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My primary research fields are political economy, development economics, and their intersection. My research agenda explores several of the most salient political events in recent decades, including the rise in affective polarization and protests, the perceived increase in voters' dissatisfaction with the democratic system, and the high levels of corruption in developing countries. These events can all severely affect the success of democratic institutions, which are vital for economic development. One stream of my research examines how information diffusion through new information technologies helps explain these events. A second line of research studies the role of other barriers to development and the performance of democratic institutions in developing countries. I describe each strand in turn.

I. The Role of New Information Technologies

Social media platforms have become major moderators of news content for a large share of the population. A leading hypothesis maintains that such platforms affect polarization by creating and facilitating interactions within echo chambers, thus limiting users' access to counter-attitudinal opinions. Despite the concerns associated with echo chambers, there is little evidence to establish which mechanisms explain how interactions with others contribute to the consumption of biased news and, ultimately, polarization. In [Social Influence and News Consumption \(Job Market Paper 1\)](#), we present evidence of two of these mechanisms. First, individuals can learn about their peers' news preferences and use this knowledge to inform their own choices of news outlets. Second, individuals can tailor their own news choices when they believe their peers are paying attention to which news outlets they follow on social media (due to social image concerns). We design a field experiment on Twitter to separately identify the importance of these mechanisms and leverage variation in both an individual's perceptions of the political leanings of their peers' news consumption and the visibility of their own news preferences to their social media followers. We find little evidence to support the hypothesis that, at least through the lenses of these two mechanisms, online interactions with like-minded people are a major contributor to the demand for polarized news content. When our subjects are observed by their peers, they have significant social image concerns, which modify their news diet. However, in contrast to what is often conjectured, we find that these socially much concerns lead to a more balanced news diet, rather than greater polarization.

There has been a dramatic rise in protests worldwide in recent decades. Social media is believed to have played a central role in facilitating events ranging from the Arab Spring to the Capitol Riots after the 2021 US presidential election. In [Facebook Causes Protests \(Working Paper, 2023\)](#), we examine the impact of the world's largest social media platform on collective action across a broad sample of countries and regions. Our identification strategy relies on the introduction of Facebook in different languages. We exploit its release in a given language as an exogenous source of variation in access to social media among countries, regions, and people who speak that language. Across a variety of specifications, estimation methods, and samples, we find that Facebook has a positive and sizable effect on protests. We find that "coordination" effects that rest on the "social" nature of social media play

an important role beyond one-way information transmission, including a “liberation effect” generated by having a direct outlet through which to voice opinions and share them with others. Finally, we establish that the increase in protests due to social media does not typically translate into better political outcomes (e.g. an increase in democratization), but it does help reduce conflict. Suggestive evidence indicates that this is because social media (i) increases visibility and thus deters violence and (ii) the resulting protests help voice discontent and conflicts that might otherwise turn more violent.

My ongoing work also extends this agenda by exploring other ways in which new information technologies have shaped our world. In **Social Media and Trade** (research in progress), we demonstrate that the introduction of Facebook has increased bilateral trade among countries, in part by facilitating overseas advertising, which significantly reduces the barriers to entry for relatively small firms.

II. Barriers to development and the well-functioning of democratic institutions

In my second line of research, I investigate barriers to the health of democratic institutions and the support that citizens have for them.

Corruption. A crucial barrier to the health of democratic institutions, broadly studied in the literature, is corruption. The literature on corruption distinguishes between two forms of vote buying: corrupt candidates can either bribe voters to change their vote (voter-buying) or bribe non-voters to vote (turnout-buying). In *Electoral Transhumance: Voter Registration Shifting and Corruption Engagement Before Election Day (Job Market Paper 2)*, I study a third form of vote-buying: *electoral transhumance*. In its most common form, corrupt candidates pay citizens from neighboring areas to change their registration location, so that they can vote in the locations where the candidates plan to run. This practice has become very popular in many developing countries recently but, as with any other form of vote-buying, it is hard to measure. I study electoral transhumance in Colombia by looking at failed registration attempts – i.e., registrations of people who illegally attempted to vote in a municipality that was not their residence. I document a high incidence of this practice: ‘failed’ transhumance – i.e. cases where voters were caught switching their localities – represents 5.03% of the electoral roll. I examine the consequences of an important reform that publicly released information about drastic changes in all municipalities’ future budgets more than a year before election day. I exploit the variation resulting from a discontinuity in the allocation of resources mandated by this reform. I find evidence that candidates involved in corrupt practices plan their vote-buying strategies well before election day. I establish that these candidates engage in even more corruption when they learn that the municipality in which they are running for office will receive more central government resources due to the reform. This result indicates how politicians are motivated by rent capture more generally. This study challenges the common belief that increased government transparency, in this case concerning future resource allocations, is always desirable. My research demonstrates the opposite effect: heightened transparency increases corruption among candidates in regions expecting additional resources. This counterintuitive outcome highlights the complex dynamics among transparency, political behavior, and corruption, and provides valuable insights into the unintended consequences of transparency initiatives to strengthen democratic

institutions. It also suggests that policies designed to monitor the functioning of elections should consider these dynamic effects.¹

In **Political Incentives and Corruption: Evidence from Ghost Students** (Working Paper, 2023), we empirically examine the role of political connections in Colombia as another determinant of corruption, drawing on substantial anecdotal evidence that underscores their significance. We use another novel measure of corruption: the number of “ghost students” who have been fabricated to obtain more transfers from the national government. We find that political connections increase corruption without raising the quality or quantity of education. Although politicians divert resources for personal gain rather than to favor their constituencies, they have better future career prospects, reflecting a failure of electoral control. This research on corruption primarily focuses on candidate behavior and complements my pre-PhD work, which examines voters’ engagement with corrupt practices.²

One common finding in these results, and in the literature on corruption more generally, is that its determinants are particularly salient in the presence of weak institutions. In **The Weak State Trap** (*Economica*, 2022) we propose a set of theoretically distinct mechanisms to help explain why states with insufficient fiscal resources tend to be patrimonial or clientelistic in how they operate. We also provide empirical descriptive evidence of this trap and its mechanisms in developing countries.

