What information do citizens want? Evidence from one million information requests in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

While scholars have emphasized the importance of information for accountability, little research has addressed the *demand* for government information by real citizens. We study the totality of information requests filed with Mexican federal government agencies from 2003 to 2015, over 1 million requests in all. We use unsupervised methods to categorize requests, revealing the diversity of topics including environment, security, budgets, and government procurement and employees. While many topics have clear public accountability-seeking purposes, others are focused on more private, micro-political goals. Analysis over time and across states reveals linkage between information demand and issues of public interest such as environmental impacts and criminal violence. Our results demonstrate that, given functioning access-to-information institutions, citizens in a transitional democracy really do demand information relevant to public accountability.

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1. Introduction

Citizens around the world are more empowered to seek and access government information than ever. Over 100 countries have passed access-to-information (ATI) laws, enabling citizens to request documents and information and obligating officials to respond (Ackerman & Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2006; Roberts, 2006; Florini, 2007). National, provincial, and local governments around the world are also embracing new "open government" mechanisms, making government information available proactively through online platforms (Meijer, Curtin, & Hillebrandt, 2012; Fung, 2013; Piotrowski, 2017). Research on the *supply* of government information is advancing on multiple fronts, seeking both to understand why and how such policies and mechanisms come about, and what effects information has on citizen and politician behavior.

However, little attention has been paid to the *demand* for information. Most research to date has relied on implicit assumptions about what information citizens actually want. Research and advocacy on ATI and open data policies are motivated by the assumption that they function as a tool of public accountability – but are these policies being used that way in practice? And experimen-

tal research that exposes citizens in developing countries to informational treatments generally fails to ask what politically relevant information those citizens might actually want, and actually seek on their own in a real-world context. We thus focus on main two questions: What information *do* citizens seek? And how does information demand link to issues of public importance?

When provided with a mechanism to request government information, do citizens ask for documents or data that they can use to hold policymakers publicly accountable – that is, to evaluate government performance, investigate potential wrongdoing, or mobilize for political goals? More broadly, can the information sought by citizens contribute to "action cycles" (Fung, Graham, & Weil, 2007; Kosack & Fung, 2014) that help engender public accountability?

Past approaches suggest two different models, differing in the extent to which citizens[1] predominantly seek information with public or private goals. Under a public accountability model of information demand, citizens seek information that is suitable to uses in political mobilization and oversight, and is linked with issues of importance or interest to the population at large. Such a model is also consistent with traditional principal-agent approaches to electoral politics. Activists, journalists, and electoral campaigns have

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[1] By "citizens" we mean the entire public; including ordinary individuals as well as organizations, journalists, and commercial entities that may be acting either on their own account or as intermediaries in disseminating information to the broader public.

much to gain by obtaining evidence of government performance and decisionmaking, particularly in low- and middle-income democracies where corruption and inefficiency are widespread (Rothstein, 2011), and many case studies offer success stories of information use in campaigns to demand better public services or denounce corruption (e.g. Jenkins & Goetz, 1999; Cejudo, 2012; Gaventa & McGee, 2013; van Zyl, 2014). These cases present the tantalizing possibility that the demand for public accountability-generating information is the rule rather than the exception, and that the main obstacle in most contexts is not demand but supply: the availability of functioning ATI institutions.

However, many skeptics see publicly-relevant information as only the "tip of the iceberg," with more mundane information comprising the submerged majority (Michener & Worthy, 2018). Under such an "iceberg" model, citizens predominantly seek information for private, micro-political goals with little potential for publicity or demand-making on behalf of collective goals, and unlinked from issues of public attention. Examples include information useful in solving private problems, either in the business sector (e.g., navigating regulations, pursuing government contracts) or for individuals (e.g. accessing government benefits, completing official procedures, acquiring data for research). While these uses are important, they resemble the sorts of information most often available on government websites (Thomas & Streib, 2003; Almazan & Gil-García, 2008), and may not justify costly investments in ATI institutions. Some critics, often politicians themselves, even argue that ATI institutions are being abused through such private uses, constituting a waste of government resources (Kwoka, 2015; Worthy, 2017).

