

# Experiments about Institutions

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## Abstract

We review an emerging experimental literature studying institutional change. Institutions are a key determinant of economic growth, but the “critical junctures” in which institutions can change are not precisely defined. For example, such junctures are often identified *ex post*, raising methodological problems: selection on the outcome of institutional change; an inability to study *beliefs*, central to coordination and thus the process of institutional change; and an inability to conduct experiments to identify causal effects. We argue that critical junctures are identifiable in *real-time* as moments when there exists deep uncertainty about future institutions. Consistent with this conception, the papers reviewed: (i) examine changes to institutions, i.e., the “fundamental rules of the game”; (ii) are real-time studies of plausible critical junctures; and, (iii) use field experiments to achieve causal identification. Substantively, this literature examines institutional changes in state capacity and legitimacy, political inclusion, and political accountability. We also advocate more systematic measurement of beliefs about future institutions to identify critical junctures as they happen and provide an empirical proof of concept. Such work is urgent given contemporary critical junctures arising from democratic backsliding, state fragility, climate change, and conflicts over the rights of the marginalized.

**Keywords:** institutional change, critical junctures, field experiments, fragile states, belief elicitation

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# 1 Introduction

Political institutions are widely seen as playing a fundamental role in shaping economic outcomes; in particular, empirical evidence indicates that open, inclusive, and democratic political institutions play a causal role in driving economic growth (e.g., [North and Weingast, 1989](#); [Acemoglu et al., 2001](#); [North et al., 2009](#); [Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012](#)). But where do these propitious political institutions come from? Social scientists have long argued that institutions exhibit path dependence, with radical institutional change emerging from “critical junctures” during which multiple institutional equilibria can emerge (e.g., [Moore, 1966](#); [North, 1994](#); [Collier et al., 1991](#); [Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012](#)). Understanding the fundamental drivers of economic growth thus requires understanding the causes of institutional change during critical junctures.

Until recently, empirical research in economics on the causes of institutional change has been limited. Rather, a large literature has studied the *consequences* of path-dependent institutional change arising from exogenous shocks to historical institutions.<sup>1</sup> This work has provided credible estimates of the causal effects of institutions on long-run development.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there is near-consensus among economists that institutions are the main reason why some countries are rich and others are poor. However, the sources of variation in political institutions are typically not the object of study — indeed, *arbitrary* institutional variation is typically a feature of this research (supporting the argument for causal identification).<sup>3</sup>

Studying the causal drivers of institutional change is difficult because the critical junctures during which substantial institutional change might occur are hard to identify and, when identified, it is typically *ex post*. This raises methodological challenges. Most basically, the social science literature on critical junctures offers a broad, and sometimes imprecise, set of definitions that only partly overlap. Thus, it can be difficult to know where to look for the causes of institutional change. Given this basic challenge, it is natural to study episodes in which significant institutional

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<sup>1</sup>[Capoccia and Kelemen \(2007\)](#) write that scholarship has focused on “mechanisms of reproduction underpinning path dependence, rather than on the genetic phase of the critical juncture itself”.

<sup>2</sup>Notable examples include ([La Porta et al., 1998](#); [Acemoglu et al., 2001](#); [Nunn, 2008](#); [Dell, 2010](#); [Jia, 2013](#)).

<sup>3</sup>A smaller historical literature explores the drivers of institutional change during critical junctures: for example, [Aidt and Franck \(2015\)](#) on the impact of riots on support for democratic reforms in 19th century Britain; [Jha \(2015\)](#) on the impact of financial incentives on support for Parliament in the English Civil War; [Bai and Jia \(2016\)](#) on the impact of civil service exam reforms on revolutionary activity in Qing China.

change occurred — and to treat such cases as the relevant set of critical junctures. However, this introduces selection on the outcome of institutional change, rather than studying contexts with the *potential* for such change, potentially distorting our understanding of institutional change. Moreover, studying such events after the fact often precludes the measurement of *beliefs*, especially regarding future institutional trajectories, which are central to social coordination and to the process of institutional change. This approach also limits the use of experimental interventions, which can credibly identify causal effects of interest.

In this review, we first argue for a definition of critical junctures as periods during which multiple institutional equilibria can emerge — whether or not a change in institutional equilibrium occurs. We therefore suggest the possibility of identifying critical junctures *ex ante* from the dispersion of citizens’ beliefs about future political institutions. Very diffuse beliefs about future institutions suggests the possibility of multiple institutional trajectories that characterize critical junctures. We provide a proof-of-concept using survey data collected in Afghanistan during the era of civil conflict between the Taliban and the Afghan Republic.

We then highlight an emerging literature that overcomes the empirical challenge of studying the causes of institutional change. The papers reviewed: (i) examine changes in institutions, i.e., the “fundamental rules of the game”; (ii) are *real-time* studies of plausible critical junctures; and, (iii) implement field experiments. While these features are not strictly necessary to shed light on causes of institutional change (see papers cited above and our discussion below), they help address the aforementioned challenges. Studying the “rules of the game” — the formal and informal constraints that shape the exercise of political power — is the key to understanding institutional change (whether gradual or sudden). Particularly during critical junctures, we view these “institutional” outcomes as distinct from impactful public policy or improved functioning of an already established bureaucratic or electoral system. Studying critical junctures in real time helps avoid the problem of selecting research contexts on the outcome: i.e., whether or not institutions ultimately change. It also allows for credible elicitation of beliefs and preferences (i.e., without hindsight bias). Conducting field experiments allows researchers to estimate credible causal effects.

This literature we review also marks the confluence of two influential strands of economic

development research over the last 25 years: the literature on institutions as deep determinants of economic growth and the literature implementing randomized controlled trials (RCTs). From one direction, the institutions and growth literature became more focused on causal identification over time, in line with the broader “credibility revolution” in empirical economics [Angrist and Pischke \(2010\)](#). It evolved from historical analyses (e.g., [North and Weingast, 1989](#); [Engerman and Sokoloff, 1994](#)), toward cross-country regressions (e.g., [La Porta et al., 1998](#)), to instrumental variables ([Acemoglu et al., 2001](#); [Nunn, 2008](#)) and regression discontinuity ([Dell, 2010](#); [Dell et al., 2018](#)) estimation. From the other direction, the application of RCTs and field experiments expanded from the evaluation of poverty alleviation programs (e.g., [Banerjee and Duflo, 2011](#)), to the study of public service provision ([Bertrand et al., 2007](#); [Muralidharan and Sundararaman, 2011](#)), to bureaucratic selection and incentives ([Dal Bó et al., 2013](#); [Khan et al., 2016](#); [Ashraf et al., 2020](#); [Bandiera et al., 2021](#)). Crucially, while these strands of research at times explore political economy questions, they do so in contexts with stable political rules of the game.

The papers we study build on these literatures by using field experiments to study institutional change in contexts with institutions in flux. For example, social scientists have long theorized about the origins of the social contract and its relation to the fiscal development of incipient states (e.g., [Tilly, 1985](#); [Finer, 1997](#); [Scott, 1998](#)). [Weigel \(2020\)](#) conducts an experiment in partnership with government authorities in the D.R. Congo to identify how the first systematic efforts to collect the property tax shapes the emergence of a social contract. Social scientists have also long theorized regarding the sources of state legitimacy (e.g., [Tyler, 2006](#)). [Berman et al. \(2019\)](#) studies a field experiment varying election monitoring to show that perceptibly fairer elections induce changes in citizens’ views of the state’s legitimacy in Afghanistan. [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2006\)](#) model franchise extensions as the outcome of pressure by organized citizens; [Cantoni et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Bursztyn et al. \(2021\)](#) study the causes of citizen turnout in democratic protests by conducting field experiments in Hong Kong. More than half of modern democracies leave the selection of candidates to party elites. By contrast, [Casey et al. \(2021a\)](#) demonstrate that a more open system involving voter input selects candidates more aligned with citizen preferences who have better records of service provision. We structure the review around themes of state capacity (e.g., [Blattman et al., 2023](#); [Sanchez de la Sierra, 2021](#); [Khan et al., 2016](#)), political inclusion (e.g.,

[Olken, 2010](#); [Casey et al., 2012](#); [Beath et al., 2013](#)), and political accountability (e.g., [Callen and Long, 2015](#); [Dunning et al., 2019](#); [Armand et al., 2020](#)).

This literature has expanded rapidly in recent years. We search the “general interest” economics journals and the “top two” political science journals — details provided below — to identify research satisfying our three criteria. From the earliest papers we review (e.g., [Olken \(2010\)](#)’s study of direct versus indirect democracy in post-Suharto Indonesia) until now, research on institutions generally (in the same journals) has increased by 50% in the last decade; research using RCTs has increased by 150%; research in our set of papers — “experiments about institutions” — has increased by 400% (albeit from a lower base).

Reviewing this literature suggests the possibility of using rigorous research methods to study the fundamental institutional determinants of economic development. On this point, [Banerjee and Duflo \(2011\)](#) wrote:

The political constraints are real, and they make it difficult to find big solutions to big problems. But there is considerable slack to improve institutions and policy at the margin... These changes will be incremental, but they will sustain and build on themselves. They can be the start of a quiet revolution.

As [Humphreys and Weinstein \(2009\)](#) argued, whether the agenda of using field experiments to study institutions will succeed depends largely on whether they address questions of broad social scientific interest. The recent work we review demonstrates that experiments about institutions are not necessarily confined to working only on the margins and help us understand the paths to “big solutions” or at least clarify the “big problems.” We anticipate continued exciting work in this area in the years ahead.

## 2 Defining Critical Junctures

A substantial social science literature defines institutional critical junctures in overlapping, but distinct ways. We focus on three highly-cited definitions.

- [Collier et al. \(1991\)](#): “a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries . . . and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies.”
- [Capoccia and Kelemen \(2007\)](#): “brief phases of institutional flux . . . during which more dramatic change is possible.”<sup>4</sup>
- [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#): “a major event or confluence of factors disrupting the existing economic or political balance in society. A critical juncture is a double-edged sword that can cause a sharp turn in the trajectory of a nation.”

These definitions of polity-level institutional critical junctures share several elements. First, critical junctures are temporally bounded: they are brief *relative to* the long, path-dependent institutional trajectories that emerge. Second, they allow for the possibility of *radical* change: the possibility of new institutional equilibria. Third, they are historically *contingent*: radical institutional change is possible, but outcomes of critical junctures will vary across contexts.

