

14.773 Political Economy of Institutions and
Development.
Lecture 10. Information, Beliefs and Politics

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Introduction

- Why do people vote?
 - Because they think they will be pivotal.
 - Because they obtain utility from voting (but if so, how do they vote?)
 - Because they wish to express their opinions (again, if so, is this along the lines of their narrow interests?)
- What do people infer about candidates from their policies and past performance? How do they form beliefs about future policies?
- Central questions for understanding functioning of voting systems (and little empirical evidence).
- In the lecture, we take the voting motive as given and study the interaction between information and political outcomes.

Information-Behavior Feedbacks

- An important dimension of politics is about beliefs. For example, voters may be uncertain about how distortionary redistributive policies will be.
- If voters think that these are very distortionary, then they may choose low redistribution. But then the society may not learn about true consequence of redistributive policies.
- This idea is investigated in an “overlapping generations” model by Piketty.
- To avoid the “swing voter’s curse” of Feddersen and Pesendorfer (discussed in recitation), Piketty assumes that each individual votes according to what they think would maximize “social welfare” and does not try to infer information of others from their votes (formally, heterogeneous priors and some “myopia”).

Redistribution and Mobility: Model

- An individual i of generation t has utility

$$U_{it} = \hat{y}_{it} - \frac{1}{2\alpha} e_{it}^2,$$

where $\hat{y}_{it} = (1 - \tau)y_{it} + T$ is after-tax income, $y_{it} \in \{0, 1\}$ is earned income (and can be thought of as success or failure), τ is the tax rate, T is a lump-sum transfer, and e_{it} is the effort level.

- Suppose that success depends on effort and also on

$$\mathbb{P}(y_{it} = 1 \mid e_{it} = e \text{ and } y_{it-1} = 0) = \pi_0 + \theta e,$$

and

$$\mathbb{P}(y_{it} = 1 \mid e_{it} = e \text{ and } y_{it-1} = 1) = \pi_1 + \theta e,$$

where $\pi_1 \geq \pi_0$.

- The gap between these two parameters is the importance of “inheritance” in success, whereas θ is the importance of “hard work”.
- The vector of parameters (θ, π_0, π_1) is unknown.

Model (continued)

- At any given point in time, individuals will have a posterior over this policy vector μ_{it} , shaped by their dynasty's prior experiences as well as other characteristics in the society that they may have observed.
- The only policy tool is a tax rate on output, which is then redistributed lump sum.
- Let total output under tax rate τ be $Y(\tau)$.
- This implies that given an expectation of a tax rate τ , an individual with a successful or unsuccessful parent denoted by $z = 1$ or $z = 0$ will choose

$$e_z(\tau, \mu) \in \arg \max_e \mathbb{E}_\mu [(1 - \pi_z - \theta e) \tau Y(\tau) + (\pi_z + \theta e) ((1 - \tau) + \tau Y(\tau))] - \frac{1}{2\alpha} e^2,$$

where the expectation is over the parameters.

Effort and Voting

- It can be easily verified that

$$e_z(\tau, \mu) = e(\tau, \mathbb{E}_\mu \theta) = \alpha(1 - \tau) \mathbb{E}_\mu \theta.$$

- Therefore, all that matters for effort is the expectation about the parameter θ .
- Now given this expectation, individuals will also choose the tax rate by voting.
- Individuals vote for the tax rates that maximizes “expected social welfare” $\mathbb{E}_{\mu_{it}} V_t$ (why is this conditional on μ_{it} ?).
- Given the quadratic utility function, it can be verified that individuals have single peaked preferences, with bliss point given by

$$\tau(\mu_{it}) \in \arg \max \mathbb{E}_{\mu_{it}} V_t.$$

- An application of the median voter theorem then gives the equilibrium tax rate is the median of these bliss points.

Evolution of Beliefs

- How will an individual update their beliefs? Straightforward application of Bayes rule gives the evolution of beliefs.
- For example, for an individual $i \in \mathcal{I}$ with a successful or unsuccessful parent denoted by $z = 1$ or $z = 0$, starting with beliefs μ_{it} , with support $S[\mu_{it}]$, we have that for any $(\theta, \pi_0, \pi_1) \in S[\mu_{it}]$, we have

$$\mu_{it+1}(\theta, \pi_0, \pi_1) = \mu_{it}(\theta, \pi_0, \pi_1) \frac{\pi_z + \theta e(\tau_t, \mathbb{E}_{\mu_{it}} \theta)}{\int [\pi'_z + \theta' e(\tau_t, \mathbb{E}_{\mu_{it}} \theta)] d\mu_{it}}.$$

- Note that individuals here are not learning from the realized tax rate, simply from their own experience. This is because individuals are supposed to have “heterogeneous priors”. They thus recognize that others have beliefs driven by their initial priors, which are different from theirs and there is no learning from initial priors.
- Is this just to consequence of heterogeneous priors?

