

Readings in Public Choice Economics

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Jac C. Heckelman, Editor

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Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Preface ix

I OVERVIEW 1

The Public Choice Revolution *Gwartney & Wagner* 3

II INSTITUTIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY 19

I RENT SEEKING 20

Is the Theory of Rent-Seeking Here to Stay? *Tollison* 24

Rent Seeking and Tax Reform *Tullock* 40

Rent Extraction and Rent Creation in the Economic Theory of Regulation *McChesney* 53

II COLLECTIVE ACTION 73

The Theory of Collective Action and Burden Sharing in NATO
Oneal 77

The South Will Fall Again: The South as Leader and Laggard in
Economic Growth *Olson* 100

III BUREAUCRACY 123

Are Bureaucrats Budget Maximizers? The Niskanen Model and Its
Critics *Blais & Dion* 126

	The Equilibrium Size of a Budget-maximizing Bureau: A Note on Niskanen's Theory of Bureaucracy <i>Breton & Wintrobe</i>	146
IV	ELECTIONS AND THE ECONOMY	162
	National Elections and Policy Induced Business Cycles: A Historical Perspective on the Literature <i>Soh</i>	165
	Econometrics and Presidential Elections <i>Fair</i>	186
	Taxes and the Electoral Cycle: How Sensitive Are Governors to Coming Elections? <i>Case</i>	201
III	SOCIAL CHOICE THEORY	215
I	CHOOSING DECISION RULES	216
	Individual Choice in Voting and the Market <i>Buchanan</i>	219
	Constitutional Design for a Rent-Seeking Society: Voting Rule Choice <i>Spindler</i>	232
	Social Choice and Arrow's Paradox <i>MacKay</i>	242
II	MAJORITY RULE	252
	Collective Decision Rules and Local Debt Choice: A Test of the Median-Voter Hypothesis <i>McEachern</i>	255
	The Strategy of Voting <i>Dixit & Nalebuff</i>	267
	Probabilistic Majority Rule <i>Mueller</i>	288
III	ALTERNATIVE VOTING PROCEDURES	305
	An Introduction to Vote-Counting Schemes <i>Levin & Nalebuff</i>	308
	An Application of Social Choice Theory to U.S.D.A. Forest Service Decision Making <i>Martin, Shields, Tolwinski, & Kent</i>	335
IV	THE CALCULUS OF VOTING	354
	Rational Choice and Turnout <i>Aldrich</i>	357
	The Effect of the Secret Ballot on Voter Turnout Rates <i>Heckelman</i>	389
IV	FINAL THOUGHTS	411
	Is Public Choice Immoral? The Case for the "Nobel" Lie <i>Brennan & Buchanan</i>	413

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Preface

The lack of a standard undergraduate public choice textbook has forced many public choice instructors to create a “readings” course that is developed around a core set of academic articles and book chapters. Since most academic articles are written in such a way that only other scholars can understand, it is a tedious and time-consuming process to find articles that speak to the state of knowledge undergraduate economics majors have attained. The purpose of this volume is to provide instructors with a ready-made set of papers from which to build a course around. The volume is intended to supplement, rather than replace, traditional lectures and hopefully generate a basis for good classroom discussion.

The particular readings included in this volume represent my assessment of the most interesting and accessible readings that have appeared on various instructors’ syllabi. Students in my public choice courses have been required to base their own papers on articles not found on my regular course listing of assigned readings. Their searches have helped me to better gauge a reasonable level of technical proficiency for them. Some of the papers included here were first brought to my attention through this process.

The papers that follow in this volume represent a mix of overview (or survey) readings and extensions in both theoretical and empirical dimensions. Papers are presented in their entirety. Inclusion therefore requires the information to be comprehensible for a typical student having only a background

in undergraduate intermediate theory courses and a preliminary knowledge of basic statistical analysis. Theory pieces contain a minimal amount of notation and are well explained. Empirical studies make use of only standard regression techniques, but instructors may wish to familiarize their students with rudimentary regression analysis to get the most out of some of these readings. Even here, students should find they can read around the technical details and still absorb the material. Thus, the focus of the empirical readings is on what and how they test, rather than on statistical details.

Thus, while the papers represent a diverse view of topics and methodologies, the more technical nature of public choice has been specifically avoided. Just as the study of economics has undergone a mathematics revolution, so too has public choice. Cutting-edge theory often employs game-theoretic modeling techniques, and much of social choice utilizes vector analysis and number set theory. Empirical studies have become more econometrically advanced as well. These improvements are to be lauded and are important for generating new insights not otherwise obtainable. Their exclusion here is not meant to de-emphasize their importance but rather to ensure the volume is comprehensible to the typical student in an undergraduate public choice course.

Each section contains two or three papers on a related topic, so instructors are able to pick and choose those that most closely represent their particular interests. The survey pieces in particular will help students obtain a broad overview of the topic, and instructors may wish to highlight individual sections and provide additional details in class. As an aid, each section contains a brief descriptive introduction to the general theme and explains its importance and evolution. Questions are presented for each of the readings for students to assess their degree of comprehension. Suggested additional readings are presented at the end of each section, including slightly more technically advanced ones that are listed separately.