# What, Where, Who, and Why? An Empirical Investigation of Positionality in Political Science Field Experiments

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olitical scientists' positionality (i.e., their own identities, beliefs, and assumptions about the context of a study) often receives implicit recognition in publications but rarely is explicitly addressed (Davis 2020; Davis and Mitchelich 2022; Soedirgo and Glas 2020). Field experiments as real-life social laboratories and the current gold-standard technology of policy expertise occupy a unique place. To a much larger extent than other methods of social science research, "realworld" experimentation entails actual economic or political stakes, complex ethical dimensions, demanding logistical costs and infrastructure, and-in an increasing number of cases—a direct link to decision makers. This article provides a first empirical basis for discussions of positionality as data on experimenter characteristics currently is unavailable.

To provide a scientometric analysis, we compiled an original dataset that pools all field experiments by political scientists preregistered between 2014 and 2019 across three main social science registries: primarily from the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) and marginally from the American Economic Association (AEA) registry for randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and the Registry for International Development Impact Evaluations (RIDIE). Table 1 is a basic overview of our data. In the absence of other sources, preregistration allows us to capture the universe of completed, ongoing, and planned studies.

We are aware of potential biases inherent in our datacollection strategy. Since preregistration emerged in the international development community (i.e., AEA and EGAP), field experiments conducted in academic fields or cultures without preregistration norms might be captured only partially. This omission raises valid sample-bias concerns. Therefore, for robustness, we also compiled and coded a parallel dataset on all field experiments published in top political science

Among the many potential dimensions relevant to positionality, we explored three aspects empirically: (1) the geographical distribution of field experiments and related time trends; (2) the clustering of field experiments by institution,

author, and topic; and (3) the type of partners involved in experimentation. The following sections discuss each dimension and present descriptive trends.

#### GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF FIELD EXPERIMENTS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

Three main sets of issues are explicitly associated with the location of field experiments: (1) the often-unacknowledged power relationships between experimenters and subjects of research; (2) relatedly, the North–South hierarchies embedded in the knowledge-production process that are exacerbated by the high costs associated with field experiments; and (3) siteselection bias and geographical clustering of field experimentation. The first issue usually emphasizes the fact that the randomization "in the tropics" conducted by Western researchers from wealthy institutions on poor subjects may not always meet full ethical standards (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Herman et al. 2022; McDermott and Hatemi 2020). A Nobel Prize-winning social scientist noted "...nearly all RCTs on the welfare system are done by better-heeled, better-educated, and paler people on lower-income, less-educated, and darker people" (Deaton 2020, 21).

When we examined the geographical distribution of the current wave of field experiments, we found that, indeed, the majority of researchers are located in the Global North, with the United States accounting for most of the experiments, as shown in the bottom-left panel of figure 1. However, the topleft panel of figure 1 shows that between 2014 and 2019, the concentration of the country locations of field research, computed as a Hirschmann-Herfindahl index, declined steadily. In the limit, a concentration index of 1 means that all experiments are taking place in one country, whereas a concentration index of o means that they are taking place in different countries.3 The concentration of experiments originating in the developing world has been low and constant over time. The distribution of the data on published field experiments is even more skewed and relatively stable over time: among 16 countries of origin, 84.39% of 205 coauthors were affiliated with US institutions between 2014 and 2019. Less than 4% of published

Table 1
Preregistered Experiments in the Three Registries

Registry	Total Number Experiments	Number Field Experiments	Number Experiments by Political Scientists	Number Field Experiments by PS
EGAP	1,441	944	1,178	779
AEA	2,601	2,264	31	29
RIDIE	143	94	1	1
Overall	4,185	3,302	1,210	809

Notes: Preregistered experiment data collected from 2014 to 2019. Discipline is reported for the principal investigator. Field experiments exclude survey and lab experiments.

RCTs in political science originated from three emerging economies (i.e., Brazil, China, and Russia) and none from low-income countries. Therefore, scholars must grapple with the following tradeoff: as experimental evidence becomes more standard, the research of political scientists trained at

country of study corresponding to the country of the lead researcher's institution.<sup>4</sup>

