

Attitudinal change in troubled times: A triangulation strategy (TRIANGULATE)

Aina Gallego
Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals
agallego@ibei.org

Research question and main aims

This project has studied how the contexts where people live influence their political attitudes. Individuals are greatly influenced by information they encounter in the news, in their neighborhood and their social networks as well as the culture, economic environment and institutional setting in which they live. For instance, income inequality may undermine trust in institutions, but this effect may be more detrimental to the political attitudes of the poor than of the rich. Understanding how contexts shape political attitudes and behavior and for whom is an important goal because it can help explain why some nations have higher stocks of valuable attitudes than others. It can also inform the design of economic policies and electoral institutions by providing insights into the likely micro-level effects of macro-level reforms.

In spite of the importance of this topic, research faces severe difficulties at identifying causal effects of contexts on individual behavior pervade empirical research. Typically, studies study a small number of contexts, for instance by comparing a small number of countries. However, countries differ in many respects and it is not possible to correctly identify the effects of contextual variables based on a small number of cases when the number of omitted variables may be large.

This project attempts to address this problem by combining observational and experimental data about the effects of contexts on political behavior. Within this broader general aim, it has focused on several more specific research questions that each aim to explore new ways of combining experiments that manipulate features of the context with observational data.

Specifically, the project has focused on five research questions that ask about the heterogeneous consequences of contexts for individual political behavior. In all cases, some economic or political contextual characteristics shape the political attitudes of citizens about important policy questions, and these reactions are more intense for some citizens than others. Through the use of novel survey experiments, it has been possible to obtain findings on the effects of context:

The effects of economic contexts

1. Does income inequality reduce social and political trust? Among whom is this effect more pronounced? This project has found that perceptions of increased income inequality undermines generalized trust and that this erosion is particularly

pronounced among poor citizens. This process may affect the capacity of the poor to mobilize politically against rising income inequality.

2. Does an economic crisis increase support for labor market reforms? Which characteristics of policies mobilize more political support? Through survey experiments, it has been possible to establish that a context of widespread economic crisis leads to broader support for generous unemployment benefits. However, citizens do not

The effects of political contexts

1. Do features of corruption scandals influence the extent of electoral punishment? Which citizens are more likely to vote for corrupt incumbents? In a series of survey experiments, the project has found that citizens are more likely to reelect incumbents who are suspected of corruption when these incumbents argue that the accusations are fabricated by political rivals and when they emphasize how they have performed on other dimensions. Less educated citizens are more sensitive to such excuses.
2. Does a context of political conflict polarize national identities? Are some citizens sheltered from the polarizing dynamics of conflict? Political conflict about secession has increased in Catalonia in the last years. We find that this change in the political context has led to the polarization of national identities, but only among people with strong pre-defined identities. For a large share of citizens, who identify with both the region and the nation, conflict leads to demobilization and a reduction of interest in politics.
3. Does intense political debate about moral issues shape vote choice? Do all citizens care equally about moral issues? Through a series of survey experiments in the US, we find that as the salience of moral issues such as abortion or the rights of homosexuals increase, citizens with strong liberal or conservative views shift their vote to a similar extent. The rise of moral issues makes many citizens choose politicians who are at odds with their views on economic issues, hence leading to “distraction” from economic concerns.

Dissemination and career consolidation

The results of the project have been disseminated in more than 20 scientific presentations and seminars, and have been published or are forthcoming in six journal articles in highly ranked international journals. Moreover, through four courses and participation in a network to promote the use of survey experiments in Spain, the project has achieved one of its main goals, the advance of experimental techniques in political science research.

Aina Gallego started the project while she had a post-doc position at the Spanish Research Center for Scientific Research. She has now obtained a tenure-track position at another institution, the Institut de Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals, through the prestigious and very competitive Ramon y Cajal fellowship system. Hence, there has been significant advancement toward the permanent scientific integration of the fellow.

Website

<http://www.ainagallego.org/>