

IMPROVING GOVERNANCE THROUGH EXPERIMENTS

(1031-3989)

(1031-0989)

PABLO BALÁN

Tel Aviv University

Spring 2026

Class Hours: Wednesday 10:00 – 14:00

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Classroom: 205

Note: the percentages below and number of assignments are tentative. The final number of assignments and their weight in the final weight will depend on the total number of students enrolled.

Short Video Introduction: [Here's a short video introduction to the class.](#)

Course Overview: The 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to [Abhijit Banerjee](#), [Esther Duflo](#), and [Michael Kremer](#) “for their experimental approach to alleviating global poverty.” Did you know that experiments can be used to study politics and society and improve the lives of the most disadvantaged people in the world? Experiments are not just something that chemists, physicists, or engineers do in their laboratories. In recent decades, social science has experienced a true revolution by adopting the experimental approach. Currently, experimental research is an exciting new part of the toolkit of economists and political scientists studying development. This course is an introduction to experimental methods to address governance problems in developing countries. We will read recent research seeking to provide rigorous answers to some of the following questions: Can democratic institutions be exported? Can information improve democracy and accountability? What kind of incentives can improve bureaucracy and civil service? Can we increase state capacity by collaborating with local leaders? What kind of interventions can reduce prejudice and hatred among groups? Given Israel’s relationship with several countries in the Global South and its unique position as a supplier of environmental technologies, the course should be relevant for students seeking to work in NGOs or private sector ventures operating in such countries.

Goals: This course provides an introduction to experimental research on developing countries. The course has two goals:

- Learning about governance problems in developing countries and arguments in political economy
- Acquiring methodological tools to understand and criticize experimental research (and quantitative social science more generally)

Is this course right for me?: The course is open to BA students in any discipline. Economics, PAKAM, and Lautman Program students are encouraged to take the course. MA students in the Sustainable Development program are encouraged to take the course. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact me: pbalan@tauex.tau.ac.il

Prerequisites: There are no prerequisites, but familiarity with basic statistics is recommended. If you have any questions, please talk to me. A good introduction to experiments is Glennerster and Takavarasha (2013) listed below and on Moodle.

Etiquette: You are not alone in the class, so please be considerate of your fellow students: arrive on time, take notes of what has been discussed, and do not leave early unless absolutely necessary. **Mobile phones are not allowed during lectures.** Barring necessity or a medical condition, I strongly encourage you not to use laptops, phones, or tablets.

Reading and Participation: We will devote a significant fraction of the class to discussion. **I expect everyone to participate, so it is crucial that you do the readings every week and come prepared to discuss them.**

Buckle up. I want to make sure that everyone participates and feels comfortable doing so. As it is the case in most social science classes, this course covers potentially controversial topics, such as conflict, repression, and much more. Students should be prepared to engage scientifically with such topics. If you ever feel uncomfortable, you are invited to discuss any concerns with me.

Contact. If you have questions or concerns you should come to office hours. If you can't make it to office hours, you can contact me by email. I check my inbox twice a day, so please don't desperate if I don't answer immediately! I will do my best to respond within 24 hours.

Evaluation and Grading. Because of AI, in-class assignments and participation will carry greater

weight in this seminar, while the final paper will carry less weight than in past iterations. Students will be required to present papers from the syllabus and to present the progress and students taking the class as a seminar will be required to present advances of their final paper in class and/or during office hours. **The goal is to develop presentation, analytical, and argumentative skills that cannot be substituted by AI tools.** You are expected to participate in class, and **you will deliver oral presentations during the semester.**

Note: the percentages below and number of assignments are tentative. The final number of assignments and their weight in the final weight will depend on the total number of students enrolled.

Seminar (3989)	Elective Course (0989)
Attendance and Participation: 15%	Attendance and Participation (including short in-class assignments): 20%
Presentation of syllabus paper(s): 15%	
Presentation and oral defense of final paper plan: 20%	
Seminar paper: 50%	Final exam (in person): 80%

AI Policy.

