
The democratic limits of political experiments

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Abstract

Since field experiments in democratic politics influence citizens and the relationships among citizens, they are freighted with normative significance. Yet the distinctively democratic concerns that bear upon such field experiments have not yet been systematically examined. In this paper, we taxonomize such democratic concerns. Our goal is not to justify any of them, but rather to reveal their basic structure, so that they can be scrutinized at further length. We argue that field experiments could be democratically objectionable even if they are not decisive – even if they do not swing the results of elections or other political decisions. Rather, if a class of campaign experiments is objectionable, one reason for this is that they undermine citizens' equal standing. The ideal of equal standing affords nuanced judgments about the permissibility of field experiments in democratic politics.

Keywords

ethics of field experiments, democratic theory, manipulation, egalitarianism

Field experiments in democratic politics are freighted with normative significance. They not only allow researchers and campaign staffs to collect data. They also influence the

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actions and relationships of various political officers – including voters. Any intentional influencing of morally relevant actions and relationships will carry moral questions in tow, and political experiments are no exception. Do citizens and/or elite political actors possess moral complaints against certain field experiments? If there is a conflict between democratic values and intellectual ones, how should these concerns be traded off? Are there moral limits on how experimenters might permissibly influence the rational deliberation of political actors?

These questions have not been the subject of sustained philosophical scrutiny.¹ To be sure, there are extensive philosophical literatures on experimental ethics in other fields. The literature on medical ethics, for example, focuses on issues of consent and deception within clinical trials. Insights from these fields will certainly help to develop a full view of the ethics of political field experiments. But we think that the political context – and the democratic context, in particular – raises distinctive moral concerns, which the ethics literatures from other fields do not capture. Meanwhile, several practitioners of field experiments have begun to reflect, quite sensitively, on the ethics of their work. But these efforts have not been deeply grounded in the rich literatures of political philosophy and normative ethics.

In this paper, we hope to fill this gap: we hope to articulate some distinctively political concerns about field experiments, in a relatively systematic fashion. Our goal is not to vindicate these concerns, but to clarify just what these concerns are and identify what further reflection is needed to adjudicate them.

We will argue for two claims. First, field experiments designed to influence the political behavior of citizens should be informed by their implications for social equality. One source of moral concern about field experiments in a democratic context is that they may infringe on citizens' equal standing. Second, whether some mode of influence in democratic politics is morally acceptable may depend on the identity of the actor in question. Given what we might call the speaker-relativity of democratic ethics, it may be the case that researchers ought not engage in some activities that could be permissibly performed by political operatives.

This paper proceeds in the following sections. First, we outline features that might make field experiments morally salient – meriting of at least some normative consideration. Second, we consider an instrumentalist account of the ethics of democratic field experiments. Third, we propose augmenting this account with a principle of respect for social equality. Fourth, we elaborate the sources of speaker-relativity in democratic participation. Finally, borrowing from a few morally creative examples, we take stock of how experimental designs might respond to these principles.

Political experiments and moral salience

'Manipulation' – understood as an intervention by the researcher that creates a difference in circumstances between treatment and control groups – is characteristic of experimental work in general. Philosophers also have a concept of manipulation. This concept refers to forms of treatment which, given some specific local contexts and relationships, may give rise to moral complaint (cf. Barnhill, 2014). When Teele (2014: 118) suggests that 'the term manipulation seems rather anodyne,' she has in mind the social scientist's

concept, and not the philosopher's. We should not be read as suggesting that manipulation, in the social scientist's sense, is generally morally objectionable. Our initial focus is not on experimental manipulation generally, but on forms of experimental influence that parallel morally concerning forms influence in ordinary, first-personal cases.

Consider the following cases:

- (a) *Informant*. Rose and Sam are siblings who belong to a local church. Sam knows that their grandmother, with whom Rose has a close relationship, is very concerned about Rose's religious well-being. Frequently, Rose doesn't manage to get to church, a fact that she does not report to her grandmother, although she also doesn't lie about it. One day, Sam tells Rose that he intends to visit their grandmother in the next month, noting in passing that he suspects Rose's recent church attendance will likely come up in conversation.
- (b) *Test*. Sarah claims to possess the virtue of being willing to help others, even when she has no personal connection to them. John, a friend of Sarah's, is suspicious that she might be less committed to being a good neighbor than she publicly portrays. He sends her a request from a made-up email address, requesting some minor assistance. His aim to ascertain if she is as committed to her values as she publicly avows.
- (c) *Persuasion*. Tom and Andrew are members of their local school board who often find themselves at opposing purposes. Unbeknownst to Andrew, Tom has studied Andrew's positions and values to create a stock of reasons that he thinks will help win Andrew over to his view. Tom's own perspective is so different that he regards these reasons and values as nonsense, but he uses them in conversation with Andrew because he regards them as most likely to help Andrew come around to his view.

Each of these cases describe instances where one person intentionally attempts to exercise influence over another, and does so in a way that might at least raise moral concerns. Though they are different circumstances, the common thought is that one agent might be manipulating another. In saying this, we are not yet registering any judgments about the actions' permissibility or impermissibility, justice or injustice, or the like. Rather, we are observing that the cases call out for further moral consideration. They are *morally salient*.

Parallel concerns might be raised about experimental research and campaign methods. Consider:

- (a') *Disclosure*. In a well-known experiment, researchers sent voters a flyer entitled, 'What if your neighbors knew whether you voted?' The letter then gave information about whether the recipient, as well as other people in the recipient's neighborhood, had voted. The letter described voting as a civic duty, and said that the authors were 'taking a new approach' to the problem of non-voting by publicizing who does and does not vote (Gerber et al., 2008).
- (b') *Request*. A recent field experiment tested discrimination among state legislators by sending them letters requesting help registering to vote (Butler and

Broockman, 2011). Some legislators received a letter from ‘Jake,’ an alias suggesting the sender was white. Other legislators randomly received a letter from an ‘alias’ from ‘DeShawn,’ a name suggesting the sender was black. Neither ‘Jake’ nor ‘DeShawn’ was a real person – the names were chosen due to their racial correlates. The researchers found racial discrimination among state legislators.

