Empirical Political Economy
Master Seminar
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Empirical Political Economy

Below you find a list of topics for the seminar which will focus on the effects of political institutions. However, it is never too early to start thinking about your Master thesis. So, if you have any (however vague) ideas about potential topics or things you would like to learn more about, email them to me or come by my office hours. I welcome your suggestions – this is a great opportunity to think about your own ideas.

A good survey on the role of political institutions within the US context:

(1) Direct Democracy

Many countries debate the introduction or strengthening of direct democratic institutions like voter initiatives and referendums. But what are the benefits and potential costs of direct democratic participation? And what does the empirical evidence show?


(2) Electoral Systems: Majority versus Proportional Representation

The two major electoral systems in representative democracies today provide different incentives for politicians. How do they differ? And can that explain why governments differ so much across countries?

(3) Extension of the Franchise

Who is allowed to vote has important consequences for whose interests and needs are represented in the political process and government policies. Two major extensions of the franchise were the inclusion of poorer voters (through the elimination of literacy or wealth requirements) and female suffrage.


(4) Electoral Accountability

Are politicians responsive to voters’ concerns? Which political institutions determine whether politicians choose their own preferred policies or cater to the voters?


(5) Ideology and parties

This topic is related to the previous one as it asks whether government ideology (or party membership) has per se an influence on policy choices.


(6) Number of Political Decision-makers

Over the past decades, parliaments and governments have grown in many countries. Does this affect policy-making? Does government spending increase or decrease with the number of political decision-makers?


(7) Paying Politicians

Salaries of politicians are not quite a hot topic as salaries for managers; yet, the questions are quite similar: how much should we pay politicians? How does it affect the quality of politicians and their performance if we pay them less or more?


(8) Corruption

Corruption is often viewed as a bad which hinders economic development. Are there effective mechanisms to curb corruption? What conditions foster corruption and red tape?


Gender in Politics

Does it matter whether your representative is a woman or a man, Black or White, a Native or an immigrant? Traditional models of political representation (e.g. Downs) suggest it does not. Under what circumstances would we expect to find an effect? Do we see an effect in real-world politics?


Lobbying

Many people believe that lobby groups have a major influence on political decisions and policy outcomes (just think about the tobacco industry and the smoking ban or the car industry and pollutants regulation). But how strong is the influence of lobby interests? And is that necessarily bad?


Role of the Media

The media has become increasingly important as an agenda setter and information provider for voters, for example. How does media shape political decisions and possibly political preferences?


(12) Property Rights

Property rights are considered one of the fundamental institutions in a market economy. How important these are for the development of an economy can often be seen in a long-run (historical) perspective.


Organizational Matters

Once you have chosen your topic, email your student id, name and most preferred and second most preferred topic to Frau Morawa (sabine.morawa@awi.uni-heidelberg.de) by October 28, 2013.

The organizational meeting of the course will be held on Thursday, November 7, from 3pm until 4.30 pm in room 00.010, Bergheimer Str. 58.

The default language of the seminar is English. However, if all participants feel comfortable in German and there is a majority of participants with a preference for German, we can also hold the seminar in German. We will discuss that at the organizational meeting as well.

We will also discuss the requirements and what you need to do until the seminar.

If you want to get started, read the suggested references and further literature you might find in those references or from other sources.

Write up a one-page concept on what your question is, the main theoretical arguments, some main results you expect or learned about and what open questions is + a list of references.

Every one of you should come to my office hours at least once to discuss the structure and arguments of your concept and the next steps.