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Workshop Proposal

Voting Experiments

An Assessment of Controlled Experiments about Electoral Behaviour

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Abstract
Experimental methods have been rapidly developing in political science over the past few years, especially in the field of electoral behaviour. At the same time, voting experiments build on very different traditions (esp. psychology and behavioural economics) and use very different designs and settings (laboratory, field, and survey experiments). This creates an urgent need for a European forum to present and discuss current research in this field. This workshop proposal aims at connecting scholars who have actively developed, used, and advanced experimental methods in the past few years. The workshop will assess the scientific contribution of experimental methods to the field of electoral behaviour, exchange practical experiences of developing and running experiments, and establish networks among scholars for future collaboration.

Experiments on electoral behaviour

Controlled experiments\(^1\) such as laboratory experiments, field experiments or survey experiments have exhibited tremendous growth in most of the social sciences over the past few years. Following psychology and behavioural economics, they are now a generally

\(^1\) We define here experiments as any method based on the random allocation of a treatment among various groups of people themselves allocated randomly to these groups.
accepted and influential approach in political science as documented in forthcoming books by Morton and Williams (*From Nature to the Lab: The Methodology of Experimental Political Science and the Study of Causality*) and the *Handbook of Experimental Political Science* edited by James Druckman, Donald Green, James Kuklinski, and Arthur Lupia (see also Druckman et al. 2006; Green & Gerber 2002; 2004). Experiments are flexible tools for theory testing that allow researchers to establish causality by clearly separating causes and effects and to shed light on the underlying mechanisms of decision making. They are particularly useful when key explanatory factors lack variance and no observable data such as surveys are available to test a theory. Examples are the effect of a campaign message that is constant during a campaign and across voters or the effect of institutional arrangements such as electoral rules on political behaviour.

The infrastructure for experiments has improved remarkably in recent years, with Europe quickly catching up with North America. First, following the example of several North American universities that have established laboratories for experiments (e.g. the EEPS at Caltech or CIRANO at Montréal), Oxford University and the University of Oldenburg, Germany, have established such labs as well. Second, survey experiments had a real breakthrough with the establishment of the American TESS infrastructure (Time sharing experiments for the social sciences). A similar Internet panel has, for example, been set up in the Netherlands, the LISS panel (Long-term Internet Studies for the Social Sciences). And finally, the training of European scientists in experimental methods has made great strides. Both the ECPR Summer School in Methods and Techniques, Ljubljana, and the Essex Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis have recently offered courses on experimental design. With infrastructure and skills in place, an ECPR workshop will offer researchers a European forum to present recent research and discuss methodological issues.

Electoral behaviour and decision making is a prominent topic in political science in general and experimental research in particular (Palfrey 2006; Rietz 2008). Charles Plott introduced laboratory experiments about electoral rules and the role of agenda-setting at the end of the 1970s (Plott & Levine 1978; Eckel & Holt 1989). Experiments in political psychology and political communication gained prominence with the work by Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder (1987). Experimental tests of rational choice theories, both in form of individual and group decision making, found a key publication in *Laboratory Research in Political Economy* (Palfrey 1991). Electoral participation has drawn special attention and led to a number of field experiments and landmark publications such as those by Donald Green and Alan Gerber (Gerber & Green 2000). This short review shows a wide range of theory-
driven experimental research on electoral behaviour. The vast majority of these studies was conducted in the United States. The proposed workshop will offer in particular European researchers a forum to present and discuss their current research.

**Workshop description**

This workshop aims to provide an appropriate setting for young and established researchers to present recent experimental work and to discuss the opportunities and challenges for the further development of experimental methods in political science. The substantive topic of the workshop will be electoral behaviour to insure that the papers focus on a central political science question that can be addressed by the full range of experimental methods (laboratory, field, and survey experiments).

