

## **State, Society, and Informality in Cities of the Global South**

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Contemporary urbanization in the Global South merits greater attention from scholars of comparative politics. Governance, associational life, and political behavior take on distinctive forms in the social and institutional environments created by rapid urbanization, particularly within informal settlements and informal labor markets. In this special issue, we examine forms of collective action and claims-making in these spaces. We also consider how the state assesses, maps, and responds to the demands of informal sector actors. Tackling questions of citizen and state behavior in these informal urban contexts requires innovative research strategies due to data scarcity and social and institutional complexity. Contributors to this symposium explicate novel strategies for addressing these challenges, including the use of informal archives, worksite-based sampling, ethnographic survey design, enforcement process-tracing, and crowd-sourced data.

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Rapid urbanization raises important questions for our understanding of politics in the Global South. As of 2014, almost half of the developing world's population resides in urban areas (United Nations, 2015, p. 21); Latin America has been majority urban since the 1970s, and urban majorities are predicted for Africa and Asia by 2030 (Montgomery, 2008, p. 762). A remarkable 86% of future population growth is forecast to occur in cities in the developing world (Montgomery, 2008, p. 762). While much of this growth will occur in sprawling megacities, the world's most quickly expanding urban centers are small and medium-sized cities with fewer than one million inhabitants (United Nations, 2015, p. 20).

Alongside these dramatic demographic changes, political decentralization has established independent municipal governments and local elections in cities across much of the developing world, expanding the scope and significance of urban governance in the process.<sup>1</sup> Greater political contestation and governmental autonomy at the local level has been accompanied by shifts in resources and responsibilities. A large number of countries have empowered local governments to raise revenue and control the distribution of resources (World Bank & United Cities and Local Governments, 2008, p. 174). In addition, administrative responsibilities regarding water, sanitation, land market regulation, transportation, primary education, and policing often now reside with city governments or metropolitan agencies (World Bank & United Cities and Local Governments, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> Constitutional reforms in India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand have increased local government autonomy, and mayors are now elected in these and several other Asian countries (World Bank & United Cities and Local Governments, 2008, pp. 57–58). In Latin America, all countries except for Cuba hold municipal elections (World Bank & United Cities and Local Governments, 2008, p. 181). In sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of countries that hold regular national elections convene local government elections as well (Ndegwa, 2002).

Contemporary urbanization in the Global South merits greater attention from scholars of comparative politics both because of the scale of such changes and also because these urban areas represent *distinctive political spaces*. Cities of the Global South are typically more diverse in ethnic, religious, and class terms than the towns or villages from which new residents originate. Urban residents engage with a wider array of associations and institutions than their counterparts in the countryside, and interactions between citizens, associations, and state entities generate complex social and political networks in cities. The study of these distinctive political and social landscapes produces acute methodological and data collection challenges that demand innovations in research design. In addition, a focus on urban spaces in developing countries may require us to significantly refine—or even altogether reconfigure—many core theories in comparative politics.

While many aspects of this urban transformation deserve attention, we suggest that it is particularly important for scholars to examine the politics of “informal” urban actors and spaces.<sup>2</sup> Most prominently, these include informal sector workers and the unplanned, largely unregulated informal settlements—often referred to as “slums”—where substantial portions of the population in developing cities live. Informality is perhaps *the* distinguishing feature of contemporary urban life in the Global South, as it distinguishes these urban areas both from rural areas and from urban areas in high-income countries. A stunning 862 million people now reside

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<sup>2</sup> The informal sector is generally understood as economic and development activities that are untaxed and unregulated by the state. This would include unregulated or unregistered businesses, as well as settlements and infrastructure that were built outside of state regulations. The term “informal economy” was first used by Hart (1973) in his description of the Ghanaian economy, and as Castells and Portes (1989, p. 11) note, it is a “common-sense notion” with “moving social boundaries,” which makes precise definition difficult. A broader conception of informality could incorporate informal institutions (see Helmke & Levitsky, 2004), unofficial or unregulated practices (e.g., Roy, 2009; McFarlane, 2012), or “flexibility, negotiation, or situational spontaneity that push back against established state regulations and the constraints of the law” (Boudreau & Davis, 2017, p. 155).

in slums worldwide (UN-HABITAT, 2013), and much of this population lacks tenure security and access to basic services (de Soto, 2000; UN-HABITAT, 2003). Large segments of the urban poor toil in informal economies that are characterized by wage insecurity and a lack of social benefits; informal sector employment comprises more than half of total employment in the developing world (see Bacchetta, Ernst, & Bustamante, 2009, p. 27).<sup>3</sup>

Conducting research in such settings presents methodological and theoretical challenges, which are the focus of this special issue. These challenges are two-fold. First, scholars conducting research in the urban informal sector must develop research strategies that are appropriate to settings characterized both by social and institutional complexity and by acute data scarcity. For instance, measuring the degree of ethnic diversity in a city or neighborhood, which some might expect to be straight-forward, can pose problems due to shifts in the definition and salience of particular identities in urban contexts. Similarly, representative sampling is difficult when there are few reliable data sources with which to construct sampling frames and when high rates of population mobility quickly render existing information obsolete.

