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# Help Me Help You: Conducting Field Experiments with Political Elites

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Field experiments can teach important facts about the political world to both political scientists and political elites, whose shared interest in how that world actually works should encourage greater collaboration between the two. Nonetheless, for political scientists, conducting field experiments with elites can seem prohibitively challenging. Drawing on four field experiments with political elites, two in Benin and two in Canada, we outline key lessons on negotiating and conducting field experiments with political elites. Specifically, we outline how ethical concerns can be addressed and overcome. We discuss how the expectations and timelines of campaigns and elites can be managed, particularly when they (appear to conflict) with academic timing and process. Finally, we outline several general concerns about implementation of field experiments and provide some unique solutions.

*Keywords:* field experiments; political elites; political campaigns; clientelism; information; direct mail

Political scientists, political elites, and policymakers share an important interest: we wish to know how the political world actually works. Whatever the value of received wisdom, anecdotes, casual lessons, or keen observation, we should most value causal statements made with certainty. If field experiments offer unparalleled insight into actual causal processes (Gerber, Green, and Kaplan 2004), then political scientists and real-world practitioners alike should share incentives to increase the number of field experiments in practice.

Field experiments can teach political scientists and political elites alike about important facts in the political world. For example, a field experiment on the turnout effects of voter contact (e.g., Green and Gerber 2004; Bowers and Hansen 2009) can inform both political scientists on the causes of turnout and campaign elites on the effectiveness of different outreach methods. Similarly, field experiments examining the effects of an income supplement program on the poor (Burtless 1986) can inform both economists and policymakers.

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These shared interests should encourage greater collaboration between political scientists and political elites. Indeed, they likely explain much of the increase in field experimentation in recent years (see Druckman et al. 2006; Green and Gerber 2002). Nonetheless, conducting field experiments with elites can seem prohibitively challenging. It need not be so.

Drawing on four field experiments with political elites, two in Benin and two in Canada, we outline key lessons on negotiating and conducting field experiments with political elites. Our main argument is that collaboration with elites and intervention in the real world may be easier than we think. We present a general argument for why experimentation is possible, by focusing on three key conditions for collaboration with elites. We next review four case studies. We then present a series of practical recommendations for undertaking this type of research.

## Key Conditions for Collaboration

At first blush, it may seem unlikely that a political campaign or a policymaker would cooperate with a political scientist to conduct a field experiment. Indeed, doing so may involve an official admission that they do not understand the true functioning or effect of a program or campaign that they administer. And it also may suggest that they do not have the tools necessary to figure out the effects of a policy or campaign practice. Nonetheless, this cooperation does happen, and it benefits both parties. We believe that three general conditions are likely to lead to such partnerships.

First, field experimentation is more likely when there is uncertainty about the outcome of a policy. Policymakers and political elites want to know whether a policy works. A cynical view would suggest they are overly risk-averse and loath

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to try an unpopular or ineffective policy. A more positive view would claim that they are interested in promoting the public good and thus understanding which policies can have the greatest positive effect. Either way, political elites are often confronted with uncertainty about the effects of a policy. By demonstrating how field experimentation allows a researcher to understand the effects of a policy, political scientists can gain the attention of political elites.

Second, field experimentation is more likely when the *mechanism* of an effect is unknown. Suppose that policymakers have good reason to believe that direct cash transfers to some population increase the health and education performance of some subset of that population. But further suppose that they are unsure about *why* this policy works. For example, it could be that the cash transfers are used to buy more food, which leads to better nutrition and thus better scholastic performance and better health outcomes. Or it could be that the cash transfers instead buy more education, which leads individuals to realize the value of better nutrition. These two mechanisms would recommend different further policies. Field experiments could help adjudicate between these different mechanisms by running competing treatments with education and food vouchers among a different population, for example. In sum, field experimentation can identify the outcomes of a policy, and further experimentation can open up the causal process that generates an effect.

Third, field experimentation is more likely when it can be implemented in a flexible, scalable, and non-intrusive manner. No matter how much they seek new knowledge, only the rarest of policymakers or political elites would turn over an entire program or campaign to a group of political scientists. Instead, they are more likely to cooperate when presented with the offer of an experiment that can be integrated into their existing activities while offering minimum disruption. This applies only more so if it can meet one or both of the first two conditions.

