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Project Description

In the past decade, political scientists have increasingly embraced tools pioneered by economics. Instrumental variable approaches, field experiments and quasi-experimental methods are now commonplace in political science and have been adapted to address topics as wide-ranging as foreign aid, party behavior, public goods provision, and even political violence. Moreover, political scientists are increasingly at the cutting edge of experimentation in field settings (see e.g. Gerber and Green, 2000, Wantchekon 2003; Habyarimana et al 2007, among others) and have likewise made important contributions to the development of experimental and quasi-experimental methodology (see e.g. Imai and Shapiro 2011; Imai, Tingley and Yamamoto 2013). At the same time, economists have used experimental and quasi-experimental approaches to study topics that were previously dominated by political scientists. Prominent examples include the influence of the slave trade on modern stocks of human capital (Nunn and Wantchekon 2011), the impact of colonization on economic development (Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2001), institutional reform (Banerjee et al 2012), and the effect of information availability on political accountability (Pande 2011; Reinikke and Svensson 2005; Keefer and Khemani 2005, Olken 2010).

This cross-pollination has been fruitful for both disciplines, but it has also brought new challenges. For example, though experimental methods have gained widespread acceptance, so too have they exposed difficulties in designing interventions, particularly those that target political institutions such as electoral rules or party behavior. Problems of compliance, ethics, and external validity have taken on new dimensions. Researchers employing experimental approaches in the field must navigate a complex web of methodological challenges in environments that are far less predictable
than the laboratory. Those doing work in developing countries face still more obstacles. Yet, barring a recent conference held at Princeton on lessons and challenges in experimental political science, there has been a surprising lack of dialogue on these issues; the use of experimental and quasi-experimental methods is now a global affair, both in terms of its scope and its practitioners, but there have been few attempts to share knowledge and develop best practices. What networks that do exist for sharing experiences from the field and innovative interventions are informal, limited in scope, or both.¹ Our project, the Empirical Political Economy Network (EPEN), seeks to fill this gap.

**Contribution**

The network will make major substantive contribution to the literature on democratic governance, the main area of application of experimental methods in political economy. Topics of interest include institutions of participatory democracy, horizontal accountability in governments and bureaucratic autonomy. It will also be an important opportunity for methodological contributions. Princeton has been at the forefront of recent efforts to apply experimental and quasi-experimental approaches to issues in political economy, particularly those related to economic development. In September, the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice, the Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance, and the Program for Quantitative and Analytical Political Science hosted the first of a series of annual conferences on challenges and best practices in field experiments. This year also marked the creation of a seminar and workshop series on experimental methods, which includes both faculty and graduate students in political science, economics, sociology and psychology. Through monthly seminar meetings, we have been able to invite researchers at the cutting edge of experimental work to discuss their design, data collection and results, while twice-monthly workshops allow graduate students and faculty to improve their designs before taking them into the field. These events, coupled with the presence of prominent experimental researchers, have placed Princeton at the center of attempts to improve how experiments are conducted and encourage innovation in the kinds of interventions researchers pursue.

While these developments are important initial steps, they are limited in two ways. First, they are still narrow in their geographical scope: cutting edge work in political economy—particularly in the experimental realm—is a global affair, with important contributions being made by scholars from all over the world. True collaboration entails building relationships with scholars outside of the United States as well as the universities and research centers that conduct the interventions and collect data. Second, the explosion of interest in experimental and quasi-experimental work has far outstripped the available training resources for faculty and graduate students. Recent publications have ameliorated the dearth of written material, but handbooks are not substitutes for in-person training by top practitioners. It is these shortcomings we intend to address with EPEN. Comprised of a partnership with Princeton University, the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil (USP),

¹The Contemporary African Political Economy Research Seminar (CAPERS), for example, is restricted largely to faculty and students from Columbia and NYU, while the more formalized networks common in experimental economics have not yet emerged in political science.
the Center for Teaching and Research in Economics (known by its Spanish acronym CIDE) in Mexico City, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IERPE), which is a research center of the African School of Economics (ASE) in Benin, the goal of the EPEN will be to develop a comprehensive program on the role of experimental and quasi-experimental methods in studying governance and social policy, with students and faculty from several universities participating in a series of conferences, workshops, and training courses designed to identify promising approaches and equip a new generation of practitioners with the methodological tools necessary for rigorous experimental research.

Collaboration

Because the ultimate goal of the project is to improve the substantive and methodological rigor of experimental and quasi-experimental work, it is worth mentioning briefly the specific contributions each of the EPEN partners can make. The partnership between the USP, CIDE, IERPE, ASE and Princeton is one borne out of mutual belief in the importance of social science research for policy formulation, as well as a need to foster collaboration across disciplines and locations. Each partner also brings important resources to bear on the task at hand. Below is a brief summary of the strengths of each organization.

