

Research Statement

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I am an applied economist whose research examines institutions and information in developing economies, with a particular empirical focus on South Asia. My work integrates insights from development economics, institutional economics, and behavioral economics to understand how institutional design and information environments shape economic and political outcomes. I employ rigorous causal identification strategies—including randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental designs, and novel administrative data—to study policy-relevant questions about democratic governance, human capital formation, and climate adaptation. My research contributes to our understanding of how institutions can be designed to promote inclusive development and how information interventions can improve decision-making in low-information environments.

Job Market Paper: Countering Misinformation Early

*Joint work with Simon Chauchard, Sumitra Badrinathan, and Florian Sichart
Forthcoming at American Political Science Review*

Can educational interventions build citizens' capacity to navigate complex information environments and misinformation? This project addresses a major implementation challenge that has significant consequences for individual and social welfare. Governments from Finland to New Jersey are investing millions in classroom media literacy. But the big question remains: does this method to combat misinformation actually work? We test whether sustained educational interventions can build the capacity to comprehend, process, and apply information through the largest media literacy experiment in the world: a randomized controlled trial with more than 13,500 students in 583 villages in Bihar.

Partnering with the state government, we implemented a 14-week information and media literacy curriculum as an official government course. Using village-level randomization, we identify causal effects on information discernment, measured through standardized assessments, attitudes toward scientific health practices, and countering misinformation. The intervention produces substantial and persistent improvements: treated students show 0.32 standard deviation improvements in discerning true from false information that persist four months after treatment, along with improved health decision making (0.21 standard deviation decrease in reliance on alternative medicine).

Most strikingly, we document substantial intergenerational spillovers: Parents of treated students show significant improvements in information discernment without direct treatment. These findings suggest that institutional government-backed solutions can scale and endure, offering hope for education policy and public health strategies to address the misinformation crisis that affects democracies around the world. Our cost-effectiveness analysis shows that the intervention costs approximately \$4.84 per student with benefits that far exceed costs in the health, financial, and civic domains. This research has been recognized with the APSA Experimental Research Section Best Paper Award (2025), APSA Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior Best Paper Award (2025) and received Honorable Mention for the APSA Comparative Politics Section Sage Best Paper Award (2025).

Dissertation Overview: Local Institutions and Political Outcomes

My dissertation examines how local institutional design choices create unintended spillover effects on political participation in developing democracies. Although economists have extensively studied the direct effects of institutions on economic outcomes, we know surprisingly little about how institutional reforms in one domain systematically affect political outcomes in others. This work contributes to institutional economics by developing a framework for understanding these spillovers and their welfare implications.

Focusing on India's village council system, which governs more than 600 million rural citizens and controls substantial budgets for local public goods, my three dissertation papers examine how different institutional design choices create differential effects between social groups, with implications for inclusive economic development. My dissertation has received the *Best Dissertation Prize in Comparative Politics* from UW-Madison (2025) and also, the *Best Dissertation Prize in Diversity, Equity, Justice & Power* from UW-Madison (2025).

Paper 1 - Ethnic Electoral Quotas and Women's Political Participation: This paper examines whether caste-based electoral quotas unintentionally affect women's political participation. Using quasi-experimental variation in quota assignment within village wards and administrative data from 4,800 councils, I find that women's candidacy is 1.5 times higher and electoral success is 2 times higher in seats with caste quotas as compared to open seats (seats without any quotas). I show that the underlying mechanism operates through two channels: first, differential gender norms across caste groups that affect the costs and benefits of political participation and second, distinct political dynamics in quota and non-quota seats, a finding with broader implications for understanding how social-political norms interact with institutional design to shape the participation of women in activities outside of the home.

Paper 2 - Electoral Requirements and Minority Participation: This paper uses a difference-in-differences analysis to examine how electoral eligibility laws (fertility limits for local politicians) differentially affect minority group participation. I find that these ostensibly universal requirements reduce Muslim political candidacy while having minimal effects on other groups, operating through social cost mechanisms that create systematic barriers for marginalized communities. This has implications for understanding how institutional barriers can perpetuate political exclusion.

Paper 3 - Executive Selection and Political Competition: This paper examines how changes in executive selection methods (direct vs. indirect election) affect incentives for legislative participation. Using data from 23,495 village councils, I show that direct election reduces both candidate entry and political competition, with differential effects across social groups. This work contributes to understanding institutional complementarities and their effects on political outcomes.

Other Research

Proxy Leadership and Governance Effectiveness (with Apurva Bamezai and Rithika Kumar, *under review*): Although gender quotas increase women's descriptive representation, questions remain about substantive representation and governance effectiveness. We develop a scalable methodology to measure "proxy leadership" using phone surveys from more than 1,100 local politicians. We find that women politicians are less likely to personally respond to governance surveys and validate this measure against citizen knowledge of their representatives. This research contributes to understanding the effectiveness of affirmative action policies in achieving their intended goals.

Climate Change and Economic Participation (with Patrick Behrer, Anwesha Bhattacharya, Shweta Bhogale, Ting Liu, Bhavya Srivastava and Tanya Vaidya): We examine how extreme weather affects electoral participation, a form of civic engagement with economic implications through its effects on public goods provision. Using polling-day temperature variation across Indian elections, we find that extreme temperatures reduce voter turnout and increase winners' vote margins, suggesting reduced political competition. This research contributes to understanding the economic costs of climate change through its effects on democratic institutions.

Information Transmission and Social Identity (with Chauchard, Badrinathan, and Sichert): Through experimental methods with more than 6,000 participants, we examine how social identities affect information sharing, a process with important implications for market efficiency and social learning. We find systematic discrimination in information transmission. Respondents are less likely to share information from minority sources and penalize minority sources more severely for transmitting false information. These patterns suggest that identity-based discrimination can impede efficient information aggregation in economic and political markets.

Future Research Directions

My future research agenda will expand along three dimensions, each with significant policy relevance.

1. Institutional Design in Development: I plan to extend my institutional spillover framework through comparative work across developing economies, examining how different institutional configurations affect inclusive economic development. This research will inform policy design by identifying when and how institutional reforms achieve their intended welfare effects.

2. Information Economics and Development: Building on my research on misinformation, I will examine how information interventions can address market failures in developing economies. Key questions include: How do improved information environments affect economic decision making? Can information interventions improve the effectiveness of development programs?

3. Climate Adaptation and Institutions: As climate change increasingly affects economic outcomes in developing countries, I will investigate how institutional design can facilitate adaptation. This includes examining how local governance institutions can better respond to climate shocks and how information interventions can improve climate-related decision making.

Through continued focus on rigorous causal identification, original data collection, and policy relevance, this research agenda aims to inform both economic theory and development policy, contributing to more effective institutional design for inclusive economic growth.