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Do economics and political Science scholars differ on public choice issues? Survey evidence from Brazil

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Do economics and political science scholars differ on public choice issues? Survey evidence from Brazil

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Survey evidence from Brazil**

By Abdel-Hameed Nawar

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DO ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE SCHOLARS DIFFER ON PUBLIC CHOICE ISSUES? SURVEY EVIDENCE FROM BRAZIL

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1 INTRODUCTION

Public choice literature dates to the 1950s and 60s—see, for example, Black (1958) and Buchanan and Tullock (1962). However, it started garnering widespread attention after James Buchanan was awarded the Nobel Prize in economics in 1986. Public choice theory applies economic concepts and assumptions to the study of how collective choices are made. Specifically, the subject matter of public choice is the same as of political science and public administration, but the methodology is that of economics. Muller (2003) considers political science issues such as bureaucracy, political party competition, voting behaviours, interest groups, etc. Public choice theory makes the economic modelling assumption that ‘politics as exchange’ is generated from the forces of supply and demand. Additionally, basic behavioural assumptions about actors in political spheres (such as voters, politicians, lawmakers, regulators, bureaucrats, etc.) include self-interest, rationality, the pursuit of maximising strategies, efficiency, and so on. The theory explains politics in a way that challenges the traditional well-intentioned economic, social, or political role of government as a credible institutional apparatus and how individual rational preferences are reflected in political actions, a perspective that is described as ‘politics without romance’ (Buchanan 1984).

The public choice perspective led to heated debates about the roles of the State and government intervention. Influential works by Samuelson and Nordhaus (1989) and Tresch (2002), for example, contained new sections on public choice reasoning with compelling sceptical arguments, especially addressing market failure, the reasons for the existence of a public sector and the impact of government revenues and expenditures on the levels of income, employment and redistribution. For a long time, scholars of economics argued that the way to address market failures, such as monopolies and externalities, was through government intervention. They, along with public finance scholars, have long devised detailed criteria regarding the economic costs and benefits for the types of economic activities that government should support, as well as on social balance—the distribution of output between the public and private sectors.

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the valuable comments from Manoel Salles and Roberto Astorino and the research assistance of Marwa Wedler.

However, public choice economics and political science scholars started challenging public finance issues by introducing a political dimension to cost-benefit analysis. They also showed that there can be *government failure*, whereby government intervention to correct a market failure leads to inefficiency and misallocation of scarce resources that are worse than in the absence of said intervention.

Public choice theory has become increasingly relevant for the study of public administration. It is an evolving model emphasising the rational behaviour in making policy choices related to public goods, providing linkages between official policy processes involving collective goals *in theory* and people's individual goals *in practice*.

Many members of academia in Brazil have obtained their degrees from abroad, especially in the United States and Europe. Surprisingly, most textbooks on economics and public finance, political science and public administration published in the country do not feature a dedicated chapter on public choice theory. Reference to public choice is made mainly to draw attention to the theory and its framework and to build awareness around its representative issues.

The public choice school of thought has not yet attracted a large enough community of scholars in Brazil. Contrary to the United States, where public choice scholars formed the American Public Choice Society (APCS), dedicated to the discussion and publication of public choice research, no similar endeavours exist in Brazil, and there are no broad public choice research programmes in universities or other academic institutions.

Public choice analysis can guide government reforms (such as civil service reform), devising incentive-compatible mechanisms. However, it may raise various issues that might be seen as controversial by mainstream economics and political science scholars, especially regarding developing countries, which tend to have high rates of both market and government failure. On the one hand, there is a moral dimension, where politicians and bureaucrats are considered utility maximisers rather than public interest maximisers, while on the other hand, economists cannot take for granted that economic theory, which posits that fiscal policy can fix market failures, will also apply in practice when contrasting fiscal economics versus fiscal politics.

