

Which Principals Matter?

Accountability When Local Officials Answer to Both Bureaucrats and Politicians

Matthew Nanes* Nico Ravanilla[†] Dotan Haim[‡]

July 31, 2026

Word count: 5,600

Abstract

Government service provision often relies on local officials who implement policy while answering to overlapping administrative and political authorities. Yet we know little about which principals induce responsiveness in such settings. We study this question using a randomized evaluation of a local security reform in the Philippines. Village officials received an identical accountability letter that varied only in the identity of the principal issuing it: a national agency with formal administrative authority or the municipal mayor whose influence rests on informal patronage. Officials increased participation only in response to the national agency's letter. Citizens in villages where officials received the agency letter also reported higher perceptions of government fairness and effectiveness. These findings provide evidence on accountability among local implementers with one foot in politics and the other in bureaucracy, and motivate a discussion of when similar officials in other settings respond to accountability from one principal rather than another.

*University of Chicago; nanes@uchicago.edu

[†]University of California San Diego; nravanilla@ucsd.edu

[‡]Florida State University; dhaim@fsu.edu

Local officials tasked with delivering government services frequently occupy a dual role, acting as bureaucratic implementers on one hand and politically embedded brokers on the other. These officials deliver centrally designed policies to citizens while remaining exposed to political pressures rooted in patronage networks. In India, for example, gram panchayat leaders implement centrally funded programs on behalf of state bureaucratic agencies while exercising discretion over benefit allocation under pressure from party organizations and higher-level political elites (Besley et al. 2004). In Sub-Saharan Africa, ward-level officials and chiefs implement national government policies under the authority of national ministries but derive their political standing from a combination of elections, partisan ties, and customary institutions (Baldwin 2016; Logan 2013). Across contexts, many local officials thus occupy positions that combine features of street-level bureaucracy and political brokerage.

Delegation to politically embedded local officials raises distinctive accountability challenges for policy implementation because these actors operate under overlapping administrative and political authority. A large literature on bureaucracy emphasizes that accountability of street-level bureaucrats is central to effective frontline service delivery, highlighting the role of formal incentives, monitoring, and oversight by administrative principals in inducing compliance (Lipsky 1980; McCubbins et al. 1987; Brierley et al. 2023). A parallel literature on clientelism and patronage likewise treats accountability as central, showing that higher-level political actors depend on aligned local brokers to ensure that public goods and services are delivered in ways that sustain patronage and clientelistic exchange (Hicken 2011; Lareguy et al. 2016; Novaes 2018; Bowles et al. 2020; Ravanilla et al. 2022). These literatures have developed largely in isolation. Yet in many settings there exists an understudied class of local actors who simultaneously serve as street-level bureaucrats and political brokers and who deliver the same government services emphasized in both literatures. As a result, we know little about which principals are most likely to induce responsiveness among these actors when administrative and political authority overlap.

We address this gap by studying accountability and compliance among dual-hatted politician-bureaucrats in the context of a large-scale community policing reform in the Philippines. The reform was initiated by the Philippine National Police (PNP) but depended on coordinated implementation by barangay (village) officials responsible for local public safety. Barangays are the primary ground-level implementing units for many government functions. Public safety specifically is managed by the barangay captain and the kagawad (councilor) for peace and order, both elected officials, along with a group of tanods (village public safety officers) whom they appoint (Congress of the Republic of the Philippines 1991). In practice, these barangay officials were tasked with extensive frontline responsibilities under the intervention, including attending monthly community policing meetings, directing neighborhood patrols and citizen outreach, and handling incident reporting. As in many centrally designed government programs, effective implementation therefore depended on the sustained participation and compliance of these local officials.

Anticipating potential compliance problems that could undermine the effectiveness of the reform, we designed a randomized intervention to test efforts to increase participation by barangay officials. Administratively, these officials answer to the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), the national government agency with oversight authority over barangay governments, which also administers the national benefits attached to their posts. Politically, they serve as key brokers for municipal mayors, helping to distribute services and mobilize support. Both the DILG and mayors had publicly endorsed the reform and expressed interest in its effective implementation. To assess which principal was more likely to induce compliance, we worked with both principals to send otherwise identical accountability letters to a randomly selected subset of barangay officials, differing only in the sender's identity.

We find a sharp contrast in responsiveness across principals. Barangay officials increased participation in observable program activities only when accountability signals came from the DILG, not from municipal mayors. Citizens in villages where officials received the

DILG letter also reported more positive perceptions of government fairness, effectiveness, and respect for human rights after the intervention.

These findings advance our understanding of accountability in systems that rely on local policy implementers with both bureaucratic and political principals. Even in a setting characterized by patronage politics, we show that these officials were more responsive to formal administrative authority than to political accountability. We view this randomized experiment as a first step toward understanding how dual-hatted politician-bureaucrats respond to multiple sources of authority. Rather than testing a fully specified theory, it provides an empirical benchmark from a setting where *ex ante* predictions were ambiguous. Drawing on patterns observed during implementation and features of the institutional and political context, we conclude by discussing the conditions under which similar actors in other settings may be more responsive to one source of authority than another.

Accountability for Politically Embedded Local Officials

Research across several literatures recognizes officials who straddle the line between bureaucrat and politician. Provincial cadres in China implement national policy similarly to career bureaucrats, yet their careers advance through evaluation by party superiors (Li and Zhou 2005; Francois et al. 2023). In Brazil, the municipal bureaucrats who run schools and health clinics frequently owe their positions to mayoral appointment, so their administrative careers rest on political loyalty (Toral 2024). Each of these hybrid officials, however, has typically been studied within a single system of accountability, as an implementer answerable to an administrative hierarchy or as a political actor answerable to a patron, rather than as an agent of both.

