

Referee Report:

Title of the paper

Author's name*

Date of report

1 Overview

This should be a very short paragraph to give the editor an overview of the paper and (if you are a junior reviewer) to demonstrate that you have understood it correctly.

- What does the paper try to do?
- How does it try to do so?
- Does it accomplish what it set out to do?
- What are its key findings?

2 Contribution

This should also be no more than a paragraph. The overarching question here is whether the paper is novel in any way to merit publication in this journal.

- Is this paper the first to address an important research question?
- If not, what is the paper's main contribution to its relevant literature?
- How does this paper compare with previous similar efforts?
- Is it a good fit for the journal to which it was submitted?

*Author's affiliation and e-mail.

3 Theory

This section seems perhaps best-suited for papers grounded in economics or other disciplines such as sociology or political science. However, most papers have at least a theory of action about the intervention that they are assessing.

- Does the paper have an implicit/explicit theoretical model?
- If so, does the model hold up upon closer scrutiny?
- Is there a better alternative theory that the authors have ignored?

4 Identification Strategy

Spend the bulk of your report in this section, unless your paper is an RCT, in which case the identification strategy is a non-issue (except for the standard concerns about randomization protocol, attrition, contamination, etc.)

- Does the paper have a clear identification strategy?
- If not, how could omitted variable bias affect its results?
- What is the paper's identification strategy?
- Have others attempted it before? (to answer this or other questions)
- Does the identification strategy improve upon previous efforts?

5 Data

This should be no more than a paragraph unless the data are one of the main reasons why this paper warrants publication. Devote the most attention to whether the data are well-suited to address the research questions—and if so, why.

- What data do the authors use to answer their research question?
- Are these data particularly well-suited to answer the research questions?
- If so, what features of the data are unique?
- If not, how are dataset used by previous studies more unique?

- Are the balancing checks compelling?
- Does the paper adequately deal with attrition from the sample?

6 Empirical Analysis

This is the other section where you should spend most of your time. Make sure that you understand what is the effect that is being identified and whether it matches what the authors believe to be the substantive meaning of the coefficient(s) of interest.

- Is the empirical model that the authors employ correctly specified?
- Is there anything else they could do to improve upon their empirical strategy?
- Is the interpretation of the coefficient(s) of interest clear and correct?
- Do the authors show all the main specifications of their main model(s)?
- Are there alternative specifications that they authors could employ?
- Do the effect sizes make sense compared to others of similar interventions?

7 Mechanisms

Most causal papers are not well-suited to tease out the mechanisms through which the effect that they are identifying operates. However, they are increasingly using observational analysis to tell a “story” about what might explain their results. This (brief) section should be devoted to the extent to which you find that story credible.

- Does the paper include any efforts to try to identify potential mechanisms?
- Could the authors make better use of their data to do so?
- Are the mechanisms explored the “right” ones? Would you consider others?
- How compelling is the story that the authors are trying to tell?
- Are there plausible alternative stories that emerge from their analyses?

8 Threats to Validity

- What are the most important assumptions embedded in the empirical strategy?
- What are specific ways in which these assumptions could be violated?
- Does the paper include a set of exhaustive robustness checks?
- Do the robustness checks adequately address these potential violations?

9 Comments/Questions

- Include an itemized list of minor comments/questions. For example:
 - Have the authors omitted key works in the literature review section?
 - Are the tables/graphs self-contained and easy to follow?
 - Would the reader be better served by some additional tables/graphs?
 - Is the paper well-written and easy to follow?
 - Are the (policy) implications of the paper clearly spelled out?