Making Causal Critiques

Day 5 - Constructive Critiques

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Being Constructive

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  - We have a scholarly obligation to point out errors in reasoning
  - We learn collectively by collaborating
  - We learn individually by thinking critically about others' work
- There is no research project that cannot be improved

Being Constructive

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  - To discourage colleagues
  - To assert status/hierarchy/superiority
  - To destroy valuable research
  - To release our own frustrations

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  2. In terms of content

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  - Have options for how to respond

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  - Recognize the inherent challenges and constraints of implementing the research
- So phrase your comment in terms of 'as I understand your argument'
- Or 'Could it be that something else is also happening?'

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- **Suggest an alternative**

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  - "I feel like there might be some readers who did not understand..."
- If in doubt, use the feedback sandwich:
  1. Something positive/encouraging
  2. Critique
  3. Something positive/encouraging

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  - If you have not fully understood, take time to invest in understanding it before commenting

Strengthening Causal Arguments

1. Multiple tests of theory

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2. Multiple methods

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3. Uncovering ’hidden’ units

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6. Investigating Mechanisms

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- **Critical tests**: Ideally we want to focus on those tests that ’separate’ theories, telling us which one is true

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  3. Whether the relationship holds even for diseases which could easily be cured with more income

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- These are all "Causal Process Observations" (Collier et al 2010)

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  - Is a regression discontinuity threshold enforced neutrally? Or was the threshold chosen to make sure a particular unit passed?
  - Can people sort/migrate across a discontinuity? We can use administrative data on migration rates to assess if these differences might be large enough to explain our results

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  - To argue in support of the exclusion restriction for the instrumental variable: that plantations were set up in the Carribean because of the climate, not because they were near the supply of slaves in West Africa

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  - We can expand our dataset and adjust our research question

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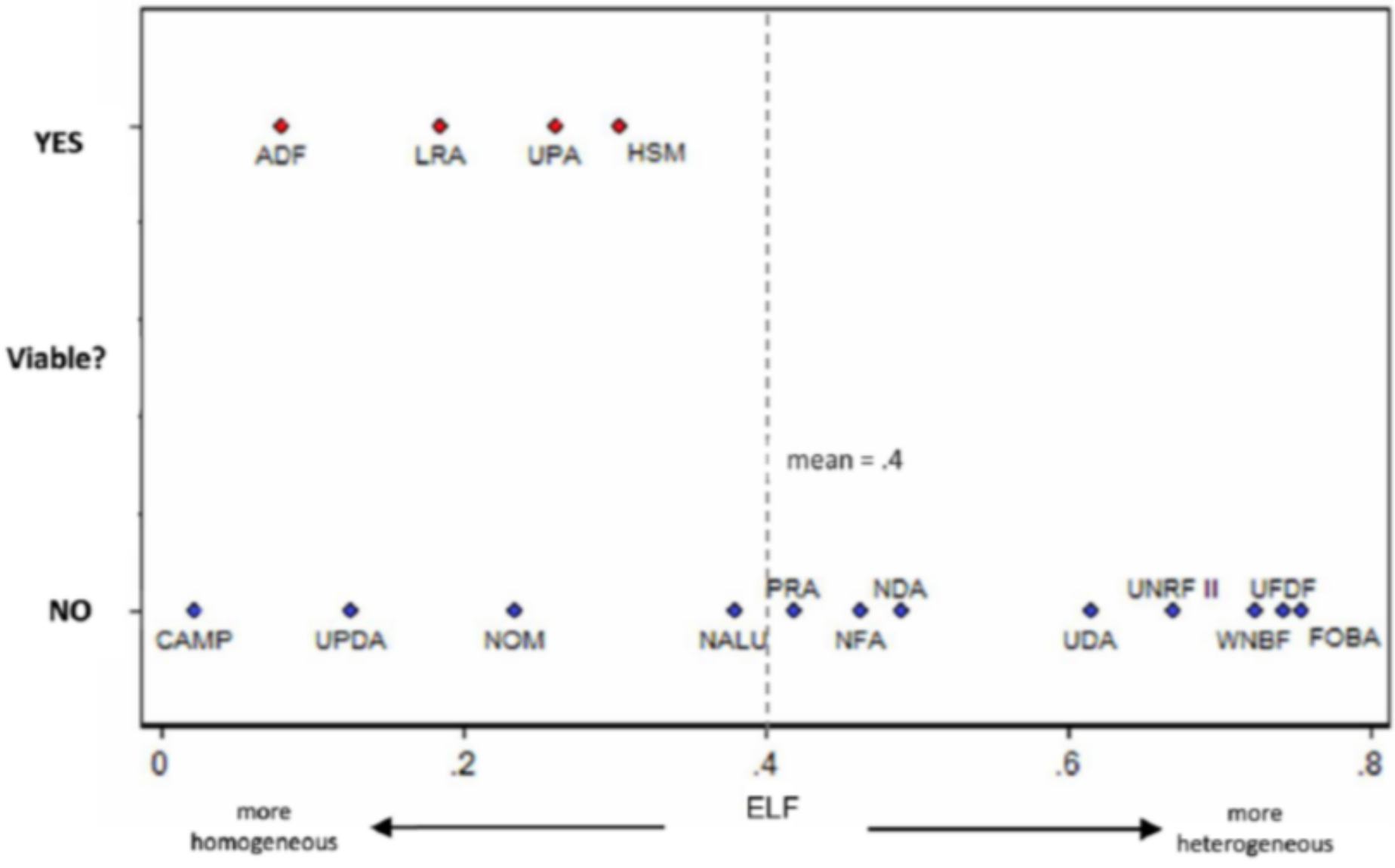
  - Expanding the sample from 1-4 (in most datasets) to 15
  - Showing that ethnicity does *not* affect rebel group formation, but may affect their success


