

What Scholars and Citizens Think of Experimental Ethics: Results of a Survey Experiment

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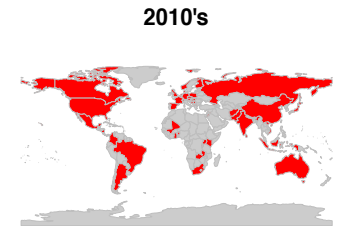
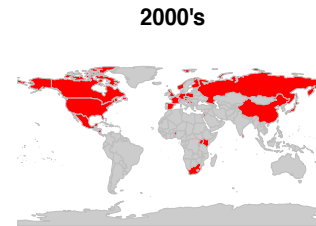
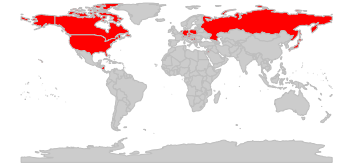
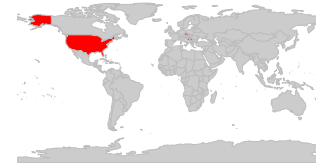
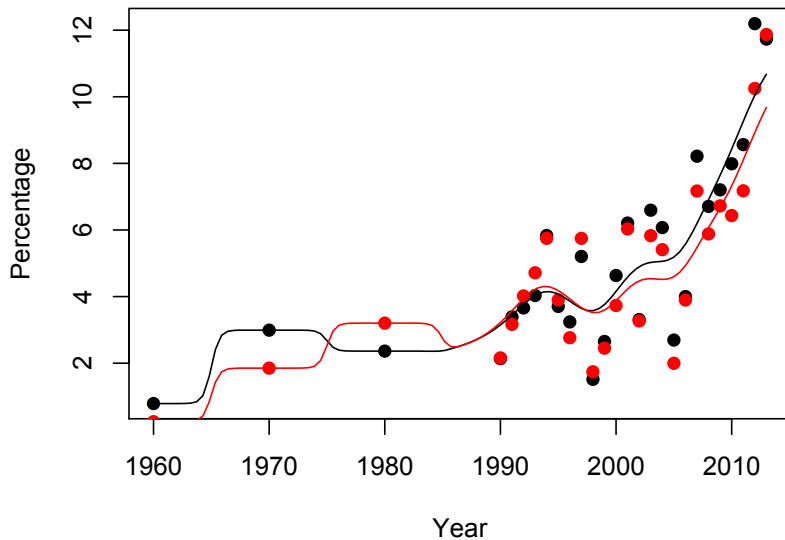


Plan for Today

- The rise of experiments has been accompanied by new ethical controversies.
- Although the ethical issues are subject to endless and circular debates, we can make progress using “empirical ethics” – asking our subjects what they think about our research.
- I’ll share results from a survey on research ethics administered to political scientists and to their subjects, with some interesting results.

An Experimental Revolution

Experiments Published in All Sampled Journals



Decade	Laboratory	Survey	Field
1980*	6.0	0.0	0.0
1990s	6.0	0.0	0.0
2000s	5.8	2.9	0.2
2010+	10.5	19.25	5.5

New Problems

- Field Experiments: These hold great promise for scientific progress, but mean we have large numbers of uninformed, unconsenting subjects and bystanders.
- Local Review: Scholars are conducting international experiments, often violating host countries' laws and norms on research involving human subjects.
- There are no clear answers as to whether these are ethical or not.

Informational Field Experiments

- Subjects are, unbeknownst to them, randomly assigned to informational treatments.
- Researchers then provide information: political ads, GOTV messages, newspapers, or something else to appropriate treatment groups.
- After some time, outcomes are measured through observed behavior (turnout, neighborhood electoral returns, surveys, etc)
- These types of designs have been widely applied all over the world, and are usually undetected by subjects.
- They are (mostly) legal, minimal risk, normatively defensible, and even so, can make lots of people angry.

What are subjects' and scholars' complaints?

- These experiments can affect election outcomes.
- They can be deceptive – fake mailers/groups and incomplete information
- Their normative value is debatable.
- They are sometimes very large – some scholars are outspending the real candidates in elections!
- Experiments may be run by outsiders who are not part of the political unit being studied.

A necessary condition for any of these to matter is a lack of informed consent. If subjects are fully informed and consenting, then size, impact, and other things matter little.

Informed Consent – What's The Answer?

- There's a 40+ year debate on informed consent that is going nowhere.
- An alternative: ask our subjects and principals what they think. This is a form of “empirical ethics”.



- This approach doesn't solve every problem – “If all your friends jumped off a bridge then would you too?”
- But if our subject-principals don't like what we are doing to them without informed consent – then we probably shouldn't be doing it to them.

Two Surveys

	Academics	Citizens
Sample	~10,000 emails sent to the APSA mailing list; 1700 responses	3,000 panelists from SSI, a “representative” sample of the US
Vignettes	1. Informational Field Experiment	
	2. Interactive Field Experiment	
	3A. Local Review for International Experiments	3B. Local Review for International Experiments
	4. Deception in Lab Experiments	

Informational Field Experiment

Treatments:

- Deception: Subjects are volunteers or subjects are unaware of the experiment
- Message: a reminder to Floss, to Vote, or that a candidate for office has a DUI conviction
- Size: 1,000 or 100,000 subjects
- Source of Mailer: anonymous or fake group
- Impact: could the experiment affect an election outcome?

Informational Field Experiment

Sample Script

Professor J wants to see whether a flyer has an effect on whether people vote.

