Essays in Political Economy: Theory and Empirics

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1. Sequential Primaries, Pandering, and Information Transfer (job market paper)

In this paper I examine the impact of the U.S. Presidential primary system on candidate behavior and voter welfare. In particular, I analyze the effect of a sequential election system when the first voter has private information using a simple two candidate, two voter model in which the second voter is decisive. Both voters observe the candidates’ policy positions, but only the first voter observes which candidate is competent. I show that in equilibrium the candidates pander to the policy preference of the first voter whenever information about the result in the first primary is coarse. Despite the pandering that it introduces, I show that a sequential election can be a Pareto improvement over a simultaneous election. This paper has been submitted to the Journal of Public Economics.

2. The Voting Behavior of U.S. Legislators and the Effects of Gerrymandering, Unemployment and Presidential Prestige

In this paper I empirically examine legislator voting behavior by estimating the weights that a legislator places on four factors that might influence her voting behavior: the preferences of voters in her district or state, the preferences of her supporters, her party’s line, and her ideology. I find that both representatives and senators place weight on the preferences of supporters and the party line but not on the general electorate. Re-estimating the decision weights in the presence of dummy variables, I find that gerrymandering increases adherence to the party line and reduces the influence of voters; that high unemployment causes more weight to be placed on the preferences of voters; that presidents are effective enforcers of the party line; and that term limits would benefit voters and harm political parties. This paper has been completed but has yet to be submitted to a journal.

3. Decomposing the Effects of Texas’s Top Ten Law

In this paper I examine the effects of Texas’s top ten percent law, which grants top decile Texas high school graduates automatic admission to any University of Texas campus. This law, an apparent codification of the status quo—before the law, over ninety percent of top decile students were admitted—has led to an explosive growth in the percentage of University of Texas students who finished in the top decile of their high school class. There are three potential explanations for this growth: the admission of top decile students who would have been rejected previously (the direct effect); a rise in applications by top decile students due to the change in the admissions rule (the indirect effect); or a rise in applications by students of all types due to a rise in the value of a University of Texas degree. I formalize these explanations and their predictions using a simple theoretical model, and then evaluate empirically their contribution to the growth in top decile enrollees at the University of Texas. This chapter will be based upon a proposal submitted to the Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project contingent upon its acceptance.