## Case Studies

Below, we outline four different field experiments, two of which occurred in Benin and two in Canada. The first two teach us important lessons about the conditions under which politicians can promote public goods in an election. The last two teach us about the persuasiveness of direct mail policy appeals. All four teach us about conducting field experiments in concert with political elites.

### *Benin*

Benin, a West African country, was colonized by France in 1894 and won independence in 1960. Its democracy was renewed in February 1990. Since that time, it has experienced four parliamentary and three presidential elections. It has also experienced peaceful democratic transitions. For Wantchekon, Benin was an ideal country in which to understand how the promotion of public goods can be increased in elections. First, it is a democratic country with free and fair elections.

Moreover, it has an important history of political experimentation, which may make its political class more open to innovative studies and proposals. Finally, Wantchekon's personal experience and commitment to the well-being and development of Benin (Browning 2002) provided an all-important element of trust.

Wantchekon completed two large field experiments, one each in the 2001 and 2006 presidential elections. These elections were well suited for experimental manipulation. Presidential elections in Benin rely on a two-round runoff system in which the two candidates destined for the second round are well known. Accordingly, some experimental manipulation can occur in the first round with little chance of the experiment affecting the outcome of the election.<sup>1</sup> In short, each experiment relied on a partnership with several political parties that allowed the randomization of different political messages and campaign approaches to different villages. The experiments took advantage of a desire among parties to figure out whether public goods messages would be well received and under what conditions.

*Clientelism and voting behavior.* The first experiment (Wantchekon 2003), conducted during the 2001 presidential election, aimed at testing the effectiveness of clientelist versus programmatic campaign messages. Clientelist messages are those that promise material favors in exchange for votes. They stand in contrast to campaign promises that hold out the provision of public goods. By randomly assigning some villages to receive clientelist messages and other public goods appeals, Wantchekon was able to measure the relative gain or loss associated with campaigns based on the narrow and exclusive appeals of clientelism, especially given that voters have ethnic affinities that may make clientelist appeals more effective.

In his experiment, Wantchekon conducted randomized trials in 24 villages in which politicians used either a clientelist, programmatic, or neutral election campaign. These different messages were crafted in cooperation with the political parties and were delivered by real campaign workers. By pairing these workers with research associates, Wantchekon was able to ensure the correct administration of treatment while maximizing the realism of the treatment. A four-person project management team that also acted as an interface between the project and the party leaderships oversaw the entire project.

At the end of the first round, the research team both compiled official election results and administered a survey in villages. The official results suggested that a clientelist electoral campaign is more effective and that the programmatic or public goods election campaign loses votes. However, the survey results found that the effect was not constant across all voters. Rather, female voters, more informed voters, or co-ethnics of the candidate delivering the experimental message were more positively responsive to programmatic platforms. This finding, especially the information aspect, informed a subsequent set of experiments conducted in 2006.

*Expert information, public deliberation, and electoral support for good governance.* The findings of Wantchekon's first experiment generated new hypotheses

for a second experiment (Wantchekon 2008). After finding that clientelist messages carried less appeal among informed voters, interested parties in Benin wanted to know if electoral support for policies could be increased if voters knew about the soundness of those policies. More specifically, could trading off patronage and favors for empirically informed public policy proposals increase electoral support? In addition to testing this outcome, the parties wanted to test a particular mechanism for informing policy proposals. Accordingly, they agreed to a two-stage experiment.

In the first stage, a conference was held involving academics, all major candidates and political parties, and policy experts. This conference, held in December 2005, generated expert policy proposals in four domains: education, public health, governance, and urban planning. The recommendations were public and well publicized. After their generation, parties representing 85 percent of the electorate volunteered to experiment with the proposed policies and to do so in an unconventional manner, namely through public information meetings.

The second stage of the experiment involved the holding of these public information meetings. In contrast to normal campaign events, which are typically frenzied affairs and hardly oriented toward policy, these public information meetings were large discussions in which voters were informed of the policy proposals and their origins. These information meetings, run by party activists and supervised by researchers, were randomly assigned to 12 different villages, divided evenly among the four principal parties. As with the previous experiment, the results were ascertained through both official election returns and a survey of voters.

In contrast to the more sobering results of the first experiment, the treatment in this experiment had a positive effect on voters' self-reported level of political knowledge. Election results suggest that it also had a positive effect on both vote share and turnout for the participating parties. In total, the experiment provides strong evidence that voters can be persuaded to choose better public policies when experts craft them and voters are aware of this origin. This is a finding of important interest not only to political scientists but also to the parties responsible for proposing and ultimately implementing these policies.