Learning and (mis)information. The health of democratic institutions also depends on the extent to which individuals support them. For instance, a well-functioning democracy is frequently argued to require active citizens who keep their leaders accountable. My research agenda furthers our understanding of how individuals form their beliefs about institutions and the role of various underlying factors in shaping individuals’ support for democratic institutions – and, ultimately, economic outcomes.

(Successful) Democracies Breed Their Own Support (*Review of Economics Studies*, forthcoming) investigates a simple question: does exposure to a regime spark support for it? We use survey data from a wide range of countries and exploit within-country variation across cohorts and surveys to show that individuals with a longer exposure to democracy display stronger support for democratic institutions. Importantly, this effect is entirely driven by (i) only democratic regimes and (ii) only successful exposure. This finding suggests that individuals are not necessarily less likely to support democracy if they live in economically competent autocratic regimes.

My work in progress extends this agenda in several directions. In **Institutions Shape Social Preferences: The Civic Imprint of Democracy** (research in progress), a spinoff of this research, we use a similar strategy to investigate whether exposure to democratic regimes also fosters the formation of multiple aspects of civic culture likely underlying proso-

¹In the paper, I also develop a model in which open economies can “trade” voters and engage on electoral transhumance. Consistent with the model, I find that a positive shock in a municipality’s revenue makes electoral transhumance more likely in three types of municipalities: (i) those with small populations, (ii) those with poorly functioning institutions, and (iii) those with neighboring municipalities that have a large electorate.

²In **Consumers as VAT “Evaders”** (*Economia*, 2018) and **I Sell My Vote, and So What?** (*Economia Journal*, 2019) we show that tax evasion and vote selling are so entrenched in developing countries that they have become widely accepted; individuals are not ashamed to openly admit engaging in these activities.

cial behavior, such as civic values and reciprocity.

The Return of Pachamama (research in progress) explores a unique causal chain of events triggered by individuals' exposure to an external shock – the escalation of coca eradication in Bolivia during the 1990s. We exploit quasi-experimental variation in the intensity and timing of this shock as well as individual- and municipality-level exposure to coca. Our findings support a compelling narrative: the disruption of Bolivia's rural “moral economy,” in which coca played a central role, unexpectedly fueled a surge in demand for democratic reforms. This shift in public sentiment played a pivotal role in the rise of inclusive political parties and culminated in the historic election of Bolivia's first indigenous president (even though indigenous residents have historically constituted the majority of the country's population). This shock triggered demand for democratic policies; once these policies were implemented, they generated an empowerment effect. Indigenous people were more likely to use indigenous first names for their children, and the indigenous population enjoyed increased expectations of social mobility.

In **Voter Support for Democratic Institutions and Civil Liberties under Authoritarianism** (research in progress), we examine whether individuals value having strong democratic institutions where institutions are weak. Individuals could hold incorrect beliefs about the effect of strong democratic institutions, for instance, due to censorship and misinformation. We combine experimental variation from an online experiment and a large-scale door-to-door intervention with 870,000 voters to study how information campaigns about democratic institutions affect voter knowledge and preferences for these institutions. We find that this information corrects voters' beliefs about both the quality of democratic institutions and the importance of such institutions in reducing corruption. Importantly, it increases voters' valuations of democratic institutions measured as a higher vote share for non-autocratic candidates in the 2023 presidential election.

In **Voting Behavior and Female Representation** (research in progress), a project in its very early stages, we design another large door-to-door field experiment that we plan to run in Turkey during the March 2024 election. We intend to study how misinformation on the *politicians'* side can also reinforce an equilibrium with low demand for democratic policies on gender equality.

References

Research Papers

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- Moehring, Alex and Carlos Molina. 2023. Social Influence and News Consumption. Working Paper. Available [here](#).
- Molina, Carlos. 2023. Electoral Transhumance: Voter Registration Shifting and Corruption Engagement Before Election Day. Working Paper. Available [here](#).

Research in Progress

- Acemoglu, Daron, Nicolas Ajzenman; Cevat Aksoy, Martin Fiszbein and Carlos Molina. Institutions Shape Social Preferences: The Civic Imprint of Democracy.
- Acemoglu, Daron, Ceren Baysan, Cevat Aksoy, and Carlos Molina. Voter Support for Democratic Institutions and Civil Liberties under Authoritarianism.
- Acemoglu, Daron, Ceren Baysan, Carlos Molina, Antonia Paredes-Haz and Gamze Zeki. Voting Behavior and Female Representation.
- Fergusson, Leopoldo and Carlos Molina. Social Media and Trade.
- Molina, Carlos; James Robinson and Pablo Selaya. The Return of Pachamama.