Second, these novel empirical terrains may challenge existing theories about the causes and consequences of political action. For example, much of the literature on collective action and social movements stresses how long-entrenched informal institutions, shared identities, and social capital translate latent grievances into collective action (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000; Krishna, 2002; Bowles & Gintis, 2004; Tsai, 2007). The factors that explain citizen coordination may differ in urban contexts characterized by rapid population turnover and high levels of social

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<sup>3</sup> In countries as diverse as Bolivia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Tanzania, informal employment makes up more than 75% of total non-agricultural employment (International Labor Organization, 2014, p. 9).

diversity. Absent common identity or a shared political language, political action may depend to a greater degree on individual self-interest (Portes, 1972; Roberts & Portes, 2006).

This symposium takes up these methodological and theoretical challenges. This introductory essay sets out a research agenda on the politics of urban informality in the contemporary Global South and argues that such research can generate theoretical insights of broad relevance to scholars of comparative politics. It illustrates the potential analytic gains of such research with examples from Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The primary aim of each of the component papers that follow is methodological. These four essays describe new research strategies generated in the context of research on urban informality, each of which has applicability in comparative politics outside the empirical setting where it was developed. These strategies include consulting “informal” archives; conducting worksite-based sampling of hard-to-reach populations; engaging in process tracing of government efforts to enforce laws; and using crowd-sourced data to track service provision by bureaucrats. In addition, each component paper delves into an example of either “bottom-up” or “top-down” politics as it relates to urban informality. Drawing on research in India, Colombia, and Turkey, these papers variously examine the forms of collective action and claims-making that emerge from within informal settlements and labor markets, or consider how the state assesses, maps, and responds to the demands of informal sector actors.

In the remainder of this introductory essay, we first show how urbanization in the Global South has generated a distinct environment characterized by great social and institutional complexity—complexity that takes on a particularly stark form in informal settlements and labor markets. We then illustrate how considering urban informality can help scholars of comparative politics pose new research questions and revisit classic theoretical debates from new

perspectives. Next, we outline the serious methodological challenges presented when conducting research in the urban informal sector and introduce the innovative research strategies developed by symposium contributors to address these difficulties. We conclude by highlighting the broad potential applications of these strategies.

## **I. Rapid Urbanization and Social and Institutional Complexity**

Between 2005 and 2010, the average annual urban population growth rates in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were 3.55%, 2.79%, and 1.55%, respectively (United Nations, 2015, pp. 253, 255, 259). If such rates continue, the urban population in these regions will double in approximately 20, 25, and 45 years, respectively. This rapid urbanization generates great social and institutional complexity in the Global South. By social complexity, we mean heightened ethnic and linguistic diversity, fluid population movement, and social and economic differentiation. By institutional complexity, we refer to environments in which governance and services are provided by overlapping institutions and across multiple jurisdictions, by large and complicated bureaucracies, and by both state and non-state actors. Both social and institutional complexity take on especially stark forms in the proliferating slums and informal labor markets of these cities, where varied institutional and associational arrangements have emerged to articulate and meet citizens' demands for representation and basic services. Below, we elaborate on how the nature of rapid urbanization in today's Global South generates social and institutional complexity and then explicate why these phenomena are especially acute in the informal sector.

### **A. Urban Population Growth and Social and Institutional Complexity**

Rapid population growth contributes to social complexity through several avenues. According to classic social theory, urbanization prompts social and economic specialization (

Wirth, 1938, pp. 20–21; Simmel, 1950, pp. 416–417, 420). Whereas individual behavior and interactions with non-community members may be tightly regulated in villages, “traditional” forms of social control are often weaker in cities, facilitating the emergence of new identities.<sup>4</sup> Cities also pull migrants from what are often large and diverse hinterlands, resulting in greater social diversity than observed in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> And while village economies are typically too small to support significant economic specialization, larger urban economies support differentiated markets and allow for employment mobility over a worker’s lifetime.

Rapid population growth also fuels institutional complexity in cities in the Global South. As cities expand in size, they often spread outwards, spilling over existing municipal boundaries into adjacent villages or towns. Over time, this process creates politically fragmented metropolitan areas, as existing jurisdictions tend to resist efforts at amalgamation or the creation of metropolitan regional authorities that would curb their political power. For example, 350 urban areas in East Asia contain multiple political jurisdictions, 135 of which have no overarching city authority (World Bank, 2015, p. 56); metropolitan areas are also highly fragmented in Latin America (Nickson, 1995). These political divisions complicate efforts to regulate urban development and deliver basic services (Stren & Cameron, 2005). Parallel efforts to create legally independent service providers focusing on particular sectors—a common product of state reform programs promulgated by development banks and international aid agencies during the 1990s—further fragment metropolitan areas in the Global South (see Herrera & Post, 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> In some settings, traditional identities and modes of social control may be adapted to urban settings, and retain much of their force (e.g., Cohen, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> These observations date back to the Chicago School of Sociology, and have been noted across world regions (see Erdentug & Colombijn, 2002). Note, however, that cities vary in levels of ethnic and racial mixing at the neighborhood level (e.g., Schensul & Heller, 2011).

Urbanization also encourages governments to develop more complex bureaucracies to deliver basic services. Kuznets (1966, p. 103) famously argued that urbanization necessitated a bigger governmental apparatus, especially to regulate and provide the services underpinning markets. Relatedly, urban population densities require infrastructure of greater scale and sophistication, which in turn require more elaborate bureaucracies to administer them. For instance, cities need highly developed infrastructure to extract, treat, and transport water from multiple sources, as compared to the relatively simple well technologies typically used in rural areas.

