

CHAZEN INSTITUTE RESEARCH BRIEF

The Power of Knowledge: How Academic Research Informs Public Policy Decisions

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ There is value in conveying academic research for policymakers.
- ✓ Political leaders are willing to pay to learn the results of impact evaluations on key policies.
- ✓ Officials are more likely to update their beliefs if the information is from a large sample study.

Each year, studies evaluating key areas of government policy are published and circulated by leading institutions and scholarly journals. But do political leaders actually value these papers? And does this information sway their policy decisions?

In “[How Research Affects Policy: Experimental Evidence from 2,150 Brazilian Municipalities](#),” **Jonas Hjort, Chazen Senior Scholar at Columbia Business School**; Diana Moreira, assistant professor at UC Davis; Gautam Rao, associate professor at Harvard University; and Juan Francisco Santini, post-doctoral research fellow at Innovations for Poverty Action, suggest that providing research findings to political leaders in an accessible and informative way can lead to significant policy change.

Research

The researchers conducted two field experiments in collaboration with the National Confederation of Municipalities in Brazil, leveraging its access to 2,150 municipalities and the mayors who govern them. The experiments tested the mayors’ demand for research information and whether their beliefs changed after being presented with research findings about the impacts of a given policy.

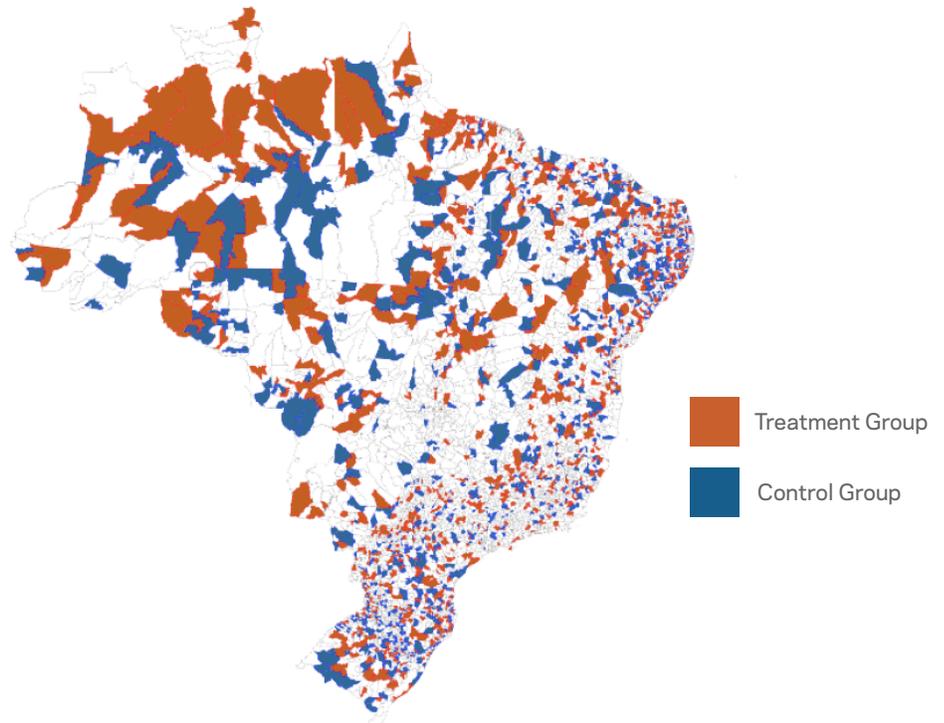
Brazil's municipalities provide an ideal setting to investigate how research affects policy practice because local government leaders hold roles that resemble heads of state in many countries. Brazilian mayors, for example, are directly elected and wield considerable de jure power over policy choices within their municipalities. In addition, over 90 percent raise tax revenues locally. The collaboration with the National Confederation of Municipalities provided the researchers with direct access to these municipal officials and enabled them to carry out experiments at the polity level.

Results

900 officials from 657 municipalities participated in the first experiment. While participants were initially ambivalent about the policy in consideration, an Early Childhood Development (ECD) program, they were willing to pay a fairly high amount — about \$36, on average — to find out the results of an impact evaluation of the ECD program. The researchers found that policymakers tended to update their beliefs about the effectiveness of the ECD program after learning the results of the impact evaluation. Officials were even more likely to update their beliefs if they held a college degree and, notably, if the official received a large sample study.

Where the studies were conducted also mattered. Studies conducted in developing countries similar to Brazil, as opposed to developed countries like

Policy-Adoption Experiment: Sample Municipalities



the United States, appeared to carry less weight in shifting their beliefs.

The second experiment invited half of the mayors of 1,818 Brazilian municipalities attending the National Confederation of Municipalities' annual convention to a research information session. The session included a presentation about a policy tool that would provide reminder letters to taxpayers to encourage them to comply with taxes. At the end of the session, officials were provided with a printed policy brief summarizing the information. The findings show a 33 percent increase among officials that attended the information session in

the probability they had implemented taxpayer reminders 15-24 months later.

The results of these two experiments provide some of the first direct evidence that political leaders are interested in, update their beliefs in response to, and ultimately act on new research findings.

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