

Testing Issue Accountability on Public Commenters

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Standard theories of accountability suggest politicians respond to voter preferences for fear of electoral sanction, but many voters are ill-informed about policy. One answer to this paradox is that a small group of engaged citizens---an issue public---is sufficient to drive responsiveness. We test this claim by tracking over 7,000 members of the public in San Francisco, CA who submit comments on land use policies, observing their expressed preferences, surveying them later, and linking them to administrative data on turnout and contributions. We show that over three-quarters of commenters successfully recall their past positions expressed on issues up to five years later but less than half learn the subsequent policy action that was taken. Those who recall their views aligning with the policy action are four times more likely to report that their comment was listened to and resulted in a change in policy. However, facing ceiling effects and lack of credible alternatives, we find no differences in generalized efficacy, trust, perceptions of responsiveness, evaluations of candidates, or voter turnout. In contrast, we find that anti-development voters are 22% more likely to contribute to ideologically aligned challenger candidates when they do not see their preferred policies enacted; they do not reward incumbents for policy congruence, and pro-development commenters do not exhibit any significant patterns in contributions. These results suggest that even among an issue public, only a minority meet the conditions for issue accountability, but this may be enough to drive policy outcomes.