

Squeaky Wheels Driving Inequality in Bureaucratic Service Provision

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“Who gets what” from the state

Accounts of distributive politics focused on:

- **Politicians** who make policy, allocate funds
- **Voters/citizens** who shape politician incentives

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- Omitted actor: **bureaucrats** who “produce public goods”

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This paper: Under what conditions do **bureaucrats’ actions** generate inequalities in the provision of public services?

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Theory: A model of service underprovision

- 3 mechanisms drive inequality in bureaucratic administration of services

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Research design: National-scale phone audit of two Colombian social programs

- In collaboration with national government agencies
- Factorial design varies attributes of petitioners, petitions

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Research design: National-scale phone audit of two Colombian social programs

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Results: Bias against lower- relative to lower-middle class petitioners

- ...*only* where oversight by the principal is likely
- ...*increases* in municipal poverty (inequality)

Three mechanisms bureaucratic bias/discrimination

The obvious: bureaucrats prefer to serve some citizens more than others

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Politician's taste- and complaint-driven mechanisms occur due to **oversight** of bureaucrat

Theory and Research Design

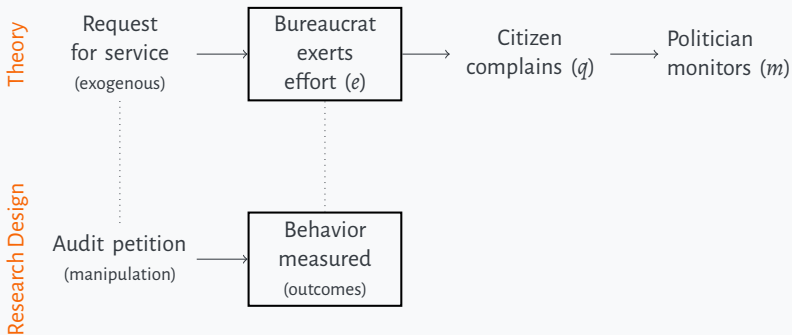
Audit experiment to measure **bureaucratic effort**

- Treatment effects measure bureaucratic bias/discrimination
- Experimental and observational variation provides suggestive tests of mechanism

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Audited programs



Sistema de Identificación de
Potenciales Beneficiarios de Programas Sociales

- **Means testing** system for social programs
- **Politicized** (Camacho and Conover, 2014)
- ≥ 1 bureaucrat/municipality
- In collaboration with DNP, DAFP



- **Conditional cash transfer** (CCT)
- **Not** politicized (de la O, 2015)
- ≥ 1 bureaucrat/municipality
- In collaboration with Prosperidad Social

Implementation

12 confederates (**actresses**)

- Exploit within-petitioner variation

Rented a call center in Bogotá in 2018

- Record all calls

Confederates filled out survey after every call

Later double entered by Colombian RAs



Manipulation #1 (of 4): socioeconomic class

Socioeconomic Class

At the national level...

- Lower refers to lowest \approx 40 percent
- Lower-middle refers to next \approx 35 percent

Class

→ Lower

→ Lower-Middle

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Communication of class by phone:

- Salutations of figures of authority
- Vocabulary used
- Way of presenting petition
- *Identical statement of petition*

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Double coder compliance rate: 78%

Rates of complaint positively correlated with class in:

- Aggregate administrative data
- Public opinion surveys (in absolute and relative terms)

Manipulation #2 (of 4): question difficulty

Difficulty of Question

- Class
 - Lower
 - Lower-Middle
- **Petition Difficulty**
 - Easy/Registration
 - Technical

Developed with government partners

- From training manuals for new hires
- Partners defined benchmark answers

Easy version:

- "... how to enter SISBÉN/MFA"

Technical version:

- SISBÉN: "... how to lower SISBÉN score to access a program"
- MFA: "... how to change designated parent/guardian of an enrolled child"

Double coder compliance rate: 99%

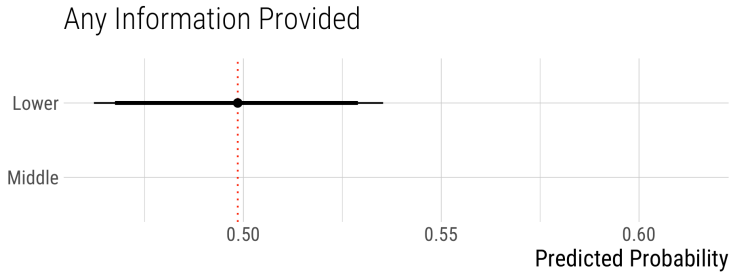
Pre-specified outcomes

Access to local government officials (in the *alcaldía*)

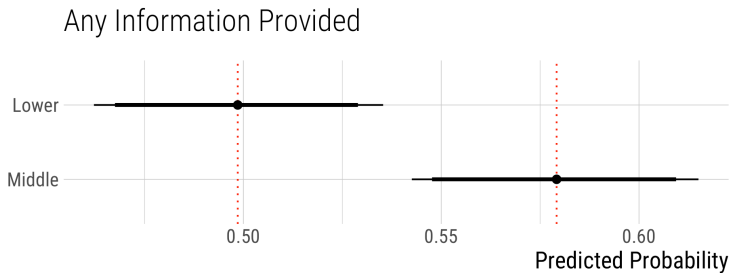
Information provided in response:

