# Can information improve rural governance and service delivery? – Kosek and Wantchekon, 2018 - World Development

* Rural areas present logistical challenges due to their remoteness that can make government accountability and service delivery especially challenging and tenuous.
  + They are often less economically integrated, public services are delivered in an environment with both poor information among service providers about the demands of service user, and poor information among service users about the mandates and capabilities of service providers.
  + In such an environment, policymakers may use information asymmetries to their advantage, to the detriment or rural citizen’s welfare (Olken, Banerjee, Hanna & Kyle, 2018). Especially when levels of education and political engagement of the citizenry are relatively low (common feature in rural settings).
  + Despite these challenges, unskilled workers have a much higher valuation of government services than do more skilled workers (Serrato & Wingender, 2014).
* When citizens have information, they can better articulate their policy priorities and provide electoral support for good governance more broadly (Wantchekon, Lopez-Moctezuma, Fujiwara & Lero, 2015; Wantchekon, 2017).
* In rural, developing county settings, simultaneously bringing together relevance, power, and incentives may be especially challenging due to low capacity to receive, understand and act on information. However, the payoffs of doing so in such setting might be largest.

# Greater Expectations: A Field Experiment to Improve Accountability in Mali – Gottlieb, 2016 - American Journal of Political Science

* There is a consensus in the theoretical literature that information about government performance is a necessary condition for political accountability (Barro 1973, Besley 2006, Ferejohn 1986).
  + When voters are uncertain about the actions of their politicians good performers cannot guarantee reelection, so it is harder for voters to motivate them to perform well or respond to their interests. It is thus puzzling why some recent attemps to increase voter information have failed to improve politician accountability (Banerjee, Green et al. 2010; Chong et al. 2012; de Figueiredo, Hidalgo, and Kasahara 2011; Lieberman, Posner, and Tsai 2014).
    - Performance information is not sufficient, voters also requires an appropriate reference point.
  + Due to low levels of civic education and poor access to credible media outlets, the information necessary to construct such reference point is lacking in developing countries.
  + Voters in developing democracies will hold politicians to low performance standards and fail to sanction poor performance at election time, providing insufficient incentives for political accountability.
* Low voter expectations of politicians have negative implications for both government accountability and the democratic system itself.
  + When the public has little esteem not only for individual politicians but also for the democratic system, citizens fail to defend their democracy from autocratic takeover.

# Determinants of institutional trust: the role of cultural context – Andriani and Kaasa, 2022 – Journal of Institutional Economics

Institutional trust plays an important role in economic growth (Hwang, 2017; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Sumanjeet, 2015). If government is perceived as trustworthy and is believed to enforce the law, assure property rights and keep tax legislation stable, then more investment and other economic activity can be expected (Knack and Keefer, 1997). Institutional trust is essential in the governance of a modern state since enabling citizens to accept government authority supports the legitimacy, effective functioning and stability of democratic systems (Hooghe et al., 2015; Mishler and Rose, 2005),

In her influential work, Cairncross (1997) predicted that the digital revolution would bring about "the death of distance," fundamentally transforming how information flows across space.

*As captured by a Central African Republic official’s observation that “The State stops at PK12, twelve kilometers from the capital, Bangui,” this sharp decline in state presence with distance from capitals creates distinct environments for how citizens engage with and evaluate their governments.*

*%However, the extent to which this potential is realized likely depends on several important scope conditions. First, given that Sub-Saharan African democracies often exhibit clientelist tendencies characterized by regional and ethnic favoritism from ruling governments, information access may not be sufficient to enhance accountability \citep{franck2012does, hodler2014regional, kramon2016ethnic, de2018ethnic}. Second, the strategic responses of entrenched elites to this changing informational landscape can critically shape its equilibrium impact; in some cases, threatened insiders may try to capture the functioning of these new information flows or the deployment of its infrastructure to preserve their advantages \citep{chenInformationManipulationReform2017, morozov2012net}. Finally, the quality and reliability of the information supplied through these new digital channels is crucial; if mobile internet facilitates misinformation and manipulation \citep{cariolle2024misinformation, vanzoonenTrustVerifyExamining2024}, it could actually undermine rather than strengthen accountability linkages.\footnote{ While our identification strategy addresses the first two concerns (see below and section XXX), the latter remains beyond the scope of this paper, as we discuss in section YYY.}*

