

Ethics in the Era of Big Experiments

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In the social/behavioral sciences, big data increasingly collected through big field experiments

Existing IRB procedures may not be adequate to review ethical issues associated with these experiments

Putting our graduate students and our institutions at risk

The Montana mailer experiment

Conducted by Stanford and Dartmouth faculty

N = approx. 200,000 registered Montana voters (30% of the registered electorate)

Stage 1: Mailers sent to treatment group (N = approx. 100,000) in October 2014

Stage 2: Collection of post-election individual-level turnout from publicly available data

Research question: Does providing more information to voters in nonpartisan judicial races increase turnout?

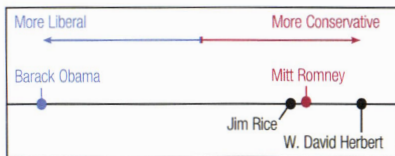


2014 Montana General Election Voter Information Guide

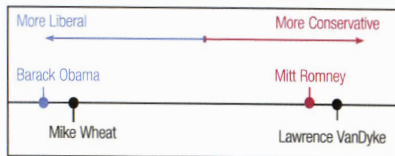
Election Date: November 4, 2014



Nonpartisan Supreme Court Justice #1 Race



Nonpartisan Supreme Court Justice #2 Race



For more information on how these figures were created, please see <http://data.stanford.edu/dime>. Please note that this guide is non-partisan and does not endorse any candidate or party. This guide was created as part of a joint research project at Stanford and Dartmouth.

Paid for by researchers at Stanford University and Dartmouth College, 616 Serra Street, Stanford, CA 94305

Take this to the polls!

Fallout:

Widespread national negative publicity aimed at researchers and institutions

Demand of letter of apology from Senator Jon Tester

Pre-election letter of apology from both university presidents to all Montana registrants (cost approx. 50K)

Expended funds from Hewlett Foundation for unusable experimental data

Finding of election law violations by state of Montana; fines paid in lieu of prosecution

Possible harm to reputations of researchers, institutions, field experimental research more generally

Role of IRB approval:

Dartmouth IRB reviewed analogous experiment in NH; ruled that experiment exempt from IRB review

Neither Stanford nor Dartmouth IRB review obtained for Montana experiment

However, strong likelihood that would have received exemption or passed review

No private data collected from human subjects

Rapid growth in large N field experiments like Montana mailer experiment, including by graduate students

IRB rules derived from biomedical context

May not appropriately address ethical issues involving large N field experiments

How can we protect our students and our institutions?

Possible solutions:

- Expand scope of IRB review to include externalities
- Establish field-specific panels for ethical review of field experiments