- (c') *Persuasion.* Modern campaigns use experiments to determine which arguments will be most persuasive to particular voters, and then deploy arguments in the expected optimal way. Campaign staff do not communicate why they have chosen the reasons they are using, instead presenting the reasons directly to those voters for whom they expect the arguments will be most likely to persuade. Campaigners may produce reasons which *they themselves* believe are bad.

None of the actions in (a')–(c') is obviously morally wrong. But like (a)–(c), each one raises moral considerations that recommend further theoretical reflection, and for similar reasons. In each case, the experimenter attempts to intentionally influence an individual's behavior in ways that might be objectionable. As before, the details differ (in ways that we will consider later), but the pre-theoretical worry is again one of manipulation. It appears that the researcher or campaign staffer is trying to get individuals to do something – not with coercion or overt deception – but with tools that change the individual's practical reasons or deliberative circumstances.

Field experiments in political settings like (a')–(c') are morally salient because they are intentional attempts to influence others' choices. Given the importance of individual autonomy, any intentional influencing of another person's choice will carry moral questions in tow. Are they impermissible? Are they unjust? To repeat – these questions need not have positive answers; both offers and sincere persuasive speech are modes of attempting to influence others' choices, and they are typically permissible. But they *might* be answered positively; lying, deception, and coercion, after all, are typically impermissible. Field experiments like (a')–(c') raise interesting moral questions because we cannot readily place them near either moral pole.

Such moral questions seem to have different stakes in the democratic context. Paradigmatically wrong influencings seem to be distinctively wrong when they are made upon democratic citizens, as those citizens discharge their political responsibilities. Compare:

Grocery Store: Al asks Bert for directions to the nearest grocery store. Bert, who wants to buy the store's last birthday cake for his son, sends Al in the wrong direction.

Voting: Al asks Bert for directions to the nearest polling booth. Bert, who wants Al's preferred candidate to lose, sends Al in the wrong direction.

Both of these misdirections are wrong, but democratic theorists often hold that the second one is distinctively so. That is, even if the second misdirection is objectionable for the same reasons as the first, it is *also* objectionable on other grounds,

grounds that have something to do with the democratic context. One reason for thinking that the democratic context is special has to do with the status of the agents involved. The right to vote is commonly taken to be a marker of full membership in a political community, and so interference with another's voting is a threat to their position in society in a way that interference with their grocery shopping is not (Scanlon, 1998: 251–255). The idea of a moral interest in a status or position in society raises issues of relationships among citizens – an issue to which we will return in section 4. The present point is that the moral considerations that bear upon the permissibility of field experiments (a')–(c') might be different from the moral considerations that bear upon their interpersonal analogues (a)–(c). Just as deception is distinctively wrong in the democratic context, so too, we suspect, is manipulation. We have good reason to figure out what whether this suspicion is warranted.

The instrumental account

So far, we have been canvassing intuitions to support two claims: first, field experiments are worthy of moral investigation, even when they are neither coercive nor deceptive; second, whenever manipulation is morally wrong, it is likely to be *distinctively wrong* in the democratic context. It is high time to see if these intuitions can be explained by more general moral principles.

Randomized experiments can seem to introduce an invasive species into a political habitat. Democratic politics, in one way or another, aims to give its participants an equal say in shaping laws and institutions. Actual practice falls far short. Still, if we take this as a worthy ideal, field experimentation can seem to undermine our democratic ideal. What makes experiments the gold standard for causal inference is exactly what makes them democratically worrisome. They don't just 'ask the world a question' (Paul and Healy, 2016). They selectively treat a subset of citizens, and leave others untreated, randomizing them into treatment and control conditions. In other words, an experiment, to earn its name, must aim to be causally momentous. If experiments must have the possibility of being consequential, there is the chronic possibility that it will affect the outcome of an election. And this is at least cause for concern, from a democratic point of view. At the same time, experiments also present opportunities for expressing equal treatment. An extensive literature in democratic theory defends randomization as a way of securing equality, and experimental treatments are well situated to capitalize on this moral advantage.²

Focusing first on the prospect for moral concern, we need to identify just *what* the concerning fact is. In this section, we will examine one idea, floated by Alan Gerber, according to which field experiments are objectionable only if they actually *swing* elections – that is, when their interventions are but-for causes of electoral outcomes. We believe that interventions in elections can be wrong on *non-instrumental* grounds – that is, quite apart from the effects that they produce. In the section that follows this one, we will develop such a non-instrumental account of why field experiments might be objectionable, on democratic grounds. This section helps to clear the way for our account.

Gerber writes:

[T]here are countless other mundane and essentially arbitrary contributions to the outcome with electoral consequences that are orders of magnitude larger than the typical experimental intervention. A partial list includes: ballot order (Miller and Krosnick, 1998), place of voting (Berger et al., 2008), the number of polling places (Brady and McNulty, 2004), use of optical scan versus punch card ballots (Ansolabehere and Stewart, 2005), droughts, floods, or recent shark attacks (Achen and Bartels, 2004, 2017), rain on election day (Knack, 1994), and a win by the local football team on the weekend prior to the election (Healy and Malhotra, 2010). That numerous trivial or even ridiculous factors might swing an election seems at first galling, but note that these factors only matter when the electorate is very evenly divided. In this special case, however, regardless of the election outcome, an approximately equal number of citizens will be pleased and disappointed with the result. As long as there is no regular bias in which one side gets the benefit of chance, there may be little reason for concern (Gerber, 2011: 130).