During an election, Professor J chooses 1,000 people from public voter registration records to be in the study. Professor J randomly divides the list of people into two groups, and sends a flyer to one of the groups and nothing to the other group. The flyer is a reminder to vote.

The flyer is sent anonymously with no information about the study or the professor.

After the election, Professor J contacts all the people in the study and asks them whether or not they voted. The Professor will then see if people who received the flyer are more likely to report voting than people who did not receive the flyer.

The election is expected to be close and the flyer might affect who wins.

The flyer has no return address and subjects are never told that they are in a research study.

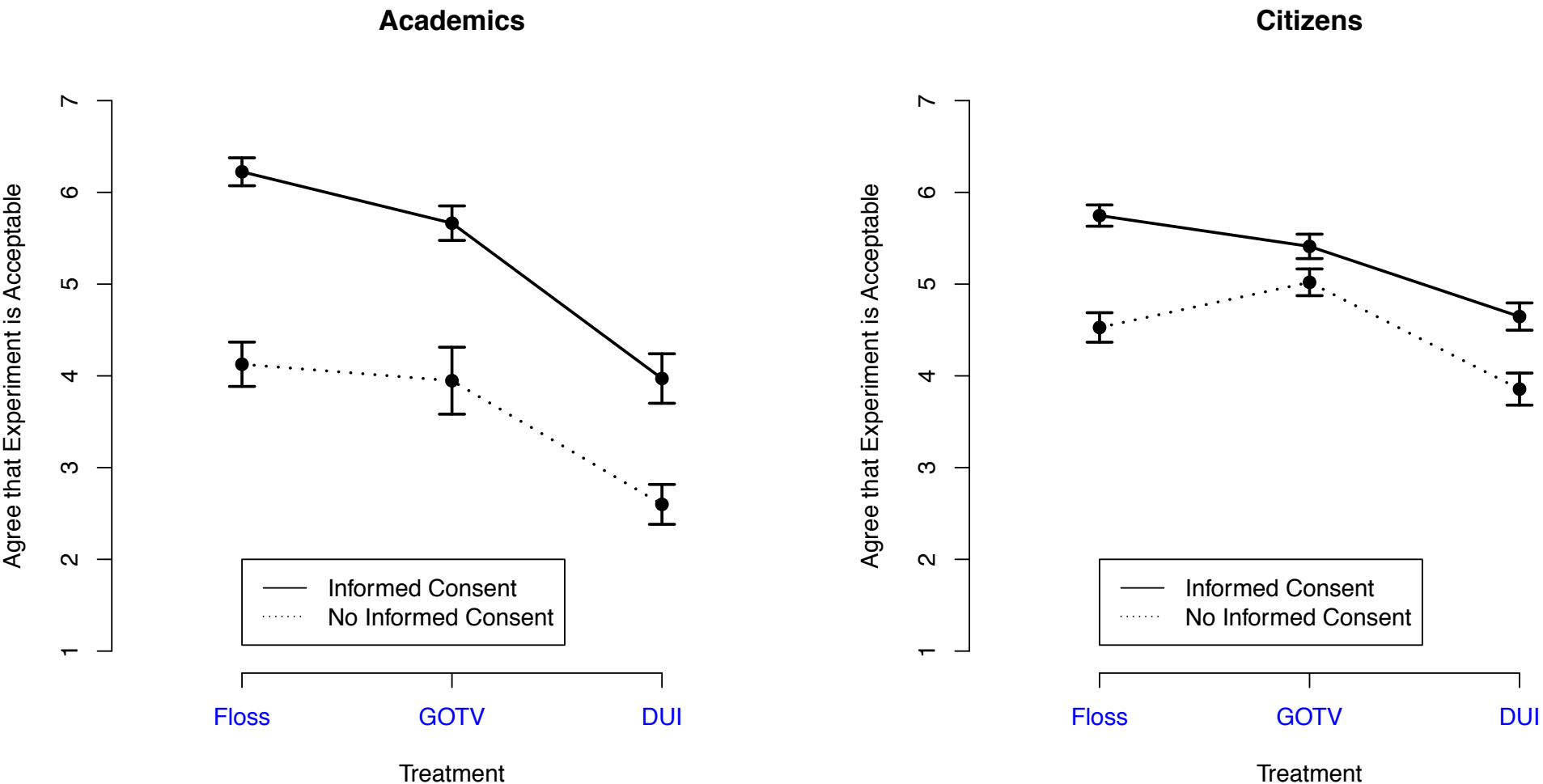
The study was approved by all appropriate committees at the researcher's university, including the institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee.

Dependent Variables

1. To what extent do you agree that it is acceptable to conduct this study? [Strongly Disagree = 1; Strongly Agree = 7]
2. Suppose you learned that a study like the one described above had been conducted in your community, and that you were one of the subjects. Which of the following best describes how you would feel about being included in the study? [I would be glad I was in the study / I would rather not have been in the study / I would not care either way]