Evolution of Beliefs (continued)

- Standard results about Bayesian updating, in particular from the *martingale convergence theorem*, imply the following:

Proposition

The beliefs of individual $i \in \mathcal{I}$, μ_{it} , starting with any initial beliefs μ_{i0} almost surely converges to a stationary belief $\mu_{i\infty}$.

- But if beliefs converge for each dynasty, then the median also converges, and thus equilibrium tax rates also converge.

Proposition

Starting with any distribution of beliefs in the society, the equilibrium tax rate τ_t almost surely converges to a stationary tax rate τ_∞ .

Limits of Learning

- The issue, however, is that this limiting tax rate need not be unique, because the limiting stationary beliefs are not necessarily equal to the distribution that puts probability 1 on truth.
- The intuition for this is the same as “self confirming” equilibria, and can be best seen by considering an extreme set of beliefs in the society that lead to $\tau = 1$ (because effort doesn't matter at all).
- If $\tau = 1$, then nobody exerts any effort and there is no possibility that anybody can learn that effort actually matters.

Limits of Learning (continued)

- The characterization of the set of possible limiting beliefs is straightforward.
- Define $M^*(\tau)$ be the set of beliefs that are “self consistent” at the tax rate τ in the following sense:
- For any $\tau \in [0, 1]$, we have

$$M^*(\tau) = \left\{ \mu : \text{for all } (\theta, \pi_0, \pi_1) \in S[\mu], \right. \\ \left. \pi_z + \theta e(\tau, \mathbb{E}_\mu \theta) = \pi_z^* + \theta^* e(\tau, \mathbb{E}_\mu \theta) \right. \\ \left. \text{for } z = 0, 1 \text{ and } (\theta^*, \pi_0^*, \pi_1^*) \in S[\mu] \right\}.$$

- Intuitively, these are the set of beliefs that generate the correct empirical frequencies in terms of upward and downward mobility (success and failure) given the effort level that they imply.
- Clearly, if the tax rate is in fact τ and $M^*(\tau)$ is not a singleton, a Bayesian cannot distinguish between the elements of $M^*(\tau)$: they all have the same observable implications.

Limits of Learning (continued)

- Now the following result is immediate.

Proposition

Starting with any initial distribution of beliefs in society $\{\mu_{i0}\}_{i \in \mathcal{I}}$, we have that

- 1 For all $i \in \mathcal{I}$, $\mu_{i\infty}$ exists and is in $M^*(\tau_\infty)$, and
- 2 τ_∞ is the median of $\{\tau(\mu_{i\infty})\}_{i \in \mathcal{I}}$.

- This proposition of course does not rule out the possibility that there will be convergence to beliefs corresponding to the true parameter values regardless of initial conditions. But it is straightforward from the above observations establish the next result:

Limits of Learning (continued)

Proposition

Suppose \mathcal{I} is arbitrarily large. Then for any $\{\mu_{i\infty}\}_{i\in\mathcal{I}} \in M^(\tau_\infty)$ such that τ_∞ is the median of $\tau(\mu_{i\infty})$, there exists a set of initial conditions such that there will be convergence to beliefs $\{\mu_{i\infty}\}_{i\in\mathcal{I}}$ and tax rate τ_∞ with probability one.*

- This proposition implies that a society may converge and remain in equilibria with very different sets of beliefs and these beliefs will support different amounts of redistribution.
- Different amounts of redistribution will then lead to different tax rates, which “self confirm” these beliefs because behavior endogenously adjusts to tax rates.

Interpretation

- Therefore, according to this model, one could have the United States society converge to a distribution of beliefs in which most people believe that θ is high and thus vote for low taxes, and this in turn generates high social mobility, confirming the beliefs that θ is high.
- Many more Europeans believe that θ is low (and correspondingly $\pi_1 - \pi_0$ is high) and this generates more redistribution and lower social mobility.
- Neither Americans nor Europeans are being “irrational” .

Discussion

- How to interpret these results?
- Perhaps a good approximation to the formation of policemen individuals are not “hyper rational” .
- But why don't different societies learn from each other?
- How likely is this process to lead to multiple stable points?

Voting and Experimentation

- Information is in general acquired dynamically, as a result of past political choices.
- Example: Economic or social reforms
 - Reforms make winners and losers, whose identities are unknown ex ante.
 - Fernandez and Rodrik (1991): resistance to trade liberalization because of losers' fear that they will not be compensated.
- But in a dynamic context, there are new effects that make political actors even more averse to the information and experimentation.
- Strulovici (2010): two novel reasons for this:
 - Loser trap (can't return to status quo).
 - Winner frustration (can't exploit new alternative).