One key difference across these definitions is whether significant change needs to be observed for an episode to be considered a critical juncture. [Capoccia and Kelemen \(2007\)](#) propose a revision to the definition given by [Collier et al. \(1991\)](#) because it requires that critical junctures necessarily produce change. Given the importance of historical contingency and the possibility of multiple institutional equilibria emerging from a critical juncture, maintenance of the *status quo ante* is a possible outcome.

Indeed, many historical examples of social upheaval with the potential for change do not ultimately alter institutions. The 1989 Tiananmen Square protests fundamentally challenged the Chinese Communist Party, with some in the Party considering compromise with protesters. However, hardliners won the internal debate and the protests were repressed. The 2011 Arab Spring uprising in Egypt managed to drive Hosni Mubarak from office, but after a brief interregnum, political control in Egypt returned to the military. The Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong rejected a modest extension of democratic rights offered by China, aspiring to fully free and fair elections for the Hong Kong Chief Executive. The Chinese government eventually withdrew even the limited

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<sup>4</sup>This institutional flux grants leaders substantial scope to shift equilibria. For a discussion of the role of leaders during critical junctures see [Bidner and Francois \(2013\)](#).

democratic rights that Hong Kong citizens possessed at the time. In each of these cases, a moment of protest was pregnant with the possibility of institutional change; the outcome was historically contingent.

Yet, especially with the passage of time, scholars naturally focus on cases in which institutional change occurred, such as the Glorious Revolution, the French Revolution, the British extension of the franchise, and the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>5</sup> While these events undoubtedly affected the welfare of millions of people (and are surely worthy of study), they represent a *selected sample* of events — with selection on the outcome of institutional change. Understanding critical junctures and the causes of institutional change, we argue, would benefit from the study of a broader range of cases, including those in which the institutional trajectory remains unchanged. Omitting these would exclude the revolutions of 1848, described as “the turning point at which modern history failed to turn” (Trevelyan, 1922).

The *ex post* identification of critical junctures imposes two additional empirical constraints on the study of institutional change. First, *ex post* studies aimed at estimating causal relationships rely on quasi-random variation in explanatory variables of interest — but this variation may not capture the variation of interest. Testing theories of institutional change may require experimental manipulation of the variables of interest, and this cannot be done after a critical juncture has passed. Second, as discussed further below, *beliefs* play a central role in many models of institutional change: beliefs that coordinate political behavior (such as those regarding the future state of institutional rules); beliefs about a government’s credible commitment; or, beliefs about the state’s legitimacy. Yet, such beliefs generally cannot be elicited *ex post*.

We therefore advocate for an *ex ante* and *actionable* definition of critical junctures, as we elaborate and illustrate in the next section.

### 3 The Conceptual Roles of Beliefs

The elicitation of beliefs is a key part of studying the causes of institutional change because it provides a way to identify critical junctures and helps elucidate reasons why institutional changes

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<sup>5</sup>Indeed, several prominent theories of institutional change provide *ex post* characterizations of these events (Lizzeri and Persico, 2004; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000).

matter for subsequent political and economic development.

### 3.1 Beliefs to identify critical junctures

The possibility of multiple institutional trajectories (or equilibria) during a critical juncture suggests the diffusion of beliefs regarding the future rules of the game. Whether in Prague in 1968, Beijing in 1989, Cairo in 2011 — critical junctures in which institutional change did not occur — or in Havana in 1958, Leipzig in 1989, or Tunis in 2011 — critical junctures in which change did occur — citizens in the midst of the critical juncture very likely would have had diffuse beliefs about what their future political institutions would look like. This diffusion would have likely occurred within individuals — who would have put some probability weight on different institutional trajectories — as well as across individuals.

This observation suggests a method for identifying critical junctures *in real time*: by eliciting beliefs about future political institutions regularly in a population, it should be possible to detect high levels of diffusion that could herald a critical juncture. Currently there is no large-scale effort to elicit such beliefs systematically, and this is the next step of our research agenda. We hope such an effort will be valuable: social scientists would not only benefit from a real-time measure of political uncertainty, complementing what might be observed in media, as in [Baker et al. \(2016\)](#); it would also facilitate the work we discuss below, which requires real-time study of critical junctures.

### 3.2 Beliefs to study institutional change

Beyond identifying critical junctures, beliefs are also core elements (often causal factors) in theories of institutional change. We highlight three sets of theories with beliefs at their heart. Real-time belief elicitation would allow for sharper testing of theoretical predictions of these models and adjudication among competing models.

**Class Conflict.** [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2000, 2006\)](#) model franchise extension as the outcome of conflict between classes. One might, at first glance, consider observable economic variables to be the only driving forces in the model. Yet, *beliefs* are also crucial. First, the capacity of the poor to



mobilize — the outcome of strategic interactions shaped by first- and second-order beliefs — helps determine equilibrium. Second, the model assumes that commitment to permanent democracy is credible — a key assumption about the beliefs of the poor.

**Social Mobilization and Protests.** Individual participation in protests and social movements aimed at institutional change are frequently modeled as strategic games. Participation may be a game of strategic complements (Bueno de Mesquita, 2010; Edmond, 2013) or substitutes (Olson Jr., 1965; Tullock, 1971), depending on how beliefs about others influence one’s own decision to participate. Importantly, beliefs about others may not be accurate, for example in cases of pluralistic ignorance (Kuran, 1997; Bursztyn et al., 2020), with implications for mass political behavior.

**Legitimacy.** A stable institutional equilibrium arising from a critical juncture will depend on the establishment of a set of rules of the game accepted by all — that is, a *legitimate* set of rules. According to Levi et al. (2009), “Legitimacy is a concept meant to capture the beliefs that bolster willing obedience.” Beliefs regarding legitimacy play a role in selecting among competing institutions and sustaining an institutional equilibrium by coordinating actors on the accepted rules of the game (e.g., Besley and Persson, 2019; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2019).

### 3.3 Beliefs about future institutions and engagement with the state in Afghanistan

To illustrate the value of belief elicitation in studying institutional change, we present data from Afghanistan that: (i) documents diffuse beliefs held by the Afghan population regarding their nation’s political future; (ii) reveals how those beliefs responded to news shocks; and, (iii) links those beliefs to citizens’ willingness to use formal state structures for dispute adjudication.

Afghanistan was plausibly at a critical juncture from 2001 to 2021. NATO ejected the Taliban from power and sought to build a democracy from the ashes of the prior regime. This included organizing a constitutional convention, holding regular elections, and creating elected community development councils in nearly every village in the country.<sup>6</sup> If NATO succeeded, there would be open institutions and democracy; the alternative was the oppressive theocracy in power today.

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<sup>6</sup>See Callen and Kabuli (2022) for a discussion of this process and issues in the original institutional design.

The Afghanistan Nationwide Quarterly Assessment Research (ANQAR) program — NATO’s large-scale public opinion polling program — was designed to provide policymakers with a periodic assessment of progress toward the goal of building an open and democratic Afghanistan. The quarterly survey engaged a representative sample of approximately 11,500 Afghans in a repeated cross-section.<sup>7</sup> The data are useful for helping discern whether Afghan citizens indeed perceived the possibility of different institutional trajectories in the early 21st century.

Importantly, every quarter the ANQAR asks, “Do you think the National Army will be able to defeat the Opposing Government Elements in the next few years?” This question maps nicely into the conceptual development in Section 3. First, the institutional arrangement if the National Army prevailed would resemble that outlined in the constitution of the Republic of Afghanistan, including a commitment to regular elections, and protections for the rights of women and minorities. The Opposing Government Elements, a euphemism for the Taliban, never strayed from their commitment to reimpose an Islamist theocracy. The question therefore provides a measure of *beliefs about the future rules of the game*. Diffuse beliefs over these future institutions — i.e., evidence of a critical juncture — would appear as uncertain (“maybe”) responses at the individual level and/or variance in responses across individuals.

Consistent with an ongoing critical juncture, Afghan citizens held a wide range of views on this question. In September 2008, when the survey started, 38.77% of respondents thought that the National Army would defeat the Taliban, 23.09% thought that they would lose, and 33.74% were not sure either way. Over the next eight years, the share of respondents who thought the Afghan army would defeat the Taliban typically exceeded 30% (Figure 3). While some observers may have been certain about Afghanistan’s institutional trajectory at the time — reflecting the “graveyard of empires” perspective on Afghanistan — the ANQAR evidence reveals citizens’ perception of multiple possible future institutional paths.

To address concerns about demand effects, we show that these beliefs appear quite sensitive to a series of salient news shocks about changes in *de facto* political power. For instance, after a news leak about a request for 60,000 troops to be included in Obama’s surge, the perceived probability

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<sup>7</sup>On average, across the 32 waves we accessed, the survey covered 282.5 districts and around 11,500 respondents, with around 40 respondents per district per wave.

of Taliban defeat rose by roughly 8ppts. After the release of news that troops would be withdrawn, this perceived probability fell by almost the same amount.

To further illustrate the value of elicited beliefs in explaining behavior during critical junctures, we study how they co-move with a high-stakes decision that hinges on the perceived legitimacy of the state: citizens' willingness to use formal state structures for dispute adjudication. Crucially, an individual's reliance on formal institutions should depend on both their own beliefs about state legitimacy and higher-order beliefs (i.e., regarding others' perceptions of state legitimacy). The ANQAR data do not allow us to test this prediction at the individual level, but aggregated ANQAR data can be linked to district level data on use of the formal state. In the aggregate, whether citizens rely on formal institutions should depend both on the *level* of their beliefs about the durability of future institutions, and also on the *degree of consensus* about future institutions. Consider a community's aggregate beliefs about the outcome of the conflict between the Afghan state and the Taliban. All else equal, more positive beliefs about the state's success will be associated with greater reliance on the state's formal institutions. Now consider the dispersion of beliefs in a community: if there is consensus that the state will defeat the Taliban, individuals will perceive that *others* will respect the outcomes of formal institutional (e.g., judicial) processes. This will reinforce the use of formal institutions. If there is not consensus — if beliefs about the outcome of the conflict exhibit substantial variance across individuals — then even individuals who believe the state will be victorious may doubt that *others* believe this is the case. This will tend to reduce the use of formal institutions, even when average beliefs about the state's success are high.

We study whether citizens turn to formal state courts or to informal *shuras* as a measure of their reliance on formal institutions.<sup>8</sup> We first examine the association between the *level* of citizens' beliefs, at the *district × quarter* level, and citizens' use of formal courts (controlling for district and quarter fixed effects). As predicted, citizens with greater confidence that the Taliban will be defeated are more likely to use the formal court system (Table 1, column 1).