1. I strongly encourage you to use AI (ChatGPT, NotebookLM, Claude, Perplexity, or other). It can provide relatively accurate summaries of many things we learn. Use it to ask general questions, provide examples and counterexamples, compare and contrast arguments, etc. AI is an invaluable resource. The best way to think about AI is as a **learning partner**, a **personalized tutor that helps you augment your intelligence**—not as a substitute for doing work. In class, I will showcase multiple uses of AI (for example, to help you understand scientific articles) and how to integrate AI into your workflow to become a more effective student.
2. Writing is a practice of taking responsibility for our thoughts and interpretations and a practice of thinking. **Writing is thinking.** Using AI is not a substitute for doing the readings or writing original work. In written assignments, you will need to include an AI use statement declaring exactly how AI was used as well as the full transcript of your interactions with the AI. I will specify allowed and prohibited uses of AI for the final exam when we discuss the final exam guidelines. Any unacknowledged use of AI to generate writing included in the exam is plagiarism, just like unacknowledged inclusion of material from any other source.

Academic Integrity. Neither cheating nor plagiarism are tolerated by Tel Aviv University. Tel Aviv University defines plagiarism as “Submitting material that in part or whole is not entirely your work without attributing those same portions to their correct source.” Any assignment that plagiarizes will receive a zero and be reported to the university authorities. Please find more information on plagiarism under the following link, including explanations in Hebrew. <https://soclib.tau.ac.il/plagiarism>

Reading and Writing Social Science in English. The following resources may be useful for reading and writing social science.

- Farrell, Henry. [Good Writing in Political Science](#)
- Blattman, Chris. [How to Write an Essay](#)

In addition, TAU has excellent resources to help you succeed in English speaking classes. For more information, contact the [Center for Language Excellence](#). For example:

- [Listening to Lectures in English](#)
- [TAU app to learn high-frequency academic words](#)

Recommended materials. While not required, I recommend you subscribe to *The Economist* and/or *The Financial Times* to be informed about current events. The following books are recommended, and sometimes we will read materials from them:

Development and Political Economy

- Koyama, M., and Rubin, J. (2022). *How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Galor, Oded (2022). *The Journey of Humanity: The Origins of Wealth and Inequality*. Random House.
- Banerjee, A., and E. Duflo (2011). *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*. Public Affairs.

Experiments, causal inference, and research design

- Angrist, J.D., and J.S. Pischke. 2014. *Mastering’Metrics: The Path from Cause to Effect*. Princeton University Press.

- Glennerster, R., and K. Takavarasha. 2013. *Running Randomized Evaluations: A Practical Guide*. Princeton University Press.
- Dunning, T. 2012. *Natural Experiments in the Social Sciences: A Design-Based Approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gerber, A., and D. Green. 2012. *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation*. WW Norton.
- Angrist, J.D., and J.S Pischke. 2008. *Mostly Harmless Econometrics: An Empiricist's Companion*. Princeton University Press.
- Morgan, S., and C. Winship. 2007. *Counterfactuals and Causal Inference: Methods and Principles for Social Research*. Cambridge University Press.

Week 1: Why Nations Develop or Fail? Introduction to Experiments (April 15) [PLEASE DO THE READINGS AND WATCH VIDEOS BEFORE CLASS]

(1) Video: [Ten Global Trends Every Smart Person Should Know](#)

(2) Video: [TED Talk by James Robinson \(one of the three winners of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economics\)](#)

(3) Koyama, M., and Rubin, J. (2022). *How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth*. Chapter 1.

(4) Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. (2012). *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. Chapter 2, “Theories that don’t work”.

(5) Ater, Itai, and Tzachi Raz (2023). [Checks and Balances, Public Corruption, and Economic Development](#)

To learn more (optional):

- Video: [Hans Rosling, The best stats you’ve ever seen](#)
- Fukuyama, Francis (2014). *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*. Chapter 1, “What is Political Development?” and Chapter 2, “The Dimensions of Development”.

- Martin, Courtney (2016). The Reductive Seduction of Other People's Problems
<https://brighththemag.com/the-reductive-seduction-of-other-people-s-problems-3c07b307732d>
- Esther Duflo's TED Talk

Week 2: The Toolkit: Experiments and Causal Inference (April 29)

- (1) Angrist, J. and J.S. Pischke (2014). Mastering Metrics: The Path from Cause to Effect. Chapters 1 and 2.
- (2) Humphreys, Macartan. 10 Things to Know about Causal Inference. [\[Link\]](#)
- (3) Long, Abby. 10 Things to Know About Reading a Regression Table. [\[Link\]](#)
- (4) Duflo, E. (2017). The economist as plumber. *American Economic Review*, 107(5), 1-26.