Viewed through the lens of research on bureaucracy, the local officials we study are street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980). They interact directly with citizens and deliver centrally designed policy under the supervision of a national agency, which sets the terms of

their office and can initiate disciplinary proceedings against them. At the same time, their discretion and distance from supervisors create ample opportunities for shirking. Administrative principals respond with monitoring and oversight (McCubbins et al. 1987; McCubbins and Schwartz 1984), conditional incentives (Padró i Miquel and Yared 2012), and personnel tools like performance evaluations, budgetary control, and transfers (Brierley et al. 2023; Besley et al. 2022). Compliance does not always require high-powered incentives. Strategic communication from superiors can shift frontline workers' positions on the policies they implement (Andersen and Jakobsen 2017), and emphasizing the organization's mission increases effort even on tasks that are neither monitored nor rewarded (Khan 2025).

A second lens comes from research on clientelism and political brokerage. The same local officials often serve as brokers for higher-level politicians, mobilizing voters and distributing resources on their patrons' behalf (Hicken 2011). Political principals secure compliance from these intermediaries by conditioning selective benefits on performance and by investing in the capacity to monitor broker effort (Larreguy et al. 2016; Bowles et al. 2020), and they recruit brokers whose social ties make performance easier to observe and enforce (Brierley and Nathan 2021; Ravanilla et al. 2022). This discipline operates continuously rather than only at election time, since brokers channel patronage and facilitate credit claiming between electoral periods. Yet broker-patron ties are rarely exclusive. Brokers cultivate alternative alliances and defect when better offers arrive (Novaes 2018), and political principals sometimes tolerate poor performance in exchange for political support (Callen et al. 2020).

The officials described in these two literatures are often one and the same. Local bureaucrats who draw their salaries from administrative agencies are frequently the very brokers that the clientelism literature studies, and many secured their administrative posts in the first place through patronage ties to the politicians they go on to serve. Each literature nonetheless proceeds as if its own class of principal were the operative one. Where empirical work encounters agents facing both kinds of authority, the overlap tends to be noted in passing rather than examined. Raffler (2022), for example, notes that the Ugandan bureaucrats

whose political oversight she studies “effectively have two principals” (p. 1447), an elected council and a centrally employed administrative officer, but her experiment engages only with the political channel. The Ghanaian bureaucrats whom Brierley (2020) shows being co-opted by mayors are likewise formally employed and transferred by a national administrative agency that remains in the background of her account. When administrative and political authority converge on the same official, whose demands prevail?

A literature on multiple principals comes closest to this question, and suggests that overlapping authority weakens accountability. In formal treatments, multiple principals dilute incentives and diffuse monitoring (Dixit 1997; Martimort 1996). The most direct empirical evidence comes from Gulzar and Pasquale (2017), who show that local bureaucrats in India perform better when their jurisdiction falls under a single politician rather than several politicians. However, this line of work deals with multiple principals of the same type, addressing circumstances when several politicians compete over one bureaucrat. The officials we study instead face principals of different types, one wielding formal administrative authority and the other informal political influence. Reviews of this literature acknowledge the resulting blind spot: Besley et al. (2022) observe that research in political economy bundles politicians and bureaucrats together as “government” even though the two are “subject to different accountability mechanisms,” and conclude that “we know relatively little about” how accountability operates across these roles (p. 418). Which type of principal induces compliance from officials who answer to both is an open question.

We approach this question inductively. Both lenses supply plausible reasons to expect responsiveness to either principal, so we designed the experiment as a direct comparison rather than a test of a directional theory.¹ Pressure from either principal should surface first in observable compliance behaviors, such as attending program meetings and starting them on time (Callen et al. 2023), and may travel downstream to citizens’ perceptions of

¹This design was pre-registered at [link redacted for review]. The plan hypothesized that accountability letters would increase officials’ participation in program activities and improve citizens’ perceptions of government relative to control, and specified separate estimates for the mayor and DILG letters without predicting which principal would prove more effective. Minor deviations from the plan are noted in Section G.

government performance. Because the design identifies which principal moved behavior rather than why, we defer discussion of mechanisms, and of when similar officials elsewhere answer to one authority over another, until after the results, informed by what we observed during implementation.

Intervention and Research Context

We study politician-bureaucrats implementing a public safety reform in Sorsogon, one of 81 provinces in the Philippines. Sorsogon is primarily rural, with a population center in the provincial capital of Sorsogon City. The province is divided into 541 barangays, the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines and roughly analogous to a neighborhood in urban areas or a village in rural areas. Barangays constitute our primary unit of analysis.

Public safety at the barangay level is delivered primarily by members of the local barangay government, including the barangay captain, an elected official who leads the barangay; the elected kagawad (councilor) for peace and order; and tanods, semi-professional public safety officers appointed by the barangay’s elected officials. Serious crimes are referred to the Philippine National Police (PNP), but day-to-day order falls largely within the barangay’s domain, covering petty theft, disorderly conduct, neighborhood disputes, harassment, and domestic violence. Tanods are a constant presence in barangay life. Roughly 85 percent of the residents we surveyed report seeing a tanod daily, and 46 percent name tanods as the most important source of security in their barangay.

This study was part of a broader evaluation of a community policing initiative, described in greater detail in the appendix and in related work [citations redacted for review]. The relevant component for this article is problem-oriented policing (POP), which identifies locally salient public safety challenges using data and addresses them through targeted, community-level strategies (Cordner and Biebel 2005). Of the province’s 541 barangays, 298 met the study’s inclusion criteria, and of these we randomly assigned 198 to receive the

intervention and 100 to serve as controls. We evaluate the performance of the barangay officials in charge of public safety, who formed the core of the POP teams in the 198 treated barangays.

In Sorsogon, barangay officials face two primary upward principals: the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) and the municipal mayor.² The relationship between the barangay government and the DILG is a formal administrative one. The DILG maintains field officers in every municipality, sets the program mandates barangays are required to implement, prescribes how they may spend their development funds, and audits their compliance. It also rules on barangay officials' entitlement to the honoraria they draw and determines the benefits attached to their posts. Where it finds misconduct, the DILG can initiate administrative proceedings before the municipal council or the Ombudsman. Based on our field experience, the DILG has the strongest reputation for enforcement among the national agencies operating in the province.

