

Internet Access, Social Media, and the Behavior of Politicians: Evidence from Brazil*

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed the remarkable diffusion of social media, such as Facebook, in tandem with the spread of the cell phones that have become the key tool for access to those media. We ask whether this has affected the accountability of politicians, in a context where the coverage of local politicians by traditional media is negligible. Using data on the spread of 3G cell phone networks across municipalities in Brazil, we implement a triple-differences strategy to show how legislators respond when municipalities that are part of their electoral base obtain access to the 3G technology. The reaction takes place both in their social media activity – they increase the number of Facebook mentions to the municipality – and in their legislative activity – they *decrease* the amount of earmark transfers to the municipality and mentions to those municipalities in Congressional speeches. We thus find direct evidence of substitution between the online and offline types of responses. We also show that citizens increase their social media interaction with politicians, as measured by Facebook “likes,” “shares,” or “comments.” Taken together, our results suggest that the combination of social media and mobile phones creates the potential for substitution between online and offline behaviors of the politicians.

Keywords: Cell Phones; Social Media; Facebook; 3G Networks; Accountability; Legislative Behavior; Elections. Bessone

JEL Codes: D72, H72, L86, L96.

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