To learn more (optional):

- GT, Chapter 2, "Why Randomize"?
- Josh Angrist Video: [Ceteris Paribus](#)
- Josh Angrist Video: [Selection Bias](#)
- Josh Angrist Video: [Randomized Controlled Trials](#)
- Josh Angrist Video: [Reading Regression Tables](#)
- Humphreys, Macartan and Jeremy Weinstein (2009). Field Experiments and the Political Economy of Development. *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, 367–378.
- Esther Duflo's TED Talk
- Joshua Angrist Nobel Prize Lecture: [Empirical Strategies in Economics: Illuminating the Path from Cause to Effect](#)

Week 3: Markets and Property Rights (May 6)

- (1) Bhandari, A. (2022). Political Determinants of Economic Exchange: Evidence from a Business Experiment in Senegal. *American Journal of Political Science*, 66(4), 835-852.

(2) Margalit, Yotam, and Moses Shayo (2019). How Markets Shape Social Values and Political Preferences: A Field Experiment. *American Journal of Political Science* 65(2): 473-492

(3) Glennerster, R., and K. Takavarasha (2013), Chapter 4, “Randomizing”

To learn more (optional):

- Jha, S., and M. Shayo. (2019). Valuing Peace: The Effects of Financial Market Exposure on Votes and Political Attitudes. *Econometrica* 87(5): 1561-1588. item Friedman, Benjamin (2006). The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth. *Society* Jan/Feb 2006.
- Di Tella, R. and R. MacCulloch (2009). Why Doesn't Capitalism Flow to Poor Countries? Brookings Papers on Economic Activity.
- Henrich, J., et al. (2001). In Search of Homo Economicus: Behavioral Experiments in 15 Small-Scale Societies. *American Economic Review* 91(2): 73-78.
- [Economic Freedom Map, Fraser Institute](#)

Week 4: Institutions and Democracy (May 13)

(1) Beath, Andrew, Fotini Christia and Ruben Enikolopov (2017). Direct Democracy and Resource Allocation: Experimental Evidence from Afghanistan. *Journal of Development Economics*, 124: 199–213.

(2) Baldwin, K., Muyengwa, S., & Mvukiyehe, E. (2022). Accountability and Inclusion in Customary Institutions: Evidence from a Village-Level Experiment in Zimbabwe. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 17(2), 283-315.

(3) Glennerster, R., and K. Takavarasha., Chapter 4, “Randomizing”

To learn more (optional):

- Olken, B. A. (2010). Direct democracy and local public goods: Evidence from a field experiment in Indonesia. *American Political Science Review*, 104(2), 243-267.
- Humphreys, Macartan, Raul Sanchez de la Sierra, and Peter Van der Windt. (2019). Exporting democratic practices: Evidence from a village governance intervention in Eastern Congo. *Journal of Development Economics*, 140: 279-301.

- North, D. and B. Weingast (1989). Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth Century England. *The Journal of Economic History* 49(4): 803–832.
- Acemoglu, Daron, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson (2005). Institutions as a Fundamental Cause of Long-run Growth. *Handbook of Economic Growth* 1: 385–472.
- Acemoglu, Daron, Simon Johnson, and James A. Robinson (2001). The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation. *American Economic Review*, 91(5): 1369-1401.

Week 5: Corruption (May 20)

(1) Bertrand, Marianne, Simeon Djankov, Rema Hanna and Sendhil Mullainathan (2007). Obtaining a Driver’s License in India: An Experimental Approach to Studying Corruption. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122(4): 1639-1676.

(2) Olken, B (2007). Monitoring Corruption: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Indonesia. *Journal of Political Economy* 115(2): 200-249.