Each barangay is also nested within a municipality led by an elected mayor. Barangay governments do not formally report to the mayor, but barangay officials are central to the clientelist networks through which mayors win and hold office. Barangay captains commonly serve as the village-level brokers of a mayor's political machine, mobilizing voters and distributing benefits on the mayor's behalf (Cruz 2019; Hicken et al. 2019; Ravanilla et al. 2022). In return, they depend on the mayor for the discretionary resources their constituents seek from local government, including municipal jobs, medical and burial assistance, and access to national programs administered locally (Fafchamps and Labonne 2017; Cruz et al. 2017), and they rely on the mayor for financial and political support in their own campaigns. While the mayor's political influence may vary between individual barangay leaders, the relationship between mayors and barangay governments is primarily defined by informal, patronage-based ties rather than administrative hierarchy.

²Barangay officials also answer downward to the residents who elect them. Our design holds this channel constant, since the letters were delivered privately and invoked authority from above, leaving constituent pressure balanced across conditions by randomization.

The DILG and the mayor monitor barangay performance through largely similar informal channels. Neither maintains a dedicated reporting apparatus at the village level, and both instead rely on their informal contacts and on routine paperwork from other agencies operating in the barangays, including the PNP. Each sits about as close to the barangays it oversees as the other, and citizens have comparable access to both for lodging complaints.

POP teams met monthly from December 2017 through May 2018. In the first three meetings, teams reviewed information about local public safety challenges, selected a focal issue, and developed an implementation strategy. Over the next three meetings they carried out that strategy and reported on progress. Many teams increased tanod foot patrols or purchased basic equipment like flashlights, whistles, and rain ponchos. Others invested in minor infrastructure improvements, including street lighting or safety signage. Some barangays developed programs to address juvenile delinquency or public intoxication through organized activities.³ A seventh and final gathering was a culminating event at which each barangay publicized its activities and discussed plans for sustaining public safety efforts going forward. Because participation in the POP intervention was discretionary, team members had incentives to shirk amid competing demands on their time.

The accountability letters originated as a request from our implementing partners to improve program quality. Working with them, we approached the DILG and the municipal mayors. Both had endorsed the reform and agreed to send letters to barangay captains in their jurisdictions. We introduced the accountability treatment between the third and fourth POP meetings, as barangays were transitioning to the implementation phase of the program. We randomly assigned the 198 participating barangays in equal numbers, 66 to each condition, to receive a letter signed by the DILG, an otherwise identical letter signed by the municipal mayor, or no letter. Staff from Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), which provided implementation support for the program in Sorsogon and handled tasks like

³In the Philippines, juvenile delinquency mostly refers to property crime and physical assault by minors, and public intoxication complaints often involve brawls or domestic violence severe enough that barangay officials are legally required to mediate them before they can reach the courts.

scheduling team meetings, hand-delivered the letters to the barangay captains in the two treatment conditions.

Each letter reaffirmed the sender’s commitment to the program and promised support for effective participation. It also informed the recipient that the sender had asked IPA for monthly updates on the barangay’s POP team, covering meeting attendance, the problems the team had chosen to address, the solutions it had adopted, and its use of discretionary funds. Of these, attendance was the item a principal would most readily read as compliance, while the rest described the substance of a team’s work. The full text of the letter is in the Supporting Information (Section B). We discuss the ethical considerations raised by the letters, and by the broader partnership, in Section F. By randomly assigning the identity of the principal issuing the accountability signal while holding all other features of the intervention constant, we isolate the effect of invoking different types of principals.

Conceptually, the accountability letter constitutes a light-touch intervention. It does not alter formal responsibilities, material incentives, or program resources. Instead, it makes participation salient by signaling that a particular authority is attending to implementation and positioned to respond to what it sees, without specifying any sanction or reward. Because the reporting it described ran through IPA rather than through either principal’s own channels, and because the letters were otherwise identical, the two principals were placed in roughly the same informational position with respect to their agents.

Data and Outcomes

We analyze data from two primary sources: administrative records collected by research staff at each POP meeting, and a panel survey of civilians conducted prior to and shortly after the intervention. Together, these data allow us to measure both the behavioral responses of local officials to accountability signals and downstream perceptions among citizens.

To collect administrative outcomes, an enumerator from our research team attended each meeting. Aside from distributing or collecting any applicable materials, their role was exclusively observational. They recorded details like meeting location, attendees' titles, and meeting start and end times. Enumerators also evaluated each meeting's overall quality based on standardized criteria, including whether discussions remained focused on identified public safety problems and whether team members made appropriate use of available information and resources in line with program goals. Meeting participants were not informed that these quality assessments were being recorded.

Our meeting-level outcomes track the same activities the letters identified for reporting, and are readily observable and verifiable by higher-level principals. Attendance is measured as the number of POP team members present at each meeting, out of the six formally assigned to each team. Teams averaged 4.7 members present. Delays are the number of minutes after the scheduled start time that the meeting began, and just over half of meetings began within fifteen minutes of the scheduled start. Because attendance was among the items the letters identified for reporting, a late start is as plausibly a team waiting on a missing member as it is a sign of inattention, particularly where the member in question holds a central role, such as the kagawad for peace and order or the chief tanod. Our enumerators reported anecdotally that this was often what a delayed start involved. We therefore treat delay as a measure of how meetings were convened rather than as an indicator of compliance in its own right. Meeting quality is rated on a scale from 0 to 10. We analyze meetings 4 through 7, the meetings that took place after the letters were delivered.

