

Rethinking Foreign Aid and Legitimacy: Views from Aid Recipients in Kenya*

Lindsay R. Dolan[†]

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Abstract

Contrary to scholarly predictions, foreign aid does not appear to undermine individuals' beliefs in the legitimacy of their governments. Rather than testing a theory of foreign aid and legitimacy, this paper aims to understand why this prediction has failed to materialize in mounting evidence. I develop explanations inductively based on original descriptive evidence from a survey and in-depth interviews in western Kenya. I propose, first, that the prediction itself is based on incorrect assumptions about individuals' expectations of government, and second, that scholars may not be measuring legitimacy accurately. I offer specific suggestions for how future studies can overcome these limitations in their theories and research designs. The contribution of this project is to improve the rigor of future studies by furnishing detailed and descriptive evidence on how individuals from a remote and relevant sample think about politics and aid.

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[†]Assistant Professor, Department of Government, Wesleyan University; Fellow, Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance, Princeton University. E-mail: lindsayrdolan@princeton.edu.

Does foreign aid damage the legitimacy of recipient governments? Social scientists have long expressed concern that foreign donors, by providing goods and services that are typically the domain of the state, could cause individuals to believe that their government has failed in its responsibilities. Since many argue that “legitimizing beliefs” are key to preserving citizens’ willingness to pay taxes and comply with laws, this possible consequence of foreign aid is alarming. However, recent empirical tests consistently find limited grounds for this concern (Sacks 2012; Dietrich and Winters 2015; Blair and Roessler 2016; Dietrich, Mahmud and Winters 2018). If anything, foreign aid improves perceptions of the government’s legitimacy.

Why has this prediction failed to materialize? I offer two possible explanations, which I develop based on findings from three months of fieldwork in western Kenya. I fielded an original survey to 198 individuals and conducted 30 in-depth interviews with individuals, NGO leaders, and local politicians. Based on this descriptive evidence, I propose, first, that the prediction could be based on incorrect assumptions, and second, that scholars may not be measuring legitimacy accurately. First, whereas the legitimacy prediction assumes that individuals expect their governments to provide public goods independently, I show that citizens in western Kenya expect their governments to receive assistance from other actors. Second, I argue that several common survey questions are poor proxies for legitimacy in this context. While highlighting these two explanations for an existing gap between theory and evidence, I offer concrete suggestions for how scholars may study foreign aid and government legitimacy with greater rigor.

The contribution of this paper is to document individuals’ beliefs about foreign donors and their governments in a way that facilitates research on these topics. This paper does not test a causal theory of foreign aid and government legitimacy but rather investigates the micro-level beliefs and attitudes underpinning this relationship and develops explanations inductively. It does so using descriptive evidence resulting from in-depth interviews, survey questions, and a behavioral experiment used as a measurement tool. A remote sample like this is difficult for a researcher to reach, so scholars typically leverage costly field surveys to test rather than build their theories. Multi-country surveys like Afrobarometer offer valuable and accessible insights, but it is sometimes challenging

to interpret them without the aid of contextual knowledge and qualitative interviews. My evidence can therefore assist scholars interested in these topics by helping them to tailor their theories and evidence before investing in expensive tests.

Foreign Aid and Government Legitimacy

Government legitimacy is “a generalized perception that the state has a right to govern and its actions are desirable, proper, or appropriate in its cultural context” (Brass 2016, 33; Suchman 1995). For many political scientists, this perception is rooted in the social contract between states and citizens, where the state acquires the unique right to demand citizen compliance with laws and taxes in exchange for its provision of public goods, namely security (North and Weingast 1989; Bates and Lien 1985).¹ Levi (1988) argues that by providing public goods, states can foster beliefs about the government’s legitimacy that lead citizens to comply with government demands even absent monitoring and enforcement. Following from this claim is the idea that “quasi-voluntary compliance,” or citizens’ willingness to pay laws and taxes, is a desirable consequence of and therefore proxy for government legitimacy (Levi 1988; Levi, Sacks and Tyler 2009).