To learn more (optional):

- Raul Sanchez de la Sierra, Kristof Titeca, Haoyang (Stan) Xie, Albert Jolino Malukisa, Aimable Amani Lameke (2022). The Real State: Inside The Congo’s Traffic Police Agency. Working Paper.
- Fisman, Raymond, and Edward Miguel (2007). Corruption, Norms, and Legal Enforcement: Evidence from Diplomatic Parking Tickets. *Journal of Political Economy* 115(6): 1020–1048.
- Shleifer, A., and R. Vishny (1993). Corruption. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 108(3): 599–617.
- Di Tella, Rafael and Ernesto Schargrodsky. 2003. The Role of Wages and Auditing During a Crackdown on Corruption in the City of Buenos Aires. *Journal of Law and Economics*, 46, 269-292

Week 6: Taxation (May 27)

(1) Weigel, J. L. (2020). The Participation Dividend of Taxation: How Citizens in Congo Engage More with the state When it Tries to Tax Them. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 135(4): 1849–1903.

(2) Balán, P., A. Bergeron, G. Tourek, and J. Weigel (2022). Local Elites as State Capacity: How City Chiefs Use Local Information to Increase Tax Compliance in the DR Congo. *American Economic Review*, forthcoming.

To learn more (optional):

- Bates, R. H., and D.H. Lien (1985). A Note on Taxation, Development, and Representative Government. *Politics & Society* 14(1): 53-70.
- Di Tella, R., Dubra, J., & Lagomarsino, A. (2021). Meet the Oligarchs: Business Legitimacy and Taxation at the Top. *The Journal of Law and Economics*, 64(4), 651-674.

Week 7: Selecting and Monitoring Bureaucrats (June 3)

(1) Dal Bó, E., Finan, F., and Rossi, M. A. (2013). Strengthening State Capabilities: The Role of Financial Incentives in the Call to Public Service. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 128(3): 1169–1218.

(2) Raffler, Pia (2022). Does Political Oversight of the Bureaucracy Increase Accountability? Field Experimental Evidence from an Electoral Autocracy. *American Political Science Review*.

To learn more (optional):

- Banerjee, Abhijit, Esther Duflo, and Rachel Glennerster (2008). Putting a Band-Aid on a Corpse: Incentives for Nurses in the Indian Public Health Care System, *Journal of European Economic Association*, 6(2-3), 487–500.
- Duflo, Esther, Rema Hanna, and Stephen Ryan (2012). Incentives Work: Getting Teachers to Come to School. *American Economic Review*, 102(4): 1241-1278.
- Pepinsky, Thomas B., Jan H. Pierskalla, & Audrey Sacks (2017). Bureaucracy and Service Delivery. *Annual Review of Political Science* 20: 249-268.
- Besley, T. J., Burgess, R., Khan, A., and Xu, G. (2021). Bureaucracy and Development. NBER Working Paper

- Hanna, Rema and Shing-Yi Wang. 2017. Dishonesty and Selection into Public Service. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 9(3):262-290.

Week 8: Holding Politicians Accountable (June 10)

(1) Grossman, Guy, Kristen Michelitch (2017). Information Dissemination, Competitive Pressure, and Politician Performance between Elections: A Field Experiment in Uganda. *American Political Science Review*

(2) Garbiras-Diaz, Natalia, and Mateo Montenegro. (2022). All Eyes on Them: A Field Experiment on Citizen Oversight and Electoral Integrity. *American Economic Review* 112(8): 2631–68.

To learn more (optional):

- Ferraz, Claudio and Finan, Frederico. 2008. Exposing Corrupt Politicians: The Effect of Brazil's Publicly Released Audits on Electoral Outcomes. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 23(2): 703-745.
- Bidwell, Kelly, Katherine Casey and Rachel Glennerster. 2019. Debates: Voting and Expenditure Responses to Political Communication. *Journal of Political Economy*.
- Bowles, Jeremy and Horacio Larreguy (2018). Who Debates, Wins? At-Scale Experimental Evidence on Debate Participation in a Liberian Election. Working Paper

Week 9: Clientelism and Vote-Buying (June 17)

(1) Rizzo, T. (2023). Breaking the Clientelistic Feedback Loop: A Field Experiment in the Yucatan Peninsula. Working Paper.

(2) Wantchekon, L. (2003). Clientelism and voting behavior: Evidence from a field experiment in Benin. *World Politics*, 55(3): 399-422.

To learn more (optional):

- Bobonis, Gustavo, Paul Gertler, Marco Gonzalez-Navarro and Simeon Nichter. 2019. Vulnerability and Clientelism.