- Complete, correct response
- Partial response
- *Any information provided*
- “Just come in” (*alcaldía* only)
- Red tape (extra requirements)

Bias in information provision

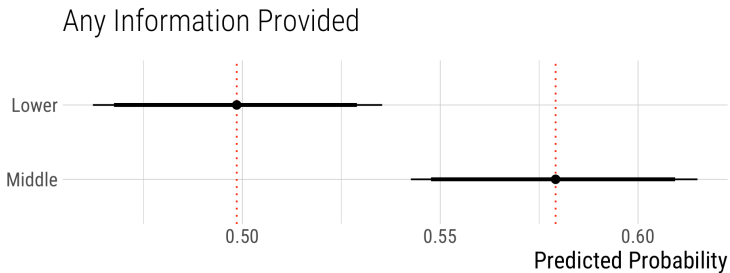


Bias in information provision



$L \rightarrow M \rightsquigarrow \uparrow 8.1 \text{ p.p.}, p < 0.005$

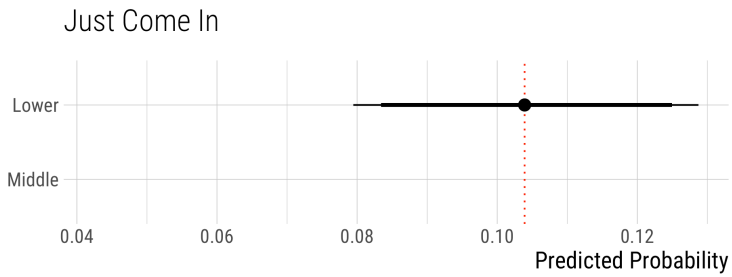
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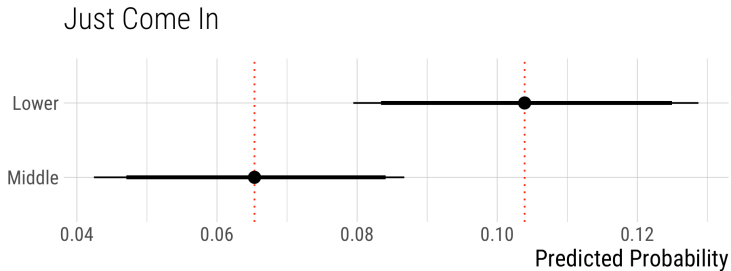
$$L \rightarrow M \rightsquigarrow \uparrow 8.1 \text{ p.p.}, p < 0.005$$

Lower class petitioners receive **less information** than lower-middle class petitioners.

Bias in information provision

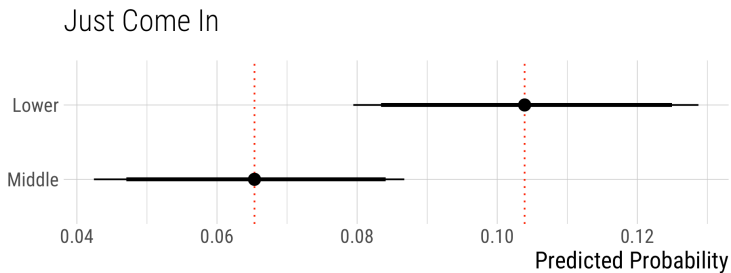


Bias in information provision



$L \rightarrow M \rightsquigarrow \downarrow 3.9 \text{ p.p.}, p = 0.025$

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Difference in **just come in** response is less than anti-lower class bias in information provision.

Heterogeneity and Mechanisms: Step #1

Decompose **bureaucratic taste**-driven bias from **oversight-driven** bias

Two proxies for costs to the politician:

- **Politicization** of program: SISBÉN < MFA → observational
- **Ease of petition**: easy < technical petition → experimental

Finding: Suggestive evidence of **oversight-driven bias**:

- Bias attenuated to zero for MFA and on technical petitions
- Measured bias comes from SISBÉN petitions and easy petitions

Heterogeneity and Mechanisms: Step #2

Decompose **politician taste**-driven from **complaint-driven** mechanisms

Leverage **relative** position of lower and lower-middle class profiles within municipality. In poorer municipalities:

- Median voter is poor
- Greater differences in status between lower and lower-middle class profiles

Finding: Bureaucratic bias driven by **poorer municipalities** where status differentials are largest. Attenuated to zero in richer municipalities.

Implications

Access to state services:

- Estimates reflect a lower bound on inequalities in access
- Theory: endogenous (costly) requests for service
- Design: well-formulated questions across all petitioners

Implications

Access to state services

Design of **social policy**:

- Latin American social policy to 100m+ new beneficiaries (Garay, 2016; de la O, 2015)
- Inequalities arise in **administration**
- Challenge for program design

Implications

Access to state services

Design of **social policy**

For study of **inequality**:

- Socioeconomic and political inequality mutually reinforcing
- Mechanism: interaction with bureaucracy
- Undermines state's ability to combat socioeconomic inequality
- New rationale for “inequality traps”

Thank you! Comments are welcome!

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