Informational Field Experiment

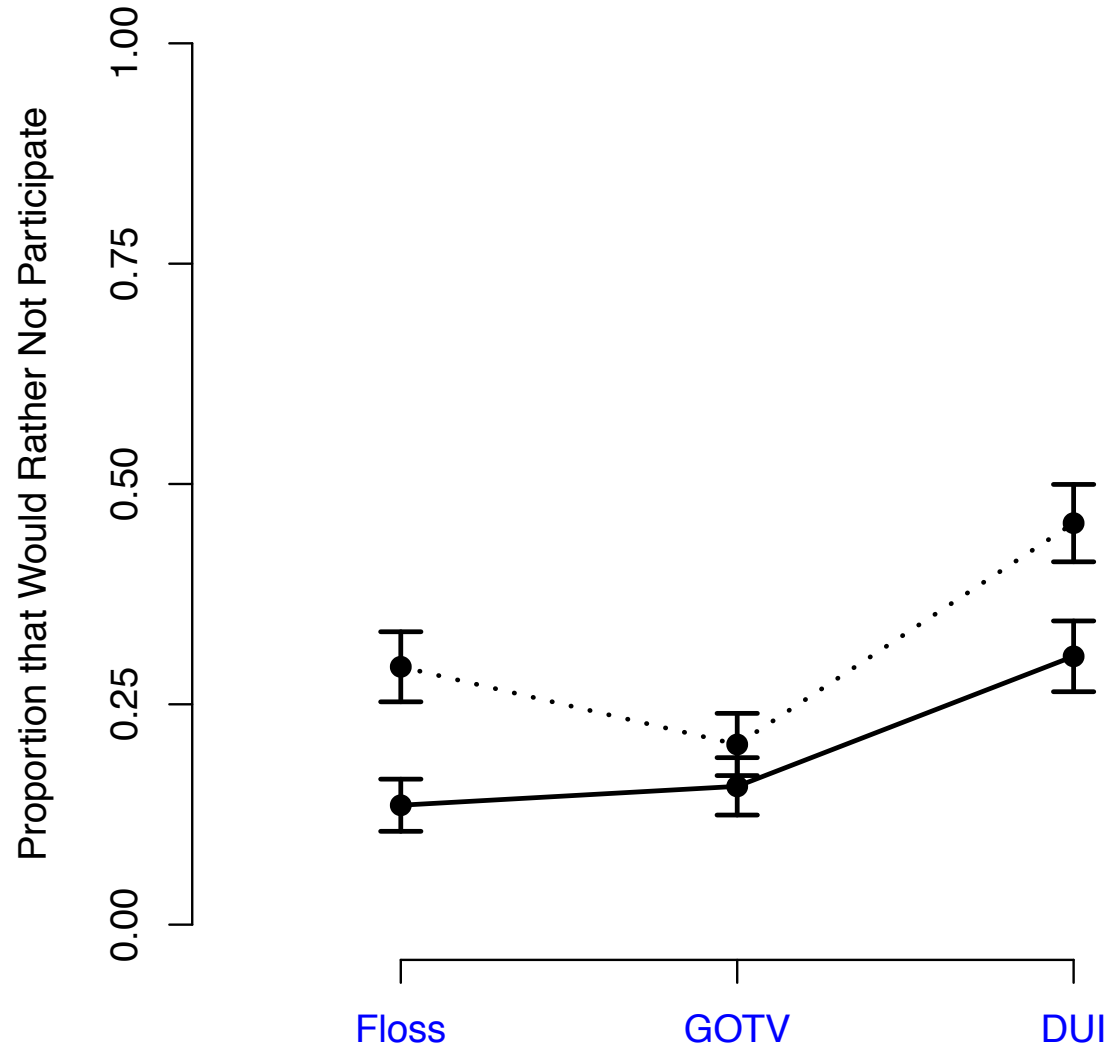
Mean “Agree Acceptable”



	Citizens	Academics
Deception	-0.614*	-1.558*
	(0.075)	(0.131)
GOTV	0.087	-0.314*
	(0.075)	(0.121)
DUI	-0.878*	-1.871*
	(0.075)	(0.112)
Fake Group	-0.382*	-0.299*
	(0.087)	(0.145)
Number of Subjects	0.041	-0.031
	(0.061)	(0.094)
Close Election	-0.071	-0.557*
	(0.061)	(0.094)
Constant	5.551*	6.313*
	(0.074)	(0.114)
r2	0.116	0.336
N	3024	1464

Informational Field Experiments

Proportion that Would Rather Not Participate



Interactive Field Experiment

Send email (pretending to be a potential student?), ask for information, manipulate features of the request or requestor.

Treatments

- Informed consent, or no informed consent
- Target: elected officials, businesses, home sellers
- Size: 100, 500, 1,000, 10,000
- Topic: Discrimination or Communication
- Burden (in minutes): 5, 10, 15, 30, 16
- Debrief, or no Debrief

Interactive Field Experiment

Professor J wants to study public communication. Professor J sends an email to 500 elected officials. In the email, Professor J pretends to be someone who lives in the elected official's district, and asks for information about a government program.

Professor J randomly varies something about the hypothetical citizen's request.

It takes each elected official about 60 minutes to provide the information.

Professor J will then see if elected officials are more likely to answer some types of questions than others.