We next test whether use of formal courts varies with levels of beliefs in the ability of the state to defeat the Taliban, with the dispersion (i.e., standard deviation) of these beliefs, *and* with their

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<sup>8</sup>In Afghanistan, key political functions, such as dispute resolution, were often simultaneously performed by the Afghan government and by the shadow government organized by the Taliban. [Acemoglu et al. \(2020\)](#) similarly study the decision to engage formal versus informal institutions in Pakistan.

interaction. Consistent with our expectation, while beliefs in the state's victory over the Taliban are significantly and positively associated with use of formal courts, this association becomes significantly weaker as beliefs become more dispersed in the district: the interaction between belief levels and dispersion is statistically significant and negative (Table 1, column 2). When beliefs are relatively concentrated, more confidence in the state's victory is positively and significantly associated with the use of state courts (Figure 2). However, when dispersion is above its mean, there is no such relationship. This pattern is robust to including district-level, time-varying controls for the local presence of the state (e.g., the police, see column 3) and also district-specific time trends (column 4).

These data thus provide a proof of concept for how the repeated elicitation of beliefs about future institutions can shed light on the process through which legitimate institutions emerge (or fail to emerge).

## 4 Defining Characteristics of “Experiments about Institutions”

Having discussed the importance of critical junctures and the benefits of studying them in real time, we now turn toward the emerging literature that does so, in particular, conducting experiments to credibly identify causal effects. We begin with the boundaries of our review, including three inclusion criteria:

1. Substantive: they have institutions *per se* as their object of study.
2. Contextual: they study critical junctures in real time.
3. Methodological: they conduct field experiments.

It is important to make clear up front that these criteria are not intended to be seen as normative: we do **not** claim that work that satisfies them should be prioritized over work that does not. Many first-order questions in political economy and development will not satisfy the requirements: substantively, many questions unrelated to institutional change are of great interest. Contextually, settings not experiencing critical junctures are certainly of interest. Methodologically,

observational studies and lab experiments offer different approaches to understanding causal relationships that complement field experimental work.

With these caveats in mind, we view our criteria as characterizing an emerging, coherent, and valuable body of work. This section explains why we apply these particular selection criteria and illustrates the (sometimes fuzzy) boundaries of the work we review.

#### 4.1 Institutions as the object of study

In categorizing studies, the most basic criterion is the study of institutions *per se*, i.e., the “fundamental rules of the game,” in North’s famous formulation. Relevant topics include: the formation and building of states in fragile settings; the emergence of inclusive political institutions and broad-based participation; and the determinants of political accountability. These are fundamental dimensions of the institutional architecture shaping the distribution of political power.

To clarify the boundaries of this criterion, it is useful to note what topics (in our view) do *not* fall within our definition of studies of institutions. First, a growing literature studies the performance of democracies and bureaucracies in polities in which the rules of the game are essentially *fixed* — thus falling outside the scope of our review. For instance, there have been many important experimental studies of the American political system (e.g., [Gerber et al., 2010](#); [Perez-Truglia and Cruces, 2017](#)) that we do not consider because we view the US (at least until recent years) as a consolidated democracy with stable institutions.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, a substantial applied literature (including field experimental work), reviewed in [Finan et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Besley et al. \(2022\)](#), studies the determinants of state bureaucracies’ performance. While state capacity and the quality of governance are first-order topics in political economy, most of this work studies variation within well-functioning states and established administrative institutions, rather than contexts where the institutional structure itself is “in flux.”

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<sup>9</sup>Recent increases in polarization (and the January 6, 2017, storming of the US capitol) have raised the possibility of institutional change in the US.

## 4.2 Studying critical junctures in real time

There are two reasons why conducting research in the midst of critical junctures is valuable. First, as noted above, studying critical junctures *ex post* is vulnerable to selection on the outcome of the critical juncture: those producing major institutional change attract differential researcher attention. Second, studying key explanatory variables, especially beliefs and preferences, is often not possible after the fact due to their absence from archival sources (beliefs are rarely recorded) or to hindsight bias (past beliefs and preferences may be misreported *ex post*).<sup>10</sup> Examples of such beliefs and preferences include parameters in models of protest participation (Cantoni et al., 2019; Bursztyn et al., 2021), beliefs about what type of regime is likely to emerge during pivotal moments (e.g., the Afghanistan example), and the implicit and explicit biases of both powerful actors (Bhusal et al., 2023) and citizens (Beaman et al., 2009).

Identifying a critical juncture in real time is difficult. Fragile states (e.g., Afghanistan, the D.R. Congo, etc.) are typically settings in which multiple institutional trajectories could emerge, making them informative contexts in which to learn about institutional change.<sup>11</sup> Other informative settings include those with active political conflict regarding the fundamental rules of the game, for example, Hong Kong in the 2010s, Turkey during and after the 2013 Gezi Park protests, or Colombia around the time of the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC. Better identifying critical junctures (e.g., using measures of beliefs or analyzing text in media) is an objective for future research. Finally, conducting field research in such settings raises a range of important ethical, safety, and logistical challenges (Phillips, 2021).

## 4.3 Implementing field experiments

We focus on randomized controlled trials conducted in the field for two reasons. First, as noted above, we view experiments about institutions as a fruitful convergence of two influential strands of literature: first, that studying the relationship between institutions and economic development;

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<sup>10</sup>One source of information on political beliefs that is available in archival sources is share prices. Several papers infer the beliefs of investors about future political states of the world using stock market data. These studies focus on firms whose valuations are tied to different political trajectories. See, for example, Dube et al. (2011) and Guidolin and La Ferrara (2007).

<sup>11</sup>The work we review, therefore, is often in fragile states. Empirical research in these settings is challenging, though this body of work is growing (Berman and Matanock, 2015).

second, that using RCTs to study economic development. The latter, Nobel-prize winning research agenda has expanded in scope from the study of poverty alleviation policies to the study of bureaucracies and governance. We see the literature applying RCTs to political institutions as an exciting expansion of its scope.

Second, the real-time study of critical junctures using field experiments can, in our view, add value relative to alternative methods. Researchers have made valuable insights about the causal drivers of institutional change using lab experiments (e.g., [Dal Bó et al., 2010](#)) and natural experiments (e.g., [Dell et al., 2018](#); [Sanchez de la Sierra, 2020a](#)). However, relative to the lab, there can be broader external validity in studying natural settings. Relative to observational studies, experimental variation may allow for cleaner identification of causal effects or structural parameters ([Card et al., 2011](#)). Moreover, the experimenter is often able to induce variation in the exact explanatory variable of interest to provide more precise theory-motivated tests.

#### **4.4 The growth of experiments about institutions**

To illustrate the growth in this literature, we present data from a Web of Science search among thirteen top (i.e., general interest) economics journals and two top political science journals. To identify articles that meet our inclusion criteria for “experiments about institutions” we first conducted a broad search for articles referring both to institutions and to field experimental methods. We then systematically refine our search, introducing exclusion criteria to remove articles irrelevant to this review, for example, field experiments that relate to “institutional investors.” This process is described in detail in the Online Appendix, Section A, where we also list the journals and 64 articles we identify as meeting our criteria.

As Figure 1 shows, “experiments about institutions” first appear in 2009. Since then, yearly publications have rapidly increased, with 8–10 top publications per year in the last several years. Comparing the growth in publications about “experiments about institutions” to the growth of papers about “institutions” generally or papers using field experiments (in the same set of journals), we see a much more rapid expansion of the literature reviewed here (albeit from a smaller base). From 2009, general research on institutions has increased by 50% in the last decade; research using RCTs has increased by 150%; research on “experiments about institutions” has increased by

400%.

## 5 The Literature: Three Dimensions of Institutional Variation

Here we discuss work meeting the three criteria discussed in Section 4. We organize this literature along three dimensions of institutional variation.

### 5.1 State capacity

By state capacity, we mean the ability of the bureaucracy to implement the policies chosen by the government. Following [Besley and Persson \(2009\)](#), we focus on legal and fiscal capacity, i.e., the productive and extractive sides of the state.

#### 5.1.1 Legal capacity

During early stages of state formation (such as after conflict), state effectiveness depends crucially on its ability to build a legal system that citizens understand and trust. In settings affected by conflict, citizens tend to have diffuse beliefs about the state and its law enforcement capacity, both currently and in the future. Systematically promoting individual contact between citizens and police or other officers — rather than administering justice arbitrarily<sup>12</sup> — can raise confidence in the legal sector ([Karim, 2020](#)) and make local leaders more inclined to comply with central objectives ([Haim et al., 2021](#)). A multifaceted demonstration of police presence, through “confidence patrols” involving town halls, information provision, and extensive in-person interaction with citizens, improved rural Liberians’ feelings of security, decreased reported domestic violence and assault, and increased crime reporting, especially among minorities denied access to customary non-state alternatives ([Blair et al., 2019](#)).<sup>13</sup> Similar interventions expanding the presence of the non-police legal arm of the state have also been found to improve attitudes about the formal legal

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<sup>12</sup>See, e.g., [Levi et al. \(2009\)](#) on how citizen perceptions of ‘procedural justice’ shape their compliance with the law. See [Sanchez de la Sierra et al. \(2022\)](#) for an illustration of arbitrary policing at work.

<sup>13</sup>As [Blair et al. \(2019\)](#) reveals, there is often heterogeneity in the implications of institutional change for marginalized subgroups of the population, as we discuss in Section 6. In Liberia, marginalized groups had higher demand for formal institutions because they were denied access to informal ones ([Blair et al., 2019](#); [Sandefur and Siddiqi, 2013](#)). Yet the formal sector does not always provide a safe “exit option” for excluded individuals. In Eastern Congo, provincial legal institutions are biased against minority Tutsis ([Sanchez de la Sierra, 2021](#)), and in Senegal contract enforcement depends on the strength of one’s political connections ([Bhandari, 2022](#)).



sector. The introduction of neighborhood-level state “liaisons” intended to help resolve disputes and help link citizens to the state in Medellin increased citizens’ perception of state legitimacy in neighborhoods with relatively high levels of pre-existing state capacity (Blattman et al., 2023).

Almost by definition, weak states coexist alongside a range of non-state actors, such as chiefs and gangs, who also enforce contracts and resolve disputes.<sup>14</sup> Building formal legal capacity, therefore, interacts with pre-existing informal justice mechanisms and so shapes the rules of the game.<sup>15</sup> States often ignore informal actors and try to encourage citizens to bring their disputes into the formal system. For example, randomly providing access to formal legal aid in Liberian villages reduced unresolved disputes and improved attitudes about the adjudication process, relative to informal, chief-mediated justice that was the status quo practice in the control group (Sandefur and Siddiqi, 2013). Similarly, a free legal assistance intervention for those held in pre-trial detention in Haiti helped relax legal capacity constraints and increased case advancement and liberation (Slough and Fariss, 2021). However, at times, governments consciously choose to engage with non-state actors, especially when they lack the corps of trained lawyers and judges, courtrooms, and prisons necessary to administer justice. In one such program in Colombia, the government promoted coordination between state police authorities and non-state civil society organizations in rural Colombian communities (Blair et al., 2022). This program reduced the number of unresolved disputes reported by community leaders; it also shifted citizens’ allegiances away from armed groups and toward the police.