Gerber appears to be making three arguments. First, field experiments are very unlikely to swing elections (because they are efficacious ‘only when the electorate is very evenly divided’). Second, even if experiments *did* swing elections, they would not be objectionable on that basis because arbitrary factors swing elections all the time, without any great moral import. Third, difference-making experiments are unobjectionable because they do not regularly favor one side rather than rather than the other.

Gerber’s first argument rests on an empirical claim, the full assessment of which would require rigorous testing. For the moment, we will simply raise some grounds for skepticism. In tight races, it is very much a live possibility that experiments can swing an election. Indeed, given the hundreds of get-out-the-vote (GOTV) experiments that have been conducted at every level of American politics, it is quite likely that an experiment *already has* swung an election.³

We have more to say about Gerber’s second and third arguments, which make normative claims. We think that they prove too much. Gerber’s second argument contains a conditional premise: If the electorate is very evenly divided, then an arbitrary cause affecting the outcome is not democratically important. Is this premise true? To investigate it, we might consider an analogue in first-personal action. Suppose I cause you to perform an action by lying to you, knowing that you will likely choose arbitrarily anyway between the action I favor and the action I disfavor. In this case, it seems you would be justified in resenting me for manipulating you. I influence your action by inducing you to adopt a false belief. It does not seem to excuse my action that I know you are apt to act for arbitrary reasons anyway, when you are on the fence about some action. More generally, there is good psychological evidence that humans are easily swayed by arbitrary facts (Doris and Stich, 2005).⁴ But the complaint with manipulation is not solely about acting sub-optimally. The objection is to having one’s agency interfered with by another agent. It is about how we are *treated*, regardless of whether that treatment is consequential in the world, e.g. leads us to change our vote or to turnout when we otherwise wouldn’t. There is no inconsistency in being happy enough to act arbitrarily, but still indignant over being deceived. The same may be true of the democratic case. If there is some value to democratic decision making, it may be wrong to interfere with

such collective choices, even if individuals doing the choosing are not voting on especially good reasons.

Gerber's third argument holds that even if experimental treatments do influence electoral outcomes, on net, they will tend to favor neither one political position nor another, and so there is no democratic reason to be concerned about them. But the mere fact that a another election might *also* be swung (in an opposite direction) does not undermine concerns about illicit influence over any particular one. Imagine discovering that Russian interference was sufficient to swing the outcome of the 2016 election. Now imagine discovering that some other form of interference swung the 2012 election, as well. This second discovery does not seem to cancel out our original complaint about the 2016 election – indeed, on net, it seems to make things *worse*, not better.

We've argued that Gerber's account does not capture all that might be democratically objectionable about field experiments. But there is a broader lesson here. Electoral interventions can be wrong, not simply in virtue of whether they affect the results of the election; they can be wrong because they treat citizens in objectionable ways.

An egalitarian account of democratic manipulation

What might be democratically objectionable about the treatment of experimental subjects? If certain field experiments are inconsistent with democratic values, that is so (in part) because they are inconsistent with *political equality*. In other words, they are objectionable because they threaten the equal standing of co-citizens.⁵

The value of political equality – at least in some form – is widely accepted. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this idea occurs when one person – and only that person – is denied the opportunity to vote. Many people regard this as a paradigmatic wrong. But why is that so? We cannot explain this wrong in instrumental terms; it is a familiar point that, given the size of modern democracies, each individual's vote is nearly worthless in terms of what it can achieve for her. A more compelling explanation is that denying this person an opportunity to vote creates some morally objectionable relation between her and other citizens: she is now inferior; they superior. Democracy is valuable not simply because of the results it achieves – wise policies, peaceful transitions of power – but because of the equality it embodies (Beitz, 1989; Christiano, 2008; Kolodny, 2014a, 2014b; Viehoff, 2014; Waldron, 2017).

At a second pass, we can distinguish between two sorts of demands that political equality might make upon political arrangements. First, it might make demands upon how power is distributed between ordinary citizens and elite political officials (such as legislators, bureaucrats, and judges), if such officials are to exist.⁶ Second, it might make demands upon how power is distributed among ordinary citizens.

In this paper, we will mostly set aside the first set of demands (though we will have something to say about it). We will instead concentrate upon the second set, for these demands govern the relations between political scientists and experimental subjects.

When it comes to relations among ordinary citizens, it is commonly thought that political equality demands something like equal power (hence, one person; one vote) (Brighouse, 1996; Fishkin and Luskin, 2005; Goodin and Tanasoca, 2014; Goldman, 2015; Viehoff, 2014). We embrace this, and – for sake of concreteness – we shall

embrace Niko Kolodny's specification of this demand, according to which political equality obtains among ordinary citizens just when they enjoy equal opportunity for informed, autonomous influence (Kolodny, 2014b: 310). More precisely, this condition is satisfied when each person has equal a priori chances of being decisive over a political choice. For each person, and all of their acts of influence, it must be just as likely that [had X acted differently, the political choice would have turned out differently] (Kolodny, 2014b).

We are now in a position to understand this value as one possible ground for warranted complaints against some forms of democratic influence. We might formulate a version of the principle as follows:

Political Equality. One has a moral reason not to exacerbate differences in opportunities for informed, autonomous influence over democratic outcomes.

There are at least two ways in which experiments might run afoul of political equality. First, they might upset equality between experimenters and *their subjects*, by enabling the experimenter to influence outcomes or civic relationships in ways that are inaccessible to ordinary citizens. We might call this an *input objection*. Second, they might upset equality among citizens, by compromising the standing or opportunities for some citizens relative to others. We might call this an *output objection*.

