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Julien Labonne - Making Policies Matter: Voter Responses to Campaign Promises

The paper (with Cesi Cruz, Phil Keefer, and Julien Labonne) provides evidence of rational use of sophisticated electoral information in a context where clientelistic ties and vote buying are pervasive. We elicit multidimensional campaign promises from candidates in multiple mayoral races in the Philippines for two consecutive elections. Information about these campaign promises is then randomly assigned to voters, who are shown to incorporate it into their beliefs and vote choices.

Treated voters assess individual candidates in a way consistent with rational updating along both policy and valence dimensions. Voters who receive information about current platforms use it in their vote choice. Voters who receive information about current and past promises, and therefore can compare past promises to past actions for incumbents, reward incumbents who fulfilled them, as voters perceive them to be more honest and competent. Voters with clientelistic ties to one of the candidates do not respond to the informational treatments. Leveraging our structural model estimates, we present quantitative counterfactuals of clean elections absent vote buying and of optimal campaign announcements. Implications for elections in less than consolidated democracies are discussed.