

Research Statement

I am an applied microeconomics with research interests in political economy, public economics and development economics. In this statement I describe my two broad lines of research: investigating the consequences and quantifying the impacts of populism and political representation more generally, and investigating causes and consequences of political conflict. I use advanced econometric techniques with data from both developed and developing countries.

Populism and political representation

My job market paper, *“Populism and Ideological Convergence: Evidence from a Multiparty System”* studies the effects of populist representation. Populist parties have gained significant power in European politics in the last decades, raising concerns about the potentially contagious effect of populism. One of the ways through which populism could spread is the impact of populist representation on mainstream parties. I study how populist party representation in local councils affects other parties’ ideological positions. Previous literature on why and when parties adjust their positions has focused on the impact of public opinion, showing that changes in voter preferences can induce candidates and parties to adjust their positions. I use variation created by close elections to identify ideological shifts resulting from a change in party representation, holding voter preferences constant.

I study a context of proportional elections in which electoral closeness is not easily defined. The seat thresholds are jointly determined by all parties and candidate’s personal votes determine ranking within her own party, and candidates therefore face multiple competitive margins. To overcome this, I use a bootstrap approach to simulate elections and identify candidates’ electoral closeness. I then instrument the populist seat share with the share of closely elected populist party candidates. I use novel survey data on individual candidates’ political preferences that comes from a voting advice application. To determine parties’ ideological positions, I model candidates’ responses using item response theory. This measurement framework has been commonly used in educational assessment, but is underutilized in economics. It can provide more credible estimates than factor or principal component analysis, particularly in a situation where the survey changes between years. My paper provides novel findings that shed light on how the emergence of populist parties can shape the political spectrum and competition between parties. My main finding is that increased populist representation causes mainstream parties’ ideological positions to converge towards the populist party’s position, holding voter preferences constant. Therefore, mainstream parties appear to overreact to the electoral success of the populist party. The results show that populist representation can amplify the populist shift of the political space.

In, *“Making the Cut: Close Elections and Local Welfare Policies”*, which is joint work with Nikolaj Broberg and Thomas Walsh, we study whether the party affiliation of a member of parliament affects the implementation of austerity measures in her constituency. In particular, we study the effect on unemployment sanctioning. Unemployment benefit sanctions rose sharply after the 2010 general election, in which the Conservative Party came to power and initiated the austerity programme. Cuts to public

spending have on average been larger in Labour-held areas than elsewhere and there is a strong correlation between party vote shares and the number of unemployment benefit sanctions per claimant. We take advantage of close races in the parliamentary elections to identify the causal effect of party control on local welfare policies. Preliminary results show that the rate of unemployment benefit sanctions increased in constituencies won by Labour, and decreased in constituencies won by Conservatives. We hypothesise that because the policy was known to be unpopular, and the party in power is likely to have more political power over public employees, the Conservative party representatives had an electoral incentive to mitigate the effects in their constituencies.

My ongoing work and future research agenda continue to examine electoral politics and the consequences of populism. In preliminary work, *“Politician Ideology and Policy Outcomes,”* I continue exploring the survey data on political preferences to study how individual politicians’ ideology impacts policy outcomes. Using individual level data on candidates’ ideological and policy views allows me to consider the degree of populism, instead of relying on the binary classification of parties as populist or mainstream. In my future work, I also plan to continue research on the effects of ideological convergence. In particular, I plan to analyse whether and under what conditions ideological convergence benefits or hurts mainstream parties or the populist party. Moreover, I plan to study if electoral success of a populist party has geographic spillovers effects.

Political conflict

My second line of research is focused on determinants and consequences of political conflict. *“When Facebook is the Internet: The Role of Social Media in Ethnic Conflict”* investigates whether social media affects the intensity of conflict. Due to the endogenous nature of social media use, causal estimates of its effects are still scarce. This paper uses a novel approach to identify the effect of social media use from broader internet use. I focus on the ongoing Myanmar conflict since in such context internet is mainly accessed via mobile phones, and in particular via Facebook. In this setting, availability of social media constitutes a significant shock to communication and access to information. Moreover, Facebook is known to been used to spread misinformation and hate speech against ethnic minorities. To identify the causal effect of social media on conflict, I take advantage of a temporary shock in Facebook availability created by a telecom agreeing to waive data charges associated with Facebook use. I use local variation in cell phone coverage as an exogenous determinant of social media availability. To measure the outcome, ethnic violence, I use a georeferenced data on conflict events. Results indicate that on average social media availability reduced the occurrence of conflict between organized armed groups. However, the analysis reveals important regional variation. When focusing on Rakhine State, a region which is home to the Rohingya minority, the results suggest that availability of Facebook led to a small increase in probability of conflict. The results suggest that inflammatory content on social media may escalate conflict in areas where ethnic tensions are particularly high.

In future work with Nicole Stoelinga, we plan to explore the significant heterogeneity, particularly across age groups, with respect to support for democracy and electoral participation in Africa. Our project considers to what extent exposure to protests and conflict can explain these differences.