Adresse e-mail \*

Votre adresse e-mail

What is your “big picture” theoretical question? You should think about this as the first few sentences of an abstract to the paper produced from this research. (Sometimes people say their question is “problem driven.” In academic work, a problem is something we cannot explain given existing work, more akin to a puzzle. Ask yourself, what is the puzzle or question we can't answer now, and why is answering it important?)

Direct democracy has been alternatively hailed as a cure from some ailments of democracy (people would be less likely to be captured by interest groups, money or partisan considerations) or as a cause for them (people’s lack of political competency would open the door for capture, deception and bad decisions). The little empirical evidence we have seems to show the interest groups have less influence under direct than representative democracy, and yet we also know that interest groups spend enormous amounts of money on initiative campaigns.

Is direct democracy is a net boon or burden for business interests, how easily can people be “captured” in a direct democracy setting such as a ballot initiative, and can some potential fixes (provide information or clearer questions) be identified?

How do you plan on operationalizing this theoretical question in your experiment?

The political economy literature has identified three key mechanisms for capture in the context of ballot initiatives: (i) the wording of the proposal is made unclear so as to confuse people, (ii) advertising and information is provided by advocacy and interest groups, (iii) money is spent to put the initiative on the ballot and campaign for or against it.

We are hoping to test (i) and (ii) through a survey experiment first, hopefully followed by a field or lab experiment. We are hoping to measure first whether those capture mechanisms work, and second whether providing information or clearer questions can reduce the capture.

(iii) makes for a more challenging identification strategy. Existing observational studies only show correlations between amounts spent and changes between vote shares and pre-election polls. We could leverage the existing datasets to come up with a better, albeit still observational, identification strategy (anything from more controls to a quasi-experiment). This part is still a work in progress, and will not be covered in this memo.

What has prior work in this domain found? How is this experiment an advance over the prior work?

* Ballot initiatives literature
  + Theory and little empirical evidence we have claim that people are better able to avoid capture and partisan considerations than elected officials
  + PE literature claims that direct democracy will not fare better than representative democracy and show massive amounts of money spent on ballot initiative campaigns by interest groups.
  + Experiments on wording of ballot initiatives have looked at status quo bias (in a poor way in our opinion). We would look at the complexity/clarity of the wording. This echoes a lot of press articles and accusations, but have not been tested experimentally to our knowledge.
* Persuasion literature
  + Experiments on ballot initiatives show limited effect of campaigns and advocacy group reaching out to voters, but effects are larger than for normal elections.
  + We need more evidence on this
  + Only advocacy groups outreach has been used as a treatment in ballot initiative settings. We would focus more directly on interest groups, and add a neutral/scientific treatment

What will a critical reviewer think of your theoretical contribution? What can you do at this point to avoid these criticisms?

* Does our design get us much more than the existing literature on persuasion?
  + We can make it clear in the literature review that we need more evidence in the context of ballot initiatives + we are adding treatments that have not been tested before (clarity of the wording, providing of neutral/scientific information).
* Are we telling the whole story about capture in ballot initiative settings?
  + Probably not, but we are looking experimentally at two of the most often cited mechanisms, and we are hoping to improve the quality of observational studies on the 3rd mechanism
* Are the information provision and clearer treatments potential fixes for capture, or are they proof that capture does not happen?
  + The answer to this question will depend on context and what actually happens in the field. If we find that providing clearer questions and/or information change voting outcomes on the proposal, then we would need to look at how many votes approach these conditions in the real world.

What is your proposed treatment? What does it manipulate and how does this connect to your bigger theoretical picture? Relatedly, how do you know that it is manipulating only that mechanism and not others? (The assumption that a treatment works by perturbing one theoretical construct but not any other is the exclusion restriction. You should be prepared to explain how your treatment will be perceived and why you are sure that is the correct interpretation.)

* A 2x4 factorial design in a survey experiment would help us address the first two mechanisms of capture.
  + First treatment arm: the wording of the proposal. Control: unclear, confusing proposal. Treatment: same proposal, but rewritten in a clearer way.
  + Second treatment arm: information provision. Control: no information. Treatment 1: business/interest group information. Treatment 2: partisan information. Treatment 3: scientific/neutral information.

The survey experiment would serve as a potential pilot for a field experiment. If we find a small or null effect of information provision on people’s vote, then we would stop with the survey experiment (and perhaps conduct a lab experiment to test other forms of information provision, such as watching commercials). If the effects in the survey experiment are large enough, we could try to conduct a field experiment during the 2020 election.

**Exclusion** **restriction?**

The treatments for this field experiment would focus on information provision: we would send voters information about one proposition that’s on the ballot in California or Oregon. We would randomize at the precinct level whether we would send (i) interest groups information or (ii) neutral/scientific information. Whether we would send this information by mail, email or canvassing, and whether we will need to partner with 3rd party organizations are still open questions.

What is your outcome measuring? How is this connected to your bigger theoretical picture?

* First and main outcome: vote on the ballot initiative (yes or no). This is the theoretical outcome of interest, since we want to know the impact on policy.
* In the survey experiment, we could also ask a couple of factual questions about some of the policies participants had to vote on. This would allow us to get into some mechanisms behind the voting outcome: did people vote differently (if they did) because they understood the proposal better?