Scholars working in this tradition argue that foreign aid may reduce the government’s legitimacy by undermining the perception that the government is fulfilling its end of the bargain through the provision of public goods. Similar claims have long been made about non-governmental organizations (NGOs) more generally. For example, a widely cited article warns that because the legitimacy of African governments rests on their promises of economic advancement, “effective NGO initiatives may reflect unfavorably on the government” (Bratton 1989, 572).² In their review,

¹While this is not the only conceptualization of legitimacy, it is the only one that has been invoked in the study of foreign aid and therefore is the focus of my discussion. This contemporary approach in political science is often called “audience legitimacy” and follows from a Weberian legal-rational tradition. For earlier approaches in political science, see Rothschild (1977); for alternative approaches in law and sociology, see Bottoms and Tankebe (2012); Tyler and Jackson (2013).

²See also Whaites (1998); Schuller (2009); Batley and Mcloughlin (2010); Brinkerhoff, Wet-

Dietrich and Winters (2015, 2) summarize: “The idea that non-state provision of social services might undermine state legitimacy is widespread in the literature on non-governmental organizations in the developing world.”

But several recent studies find little support for this prediction.³ Survey experiments and behavioral games in India, Bangladesh, and Liberia find that attributing aid projects to a foreign donor has a null or even positive effect on government legitimacy (Dietrich and Winters 2015; Blair and Roessler 2016; Dietrich, Mahmud and Winters 2018).⁴ These corroborate new observational studies, which also illustrate the surprisingly positive effects of foreign aid and NGOs on government legitimacy (Sacks 2012; Brass 2016).⁵ A separate literature, motivated by theories of political accountability rather than government legitimacy, concludes that foreign aid projects boost an incumbent’s chance of re-election (Briggs 2015; Guiteras and Mobarak 2015; Cruz and Schneider 2017). While incumbent re-election is distinct from government legitimacy, these results reinforce the growing conclusion that foreign aid does not seem to undermine opinions of the government’s right to rule. This invites the question: What accounts for this discrepancy between a core theory of political science and rigorous evidence against it?

terberg and Dunn (2012).

³A more detailed summary of the following literature review appears in table form in Appendix S1.

⁴Blair and Roessler (2016) even pre-registered their hypothesis that attributing aid projects to a foreign donor would reduce tax compliance, their measure of government legitimacy. This is further evidence that the dominant political science theories predict a negative relationship between foreign aid and government legitimacy. See <http://egap.org/registration-details/1285>.

⁵While there is also surprising new evidence that foreign aid improves political institutions (see Jones and Tarp 2016), this is a separate mechanism from the one invoked in predictions about government legitimacy. My review and investigation concerns itself with arguments about how individuals *perceive* the legitimacy of their governments, holding constant the quality of governance itself.

Research Approach

The goal of this project is not to test a causal theory of foreign aid and government legitimacy but to understand why existing tests consistently but counter-intuitively do not find support for this theory. In service of this goal, I documented in detail how individuals think about their governments and foreign aid and looked for possible discrepancies between these and the assumptions often made by scholars. I did so by fielding an original survey to 198 individuals and conducted 30 in-depth interviews with individuals, NGO leaders, and local politicians. (Details about the interview and survey samples are available in Appendix S2.) Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches helped me to understand how individuals interpreted questions and pieces of information commonly included in surveys on these topics. These descriptive data allowed me to inductively develop possible explanations for the findings other scholars have reached.