### 5.1.2 Fiscal capacity

Social scientists have long theorized the emergence of fiscal capacity and its role in the social contract between citizens and the state (Finer, 1997; Scott, 1998; Gennaioli and Voth, 2015; Besley, 2020). Given that citizens’ decisions to comply with or evade taxes hinge on their beliefs — about the probability of detection and enforcement (e.g., Allingham and Sandmo, 1972), and about expected public goods — real-time data collection focused on belief elicitation is first-order in study-

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<sup>14</sup>For example, the data from Afghanistan indicate that only 15.9% of respondents took disputes to a court, 11.4% took disputes to a local shura, and 9.79% who used both a court and a shura.

<sup>15</sup>When legal systems are absent or broken, “alternative dispute resolution” (ADR), which teaches people basic negotiation skills, has been found to reduce unresolved property disputes in rural Liberia (Blattman et al., 2014), with effects detected up to three years later (Hartman et al., 2021).

ing the causal drivers of fiscal capacity building. Thanks to close collaborations with tax authorities, researchers have managed to conduct field experiments examining institutional variation in tax administration.<sup>16</sup>

The professionalization of tax administration department has been heralded as the birth of the modern bureaucratic state (Brewer, 1990). This often begins with the creation of systematic procedures for tax collection, which otherwise are often unpredictable, idiosyncratic, and (perceived as) arbitrary (Sanchez de la Sierra, 2020a). When tax authorities regularized how taxpayers are registered, billed, and fined for noncompliance, tax compliance and revenue tend to increase (Weigel, 2020; Weigel and Kabue Ngindu, 2023; Dzansi et al., 2020). Importantly, this increase stems from direct effects — by rationalizing the process of tax collection (Dzansi et al., 2020) — and indirect effects — by improving citizens’ attitudes and intrinsic motivation to pay (Weigel and Kabue Ngindu, 2023). Reforming the tax administration also concerns how to select, incentivize, and manage personnel. On agent type, low-capacity states often collaborate with informal local leaders in the sensitization, assessment, and collection of taxes. Delegating collection responsibilities to city chiefs in D.R. Congo raised revenue (Balan et al., 2022), while delegating taxpayer registration to marketplace associations in Nigeria had no effect (Gottlieb et al., 2020). On incentives, evidence from Pakistan suggests that strengthening incentives for tax collectors can raise revenue without excessive collusion costs (Khan et al., 2016, 2019). On management, assigning collectors via positive assortative matching when forming teams — i.e., skilled collectors paired with other skilled collectors — and when assigning teams to neighborhoods raised revenue in D.R. Congo (Bergeron et al., 2022). Finally, fiscal capacity hinges on the accumulation of information (Scott, 1998). In addition to directly improving enforcement (Pomeranz, 2015), accumulating information can have an indirect effect on compliance as citizens realize they are ‘seen’ by the state (Sanchez de la Sierra, 2020b; Okunogbe, 2021).

Scholars have long associated the expansion of taxation with the emergence of a social contract (Schumpeter, 1918; Tilly, 1985). When the state begins to solicit citizens systematically for revenue, the story goes, they demand more public goods, political inclusion, and accountable governance in exchange. Field experimental evidence from Congo finds support for this account of the emer-

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<sup>16</sup>See Jensen and Weigel (2023) for an in-depth review on this topic.

gence of a tax-based social contract (Weigel, 2020). Further evidence from urban Haiti finds that more salient tax collection raised political demands and fueled protests in the hotly contested city of Port-au-Prince (Krause, 2020). Recent work also explores the social contract in the reverse direction: whether providing citizens with more public goods or more avenues of participation *ex ante* increases their willingness to pay for the state. Providing public goods like wells in urban Pakistan (Khan et al., 2023) and garbage collection in urban Haiti (Krause, 2020) stimulated greater tax compliance, for instance.<sup>17</sup>

## 5.2 Political inclusiveness

Whose voices are heard in politics — i.e., the inclusiveness of the state — is a second fundamental rule of the game. Although random variation in the institutions governing political inclusion is rare, researchers have made progress by studying (i) “natural field experiments” implemented by governments that change the degree of inclusiveness, (ii) international development programs that rely on a local council of decision-makers whose composition can be randomized, and (iii) interventions promoting more openness in communication between the state and citizens.

First, occasionally researchers find a “natural field experiment,” in which governments randomize aspects of the institutions governing political inclusiveness. Perhaps the most famous is quotas for local female political leaders in India, introduced in the early 1990s amid an effort to liberalize and decentralize the state. The random reservation of one-third of local political positions for women in India allowed researchers to learn that, once empowered, women politicians tend to invest more in public goods relevant to the types of work that women traditionally do in Indian society, such as collecting water for the household (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). Moreover, gender quotas helped combat negative stereotypes about women that had likely hurt female candidates’ chances in elections in the past (Beaman et al., 2009). Finally, by providing women with political experience, the local quota system had longer-term positive effects on the supply of female candidates and politicians in future state and national races (O’Connell, 2020). Different formal rules of the game — a quota system — shifted Indian society toward an equilibrium in

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<sup>17</sup>Randomly inviting citizens to participatory budgeting sessions in Freetown, Sierra Leone, improved attitudes about the city government and, among those politically aligned with the mayor, raised tax compliance (Kamara et al., 2023).

which women have a greater say in politics.

In a field experiment directly varying political inclusiveness, the two largest political parties in Sierra Leone randomized how candidates are selected — between the status-quo practice of party elites deciding and a more directly democratic system, in which aspirants first debate and then voters' preferences are solicited and publicized (Casey et al., 2021a). By relaxing information constraints, the more democratic selection method ultimately led parties to select candidates closer to the median citizen's preferences, who tended to have better records as public goods providers.

Second, a substantial body of work studies community-driven development (CDD) programs, in which village councils are created to help choose and administer aid-funded public goods. By collaborating with foreign assistance organizations, researchers have embedded randomization into different aspects of the design and operation of village councils.<sup>18</sup> One of the pioneering studies was Olken (2010)'s analysis of project selection in Indonesia. Choosing development projects via direct plebiscite rather than via representatives hugely increased citizens' satisfaction with and willingness to contribute to the project without substantially changing the types of projects selected. Similarly, in a field experiment in Afghanistan, requiring gender quotas for CDD councils improved the self-reported community and economic engagement of women in treatment villages (Beath et al., 2013). In another experiment, villages in Afghanistan were randomly assigned to constitute one multi-member district or to be partitioned into multiple single-member districts before CDD council elections (Beath et al., 2016). The multi-member district villages ended up electing better educated council members with less extreme policy positions, with the effect more pronounced in more heterogeneous villages.

Of course, the existence of local decision-making bodies charged with allocating large sums of money toward public goods in a village is itself a potential shock to local political institutions. Indeed, CDD was envisioned as a mechanism for both delivering aid-funded public goods infrastructure ("hardware," following Casey et al., 2012) and promoting social capital and inclusion in local decision-making ("software"). That said, a large body of evidence suggests that, while CDD does succeed in building roads and schools, it tends not to have much of an effect on local political

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<sup>18</sup>There exist questions about the external validity of work based on institutional variation in CDD programs, given that the "institutions" are created by international aid organizations. However, they represent a rare opportunity to study experimentally how formal rules determining selection and decision-making impact outcomes.

participation and inclusion.<sup>19</sup> For instance, in a short-run evaluation of a large-scale CDD program in Sierra Leone, [Casey et al. \(2012\)](#) found strong evidence of infrastructure improvements, but not much evidence of institutional change (see also [Casey et al., 2023](#), and [Casey et al., 2021b](#).) In fact, there is evidence from some contexts that CDD may erode social capital ([Avdeenko and Gilligan, 2015](#)). By substituting for traditional social networks and community meetings, CDD ended up crowding out informal insurance networks in the Gambia ([Heß et al., 2021](#)).

The third area in which researchers have made inroads is randomizing the channels of communication between citizens and the state. The extent to which a broad set of citizens' preferences are elicited by politicians and bureaucrats is an important dimension of political inclusion. For instance, in Uganda, allowing citizens to send cheap text messages to their political representatives flattened the flow of information from citizens to the state, granting marginalized communities a voice ([Grossman et al., 2014](#)). Similarly, inviting firms to comment on new labor regulation in Vietnam — without even changing the regulation in response — substantially raised firms' compliance with and attitudes toward government regulators ([Malesky and Taussig, 2019](#)). At times, however, contact with citizens can generate expectations that are difficult for states, especially low-capacity ones, to fulfill. When the Kenyan Electoral Commission sent SMS messages to remind citizens to vote, it increased turnout but subsequently eroded trust in electoral institutions; citizens on the losing side and those who experienced election-related violence updated more negatively ([Marx et al., 2021](#)). Signalling capacity and integrity can backfire if the electoral authorities fail to deliver.

### 5.3 Political accountability

Whether or not politicians are accountable to their citizens — through elections or other mechanisms — is a third essential rule of the game. The extent to which politicians feel constrained by accountability pressures shapes their effort and policy choices. Researchers probed the roots of accountability by studying interventions at the election, citizen, and candidate/politician level.

**Election experiments.** A first way to enhance political accountability is improving the quality of elections, which in settings of institutional flux is no sure thing. For instance, [Callen and](#)

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<sup>19</sup>See [Casey \(2018\)](#) for a detailed review of this literature.

Long (2015) study the introduction of a simple monitoring technology, in which photographs are taken of provisional vote tally sheets at polling centers before the vote aggregation process begins at a higher level. This monitoring system reduced the degree to which voting materials were destroyed or tampered with and reduced votes for powerful candidates. In a weakly institutionalized democracy like Afghanistan, these large improvements to the integrity of the election system serve as a crucial step toward genuine political accountability. Moreover, Berman et al. (2019) provide evidence that this monitoring intervention increased citizens expressed willingness to comply with formal laws. The composition of polling station agents can also enhance electoral integrity (Neggers, 2018).