The survey was conducted in person at randomly-selected respondents' homes, and was representative of adults living in study barangays. The first outcome group captured by the survey was citizens' general evaluations of government, including whether it provides services fairly and effectively and whether it respects human rights. The second covers

experiences with crime, perceptions of safety, satisfaction with the police, and willingness to report. We describe full survey procedures in the Supporting Information (Section C).⁴

Results

We begin by examining how barangay officials responded to accountability signals issued by different principals. Table 1 presents results. Because treatment assignment was randomized, the baseline specification for these administrative outcomes, following our preregistered analysis plan,⁵ includes no additional covariates beyond controls for cross-randomized treatment arms, described in Section A. We find no evidence that the mayor’s letter affected attendance, meeting start delays, or meeting quality relative to the control group of POP meetings where officials did not receive the accountability letter. In contrast, barangays that received a letter from the DILG exhibited higher attendance and longer delays in meeting start times. The DILG letter increased attendance by an average of 0.22 officials relative to control and delayed meeting start times by approximately six minutes, both statistically significant at the 5 percent level. Though not dramatic in magnitude, it amounts to roughly a fifth of a standard deviation in attendance, and closes about a sixth of the distance between average attendance and the six officials formally assigned to each team. As a placebo check, letter assignment shows no relationship with any of the three outcomes in the first three meetings, which took place before the letters were delivered (Table E.2 in the Supporting Information).

The combination of higher attendance and longer delays is consistent with the account of delay described above: meetings ran late while teams assembled their members. Compliance, in other words, appears concentrated on the dimensions principals can most readily verify. It did not extend to meeting quality, where we find no corresponding improvement in enumerator ratings. This null result persists when including enumerator fixed effects, as

⁴Descriptive statistics for the meeting-level and survey outcomes appear in Tables D.1 and D.2 in the Supporting Information.

⁵See Section G.

Table 1: Effects of Accountability Letters on Meeting Quality

	(1) LGU Attend	(2) Delay	(3) Quality
Letter-Mayor	0.111 (0.102)	-2.440 (2.894)	0.0624 (0.121)
Letter-DILG	0.224** (0.0991)	6.196** (2.895)	0.00507 (0.119)
Observations	760	759	759
R^2	0.263	0.029	0.039

OLS with barangay-clustered SE in parentheses.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

shown in Table E.1 in the Supporting Information. One reading is that officials focused strategically on easily observable behaviors like attendance (Callen et al. 2023) rather than on ambiguous indicators or outcomes that are not fully within their control. Another possibility is ceiling effects in enumerators’ evaluations of meeting quality, as nearly all meetings were rated 6 or higher, with a median score of 8.

Variation in mayoral strength

The mayor’s letter produced no detectable response. One explanation is that the null says less about political authority in general than about the particular mayors in our study, some of whom may not have been principals worth answering to. We test this using two measures of a mayor’s personal power. Barangay officials might be more responsive to mayors who performed well in their barangay in prior elections, which could signal greater influence. They might feel less compelled to respond to a term-limited mayor who cannot run again (a “lame duck”) and whose influence will soon end. Table 2 examines whether the effect of the mayor’s letter depends on these characteristics.

We find no evidence of heterogeneous effects. The interaction terms are small and statistically insignificant across all meeting-level outcomes, while the effect of the DILG letter remains stable when these characteristics are included. Controlling for the mayor’s municipal

Table 2: Effects of Accountability Letters and Mayor Characteristics on Meeting Quality

	(1) LGU Attend	(2) Delay	(3) Quality	(4) LGU Attend	(5) Delay	(6) Quality
Letter-Mayor	0.103 (0.433)	8.345 (8.773)	-0.278 (0.481)	0.0750 (0.112)	-3.532 (3.149)	0.112 (0.138)
Mayor Vote Share	0.570 (0.380)	8.251 (11.07)	-0.896** (0.443)			
Mayor Letter x Vote Share	0.0419 (0.754)	-20.67 (15.72)	0.643 (0.849)			
Letter-DILG	0.265** (0.103)	7.596** (3.151)	-0.0299 (0.126)	0.208** (0.0978)	6.572** (2.964)	0.0104 (0.120)
Lame Duck Mayor				-0.247* (0.143)	5.041 (3.804)	0.104 (0.142)
Mayor Letter x Lame Duck				0.126 (0.224)	7.102 (6.200)	-0.237 (0.242)
Observations	666	665	665	760	759	759
R^2	0.261	0.033	0.048	0.269	0.039	0.042

OLS with barangay-clustered SE in parentheses.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

vote share likewise does not alter the results, as shown in Table E.6 in the Supporting Information. Because a mayor’s local vote share reflects both the reach of their machine and their standing with residents, this also weighs against the possibility that responsiveness to the mayor operated through officials’ accountability to their own constituents. Variation in individual mayors’ political strength, in short, did not systematically affect responsiveness.

Effects on Citizens’ Attitudes

Beyond observable compliance by POP team members, we examine whether the accountability letters affected citizens’ perceptions of government performance. In related work [citations redacted for review], we find that the POP program did not improve public safety outcomes on average. That average pools across barangays whose officials received very different accountability signals, and it is silent on whether the letters mattered. If the letters changed how officials carried out the program, they may also have changed how residents saw their local government, whether or not crime fell.

Table 3: Effects of Accountability Letters on Perceptions of Government

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Trust	Fairness	Effectiveness	Rights
Letter-Mayor	-0.0227 (0.0689)	0.00103 (0.0653)	-0.00129 (0.0693)	0.0784 (0.0681)
Letter-DILG	0.102 (0.0641)	0.177*** (0.0599)	0.117** (0.0569)	0.141** (0.0712)
Observations	1818	1790	1817	1780
R^2	0.067	0.082	0.079	0.053

OLS with barangay-clustered SE in parentheses.

Controls for outcome at baseline and cross-randomized alternative treatments.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Table 3 presents the effects of the accountability letters on citizens’ evaluations of government fairness, effectiveness, and respect for human rights, measured using a panel survey of citizens in study barangays. Following the pre-analysis plan, models for citizen attitudes control for the same outcome measured at baseline. Citizens in barangays whose

local officials received the DILG letter report higher assessments along all three dimensions. In contrast, we find no evidence that the mayor’s letter affected these attitudes.⁶ These effects are specific to general evaluations of government. We find no evidence that either letter affected the other group of citizen outcomes we pre-registered, covering experiences with crime, perceptions of safety, satisfaction with the police, and willingness to report (Table E.3 in the Supporting Information). Several of these outcomes concern the PNP rather than the barangay officials the letters addressed, and the crime measures do not capture much of the public safety work the teams actually took on.