### **B. Social and Institutional Complexity under Urban Informality**

The social and institutional complexity produced through rapid urbanization takes on a particularly stark form in informal labor markets and settlements. Informal labor markets and settlements in cities of the Global South commonly experience rapid population turnover and movement, which accentuates the complexity of urban social life.<sup>6</sup> Seasonal migrants often arrive in cities to work for fixed periods, only to return to their rural homes at harvest time or when urban employment opportunities diminish. Thachil (this volume) notes that the seasonal migrant population is estimated to exceed 100 million people in India alone. China is home to a similarly large “floating population” of migrant laborers; of the estimated 750 million city dwellers in China, approximately 250 million lack the registration (*hukou*) that allows for legal urban employment and residence (Li, Chan, & He, 2014). Sub-Saharan African countries also exhibit robust circular migration between cities and rural areas (e.g., Ferguson, 1999; Potts, 2011). Informal labor and commercial markets within cities can bring together workers, buyers,

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<sup>6</sup> Extensive population movement can also occur in rural settings (see World Bank, 2009, p. 153).



and sellers from diverse regional and/or ethnic origins (Grossman & Honig, 2017; Thachil, 2017). In such contexts, low-skilled migrants must often intensely compete, face-to-face, for work in construction, street vending, and other trades (e.g., Thachil, 2017).

Even when migrants settle permanently in urban areas, they do not necessarily stay rooted in one place within a city.<sup>7</sup> In Latin America, for example, even though permanent migration to cities is common (Nelson, 1976; Gilbert, 1998, p. 41), poor residents are increasingly forced to migrate within urban areas, often as a result of crime and violence (Sánchez, 2013; Cantor & Rodríguez Serna, 2017). There and elsewhere, rising housing and land prices, as well as evictions by the state or non-state actors, displace poorer residents to peripheral areas, destabilizing social networks and access to labor markets in the process. Settlements are often located on marginal land vulnerable to natural or manmade hazards such as landslides, earthquakes, and industrial pollution, which can prompt sudden and substantial shifts in the social composition of neighborhoods. Finally, communal conflict can generate movement and at times increased segregation within urban spaces, perhaps undermining those features of urban life that promote ethnic integration (e.g., Field, Levinson, Pande, & Visaria, 2008).

Urban population growth and movement also fuels institutional complexity in informal labor markets and settlements. Informal economies are characterized by an extremely diverse set of market governance institutions and trade networks.<sup>8</sup> While some of these institutions have written charters and rules, others constitute informal institutions according to Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) definition: rules are unwritten, yet members are aware of them and sanction violations. These institutions arise to facilitate contracting and economically beneficial exchange

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<sup>7</sup> For example, a large survey of economically diverse residents in eleven Nigerian cities found that 30% of respondents had moved within the past 5 years (December 2010 data collected by Adrienne LeBas; see Bodea & LeBas (2016) for more details).

<sup>8</sup> See Breman (1996); Gill (2012); Grossman (2016).

between strangers in a chaotic, often changing urban environment. This is in contrast to the formal sector, where formal institutions and the rule of law facilitate exchange, and also in contrast to rural or village settings where direct personal relationships are possible (Mitchell, 1969; Greif, 1993; Clark, 1994). In addition, informal economic activity by definition lies at the margins of the tax and regulatory reach of government agencies (Castells & Portes, 1989). As informal economies are not officially “seen” by the state, attempts to tax and regulate these businesses are likely to be unofficial, less predictable, and more uneven than the state’s efforts in formal areas of the economy (Joshi, Prichard, & Heady, 2014; Goodfellow, 2015). In addition, informal businesses may face attempts at regulation and extraction from non-state actors, such as community organizations and criminal gangs.

Informal settlements also lie largely outside the regulatory reach of the state, contributing to institutional complexity. Land in slums is typically occupied rather than purchased on the legal market, and structures are built without legal permissions or approvals. Service providers, already stretched thin in developing cities, often refrain from making infrastructure investments in informal settlements that may be razed by future governments. For these reasons, O’Donnell (1993) famously classified slums—along with peripheral provinces and other areas with little effective state penetration—as “brown areas.”

This uneven and intermittent formal state presence creates an opportunity for a wide variety of non-state actors to emerge to channel or meet citizens’ needs for basic services. For example, in many slums in the developing world, policing is carried out by vigilante groups, private militias, and gangs operating alongside and/or in competition with one another and government security forces (Davis, 2010; LeBas, 2013; Hidalgo & Lessing, 2015; Moncada, 2016). Private entrepreneurs and cooperatives commonly provide households with water and

electricity, often siphoned off from state networks (see Post, Bronsoler, & Salman, 2017). NGOs (Brass, 2016), organizations with informal ties to political parties (Thachil, 2014), and community developments associations ( Stacey & Lund, 2016; Auerbach, 2017) can also step in to substitute for or supplement state services. In less coordinated ways, residents of informal settlements sometimes even generate illicit and haphazard patchworks of water and electricity connections to link themselves to city grids. Just as improvised service provision arrangements vary significantly from community to community, so do organized efforts to pressure political authorities (e.g., Gay, 1994; Stokes, 1995; Jha, Rao, & Woolcock, 2007; Heller, Mukhopadhyay, Banda, & Sheikh, 2015; Auerbach, 2016). As Lund (2006) points out, the existence of multiple authority claimants, services providers, and taxing entities generates a context of intense institutional competition -- with uncertain effects on citizens' orientation to the state itself.

