Personal Statement

I am an applied microeconomist, working at the intersection of economic development and political economy, with broader interests in the area of health, labor, and education. Methodologically, I combine cutting-edge causal inference tools with rich administrative data to answer policy-relevant research questions on development and socioeconomic inequality. I also complement rigorous empirical analysis with experimental and structural approaches.

The Political Economy of Institutions and Development

My research in political economy advances two core themes. The first addresses a fundamental question in the personnel economics of the state: how can governments select and incentivize public sector employees to enhance public performance and strengthen state capacity? The second explores the economic origins of individual political preferences and their implications for nation-building, focusing on how exposure to globalization shocks such as trade and immigration shapes ideology and social cohesion.

In my job market paper – **"Corruption and Talent Allocation"** (submitted), I study the extent to which political corruption shifts the allocation of talent across public and private sector career paths. Focusing on Brazil, I exploit a unique anti-corruption policy experiment that generates plausibly exogenous variation in local corruption, together with nationwide administrative data that allow for direct measurement of talent allocation. I find that reducing corruption in a municipality induces a negative sorting by ability into public sector careers, where ability is proxied by standardized test scores taken prior to college entry. The negative sorting manifests both in students' pre-labor-market major choices and in their realized career outcomes. Additional evidence shows that this sorting is mainly driven by a perception of reduced rent-seeking returns and rising reputation costs associated with the audits.

These findings highlight an important yet understudied channel through which corruption affects the economy: the distortion of talent allocation towards unproductive rent-seeking activities. The results shed light on a "corruption-attracts-the-corrupt" vicious circle faced by many middle- and low-income countries, where rampant corruption can deter prosocial talent and attract rent-seekers. Top-down anti-corruption policies, in turn, have the potential of adjusting this allocative inefficiency by re-diverting talent towards more productive activities.

The paper focuses on the selection margin, a central theme in the literature on the personnel economics of the state (Finan et al., 2017; Besley et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2023).

One advantage of my setting is that, with economy-wide data, student major choice can serve as a proxy for the candidate pool, the information on whom is generally costly to obtain outside of experimental contexts. Looking ahead, I plan to follow students in the longer run and gauge the productivity consequences of talent reallocation. I also aim to incorporate complementary survey experimental designs to elicit traits unavailable in administrative data, such as honesty and prosociality. Understanding how selection on prosociality reacts to anti-corruption policy is key to pinning down the extent to which the policy is effective in shifting social norms surrounding integrity in public service.

The paper has drawn interest from the Brazilian federal anti-corruption agency (CGU), the very entity that implemented the anti-corruption audit program. In April 2025, I was invited to present the findings at the CGU and discuss them with senior bureaucrats. I have since maintained close collaborations with officials at the Ministry of Education (INEP), the National School of Public Administration (ENAP), and the CGU to support ongoing and future projects. Some example projects under development include studying how school networks affect government hiring and evaluating how digital training for public servants can improve task matching and efficiency.

My second line of work investigates the economic roots of political preferences. Economic shocks and policy interventions can shape political ideology through channels related to culture and social identity (Grossman and Helpman, 2021). Globalization shocks such as trade and immigration, in particular, have been shown to contribute to the rise of populism in recent decades (Rodrik, 2021).

In **"Immigration and Assimilation of the Chinese Diaspora in Indonesia"** (work in progress), I examine the role of state policy in fostering immigrant integration in the context of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. During the New Order regime (1966–1998), the Chinese faced systemic and institutionalized discrimination, which was repealed following the fall of Suharto. I exploit cross-regional variation in pre-revocation ethnic Chinese population shares as a proxy for out-group exposure. Difference-in-differences estimates suggest that the revocation of discriminatory legislation accelerated cultural assimilation, as measured by language use and religious affiliation, yet led to a backlash in political integration, as reflected in a lower political participation rate. I am currently gathering the Indonesian full-count population census data to explore additional outcomes such as interethnic marriages and naming patterns, and to underpin mechanisms underlying the diverging patterns between cultural and political assimilation.