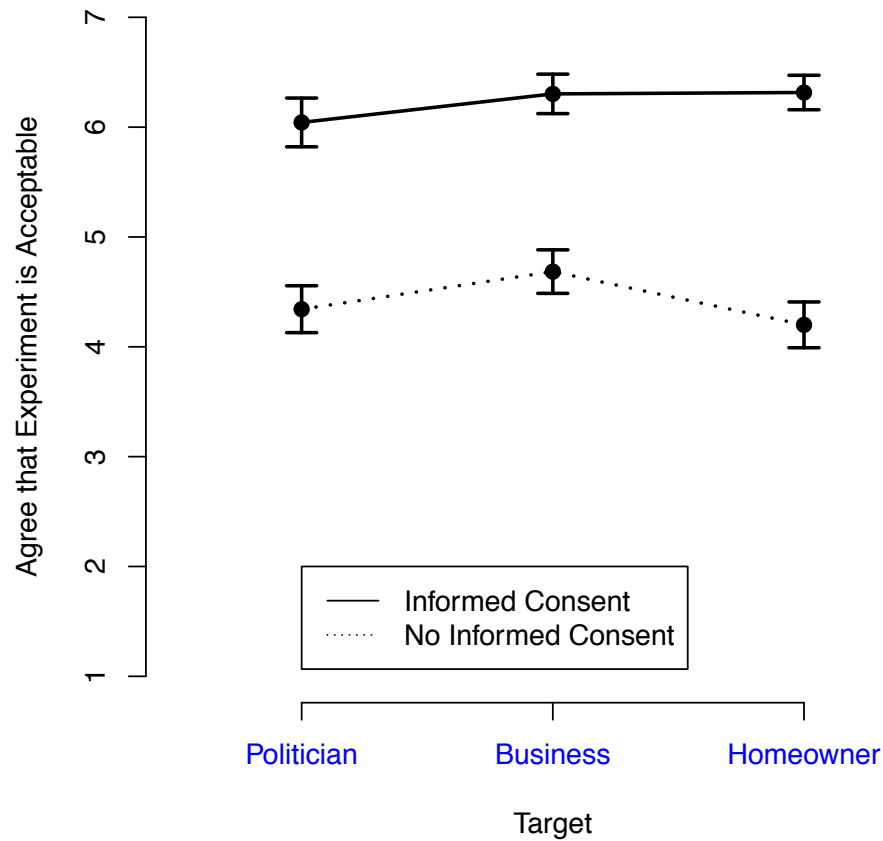
The elected officials in the study are never informed they are participating in a study.

The study was approved by all appropriate committees at the researcher's university, including the institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee.

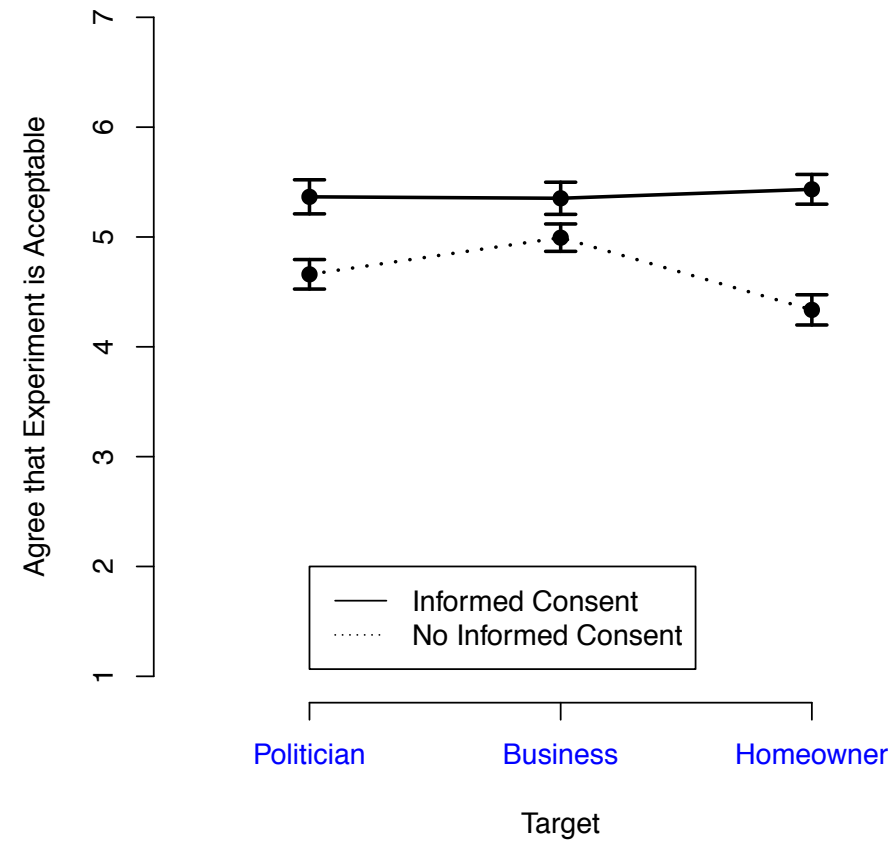
Interactive Field Experiment

Mean “Agree Acceptable”