## **II. The Politics of Urban Informality**

The complex social and institutional environments found in informal settlements and labor markets in the Global South provide fertile terrain for revisiting important themes in comparative politics. In the first instance, studying slums and informal labor markets can lead us to think differently about “bottom up” forms of collective action and claims-making, such as mobilization and clientelistic exchanges for public services. In addition, considering state responses to urban informality can shed new light on “top down” politics, such as the politicized allocation of services and infrastructure, regulatory enforcement, and the behavior of government bureaucracies. In this section, we argue that the distinctive features of urban informal environments may require scholars to revisit conventional approaches to a variety of bottom up and top down processes, as well as interactions between them. We provide a number of examples

of how a focus on urban informality could shape the study of key scholarly questions; a few of these are explored in depth in the constituent papers of this special issue.

### **A. Urban Informality, Claim-making, and Collective Action**

Informal settlements and labor markets provide key settings in which to examine classic questions of bottom up politics, including collective action, political organization, and claims-making. We take as points of departure some of the distinctive features of these informal settings, both social and institutional. Focusing on these factors points to ways in which we might reconsider many debates within comparative politics.

A central feature of informal urban spaces is ethnic diversity. Scholars have recently devoted a great deal of attention to the effects of diversity on local public goods provision, but we know less about the ways in which diversity and the new identities that emerge in urban settings shape social organization and claims-making. Does diversity hinder collective mobilization (Banerjee, Iyer, & Somanathan, 2005; Habyarimana, Humphreys, Posner, & Weinstein, 2009; Khwaja, 2009), or are there conditions under which differences can be bridged or simply made less important? Recent studies find that ethnic preferences are often contingent, shaped by election timing, class status, and neighborhood diversity (Marx, Stoker, & Suri, 2015; Michelitch, 2015; Grossman & Honig, 2017). This may be especially true in informal urban areas. Thachil speaks to this question by examining the degree to which informal sector workers in urban India are willing to cooperate across ethnic lines. His community of focus—circular migrants who reside in their home villages part of the year and also spend months at a time living in large urban areas—are a large and heretofore understudied group in the Global South. He shows how these migrants work and live across traditional ethnic divisions when they are in the city.

A focus on urban informality also prompts us to consider how the fluidity of social and political hierarchies in these spaces affect patterns of collective action. Is it more or less difficult for communities to mobilize to obtain benefits from the state when traditional social hierarchies are less strictly followed, as is frequently the case in urban areas? How does diversity and population movement impact the structure of patron-client networks and party-voter linkages? Under what circumstances do political elites intentionally foment collective action challenging the status quo? Recent experimental work, for instance, shows that residents of India's impressively diverse slums wield substantial agency and choice in selecting their informal leaders, and are willing to seek help from and follow non-coethnic slum leaders; in particular, those slum leaders with the capacity to successfully petition the state for public services (Auerbach & Thachil, 2017). Branch and Mampilly (2015) suggest that shared economic grievances can knit together diverse groups in urban Africa and allow for the organization of large-scale urban protests. Auyero (2006, 2007), meanwhile, illustrates how elites may encourage collective action among the urban poor when they feel it will help them gain the upper hand in factional struggles or allow them to avoid blame for disruptions to the flow of clientelistic handouts.

The complex and variegated institutional environments in the urban informal sector also create an opportunity to enrich existing theories of citizen claims-making. For example, one key source of institutional complexity—land tenure insecurity in informal settlements—suggests a new approach to the study of clientelism. Standard models of clientelism focus on “positive” inducements for voters to support particular politicians (see Mares & Young, 2016), yet negative inducements may have significant effects on urban voters. For example, a voter who fears eviction may find it harder to sanction a poorly performing politician than a voter without those

fears. To date, the few scholars who have engaged with this point offer contrasting accounts. Studying poor Mexico City neighborhoods during the 1970s, Eckstein (1977, p. 80) found that the urban poor mobilized more effectively and secured more benefits when they lacked title, as their needs were greater and neighborhood organizations had not yet been coopted by the dominant party, the PRI. More recently, however, Larreguy *et al.* (2015), find that rates of clientelism dropped following land titling in Mexico because voters were less susceptible to threats and thus freer to vote according to policy preferences. Although much contemporary work on clientelism examines urban environments, more work is needed to understand how informality itself affects the nature and prevalence of clientelism. Although not the focus of the essays in this symposium, we consider this a fruitful avenue for future research.