**Politician-level experiments.** The second way researchers have probed accountability experimentally is intervening on the side of political representatives. For instance, in Vietnam, elected delegates were very responsive in their policy-making efforts to receiving information about citizen preferences combined with a reminder about the competitiveness of upcoming elections (Malesky et al., 2023). The study provides evidence that even in a single-party regime, promotion incentives can motivate politicians to be accountable to citizens. Much research focuses on the accountability of politicians to citizens, but there is another important principal-agent relationship in the state: the accountability of bureaucrats to elected politicians. Raffler (2022) investigates this relationship in a field experiment in Uganda. Local politicians in the treatment group received training about their duty to monitor bureaucrats, along with quarterly financial information. In areas not led by the dominant national ruling party, this intervention raised monitoring effort among local politicians and improved the quality of service delivery. Civil society can also complement the efforts of politicians to monitor local bureaucrats (Anderson et al., 2019).

Candidate debates are a potential accountability tool in democracies through which candidates can signal their skills and priorities and citizens can acquire information and refine their preferences. Bidwell et al. (2020) find that screening public debates at randomly selected polling centers in Sierra Leone shifted vote shares in favor of high-performing candidates and, in turn, induced candidates to increase spending in these areas during and after the campaign (see also Brierley et al., 2020). Relatedly, Fujiwara and Wantchekon (2013) find that organizing townhall meetings in rural Benin lowers vote shares of stronghold candidates and reduced evidence of subsequent

clientelism (see also [López-Moctezuma et al., 2022](#)).

**Citizen-level experiments.** Third, there is a vast literature exploring ways to empower citizens to hold their leaders to account. We do not seek to review this literature comprehensively, but rather highlight three focal areas of research activity: (i) how civil society can inform and empower citizens to monitor elections and/or political leaders; (ii) how direct or indirect (e.g., via the media) provision of information to citizens about candidates or politics shapes accountability; and (iii) how incentives and beliefs influence in protest participation.

Regarding civil society (i), a first approach concerns citizen election monitoring via social media. In Colombia, for instance, [Garbiras-Díaz and Montenegro \(2022\)](#) conduct a large-scale Facebook field experiment in which 4.4 million citizens were randomized to receive a nudge to report election irregularities on a pre-existing online NGO-run forum. The treatment increased reporting on the platform, reduced electoral irregularities and reduced citizens' votes for candidates dependent on irregularities. However, a comparable SMS hotline, through which citizens could report electoral problems, had no discernible effect on irregularities reported by election observers ([Aker et al., 2017](#)). Another common intervention is voter education, providing information about the responsibilities of the government and the corresponding performance of local leaders; these were found to enhance accountability in Mali and Tunisia ([Gottlieb, 2016](#); [E. Finkel et al., 2023](#)). In Kenya, however, civic education had no effect, while boosting outreach about voter registration enhanced electoral competition ([Harris et al., 2021](#)). An anti-vote-buying education campaign in Sao Tome and Principe shifted perceptions of vote-buying, decreased turnout, but increased the incumbent's vote share, suggesting vote-buying might differentially aid challengers ([Vicente, 2014](#)). A more intensive anti-election-violence campaign reduced the intensity of election-day violence recorded by journalists in Nigeria and correspondingly increased voter turnout ([Collier and Vicente, 2014](#)).

Regarding citizen information (ii), models of political accountability emphasize the information asymmetry between citizen principals and political agents for understanding how democracy selects and disciplines politicians (e.g., [Besley, 2006](#)). In many societies, the media is censored or underdeveloped, limiting voters' information about their leaders and thereby limiting their ability to hold them to account.

A first approach to studying the accountability effects of information is to shock citizens' access to media. Amid China's increasingly autocratic and repressive turn under Xi Jinping, for instance, [Chen and Yang \(2019\)](#) examine how access to uncensored internet in China affects support for the regime. The researchers offered a subset of Chinese university students free access to a VPN that allowed them bypass the censors. When additionally nudged to visit (normally censored) western media outlets, these treated students substantially updated their beliefs about the Chinese government — evidence of the power of free information to shape voter opinion, when beliefs about the value of that information are sufficiently strong.

The rise of social media as a source of political news — much of it of questionable quality — is often viewed as fueling polarization and weakening accountability. To investigate, [Levy \(2021\)](#) randomly offered Facebook users subscriptions to conservative or liberal news sites. These subscriptions pushed subjects toward consuming more news in the expected direction and offset negative attitudes about the opposing political party — but they did not change policy positions *per se*. Because Facebook may limit how much counter-attitudinal news its users consume, this paper provides evidence consistent with the echo-chamber hypothesis. Other researchers have explored the power of content verification tools. For instance, French voters were less likely to share false statements made by a far-right group if they were required or invited to fact-check the statements ([Henry et al., 2022](#)).

A second approach studies how information about politician performance specifically (rather than all media content) shapes accountability. A seminal paper examines how the randomized audits of Brazilian municipalities — a natural field experiment — shaped voter behavior by providing information about corrupt politicians ([Ferraz and Finan, 2008](#)). Comparing equally corrupt municipalities, the revelation of corruption information before the election reduced the incumbent's electoral performance by 7 ppts. This effect was more pronounced where the audit reports had been promulgated on local radio, consistent with an informational channel of political accountability.

A third approach is to provide information about politician performance directly to citizens. The majority of these studies find small or null results. For instance, [Dunning et al. \(2019\)](#) report average null results of typical information campaigns on voting behavior across seven coordinated



randomized controlled trials in developing countries around the world.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in a number of settings, researchers detected unexpected and at times adverse accountability consequences of such campaigns. Providing information about corruption in Mexico, for instance, caused citizens to become disenchanted with the political system altogether, turning out and supporting both main parties less (Chong et al., 2015).<sup>21</sup> A randomized door-to-door information campaign about executive performance and an upcoming referendum that would weaken constraints on the executive in Turkey fueled geographic voter polarization (Baysan, 2022). Providing basic information about the expected roles of politicians in the Philippines decreased support for incumbents, but these same incumbents increased their efforts to buy votes in treated villages (Cruz et al., 2021). All told, researchers' efforts in this area reveal the importance of context — the tightness of the race, the proximity to the election, the tools available to politicians to offset unfavorable revelations — in understanding how relaxing information constraints shapes accountability.

Providing targeted information to voters before specific political events shows greater promise in generating accountability effects. For example, in Mozambique, randomly providing information to voters about a recent natural gas discovery increased citizen political engagement and reduced the incidence of subsequent violence (Armand et al., 2020). As another example, a female-targeted voter education campaign about the importance of voting and the secrecy of the ballot increased the probability that women turned out to vote (Giné and Mansuri, 2018). They were also more likely to make an independent choice (from their husbands or clan heads), with the campaign decreasing the vote share of the winning party.

The last research area is citizen protest participation (iii), which in many models of domestic politics serves as a constraint on the use of political power. Researchers have managed to explore a variety of proposed drivers of engagement in protests using experimental incentives, information shocks, priming, and framing.

Individual-level randomization of information or incentives offers a way to study some potential drivers of participation in protests. By eliciting and updating the beliefs of Hong Kong students about others' participation in antiauthoritarian protests, Cantoni et al. (2019) find evidence

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<sup>20</sup>There are of course exceptions, in which providing information had more salutary effects on voter behavior and accountability (e.g., Banerjee et al., 2011; Grossman and Michelitch, 2018; Cruz et al., 2018).

<sup>21</sup>See also Arias et al. (2019).

of strategic substitutability: subjects who positively update beliefs about others' turnout are less likely to attend the protest, while subjects who negatively update beliefs about others' turnout became more likely to attend. This finding runs in contrast to many theoretical models of protest participation, which assumed strategic complementarities. As another example, [Bursztyn et al. \(2021\)](#) randomly offer individual-level incentives to observe crowd size during protests, allowing the researchers to study whether participation in one protest has a causal effect on subsequent participation. In the context of a gay pride protest in New Jersey, [McClendon \(2014\)](#) randomly informed potential participants that their names would be listed in a newsletter or posted on Facebook if they indeed participated. This promise of social esteem was enough to boost participation.

It is also possible to conduct experiments at a higher level, such as the cohort or group. For instance, [Bursztyn et al. \(2021\)](#) are interested in learning how the protest participation in one's social network affects individuals' decisions about whether or not to participate. They therefore randomly vary the intensity of individual-level incentives across academic major  $\times$  cohort cells, between 0%, 1%, 50%, and 75%. The researchers find that individuals incentivized to participate one year are also more likely to participate again the following year — but only where at least 50% of their social network was also incentivized to turnout. Protest participation appears to have important within-subject dynamic effects — i.e., exhibiting state dependence — thanks to the creation of new social bonds and friendships among other participators. Evidence from protests in Spain also finds that participants form new (online) social networks that lead to persistent changes in their political behavior ([Casanueva, 2021](#)).

## 6 Discussion: Experiments in a Contested World

The literature on “experiments about institutions” helps shed light on a range of causes of institutional change. We hope that scholars continue to advance this literature: developing methods to identify critical junctures *ex ante* (potentially using belief elicitation) and conducting experiments that build on the work reviewed above. Here we highlight four contemporary sources of critical junctures — all of which are priority issues for global economic development ([FCDO, 2023](#)) —

that could be better understood through the application of field experiments: (i) democratic backsliding; (ii) state fragility; (iii) climate change; and, (iv) conflicts over the rights of marginalized populations.

**Democratic backsliding.** A first source of critical junctures is the recent decline in political freedom around the world. Figure 4 (panel A) plots the average 5-year change in Freedom House scores across countries over the last four decades, revealing both the “third wave” of democratization beginning in 1989 and a recent trend toward autocracy. Emerging AI technology, in particular exports of surveillance AI technology may reinforce this trend (Beraja et al., 2023).

Studying critical junctures in contexts where political change is moving *away* from freedom may change the research questions asked as well as the data that must be collected (e.g., shifting toward the study of civil society rather than the study of an autocratic state). It will also present specific implementation challenges, not least the difficulty of working ethically and safely in contexts in which freedoms are being removed (Phillips, 2021). While aware of these challenges, we believe that episodes of democratic backsliding represent important areas for future work.

**State fragility.** Freedom House data indicate a global increase in political instability. In Figure 4, panel B, we plot the distribution of the share of sentences in countries’ Freedom House reports mentioning political instability. While in 2000 the average report mentioned instability in around 20% of sentences, this increased to about 33% by 2020.