Academics



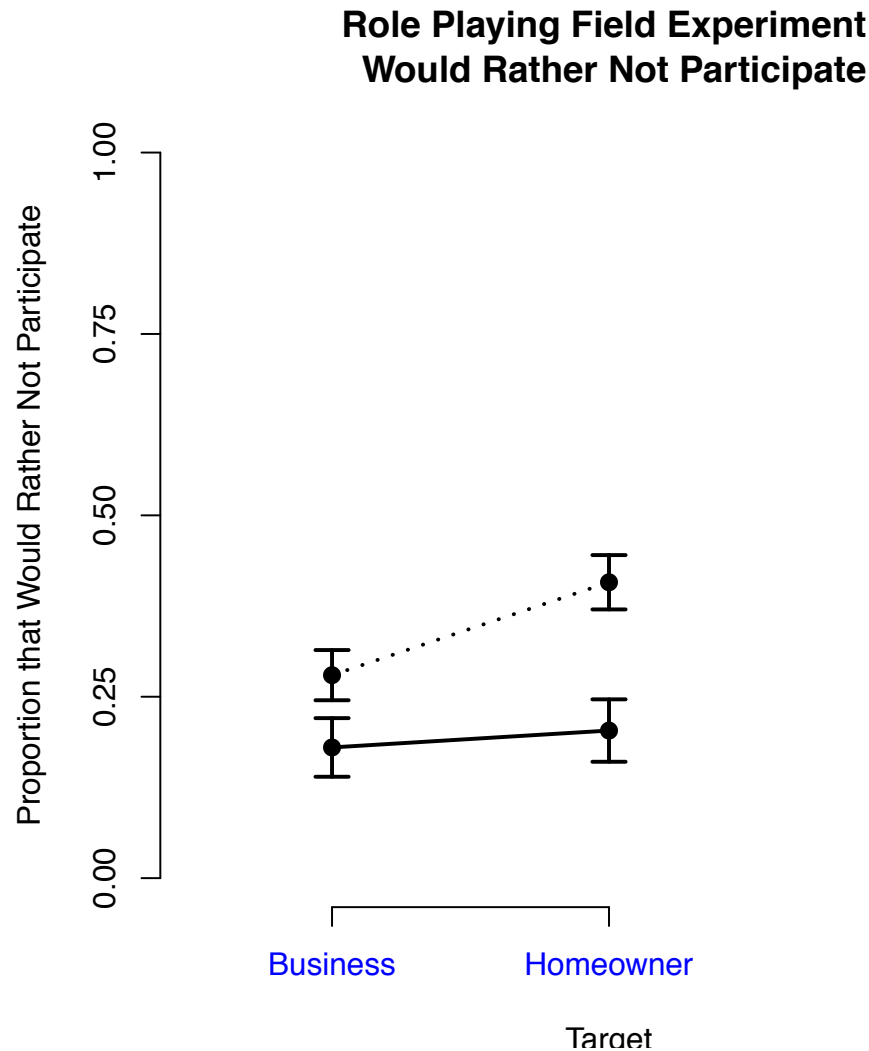
Citizens



	Citizens	Academics
Deception	-0.692*	-1.838*
	(0.072)	(0.108)
Target: Businessowner	0.404*	0.312*
	(0.073)	(0.108)
Target: Govt Official	0.199*	-0.007
	(0.072)	(0.108)
Studying Discrimination	0.296*	0.300*
	(0.059)	(0.088)
Number of Subjects	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Burden on Subjects	-0.004*	-0.011*
	(0.001)	(0.002)
Debrief (if deception)	-0.061	0.055
	(0.072)	(0.108)
Constant	5.159*	6.279*
	(0.083)	(0.122)
r2	0.062	0.210
N	3027	1597

Interactive Field Experiments

Proportion that Would Rather Not Participate



Local Review - Academics

Should researchers seek approval from host governments when conducting experiments overseas?

Conducting research in Country B

Regime type: Democracy or not a democracy

Length of Review Process: 90 days, 2 years, or never

Risk: No risk, or risky for subjects

Local Review - Academics

Professor **J** is based in the US and wishes to conduct a public opinion study in a different country, which will be referred to as Country B. Country B has its own ethics review process, which is required by law in that country.

The review process in Country B is **difficult to navigate and it may take up to two years to obtain permission for the study.**

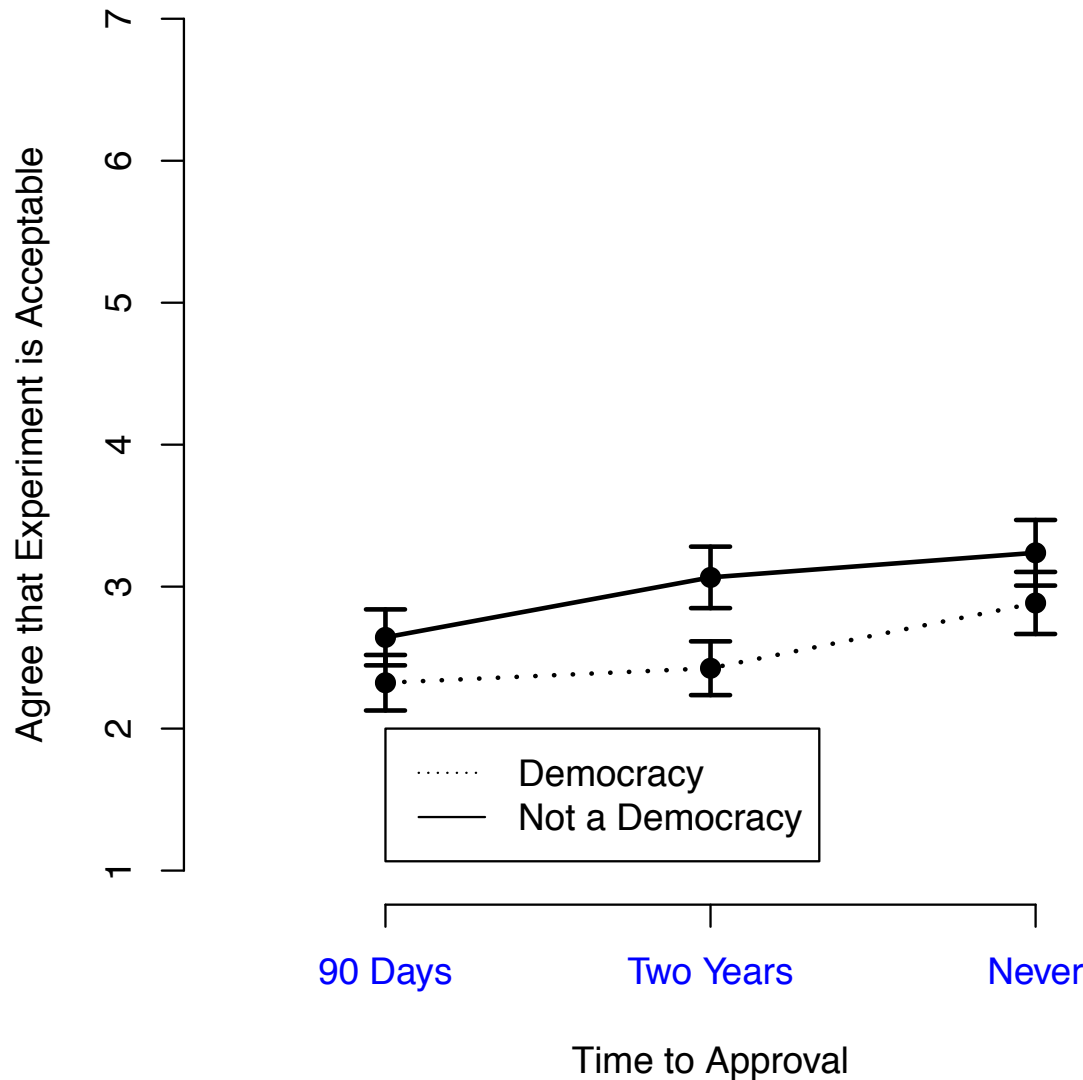
Although Country B is a democracy, some of the survey questions are sensitive and could cause political problems for subjects and enumerators.