### *Canada*

Perhaps the most prominent use of field experiments in political science has been in testing the *mobilizing* capacity of voter contact, especially, but not limited to, direct mail (e.g., Green and Gerber 2004). Less work, however, has been done evaluating the *persuasive* capacity of direct mail. Despite this lack of work, this property of voter contact is certainly of as much if not more interest than mobilization. We next outline two experiments of this type before turning to our general lessons on conducting field experiments with elites. The first evaluated the ability of detailed policy to persuade elite party members during the selection of a leader for the Liberal Party of Canada in 2006. The second evaluated the effects of receiving direct mail from *both* sides of a referendum campaign to change the electoral system in Ontario, Canada in, 2007.

*Direct mail persuasion in a leadership race.* In October and November 2006, Loewen and Rubenson (forthcoming) conducted a field experiment in cooperation with the front-running campaign in a race for the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada, traditionally the country's most popular political party. Indeed, it is one of the world's most successful political parties (Blais 2005). They were interested in exploring two questions. First, rather than just mobilizing voters, can direct mail also persuade them to increase their positive feelings for a political candidate and to move that candidate up in their preference ordering?<sup>2</sup> Second, what happens when a candidate for a party's leadership is forthright about his or her desire to move the party's key policy planks away from the median position in the party? In the case of this campaign, the choices made by the candidate and his team allowed us to examine not only the first question but also the second.

The race for the leadership of the Liberal Party involved three stages. In the first stage, campaigns signed up new party members and met with existing members. In the second stage, held in the last weekend of September 2006, party members met in their local constituencies and cast ballots to indicate their preferred leadership candidate and to select—from among local party members—those they would like to represent them as delegates at the party's leadership convention. The convention was to be held during the first weekend in December 2006. Delegates were selected at these local meetings in proportion to local support for each of the eight candidates for the leadership. Thus, the third stage of the race involved the period between the selection of a few thousand delegates and these delegates' voting for a leader at the party's convention in December.

As Loewen had crafted policy memos for the leading campaign in the race, Loewen and Rubenson had enough personal capital to convince the campaign to allow them to run an experiment on their persuasion efforts. On the basis of a clear memorandum of understanding, they set out to test the persuasive capacities of the detailed policy mailings the campaign was sending to the supporters of other candidates. The campaign agreed to randomly select approximately 550 delegates for the experiment. This represented nearly 20 percent of all delegates not pledged to their candidate. Among this subset, one hundred were chosen to receive two mailings from the campaign, comprising a 40-page policy manifesto and a flyer summarizing these positions. Two hundred further delegates were selected to receive just the policy booklet. The remaining delegates received nothing until the conclusion of the experiment. In agreement with the campaign, Loewen and Rubenson coordinated this experiment with just two campaign operatives, both of whom pledged not to share information about the experiment with any other campaign workers. This guarded against contamination and efforts at compensation by eager campaign volunteers.<sup>2</sup>

A week after sending out the policy brochures, all delegates in the experiment were sent a survey under the cover of a Canadian university, to conceal any connection between the survey and the experiment. Any reference to the experiment was also removed from respective academic Web sites. Of course, the survey did not mention the experiment, but it did include the questions on candidate likeability and preferences necessary to test the effects of the direct mail.

Loewen and Rubenson agreed upon a deadline with the campaign, after which the campaign could mail the remaining delegates. By the time this deadline was reached, surveys had been received from 28 percent of subjects. From these data, Loewen and Rubenson were able to inform the campaign, in the aggregate, as to whether their mail was persuasive or not. They were not, however, permitted to reveal any individual information on the outcome of the experiment. At the time, they reported that the mail was having no effect, either negative or positive. However, later analysis revealed that the mail was in fact having a negative reactance or boomerang effect (Peffley and Hurwitz 2007; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Chong and Druckman 2007). Indeed, it appeared that receiving mail from the campaign made delegates *less* likely to support the campaign. The tight timelines of the campaign and a small sample size likely prevented the effect from being uncovered in time for the campaign. However, it did provide valuable information for the future, especially given that this candidate lost the race but successfully pursued the leadership of the party two years later. Accordingly, the experimental results had the downstream benefits of informing strategy in a later contest.