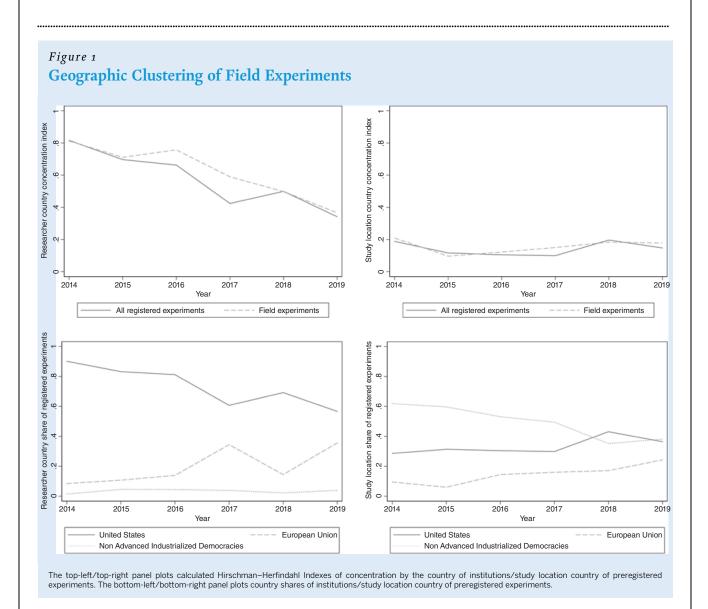
In parallel, and to the contrary, there is an opposite concern in terms of geographical coverage of experimentation from a knowledge-gain perspective—namely, that the geographical

Field experiments as real-life social laboratories and the current "gold-standard" technology of policy expertise occupy a unique place. To a much larger extent than other methods of social science research, "real-world" experimentation entails actual economic or political stakes, complex ethical dimensions, demanding logistical costs and infrastructure, and—in an increasing number of cases—a direct link to decision makers.

and employed by North American institutions, although contributing significantly to knowledge, entails potential positionality biases.

It is notable, however, that despite the recent notoriety gained by the randomista movement in development, field experimentation has much deeper historical roots in advanced industrial democracies. The earliest field experiments in political science studied "get-out-the-vote" mailings during the 1924 US presidential election; followed by voter mobilization in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the early 1950s (Gerber 2011); and several US federal and local government program evaluations during the 1960s and 1970s (Ogden 2017). Assuaging the randomization "in-the-tropics" concern to some extent, field experiments in political science have developed a geographical bimodal distribution over time, with studies of voting behavior mainly focused on the United States. This was followed in a second wave by experiments on non-Western countries in the subfields of comparative politics and political economy of development. Empirically, what is striking in our data in terms of study location is the shift from the non-advanced industrialized countries into the United States and Europe during the period we studied (2014–2019). Figure 2 demonstrates the similarly increasing trend in "RCT domestication" (i.e., the researcher country also being the site of experimentation) in the top-left panel and the relative decline of the share of "North-South" experiments (i.e., an advanced industrialized country fielding an experiment in a developing country) in the top-right panel. "Domestication" refers to the focus in political science traditionally has been Western-centric rather than global. This epistemic concern rests on a long-standing geographical imbalance in political science research. Wealthier democratic countries with English, Spanish, or French as their main spoken language were more likely to be studied (Wilson and Knutsen 2020). An emerging literature also demonstrates that field experiments are more likely to occur in certain contexts (i.e., political, geographical, and institutional) (Blair, Iyengar, and Shapiro 2013; Corduneanu-Huci, Dorsch, and Maarek 2021; Das 2020). Our data optimistically show that the sites of experimentation diversified to more than 100 countries between 2014 and 2019.

The share of nondomestic experiments taking place in a country where English is an official language-a potential source of site-selection bias-also showed a marked decrease during the period. Moreover, several low- and middle-income countries from Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, and the Middle East (e.g., Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Uganda, Lebanon, and Vietnam) were in the top-10 ranking of RCT geographical coverage as they were featured in multiple studies published in leading political science journals (Figure A5 in the Online Appendix). These countries previously were epistemically marginal in the leading political science literature. Liberia, for instance, was studied in only 14 of a total 27,689 articles appearing in top political science journals during more than a century. However, it became a top-10 site for field experiments, accounting for approximately 6% of all field RCTs published in the same journals in only five recent years.