Professor J decides to skip Country B's review process and proceed with the study.

The study was approved by all appropriate committees at the researcher's university, including the institutional Review Board (IRB) or Ethics Committee.

Local Review of Experiments

Mean “Agree Acceptable” To Skip Review



Local Review - Citizens

Scholar: From USA or Mexico

Research: Conducted in USA or in Mexico

Length of Review Process: 90 days or 2 years

Excluded Mexican scholars conducting research in Mexico

Example:

Professor **L** is based in the **USA** and will conduct a study in **that country**. The study is a public opinion survey where people are asked 10 standard questions. However, let's consider a situation where **American** law says that all studies must be reviewed by the **American** government for safety and for ethics, and the review takes **2 years** to complete.

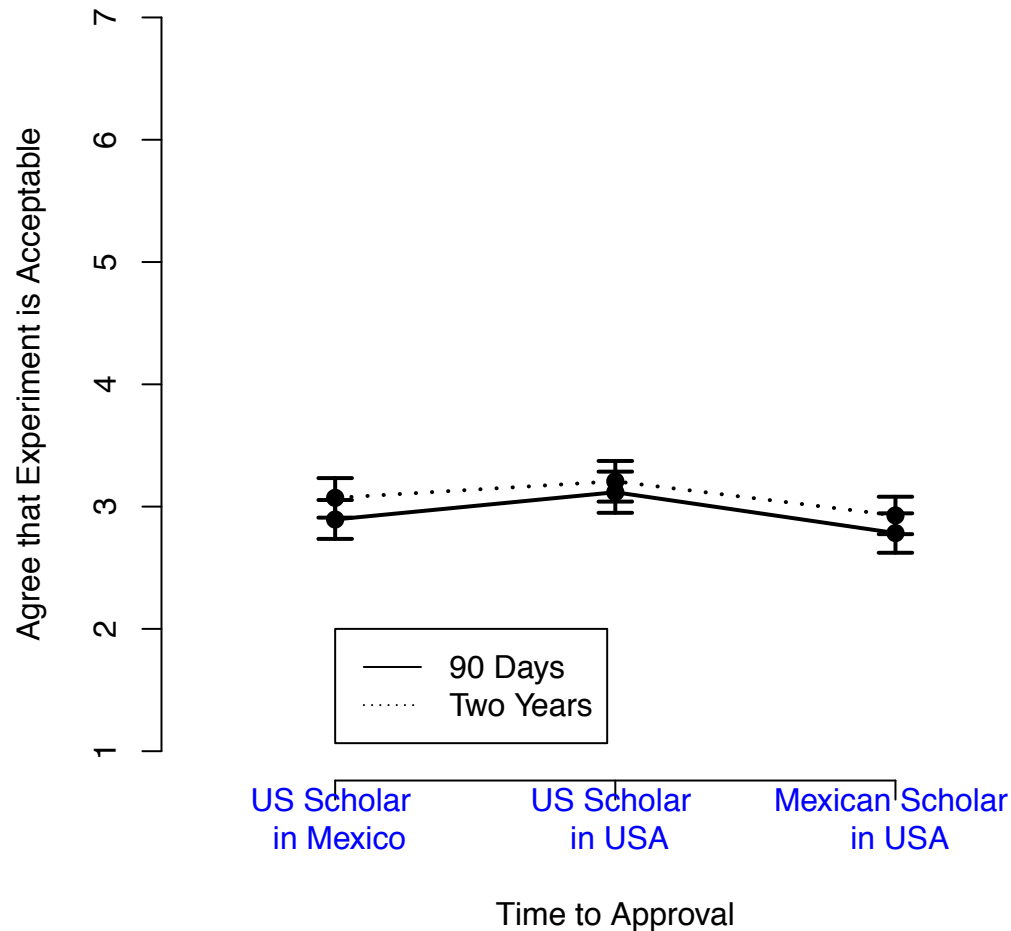
If Professor L runs the study without completing the review process, there is almost no chance of getting caught.

Professor L decides to skip the review process and just run the study.