Taken together, the results show that barangay officials responded selectively to accountability signals depending on the type of principal issuing them. Invoking a formal administrative principal altered observable participation and improved citizen perceptions of local governance, while invoking a political principal did not. These findings establish that the dual-hatted officials we study responded differently to demands for compliance depending on the type of principal making them.

When Each Principal Matters

Our experiment identifies which principal induced compliance in Sorsogon for one specific program. It does not establish that administrative authority will dominate wherever politician-bureaucrats answer to multiple principals. We therefore treat our findings as a springboard for thinking about when each type of principal should prove more effective, returning to the question we left open at the outset about which type of principal induces compliance from officials who answer to both. Drawing on the literatures reviewed above and on our observations during implementation, we identify three factors that plausibly condition the relative effectiveness of administrative and political accountability: the substitutability of what each principal provides, the credibility of its demands, and its capacity to act on

⁶Bivariate correlations among these outcomes range from 0.42 to 0.70, indicating that they are related but conceptually distinct.

what it learns. While each of these factors is discussed in existing research, existing work tends to focus on only one or two of them in any given setting. By jointly examining the values of all three, we suggest that it is possible to generate testable predictions about the relative importance of administrative versus political accountability in a given setting. We emphasize that field observations and existing research motivate these factors, but the factors remain inductive interpretations rather than tested mechanisms.

Each of these factors has an intellectual home in one of the two literatures we bring together. Substitutability belongs to work on clientelism and brokerage, where ties between brokers and patrons are non-exclusive (Novaes 2018); it rarely arises in research on bureaucratic accountability, whose agents answer to a single hierarchy. Credibility and capacity come from that bureaucratic literature, where compliance runs through monitoring, sanctions, and control over careers and budgets (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; McCubbins et al. 1987; Brierley et al. 2023). The officials we study, however, answer to both kinds of principal at once. What determines their compliance is therefore a balance: not whether any single factor is present, but how the two principals compare across all three. Table 4 summarizes the three factors and locates our setting on each.

The first factor is substitutability: whether the agent can replace what a principal provides through other relationships. Political patronage, while valuable, can often be replicated, and as the clientelism literature reviewed above suggests, neither side of a broker-patron tie treats it as exclusive. Both patterns are sharper for barangay captains than for the party brokers of that literature. Captains command independent support bases of their own, so mayors must weigh the cost of alienating them and may tolerate a degree of slack precisely to keep them loyal. They can also hedge against the loss of any single patron by cultivating alternative alliances, including with the mayoral and vice-mayoral candidates who might displace the incumbent at the next election. The DILG offers no equivalent alternative, and non-compliance with it carries costs that political connections cannot offset.

Table 4: When should each type of principal matter?

Factor	A principal’s demands bind more when. . .	Our setting
Substitutability	What it provides cannot be replaced through other relationships	Mayoral support is hedgeable in dense political networks; non-compliance with the DILG carries costs political connections cannot offset. Favors DILG
Credibility	The program is central to its own agenda or mandate	Community policing was the flagship program of the PNP, which the DILG oversees; no mayor’s signature program. Favors DILG
Capacity	It can both observe what the agent does and convert what it sees into consequences	Both principals were promised identical reports from IPA, holding observation constant; the DILG was better placed to translate them into consequences. Weakly favors DILG

The second factor is credibility: whether the agent believes the principal will actually act on the signal. Principals follow through when they have something at stake in the outcome, and a demand from a principal with little at stake is easy to discount (Gulzar and Pasquale 2017). In our setting this asymmetry was stark. Problem-oriented policing was the flagship program of the PNP, which the DILG oversees, and participating barangay leaders noted to our research staff that the program was raised regularly at the monthly Liga ng mga Barangay meetings convened by the DILG, a standing reminder that the agency was paying attention. No mayor, in contrast, made community policing their signature initiative, and timing compounded this. The letters went out roughly three months before the May 2018 barangay elections but more than a year before the next mayoral contest, so mayors had little immediate electoral stake in a program that did not figure in their own campaigns. A letter tied to a program central to a mayor’s agenda, or arriving in a mayoral election year, might have carried more weight.

The third factor is capacity: whether the principal can both observe what the agent does and convert what it sees into consequences. Our design separated the two. Both let-

ters promised reports about program implementation from IPA, the program’s implementing partner, so the two principals stood to learn the same things. What differed was their ability to act on what they learned. The DILG audits barangay spending and rules on the benefits attached to officials’ posts, so a report on meeting attendance feeds into decisions the agency already makes (Besley et al. 2022). Officials worried concretely about this machinery, especially the tanods, whose modest honoraria are exposed to DILG determinations. Mayors matter a great deal to barangay officials, but their leverage runs through relationships and discretionary favors rather than a standing apparatus that turns an attendance report into a decision. Institutionalized parties build such an apparatus to track and reward intermediaries (Larreguy et al. 2016), but Philippine parties are candidate-centered and offer mayors no comparable machinery (Bowles et al. 2020). Mayoral displeasure, while genuinely costly, is therefore not something a monthly compliance report readily triggers. In other settings the two halves may diverge, with one principal seeing far more of what local officials do than the other.

In our setting all three factors happened to load in the same direction, but nothing about the framework requires that, and we would expect many settings to produce the opposite result. Two kinds of variation seem most likely to move the balance, and either can act on any of the three factors. The first concerns the program. Programs differ in whose agenda they advance, whose reputation they build, and how visible their day-to-day conduct is to whom. Ours belonged to a national police reform overseen by an administrative agency, so the demand that carried weight came from that side. A program a mayor had branded, or one whose activities were conducted in view of the municipal hall rather than inside a village meeting, would place both credibility and observation on the political side instead. The second concerns the political context. Contexts differ in how institutionalized parties are, where officials sit in the electoral calendar, how many patrons an agent can turn to, and who controls their careers. Where a political principal can track and discipline its intermediaries, or controls hiring, transfers, and promotion (Brierley 2020; Toral 2024), its

demands would carry the leverage and the irreplaceability that administrative ones carried for us. Our null results fit this reading, since the mayor’s letter had no effect regardless of the mayor’s vote share or term-limit status.