This paper analyses the results of a survey carried out to examine and measure how Brazilian scholars of economics and political science—including public administration—tend to agree or disagree on main public choice issues. Previous studies on this topic are very limited, focusing only on the US and either on economics scholars, such as Alston, Kearn, and Vaughan (1992) and Whaples and Heckelman (2005), or on political science scholars, such as Heckelman and Whaples (2003). A pioneering study was carried out by Heckelman and Whaples (2006). Another leading study was carried out by Choi and Lee (2011), which was the first to explore and analyse public choice issues in South Korea.

Section 2 describes the survey's conceptual framework and empirical methodology. Section 3 explains the survey results and draws comparisons to the US and Korea. Finally, Section 4 discusses the implication of outcomes and provides a conclusion.

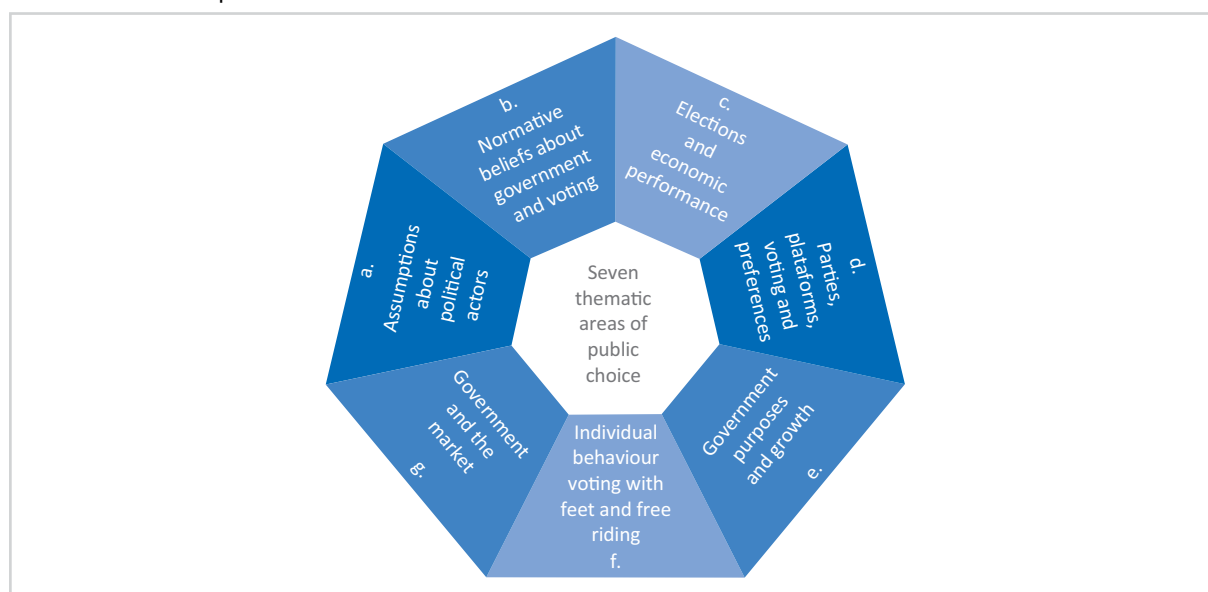
2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The literature on public choice theory covers a broad spectrum of political issues. Given that not all issues need be addressed at once, the approach adopted for this paper was to focus on a representative thematic sets of public choice issues. Heckelman and Whaples (2006), who carried out a survey to examine the extent of disagreement or consensus between economics and political science scholars on public choice issues in the US, pioneered this approach. Choi and Lee (2011) conducted the same survey in South Korea, but to the best of our knowledge, similar surveys have never been conducted elsewhere. This methodology was adopted to analyse the case of Brazil, in the hopes of helping reach a more robust conclusion about these issues worldwide.

Economics and political science scholars were asked to rank their level of agreement regarding a variety of public choice issues. The questionnaire consisted of 34 issues on a scale of 1 to 5, with higher numbers indicating stronger agreement: (1) **strongly disagree**; (2) **disagree**; (3) **neutral**; (4) **agree**; and (5) **strongly agree**.

The 34 Issues of the questionnaire span 7 typical thematic public choice areas, as illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Thematic public choice issues



Source: Author's elaboration.