Local Review of Experiments

Mean “Agree Acceptable” To Skip Review

Foreign Review by Nationality and Length



Summary of Key Findings

1. Academics and subjects don't like deception or being lied to. For a simple field experiment, as many as half of subjects might prefer non-participation.
2. Subjects and scholars are responsive to the goals of the study, not just the design (discrimination versus communication, flossing versus attack messages)
3. There is little support for international research without local review.

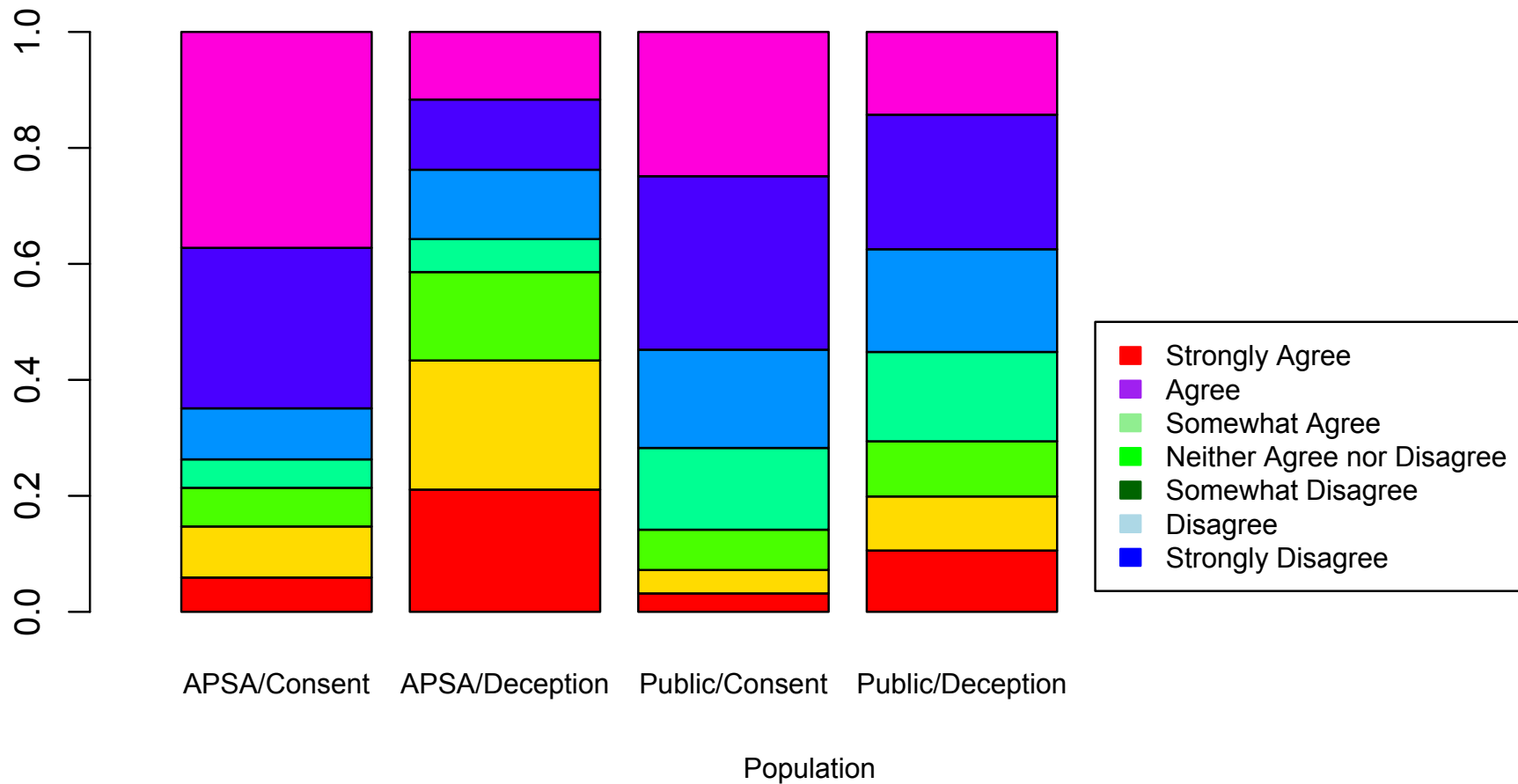
There's lots NOT to like about these results...

- Results might not generalize, for many reasons.
- Citizens may be responding more haphazardly.
- More interesting research designs might be more favorably received
- Low-quality research is unethical
- Information on the purpose and contribution of the study could improve acceptability.
- Questions could be better written
- But all these suggest testable hypotheses. And for now, even if flawed, we need to take these results very seriously.

Conclusions

- Minimize problems by using informed and consenting subjects as much as possible. Or, employ third-party interventions.
- For deceptive field experiments, follow four guidelines: do good, tread lightly, confess, and compensate.
- Contribute to our knowledge about ethics. Conduct a better survey. Or, when you debrief, ask subjects whether they are ok with having been forced into a study.
- Be especially careful overseas, as there is widespread disapproval of “under the radar” studies without foreign approval.

Agree Acceptable by Population and Deception



Lab Deception - Academics

Lab Experiment

No deception, deception with warning, or deception without warning

Example:

Professor L wants to see how framing affects opinions.