Because this project aims to understand individuals' political views more deeply rather than more broadly, I collected data from a single place. I spent three months living in Siaya County, Kenya, becoming familiar with the kinds of international actors that individuals were mentioning in their survey responses. I selected this case for three reasons: First, individuals were very comfortable discussing politics and the presence of international actors. This accessibility was essential for learning how they think about these relationships. Second, Siaya County is one of the poorest counties in Kenya and is home to many international NGOs. While there is great heterogeneity among regions that receive foreign aid, these features make Siaya as typical of a recipient region as is possible. Third, this geographic area of Kenya and Uganda receives significant attention in the literature on foreign aid and political opinions (see e.g. Briggs 2014; Brass 2016; Baldwin and Winters 2016; Findley et al. 2017). Therefore, while this paper does not present generalizable evidence, it does present evidence that is especially applicable to this literature. Regardless, such a limitation is a necessary and appropriate price to pay for the opportunity to intensively scrutinize how individuals think about politics when foreign donors are present.

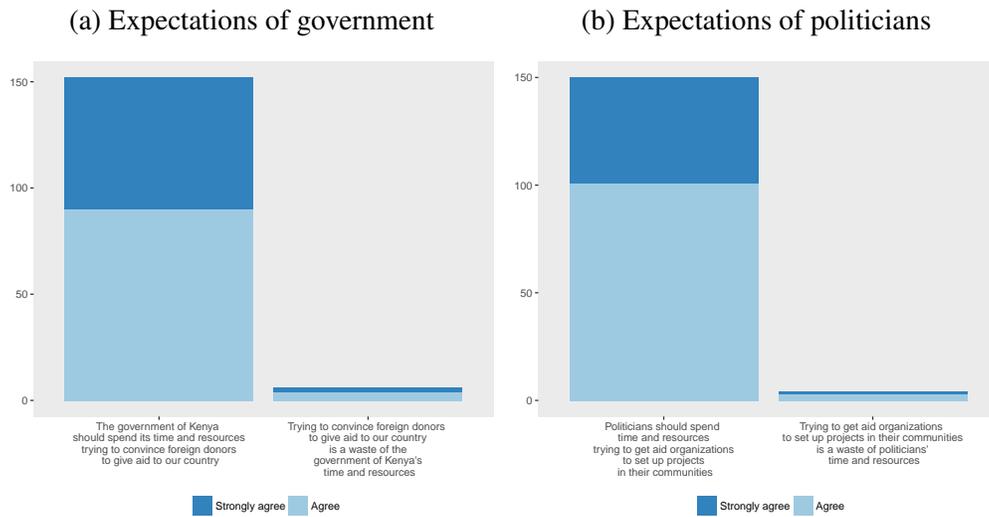
The Role of Expectations

This study is motivated by the gap between theory and evidence about the relationship between foreign aid and government legitimacy. One possible explanation for this gap is that the legitimacy prediction follows from assumptions that do not accurately describe politics in the developing world. While canonical theories of legitimacy themselves do not specify the obligations that constitute the contractual commitment between the government and its citizens, applications of these theories sometimes implicitly assume that the government is expected to provide public goods while citizens are expected to pay taxes to finance those public goods, a relationship known as the “fiscal contract” (Levi, Sacks and Tyler 2009). By these accounts, receiving public goods “for free” from foreign donors severs this contract: individuals will perceive that the government is not adequately fulfilling its responsibilities and will no longer feel obliged to pay taxes.

But respondents actually expected their government and politicians to cooperate with and actively recruit foreign donors to provide their public goods. One participant surmised, “When Kenyan leaders visit some of the wealthy nations, they talk of poverty and need for livelihood improvement. These kinds of proposals are received well by rich nations who easily provide support.”⁶ Most respondents agreed that even though the government and politicians have limited time and resources, one of the government’s primary functions is to obtain aid from foreign donors, and local politicians are expected to direct this aid to their constituencies (see Figure 1). This expectation explains why many respondents blamed their politicians for the absence of foreign aid in their constituencies, an expectation that politicians felt was unwarranted. One MP from Siaya County indicated that she had no idea how she would go about securing foreign aid projects for her constituency, and she felt “punished by the public” for failing to secure money that the President had directed to more electorally valuable constituencies, an assertion which is supported by several

⁶Response from survey participant 41, October 27, 2015. Participant was asked to explain why s/he expressed agreement with the statement: “Wealthy countries usually give more aid to countries with ineffective governments.”