A further consequence of slums' great institutional complexity is that citizens can approach a wide array of institutions, intermediaries, and associations in their efforts to solve individual and collective problems. Notably, these institutional configurations can vary dramatically across informal settlements. In his classic study of political participation in PRI-dominated Mexico City during the 1970s, Cornelius (1975, p. 130) explicitly compared patterns of political participation and demand-making across neighborhoods, observing dramatic variation across them. Contemporary comparative politics scholarship on political participation in settings with more robust party competition could usefully examine whether community-level institutional characteristics explain variation in how citizens approach the state and the sorts of benefits communities extract from governments and political leaders.<sup>9</sup> A pending question is

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars can also examine the extent to which state-sponsored venues for citizen participation at the community and city level affect political participation by the urban poor (e.g., Heller & Evans, 2010).

whether institutional complexity makes it more or less difficult for residents to pursue remedies for their grievances.<sup>10</sup>

### **B. State Responses to the Informal Sector**

Focusing on urban informality in the Global South also prompts a reexamination of classic questions about how governments understand and respond to citizen grievances and pressures. Here, it is important to consider the actions not only of elected officials but also those of employees in large urban bureaucracies. Once again, we argue that distinctive features of informal settlements and labor markets, such as ethnic diversity and land tenure insecurity, may prompt reformulations of familiar questions in comparative politics.

We might consider, for instance, how high levels of ethnic diversity in cities affect incentives for politicians to engage in ethnic targeting when distributing state resources. While a large literature in African politics documents the prevalence of ethnic targeting, it is unclear whether these practices are effective in urban areas, since relatively integrated neighborhoods may make it harder to withhold goods from non-coethnics. In the short run, increasing ethnic diversity in urban areas may result in strategic action by both politicians and voters. For instance, minorities are more likely to abandon ethnic voting and support a rival ethnic group's party when ethnic demography would make their exclusion from clientelistic rewards difficult (Ichino & Nathan, 2013). Meanwhile, politicians in diverse constituencies can respond to this problem of non-excludability by shifting from the provision of public goods to private transfers to coethnics

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<sup>10</sup> Studying a Buenos Aires slum suffering from toxic exposure, Auyero and Swistun (2009) find that institutional complexity makes it difficult for community members to understand to whom they can direct their complaints, while in Santiago, Chile, community leaders in a slum point to the usefulness of NGOs, rather than political parties, in advancing environmental concerns (Roberts & Portes, 2006, pp. 67–68).

(Ejdemyr, Kramon, & Robinson, 2015).<sup>11</sup> In the long run, however, increasing urban diversity may erode ethnic clientelism. In Africa, urban voters are increasingly drawn to populist candidates who rely on cross-ethnic campaigns (Koter, 2013; Resnick, 2013). If politicians rely less on ethnicity in their search for support, there is a need to understand the strategies that may replace ethnic mobilization in urban areas.

The prevalence of tenure insecurity and informal employment also suggests that the politicized enforcement of zoning and labor law merits more attention from political scientists.<sup>12</sup> Politicians' decisions to grant titles or recognize slums can significantly affect the security and stress experienced by the urban poor, as well as their access to basic services (Heller et al., 2015). Government decisions to not enforce existing laws (against squatting, for example)—or “forebear”—can similarly affect citizens' livelihoods and politicians' careers (Holland, 2016). Under what circumstances do politicians have incentives to push bureaucrats to enforce regulations, and under what circumstances do they face incentives to forebear? To what extent does community mobilization affect the state's willingness to enforce laws? Bozçağa and Holland tackle these questions, investigating how electoral institutions affect the incentives for politicians and bureaucrats involved in different stages of the enforcement process to either enforce or refrain from enforcing existing laws in urban informal spaces.

Finally, it is important to consider how government bureaucracies that deliver public services in cities in the Global South relate to informal settlements. How can the heads of large, complex agencies effectively monitor their employees and their contacts with citizens, especially when there is little information about who receives services and when? Can they establish more

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<sup>11</sup> Reliance on these strategies may vary even within a single city (Nathan, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> This question has attracted greater attention from other fields; see for example Cross (1998) and Davis (2013) on the role of government officials under a one-party regime and business elites, respectively, in regulating street vending in Mexico.



direct links with citizens to learn about their preferences and the perceived performance of their organizations? This is the focus of the paper by Post, Agnihotri, and Hyun in this symposium. The chain linking service providers and citizens is even more complicated in informal settlements that lie outside formal service delivery networks. In Sub-Saharan Africa and Indonesia, for example, utility employees or elected officials often accept payoffs in exchange for arranging for utility bulk water to be informally “sold” to private firms, which distribute water in informal settlements (Kjellén & McGranahan, 2006, p. 13; Keener, Luengo, & Banerjee, 2010, p. 18; Kooy, 2014, pp. 43–47). This points to ways in which “bottom up” efforts by local actors affect the activities of state agencies in informal settlements. While such relationships have received some attention in anthropology, geography, and urban studies (see Post, Bronsoler & Salman, 2017, p. 959), political scientists have devoted far less attention to them. In sum, scholars of comparative politics could gain new perspectives on classic questions regarding collective action, linkage strategies between politicians and citizens, and the politics of local public goods provision by considering urban informality and its defining features.

### **III. Research Design and Methodological Challenges in the Study of Urban Informality**

In the previous section, we pointed to two large conceptual arenas, citizen claims-making and state responses to that claims-making, in which greater attention to urban informality may generate new theoretical insights. But how exactly should researchers go about studying these dynamics? Low levels of state capacity and limited state engagement with the informal sector mean that states generally collect little data that could assist research on these themes. Meanwhile, the causes and manifestations of social and institutional complexity found in cities of the Global South—rapid urban population growth and movement, multi-focal institutional environments, and urban informality itself—present significant challenges for researchers

collecting their own data. Scholars therefore must devise creative strategies to address these obstacles. We outline these challenges in this section and preview efforts by our special issue contributors to address these challenges.