What will a critical reviewer think of your experimental design? What can you do at this point to avoid these criticisms?

* Main concern about the survey experiment: it is just a survey experiment; would it replicate in the field?
  + Ideally, we would replicate in the field and compare the results – but the survey experiment would provide a higher bound on the effect, and we need it as a pilot to see whether it’s worth considering the field experiment
  + What if the survey experiment results don’t replicate in the field? It does not necessarily mean that people don’t care about information – it might just be that people get bombarded by information in the field, and therefore that our treatment got drown by other pieces of information.
  + A survey experiment takes out this noise and focuses on one treatment of interest.
* Main concern about the field experiment: that our treatment is too weak.
  + Having the survey experiment as a pilot would help

What will readers learn if your experiment turns out positive, negative, or null? Will the experiment be interesting and important regardless of how it turns out?

* Information provision: a null result in a survey experiment, which should constitute a higher bound, would have theoretical and normative implications about the role information plays in politics.
  + A null result in the field experiment would rise interesting questions as to the replicability of survey experiments in the field. It would open the door for new lines of inquiries, such as whether it means that information doesn’t really matter in the real world, or that voters get too much information and our treatment was too weak?
  + The comparison between the effect sizes of the treatment arms (business/scientific/partisan) will also be interesting, regardless of the individual value of the point estimates.
* Clarity of the wording: a null result would go against the common wisdom and multiple press articles.

Write an abstract for a positive finding:

Direct democracy has been alternatively hailed as a cure from some ailments of democracy (people would be less likely to be captured by interest groups, money or partisan considerations) or as a cause for them (people’s lack of political competency would open the door for capture, deception and bad decisions). The little empirical evidence we have seems to show the interest groups have less influence under direct than representative democracy, and yet we also know that interest groups spend enormous amounts of money on initiative campaigns. Is direct democracy is a net boon or burden for business interests, how easily can people be “captured” in a direct democracy setting such as a ballot initiative, and can some potential fixes (provide information or clearer questions) be identified? We test these questions using a survey experiment and find that (i) voters vote differently when the wording of the proposal is rewritten in a clear way and (ii) providing scientific/neutral information to voters sway their vote less than providing partisan information, but more than providing interest group information. The effect of the information provision is higher when the wording of the proposal is confusing. We also find evidence that this difference in vote outcomes can be at least partially explained by an increased factual understanding of the policy being voted on. These findings put together seem to point toward the possibility of capture of ballot initiatives by interest groups, but also the availability of solutions to counter this capture. We finish by considering whether these solutions are often deployed (and deployable) in the real world.

Write an abstract for a negative finding:

We test these questions using a field and survey experiment and find that (i) voters vote differently when the wording of the proposal is rewritten in a clear way and (ii) providing information to voters sway their vote, but only in the survey experiment setting. This suggest that capture probably happens through the wording mechanism, but that evidence on the information provision mechanism is less conclusive. We discuss potential reasons for this discrepancy, notably whether it means that information provision does not matter, or that our treatment was too weak given that voters get bombarded with information.

Write an abstract for a null finding:

We test these questions using a field and survey experiment and find that (i) voters do not vote differently when the wording of the proposal is rewritten in a clear way and (ii) providing information to voters does not sway their vote. This suggest that if capture indeed happens at the ballot initiative level, the mechanisms usually theorized or thought to be at play do not seem to play that big a role.

What will your sample be? How do you plan on recruiting them for treatment delivery and outcome measurement?

* Survey experiment: pilot on MTURK, then run the experiment on ??
* Field experiment:
  + Treatment will probably be clustered at the precinct level (smaller unit for which we can get outcome measurement, i.e. vote results)
  + Voters will receive either a mail or email (we would probably need to partner with a 3rd party organization for the interest group message).
  + One alternative could be to randomize treatment at the individual level, use canvassers and post-election survey as our measurement tool. This option would be costlier, using a survey to measure outcomes seems sub-optimal, but we could expect larger treatment effects.

Do you have funding for this plan? If not, have you identified sources of funding?

* We have access to ISPS money through Angele’s ISPS policy fellowship
* Peter Aronow has offered to fund a MTURK pilot
* We will probably have enough money for the survey experiment, but would need access to other sources of funds if we do the field experiment.

Have you done a power calculation for planning your sample size and budget? How do you justify your assumptions?

We are still finalizing the design of this study and haven’t conducted a power analysis yet.

\*[If survey experiment]\* Is a field experiment answering your big picture question feasible? If not, why not? Say more than just a lack of funding.

As discussed before, we are worried about our treatment being too weak in a field experiment setting (because voters get inundated by so much information). We’ll need the survey experiment as a high bound before we decide to move forward with the field experiment.

\*[If survey experiment]\* Would this research be more interesting if conducted as a field experiment than a survey experiment? Why or why not?

* Yes, in that it would get us closer to a real-world setting.
* No, in that our treatment will be flooded by all the information voters get, and a survey experiment would allow us to cut some of this noise and focus on our mechanisms.