How demanding is the value of political equality? There is significant disagreement among democratic theorists who endorse some version of this value (and we acknowledge that not all do). For some, social equality demands 'deflatingly little' in specific reforms for our political institutions (Kolodny, 2014b: 288, 332). For others, it puts serious constraints on the kind of electoral and legislative institutions that we can support. Here our aim is to design a 'modular' theory – one that clarifies the egalitarian objections that political experiments can, in principle, raise. The strength of the objections that our theory flags will turn on the underlying weightiness of political equality – whether it is seen as the master value of democratic politics, or one value that is weighed among others.

Political equality is secured when citizens have equal opportunity for autonomous, informed influence over political outcomes. Insofar as experimental interventions compromise or create disparities in autonomy, informedness, or electoral influence, they may be susceptible to democratic objections. In the remainder of this section, we review a variety of ways in which interventions might give rise to democratic inequalities.

To begin, consider interventions that merely provide some parties with access to additional information. Moral philosophers have long regarded the provision of accurate, relevant information as a paradigmatically respectful mode of influencing another's choice or action. Providing information is meant to facilitate another's autonomous choice, rather than intervene at some stage of that choice in a potentially manipulative way. Nevertheless, some normative theorists have still worried that under some circumstances, even providing another with accurate, relevant information can be morally objectionable. In particular, providing information might sometimes compromise another's status by implying that the receiving party is insufficiently capable of exercising their own rational capacities to engage in information collection and processing

(Tsai, 2014). The worry is that there may be cases in which providing information can actually stop or prevent an agent from engaging in a morally valuable activity.

This is not a merely abstract, philosophical concern. Social scientists have found that low-knowledge voters can actually be demobilized by receiving information (Albertson and Busby, 2015; Bailey et al., 2016). Low-knowledge citizens given information about climate change were less likely to engage in participatory activities than those who were not given any relevant information (Albertson and Busby, 2015: 3–5). Even when providing information does not have a negative effect on recipients, it can still exacerbate political inequality. In a striking analysis of published GOTV interventions, Enos et al. (2014) find that such actions tend to amplify the participation gap between high-propensity voters and low-propensity voters. Twice as many published interventions increase the participation gap as decrease it, and increases are sometimes quite large (2014: 274). This finding is important because high-propensity voters are wealthier and better educated (2014: 280). In short, experimental interventions may increase the political influence of exactly those citizens (rich, educated, etc.) whose interests already carry disproportionate political influence.

Such concerns may be amplified in cases of experiments that not only provide information, but also apply pressure.⁷ Experimental treatments can apply positive social pressure by encouraging participation or insisting to voters that ‘your party needs you!’ (Condon et al, 2016). They can also encourage or guide an individual in forming and executing an intention to vote (Nickerson and Rogers, 2010). Interventions of this kind have been shown to causally impinge upon how citizens act.

One might object that neither of the two worries just canvassed bears on equality of opportunity for influence. In the former example, it might seem that providing citizens with information at most affects their willingness to exercise their opportunities for influence, but does not influence those opportunities, themselves. In the latter case, one might argue that pressuring people to vote – if anything – increases the likelihood that they will influence a political outcome. Strictly in terms of equal opportunity for influence, it might even seem that those who have a complaint are the voters who do not receive the experimental treatment, rather than those who do.⁸

With respect to these objections, it is important to underscore that the political equality principle emphasizes informed, autonomous influence. If citizens are pressured to participate, there is at least a question about whether their participation represents autonomous influence. Does pressure compromise citizens’ acting ‘on free reflection’ on what they judge ‘to be relevant reasons’ (Kolodny, 2014a, p. 335)? Pressure may motivate citizens to act politically on reasons which are, from the citizen’s own point of view, not politically relevant. If, as noted above, providing information can undermine an agent’s exercise of her rational capacity to seek out and analyze reasons, then other GOTV treatments might also encroach on free reflection (Tsai, 2014). And, setting that concern aside, there is still an egalitarian worry that while citizens might have the same formal rights to vote, differences in wealth, leisure, and resources can result in informal inequalities (Kolodny, 2014: 333). Of course, experimental interventions do not create or amplify these differences. However, if we have good reason to think that they do amplify the electoral consequences of these differences, then such treatments might be granting a further advantage to voters who already wield disparate informal influence. This may be

a secondary source of egalitarian concern. While each citizen's response to the treatment might be mediated by their own judgment (and so be autonomous), the aggregate increase in influence among high-propensity voters is independent of anyone's judgment.⁹ We are not claiming these results demonstrate that the treatments do violate political equality, but considerations of this sort are worthy of further investigation.

While we might not generally consider positive social pressure to be objectionably manipulative, one can imagine morally salient cases. It's ordinary enough to think that unwanted encouragement can be burdensome, and researchers find this is also true in politics. For example, applying social pressure can backfire when voters have been exhausted already by receiving political communication (Bailey et al., 2016: 729, 733). We can understand this worry in terms of social equality. If some voters are burdened by an intervention in ways that others are not, and this burden predictably impinges on their likelihood of participating politically, then their equal political status is undermined.

There's also a gender-based version of this egalitarian concern. For example, Bond et al. (2017) suggest that social pressure might affect the actions of women more than men (although their own findings are not significant on this variable). If this is true, then it might be that women are, in expectation, differentially burdened, and this might likewise affect their equal political standing. Suppose, by analogy, that women were more likely to comply with social pressure to provide unpaid labor around the office. If we knew this was true, we might worry about that even if social pressure to contribute was applied equally to men and women, the output of our intervention could still be unequal.