To balance out responses and avoid various biases, the 34 issues of the questionnaire were not ordered thematically. Table 1 lists all issues and corresponding themes. Note that the number of issues differs according to theme. Namely, theme (a.) *Assumptions about political actors* covers 6 issues: 1, 6, 7, 13, 31, and 32; theme (b.) *Normative beliefs about government and voting* covers 3 issues: 10, 15 and 25; theme (c.) *Elections and economic performance* covers 6 issues: 2, 4, 11, 16, 17, and 23; theme (d.) *Parties, platforms, voting and preferences* covers 6 issues: 3, 8, 14, 22, and 24; theme (e.) *Government purposes and growth* covers 7 issues: 9, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 34; theme (f.) *Individual behaviour: voting-with-feet and free riding* covers 3 issues: 18, 19 and 21; finally, theme (g.) *Government and the market* covers 4 issues: 5, 12, 20, and 33.

TABLE 1. Thematic public choice issues

1. Most politicians are solely office-seeking vote maximisers. (a)
2. National election outcomes are dependent on current economic conditions. (c)
3. Voters seek to balance representation across parties. (d)
4. Incumbent politicians generate political business cycles. (c)
5. Potential rents are fully dissipated by rent-seeking expenditures. (d)
6. The act of voting in general elections is rational. (a)
7. Bureaucrats are budget-maximisers. (a)
8. Legislative voting cycles occur frequently. (d)
9. Governments exist primarily to produce public goods. (e)
10. Governments exist primarily to redistribute wealth. (b)
11. Election timing in parliamentary systems is primarily dependent on economic conditions. (c)
12. Individual rights prevent Pareto-optimal outcomes. (g)
13. Individuals are rational utility-maximisers. (a)
14. Group preferences are typically intransitive. (d)
15. Simple majority rule prevents effective third-party competition. (b)
16. Political rights and civil liberties promote economic growth. (c)
17. Economic growth is higher when Left-leaning parties are in office. (c)
18. Individuals often move in response to local government taxes and expenditure. (f)
19. Voting-with-feet migration sorts people into groups with homogeneous tastes. (f)
20. When transaction costs are low, the market achieves the efficient allocation of resources regardless of how property rights are assigned. (g)
21. In large-group settings, individuals typically free-ride on others' contributions. (f)
22. Simple majority rule is the preferred way to make group decisions. (d)
23. Economies grow faster after coups and revolutions due to the destruction of existing special-interest organisations. (c)
24. In a two-candidate election, both candidates will moderate their positions to attract votes. (d)
25. Voting rules should limit the incentive for strategic voting. (b)
26. The size of government has grown due to the proliferation of special interest groups. (e)
27. The size of government has grown due to the expansion of the franchise. (e)
28. The size of government has grown due to bureaucratic self-interest. (e)
29. The size of government has grown due to an increase in the size of government desired by voters. (e)
30. The size of government has grown due to the failure of the government to return to its initial size after a crisis. (e)
31. Firms often seek regulation to protect them from new competition. (a)
32. Voters vote out of a sense of civic duty. (a)
33. Government does more to protect and create monopoly power than it does to prevent it. (g)
34. Most government programmes are driven by rent seeking. (e)

Notes: (a) to (g) identifies one of the seven thematic public choice areas in the survey's conceptual framework.

Source: Author's elaboration.

To increase the response rate, the questionnaire was made available in two languages: English and Portuguese. Additionally, for the sake of clarity to the respondents, the author included a glossary explaining some key terms, such as 'strategic voting', 'rent-seeking', 'voting cycles', etc. The survey questionnaire was sent to respondents by e-mail as an attached Microsoft Word file. Simultaneously, a web-based version was made available online.

2.1 SURVEY DATA COLLECTION

The survey sample was collected from various sources. First, a mailing list was constructed through professional web scraping to extract the contact information of Brazilian scholars from RePEc (Research Papers in Economics, a central index of economics research) and Google Scholar. The original sample was then supplemented by a mailing list from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG). The list covered many Brazilian universities in different regions, including the states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Paraná, Bahia and Ceará.