Figure 1: Expectations of political actors



Note: N=158 (Panel A) and 175 (Panel B). (Variation in sample size is due to refinements in question wording over course of survey.) Source: Author's data.

empirical studies.⁷

Individuals are widely aware of this politicization of foreign aid, and as a result, they express preferences for forms of aid that bypass their governments. Many interviewees praised GiveDirectly, an international NGO providing direct cash transfers to recipients, citing the “direct” in its name as evidence of its quality, since these funds could not be reappropriated by politicians.⁸ But such programs are rare, and while it may be undesirable that politicians can capture or divert foreign aid, this reality nevertheless informs individuals’ expectations of their politicians.

Moreover, foreign aid does not signal that the government has failed in its responsibilities because individuals have competing beliefs about how donors select recipients. As scholars of legitimacy feared, some respondents did feel that aid implied that their government was ineffective, for reasons such as, “Rich countries want to uplift the economic status of ineffective government. That is why they give them more aid.”⁹ But, consistent with the evidence above, just as many respon-

⁷ Author’s interview, November 16, 2015. See, for example, Briggs (2012, 2014); Jablonski (2014).

⁸ For example, author’s interview, July 20, 2015.

⁹ Response from survey participant 65, October 29, 2015. Participant was asked to explain

dents interpreted aid as an opposite signal of their government's competence; as one respondent explained, "Effective governments present strong and credible proposals before rich nations and therefore stand better chances of getting aid."¹⁰ The distribution was nearly symmetric, with half of the sample feeling that donors tend to give aid to effective governments, and half feeling that they prefer to fund ineffective governments.¹¹ To the extent that there exist competing beliefs about donor strategies, receiving aid is unlikely to signal that the government has failed to fulfill its contractual obligations to its citizens.

It matters that individuals endorse their government's acceptance of foreign aid because individuals are surprisingly well-informed about the sources of their government's funding. I asked participants to imagine that a fixed number of objects represented all the money the government received in the previous year and to guess how many of those objects came from each of five sources: taxes, foreign aid, natural resources, other, and churches (included as a placebo). Figure 2 shows that respondents estimated quite accurately the proportion of the government's revenue that comes from foreign aid (about one-third). This sophistication underscores the importance of learning how individuals' beliefs about the government's funding do or do not influence their attitudes and behaviors. For example, the fact that citizens know how their governments are funded makes it even more reassuring that de la Cuesta et al. (2017) find that citizens are equally likely to monitor the government's management of tax revenue and foreign aid.

In sum, individuals are aware of and support their government's receipt of foreign aid. As a

why s/he expressed agreement with the statement: "Wealthy countries usually give more aid to countries with ineffective governments."

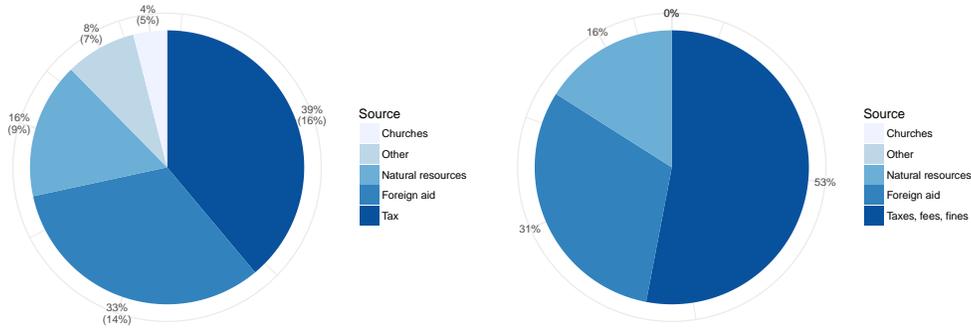
¹⁰Response from survey participant 52, October 28, 2015. Participant was asked to explain why s/he expressed agreement with the statement: "Wealthy countries usually give more aid to countries with effective governments."