Further cause for skepticism derives from recent experimental studies that have found only mixed or inconclusive results as to whether exposure to new information can change voter behavior or spark greater accountability (e.g. Humphreys & Weinstein, 2012; Lieberman, Posner, & Tsai, 2014; Chong, De La O, Karlan, & Wantchekon, 2015). These studies raise the possibility that the supply of information is not the core obstacle to holding politicians accountable, but rather deficits in human capital and collective action capacity are to blame. Such deficiencies may affect not only what people do with information, but also their demand for accountability-relevant information in the first place. Further, classic studies linking socioeconomic status to political participation (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) suggest that demand for publicly relevant information would be more anemic in new democracies, where a greater share of citizens are poor and inexperienced in democratic politics.

By studying the demand for information by real citizens, we evaluate the validity of these two models. We find evidence that both public, macro-political and private, micro-political uses are frequent and persistent over time. However, we find that the majority of topics of information demand have clear potential for public accountability-oriented uses, and that demand for information is linked to issues of public importance both over space and over time. These findings support the public accountability model of information demand, amended with a recognition of the complex layering of multiple information uses, both public and private, even on the same platform and from the same government agencies.

We assess citizen demand for information in the context of Mexico, using data on every information request filed with federal government agencies from 2003 to 2015 – over 1 million in all. Mexico's *Ley Federal de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información Pública Gubernamental* (Federal Law on Transparency and Access to Public Information) was signed into law by President Vicente Fox on June 10, 2002. This law has been called "one of the world's most innovative and best funded, operational and responsive" (Michener, 2015), and "an unprecedented opportunity to address the rising public demand for a government committed to transparency, accountability, and respect for a citizen's right to know" (Sobel, Davis Noll, Bogado, TCC Group, & Price, 2006, 6).

We take an inductive approach to characterizing Mexico's ATI environment, using unsupervised topic modeling to categorize all 1 million-plus requests into twenty topics, based on the text of the requests themselves. These include many topics of clear public relevance, including the military, police, and crime; the oil and energy sectors; budgets and spending; the environment and land use; qualifications of government employees; and compliance information about public procurement. Other topics, however, appear more suited to private or micro-political uses, such as seeking access to government benefits, services, or contracts. We characterize these topics and provide additional detail on each in an Online Appendix.

We also demonstrate a strong linkage between demand for information and issues of public salience that vary across space – such as oil production – and over time – such as the prevalence of criminal violence. These findings suggest that demand for government information is indeed embedded in processes of public accountability. Given the opportunity to use transparency mechanisms with *relatively* low barriers and *relatively* high performance, citizens in Mexico really do demand a diverse variety of information relevant to public accountability.

The case of Mexico is of both theoretical and practical importance. While Mexico underwent a democratic transition in 2000, corruption and patronage remain commonplace, making it a frequent focus of studies on information and political accountability (Berliner & Erlich, 2015; Chong et al., 2015; Fox, 2007; Larreguy, Marshall, & Snyder, 2016). A pioneer among transitional democracies in the sophistication of its ATI institutions, we take Mexico as a test case to address whether citizens in such contexts actually seek accountability-producing information when provided with the opportunity. In practical terms, Mexico's ATI law offers the opportunity to study the usage of a transparency mechanism in totality, over an extended period of time. In creating an online information system as the default means of filing requests, Mexico was unique among countries until recently. We build on the public availability of these data, including both request texts and metadata such as date, target agency, and locality.

Importantly, our focus is limited to observed information requests. Our analysis is not of information demand by average citizens, or a representative sample of all citizens, but rather of the demand for information *by those who sought government information*. Like studies of many forms of political engagement – such as protest and campaign contributions – we observe only those who actually engage. Our analysis is thus not representative of what information all citizens *would* seek, were they to request. However, our focus on "revealed" demand is not only representative, but in fact exhaustive, of the information sought by citizens whose desire for information outweighs the transaction costs of making requests. Thus, our approach is conducive to inferring the real-world uses of government information for public or private purposes.

2. The supply and demand for government information

ATI institutions are tools for vertical accountability (Mainwaring & Welna, 2003; O'Donnell, 1998), designed to make politicians "answerable" (Schedler, 1999) to citizens. Their premise is that when citizens have access to information about government performance and decision-making, their political participation – both at the ballot box and through coordinated mobilization or lobbying – becomes more effective. There is thus a substantial focus on studying the *supply* of information – both in explaining