The survey was sent to a sample of 124 faculty members in Brazil with at least a PhD in Economics, Political Science or Public Administration.

The response rate was modest. A total of 76 responses were received, mostly via the web-based version of the questionnaire. These responses included 43 professors, 32 associate professors, and 1 lecturer/assistant professor. Political science and public administration responses were pooled together. There were 48 respondents from Economics departments and 28 from Political Science and Public Administration departments. Most respondents completed survey questionnaire in English.

Table 2 shows the mean response score, standard deviation, difference between the means of the two groups, and the t-value and the p-value of the difference for each of the 34 issues.

3 SURVEY RESULTS AND COMPARISONS

For the sample of Brazilian economics scholars, the number of issues with a mean score of 3.0 or above was 15—less than half of the 34 issues. Two issues had mean scores of 4.0 or above (agreed)—namely issues 2 and 31. On average, economics scholars in Brazil seem less supportive of interpreting political issues through the reasoning of economics. Issue 2 was about the dependency of national election outcomes on current economic conditions, while issue 31 described corporate preferences for protective government control. Brazilian economics scholars recorded the lowest mean (2.02) for issue 23: economic growth accelerates following coups and revolutions due to the destruction of existing special interest organisations.

In addition, economics scholars exhibited very little difference within the group regarding issues 2 and 31, as evidenced by the standard deviation being less than 1. In general, the standard deviation of the economics group was more than 1 in 23 issues, illustrating the divergent viewpoints within the group.

On the other hand, for the sample of Brazilian political science scholars, there were 18 issues with a mean of 3.0 (more than half of all 34 issues). Four issues had mean scores of 4.0 or above (agreed): 2, 21, 24, and 31. On average, political science scholars in Brazil seem more supportive of interpreting political issues through the reasoning of economics. Unlike economics scholars, political science scholars agree on two additional issues: 21 (in large-group settings, individuals typically free-ride on others' contributions) and 24 (in a two-candidate election, both candidates will moderate their positions to attract votes). Political science scholars recorded the lowest mean (1.89) in issue 32 (the romanticised idea that a sense of civic duty is the main predictor of why conscious voters vote).

In addition, Brazilian political science scholars exhibited very little in-group differences regarding issues 2, 24 and 31, as evidenced by the standard deviation being less than 1. Coincidentally, the standard deviation in the political science group was more than 1 in 23 issues, illustrating divergent viewpoints within the group. Accordingly, both economics and political science scholars were often hazy about many public choice issues with a low level of consistency within the group.

To compare economics and political science scholars, a two independent sample comparison of means t-test was conducted for each of the 34 public choice issues. However, this t-test was statistically conducted under the assumptions of either equal or unequal variances. Hence, an F-test for equal variances of the two groups was first conducted² and then, based on its statistical significance, one of the two t-tests for comparison of means was conducted.

Examining the significance of the difference between the means of the two groups by issue, Table 1 shows that both groups highly agreed with two issues: 2 (on the dependency of national elections outcomes on current economic conditions) and 31 (on corporate preference for protective control). The two groups also agreed on two additional issues: 21 (on the moderation of positions in a two-candidate election) and 24 (on free-riding in a large group settings). These results may be related to the fact that Brazilian economics scholars downplay the influence of politics, linking election outcomes to economic conditions at the macro level and to corporate behaviours and protective regulations at the micro level, while Brazilian political science scholars attribute a higher importance to politics, linking strategic moderation of positions to two-candidate elections and linking large-group settings to individual free-riding behaviour. In fact, unlike economic groups that generally involve a small number of corporations or individuals and are easier to form, and where the cost of free riding is relatively high, political groups—e.g., political parties or coalitions—generally involve a large number of people and are far harder to forge, but the cost of free riding is relatively small.

On average, economics scholars reported higher mean scores than political science scholars in more than half of the issues. The difference between the means of the two groups was a negative number in 15 issues, while economics scholars recorded lower mean scores than the other group in 19 issues.