### **A. Research Challenges Stemming from Social Complexity**

Rapid population movement, ethnic diversity, and a weak state presence contribute to the great social complexity observed in informal settlements and labor markets in the Global South. State data collection efforts—rarely exemplary in the developing world—are particularly lacking in these contexts. The combination of social complexity and acute data scarcity presents significant challenges for researchers interested in studying informal sector politics.

Population data for the developing world is of poor quality, and data inadequacy is particularly acute for rapidly growing cities. Censuses are conducted infrequently and at highly irregular intervals, especially in much of Africa, so state data on urban populations quickly becomes obsolete. Even where states conduct regular censuses, data quality for informal labor markets and settlements is poor, since many informal sector workers and slum dwellers are not officially recognized by the state. Any official data that exists is likely to exhibit a dramatic downward bias (e.g., Tripp, 1997, p. xii).<sup>13</sup> When researchers try to collect data on these populations independently, population movement, poor information on the size or density of settlements, and lack of the basic data needed to stratify samples makes it difficult to identify subjects, develop sampling strategies, and capture representative samples. Thachil's paper underscores these difficulties. The circular migrants he studies are absent from state registries

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<sup>13</sup> The most extreme example of this can be found in China, where labor migrants often do not appear in official counts. This sampling problem is not limited to urban populations: transient and migratory populations, such as African pastoralists, are also difficult to sample. See Randall (2015).

both because they move back and forth between the city and the countryside and because they are informal sector workers. The locations of spot labor markets where they work are not officially recorded, making it difficult to construct an exhaustive list of locations from which to sample.

Informal urban settlements are also rarely mapped or surveyed by government agencies, presenting significant challenges for researchers. Both qualitative and survey researchers must devote time to establishing the informal boundaries that separate neighborhoods within settlements, as well as the distinct demographics associated with those neighborhoods. For survey researchers, the lack of baseline data makes it difficult to draw representative samples, and the absence of reliable maps means that sampling protocols can be prone to bias in favor of wealthier residents who live closer to main entrances and roads. Slum designation practices can be uneven across and within cities too, frustrating attempts to compare and combine data. For instance, Indian state and municipal governments sometimes only collect data on officially “recognized” slums, an older and more established subset of the full slum population (Krishna, 2013).

Rapid population movement speeds the obsolescence of state data and fuels social complexity, which complicates efforts at independent data collection. Settlements can appear suddenly through land invasions, often scheduled for politically opportune moments when authorities are less likely to engage in eviction (Gilbert, 1998) or through what Holston (2009) refers to as processes of “insurgent citizenship,” in which poor citizens remake the urban environment so as to demand inclusion and advance their rights and material interests. The scale and pace of these changes can frustrate even relatively capable state authorities attempting to regulate their populations. In her study of Bogotá, for instance, Bozçağa and Holland note that

officials are able to identify illegal land occupations from satellite images; however, when they arrive at the location, they often find that new construction has changed the physical landscape too markedly to identify the original violation.

The rapid pace of population change in slums presents particular problems for both comparative and longitudinal research designs. Where spot labor markets can pick up and follow mobile construction projects, informal settlements can be reshaped by state actions, or street vendors can be pushed out of public spaces, standard case selection procedures are difficult to employ. Spatial units selected for particular similarities or differences at one moment in time can therefore quickly change, undermining the logic of the original comparison and our ability to hold local factors constant over time. Alternatively, social networks may disregard neighborhood and administrative boundaries, complicating the assignment of treatments in experimental designs, as Post, Agnihotri, and Hyun describe in this special issue.

Because informal urban spaces and activities are vulnerable to state sanctions and removal and because the individuals who occupy these areas are often illiterate and transient, it is also difficult to gather the historical data necessary to trace temporal change. As Auerbach discusses in this special issue, the collection of historical information on informal urban settlements is difficult due to these volatile conditions and the absence of documentation in conventional state archives. These features of urban informality generate considerable obstacles to understanding how settlements diverge in terms of political order and development over time.

Ethnic diversity in informal settlements and labor markets also poses challenges for measuring the nature and the political salience of social identities over time and space. Standard questionnaires often focus on ascriptive identities but ignore class-based or other “cosmopolitan” identities that can emerge and inform political behavior in cities. For instance, survey

instruments in Africa typically ask respondents about their ethnic identity, religiosity, and marital status but rarely collect information on cross-ethnic marriage or the diversity of respondents' social networks. In India, the predominant focus on caste (*jati*) and religion ignores a range of identities in urban areas that flow from heterogeneity in language and even state of origin.

The contributors to this special issue employ a number of strategies in response to these challenges. Thachil's essay illustrates a creative response to the research design challenges posed by rapid population change in urban informal labor markets. Most rural migrants who work in construction find day jobs in specific marketplaces, leading Thachil to develop workplace-based sampling that uses an innovative lottery component. Since identities are often in flux for recent rural-to-urban migrants, he engaged in extensive ethnography to identify both an effective way to measure attachment to identity and the forms of cooperation for which ethnic and religious identities might be important for these individuals. Auerbach discusses the utility of "informal archives" to document slum politics. These are unmapped and non-systematized collections of materials held by individuals and groups in the spaces under study. They include community meeting notes, political pamphlets and posters, correspondence from officials, newspaper clippings, photographs of public events, and petitions for local development. These informal archives open possibilities for historical process tracing in marginalized urban environments and could be used to study a variety of phenomena that would not be documented in conventional archives.