¹¹This question asked individuals to rate their agreement with two statements: "Wealthy countries usually give more aid to countries with ineffective governments." or "Wealthy countries usually give more aid to countries with effective governments." 49 percent agreed with the first while 45 percent agreed with the second (6 percent agreed with neither, N=155). The quotations above are typical of the open-ended responses given by most participants.

Figure 2: Awareness of the sources of the government’s budget

(a) Individual guesses

(b) Actual statistics, 2013



Note: Panel A reports individual estimates of the proportion of the government’s budget that come from taxes, foreign aid, natural resources, others, and churches. Participants received several beans and were asked to place beans on five labeled cards to indicate what portion of the government’s money they believe came from that source in the previous year. Labels indicate means, with standard deviations in parentheses. N=107. Source: Author’s data. Panel B reports actual sources of the Kenyan central government expenditure in 2013. Source: World Development Indicators.

result, there is no reason to expect that alerting individuals to foreign sources of the government’s income would change either their beliefs about where their goods and services come from or their opinions about the government’s legitimacy.¹² This compatibility of government legitimacy and foreign aid in developing countries also makes sense when seen in historical perspective. Many countries like Kenya won independence relatively recently, frequently from a colonizing country that continues to provide significant amounts of foreign aid today. Structural adjustment programs engineered by international organizations were the hallmark of the 1980s, and, today, NGOs frequently partner with governments to complement their programs. While my evidence hails from Kenya, it shares these features with many countries in the developing world, and it is not surprising that predictions based on a framework assuming government self-sufficiency fall short. Accounting for alternative expectations of the government illustrates that the theory of government legitimacy may well be intact but can be better adapted to generate predictions that make sense in aid recipient

¹²These findings also reinforce scholarly concerns about the effects of foreign aid on political accountability. See Appendix S3 for further discussion.

countries.

Measuring Legitimacy

An alternative explanation is that existing outcomes—an individual’s trust in the government and attitudes toward taxation—are not actually measuring legitimacy.

A common measure for legitimacy is to ask individuals about their trust in their governments, but these opinions are highly correlated with their perceptions of the government’s performance. Table 1 shows correlation coefficients of .72 (central government) and .60 (local government); in fact, individuals conflated these concepts so much that several expressed confusion at the redundancy of the questions.¹³ While a positive correlation between trust and performance is reasonable (individuals are probably more likely to trust governments that perform well), such a strong correlation raises the concern that individuals do not distinguish between the two. Seen in this light, evidence from studies using “confidence” or “trust” measures (see e.g. Dietrich, Mahmud and Winters 2018) may reflect improvements in perceptions of the government’s effectiveness, not its legitimacy.

Why does this matter? Contemporary theorists argue it is essential to preserve the conceptual distinction between effectiveness and legitimacy. In a recent review from two legal scholars acclaimed for their work on legitimacy, they write, “We simply do not know whether effectiveness is necessary for legitimacy,” and open the question, “When does legitimacy depend upon being able to provide material benefits to people in the community?” for future study (Tyler and Jackson 2013, 13). This question is arguably most important in places like Kenya, where democracy is young and capacity for effective governance is limited. In these societies, governments may not have the resources to bolster their legitimacy through effective governance. Furthermore, because of these resource constraints, these governments are the least equipped to compel individuals

¹³Results calculated using pairwise complete observations to make use of as much data as possible. However, results are similar when calculated using complete observations (coefficients of .66 and .59 respectively), limiting the sample to 74 respondents who answered all five questions.