The two groups tend to share agreement when they disagree. In other words, both groups of Brazilian economics scholars and political science scholars tend to agree to **(strongly or somewhat)** disagree on public choice issues. For example, economics scholars recorded the lowest mean (2.02) in issue 23 (economic growth accelerates following coups and revolutions due to the destruction of existing special interest organisations) The reaction from political science scholars was similar (2.43). political science scholars recorded the lowest mean (1.89) in issue 32 (the romanticised idea that a sense of civic duty is the main predictor of why conscious voters vote), implying that other predictors can better explain the political engagement of citizens. The reaction from economics scholars was similar, but less pronounced (2.94).

2. In previous US and South Korean studies, it is not clear whether the authors conducted a test of equal standard deviations prior to testing the difference of means between the two groups.

TABLE 2. Summary statistics and comparisons between Brazilian economics and political science scholars

Issue #	Economics (n=48)		Political science (n=28)		Difference	t-value	P-value
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation			
32	2.94	1.21	1.89	0.69	1.045	4.805	0.000
12	2.41	1.09	3.39	0.96	-0.980	-3.932	0.000
11	3.60	0.82	2.82	0.94	0.783	3.798	0.000
13	2.69	1.50	3.96	1.16	-1.275	-3.811	0.000
19	2.26	0.85	2.82	1.09	-0.566	-2.512	0.014
7	2.65	1.10	3.25	1.00	-0.604	-2.381	0.020
6	3.17	1.24	3.75	1.00	-0.583	-2.111	0.038
15	2.67	0.97	3.18	1.12	-0.512	-2.086	0.040
17	2.46	1.15	1.96	0.92	0.494	1.940	0.056
18	3.04	1.18	3.54	0.92	-0.493	-1.894	0.062
29	3.29	1.27	2.75	1.11	0.542	1.875	.065
22	2.85	1.17	3.36	1.28	-0.503	-1.748	0.085
33	3.06	1.23	2.57	1.14	0.491	1.728	0.088
23	2.02	0.91	2.43	1.14	-0.408	-1.717	0.090
5	3.00	1.30	2.54	1.10	0.464	1.580	0.118
21	3.56	1.40	4.00	1.12	-0.438	-1.411	0.162
31	4.21	0.65	4.04	0.51	0.173	1.204	0.232
4	3.81	0.84	3.57	0.96	0.241	1.143	0.257
26	3.13	1.25	3.43	0.92	-0.304	-1.120	0.266
1	3.38	1.31	3.04	1.35	0.339	1.076	0.286
27	2.29	0.80	2.57	1.23	-0.280	-1.078	0.287
24	3.88	1.18	4.11	0.74	-0.232	-1.056	0.294
9	2.79	1.43	3.14	1.35	-0.351	-1.054	0.295
14	2.98	1.19	2.75	1.24	0.229	0.797	0.428
20	2.71	1.40	2.89	1.26	-0.185	-0.575	0.567
25	2.38	1.25	2.56	1.45	-0.181	-0.567	0.572
10	2.75	1.23	2.64	1.06	0.107	0.385	0.701
8	3.17	0.97	3.07	1.15	0.095	0.384	0.702
2	4.06	0.98	4.14	0.76	-0.080	-0.375	0.709
28	3.56	0.94	3.50	1.04	0.063	0.269	0.789
16	2.98	1.21	3.04	1.48	-0.057	-0.181	0.857
30	2.71	1.05	2.75	1.00	-0.042	-0.169	0.866
34	2.69	1.22	2.64	1.03	0.045	0.163	0.871
3	2.02	0.64	2.00	0.86	0.021	0.121	0.904

Source: Author's elaboration.