### **B. Research Challenges tied to Informal Sector Institutional Environments**

Weak state capacity and dense, interlocking webs of institutions in the urban informal sector present further challenges for researchers. Government agencies providing services in urban areas often lack the resources to monitor the activities of their own "street level

bureaucrats.” For example, Post, Agnihotri, and Hyun describe how the Bangalore water utility employs hundreds of water “valvemen” to turn water on and off, placing these actors at the center of water distribution in the city. The utility, however, cannot afford sensors and therefore does not have accurate, real-time information on water flow. Municipal governments faced with new responsibilities but limited resources also rarely systematize data for publication or establish repositories that can be consulted by researchers. Even when governments possess and make data accessible to researchers, it may not be standardized and comparable with data produced by nearby municipalities.

This lack of information on the most basic forms of state activity is particularly stark in slums and informal labor markets due to the tenuous and varied nature of the state’s reach. Street level bureaucrats may arrive at informal agreements with slum leaders or worker associations regarding access to state services, which go unrecorded in official databases and system maps. For example, slum associations may rig unofficial connections to power lines, and pay electricity linemen to look the other way or inform them in advance of inspections so lines can be temporarily removed (e.g., Sverdlik, 2017). Researchers interested in understanding the on-the-ground activities of state agents and real allocation of state resources thus need to engage in original data collection, which may present special challenges due to citizens’ and state employees’ incentives to dissemble.

Researchers interested in understanding urban politics also contend with a proliferation of organizations and institutions within cities, which make it difficult to attribute political decisions and actions to the correct actors. The prevalence of “shared responsibility” between different tiers of government for numerous services described above presents difficulties for analysts. Even when responsibilities for urban services are not formally split, politicians from higher tiers

of government may still influence policymaking by withholding funds or exerting pressure through party hierarchies (e.g., Dickovick, 2005, pp. 190–191). To understand how decisions are made in such contexts, researchers must understand the various ways in which politicians and bureaucrats across different tiers of government intervene. For example, Bozçağa and Holland’s paper on regulatory enforcement in Colombia provides a telling example of how multiple, overlapping nodes of urban governance complicate our ability to understand who is responsible for non-enforcement of laws regarding slum clearance. The attribution of responsibility for services can be particularly difficult in the informal sector, due to the extensive participation of non-state actors in service delivery. When studying such contexts, scholars must develop nuanced maps of the roles played by a variety of state and non-state providers, and compile original data on their respective contributions.

The contributors to this special issue offer creative strategies to address some of these challenges. Post, Agnihotri, and Hyun demonstrate the opportunities, as well as the pitfalls, associated with using crowd-sourced data as a substitute for state data on public service delivery in informal settlements and more broadly. Because the Bangalore water utility itself does not know with precision where its water is being allocated, these authors turn first to crowd-sourced data on water arrival times to establish patterns of water allocation throughout the city. They also use these data to understand principal-agent problems within the water utility’s elaborate bureaucracy. These crowd-sourced data are then “ground-truthed” with information from other sources, such as surveys and qualitative research. Bozçağa and Holland’s paper presents a method for reconstructing processes of legal enforcement of eviction laws that allows researchers to distinguish a lack of enforcement due to political intent from that due to low state capacity.

“Enforcement process-tracing” involves comparing levels of enforcement at particular decision-making nodes with a hypothetical statistical distribution.

## **Conclusion**

Cities in the Global South offer substantial opportunities for theoretical and methodological innovation by scholars of comparative politics. These dramatically changing urban environments house a large and growing portion of the world’s population. They frequently exhibit greater social and institutional complexity than rural areas. This is especially true in slums and informal marketplaces, where institutions of urban governance collide with emergent non-state organizations that are built by urban residents to mitigate the pervasive risks of living and working in cities. The rapid expansion and variegated institutional landscapes of these spaces raise questions about whether central theories in comparative politics—on political participation, associational life, and state behavior, to name a few—retain explanatory power in urban settings.

In this introductory essay, we suggest that scholarship on two specific aspects of politics in informal settings is likely to generate important theoretical and empirical insights: patterns of association and claims-making among informal sector actors, and government efforts to understand and respond to the needs and demands of informal sector populations. These two themes motivate the four component papers that follow. Auerbach’s essay probes why some informal settlements have developed a greater political capacity to lobby the state for public services than others, while Thachil examines the circumstances under which workers in the urban informal sector are willing to collaborate across ethnic lines. Bozçağa and Holland’s essay studies the enforcement of laws affecting informal settlements and informal sector workers. Post, Agnihotri, and Hyun analyze the circumstances under which frontline workers within large urban



service bureaucracies comply with central mandates rather than taking their cues from the residents of low-income neighborhoods. As the symposium contributors highlight, there are important interactions between bottom-up and top-down processes.