YES
Viable?
NO
ADF
LRA
UPA
HSM
mean = .4
PRA
NDA
UNRF II
UFDF
CAMP
UPDA
NOM
NALU
NFA
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WNBF
FOBA
0
.2
.4
.6
.8
ELF
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- What other theory would be consistent with *all* of this evidence?

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- But we can also test the 'non-predictions' of our theory, when there should *not* be an effect
- If we found an effect where there should *not* be one, we might think something is weird in our data/methodology and have less confidence in our main result

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- We expect there *not* to be a ’jump’ effect when winning margin=10%
- So we can apply our regression discontinuity again and measure the effect at winning margin=10%
- If we still find an effect, there might be something wrong with our data/method

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- The more tightly the data are consistent *only* with your theory, the more credible is your theory

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- We want to assess the effect of presidentialism on reducing party cohesion
- A good comparison is between the USA (presidential) and Canada (parliamentary)
- But we also gain confidence if we can show that other similar parliamentary systems have cohesive parties (Britain, Australia, etc.)

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- To show that a specific theory is operating, we want to trace every step of the mechanism

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- Eg. To test if there is an ethnic 'technology' that helps co-ethnics, they asked Ugandans to find a specific person in a neighbourhood, and paid them a reward if they did
  - Co-ethnics found their target 43% of the time, non-co-ethnics only 28% of the time

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- We're substituting assumptions/theory for a counterfactual
- Provides evidence for our specific case; generalization is hard

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  - Voters still had a reason to vote for other offices

6. Mechanisms

- Brady (2004) provides an example of a type of process tracing to evaluate the plausibility of a difference-in-differences research design
- Difference-in-differences analysis suggested media announcements that Al Gore won Florida in 2000 caused 10,000 Gore voters to stay at home, allowing Bush to win.
- But:
  - There were only 10 minutes until the polling stations closed
  - Only about 20% would have heard the announcements
  - Around half were Bush voters, who may also have stayed home
  - Voters still had a reason to vote for other offices
- Brady estimates that at most 224 people did not vote due to the media announcements