State fragility — the extreme form of unstable political institutions — is characterized by “exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state to mitigate those risks” (OECD, 2022). Perhaps the key defining feature of fragility — that the state might fail — implies the potential for multiple institutional futures. As such, there is substantial overlap between extreme fragility and our conception of “critical junctures.”<sup>22</sup>

The human costs of fragility and conflict are high and rising, creating an obstacle to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) articulated by the UN (FCDO, 2023). Indeed, deep uncertainty about the durability of the state, might deter investments in state capacity (Blumenstock

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<sup>22</sup>State fragility is not sufficient for a state to be in a critical juncture. Multiple political outcomes may be likely in a fragile state with all adhering to the same fundamental rules of the game.

et al., 2023), creating a “fragility trap” (Collier et al., 2018). There is thus an urgent need to define and understand fragility, its links to institutional transition, and to identify policies that can help restore progress toward key development priorities.

**Climate change.** A large and growing literature documents climate change’s substantial impact on social and economic outcomes (Carleton and Hsiang, 2016) and conflict (Hsiang et al., 2013). These consequences increase the likelihood of institutional critical junctures: poverty and conflict may threaten existing institutions, and uncertainty about the future induced by climate change may produce critical junctures even *before* the most severe environmental consequences are experienced.

Studying political critical junctures in a context of climate uncertainty again suggests new research questions, in particular regarding the interaction of uncertainty over climate change and uncertainty over institutional outcomes. How closely related are these sources of uncertainty within and across individuals? How does a change in uncertainty on one dimension affect uncertainty about the other?

**Conflicts over the rights of marginalized populations.** A final important source of critical junctures that requires further study is conflict over the rights of politically marginalized populations. Many historical episodes of institutional change at the national level did not meaningfully change the economic and political rights of the socially marginalized. As a case in point, consider the American Revolution, which meaningfully changed political institutions for White American men, but much less so for Black Americans or for White women. Indeed, there are likely to be distinct critical junctures for different sub-populations: movements for Black Americans’ rights (first abolition and later the Civil Rights Movement) and women’s rights movements (first suffrage, then equal rights) had their own distinct watershed moments in US history — and these were not always overlapping with critical junctures for the US population as a whole (with the Civil War being one important case of overlap).

In both developed and developing countries today, the rights of marginalized groups are being contested: the Black Lives Matter movement and movements for the rights of undocumented

immigrants are shaping debate in the US. The rights of women (e.g., in the Middle East) are increasingly discussed in developing countries. The rights of ethnic minorities are contested around the world. We believe that in a world in which we attend more to the rights of, and inequities facing, marginalized groups there is substantial value in experimental work aimed at understanding institutional change for these groups. This suggests studying not only changes in national institutional trajectories, but also changes in institutions specific to sub-populations.

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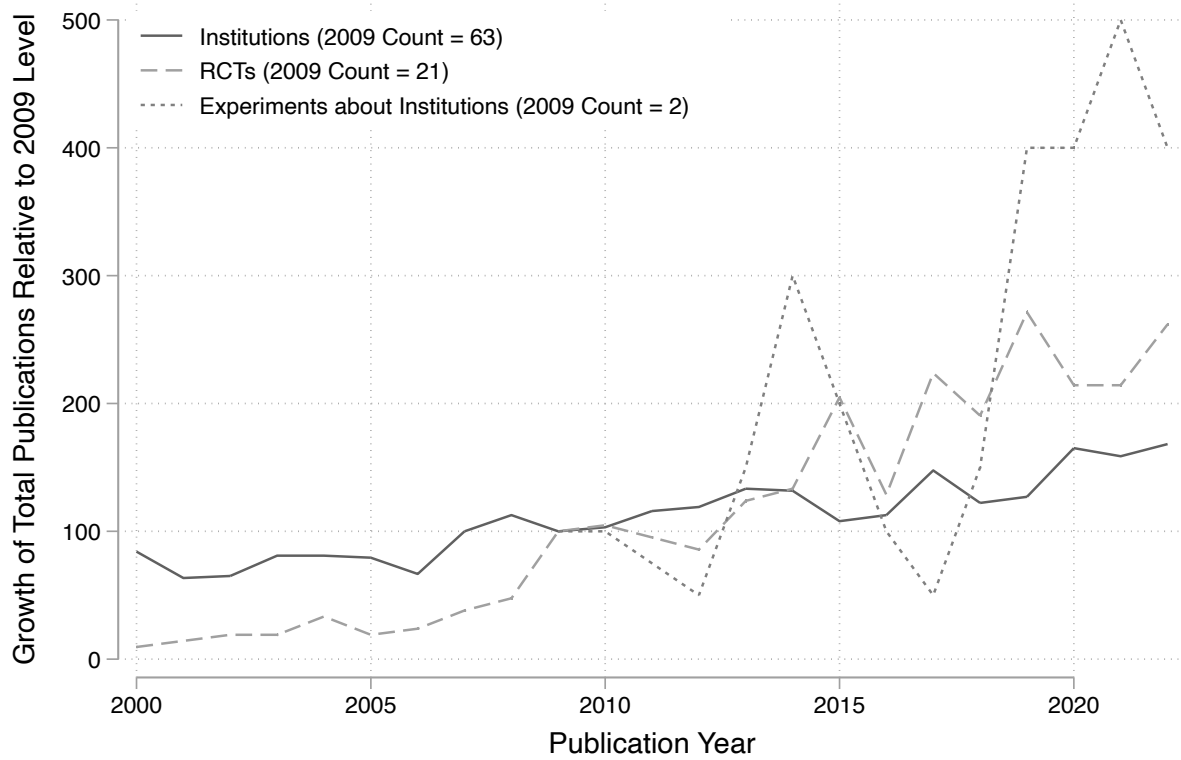
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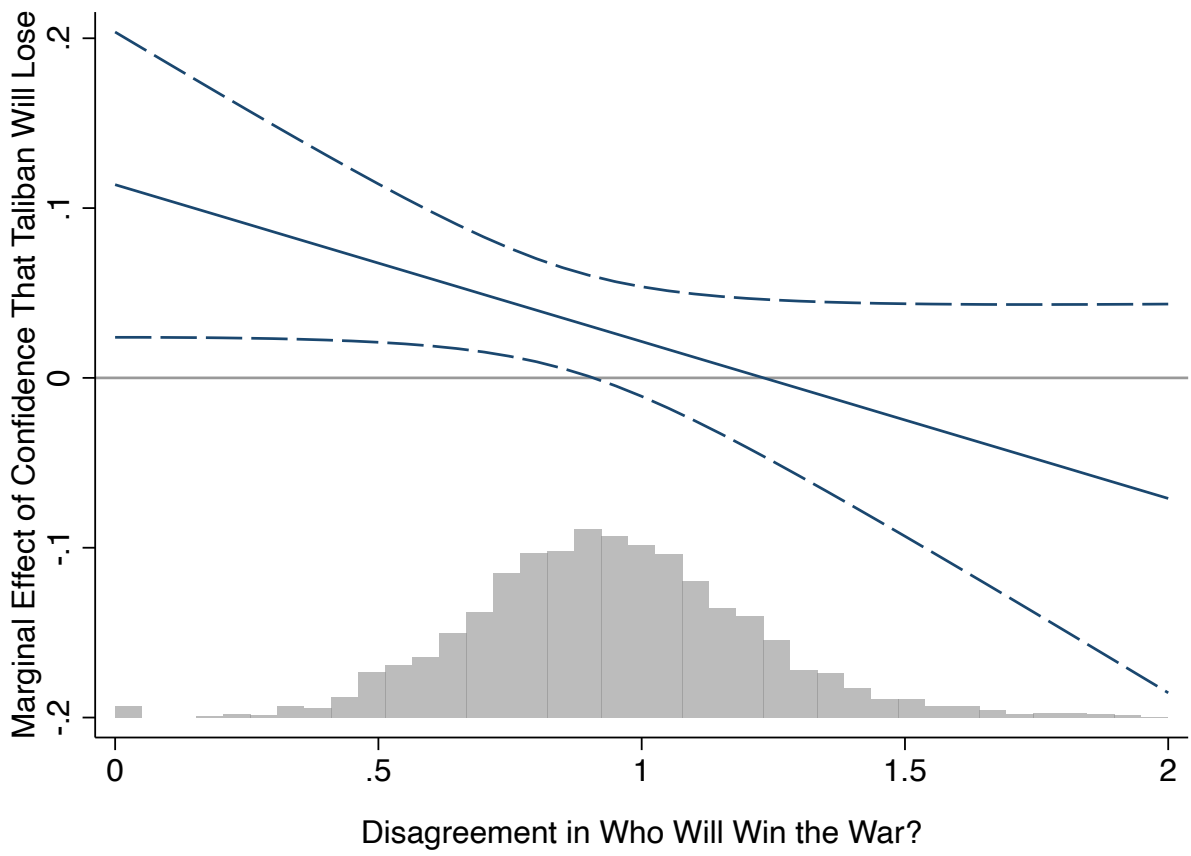
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## 7 Figures and Tables



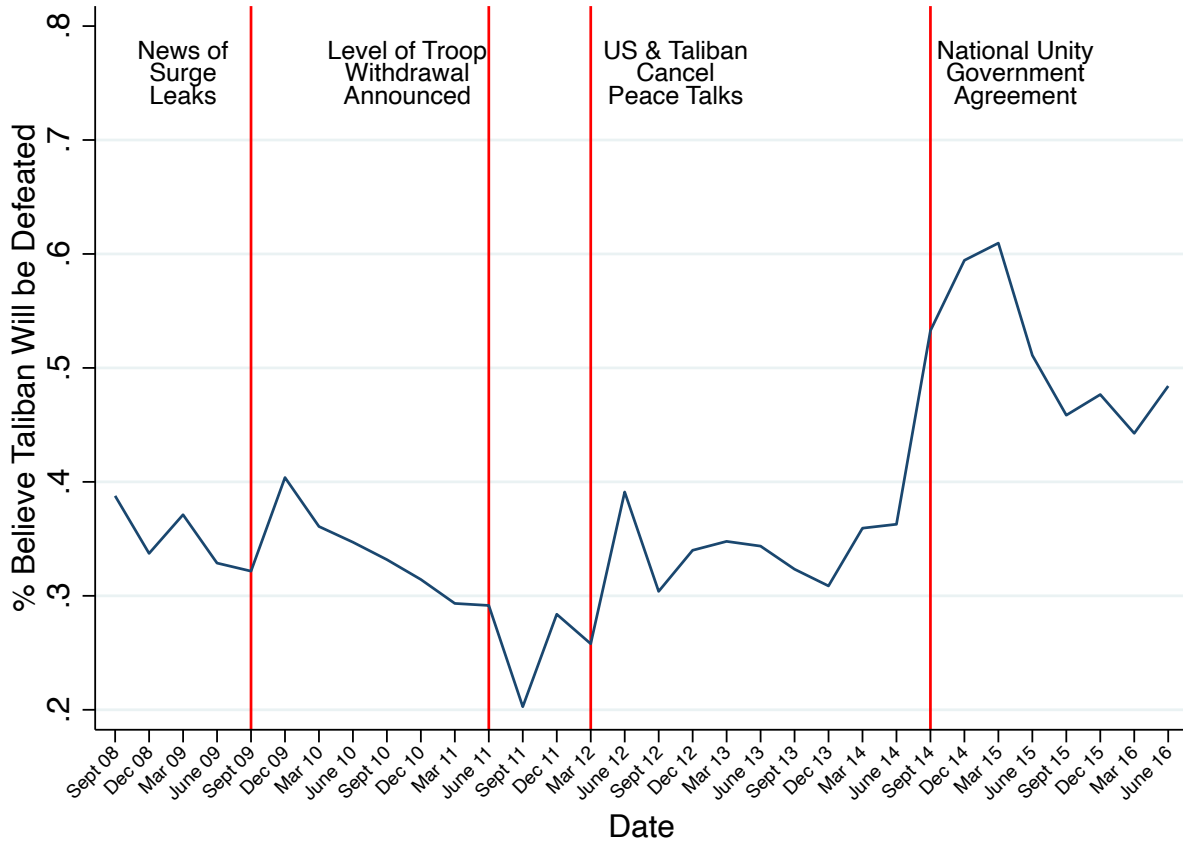
**FIGURE 1: PUBLICATION TRENDS SINCE 2000**  
(2009 = 100)