*Two-sided messages and persuasion in a referendum.* One of the great benefits of field experimentation is that it allows researchers to manipulate the content and/or reception of real campaign materials. However, this normally appears only on one side of a campaign, effectively limiting the causal statements that researchers can make to those conditional upon some treatment given the (often unobserved) behavior of another campaign. Ideally, field experiments would manipulate both sides of a campaign. Loewen and Rubenson (2008) took a small step toward this in the fall of 2007 in a referendum on electoral reform.

In 2004, the Ontario government announced that it would charge a “Citizens’ Assembly” with the task of considering reforms to the province’s existing single-member plurality—or first-past-the-post—electoral system. Any reform recommendations would be put to a binding referendum. The Assembly would eventually propose a shift to a mixed-member plurality system, very similar to that in place in Germany.

The referendum would feature campaigns on both sides of the issue. However, neither campaign received money from the provincial government. Likewise, they were not regulated in the reception of donations. As it turned out, neither campaign was very adept at raising funds, and both ran what could be called anemic efforts. While the campaigns did run direct mail efforts, they were minimal. In the end, the existing system received 62 percent of the vote.

The relative poverty of both campaigns provided an opportunity: Loewen and Rubenson made an offer to both campaigns to pay for the sending of flyers to approximately 6,000 households. In exchange for this, the campaigns had to agree not to send flyers in the treated constituencies. As this represented a net gain, both campaigns agreed and provided copies of their campaign materials. Households were randomly assigned to receive 0, 1, or 3 direct mail pieces



from one or the other or both sides of the campaign. Rather than relying on survey results, Loewen and Rubenson were able to analyze the effect of the mail on official vote and turnout tallies and to report results back to the campaigns, in the event of another campaign.<sup>3</sup>

As it turned out, neither campaign was very effective in persuading voters to vote for or against reform. There are likely many reasons for this, chief among them the distraction caused by the concurrent provincial election. Nonetheless, these (non)findings provided important information about the issue of electoral reform in Canada and its plausibility under different deliberative circumstances (see Loewen and Rubenson 2008). Moreover, the results did show that roll-off between voting in the election and in the referendum was lower under treatment, suggesting that direct mail may be more effective as a mobilizing tool than as one of persuasion.

## General Lessons

Several lessons can be drawn from the examples described above. We outline seven in the subsections below.

### *1. Don't shy away from big and rich treatments . . .*

Our most important recommendation is not to shy away from proposing ambitious and complex treatments. We suspect that much is lost in the stages between the conception and the proposal of a project. However, this ought not to be the case. Political elites and policymakers are interested in understanding how significant changes in campaigns and in policy can bring about new outcomes. Wantchekon's work provides a stellar example of this. He recognized a clear interest among all the principal parties in Benin: namely, to move beyond clientelist promises and onto offering public goods. Rather than propose a half-measure for an experiment, he sold parties on the importance of a rich treatment. Finally, even when partners are neither capable of or interested in implementing an ambitious program, there is little harm in asking.

### *2. . . . but manage expectations*

Experiments should not be viewed as one-shot affairs but instead as the beginning of a relationship. Accordingly, a well-executed small experiment that allows for actionable advice and further collaboration is better than a grand endeavor that is not effectively executed.

Researchers should also manage expectations not only about the end product of the experiment but also about how it will be administered over its course. The requirements of the campaign should be well documented. The obligations of the researchers should also be made clear at the outset. In short, unnecessary disappointment should be avoided at all costs.

### 3. *Documentation is data*

Not every experiment will be executed properly. Randomization protocols may be intentionally or unintentionally violated, or they may simply be impractical. Similarly, treatments may get mixed up or be poorly administered. These factors all pose a threat to validity, especially when they cannot be traced or documented. Accordingly, it is in the interest of researchers and their partners to establish a well-documented “paper trail.” This should begin with a memorandum of understanding to which all parties agree and should continue down to the clearest instructions possible for randomization and treatment administration. Indeed, one should have a record of every action taken on the experiment. Ideally, a researcher can keep an account of all decisions and protocols, as can a member of the partnering campaign or organization. Finally, those implementing the treatment—for example, Wantchekon’s canvassers—should document their activities carefully. This will allow the detection of those who do not complete their tasks as well as allowing for the corrections to data necessary when some complete their tasks incorrectly. Documented mistakes can be corrected for. Undocumented mistakes cannot.

