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From: "Ivey, Tommi M" <tommiivey@utdallas.edu>

Date: Tue, 3 Feb 2009 13:13:08 -0600

To: <bdjones@u.washington.edu>

Subject: AJPS 33702

Professor Jones,

Attached and in the body of this email are the reviews on your manuscript per Dr. Stewart's request.

Rev 2:

Review: A General Empirical Law of Public Budgets: A Comparative Analysis

The authors have responded to each of my comments thoughtfully and in full.

1. The references to chaos theory have now been removed.
2. The authors have expanded their theorisation of friction and error-accumulation. This is an important enhancement of the theoretical contribution of the paper.
3. The discussion of Soroka and Wlezien has been revised (p.16). This acknowledges the distinction between friction and responsiveness of political systems.
4. The Texas School Districts data has been dropped from the analysis. This previously distracted from the comparative focus of the paper.

My initial response to the manuscript was positive and I still consider the empirical findings of the paper to be important whilst being sympathetic to its methodological approach. Overall, the revisions offer a number of significant improvements to the analysis, without detracting from its original claims. First, its theorisation of the key concepts has been expanded and enhanced, representing an innovation on existing research. Second, this is supported with thoughtful discussion of conceptualisation and measurement of both friction and error-accumulation. Together these offer a theoretical and methodological contribution to the existing literature. Third, the claims have been refined to emphasise the empirical regularity of Paretian distributions in public budgets. Fourth, the discussion of friction has drawn on earth science to emphasise the meaningfulness of such findings even in the absence of a full causal explanation.

The paper provides strong evidence of the empirical regularities of Paretian distributions in public budgets in a number of countries and across a number of political systems. As such it offers an important contribution in adding comparative evidence in support of claims that have tended, in the past, to be tested for evidence from the United States. While inferences about friction from this stochastic process approach might be questioned by some, the empirical findings are noteworthy and merit further investigation.

I recommend publication of the revised manuscript.

Rev. 3

Review of:

Ms. No. AJPS-33702R1

A General Empirical Law of Public Budgets: A Comparative Analysis

I am generally pleased with the revisions that the author(s) has made to the draft though I would like to mention some consideration in the potential acceptance of the manuscript.

The manuscript has become ponderous in its earlier section. I will provide a couple of example. The first page of the manuscript gives no hints (outside of the title) that the article will be about budgets and policy change. Instead, this entire page is devoted to a general discussion of the importance of integrating theoretical development and empirical testing. Placing this discussion at so prominent a place in the manuscript does not seem appropriate. The discussion could be moved later in the paper, after the general thesis is introduced. I am not convinced this section actually serves to further the thesis of the paper and could be shortened or removed with little cost to the paper.

A similar problem has emerged in the early sections on non-incremental models in a variety of circumstances. The discussion is interesting and illustrates the connection between processes as disparate as earthquakes and budgets. However, this discussion again seems to take up a lot of space and again defers the discussion of the heart of the paper - models of policy change. I would prefer to see these sections tightened considerably. The citations can, and should, remain with just enough information for interested readers to track down more detailed discussions. In this particular case, the extended discussion puts farther distance between the reader and the thesis of the article.

My final recommendation has to do with the theoretical development - with particular attention to the independent variables. My fear is that some of what I described above as interesting but tangential discussions are the author(s) reaction to the reviewers calls for increased theoretical development. What I would have liked to see was a fuller discussion of how one would measure institutional friction and justify a rank order of budgetary systems. The newest draft does a better job of this justification but the increased attention to the measurement and conceptualization of friction is dwarfed by the increased attention to the universality of power laws in non-political science settings.

While I would like see more development of the conceptualization of friction here, I have become convinced that an article is not the venue where this will take place. In this respect, my problem may be more with the literature than with this specific article. The literature itself has failed to develop a convincing model of friction. This individual article is not going to fill that void in the literature. This problem will likely require a series of articles or a book (or even a series of books).

The realization that the article cannot realistically address my concerns about the conceptualization of friction has changed the niche that I see this article filling. As the author(s) seems to increasingly situate the article as a demonstration of the plausibility of a general law of budget distributions. This seems to be an appropriate thesis for an article in this journal. Even if the article does not nail down a fully elaborated theory of institutional friction, the article does a significant service by convincingly demonstrating that budgets in different nations and at different levels of government exhibit similar properties. Having demonstrated that, the author(s) can then suggest that there may be a logic to the order of these budgets. This suggestion serves more as a guide to future research than to final test of the proposition. Appropriately enough, the article then ends with an agenda setting exercise for the study of policy change.

In conclusion, after some revision I feel this article can make an interesting contribution to the literature. To some extent, the article has an impossible task of addressing diverse literatures and developing relatively novel theoretical constructs. While the results are strained at times, I prefer to see

such strained attempts at novelty than safer articles that don't seem to add much to the existing literature.

Tommi M. Ivey
Administrative Assistant
American Journal of Political Science
School of Economic, Political, and Policy Sciences
The University of Texas at Dallas
800 W. Campbell Rd. GR31
Richardson, TX 75080
Tel: 972-883-4595
Fax: 972-883-6571
email: tmivey@utdallas.edu <<mailto:tmivey@utdallas.edu>>