**Notes:** This figure is based on data from the systematic search described in Section 4 and Online Appendix A.



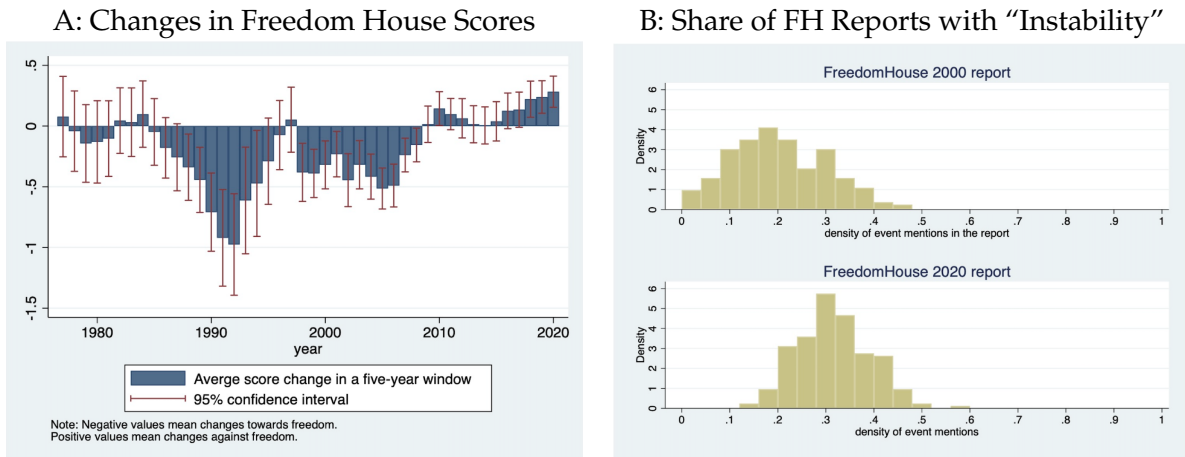
**FIGURE 2: PEOPLE USE THE FORMAL STATE WHEN THEY SHARE BELIEFS THAT IT WILL ENDURE**

**Notes:** This figure is based on the estimates reported in Table 1 column 2.



**FIGURE 3: THE EVOLUTION OF BELIEFS: WILL THE TALIBAN BE DEFEATED?**

*Notes:* This figure plots the share of respondents reporting “certainly defeat” or “most likely defeat” to the question of whether the Afghan Army would defeat the Taliban from September 2008 until June 2016. The exact survey question is “Do you think the National Army will be able to defeat the Opposing Government Elements in the next few years?” The possible responses range from 1 = “certainly not defeat” to 5 = “certainly defeat”. The figure removes respondents indicating “don’t know” and applies population weights.



**FIGURE 4: THE WORLD IS LESS STABLE AND LESS FREE**

Notes: Panel A reports the five year rolling average of changes in Freedom House scores across countries. Negative changes indicate a move toward greater freedom and positive changes indicate less freedom. Panel B plots the distribution of the share of sentences in countries’ Freedom House reports mentioning political instability.



**TABLE 1: BELIEFS ABOUT FUTURE INSTITUTIONS AND ENGAGEMENT WITH THE STATE**

Dependent Variable:	Share Taking A Dispute to A State Court			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Belief Taliban lose (level)	0.037** (0.015)	0.114** (0.046)	0.106** (0.045)	0.081* (0.048)
Belief Taliban lose (std. dev.)		0.023 (0.021)	0.025 (0.021)	0.012 (0.023)
Belief Taliban lose (level) × Belief Taliban lose (std. dev.)		-0.092* (0.050)	-0.090* (0.049)	-0.073 (0.053)
Share Reporting Government Has Control			-0.004 (0.016)	-0.001 (0.018)
Share Reporting Having Seen the Police			0.196*** (0.028)	0.173*** (0.032)
Observations	5,133	5,129	5,129	5,129
R2	0.387	0.387	0.398	0.462
Number of Districts	379	379	379	379
Mean Dependent Variable	0.208	0.208	0.208	0.208
District FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Quarter FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
District Time Trends	No	No	No	Yes

*Notes:* This table reports on the relationship between Afghan citizens' beliefs about who will win the war and their participation in formal institutions. All specifications are weighted to reflect sampling probabilities. The dependent variable is the share of respondents who answer "Afghanistan state court" to the question "have you take a dispute to an Afghanistan state court or a local Shura/Jirga in the last five years?" The variable "Share believing Taliban will lose" reflects the share of respondents indicating that the Afghan army will "most likely will win" or "certainly will win" to the question "Do you think the National Army will be able to defeat the Opposing Government Elements in the next few years?" Will the Taliban be defeated? ( $\sigma$ ) is the standard deviation of the underlying five-point variable (ranging from 1 = "definitely not defeat" to 5 = "definitely defeat"). Standard errors are clustered at the district level.

# Appendix

## A Searching for articles

We identified articles published since 2000 about institutions, using experiments, and about institutions using experiments in several steps. First, we selected the set of journals, including the top 13 economics journals and top 2 political science journals: the American Economic Review, Quarterly Journal of Economics, Econometrica, Journal of Political Economy, Review of Economic Studies, American Economic Journal - Applied, American Economic Journal - Microeconomics, American Economic Journal - Policy, American Economic Journal - Macroeconomics, Review of Economics and Statistics, Journal of the European Economic Association, The Economic Journal, American Economic Review - Insights, American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science. Second, we iteratively ran searches in these journals containing our keywords — i.e., institutions, experiments, and the union (see the exact search below) — while taking randomly selected sub-samples to identify false positives (articles that do not match the spirit of our inquiry), such as “institutional investor” or “post-secondary institution.” The full list of exclusion criteria for the economics and political science query is reproduced below. We then manually examined the resulting 220 (economics) and 241 (political science) articles to identify the set of 64 papers (Table A1) that fit the criteria we outline in Section 4. We use the full set of papers (before manual coding) to identify the publication trends summarized in Figure 1.

### A.1 Web of Science queries

We enumerate below our exact Web of Science queries. “SO” indicates the journals; “TS” indicates the topic or keyword search (Web of Science searches titles, abstracts, and keywords); “PY” indicates the time period; and “NOT TS” indicates keywords to exclude.

1. **Economics.** (SO=(AMERICAN ECONOMIC REVIEW OR QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ECONOMICS OR Econometrica OR JOURNAL OF POLITICAL ECONOMY OR REVIEW OF ECONOMIC STUDIES OR AMERICAN ECONOMIC JOURNAL APPLIED ECONOMICS OR AMERICAN ECONOMIC JOURNAL MICROECONOMICS OR AMERICAN ECONOMIC JOURNAL ECONOMIC POLICY OR AMERICAN ECONOMIC JOURNAL MACROECONOMICS OR REVIEW OF ECONOMICS “AND” STATISTICS OR JOURNAL OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION OR AMERICAN ECONOMIC REVIEW INSIGHTS OR ECONOMIC JOURNAL) AND [CONDITION FOR TOPIC] AND PY=(2000-2023) NOT TS=(“microfinance” OR “investor” OR “monetary policy” OR “interest rate” OR “CEO” OR “retail depository” OR “bubble-and-burst” OR “multiple banking” OR “corporate governance” OR “for profit institution” OR “for-profit institution” OR “undergraduate institution” OR “four-year institution” OR “four year institution” OR “higher education institution” OR “postsecondary institution” OR “post-secondary institution” OR “affirmative action” OR “merit aid program” OR “health policy institution” OR “health institution” OR “medical institution” OR “institutional review board” OR “marriage institution” OR “institution of marriage” OR “Religious institution” OR “marriage” OR “kinship” OR “deposit institutions” OR “lab experiment” OR “laboratory” OR “dictator game” OR “experimental economy” OR “historical experiment” OR “experiment of history” OR “survey experiment” OR “quasi-random” OR “as-if random” OR “quasi-experimental”))

2. **Political Science.** (SO=(AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW OR AMERICAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE) AND [CONDITION FOR TOPIC] AND PY=(2000-2023) NOT TS=("microfinance institution" OR "institutional investor" OR "for profit institution" OR "for-profit institution" OR "undergraduate institution" OR "four-year institution" OR "four year institution" OR "monetary policy" OR "interest rate" OR "health institution" OR "medical institution" OR "institutional review board" OR "marriage institution" OR "institution of marriage" OR "affirmative action" OR "health policy institution" OR "post-secondary institution" OR "post-secondary institution" OR "financial institutions" OR "Religious institution" OR "marriage" OR "kinship" OR "deposit institutions" OR "dictator game" OR "CEO" OR "dictator game" OR "retail depository institutions" OR "experimental economy" OR "merit aid program" OR "bubble-and-burst" OR "multiple banking" OR "higher education institution" OR "natural experiment" OR "historical experiment" OR "survey experiment" OR "American politics" OR "American" OR "Americans" OR "Americans"" OR "USA" OR "United States" or "US" or "Congress" or "Congressional" or "Supreme court" or "senate" or "GOTV" or "get-out-the-vote"))

For each search query, we modified the above text highlighted in red to match the specific topics that we wanted to search for.