Different types of experiments are rooted in very distinct traditions, creating the urgent need for discussion, the exchange of ideas, and ultimately methodological cooperation. For example, political economists excel at testing formal models in abstract, context-free decision scenarios that operationalize preferences as monetary incentives. Political psychologists, on the other hand, consider context and pre-existing preferences as well as the use of concealment and deception to operationalize and manipulate independent variables as key to understanding individual behaviour. Field experiments introduce real world scenarios and help to address the robustness and generalizability of laboratory results. A workshop with researchers from these different traditions working on the shared topic of electoral behaviour would offer an ideal opportunity for exchanges and help researchers working in different counties to connect and establish networks for further collaboration.

**Types of paper**

We look for a wide range of papers using experimental methods (laboratory, field, and survey experiments) or that review published experimental results of all dimensions of electoral behaviour. We would give preference to new and original empirical work but would also consider papers proposing to replicate published results of experiments. Papers are expected to include discussions of methodological issues, substantive results, and the contribution of experimental methods to the field of electoral behaviour by explicitly addressing the issue of external validity.
Possible participants

The network of political scientists using experiments has grown larger and larger. Various recent meetings such as the “International Conference on Experimental Methods in Political Science”, Universitaire Stichting, Brussels, in 2007 and the workshop “Experimental Political Science” at the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg, Delmenhorst, Germany, in 2008 indicate that many political science scholars work with experimental methods and would constitute a pool of possible participants for the proposed workshop. It is also likely that economists and psychologists working on the topic would be interested in joining the session. Possible participants include André Blais (U. de Montréal), Thomas Bräuninger (Mainz), Tereza Capelos (Surrey), Bernard Dolez (Lille), Raymond Duch (Oxford), Alan Gerber (Yale), Donald Green (Yale), Thomas Gschwend (U. Mannheim), Marc Hooghe (Leuven), Bernhard Kittel (Oldenburg), Jean-François Laslier (Ecole Polytechnique, Paris), Annie Laurent (U. Lille), Michael Lewis-Beck (Iowa), Rebecca Morton (NYU), Diana Mutz (U. Pennsylvania), Rune Sloothus (Aarhus), Jean-Robert Tyran (U. Copenhagen), Sara Vissers (Leuven), Stefaan Walgrave (Antwerp), Leonard Wantchenkon (NYU).

Endorsement of ECPR Standing Groups

The workshop has the endorsement and support of two ECPR Standing Groups, Political Methodology and Political Psychology. This will help to increase the visibility of the workshop and encourage a wide range of participants to apply.

Funding

The home universities of the proposed directors of the workshop will be asked for financial support for the workshop.

References


**Biographical note of proposers**

Michael F. Meffert is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Leiden University (Netherlands) since 2008. Before arriving in Leiden, he was a Research Associate at the Collaborative Research Center (SFB 504) at the University of Mannheim (Germany) from 2004 to 2008, and an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Maryland (USA) from 1999 to 2004. His research interests are political behaviour and political decision making, in particular strategic voting in multiparty systems. He uses both laboratory experiments and survey experiments in his research.

He has recently in published:

Nicolas Sauger has been an Associate Research Professor at Sciences Po, Paris (France), since 2004. He was Vincent Wright Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute in Florence. His fields of research focus on the analysis of changes in structures of political competition in France and Europe. He has particular interest in laboratory experiments and comparative repeated surveys. Nicolas Sauger is the convenor of the Electoral Analysis Group (GAEL) of the French Political Science Association and acts as National coordinator for the European Social Survey and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.

He has recently in published:
- Blais, André; Foucault, Martial; Labbé Saint-Vincent, Simon, Laslier, Jean-François, Sauger, Nicolas, Van Der Straeten, Karine, 2010, "Strategic Vote Choice in One Round and Two Round Elections: An Experimental Study", accepted for publication by Political Research Quarterly.
- Dupoirier, Elisabeth, Sauger, Nicolas, 2010, "Four Rounds in a Row: Interactive Effects among Legislative and Presidential Elections Outcomes in France", accepted for publication by French Politics.
- Clark, Andrew, Sauger, Nicolas, Senik, Claudia (dir.), 2009, "Welfare, Well-Being and Immigration in Europe: Evidence from the European Social Survey", special issue of Social Indicators Research, 91 (3).