Conclusion

This study examines how politically embedded policy implementers respond to competing sources of authority in environments characterized by overlapping administrative and political control. By randomly varying the identity of the principal issuing an accountability signal, we show that officials responded to a national agency with formal administrative authority but not to an otherwise identical signal from municipal mayors whose influence rests largely on informal patronage. Citizens in those villages also came to see their local government more favorably.

More broadly, this study points to an understudied class of political actors who operate at the intersection of administration and politics, implementing policy while navigating electoral incentives, patronage networks, and political competition. Their responsiveness cannot be read off hierarchy or elections alone. It depends on how the principals above them compare on substitutability, credibility, and the capacity to act on what they learn, which is a question about the setting rather than a fact about patronage. In ours, the formal channel proved the harder one to ignore.

Finally, our findings speak to debates about governance reform and public service delivery. The broader police reforms these letters accompanied largely failed to move crime and public safety outcomes, as noted above, yet local officials proved willing to respond when the demand came through the right channel. Implementation failures cannot be attributed solely to local non-compliance. They may instead reflect the institutional pathways through which reforms are channeled.

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Supporting Information (SI)

*Which Principals Matter? Accountability When Local Officials Answer to
Both Bureaucrats and Politicians*

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A Background for the intervention

The research analyzed in this article was conducted as part of a broader exploration of community policing under the Evidence in Governance and Politics Metaketa IV initiative. In the Metaketa project, teams of researchers designed and implemented community policing interventions in six lower-income countries around the world, including the Philippines. In each country, the research team worked with a local or national police agency to implement a “harmonized” intervention coordinated across all six countries as well as site-specific interventions. The accountability letters we analyze in this article were site-specific and designed specifically for the Philippines study. Field research for this project was conducted between 2017 and 2020, culminating in publication of the harmonized results [citations redacted for review].

Our relationship with the Philippine National Police in Sorsogon began in 2016, when we were working on other research in the province and were introduced to the Provincial Police Director, Ronaldo Cabral. A known reformer, PD Cabral was seeking to implement community policing style reforms to build trust between citizens and the PNP, and to provide more service-oriented policing rather than the militarized policing common in some other parts of the country. We formed a partnership that allowed our research team to tweak the design of existing reforms to better match strategies which existing research suggested should be successful, and to create additional reforms consistent with research on community policing. We also gained the ability to randomize the roll-out of these reforms and collect troves of administrative and survey data in order to evaluate the policies’ effects.

The Sorsogon study proceeded in two phases. A community engagement program, built around officer foot patrols and citizen outreach, ran first in early 2017, and the problem-oriented policing program analyzed here followed from December 2017 through May 2018. All 198 treatment barangays received both phases, so prior exposure to the community engagement program is identical across the accountability-letter conditions studied in this article.

In addition to the accountability letters, POP teams were subject to a second, independently randomized design feature: half of the 198 teams were assigned two PNP officers to participate alongside the barangay officials, while the remaining teams consisted solely of barangay officials. Both the presence of PNP officers and, among teams that included them, the identity of the specific officers assigned were randomized; the participating barangay officials were not. We do not analyze the effects of this design feature in the present article.

B Intervention: Accountability Letter Text

Dear Barangay Captain LASTNAME,

I hope this letter finds you well. Our office is contacting you regarding the One Sorsogon RELOADED Program that uses problem-oriented policing (POP) strategies to improve public safety in your barangay. The (DILG/MAYOR’S OFFICE) is highly committed to ensuring local safety, reducing crime, and increasing trust in our local security officials, and so we are fully supportive of the program.

As part of our commitment to One Sorsogon Reloaded, the (DILG/MAYOR'S OFFICE) has asked to receive monthly updates from Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) on the activities of your barangay's POP Team. We have asked for information on:

1. Meeting attendance
2. The problems that you are addressing
3. The specific solutions you have chosen to address these problems
4. The use of discretionary funds

We want to ensure that your barangay receives the greatest possible benefits from participating in the One Sorsogon Reloaded program. Throughout its implementation, research partners at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) will provide us with updates on the POP activities in barangay [BARANGAY NAME].

We at the [DILG/MAYOR'S OFFICE] are eager to see the flagship One Sorsogon Reloaded program succeed, and we look forward to supporting barangays that demonstrate effective implementation of the program. Remember that our office's support for your barangay depends on your effective participation in programs like One Sorsogon Reloaded. Thank you for your full support and commitment to improving public safety and barangay public service.

Truly yours,

FIRSTNAME LASTNAME Provincial Director Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG)

C Survey sampling procedures

For the surveys of civilians, we used as our sampling frame the list of registered voters in each barangay, which the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) provided. Voter registration rates in Sorsogon are above 85 percent, making this a reasonable approximation of all adult residents. For the baseline survey which occurred before the POP intervention, we randomly selected 10 respondents per barangay. We partnered with the Sorsogon office of Innovations for Poverty Action, a global research firm, to field the survey. Locally-hired enumerators went to each barangay and attempted to interview the selected individuals. If the selected individual's household could not be located, the enumerator moved on to the next randomly-selected name. If the enumerator located the selected individual's household, but the respondent was unavailable and not expected to return in the same day (or was unwilling to participate), the enumerator interviewed an available adult member of the same household. For the endline, we first attempted to re-contact the individuals surveyed at baseline. Enumerators succeeded in interviewing 63.9 percent of baseline respondents. We then randomly selected additional respondents in each barangay from the list of registered voters and contacted them using the same procedures as used during baseline until we had achieved 15 responses per barangay. Respondents were not compensated for their participation. Nearly all surveys occurred in the respondent's home.

D Descriptive statistics

Attendance is measured as the number of local officials present at each meeting. Although each POP team formally consisted of six members, additional barangay government members frequently attended meetings without invitation. To avoid penalizing barangays that complied by sending only invited members and to prevent undue influence from outliers, we recode the 15 percent of meetings with more than six attendees as having six attendees.