Policy Evaluation in Labor and Health

A second strand of my research focuses on providing rigorous, evidence-based insights to inform public policy. I have several collaborative projects in progress spanning topics such as global reproductive health, gender inequality, and online dating markets, all unified by a focus on applied, policy-relevant research. These projects have allowed me to refine my causal inference toolkit while gaining valuable experience with experimental and structural estimation methodologies.

In **"The Global Health Toll of the Global Gag Rule"** (with Bhalotra and Clarke; working paper), we study the Global Gag Rule (GGR), a pro-life policy that prohibits foreign non-governmental organizations receiving U.S. aid from providing or advocating for abortion-related services. Since its introduction in 1984 by President Reagan, the policy has been reinstated under every Republican administration and revoked under every Democratic one, causing fluctuations in global reproductive health aid alongside U.S. political cycles. We examine the effects of the GGR on maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa across two presidential transitions: Clinton to Bush (1993–2008) and Obama to Trump (2009–2020). Using a triple-difference design that leverages cross-country variation in U.S. aid dependence and within-country variation in clinic access, we address idenfitication challenges associated with a canonical double-difference design such as contemporaneous policy confounders. We find that reinstating the GGR increases maternal mortality in aid-reliant countries by 16.7 percent on average. The effects are even larger under the Trump administration, reflecting the policy's unprecedented expansion in 2017.

The GGR has generated intense debate, supported by pro-life campaigners and opposed by advocates of women's rights and development aid. The Trump-era expansion was even referred to as a "war on women". By linking disruptions in health services to maternal mortality, our research provides a first set of causal estimates on the broader health consequences of the policy. As the GGR was reinstated again by Trump in January 2025, alongside the dire situation of a broader tightening of U.S. aid restrictions, our findings come at a moment of intense policy debate and carry important implications for the design of foreign aid and global health programs. While views on abortion remain politically polarized, few policymakers would disagree that rising maternal mortality signals a policy failure.

Another ongoing project, **"Dating Preferences"** (with Bhalotra, Beknazar-Yuzba-shev, Clarke, and Stalinski; pre-analysis plan and ethics resubmission stage), investigates how individuals trade off personality traits (with a particular focus on red flags of controlling or violent behaviour) and ideology (with a focus on Republican versus Democrat) against attributes such as attractiveness and income when evaluating potential partners. We are

creating a dating site that includes AI-generated profiles together with actual participants recruited from geographically refined areas in the U.S., an approach that will allow us to elicit nuanced preferences in a controlled (experimental) yet realistic setting.

We make two key contributions to the literature. First, we make a key methodological advancement over the existing literature by overcoming the hypothetical bias that typically arises in hypothetical choice experiments. Second, we aim to provide the first empirical estimates of how individuals trade off signs of controlling behaviour against attributes such as attractiveness or income. The takeaway from this study can shed light on the understudied "demand" side factors of gender violence in relationships, and inform the design of safer online dating platforms.

Finally, in **"Occupation Flexibility and the Graduate Gender Wage Gap in the UK"** (with Benny, Bhalotra, Fernández, and Wang; work in progress), we study how gender differences in the demand and supply of job flexibility contribute to the gender wage gap over the life cycle and over time for graduates in the UK. We estimate a model of labor supply and demand to quantify the role of changing preferences and relative demand for flexibility. Our current findings suggest that differences in the demand for male labor in less flexible occupations and women's higher preferences for flexible work in recent cohorts jointly explain a substantial share of the observed widening of the gender wage gap. The latter, in particular, is not well-documented in the literature and represents a key contribution of the paper. The findings will provide new policy-relevant insights into how labor market regulations and workplace practices around flexibility can reduce gender disparities and promote more equitable career trajectories for men and women.

References

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