterns are plausibly exogenous to political trust. We demonstrate three main results about how distance and information access shape political trust. First, remote areas show 27% higher political trust relative to the unconditional standard deviation. This effect is robust to our border discontinuity design, suggesting it reflects genuine spatial patterns rather than ethnic or regional differences. Second, the interaction between distance and internet coverage is strongly negative, indicating that digital connectivity has its largest trust-reducing effects in previously high-trust remote areas. Third, we find evidence that this reduction in trust reflects increased political accountability rather than general disillusionment through two channels: (a) citizens in remote areas with internet access become more critical in their assessment of the country’s economic performance, and (b) they show greater willingness to sanction the ruling party through voting.