Table D.1: Descriptive statistics for meeting-level data

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Attendance	1,354	4.7	1.1	1	6
Delay (minutes)	1,352	23.6	30.4	0	350
Meeting quality	1,353	8.5	1.0	5	10
Mayor vote share (barangay)	1,464	53.4%	14.8%	14.6%	90.6%
Letter-Mayor	1,354	.33	.47	0	1
Letter-DILG	1,354	.33	.47	0	1

Table D.2: Descriptive statistics for survey data (panel respondents)

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Trust (government)	1,862	.97	.94	-2	2
Fairness (government)	1,832	.71	.97	-2	2
Effectiveness (government)	1,860	.87	.96	-2	2
Rights (government)	1,824	.69	1.00	-2	2

E Additional Results

Table E.1 recreates the results from Table 1, column 3 in the main text but adds enumerator fixed effects to rule out the possibility that in spite of extensive training, differences between enumerators obscured an actual effect of either letter on meeting quality. Just as in the original specification shown in the main text, we fail to find evidence that either letter affected meeting quality even after adding enumerator fixed effects to the model.

Table E.2 recreates the regressions from Table 1, columns 1-3 but uses data from the first three meetings instead of the final four meetings. These regressions are used as a placebo test, since the treatment assignment should not be correlated with outcomes for meetings that occurred before the treatment was implemented (between meetings 3 and 4). As expected, there is no evidence of an effect of the letters on outcomes during these meetings.

Table E.3 presents the effects of each letter on the pre-registered citizen outcomes covering experiences with public safety and with the PNP, using data from a panel of civilians

Table E.1: Effects of Accountability Letters on Meeting Quality (Enum. FE)

	(1)
	Quality
Letter-Mayor	-0.000940 (0.0856)
Letter-DILG	-0.00489 (0.0797)
Observations	759
R^2	0.401

OLS with barangay-clustered SE in parentheses.

Includes enumerator fixed effects.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Table E.2: Effects of Accountability Letters on Meeting Quality (Placebo)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	LGU Attend	Delay	Quality
Letter-Mayor	-0.0749 (0.104)	-3.495 (3.413)	0.132 (0.131)
Letter-DILG	0.0572 (0.100)	-2.014 (3.385)	0.164 (0.129)
Observations	594	593	594
R^2	0.216	0.010	0.007

OLS with barangay-clustered SE in parentheses.

Includes controls for cross-randomized alternative treatments.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

who answered the survey both before and after the treatment was implemented. We find no evidence that either letter affected these outcomes.

Table E.3: Effects of Accountability Letters on Citizen Attitudes and Public Safety (Panel Respondents)

	(1) Victimization	(2) Future Insecurity	(3) Satisfaction	(4) Reporting	(5) Intentions	(6) Capacity
Letter-Mayor	0.0150 (0.0438)	0.0580 (0.0631)	0.0875 (0.0638)	0.0268 (0.0354)	0.0862 (0.0544)	0.0857 (0.0668)
Letter-DILG	0.0929 (0.0610)	0.0327 (0.0628)	0.0230 (0.0638)	0.00888 (0.0377)	-0.0349 (0.0607)	0.0277 (0.0723)
Observations	1853	1827	1842	1858	1842	1833
R^2	0.077	0.042	0.056	0.070	0.073	0.088

OLS with barangay-clustered SE in parentheses. Controls for outcome at baseline and cross-randomized alternative treatment.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Since we were only able to re-contact about 2/3 of respondents, there is a chance that differential attrition could bias the results. In Table E.4 we show results using the endline cross-section of respondents, which consisted of the recontacted individuals plus several thousand new randomly-selected respondents. Consistent with Table E.3, we find no evidence that either letter affected pre-specified outcomes using the full sample at endline, without controlling for the outcome level at baseline as we do in our main specifications.

Table E.4: Effects of Accountability Letters on Citizen Attitudes and Public Safety (Endline Cross-Section)

	(1) Victimization	(2) Future Insecurity	(3) Satisfaction	(4) Reporting	(5) Intentions	(6) Capacity
Letter-Mayor	-0.00238 (0.0308)	-0.0200 (0.0512)	0.000980 (0.0570)	0.0345 (0.0320)	0.0707 (0.0507)	0.0320 (0.0584)
Letter-DILG	0.0542 (0.0401)	-0.00614 (0.0518)	-0.0582 (0.0571)	-0.0110 (0.0297)	-0.0286 (0.0508)	-0.0234 (0.0630)
Observations	4381	4340	4366	4386	4363	4346
R^2	0.002	0.002	0.001	0.002	0.003	0.003

OLS with barangay-clustered SE in parentheses.

Controls for cross-randomized alternative treatments.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

We might also want to know whether there was an overall difference between being treated with either version of the letter and being assigned to the control condition. In Table E.5, we pool the mayor and DILG letters into a single dummy variable, coded 1 if the barangay received either letter and 0 if it was in the control condition. We find no evidence

that accountability letters had an overall effect on attitudes about or experiences with public safety, or attitudes about the police.

Table E.5: Effects of Accountability Letters on Citizen Attitudes and Public Safety

	(1) Victimization	(2) Future Insecurity	(3) Satisfaction	(4) Reporting	(5) Intentions	(6) Capacity
Letter-either	0.0537 (0.0390)	0.0455 (0.0549)	0.0556 (0.0558)	0.0179 (0.0315)	0.0262 (0.0497)	0.0570 (0.0601)
Observations	1860	1834	1849	1865	1849	1840
R^2	0.077	0.042	0.055	0.070	0.069	0.087

OLS with barangay-clustered SE in parentheses.

Controls for outcome at baseline and cross-randomized alternative treatments.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Table E.6 tests whether the municipal mayor's political capital, measured by his or her vote share in the most recent elections, moderates the mayor letter's impact on meeting-level outcomes. Neither the mayor's vote share nor the mayor letter influences the three outcomes. The DILG letter's positive effects on meeting attendance and start time delays persist.

