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In recent years, a number of political scientists have turned their attention to the study of taxation in low-income countries, where state capacity is weak. Much of this work has focused on citizen attitudes toward taxation and how weak states might expand their tax nets (e.g., Néstor Castañeda et al., “Opting out of the social contract: Tax morale and evasion,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(7), 2020). Tax compliance has also been the focus of a growing experimental literature, which includes my own work with Jessica Gottlieb and Janica Magat (e.g., Xiaobo Lü et al., “Do government accountability and responsiveness enhance support for property taxes? Experimental evidence from China,” *World Development*, 194, 2025; Pablo Balán et al., “Local elites as state capacity: How city chiefs use local information to increase tax compliance in the democratic republic of the Congo,” *American Economic Review*, 112(3), 2022; Jessica Gottlieb, Adrienne LeBas, and Janica Magat. “Taxation and Social Intermediaries: Experimental Evidence from Lagos, Nigeria,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 2025). We know less, however, about how tax bargaining is viewed from the government side, and there are two linked questions that deserve greater attention. First, why don’t cash-strapped governments invest in expanding direct taxation? Second, does increased reliance on taxation improve the quality of government and, especially, the provision of public goods?

Lucy Martin’s *Strategic Taxation: Fiscal Capacity and Accountability in African States* addresses both these questions and makes a valuable contribution to the emerging literature on tax in low-income countries. Martin argues that direct taxation induces a sense of income loss in citizens, making them more sensitive to the use of government revenue and more likely to protest when it is spent poorly. Martin goes beyond this question of citizen response to tax demands, which has been the heart of much recent work, to also interrogate how the expected responses of citizens might shape government strategy when it comes to tax policy. According to Martin, governments seek to safeguard rents and may forgo tax revenue if it triggers increased citizen monitoring and demands. Democratization and the institution of elections—to the extent that they increase citizens’ ability to sanction governments—may therefore result in less taxation.

The heart of Martin’s slim, punchy book is a formal model and a set of lab-in-the-field experiments that show how loss aversion and regime type shape citizen and government action. These chapters are followed by what

can be seen as extensions, in which the intuition laid out in the formal and experimental work is tested with observational data. The lab experiments were carried out in Uganda, where Martin also conducted additional fieldwork to which she returns in Chapter 7. Scholars of Africa and other comparativists may feel an impulse to jump over the heart of the book—the formal models and lab-in-the-field experiments—to get to more familiar and potentially more accessible empirical analysis in Chapters 6 and 7. This would be a mistake, as these chapters lay out the primary intuition and also raise questions that further research will need to address.

The lab experiments are designed to be suggestive of interactions between citizens and politicians and are used to shed light on when citizens will sanction poorly performing governments. Participants are assigned to either “citizen” or “leader” roles, and then play a distributional game, in which the leader allocates funds and the citizen is subsequently given a chance to punish them for the distributional choices made. Martin alters the structure of these games—mimicking “taxation” in one form and grants in another—in order to see how the experience of tax extraction affects participants’ willingness to sanction “leaders.” She finds that “taxed” participants are more sensitive to the amount that their partners redistribute and are more willing to punish at lower levels of redistribution, which Martin views as evidence that tax triggers feelings of loss aversion and accountability demand.

There are things I wish had been further explored within the context of the experiments and in the book more broadly. More specifically, in order to understand how these distributional games might map onto real-world claims-making, we would want to know more about participants’ baseline expectations of redistribution (in the game) or public goods delivery (in reality). If individuals do not have strong expectations that governments *should* provide services with tax revenue, punishment of leaders for non-delivery would seem less likely. Martin’s distinction between extraction that triggers feelings of income loss and “costs of doing business” seems quite pliable to me in practice. Generally, I would expect that lower-income citizens, those working in the informal sector, and those with less experience of state-provided services would probably be more likely to view most tax demands as fixed costs with little likely return on payment.

To me, the most interesting question is therefore what moves these kinds of individuals into *expectations* of government response and redistribution. Political engagement seems one route; greater social capital or, especially, experience of collective action seems additional pathways. In my current book project with Jessica Gottlieb, we suggest that individuals’ different relationships with social institutions and clientelism can also have significant effects on both their tax expectations and willingness to engage

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with the state. It would have been interesting to see these sources of individual heterogeneity explored in the games, and this would be one promising direction for future research. I also worry about the restrictive way in which Martin frames resistance: the structure of the game pushes individuals in the direction of sanctioning, whereas they may have employed other forms of resistance (e.g., tax evasion) if these had been available. Attention to evasion would also have brought Martin's work more productively in dialogue with current work on tax compliance.

The book might have also made better use of the fieldwork that Martin references, and it could have been more thoroughly rooted in the literature on taxation, states, and citizen resistance (in sub-Saharan Africa and in other contexts). It is possible that this omission was a deliberate choice, given Martin's approach to the presentation of data. Chapter 7 is a fascinating walk-through of several different tax initiatives in Uganda, focusing on how the structure of each tax might have affected citizens' perceived income loss and public goods demands. The chapter is structured in a way reminiscent of the approach taken in the individual chapters of Robert Bates et al.'s (1998) edited volume *Analytic Narratives*: Martin examines a series of different taxes through the lens of her explanatory framework, showing how different types of tax and pools of taxpayers yielded different levels of resistance and tax bargaining, again in line with her theoretical expectations.

I found the chapter compelling in a number of ways, most notably the idea that governments might creatively

change the form of revenue extraction in order to avoid triggering citizens' feelings of income loss. Like many tax scholars, I have viewed African governments' overreliance on indirect taxes as a result of bureaucratic weakness, so Martin's way of thinking is fresh and suggests new areas for future research. There could have been, however, more descriptive detail and analysis of each case, including greater attention to alternative explanations. Given the paucity of descriptive research on taxation in low-income countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, it seems a shame that the cases in this chapter often seem overly schematic, especially since it seems likely that Martin had a great deal more data than presented here. I had a similar feeling of regret in Chapter 5, when Martin briefly turns to discussion of qualitative data on experiment participants' decision-making, which seems to be central to her questions, but then quickly moves back to theory. Fleshing out the qualitative and fieldwork elements of this book would likely make it more accessible and compelling to a broader audience, as well as allow for a better assessment of how far Martin's elegant model extends and what it might not be able to explain.

Overall, *Strategic Taxation* is a thought-provoking work that should be required reading for those interested in taxation in low-income countries. My hope is that this book will stimulate new qualitative and mixed-methods research in this area, especially when it comes to governments' expectations of citizen response and how these expectations might shape tax policy design.