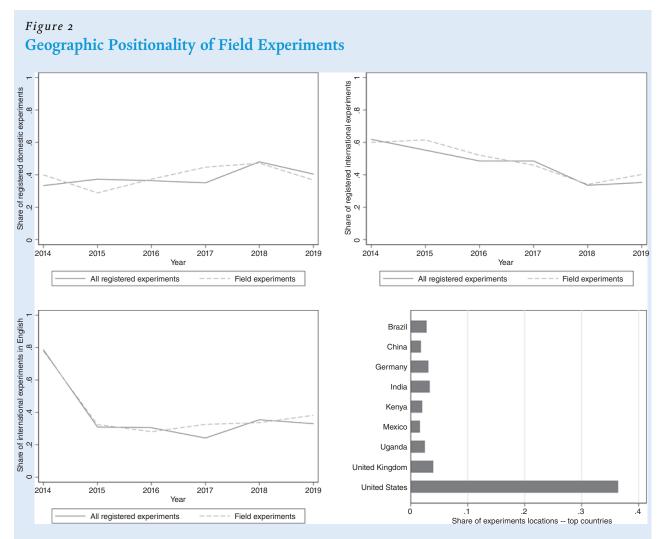


Nevertheless, despite clear evidence of geographical diversification and epistemic gains in previously neglected contexts, the experimental sites remained highly concendiversification of experimental sites according to geographical and topical evidence-gap maps, coupled with stricter ethical criteria for field experimentation (Phillips 2021),

The cautious diversification of experimental sites according to geographical and topical evidence-gap maps, coupled with stricter ethical criteria for field experimentation, may address critiques of North-South epistemic power divides and may ensure that the topical interests of field experimenters more closely match local developmental priorities.

trated, with only five countries accounting for approximately 50% of all preregistered field experiments. If anything, the geography of RCTs became more concentrated during the period that we studied. The cautious

may address critiques of North-South epistemic power divides and may ensure that the topical interests of field experimenters more closely match local developmental priorities.



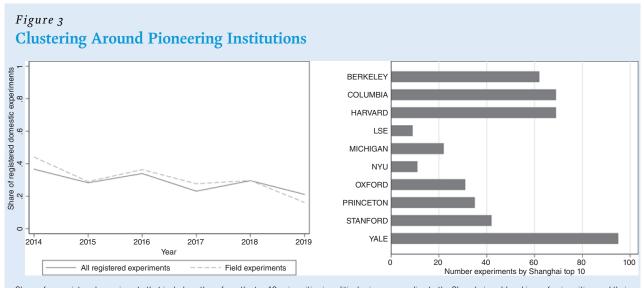
The top-left panel plots the share of preregistered experiments taking place in the same country as the preregistering institution. The top-right panel plots the share of experiments preregistered by an institution in an advanced industrialized democratic (AID) country taking place in a non-AID country. The bottom-left panel plots the share of preregistered experiments taking place outside of the preregistering country where English is an official language in the location. The bottom-right panel shows the shares of the top nine country locations between 2014 and 2019.

## INSTITUTION AND TOPIC CLUSTERING AMONG EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCHERS

Mirroring geographical patterns, the skewed distribution of knowledge production is not unique to field experiments because it affects most academic and policy research. Nevertheless, field experimentation stands out in this respect because of the high costs and complex logistical requirements compared to other methods of inquiry. This increases the likelihood that the top producers are influential institutions and authors who have access to resources as well as policy and research networks. Therefore, the concern is that the ensuing institutional and geographical imbalances are even more pronounced for field experiments. A comprehensive bibliometric review of 25 development journals (2000–2019) revealed that, indeed, even when controlling for an overwhelming majority of articles on Africa written by non-African authors (87%), the share of experimental

research on an African country by an African author is 2.5 times lower than the share of the equivalent body of *observational* research (Panin 2020). Similar scientometric studies of other world regions also highlighted the relative diversity of observational studies (Cansun and Arik 2018; Codato, Madeira, and Bittencourt 2020). We expanded this analysis by examining the affiliation of the lead primary investigators among all preregistered experiments in political science.

Figure 3 (left panel) plots the share of experiments by institutions that have political science departments ranking among the world's top 10, according to the Shanghai world rankings (Shanghai Ranking 2019). We found that, indeed, the pool of experimenters was highly concentrated institutionally, with the top 10 academic institutions accounting for 20% to 40% of all experiments between 2014 and 2019. There was a clear downward trend during this period, however, which

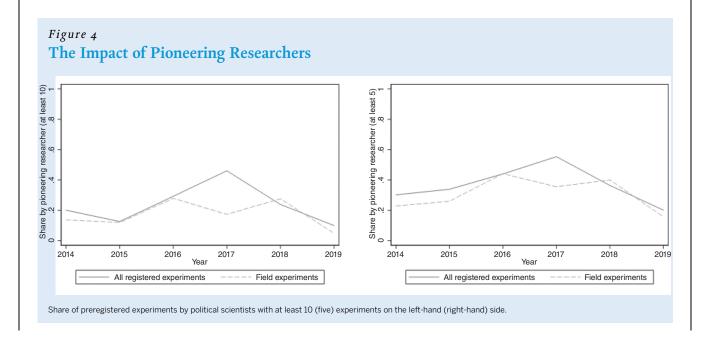


Share of preregistered experiments that include authors from the top 10 universities in political science according to the Shanghai world rankings of universities, and their numbers on the right. Note that eight of these 10 institutions have endowments greater than \$10 billion dollars USD, placing them among the top 15 endowed universities in the world. All of them except one have endowments greater than \$4 billion dollars USD.