The relationship between citizens and state institutions fundamentally shapes political accountability and democratic governance. A growing body of literature highlights a puzzling phenomenon in political behavior: citizens' evaluations of government performance often diverge significantly from objective measures of state effectiveness \citep{blandPublicServicesGeography2023, brinkerhoffDistanceServicesCitizen2018, mckayWhatGeographyTrust2023}. Studies have shown that higher approval ratings for leaders and governments don’t necessarily correlate with better public service delivery, economic outcomes, or institutional performance \citep{guriev3GINTERNETCONFIDENCE, provenzanoAccountabilityFailureIsolated2024, brinkerhoffDistanceServicesCitizen2018}. This disconnect between perceived and actual performance raises important questions about how citizens form and maintain their political assessments and its implications for democratic accountability.

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In this paper, we document a striking pattern in Sub-Saharan Africa that adds a spatial dimension to this puzzle: the emergence of two contrasting equilibria in citizens’ perceptions of government performance. In areas close to the capital centers, where state presence is strongest and citizens have regular interactions with national institutions, people maintain predominantly negative views of government performance. In stark contrast, citizens in remote areas, who have limited exposure to state institutions and reduced engagement with national politics, consistently report more positive assessments. This spatial divergence in political perceptions challenges conventional wisdom about how citizens evaluate their governments and raises fundamental questions about the role of information and exposure in shaping political attitudes.

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These contrasting equilibria in political perceptions raise fundamental questions about the mechanisms that maintain them and their implications for democratic accountability. Near capitals, frequent interaction with state institutions creates informed discontent – citizens directly observe government inefficiencies, bureaucratic failures, and service delivery shortcomings. Their proximity enables them to compare actual performance against promised outcomes, leading to more critical assessments. Meanwhile, in remote areas, limited state presence and high information costs create a different dynamic. Citizens’ detachment from national politics manifests as rational inattention – with infrequent exposure to state institutions, they have neither the tools nor incentives to evaluate government performance critically. This spatial pattern adds a new dimension to our understanding of the disconnect between government performance and citizen evaluation, suggesting that physical and informational distance might preserve positive perceptions despite poor governance. If information barriers maintain these spatial equilibria, then large-scale changes in information access should disrupt these established patterns of political perception and engagement.

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We exploit the rapid expansion of mobile internet across Sub-Saharan Africa – from virtually no access in 2010 to 40\% coverage by 2021\footnote{\href{https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-for-development/region/sub-saharan-africa-region/new-insights-on-mobile-internet-connectivity-in-sub-saharan-africa/\#\_ftn1}{GSMA 2023 report}} – to test the stability of these equilibria

and examine whether better information access can bridge the gap between perceived and actual government performance. By reducing information costs, internet could disrupt both mechanisms: enhancing citizens’ ability to monitor government performance in remote areas while increasing their exposure to political discourse. However, the persistence of these spatial equilibria may depend on deeper structural factors beyond information access, including clientelist networks, entrenched elite interests, and the fundamental relationship between citizens and the state across space.