The Institute of Empirical Research in Political Economy (IERPE)/African School of Economics. A non-profit academic training and research initiative in Political Economy and Applied Statistics, IERPE provides expertise in public policy and governance in Africa. Since its inception, IERPE has conducted major experiments in health, education and governance, developing along the way strong and extensive networks throughout Africa, a common destination for experimental researchers. It has operated in Benin, Burkina Faso and Congo, and is a core partner of Afrobarometer, a survey organization, which operates in 35 countries across Africa. In 2006, the Institute expanded the scope of its activities to include a successful Master's of Public Economics and Applied Statistics (MEPSA). The IERPE and ASE have academic partnership with Princeton and CIDE.

University of Sao Paulo. The University of Sao Paulo has a strong track record in research on conflict prevention and governance and has been at forefront of so-called ‘institutional experiments’ that seek to understand the effects of political institutions using experimental methods. In addition, Princeton University has entered into an academic partnership with USP. This partnership will provide the necessary infrastructure to facilitate ongoing collaboration.

Center for Teaching and Research in Economics (CIDE). Finally, CIDE has funded groundbreaking work on conditional cash transfers, decentralization, and the effect of pay incentives on bureaucratic performance. These experiments, including the influential Progresa randomized control trial, have become cornerstones of the literature on direct development support.
Globalizing Princeton

With the USP, CIDE and IERPE as partners, the EPEN project at Princeton will be able to cultivate networks in Africa, Latin America and North America simultaneously, while also reaching a broad cross-section of scholars and students through its methodological training. Most importantly, Princeton is exceptionally well-positioned to lead the EPEN. Princeton scholars have been at the center of important advances in experimental political economy, which has moved toward the promising but underdeveloped field of institutional experiments, emphasizing the importance of designing experiments that can help to uncover the causal effects of social and political institutions. These institutions have been increasingly recognized as the most important single determinant of a country’s economic and political well-being, and have been the focus of ground-breaking work from economists and political scientists alike. In particular, a Princeton group would be able to capitalize on Leonard Wantchekon’s research in this area and his networks in sub-Saharan Africa. A Princeton group would also be able to draw on a large network of development practitioners and in-country researchers, built up through decades of fieldwork and several large-scale experiments by Betsy Pullock in Psychology as well as Evan Lieberman and Thomas Fujiwara in economics. The group would also benefit from the presence of Helen Milner and Amaney Jamal, who have extensive experience conducting surveys and survey experiments.

The group will greatly gain from the involvement of Marcos Rangel from department of economics the University of Sao Paulo and David Arellano Gault from the division of public administration at CIDE-Mexico. Professor Rangel is one the leading researchers in development economics and experimental methods in Latin America. Professor Arellano-Gault is a leading scholar in comparative public administration and governance in Mexico. He is also the provost of CIDE.

For these reasons, we believe that Princeton can use its expertise in empirical methods to support researchers in Africa and Latin America, while at the same time benefitting from the substantive experience of our partner organizations. The latter is particularly true for graduate students, for whom EPEN can serve as a springboard into policy and academic networks in both regions. We also fully expect that collaboration between ASE and IERPE in Africa, CIDE in Mexico, and USP in Brazil will give senior scholars working on issues such as governance and accountability opportunities to learn from work conducted outside their respective regions. This is especially important given that Africa and Latin America have faced similar problems in political and economic development. Overall, we believe that the project will result in research that is at once more substantively important and more methodologically sound, and that the project’s collaborative nature will foster new research and benefit the discipline as a whole.

Project Outline

We envision the EPEN as having two distinct portions: a series of conferences, focused on the frontier of research in the political economy of governance and development, and a multi-day workshop on experimental and quasi-experimental methodology and applications, taught by prominent researchers and attended by both faculty and graduate students from around the world.
Conferences. We envision three separate conferences, one held by each of the three partnering institutions. Our first will be in Princeton, the second in Sao Paolo, and the third at IERPE in Benin. All three will be multi-day, interdisciplinary conferences that will have sessions on innovations in experimental design, best practices in implementation, and advances in quasi-experimental methodologies such as non-parametric matching.

Short-Course. The short course, while primarily for the benefit of students, will also be open to interested faculty. They will be held in Princeton and will be modeled after similar courses held by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan. Attendees will have the option of taking a basket of courses that range from an introduction to the potential outcomes framework that underpins experimental and quasi-experimental work to advanced topics in experimental design and causal inference. We also plan to offer training courses on software commonly used in experimental work, such as those that handle randomization and survey design. The short course will be financed entirely by our partner institutions.

Timeline. We envision EPEN lasting for approximately three years, with one conference occurring at each partner institution in each year. We expect the short course to occur at Princeton in the final year. Each conference will occur between July and September depending on the timetable of the host university, and will last approximately three days. The conference will be held in Benin the first year, in Brazil the second, and, finally, in Mexico. The final event, which will include a short-course, will be held at Princeton.