suggests a diffusion of the methodology that may be driven by its strength in causal identification, decreasing costs, and economies of scale.5

We also found a relatively high author concentration around influential researchers and associated networks. Figure 4 shows that the share of experiments with pioneering authors (i.e., at least 10 experiments in the left panel and at least five experiments in the right panel) was in the same range as the share from top institutions. In our supplementary data on published work in leading political science journals, 71% of all field experiments had at least one author from a top-20 institution and 40% of all authors were associated with a top-10 program.

Influence clustering entails both costs and benefits. Preexisting experimental infrastructure lowers transaction costs and generates economies of scale in knowledge production. Conversely, barriers to entry for a wider pool of researchers increase the overall costs of innovation. The availability of grants and other funding schemes that would privilege researchers from broader institutional circles and more systematic inclusion and crediting of Global South contributors could diversify the institutional pool in field experimentation. During the past two decades, pioneering policy labs and research networks (i.e., Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, Center for Effective Global Action, Working Group in African Political Economy, and Evidence in Governance and



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Politics) made substantial investments in fostering collaborations between researchers from the Global North and the Global South. Knowledge transfers and local capacity building in experimentation generate significant positive externalities that may further address epistemic inequalities.

The experimental topics also entail positional implications. We text-mined experiment titles across our registries to generate several theoretically informed and occasionally overlapping categories of field experiments in political science: electoral learning, governance and accountability, minority representation, and postconflict recovery. Figure 5 (left panel) shows that governance as a conceptual-umbrella category accounted for approximately 50% of preregistered experiments. We also coded a residual "policy-learning" category that is highly heterogeneous. Although our coding scheme is imperfect, the high share of this category may reflect broader disciplinary debates regarding the role of experimentation in addressing underlying theoretical mechanisms in political science (Humphreys and Weinstein 2009) versus adopting a more technical "mindset of plumbers" advocated in economics (Duflo 2017).6

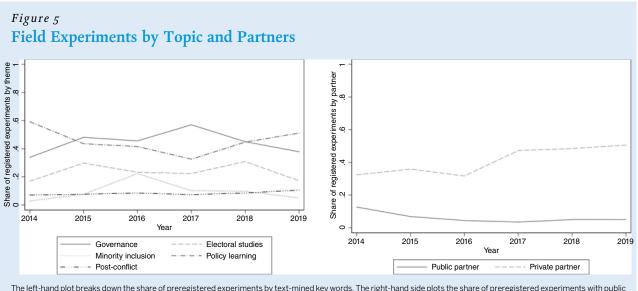
Monitoring topical trends is important because each topic raises its own unique set of ethical and research-design issues; therefore, a "one-size-fits-all" normative formula may not be optimal. For instance, policy evaluations are characterized by less-regulated ethical norms than pure research, and any steps toward codifying these norms would be crucial. In the case of postconflict or poverty-alleviation interventions, the experimental design itself may increase these ethical stakes given that a control group of vulnerable recipients does not receive the treatment (Evans 2021). This is not the case in field experimentation on voter turnout or informational treatments. Moreover, social scientists in other disciplines increasingly have begun to conduct field experiments on similar

topics. Fieldwork consolidation to prevent excessive location clustering and participant fatigue may benefit from further formal or informal cross-disciplinary coordination mechanisms

#### **EXPERIMENTAL PARTNERS**

For experimentation on political topics, the three key actors with stakes in the experimental design and implementation are the subjects/citizens, the researchers, and the implementers (i.e., research firms, donors, political parties, nongovernmental organizations, government agencies, and others) (Haas et al. 2022). Of the total articles with field experiments published between 2000 and 2017 in three top political science journals, 62 % entailed a partnership (Levine 2021). Figure 5 (right panel) shows the shares and evolution of partnership relationships over time. Political scientists rely more on partnerships with non-state partners than with governments, and the share of experiments with private partners increased during the period of our sample. We suspect that this is because of both practicality and topic-related circumspection.