Table E.6: Effects of Accountability Letters on Meeting Outcomes by Mayoral Vote Share

	(1) LGU Attend	(2) Delay	(3) Quality	(4) LGU Attend	(5) Delay	(6) Quality
Letter-Mayor	0.114 (0.102)	-2.465 (2.877)	0.0593 (0.120)	0.357** (0.157)	-1.339 (5.278)	0.301* (0.170)
Letter-DILG	0.223** (0.0990)	6.207** (2.907)	0.00618 (0.119)	0.464*** (0.132)	9.469** (4.703)	0.228 (0.160)
Mayor Vote Share	0.393 (0.325)	-3.749 (10.16)	-0.430 (0.405)	-0.0431 (0.412)	-1.688 (15.44)	-0.157 (0.527)
Captain Centrality				-0.000777 (0.00180)	0.0764 (0.0510)	0.00103 (0.00216)
Observations	760	759	759	314	314	314
R^2	0.265	0.029	0.042	0.345	0.051	0.069

OLS with barangay-clustered SE in parentheses.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

F Ethics

All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the participating universities [protocol numbers redacted for review]. All survey respondents provided informed consent before participating, and participation was voluntary.

The accountability letters informed barangay captains that a principal with authority over their barangay was attending to their participation, and that its continued support depended in part on that participation. We took seriously that this placed a form of pressure on officials whose standing depends on these relationships. Three features of the setting bounded that concern. The letters altered no formal responsibilities, material incentives, or program resources, and specified no sanction. Both the DILG and the municipal mayors had endorsed the reform before any letter was sent, and it is routine for both to express an interest in barangay performance on programs of this kind, so each letter conveyed a position its sender already held.

The letters originated with our implementing partners rather than with us. After observing low attendance by key team members at early meetings, the PNP asked that the DILG and the municipal mayors write to barangay captains to reinforce the program's importance. We approached both principals, who agreed.

The letters named our implementing partner as the channel through which each principal would receive monthly updates, which placed the research operation in a role connected to the accountability relationship we study. What the letters described concerned the official activities of public officials in a government program that both principals sponsored: meeting attendance, the problems teams selected, the solutions they adopted, and the use of discretionary funds. Attendance and meeting quality were recorded at the level of the team rather than the individual, so no measure implicated a particular official. Research data proper never crossed to either principal. Citizen survey responses and enumerator assessments of meeting quality formed no part of what the letters described and were not shared.

Partnering with a police agency on the broader community policing initiative required consideration of several further ethical questions, including the conduct of policing research during the Philippine drug war and the exclusion of areas where insurgent presence made the intervention unsafe. We discuss our process for assessing these questions at length in the supporting information to related work, and the ethics of research partnerships with police agencies more broadly in [citations redacted for review].

G Pre-Analysis Plans

Two pre-analysis plans are relevant to this study, both available online [links redacted for review]. The first is a multi-country plan for the harmonized community policing study conducted across six country sites. The second is a country-specific plan for the Philippines component of that larger study. [For the purpose of journal review, we append blinded versions of both plans below.] The final versions of both plans were filed in January 2020. The gap between our endline survey and the filing date reflects the fact that ours was the first country intervention implemented in the larger study. The steering committee needed to incorporate details of interventions rolled out later, and asked all teams to hold off on

uploading plans until that process was complete. In accordance with this arrangement, we were restricted from downloading any data until the plans were filed.

Because these plans cover pre-registered analyses for multiple papers, we note below where the material relevant to this article is located, and how we implemented it, including some minor deviations.

G.1 Guide to the plans

- The accountability-letter intervention is described in the intervention section of the country-specific plan, which specifies that treated teams receive a letter from either the mayor’s office or the DILG.
- The hypotheses are registered as a family under the header “Alternative Treatment 3: Accountability to Leadership” in the hypothesis table of the country-specific plan. Separate hypotheses cover meeting-level outcomes, the harmonized citizen outcomes, the context-specific citizen outcomes, and citizen perceptions of state legitimacy.
- The survey items composing the state legitimacy measure are listed in the outcomes table of the country-specific plan.
- The estimating equation and the clustering strategy are specified in the data analysis section of the country-specific plan. The method for index construction and for handling missing data in lagged outcomes is specified in the harmonized plan.

G.2 Administrative outcomes

Meeting attendance, meeting start time, and enumerator-rated meeting quality were all pre-registered as compliance outcomes for the accountability treatment.

We registered meeting timeliness expecting that teams under accountability pressure would begin their meetings on schedule. Our field observations indicated that timeliness traded off directly against attendance, as teams delayed starting in order to assemble members who had not yet arrived. Because attendance was the item the letters named, we interpret longer delays as evidence of effort to secure participation rather than as non-compliance. We note that this outcome admits the opposite reading.

G.3 State legitimacy

Citizen perceptions of government fairness, effectiveness, and respect for human rights were pre-registered as measures of state legitimacy under the same hypothesis family, drawn from the citizen survey and specified in the outcomes table of the country-specific plan.

G.4 Other citizen outcomes

The plans also registered a set of harmonized and context-specific citizen outcomes for the accountability treatment, covering incidence of crime, perceptions of safety, satisfaction

with the police, and reporting behavior. We report these in Table E.3 and find no evidence that either letter affected them.

G.5 Research design and estimation

Estimates are clustered at the barangay, the level of treatment assignment, and include controls for the cross-randomized arms described in Section A. Consistent with the country-specific plan, which notes an issue with the barangay-level blocking code, we do not include block fixed effects.

Two points of wording differ between the plans and this article. First, the pre-registered specification for these hypotheses controls for the outcome measured at what the plans call midline, the survey wave conducted after the community engagement phase and before the problem-oriented policing phase. Because that wave precedes the accountability treatment, we refer to it throughout this article as the baseline for simplicity. Second, the endline cross-sectional specification reported in Table E.4 is not pre-registered. We include it as a robustness check against concerns about differential attrition.