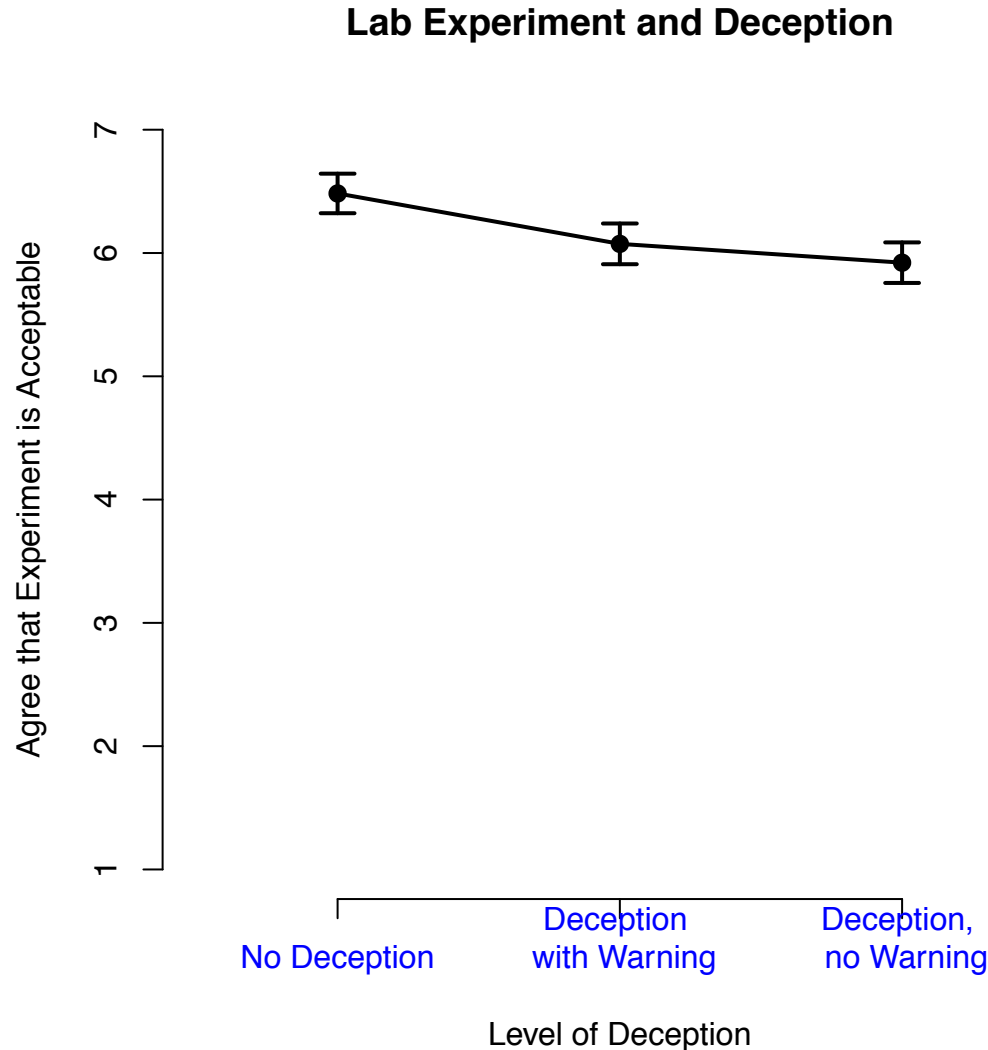
To find out, Professor L will conduct an experiment in an empty classroom on campus. Professor L will use volunteer students as subjects to conduct the study. All subjects will sign a standard form agreeing to be in a study and will be paid for their time.

During the experiment, volunteers read what appear to be newspaper articles about a candidate running for city council in another state. After reading the stories, subjects are given a survey. Subjects are initially told that the story and candidate are real, although they are not. After the study, the subjects are debriefed and told that the candidates and stories were hypothetical.

The study was approved by all appropriate committees at the researcher's university, including the institutional Review Board (IRB) or Ethics Committee.

Deception in Lab Experiments

Mean “Agree Acceptable” (only academics)



	Citizen LR	Academic LR	Academic Lab
American Prof in Mexico	-0.179*		
	(0.084)		
Mexican Prof in USA	-0.306***		
	(0.083)		
Time for Review	0.137*	0.297***	
	(0.068)	(0.054)	
Country B Democracy		-0.436***	
		(0.089)	
Risk to Subjects		-0.157	
		(0.089)	
Warn Subjects			0.153
			(0.082)
Deception			-0.561***
			(0.082)
Constant	3.094***	2.763***	6.483***
	(0.068)	(0.092)	(0.058)
N	3033.000	1597.000	1594.000
r2	.0058353	.0328992	.0306929

Citizen Comments

- The drunk driving is public record so no problem. But why mail to half of group. They could see or hear the information elsewhere.
- This flyer is not only for research, but could be considered a public service. I see nothing harmful or invasive in sending this out. The fact that it was being used for research and the recipients weren't told this is immaterial.

Citizen Comments

- This study seems underhanded to me. When participating in a study, being up front about participation is something I feel strongly about. Flossing is a good thing, but what will prevent Professor M from doing studies that are not like this? There is too much room for abuse in this scenario.
- i would find who professor x was then probably beat the #* @& out of him but i would be in mask but he would know i was paying him back for doing the survey with out my permission.

Scholar Comments

- How could this study have been approved by an IRB? There's no informed consent, no way for participants to contact the researchers, and no debrief to reveal the deception used. It's also possible that interfering in an election in this manner is illegal. These researchers should have known better.
- This seems too misleading and has too much potential to affect real world outcomes, it seems manipulative. But it was approved by IRB so I am not sure.
- With the US's low voter turnout, I see not problem trying to get more people to the polls.