to comply with laws and taxes that are essential to consolidating order and democracy. It is for this reason that governments draw on the “reservoir of support” that legitimacy provides precisely when they are least able to govern effectively (Dahl 1956). In sum, preserving the conceptual distinction between legitimacy and effectiveness is particularly important in the developing world, where governments may lack the resources to satisfy voters’ material interests. “Trust” measures collapse this separation.¹⁴

Table 1: Correlations between government approval, trust, and tax attitudes

	Trust_Central	Approval_Central	Trust_Local	Approval_Local	Taxes
Trust_Central	1.00	0.72	0.19	0.07	0.01
Approval_Central	0.72	1.00	0.15	0.06	-0.02
Trust_Local	0.19	0.15	1.00	0.60	-0.08
Approval_Local	0.07	0.06	0.60	1.00	0.01
Taxes	0.01	-0.02	-0.08	0.01	1.00

Note: Table reports correlation coefficients using pairwise complete observations. *Trust* refers to “How much do you trust the central/local government, or haven’t you heard enough about it to say?” *Approval* refers to “In general, do you approve or disapprove of the performance of the central government of Kenya in the last 12 months, or haven’t you heard enough to say?” *Tax* refers to “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The government has the right to make people pay taxes.” *Trust* and *approval* are measured with respect to both the central government in Nairobi and the local (county) government in Siaya. N=198. Source: Author’s data.

Others instead measure legitimacy using attitudes toward the government’s right to tax.¹⁵ The logic behind this question is that it focuses on a core aspect of an individual’s contractual relationship with the government and should be less sensitive to their opinions about its performance. The survey data support this view: Table 1 shows an extremely low (and, in one case, negative) corre-

¹⁴My argument is that “trust” questions appear to actually measure perceptions of the government’s effectiveness, which is important to separate from legitimacy. But even if “trust” questions genuinely measure trust and not effectiveness, others argue that it is essential to distinguish trust and legitimacy. See Bottoms and Tankebe (2012, 164).

¹⁵This is one example of a broader category of measures concerning individuals’ perceived obligation to obey the law (Bottoms and Tankebe 2012, 163). Studies about NGOs and foreign aid have focused on the perceived rights of tax authorities, which more directly relate to the goods and services provided by government, while studies in the criminal justice domain focus on the perceived rights of law enforcement officials.

lation between this measure and both the trust and approval measures. This suggests that attitudes toward the government's right to tax are at least picking up on something distinct from general positive feelings toward the government, an important advantage in light of the earlier discussion.

But researchers should be cautious about using this question to proxy for legitimacy in communities that receive foreign aid. Most individuals in these disadvantaged communities do not have sufficient income to be taxed; in this sample, for example, only 12% of respondents reported paying taxes directly to the government. Moreover, most poor individuals reported paying taxes in the form of value added taxes paid to a vendor at point of sale and did not even think about these as taxes that accrue to the government. Respondents frequently explained their negative reactions to the claim that the government has the right to tax by pointing out that it would be unjust to tax people as poor as they were. If individuals routinely interpret this statement in personal rather than sociotropic terms, then it becomes a less reliable measure for legitimacy in poorer communities and a more reliable measure in wealthier communities. Preliminary evidence consistent with this claim appears in Appendix S4, where I show that support for the government's right to demand taxes in this overwhelmingly poor sample exhibited the widest standard deviation of attitudes toward several other demands made by governments of citizens. While there are many determinants of foreign aid allocation,¹⁶ need is an important predictor, and the individuals most likely to benefit from foreign aid in their communities will be least likely to pay taxes.¹⁷ Studies of the relationship between foreign aid and legitimacy, in particular, may wish to avoid this noisy measure or, at least, control for income and taxpayer status.

¹⁶See Wright and Winters (2010) for a review of the aid allocation literature.

¹⁷A caveat to this argument is that aid does not always reach the poorest. Winters (2014) points out that there is substantial variation in the success of targeting aid projects to the poorest areas and, subsequently, to the poorest people within those areas. Politically connected individuals and communities may be able to better capture aid, even if they are not as needy. Even so, since the intent behind an aid project is often to benefit the least well off, it is important to recognize that aid beneficiaries will have, on average, lower tax burdens. An alternative or additional mechanism driving this relationship could be that there is less need to tax certain communities because they receive foreign aid (Eubank 2012).

