

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

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Public choice literature dates to the 1950s and 60s but 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, while the methodology is that of economics.

The public choice perspective led to heated debates about the appropriateness of the roles of the State and government intervention. For example, economics scholars have argued for a long time that the way to address **market failure** in the economy, such as monopolies and externalities, is to introduce government intervention. However, public choice scholars challenged this argument and showed that there can also be **government failure**.

Nawar (2021) analyses the results of a survey carried out to examine and measure how Brazilian economics and political science scholars tend to agree or disagree on main public choice issues. Their level of agreement with various public choice issues was ranked on a scale from 1 to 5. The questionnaire consisted of 34 issues organised across 7 representative thematic areas (see Figure 1).

The survey sample was collected from various Brazilian universities in different regions. A questionnaire was sent to 124 faculty members at least a PhD degree in Economics, Political Science and Public Administration departments in universities and research institutes. There were 76 respondents

Brazilian economics scholars seemed, on average, less supportive of interpreting political issues through the reasoning of economics. In addition, they had divergent viewpoints within groups, as evidenced by the standard deviation being more than 1 in 23 Issues.

On the other hand, Brazilian political science scholars seem more supportive of interpreting political issues through the reasoning of economics. Both economics and political science scholars were often hazy about many public choice issues and there was a low level of consistency within groups.

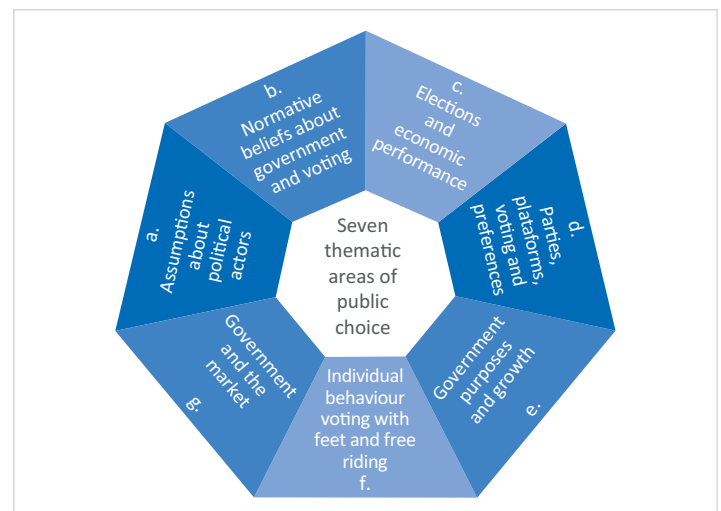
To compare economics and political science scholars, a two independent sample comparison of means t-test was conducted for each of the 34 public choice issues. On average, economics scholars reported higher mean scores than political science scholars in more than half of the issues. Both groups tend to agree to **(strongly or somewhat) disagree** on public choice issues.

A comparison with other similar survey studies carried out in South Korea and the US provides interesting findings. 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 not yet happened in Brazil or the US—the country where public choice theory was born.

The combined results and contributions of the survey can help galvanise the interest of Brazilian scholars in the public choice research agenda, especially in light of recent economic and political events taking place in Brazil, 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.

Issues that might interest economic and political science scholars in the future, 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.

Figure 1
Thematic public choice issues



Source: Author's elaboration.

Reference:
Nawar, Abdel-Hameed. 2021. "Do economics and political science scholars differ on public choice issues? Survey evidence from Brazil". IPC-IG Working Paper, No. 192. Brasília: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.