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To investigate how mobile internet affects these spatial patterns in political perceptions, we combine geocoded individual-level data from Afrobarometer across 20 Sub-Saharan countries between 2011 – 2021, providing over 98,235 individual respondents’ observations, 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, to estimate the effect of capital city distance on political perceptions, we implement a border discontinuity design that exploits colonial boundaries – which became modern national borders – that arbitrarily divided historical ethnic homelands. This design enables us to compare individuals from the same ethnic group whose communities were partitioned by colonial boundaries, resulting in different distances from their respective capital cities. Second, to examine whether mobile internet expansion disrupts spatial disparities in political perceptions, we estimate the interaction between distance to capital and internet coverage, instrumenting the latter using lightning strike patterns. This strategy exploits the fact that areas with frequent lightning strikes have higher costs for internet infrastructure deployment and maintenance, while these weather patterns are plausibly exogenous to political attitudes.

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We demonstrate three main results about how distance and information access shape political perceptions and engagement. First, remote areas show significantly more positive assessments of government performance relative to areas near capitals. 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, revealing a \textit{death of distance} effect: mobile internet appears to erase the spatial divide in political perceptions by bringing previously disconnected remote areas closer to the more critical assessments found near capitals. Third, we find evidence that increased access to information through mobile internet leads to greater political engagement 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.

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We contribute to several strands of literature. First, we contribute to the literature on the geography of trust by providing evidence of how distance shapes citizens' political trust. While prior work documents how institutional trust varies with distance from administrative centers \citep{brinkerhoffDistanceServicesCitizen2018, blandPublicServicesGeography2023, li2004political} and tends to be higher in rural areas \citep{mckayWhatGeographyTrust2023, li2004political}, we isolate the role of information frictions through the expansion of mobile internet. Our findings demonstrate that when mobile internet expansion reduces these frictions, remote populations' high political trust declines toward levels observed near capitals - suggesting information barriers, rather than other rural-urban differences, drive the spatial trust gradient. We advance this literature methodologically by employing a border discontinuity design that allows us to compare individuals from the same ethnic group across borders, isolating the effect of distance from confounding cultural and geographical factors.

Second, we extend the political economy literature on capital cities \citep{herbst2000states} by showing how their strategic placement affects not just corruption \citep{campante2014isolated} and conflict risk \citep{campante2019capital}, but also patterns of citizens' political trust and democratic engagement. Our border discontinuity design complements \cite{michalopoulos2014national} finding that national institutions' effects weaken with distance from capitals. We reveal how this institutional gradient creates systematic variations in how citizens develop political trust, with implications for democratic accountability \citep{provenzanoAccountabilityFailureIsolated2024, gottliebGreaterExpectationsField2016}, service provision \citep{asherCostDistanceGeography, blandPublicServicesGeography2023}, and state capacity \citep{pierskallaOrderDistanceLocal2017, muller-creponStateReachDevelopment2023a}. Our instrumental variables approach using lightning strikes builds on recent methodological strategies \citep{manacorda2020liberation, guriev3GINTERNETCONFIDENCE} to address endogeneity concerns in information infrastructure placement.

Third, we contribute to research on internet's role in governance by examining how connectivity reshapes spatial patterns of accountability. While studies show internet access can reduce governance satisfaction \citep{guriev3GINTERNETCONFIDENCE, cariolle2024misinformation, chongDoesCorruptionInformation2015}, increase political mobilization \citep{manacorda2020liberation, fergusson2019facebook, enikolopov2020social}, and strengthen electoral accountability \citep{donati2023mobile, bhandariAbleMostlyWilling2023, miner2015}, we demonstrate that its effects on political trust and accountability vary systematically with distance from capitals. This spatial heterogeneity adds a new dimension to our understanding of when information enhances accountability \citep{dunning2019, kosecCanInformationImprove2020}, suggesting that mobile internet expansion potential depends on pre-existing spatial patterns of state presence and citizen engagement. We also highlight potential risks, as demonstrated by recent work showing how internet access can facilitate misinformation \citep{cariolle2024misinformation, vanzoonenTrustVerifyExamining2024} and erode national identity \citep{choi2023mobile}.

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 This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the data, the empirical strategy, and our three results. Section 3 discusses the results and provides other insight into the effect of the internet in remote areas, and section 4 concludes.