Tackling such questions in informal spaces in the Global South not only raises new substantive insights but also involves grappling with significant research design and methodological challenges. Before research can be undertaken, scholars must confront the complicated social and institutional environment found in cities in the developing world. Data, especially on the existence and activities of informal sector actors, is also scarce. The primary focus of the contributions to the symposium that follow is to identify creative strategies for tackling these challenges. These include using crowd-sourced data to understand patterns of service delivery; worksite-based sampling; ethnographic survey design; the consultation of “informal archives”; and “tracing” the different stages of legal enforcement.

Though three of the four contributions to this symposium focus on urban India, they highlight phenomena and research strategies that are of relevance for much of the Global South. Informal settlements, as we have shown, are prevalent not only in India, but throughout the developing world. Informal employment is found throughout the Global South as well, comprising approximately 52% of total employment in Latin America, 78% of total employment in Asia, and 56% of total employment in Africa between 2000 and 2010 (Bacchetta et al., 2009, p. 27). Collective action and claims-making by informal sector workers and residents of informal settlement, as well as state responses to such mobilization, is thus an important object of inquiry across much of the developing world.

We expect the research strategies introduced in this symposium to be useful not only to scholars of urban informality, but to researchers studying diverse questions in a variety of

contexts. Post, Agnihotri, and Hyun, for instance, highlight opportunities afforded by new technologies such as crowd-sourced data. These data can substitute for absent or inaccurate information on public service delivery, providing previously unavailable information on the allocation of benefits and service quality. Social media posts or Twitter feeds can be used to obtain new perspectives on contentious politics. Crowd-sourced data can also potentially provide more accurate information about activities typically underreported to state agencies, such as crime and requests for bribes. Post, Agnihotri, and Hyun outline strategies that researchers can use to avoid inferential pitfalls when using such data and illustrates how their use can generate important analytic payoffs.

Informal archives of the sort Auerbach describes can be used not only to study urban subaltern populations, but also organizational evolution, bureaucratic politics, and social movement dynamics. As Auerbach notes, informal archives must be utilized with care, with researchers explicitly considering narrative biases and empirical gaps in collected historical materials, and addressing those biases and gaps through supplemental interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. He also presents and illustrates strategies for the systematic consultation of informal archives that build upon, yet depart from, common practices among scholars conducting research in formal archives.

Thachil's article presents two research strategies, each of which could be employed effectively outside of the urban informal sector. His worksite-based sampling approach could be employed to study individuals engaged in other types of common activities, such as participation in social organizations or religious establishments. His model of how to use ethnography to refine survey experiments should be useful to scholars examining marginalized or understudied populations. Though survey researchers often conduct focus groups to identify flaws or unclear

wording in their instruments, Thachil shows the value of ethnography to develop new measures or adapt existing ones to distinct contexts, especially for groups about which we know little or which possess substantially different backgrounds from that of the researcher.

Finally, Bozçağa and Holland's enforcement process tracing can be applied not only to urban policy but also to other policy domains where officials may have an incentive to manipulate outcome data, such as environmental or labor regulation. Their essay provides a guide for the types of data that should be collected, as well as a procedure for identifying the exact stage at which political influences upon regulatory enforcement occur. In sum, insights from this volume are useful for a wide range of topics in comparative politics.

As these papers all highlight, the difficulties confronted by researchers in urban settings spur innovation in theory and research design. Their substantive topics illustrate that important theoretical debates in comparative politics can be addressed productively at the urban scale. Contributors address subjects as diverse as distributive politics, regulatory enforcement, inter-ethnic cooperation, and local public goods provision. Revisiting these classic questions at a different geographic or jurisdictional scale can challenge existing theory, as scholars of subnational politics have suggested elsewhere (e.g., Snyder, 2001).

Other questions and new directions for future research remain. As Diane Davis suggests in her response in this special issue, the papers highlight the importance of topics often neglected by political scientists, such as informality and bureaucratic action, but they also downplay or possibly neglect other factors that independently shape the "top-down" or "bottom-up" politics of informality. We highlight a few of Davis's critiques as particularly fruitful for thinking about future directions for research on the urban informal sector.

Davis argues for greater contextualization of the processes discussed in this set of papers. She highlights that the papers place relatively little emphasis on the broader development goals and strategies of states, the impact of party systems and clientelism, and the roles played by time and space in shaping citizen strategies vis-à-vis- the state. To some extent, the individual papers in this special issue often shed light on one of these factors while ignoring others. Thus, Auerbach's explicitly historical account of contentious repertoires in informal settlements and Bozcaga's and Holland's analysis of regulatory forbearance are embedded in particular theories of time and path dependence, but neither engages with temporal discontinuities that may result from abrupt shifts in national politics or in development priorities. Both Post et al and Thachil provide nuanced accounts of the different preferences and coping strategies of citizens, arguing or implying that clientelism is not the main form of engagement between citizens and the state. This raises the question of why clientelism appears to be less important in these cases than elsewhere, given that political scientists focus overwhelmingly on clientelism when analyzing state-society interactions in developing democracies. The methodological innovations proposed in the papers in this special issue often prioritize the local over the national and contingent processes over fixed background features. How these different factors can be taken into account in research projects is a question of interest to political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists. We hope that this issue's articles make a case for cities in the Global South as especially interesting and productive places in which to wrestle with this question.

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