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Guideline for Field Experiments and Elections

This guideline is meant to provide a framework of considerations for researchers who wish to do field experiments on elections or similar processes, as well as for IRB members who review and approve these type of studies.

One of the main elements for ethical conduct of research is informed consent. A general force of this principle is that individuals should be in a position to make a free and informed choice as to whether or not to participate in a research study. The Common Rule (the federal regulations that govern human subjects research) asks researchers to obtain free and informed consent from prospective subjects, unless a waiver is granted by an IRB. For its part, the IRB needs to be able to do a risk-benefit analysis and judge the societal benefit of the proposed research compared to the risks to subjects. The requirement for informed consent may be waived or altered if the IRB determines that the study presents minimal risk to subjects, will not adversely affect subject rights and welfare, cannot practically be carried out without a waiver, and when appropriate subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation.

In field experiments done on the public process, such as voting, the researchers must be able to provide a strong rationale for using methodologies that may affect the outcome of a vote. A power analysis with minimal number of subjects required for study aims should be considered. Researchers also have an ethical obligation to provide voters with factual and informative messages during elections.

The researchers need to assure themselves that they are not breaking any laws and election rules. Researchers are strongly recommend to create partnerships with community organizations or political actors that work on elections issues. Additionally, engaging prospective subjects to actively participate in designing the research may make the research more relevant and increase its potential benefits.

If deception is planned, it needs to be justified in terms of the study design. When required by the IRB, the debriefing process should explain, in plain language, which elements of the study were deceptive, or used partial disclosure, and why.

Subjects should be able to contact their IRB if they have concerns after they have been debriefed or notified by the researchers. During the debriefing, researchers should consider offering participants the option to withdraw their data.

Researchers must submit an application for review by an IRB and obtain approval before commencing their experiments. An IRB review is not designed to provide assurance that a proposed study is not illegal or uncontroversial; the IRB protects human subjects in research by applying the regulatory criteria for IRB approval. Indeed, different IRBs may disagree on whether the proposed activity qualifies for waiver or alteration of informed consent or not.