A still stronger form of treatment involves not merely positive encouragement, but disclosures of information to shame or expose other citizens. Section 1 introduced a recent experiment that came to prominence in part for its controversial treatment of disclosing voting records (Gerber, et al., 2008). Researchers gathered turnout information for 180,000 voters, dividing them into a control group and four treatment groups. Each treatment group received different type of encouragement to vote in an upcoming election: (1) a simple reminder to vote, claiming that voting is a civic duty; (2) the same reminder, except with the added information that researchers were watching the election to learn about turnout; (3) the reminder as in (1), with an added note that turnout is a matter of public record; and (4) a letter displaying the turnout for the recipient and the recipient's neighbors in a previous election. Treatments (1)–(3) raised participation from between 1.8 and 4.9 percent relative to the control group. Treatment (4) raised participation dramatically – 8.1 percent relative to the control group.

The researchers developed their experimental design after Mark Grebner, a political consultant, self-funded an experiment showing that disclosing voting history was dramatically more effective than other GOTV mailers. Grebner observed that large numbers of voters reported having voted when in fact they had not. He came to 'suspect that a substantial number of potential voters believed that voting is essentially a private act, rather than a public one, and it was safe to routinely misreport voting not only to researchers but also to friends and family' (qtd. in Green and Gerber, 2010: 332). Thus, his strategy was to use the technique of publicizing voting 'by making them think they couldn't continue to get away with it.' As the authors describe, there are strong

dispositions toward compliance with social norms, so the prospect of ‘others believed to be watching’ motivates actions to ‘avoid shame and social ostracism’ (Gerber et al., 2008).

This study quickly proved controversial, with some recipients contacting local District Attorneys and the researcher being contacted by law enforcement (Michelson and Nickerson, 2011: 439). Our conception of manipulation can help to appreciate the intensity of their concerns. The researchers disclosed information that otherwise would have been very unlikely to be accessed, and they did so with the explicit intent of creating a penalty of moralized shame that would influence the actions of other persons. *Prima facie*, the researchers’ action looks like a case of manipulation. If that is true, the shaming threat impinged upon subjects’ ability to autonomously influence political processes. It created input-inequality with the researchers, and output-inequality with other citizens.

The authors might counter – as in fact their flier to voters declared in large font – that voting records are public information. But it is unclear why this should be dispositive. In the case of Informant (from section 1), Sam threatens to visit Rose’s grandmother and reveal her lack of church attendance. The case might be stylized to make clear that her non-attendance is public in the relevant sense – anyone could find out by asking her fellow parishioners (among whom it is not a secret), attending the publicly open church one Sunday themselves, and so on. What Sam does is threaten to deploy this information in a way that is damaging to Rose, by compromising her relationship with her grandmother. Likewise, the researchers threaten to take information which is already public but non-damaging, and use it in a way which will potentially compromise some citizens’ relationships with other citizens. Indeed, this is precisely the researchers’ intention, since it is the threat of shame among fellow citizens (neighbors) through which theorized treatment mechanism works. The relational aspect of this worry raises again the issue of potential inequalities among citizens. The egalitarian worry is underscored in a different way by the finding that for this experiment, in particular, the treatment effect is more than twice as strong for high-propensity voters than for low-propensity voters (Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck, 279).

A final category of studies combines elements of both shame and deception. A recent experiment investigated different strategies for increasing voter turnout in three municipal elections (and Holland, Michigan; Ely, Iowa; Monticello, Iowa) (Panagopoulos, 2010). In two of these communities, voters received a mailer that those who voted in the election would be honored by having their names appear in a local newspaper. In the third community, citizens received a mailer that those who did not vote in the upcoming election would be shamed by having their names revealed in a local newspaper. The pride treatment increased turnout by 0.8–1.5% and by 4.5–4.7%. The shame treatment increased turnout by 6.3–6.9 percent. The researcher found that in general, shame is more effective than pride, because shame motivates both high- and low-propensity voters, while pride motivates high-propensity voters only (Panagopoulos, 2010: 382). While we are uncertain whether the threat to shame was actually carried out, this design raises familiar concerns about maintaining equal opportunities for autonomous influence.

Sources of speaker-relativity

The last section sketched a principle of political equality from democratic theory and then applied that principle to relevant experimental settings, canvassing a variety of roughly egalitarian concerns. In this section, we will move away from thinking about kinds of *treatments* and focus instead on different kinds of *actors*. We will suggest that the identity of an actor may sometimes be relevant to an action's moral status, and that this may have consequences for the moral discretion of social science researchers. To see what we have in mind, consider an example from Gerber and Green:

Suppose that a political scientist were to run for public office. Suppose that she made 10 or 20 speeches in attempt to curry political support. We ordinarily would not question the rectitude of this behavior even if the churches were chosen at random. Now suppose that the political scientist were interested not simply in winning the election but also in finding out how much these speeches affected the election outcome (Green/Gerber, 2002: 830).

Gerber and Green believe, and we agree, that there is no difference between the original case and its variation. If an intervention is permissible, it does not become impermissible simply because the intervening agent gains some knowledge from it. Our account vindicates that judgment about this particular case, because both interventions – involving political speeches – influence voters through a paradigmatically autonomy-preserving means.¹⁰

While the argument works in this case, there may be more complex issues lurking about when researchers can and cannot act in the same way as political operatives. It might be tempting to reason as follows:

1. It is permissible to participate in an election (by giving speeches), and
2. It is permissible to do research on elections (by selecting venues at random),
3. So, it must be permissible to participate and research at the same time.

But this is all field experiments do. If each component is permissible, then why not think they are permissible in conjunction?