Only **8 mean differences were found to be statistically significant**, namely in issues 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15, 19, and 32, of which 7 have a negative sign, indicating that economics scholars had a less positive perception of the public choice methodology—applying economic reasoning to political phenomena. Meanwhile, the statistical difference between the two groups (issues 6,7,13, and 32) belong to the theme of “assumptions about political actors”

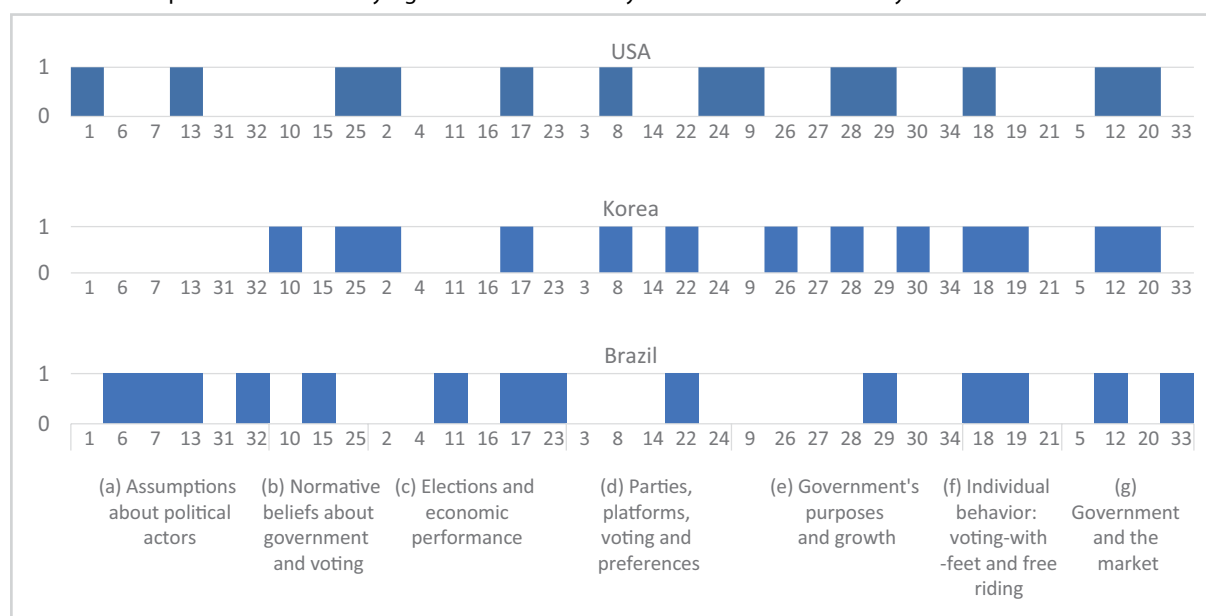
(see Figure 1). The biggest differences were found regarding issue 13 (individuals are rational utility-maximisers) and 32 (voters vote out of a sense of civic duty). These results show that Brazilian political science scholars were more familiar with the public choice methodology and perceive the major theme of public choice assumptions in a different and more supportive light than Brazilian economics scholars.

Finally, a comparison with other surveys carried out in South Korea (Choi and Lee 2011), and the US (Whaples and Heckelman 2005, Heckelman and Whaples 2006) provides interesting findings.

The mean responses exceeding 3 were the highest among South Korean scholars, followed by US scholars and finally Brazilian scholars. US economics scholars tend to agree or strongly agree on more public choice issues than South Korean and Brazilian ones. In contrast, Brazilian political science scholars tend to agree or strongly agree on more public choice issues than Korean and US ones.

Looking at the comparative standard deviations, the responses for most of the issues were less deviated, with standard deviation recording less than 1 in 28 out of 34 issues among South Korean economics scholars, and in 31 out of 34 issues among South Korean political science scholars. For the US, responses for most of the issues were more deviated, with standard deviation recording more than 1 in 24 out of 34 issues among both economics and political science scholars.

FIGURE 2. Comparison of statistically significant differences by thematic area and country



Source: Author's elaboration.

