



Electoral impacts of uncovering public school quality: Evidence from Brazilian municipalities[☆]

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Abstract

Sistemas de school accountability que estabelecem a adoção de incentivos para professores e gestores geralmente impactam positivamente o desempenho dos alunos. No entanto, em muitas circunstâncias, sistemas de school accountability podem enfrentar restrições institucionais para estabelecer recompensas e sanções para os administradores. Nesse aspecto, o sistema brasileiro de school accountability é um exemplo interessante: a maioria das escolas públicas com primário são administradas por funcionários municipais e o governo federal não pode impor a adoção de incentivos ao nível local. Entretanto, devido ao fato de os prefeitos dos municípios brasileiros serem os principais responsáveis pela educação primária pública, evidencia-se nas eleições locais de 2008, apenas alguns meses após a publicação da segunda onda de uma nova avaliação das escolas públicas pelo governo federal, prefeitos tornaram-se eleitoralmente responsáveis por não melhorar a qualidade da escola. Os resultados mostram que, em média, um aumento de um ponto em um índice de escala 0-10 entre 2005 e 2007 aumentou cerca de 5 pontos percentuais a probabilidade de reeleição dos prefeitos. Este efeito é ainda maior em localidades com menor renda per capita e aquelas em que a fração de crianças em idade escolar é maior. Portanto, a responsabilização eleitoral pode desempenhar um papel complementar em sistemas de school accountability, algo que ainda não foi totalmente explorado pelas literaturas de educação, economia política e ciência política.

JEL classification: H11; I21; I28

Keywords: Educação pública; Sistemas de responsabilização escolar e eleitoral; Eleições para reeleição de prefeitos

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1. Introduction

It is now a well-established fact in the empirical education literature that unobserved school quality plays an important role in explaining learning gains for elementary school pupils (Hanushek, 2005). As a result, parental school choices cannot be fully informed, since schools will likely differ in unobserved quality. In many countries, however, parents of children in public schools have benefited from the implementation of a school accountability system (SAS) that, among

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other goals, establishes learning targets, runs assessments and publicizes school performances, decreasing therefore the uncertainty on public school quality.¹ A SAS is usually called ‘strong’ if it additionally adopts incentives (rewards and/or punishments) for teachers and school principals as a function of the school performance on assessment tests (Carnoy and Loeb, 2002). According to Hanushek and Raymond (2002), a strong SAS tends to have larger impacts on students’ performance than a weak one,² especially in contexts where there are students’ mobility restrictions that create local monopolies for public schools.

Even under a weak SAS, there exist other channels for rewarding and punishing school managers. The Brazilian SAS is an interesting case: most of elementary public schools are run by municipal officials and federal government cannot enforce the adoption of incentives at local level. However, elected mayors of Brazilian municipalities are the ultimate responsible for public elementary education and they can, in principle, be electorally accountable for the relative poor performance of the municipal school system.

In this paper, we provide evidence that in 2008 local elections, which occurred just after the publication of the evaluation of public schools by the federal government, mayors became electorally accountable for not improving school quality during the four years of their mandates. The results show that, on average, one point increase in a 0–10 scale index from 2005 to 2007 increased by around 5% points the probability of mayoral reelection. This effect is even greater in localities with lower per capita income (higher demand for public education) and those where the fraction of children at school age is larger.

The electoral accountability channel, that we show is useful in practice in reinforcing the Brazilian SAS, in theory does not always produce positive effects on the quality of the public good being delivered. Besley and Smart (2007) present a game of incomplete information between the incumbent politician and voters, in which more information is not necessarily better for voters. In their model, there are two components, a discipline and a selection component, affecting voter’s welfare. If information on incumbent’s actions increases before election, in equilibrium, some incumbents will commit themselves to higher levels of quality in public goods whereas others will maximize rents in the first term lowering the quality of public goods provided. Thus, there is an ambiguous theoretical result on what happens to the quality level of the public good after increases in the information on incumbent’s actions. We show that the discipline component of Besley and Smart (2007)’s model is empirically more relevant than the selection one, at least in what concerns public elementary education in Brazilian municipalities. When voters have better information they reward (punish) mayors that improve (deteriorate) the provision of the public education.

Our results are novel in bridging the gap between the otherwise unrelated literatures on electoral accountability and on school accountability.³ In fact, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that directly relate school quality and electoral accountability of incumbent mayors.⁴

The key theoretical argument for a bold link between electoral and school accountability is that parents care about the quality of education and that people in fact react when they have more information on quality of schools. Fortunately, empirical evidence on these two facts already exists.⁵ Hastings and Weinstein (2007) explore two experiments in a school district in US where schools were randomly selected to distribute information about their quality to the parents. They find evidence that receiving information increases the fraction of parents choosing higher performance schools. Figlio and Rouse (2006) investigate the threat of vouchers and stigma in Florida on the performance of low performing schools after the introduction of an accountability system. They find that the lower performing schools

¹ School accountability systems were introduced in the UK during the 80’s and rapidly became an important educational managing tool in the US. For example, in 1996, 12 states in the US had some sort of school accountability whereas in 2000 39 states were adopting it. In 2001 federal government created the “No Children Left Behind” (NCLB) program.

² The empirical evidence that SAS produces positive impacts on learning has been extensively documented. See, for example Carnoy and Loeb (2002), Hanushek and Raymond (2004), Jacob et al. (2003), Ladd (1999), Peterson and West (2003) and Springer (2008). Hanushek and Raymond (2002) argue that the positive effects from NCLB are mainly due to the existence of direct rewards to the best schools and punishment to the worse ones.

³ According to the recent review on electoral accountability by Trounstein (2010), the vast majority of the research on electoral accountability is concentrated on federal level and to some extent state level elections, even though most of policies are clearly locally determined.

⁴ The only piece of empirical evidence of school quality being electorally rewarded has been documented by Berry and Howell (2007) who show results linking students’ assessments and of school board elections over three electoral cycles in South Carolina. They present evidence that in the 2000 local elections for school boards, when public and media attention to testing and accountability systems was at its peak, voters held school board members accountable for the past performance of their schools.

⁵ See, for example, Nushimura and Yamano (2013).

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