This argument requires the premise: If action [ϕ] is permissible and action [Ψ] is permissible, then the action [$\phi \wedge \Psi$] is permissible. A principle of this form is appealing, because it resembles the sound principle: If some proposition p is true, and some other proposition q is true, then the conjunction [$p \wedge q$] is also true. However, just because conjunction is truth preserving, it does not follow that agglomeration holds about permissibility. That is, there is a substantive question about whether a conjunctive set of individually permissible actions is permissibility-preserving. It may be permissible for me to proselytize that everyone ought to learn a foreign language, and permissible for me to refuse every opportunity to learn a foreign language, but perhaps there is still something amiss with both so proselytizing and so refusing (cf. Wallace, 2010). It might be permissible for you to threaten to reveal my embezzlement to the public, and also permissible for you to ask me for \$1000, but threatening and asking together might be wrong (cf. Shaw, 2012). There is, in short, no general principle of the form that if some

activity's component parts are permissible, then the complex activity must also be permissible.

Are there any cases where the agglomeration of permissibility might fail with respect to experimental treatments? Here again it will sharpen matters to look at specific cases. Consider the ethics of political persuasion. Sometimes field experiments not only provide information, but also seek to persuade voters to adopt a substantive issue position. Brockman and Kalla (2016) recently found that canvassers presenting arguments and encouraging perspective-taking could dramatically reduce transphobia. Strikingly, a single personal interaction had roughly the same effect as the gains in positive attitudes toward gay men and lesbians from 1998 to 2012 (2016: 223). The authors selected an issue of widespread philosophical agreement (the badness of transphobia) and nevertheless presented arguments on both sides of the issue.

Here, again, separately permissible actions also seem permissible together. Arguing against transphobia is morally acceptable, studying attitudes on transphobia is morally acceptable, and the conjunction of these activities likewise looks unobjectionable. However, one can imagine a study where the agglomerative inference would look more controversial. Imagine a contrast between:

Acceptance. Researchers present citizens with arguments designed to motivate acceptance of an outgroup, and study whether the arguments presented durably affect perceptions of outgroup members.

and

Campaign. Researchers present citizens with arguments designed to motivate opposition to a specific political candidate, and study whether the arguments presented durably affect approval of the candidate in question.

To make the Campaign case more vivid, imagine that researchers present citizens with the social scientific finding that voters who identify as 'liberal' have the same profile of policy preferences as voters who identify 'progressive,' and that these groups are otherwise indistinguishable *except* that members of the latter group score higher on an index of ambivalent sexism (Cf. Banda, et al., ms). Suppose, further, that researchers added that supporters of Bernie Sanders predominantly identified as 'progressive,' and canvassed in states where Bernie Sanders was polling favorably.

In this scenario, Campaign looks morally riskier than Acceptance. It might nevertheless be true that political activists could permissibly engage in tactics like those used in Campaign, and it might also be true that researchers could permissibly study the efficacy of those tactics when used by political activists. However, speaker-relative facts about the researcher might give rise to new moral reasons applying to the conjunction of these actions. Attempting to use information to influence a political outcome – when performed by the social scientist – might be thought of as a way of parlaying a kind of epistemic authority into a means of political authority or influence. While all citizens can participate in political campaigns, the researcher may have advantages not available to others. This egalitarian concern might help to explain the intuition that the researcher has a role-based obligation not to be involved directly in campaign activity, or at least not be

so involved under the guise of social scientist (compare Wallace, 2010). A principle expressing this intuition might be formulated as follows.

Speaker-relativity. The fact that an experimental treatment is carried out by a researcher may be a relevant consideration in determining the treatment's moral status.

This suggests that researchers ought not perform some actions that might be allowable for other political participants. At the same time, there may be kinds of political activity that are acceptable for researchers to engage in, but not for political campaigns. For example, social scientists have motivated turnout at polls both by offering financial rewards (Panogopoulos, 2013), and also by designing financial incentives to take the form of a penalty for not voting (Shineman, 2016). The possible ethical salience of such actions is underscored by the fact that US federal elections, as well as many state elections, legally prohibit such interventions – laws that, we note, researchers have taken care to uphold (Panogopoulos, 2013: 271).

What explains the asymmetry between researchers and political campaigns? If campaigns could provide financial incentives to vote, they could deploy these incentives in ways that indirectly (but predictably) contribute to achieving their electoral goals. Groups of citizens with greater resources could convert their advantage in wealth into an advantage in political power. They would thereby acquire a relatively greater opportunity for informal influence over electoral outcomes. The use of financial incentives by researchers is to learn about – rather than influence – electoral outcomes, and so does not make the researchers more likely than other citizens to achieve their particular political ends. The researchers' identity, with the norms of practice constraining that role, insulates them from the egalitarian objection. Because their activity is, by hypothesis, not aimed at influencing outcomes, it does not secure for them any greater share of political influence than ordinary citizens possess.

Contrast this with the case of Campaign. If researchers presented citizens with information undermining a specific candidate, they would (at least in expectation) be influencing the political outcome. Of course, influencing outcomes alone is an ordinary democratic practice. The issue is not that researchers have greater influence than other citizens. Rather, the question is whether researchers' influence over other citizens depends on those citizens' own judgments. If researchers merely persuade other citizens by providing them with good information, then there is no egalitarian objection. Any citizen *could* do that.

However, if researchers were to attempt to influence the election of a specific candidate through their academic work, that could raise a specific worry. The researchers' role *as researchers* might lead citizens to – mistakenly – attribute impartiality to their findings, and so to be more influenced by the associated claims than they might otherwise be. In other words, the researchers' role might grant them a kind of influence that traded on their academic identity in ways other citizens could not appreciate, and so would affect other citizens in a 'judgment-independent' way (Kolodny, 2014: 334). When influence on others is independent of their judgment, it risks compromising the autonomy of their opportunities for influencing outcomes (Kolodny, 2014). By identifying the features that explain when researchers should have more latitude than activists,

and when they should be more restricted, political equality can help understand and specify speaker-relativity.