As for examining the statistical difference between the two groups, the difference between the mean responses of the two groups never exceeded 1 for both South Korean and US scholars. In South Korea, the significant difference between the groups was largest in issue 19 ('voting-with-feet'). The mean response of economics scholars was 3.33, while that of political science scholars was 2.73. This shows that South Korean economists agreed with 'voting-with-feet' to

a certain extent, while the other group hardly agreed with it. Surprisingly, issue 18 (on local government taxes and expenditure), which contains an almost identical statement to the Tiebout (1956) hypothesis, recorded below-average responses (under 3) from both groups. This result implies that both groups decided that in South Korea, local tax policy and expenditure would affect individuals to a very small extent. This is also the result of the US survey. The Brazilian economics and political science scholars exhibit the most conflicting opinions on those issues. They hardly agree on issue 18 and have statistically different mean responses to issue 19 as well.

Economics and political science scholars do not necessarily see each other as being intrinsically different when thinking about public choice issues. When looking at the statistically significant differences by thematic area, one can observe that South Korean economic and political science scholars achieved consensus on (a.) “assumptions about political actors”, an intriguing outcome that has yet to happen in both Brazil and the US—the country where public choice theory was born. When economics and political science scholars are more able to pivot from cross-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary into an interdisciplinary approach, it is more likely that they will be able to make a synthesising turnaround.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Economics and political science share many common concepts and themes. While addressing relevant problems, Economics scholars are trained to respect neutralising politics and, likewise, political science scholars are trained to respect neutralising the private interest of political actors. Although each discipline has maintained its core identity, most real-world problems are not fully brought to bear by a single discipline, but instead demonstrate aspects best addressed by harnessing the links between two or more overlapping disciplines.³

Public choice theory, which has closely integrated both disciplines, promotes distinct transforming perspectives in thinking about and approaching relevant real-world problems. For long time, a debate structured around various issues—including whether economic methodology can be applied to political actors, and, conversely, what would be the impact of introducing politics to economic analysis—with fuzzy answers outlining heterogeneous positions. Indeed, economics and political science scholars may not necessarily agree on all public choice issues. For example, the political scientists’ capture theory and private interest theory of regulations differ (see Stigler 1971 and Peltzman 1976).

For over three decades (since Buchanan’s 1986 Nobel Prize in Economics) public choice scholars have influenced economics and political science via research, education and publications on theory and application. The results of this survey enrich the current body of knowledge about Brazilian economics and political science scholars and their interactions regarding major controversial public choice issues. In particular, there is substantial disagreement among Brazilian economics scholars regarding many issues that appear to be tied to assumptions about political actors. However, given this is the first analysis to compare economics and political science scholars regarding public choice issues, it may be interesting in the future to explore the influence of time as a facilitator for converging on issues and reconciling different viewpoints.

3. Lab experiments in sub-disciplines have attempted to explore the impacts of this overlap—for example, in experimental economics and experimental political science.

The results of this survey provide valuable information, especially in light of recent economic and political events taking place in Brazil, which have captured public attention and renewed interest by economics and political science scholars in public choice, including fiscal politics, political corruption, presidential elections, competition laws, minimum wage, tax bills, subsidies, coal vs. gas energy and local content requirements in industry, stimulus packages and the bailout of failed public sector companies, etc.

They also help galvanise the interest of Brazilian scholars in the public choice research agenda. In particular, issues 2, 4 and 11—the interaction between elections and current economic performance—presumes the ‘economic’ voting behaviour of citizens across the entire political spectrum: they see the effect of national and regional macroeconomic conditions, such as unemployment and inflation, reflected on the election process. Public choice theory emphasises that the bad economic history of politicians has a potential cumulative cost for re-election, and that incumbent politicians generate political business cycles.

Moreover, in explaining different sets of regulations (issue 31), such as competition laws and other means of corporate control, it would be interesting to go beyond theories of optimal regulation in economics to consider the public choice theories on lobbying by firms and special interest groups, as well as incentives in public bureaucracy and political institutions. Indeed, issues that might interest economic and political science scholars the most, such as local content requirements, may be studied through an interdisciplinary approach to capture different aspects and improve results, going beyond the limited influence of typically considered economic factors. Broader perspectives that consider and analyse previously excluded or inadequately framed factors could enrich theoretical and empirical research as well as policy recommendations.

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