

# Does Decentralization Improve Perceptions of Accountability? Attitudinal Evidence from Colombia

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*Decentralization is argued to create incentives for local and regional politicians to be more responsive and accountable to their constituents, but few studies have directly tested this claim. We use survey data from Colombia to examine individual-level evaluations of the degree to which decentralization prompts citizens to view department government as more accountable. We estimate the effect of administrative, fiscal, and political decentralization, controlling for participation, political knowledge, confidence in government, education, and income on perceptions of accountability. Our results indicate that administrative and fiscal decentralization improve perceptions of accountability, while political decentralization does not.*

Few recent policy reforms have generated as much enthusiasm as the decentralization of power from national to subnational governments. Decentralization promised to increase government's responsiveness to citizen needs, improve the effectiveness of the allocation of public goods, mobilize citizens through new venues of local political participation, increase political accountability, and generally improve democracy from below (Bardan and Mookherjee 2006; Blair 2000; Daughters and Harper 2007). In both the global north and south, subnational governments were given increased fiscal, political, and administrative responsibilities. This move came at the requests of activists seeking more local control, national governments seeking to enhance state's rights (e.g., Reagan's New Federalism) and/or reformers hoping to improve the provision of services. Meanwhile, international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) promoted decentralization as part of a strategy to realize the

twin goals of accountability and efficiency (Rondinelli 1989).

Decentralization could, consequently, be thought of as the architecture making more accountable local government possible. If decentralization works as predicted, in countries (or parts of a country) where it has become most institutionalized or implemented most extensively, government should be (and be seen as) more accountable by citizens. Places where decentralization has not been as extensive, in contrast, should be characterized by a consensus view that there is less accountability of government.

Despite the prediction that decentralization should improve accountability, previous work has failed to fully test if this is in fact the case. At its broadest, accountability is "associated with the process of being called 'to account' to some authority for one's actions" (Jones 1992, 73; cited in Mulgan 2000, 555). This has led to studying accountability as voters' control of politicians through elections

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