This section has aimed to show the importance of thinking about the point of view of the experimenting agent. We end with the observation that there is actually some experimental evidence in support of the idea that perspective matters. In one study, researchers investigated the moral differences between misleading an audience by lying, and misleading them without making any false assertions (Rogers et al, 2017). They found that those who mislead without false assertions tend to regard their behavior as more ethical than lying, but those who are thereby misled react in the same way that they would react to outright deception. It helps, in cases like this, to be willing to take the perspective of both agent and patient, and to consider if there is something about point of view of the actor that bears on the moral reasons involved.

Implications for democratic practice

So far, we have articulated a possible tension between political equality within a democracy and some uses of field experiments. We should be very clear about what we have tried to do. We have not shown that such experiments are, therefore, morally objectionable. In fact, we recognize that the democratic egalitarian's presuppositions are controversial in various ways. Some deny that political equality is non-instrumentally valuable (Dworkin, 2000; Arneson, 2004; Brennan, 2016); others believe that political equality, properly understood, does not require strict equality of opportunity for influence (Beitz, 1989; Christiano, 1996; Pevnick, 2016a). We have attempted to show, first, that the democratic complaint is worthy of consideration; and, second, to illuminate what one must think about in order to determine whether the complaint can be vindicated.

However these issues are to be resolved, though, one might think that the practical upshot of our discussion is an extreme position. If the objection *is* vindicated – if it true that political equality matters and that field experiments undermine it – then it might seem that *all* experiments in politics are impermissible. Call this rigorist view *prohibitionism*. On the other hand, if the objection is *not* vindicated – if either of its premises is false – then it might seem that all field experiments are permissible (conditioned on meeting the usual requirement of social-scientific experimentation). Thus there would be nothing distinctive about an experiment in a market setting versus an explicitly political setting; experiments are unremarkable forms of free speech, no worse than the bulk buying of ads by a SuperPAC. Call this view *permissivism*.

As far as we know, no one has explicitly defended either of these views. Yet many find themselves pulled toward one or the other.¹¹ We find each of them uncomfortable in its own way. In the rest of this section, we will try to show how the view we've outlined can avoid either extreme. It can acknowledge the epistemic – and perhaps democratic – potential of campaign experiments without denying the potential force of the egalitarian objection.

Earlier we considered a study which asks, 'Do Politicians Racially Discriminate Against Constituents?' (Butler and Broockman, 2011). In this experiment, state legislators were sent emails asking for help registering to vote. These emails were sent either under a name typically perceived as black (DeShawn Jackson), or a name typically

perceived as white (Jake Mueller). In total, the researchers sent 4,859 emails to state legislators, and received 2,747 responses, finding that ‘Democratic and Republican whites [legislators] discriminated against the black alias at nearly identical and significant levels (by 6.8 percentage points and 7.6 percentage points, respectively)’ (Butler and Broockman, 2011: 472). In this case, the researchers influenced the actions of state legislators by causing them to form a false belief – namely, that there was some particular person who had both sent the request and needed help registering to vote. Although the researchers’ emails did not contain any actual false assertions, and so do not qualify as lying, this fact does not seem to eliminate the suspicion that their intervention involved some objectionable form of influence.

Our account offers some reasons for thinking that this experiment (performed upon legislators) might be *disanalogous* to a variation performed upon ordinary citizens. That is so, because the experiment may not have created or aggravated any objectionable inequalities of influence. First, as we noted earlier, political equality need not require strictly equal opportunities for influence between both ordinary citizens and elite officials. Thus, even if this experiment *did* create inequalities of influence, those inequalities need not have been *objectionable*. Second, the experiment likely did *not* create or aggravate inequalities of influence; if anything, it lessened them. The experiment uncovered important information that could be used to hold relatively powerful legislators accountable to ordinary citizens. Thus, it helped to reduce an extant inequality. Furthermore, given the threats to social equality posed by racist attitudes – particularly among elites – the researchers created a way of potentially exposing these attitudes for critical scrutiny. This may have helped advance equality among citizens, without creating any problematic inequality between the researchers and ordinary citizens. The study is plausibly supported by equality-based considerations at both the input and output levels.

Our conjecture here is that sometimes, non-ideal features of political life may open up possibilities for equality-supporting experimental interventions. In the case above, the non-ideal feature in question was the disparity in power held by political elites, made more concerning by the prevalence of racist attitudes. But there may be other non-ideal features of the political world that could be addressed by innovative research designs. Such features might include underrepresentation of disadvantaged groups, which might be a source of concern for those interested in political equality even when it is a product of individual voting choices. Some experimentalists have confronted this issue in illuminating ways. For example, Panagopoulos (2013) designs an experiment to motivate participation by low-propensity voters. Another recent study addresses the profound underrepresentation of women in legislative bodies by collaborating with state party officials to encourage precinct chairs to reach out to potential female candidates (Karpowitz et al., 2017). Treatments may be designed to respect the autonomy of participants while also helping ameliorate political inequalities. At the same time, this could equip researchers with new resources for explaining and defending their practices.

Finally, we address the moral importance of the information yielded by field experiments. Some social scientists have been tempted by the idea that the epistemic gains of research might justify treatment of subjects (see Levitt and List, 2009). There are three ways in which it might.