Behavioral games are increasingly used to measure legitimacy (see, e.g. Blair and Roessler 2016; Blair 2018). These randomized designs estimate whether individuals are more likely to comply when requests are made by the government, an improvement on self-reported measures that suffer from social desirability bias. To investigate this method and how it compares to self-reported measures, I conducted such an experiment and report the design and detailed results in Appendix S5. In the experiment, all participants were encouraged to contribute part of their sitting fee to charity. For a randomly selected treatment group, this encouragement came from the government of Kenya, while the control group heard the same encouragement without any attribution to the government. The average treatment effect represents the legitimacy of the government to make this request: If the government were widely perceived to be legitimate, then we would expect the treatment group to contribute more than the control group because the encouragement carries the added weight of the government's authority. But in this case, the treatment effect was negative, suggesting a lower level of legitimacy than reflected by the trust and tax attitudes measures.

A concern with this design (and those it is modeled on) is that the particular request—to contribute to charity—is not one that governments are entitled to make.¹⁸ While it is true that giving to charity is not an obligation of citizens, governments do frequently encourage individuals to contribute to the common good or do their part in order to create a sense of civic duty, making the request reasonably natural. Nonetheless, in future studies, scholars should strive to make randomized request more germane to the kinds of requests actually issued by governments. For example, the Kenyan government regularly encourages individuals to be tested for infectious diseases, vaccinate their livestock, and avoid open defecation.¹⁹ Future studies hoping to measure government

¹⁸A separate concern is that there is a well-documented tradeoff between charitable giving and taxation, which would suggest that calling individuals' attention to the government (and therefore their taxes) will dampen their charitable giving (Roberts 1984). While this concern cannot be eliminated, it is unlikely to be as pronounced among a particularly poor sample that does not pay taxes directly to the government.

¹⁹Author's observations, August-November 2015. See Figure 2 in Appendix S4 for an example of a Kenyan government poster encouraging individuals to be tested for tuberculosis.

legitimacy could randomly attribute these messages to the government to test whether the endorsement makes individuals more likely to comply.

In sum, one possibility for the dearth of evidence in support of the legitimacy prediction is measurement error. I argue that specific features of aid recipient communities make trust in government and attitudes toward taxation particularly poor proxies for legitimacy. Behavioral experiments may serve as a useful measurement strategy, and I propose that such studies should employ experimental requests that are typically used by governments. It is possible that new evidence may support the legitimacy prediction after all. Regardless, these points underscore the importance of critically evaluating and adapting measurements in novel settings.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed two explanations for why, despite scholars' predictions, foreign aid does not appear to undermine the government's legitimacy in the minds of its citizens. One possibility is that the prediction is based on the assumption that individuals primarily expected their governments to independently provide public goods in exchange for taxes, but individuals in western Kenya expect their governments to receive assistance from other actors. Taking this expectation into account results in theoretical predictions that match mounting evidence. It is also possible that measurement error could account for this gap. I suggested that future studies measure legitimacy experimentally using requests that are natural for these governments to make. Adopting better measures may even overturn previous findings but would at least produce more accurate and precise results.

While this study focuses on a single literature in the context of a single case, it highlights a broad and generalizable lesson: theories and measurements often need to be adapted to developing country contexts before the results of theory-testing exercises will make sense. While scholars should be commended for applying canonical theories to new and contemporary cases, it is important that they explicitly identify the assumptions laden in models and measures and collect descriptive evidence on the validity of those assumptions. Absent this, it is difficult to interpret what

a theory's failure means. For this reason, survey and ethnographic research can be enormously valuable to researchers wishing to test the performance of a theory in a novel context.

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