Similarly, one should not discount that maintaining good documentation and data that can be accessed at any time is very much in the interests of a campaign. Suppose, for example, that a campaign wishes to know the effects of its (randomized) direct mail campaign on fund-raising. A campaign that maintains a real-time database of donation information is not limited to receiving a proper assessment at the end of a campaign. They can also receive midstream updates on the performance of their campaign. This is possible only with effective and up-to-date documentation.

### 4. *Adopt flexible treatment regimes*

A researcher cannot foresee all of the problems that may arise with a treatment regime, especially when questions about ease of implementation and effect sizes are unclear. Researchers risk a failed experiment and a disappointed partner if a treatment regime fails altogether. Therefore, it makes good sense to adopt a treatment regime that is flexible and that can respond to the information about the experiment that is collected and documented over the course of its administration (Nickerson 2005).

### 5. *Maintain constant contact with campaigns . . .*

Campaigns are not well-run ships. They are chaotic, unfocused, and intense operations. Despite the best plans, unforeseen issues, crises, and opportunities frequently sidetrack campaigns. In the face of this, it would be unreasonable to expect campaign managers and operatives to treat an experiment with the attention it deserves. An experiment has a better chance of being successful if a researcher keeps in contact with a campaign as much as is necessary to keep an experiment on track. In short, do not expect a campaign to make your experiment their priority, no matter how important it may seem to a researcher!

### 6. . . . but limit knowledge of your experiment

While it benefits a researcher to stay in constant contact with a campaign, it is also important to limit knowledge of an experiment within a campaign. Taking Loewen and Rubenson's leadership election as an example, aside from the campaign manager, knowledge of the experiment was limited to two operatives, both of whom clearly understood the benefits of not violating the treatment regime. This prevented eager campaign volunteers from contacting those delegates who were not mailed, in an effort to compensate for a lack of contact. Field experiments maximize their realism and generalizability when their conduct affects as few other aspects of a campaign as possible. The best way to achieve this is to let few people know that an experiment is being conducted at all!

### 7. Learn how to respond to ethical concerns

Researchers should always have their work cleared by the institutional review boards at their respective institutions. However, should the board hesitate to approve what it views as an unconventional study, this should not be taken as an assessment of the study's ethical merit. In the vast majority of field experiments, researchers are simply manipulating the reception of a treatment that would be administered by a campaign or organization even without the involvement of the researcher. Field experimentalists did not invent direct mail, clientelist appeals, new welfare spending programs, or new systems of education funding. But they can aid in assessing their effectiveness, which is demonstrably to the benefit of program recipients and citizens. Accordingly, while review boards may sometimes express concern that "some people are getting something while others are not," this concern can generally be overcome by noting that treatments will be administered in the same volume regardless of the involvement of the researcher. In short, do not be cowed by ethical concerns at the start of an experiment—they can be met. Furthermore, as field experimentation gains in popularity among social scientists, review boards will undoubtedly become more familiar with these types of protocols, making for a smoother ethics approval process.

## Conclusion

The world is wide open for field experiments. Indeed, the common interests of political scientists and political elites provide limitless opportunities for collaboration, particularly when the outcome of a process or the mechanism by which a policy operates is unknown and when researchers can propose unique and flexible treatments. We should not shy away from engaging with real political actors. Instead, we should recognize that we could realize much greater analytical gains while having a greater impact on real politics through such partnerships.

We have identified the general conditions under which field experiments are more likely. Researchers are most likely to be able to conduct field experiments in cooperation with campaigns when the effects or the mechanism of a policy are

unknown and when researchers can offer a flexible and scaled test of the policy. We have also shown how experiments large and small can be conducted in partnership with political elites and have outlined some general advice on how more can be achieved in the future. We look forward to the day when such advice is obvious and unneeded.

## Notes

1. A thought experiment: imagine asking an American presidential campaign to allow you to run an experiment in Florida!

2. See Shadish, Cook, and Campbell (2000) for a discussion of other threats to validity.

3. The provincial government had imposed the requirement of a supermajority whereby reform required 60 percent support and majority support in 60 percent of constituencies. At the start of the campaign, both sides anticipated a close fight and the possibility of a second campaign if the reform side won more than 50 percent but less than 60 percent. Accordingly, at the time that Loewen and Rubenson negotiated the experiment, the prospect of knowing the results of mail was enough of an incentive to ensure cooperation.

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