First, as the Butler and Brookman study shows, the acquired knowledge might help to *eliminate* extent political inequalities. In that case, the epistemic gain from a field experiment does not merely *override* the egalitarian objection to that experiment; rather, it *undercuts* that objection, leaving it without any normative weight.¹²

Second, the acquired knowledge might have intrinsic value. Knowledge of political behavior, just like Einstein's field equations and the axiom of choice, is just a good thing to have – entirely apart from its usefulness. If this kind of value makes certain field experiments permissible, in spite of the egalitarian objection, it would have to do so by *overriding* the egalitarian objection. In other words, the knowledge acquired by the experiment would have to be of greater moral significance than the political inequalities caused by it.

We are skeptical of this possibility. We set aside whether the sort of knowledge acquired by field experiments has the same intrinsic significance as, say, Einstein's field equations. The more pressing problem is that political equality seems to be a rather *stringent* value – that is, in order for actions inconsistent with its demands to be permissible, they must realize some value of great moral significance.¹³ The intrinsic value of the knowledge yielded by field experiments seems not to rise to this level. Consider, by way of analogy, a campaign that forcibly suppresses voters who would have voted down funding for political science departments at public universities. Though this campaign would, as a foreseeable consequence, increase our stock of social scientific truths, it hardly seems morally permissible. Of course, the analogy is imperfect – out and out suppression may undermine political equality to a greater degree than the interventions effected by field experiments. Accordingly, the moral calculus may be different in the two different phenomena. But the analogy does provide some grounds for doubting that field experiments would be permissible, even if the egalitarian objection is sound, simply because they yield intrinsically valuable knowledge.

Third, the acquired knowledge might have non-egalitarian instrumental value – that is, it might be valuable because useful, but not as a means of reducing political inequalities. Perhaps, for example, the knowledge acquired by a field experiment helps us to enact various policies which increase voter turnout, which in turn improves the substantive quality of our laws.

Structurally, this consideration ought to be treated in much the same way as the intrinsic value of the knowledge gained. Similarly, this form of instrumental value would have to override (and not undercut) the force of the egalitarian objection. And, similarly, it would have to do so in spite of the fact that political equality seems to be a rather stringent value. However, one difference might be that improvements to substantive justice frequently will be of greater moral significance than the intrinsic value of knowledge. Thus, it is more likely that experiments which genuinely do yield such practically valuable knowledge would be permissible, even if the egalitarian objection is sound.

Conclusion

In their handbook for non-academics, the pioneers of political experiments insist that 'experimentation is not some special form of sorcery known only to Yale professors. Anyone can do it...' (Green and Gerber, 2008: 11). The objections that we've raised

here fall far short of the charge of sorcery. But if what makes sorcery objectionable, in part, is its ability to manipulate agents, then a subset of experimental manipulations in campaigns may invite the same prohibition as sorcery. At the same time, it's too easy to support the two absolutist views that we began with: all-out prohibition or all-out permission. The simplicity of each of these views, however appealing, isn't enough to motivate them. What they neglect is the special setting of elections – an environment whose value is underwritten by an ideal of democracy. We've suggested that experiments in political settings must reckon with distinctively democratic worries – the value we place in having an equal say, and the way experiments can threaten that complex web of egalitarian relationships. A theory of democratic manipulation, developed further, would help us see what is objectionable about certain experimental interventions, and what makes others perfectly compatible with our having an equal say.

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Notes

1. This is importantly not to say that these questions have avoided ethically motivated critical attention. Our essay will follow a variety of practitioners who have already begun the process of self-conscious reflection on the ethics of experiments in political science. See Gerber (2011), Levitt and List (2009), Teele (2014), Barrett and Carter (2014) and the contributions to Desposato (2016). There has also been extensive work by political philosophers about the values associated with democratic communities, including Beitz (1989), Gutman and Thompson (1996), Christiano (2008), Kolodny (2014a) and Viehoff (2014). Although political experiments implicate democratic values, these two literatures have not yet been brought into conversation with each other.
2. For an example, see Stone (2007). We explore the potential advantages of experiments in section 5. Our thanks to a referee for pressing us to think through both sides of this issue.

3. Indeed, experimentalists have recently shown that their interventions have influenced elections. Cf. Karpowitz et al. (2017).
4. Consider the finding that people who have just found a dime are 22 times more likely to help a person who had dropped some papers on the ground than are those who did not find a dime.
5. This basic idea has several antecedents – both among philosophers, several (Gutman and Thompson, 1996; Rawls [1993] 1996; Scheffler, 2010; Scanlon, 2008) of whom have claimed that interpersonal relations are of paramount moral importance (Gutman and Thompson, 1996; Rawls [1993] 1996; Scheffler, 2010; Scanlon, 2008); and in the *Belmont Report* (1978) which explicitly brings questions of justice to bear on social science research (p. 9).¹ For an application of the *Belmont Report* to political science, see Gubler and Selway (2016).
6. Of course, whether one *is* an elite official is constituted by the political powers that one has. We don't mean to suggest that the concept of an elite official can be specified independently of political powers.
7. Perhaps providing information and pressure change implicit defaults, and so debates here may echo debates about the ethics of 'nudges'. See Hausman and Welch (2010).
8. Our thanks to a referee for pressing the objections raised in this paragraph.
9. Kolodny (2014: 333–334) uses 'judgment-dependence' as a way of assessing the autonomy of a voter's influence. If the voter responds to information from others, but does so in a way that depends on their own judgment, it is compatible with their autonomous influence.
10. More generally, our account does not imply that interventions become objectionable simply because information is gained from them, for it does not hold that the *information gain* is the putative wrong-making feature of experiments.
11. Some practitioners, however, tend toward one or the other. Teele (2014) tends toward prohibitionism; Gerber (2011) and Levitt and List (2009) tend toward permissivism.
12. An undercutting defeater is some consideration in the presence of which what would have been a reason is no longer a reason (Schroeder, 2011: 334).
13. For this notion of stringency, see, e.g. Tadros, 2016: 102.

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