- Vicente, Pedro (2014). Is Vote Buying Effective? Evidence from a Field Experiment in West Africa, *Economic Journal*, 124 (574): 356–387.
 - Finan, Frederico and Laura Schechter (2012). Vote-buying and Reciprocity. *Econometrica*, 80(2): 863-882.
 - Hicken, Leider, Ravanilla, and Yang (2018). Temptation in Vote-Selling: Evidence from a Field Experiment in the Philippines. *Journal of Development Economics*.
- Fujiwara, Thomas and Leonard Wantchekon (2013). Can Informed Public Deliberation Overcome Clientelism? Experimental Evidence from Benin. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 5(4):241–255.

Week 10: Conflict and Intergroup Contact (June 24)

- (1) Habyarimana, James, Macartan Humphreys, Daniel N. Posner and Jeremy M. Weinstein (2007). Why Does Ethnic Diversity Undermine Public Goods Provision? *American Political Science Review*, 101 (4): 709-725.
- (2) Mousa, S. (2020). Building social cohesion between Christians and Muslims through soccer in post-ISIS Iraq. *Science*, 369(6505), 866-870. [Video Lecture](#)
- (3) Lowe, M. (2021). Types of contact: A field experiment on collaborative and adversarial caste integration. *American Economic Review*, 111(6), 1807-44.

To learn more (optional):

- Alrababah, A, Marble, W, Mousa, A, Siegel, A (2021). Can exposure to celebrities reduce prejudice? The effect of Mohamed Salah on Islamophobic behaviors and attitudes. *American Political Science Review*.
- Enos, R. (2014). Causal Effect of Intergroup Contact on Exclusionary Attitudes. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(10), 3699-3704.
- Korovkin, Vasily and Alexey Makarin. 2019. Conflict and Inter Group Trade: Evidence from the 2014 Russia Ukraine Crisis. Working paper
- Rao, G. (2019). Familiarity does not breed contempt: Generosity, discrimination, and diversity in Delhi schools. *American Economic Review*, 109(3), 774-809.

- Gilligan, Michael, Benjamin Pasquale, and Cyrus Samii. 2014. Civil War and Social Cohesion: Lab-in-the-Field Evidence from Nepal. *American Political Science Review*.
- Blattman, Christopher. 2009. From Violence to Voting: War and Political Participation in Uganda. *American Political Science Review* 103(2): 231-247.
- Cilliers, Jacobus, Oeindrila Dube and Bilal Siddigi. 2016. Can the Wounds of War be Healed. Experimental Evidence on Reconciliation in Sierra Leone. *Science* 352(6287), 787-794.

Week 11: Repression and Protest (July 1)

(1) King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2014). Reverse-engineering censorship in China: Randomized experimentation and participant observation. *Science*, 345(6199), 1251722.

(2) Cantoni, D., Yang, D. Y., Yuchtman, N., and Zhang, Y. J. (2019). Protests as strategic games: experimental evidence from Hong Kong's antiauthoritarian movement. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 134(2), 1021-1077.

To learn more (optional):

- Xu, X. (2021). To repress or to co-opt? Authoritarian control in the age of digital surveillance. *American Journal of Political Science*, 65(2), 309-325.
- King, G., Pan, J., and Roberts, M. E. (2013). How Censorship in China allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression. *American Political Science Review*, 107(2), 326-343.
- Stukal, D., Sanovich, S., Bonneau, R., and Tucker, J. (2022). Why Botter: How Pro-Government Bots Fight Opposition in Russia. *American Political Science Review*, 116(3), 843-857.
- Boxell, Levi, and Zachary Steinert-Threlkeld (2002). Taxing Dissent: The Impact of a Social Media Tax in Uganda. *World Development* 158.

Week 12: The Ethics of Experiments / Review (July 8)

- Coville, Galiani, and Gertler (2020). [A Comment on the Ethical Issues Twitter Discussion in “Enforcing Payment for Water and Sanitation Services in Nairobi’s Slums”](#)
- How Poor Kenyans Became Economists’ Guinea Pigs. *The Economist*, March 1 2024.
- [When economists shut off your water.](#) *Africa is a Country*.