

Why experiment? | Requêtes et stratégies de réponse

Key points for this lecture | *Points clés de cette conférence*

- ▶ What is a policy experiment?
- ▶ Who uses experiments? yy
- ▶ What are experiments good for (and not)?

Policy experiments | yy

A method for:

- ▶ Putting beliefs about what works to the test yy
- ▶ Enabling policy decisions based on data

What is an experiment | yy

- ▶ Question: are programmatic policies or clientelistic policies more effective at mobilizing voters?
- ▶ Why we care: Programmatic policies can be more equitable, pro-poor yy
- ▶ Idea: politicians believe clientelistic policies are more effective – and maybe they would change campaigns if they knew they were wrong

What is an experiment? | yy

- ▶ Research partner: four main parties in Benin
- ▶ Intervention: programmatic policy or clientelistic policy promoted by party at election rallies in a district
- ▶ Experimental design: campaign randomly assigned to districts yy
- ▶ Outcome: vote share for the party
- ▶ Results: on average voters prefer clientelistic campaigns, but women more likely to prefer programmatic policies

Why an experiment? | yy

Random assignment → highly credible evidence that the change to messages at rallies led to a change in vote share yy

If politicians believe results → decide to change campaigns

Long history of the method | yy

- ▶ Late 1700s, early 1800s:
early double-blind
experiments with
comparison group (not
randomized)
- ▶ 1920s: first randomized
experiments in agriculture,
education, and political science yy
- ▶ 1965: first clinical
randomized trial
(Streptomycin for TB)
- ▶ 2019: Nobel prize for
popularizing randomized
experiments in economics

Widespread use | yy

- ▶ Clinical trials required by regulators for vaccines, medicines, and treatments
- ▶ Political campaigns test mobilization and persuasion strategies
- ▶ Tech companies test website features to find most lucrative (“lean startup”)
- ▶ Governments test policies in “nudge units”

Use in social science | yy

Despite recent introduction in social science, big impacts already

- ▶ Proved long-held beliefs wrong
- ▶ Demonstrated practices that work in US don't work yy in Global South
- ▶ Proved new ideas right
- ▶ Led to scaling up good policies
- ▶ Led to discovery that policies do not scale well

Proving beliefs wrong I | yy

- ▶ Belief: providing information about incumbent politicians will change votes
- ▶ Intervention: information about politicians' corruption, job attendance yy
- ▶ Experimental design: randomly assign districts to receive information or not
- ▶ Outcome: vote share for incumbent (administrative data)
- ▶ Result: no effect

Proving beliefs wrong II | yy

- ▶ Belief: local democratic institutions improve delivery of development aid
- ▶ Partner: International Rescue Committee, CARE
- ▶ Intervention: two years of democratic institutions and development program yy
- ▶ Experimental design: randomly assign village clusters to treatment or not
- ▶ Outcomes: corruption, government practices chosen after intervention
- ▶ Result: no change

Proving beliefs wrong III | yy

- ▶ Belief: engagement between police & citizens improves trust, lowers crime
- ▶ Partner: Police agencies in six countries
- ▶ Intervention: “community policing” (townhalls, beat patrols, etc.) yy
- ▶ Experimental design: randomly assign police beats to receive/not
- ▶ Outcomes: citizen trust in and cooperation with police, crime
- ▶ Result: no change in any main outcome

Proving beliefs right | yy

- ▶ Belief: conditional cash transfers change behavior, improve welfare
- ▶ Partner: Mexico public health ministry
- ▶ Intervention: cash to mothers conditioned on children attending school, going to health clinics yy
- ▶ Experimental design: first phase of rollout randomly assigned to communities
- ▶ Outcomes: poverty, school attendance, health
- ▶ Result: improvements in every outcome

Proving beliefs right | yy

Incomplete list of places with CCTs following the Progresa study:

Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia, Chile, Colombia, Egypt, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Turkey, US yy

Scaling up successes | yy

- ▶ Belief: deworming medication affects only patient's health
- ▶ Intervention: deworm all children in a community at once
- ▶ Experimental design: randomly assign communities to receive/not mass deworming yy
- ▶ Outcomes: health, but also school attendance
- ▶ Results: effects much larger than believed; cost effective way to improve school attendance, health

Failures to scale | yy

- ▶ Belief: opportunity to contact legislators flattens access (based on personal recruitment)
- ▶ Intervention: scale up to an affordable recruitment mechanism, radio
- ▶ Experimental design: randomly-assign yy constituencies to radio invitations to contact program
- ▶ Outcomes: contact rates, who contacts
- ▶ Results: vastly smaller use rate, doesn't flattens access (most people wealthy, male)

Limitations to experiments | yy

Some questions don't need an experiment

- ▶ Does smoking cause poor health?
- ▶ Do parachutes help when you jump out of a plane?

Some questions shouldn't have an experiment yy

- ▶ Does changing the interest rate affect inflation?
- ▶ What is the poverty rate?

Important role for descriptive research, qualitative investigation

Why experiments | yy

Put beliefs about effects of policies to the test

yy

What policies works?

→ let's find out