On a practical level, private or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often are preferred as main implementing partners because they are more flexible and able to randomize, whereas many governments—for legal or political reasons—face difficulties when designing control groups and eliminating recipients from treatment. Moreover, governments traditionally have been more reluctant to engage with academic researchers. In development, field experimentation initially focused on working with NGOs and adopting a gradualist and practical approach with respect to partnerships, "...not by knocking at the minister's door but by marginal successes that create credibility for the movement, gains for policy makers" (Duflo quoted in Ogden 2017, 25). In general, design adjustments tailored to the constraints of various non-state partners



The left-hand plot breaks down the share of preregistered experiments by text-mined key words. The right-hand side plots the share of preregistered experiments with public and private partners, respectively.

ranging from NGOs to political campaigns have proven fruitful for sustained researcher-implementation partner collaboration in political science (Green, Calfano, and Aronow 2014).

Topic-wise, in some cases and contexts, the study of sensitive political phenomena—to a larger extent than in the case of economic development—also precludes direct partnerships with governments or political leaders, which may explain the strategies. We documented several empirical trends centered around the interaction among researchers, experimental subjects, and implementation partners. In conclusion, although we are strong advocates of the discipline's methodological shift toward credible causal identification for which field experiments are the gold standard, our analysis—and this symposium more broadly-raises positionality issues. Geo-

### The explicit acknowledgment of the political-economy stakes that partners have is a crucial positional aspect for both normative stances and scientific value.

pattern in our data. The search for and use of evidence by decision makers often entail instrumental considerations. Circumspect awareness of this aspect is important for the relationship with the implementation partner. For instance, for conditional-cash-transfer experiments taking place in Africa, the researchers, in collaboration with international NGOs, often chose not to work with local politicians because of clientelistic concerns (Ouma 2020).

Partner selection is paramount for both normative questions—ethical parameters and project legitimacy in the field (Haas et al. 2022; Ouma 2020), as well as for scientific outcomes. From a normative standpoint, if the government is the main partner in a field experiment that relies on cluster randomization, its "right to rule" in certain policy areas (e.g., public schools and public health clinics) alleviates some ethical concerns regarding the lack of informed consent (Evans 2021). Scientifically, the interaction and basic trust between the community and the partner organization are essential for both experimental compliance and findings. There is evidence that the type of partner—either government or NGO-involved in the implementation of identical field experiments conducted on the same site could lead to divergent treatment effects (Allcott 2015; Bold et al. 2018; Vivalt 2020). For example, a study of educational reforms in Kenya by Bold et al. (2018) found that the treatment significantly raised learning outcomes when implemented by an international NGO, whereas an identical intervention had no impact when implemented by the Kenyan government. The explicit acknowledgment of the political-economy stakes that partners have is a crucial positional aspect for both normative stances and scientific value.

#### CONCLUSION

This article introduces a new dataset on the incidence of field experiments in political science as measured through experiment preregistrations and corroborated by systematic data on field experiments published in top political science journals. This contribution can be useful for the analysis of where, with whom, and why this research methodology is used. Because of the significant degree of overlap across social sciences, monitoring of basic trends across disciplines is likely to be beneficial for further understanding the issue of positionality in field experimentation and coordination graphical, institutional, topical, and relational identities in field experimentation should be considered by political scientists.

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#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the PS: Political Science & Politics Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ JVW4NF.

#### SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652200066X.

#### NOTES

- 1. As defined by the academic journal Scientometrics, "Scientometrics is (...) concerned with the quantitative features and characteristics of science (Scientometrics 2021).
- ${\bf 2.}\,$  This analysis used the web-scraping tool developed by Wilson and Knutsen (2020) that surveyed 27,689 articles published in American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, British Journal of Political Science, Comparative Politics, Comparative Political Studies, Journal of Politics, International Organization, and World Politics between 2000 and 2019. See the online
- Technically, we computed a Hirschmann-Herfindahl index of country sum of the squared country shares of experiments for a given year (e.g., for country iin year t, the index is calculated as  $HHI_t = \sum_{i=1}^{n} s_{i,t}^2$ , where stj is the share of experiments in country i in year t). Higher index values indicate greater concentration. The Hirschmann-Herfindahl index was developed as a way to measure the extent of market power in economic contexts, with a concentration index of 1 corresponding to a monopolized market.
- 4. One caveat is in order: our data do not capture systematically the researcher's country of origin, which may have important implications for the insideroutsider status (Kim et al. 2022). We emphasize institutional affiliation instead as a proxy for access to resources.
- 5. Costs for RCTs on social welfare and development, for instance, ranged between \$50,000 USD and \$1,000,000 USD during several years (Shah et al. 2015). Earlier social-welfare experiments in the United States had budgets of up to \$40 million USD (Ogden 2017). Online surveys are significantly less costly than field experiments (Dupuis, Endicott-Popovsky, and Crossler 2013).

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Our investigation of the data on published field experiments corroborates the fact that governance and accountability leads across topics, followed by minority representation and voting behavior.

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