1. **Institutions only:** TS=(Institution OR political OR politics OR protest OR election OR politician OR candidate OR bureaucracy OR bureaucrat OR governance)
2. **Experiments only:** TS=(RCT OR randomized controlled trial OR randomized evaluation OR experiment OR experimentally OR experimental OR randomize OR randomise OR randomized OR random OR randomly)
3. **Experiments about institutions:** TS=(Institution OR political OR politics OR protest OR election OR politician OR candidate OR bureaucracy OR bureaucrat OR governance) AND TS=(RCT OR randomized controlled trial OR randomized evaluation OR experiment OR experimentally OR experimental OR randomize OR randomise OR randomized OR random OR randomly)

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<i>Year</i>	<i>Journal</i>	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Abbreviated Title</i>	<i>Classification</i>
2009	QJE	Beaman, L., Chattopadhyay, R., Duflo, E., Pande, R., Topalova, P.	Powerful Women: Does Exposure Reduce Bias?	State Inclusiveness
2009	APSR	Paluck, E.L., Green, D.P.	Deference, Dissent, and Dispute Resolution	Social Norms / Informal Institutions
2010	APSR	Olken, B.A.	Direct Democracy and Local Public Goods: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Indonesia	State Inclusiveness
2010	APSR	Dunning, T., Harrison, L.	An Experimental Study of Cousinage in Mali	Social Norms / Informal Institutions

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Table A1: Papers Reviewed

Year	Journal	Authors	Abbreviated Title	Classification
2012	QJE	Casey, K., Glennerster, R., Miguel, E.	Evidence on Aid Impacts Using a Preanalysis Plan	State Inclusiveness
2013	AEJ-A	Fujiwara, T., Wantchekon, L.	Can Informed Public Deliberation Overcome Clientelism?	State Accountability and Clientelism
2013	AJPS	De La O, A.L.	Do Conditional Cash Transfers Affect Electoral Behavior?	Clientelism
2013	APSR	Beath, A., Christia, F., Enikolopov, R.	Empowering Women through Development Aid	State Inclusiveness
2014	ECON J	Vicente, P.C.	Is Vote Buying Effective? Evidence from a Field Experiment in West Africa	Information Environment
2014	QJE	Hjort, J.	Ethnic Divisions And Production in Firms	Social Norms / Informal Institutions
2014	AJPS	McClendon, G.	Social Esteem and Participation in Contentious Politics: A Field Experiment at an LGBT Pride Rally	Civil Society
2014	APSR	Grossman, G., Humphreys, M., Sacramone-Lutz, G.	I Would Like You WMP to Extend Electricity to Our Village	State Inclusiveness and State Accountability
2015	AER	Callen, M., Long, J.	Institutional Corruption and Election Fraud: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Afghanistan	State Accountability
2015	APSR	Avdeenko, A., Gilligan, M.J.	International Interventions to Build Social Capital: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Sudan	State Inclusiveness
2015	APSR	Fearon, J., Humphreys, M., Weinstein, J.M.	How Does Development Assistance Affect Collective Action Capacity?	State Inclusiveness
2015	AJPS	Gerber, A.S., Huber, G.A., Meredith, M., Biggers, D.R., Hendry, D.J.	Can Incarcerated Felons Be (Re) Integrated into the Political System? Results from a Field Experiment	Information Environment
2016	Rev Econ Stud	Beath, A., Christia, F., Egorov, G., Enikolopov, R.	Electoral Rules and Political Selection: Theory and Evidence from a Field Experiment in Afghanistan	State Inclusiveness and State Accountability
2016	AJPS	Gottlieb, J.	Greater Expectations: A Field Experiment to Improve Accountability in Mali	State Accountability and Information Environment
2017	Restat	Aker, J.C., Collier, P., Vicente, P.C.	Using Mobile Phones and Free Newspapers during an Election in Mozambique	Information Environment

Table A1: Papers Reviewed

Year	Journal	Authors	Abbreviated Title	Classification
2018	Am Econ J Econ Policy	Gine, X., Mansuri, G.	Experimental Evidence on Female Voting Behavior in Pakistan	Information Environment
2018	AER	Neggers, Y.	Experimental Evidence on Bureaucrat Diversity and Election Bias in India	State Accountability
2018	Rev Econ Stat	Blattman, C., Emeriau, M., Fiala, N.	Do Anti-Poverty Programs Sway Voters?	Clientelism
2019	QJE	Cantoni, D., Yang, D.Y., Yuchtman, N., Zhang, J.Y.	Protest as Strategic Games: Experimental Evidence From Hong Kong Antiauthoritarian Movement	Civil Society
2019	ECMA	Jha, S., Shayo, M.	The Effects of Financial Market Exposure on Votes and Political Attitudes	Civil Society
2019	AEJ-EP	Galiani, S., Hajj, N., McEwan, P.J., Ibarraran, P., Krishnaswamy, N.	Voter Response to Peak and End Transfers: Evidence from a Conditional Cash Transfer Experiment	Clientelism
2019	AER	Chen, Y., Yang, D.Y.	The Impact of Media Censorship: 1984 or Brave New World?	Civil Society
2019	APSR	Young, L.E.	The Psychology of State Repression: Fear and Dissent Decisions in Zimbabwe	Social Norms / Informal Institutions
2019	AJPS	Anderson, S.E., Buntaine, M.T., Liu, M., Zhang, B.	Non-Governmental Monitoring of Local Governments Increases Compliance with Central Mandates	State Accountability
2019	APSR	Arias, E., Balan, P., Larreguy, H., Marshall, J., Querubin, P.	Information Provision, Voter Coordination, and Electoral Accountability	Information Environment
2019	APSR	Malesky, E., Taussig, M.	Participation, Government Legitimacy, and Regulatory Compliance in Emerging Economies	State Inclusiveness and State Accountability
2020	QJE	Weigel, J.L.	The Participation Dividend of Taxation	State Capacity
2020	JPE	Bidwell, K., Casey, K., Glennerster, R.	Voting and Expenditure Responses to Political Communication	State Accountability and Information Environment
2020	JEEA	Bursztyn, L., Callen, M., Ferman, B., Gulzar, S., Hasanain, A., Yuchtman, N.	Political Identity: Experimental Evidence on Anti-Americanism in Pakistan	Does Not Fit

Table A1: Papers Reviewed

Year	Journal	Authors	Abbreviated Title	Classification
2020	AER	Armand, A., Coutts, A., Vicente, P.C., Vilela, I.	Does Information Break the Political Resource Curse? Experimental Evidence from Mozambique	Information Environment
2020	AER	Bursztyn, L., Egorov, G., Fiorin, S.	From Extreme to Mainstream: The Erosion of Social Norms	Information Environment and Civil Society
2020	RESTAT	O'Connell, S.	Can Quotas Increase the Supply of Candidates for Higher-Level Positions?	State Inclusiveness
2020	APSR	Karim, S.	Relational State Building in Areas of Limited Statehood	State Capacity
2020	AJPS	Brierley, S., Kramon, E., Ofosu, G.K.	The Moderating Effect of Debates on Political Attitudes	State Accountability
2021	AER	Bursztyn, L., Cantoni, D., Yang, D.Y., Yuchtman, N., Zhang, J.Y.	Social Interactions and the Dynamics of Protest Movements	Civil Society
2021	AER	Casey, K., Kamara, A.B., Meriggi, N.F.	An Experiment in Candidate Selection	State Inclusiveness
2021	EJ	Cruz, C., Keefer, P., Labonne, J.	New Effects of Information on Voters and Candidates	Information Environment
2021	ECMA	Sanchez de la Sierra, R.	Whither Formal Contracts?	State Capacity and Clientelism
2021	EJ	Marx, B., Pons, V., Suri, T.	Voter Mobilisation and Trust in Electoral Institutions	Information Environment
2021	AER	Levy, R.	Social Media, News Consumption, and Polarization	Information Environment
2021	RESTAT	Hess, S., Jaimovich, D., Schuendeln, M.	Development Projects and Economic Networks	State Inclusiveness
2021	AJPS	Slough, T., Fariss, C.	Misgovernance and Human Rights: The Case of Illegal Detention without Intent	State Capacity
2021	APSR	Haim, D., Ravanilla, N., Sexton, R.	Sustained Government Engagement Improves Subsequent Pandemic Risk Reporting In Conflict Zones	State Capacity
2022	AER	Garbiras-Diaz, N., Montenegro, M.	All Eyes on Them: A Field Experiment on Citizen Oversight and Electoral Integrity	State Accountability
2022	AER	Balan, P., Bergeron, A., Tourek, G., Weigel, J.L.	How City Chiefs Use Local Information to Increase Tax Compliance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo	State Capacity

Table A1: Papers Reviewed

Year	Journal	Authors	Abbreviated Title	Classification
2022	AER	Baysan, C.	Persistent Polarizing Effects of Persuasion: Experimental Evidence from Turkey	Information Environment
2022	AEJ-EP	Henry, E., Zhuravskaya, E., Guriev, S.	Checking and Sharing Alt-Facts	Information Environment
2022	AER	Bobonis, G.J., Gertler, P.J., Gonzalez-Navarro, M., Nichter, S.	Vulnerability and Clientelism	Clientelism
2022	APSR	Raffler, P.J.	Does Political Oversight of the Bureaucracy Increase Accountability? Field Experimental Evidence from a Dominant Party Regime	State Accountability
2022	APSR	Blair, R.A., Moscoso-Rojas, M., Vargas Castillo, A., Weintraub, M.	Preventing Rebel Resurgence after Civil War: A Field Experiment in Security and Justice Provision in Rural Colombia	State Capacity
2022	AJPS	Bhandari, A.	Political Determinants of Economic Exchange: Evidence from a Business Experiment in Senegal	State Capacity and Clientelism
2023	RESTAT	Casey, K., Glennerster, R., Miguel, E., Voors, M.	Skill Versus Voice in Local Development	State Capacity
2023	EJ	Casey, K., Glennerster, R., Miguel, E., Voors, M.	Long-Run Effects of Aid: Forecasts and Evidence from Sierra Leone	State Inclusiveness
2023	AJPS	Grossman, G., Michelitch, K., Prato, C.	The Effect of Sustained Transparency on Electoral Accountability	State Accountability and Information Environment
2023	AJPS	Finkel, S.E., Neundorf, A., Ramirez, E.R.	Can Online Civic Education Induce Democratic Citizenship? Experimental Evidence from a New Democracy	State Accountability and Information Environment
2023	APSR	Malesky, E.J., Todd, J.D., Anh, T.	Can Elections Motivate Responsiveness in a Single-Party Regime? Experimental Evidence from Vietnam	State Accountability