Illustration

- Ann, Bob and Chris go to the restaurant every week-end.
- They always choose their restaurant by majority rule.
- A new restaurant has opened.
- If any one of them could choose *alone* future restaurants, he or she would try the new one now.
- However, it is possible that all three will vote against trying this restaurant.

Illustration (continued)

- Experimentation with new alternatives is less attractive when one has to share power.
- Sharing control induces two opposite control loss effects, which have different implications.
 - *Loser trap.* If Ann and Bob like the new restaurant, they will impose it to Chris in the future, even if he does not like it.
 - *Winner frustration.* If only Ann likes the new restaurant, she will be blocked by Bob and Chris. So the “risk” of trying a new restaurant need not be rewarded even for those who do turn out to like it.
- Majority-based experimentation is also shorter than the socially efficient outcome.
- New winners induce more experimentation from remaining voters.

Model: Single Agent Problem

- Safe (S) and risky (R) actions.
- R can be good or bad. Agent type initially unknown.
- Continuous time with fixed discount rate, infinite horizon.
- At each instant, one action (S or R) is chosen.

Model: Single Agent Problem (continued)

- Payoffs:

$$S \rightarrow s > 0$$

$$R \begin{cases} \nearrow & \text{bad} : 0 \\ \searrow & \text{good} : \text{lump sums} > 0 \text{ at Poisson arrival times} \end{cases}$$

- bad (loser) < safe < good (winner).
- Bayesian updating of beliefs:

$$\frac{dp_t}{dt} = -\lambda p_t (1 - p_t)$$

where λ arrival rate of good outcome from the risky action and p_t belief at time t that risk action is good (or the agent is of good type).

Model: Single Agent Problem (continued)

- Equilibrium: Experiment up to some level of belief $p^{SD} < p^{\text{myopic}}$
- This is because of the option value of experimentation.

Model: Collective Decision-Making

- N (odd) agents.
- Publicly observed payoffs.
- Types are iid. Initially, $Prob[good] = p_0$ for all.
- Arrival times also independent across agents.
- State variables (k, p) where k is number of *sure winners*, and $p = Prop[good]$ for *unsure voters*.
- Equilibrium concept: *Markov Voting Equilibrium*
- At any time, chose the action preferred by majority (given that the same rule holds in the future).
- Equilibrium can be solved by backward induction on number of sure winners.

Markov Voting Equilibrium

- A *Majority Voting Equilibrium (MVE)* is a mapping $C : (k, p) \rightarrow \{S, R\}$ such that $C = R$ if $k > k_N = (N - 1)/2$ and $C = R$ if $k \leq k_N$ and

$$u(k, p) = pg + \lambda p[w(k + 1, p) - u(k, p)] + \lambda p(n - 1)[u(k + 1, p) - u(k, p)] - \lambda p(1 - p) \frac{\partial u}{\partial p} > s, \quad (1)$$

where u and w are the value of functions of unsure voters and sure winners when voting rule C determines future votes.

Collective Decision-Making: Structure of Equilibrium

- Now threshold belief $p^G(k)$ for stopping when there has been k people revealed to be of good type until now.
- Monotonicity: $p^G(k)$ is decreasing in k .
- Intuition: Good news for any one prompts remaining unsure voters to experiment more.
 - Why? Suppose to the contrary that experimentation stops when a new winner is observed.
 - Then, risky action pays lower expected payoffs and has no option value.
 - Therefore, experimentation was not optimal when the news arrived: contradiction.

Collective Decision-Making: Comparison

- We have that $p^G(k)$ is always greater than what social planner maximizing utilitarian welfare would choose.
- This is because of loser trap and winner frustration.

Comparative Statics

- Experimentation decreases if N increases (enough): $p(k, N)$ almost increases in N .
 - Agents behave myopically as $N \rightarrow \infty$
- For N above some threshold, agents prefer safe action even if trying risky action would immediately reveals types.

Alternative Rules

- Suppose R requires unanimous approval.
- This gets rid of the loser trap.
- However, this increases winner frustration, since R is less likely to be played in the long run.
- Which rule performs better depends on the relative strengths of the two effects.

Cycles of Conflict

- Conflict (between ethnic groups, religious groups, countries, ideologies, social classes, rival individuals) is endemic.
- Why? Part of it may be related to incorrect information (“misperceptions”) and relatedly to **fear** of actions, intentions and behavior of the other party as Thucydides emphasized long ago.
- Often continuing cycles of conflict between different groups. Partly related to information:

Group A's actions look aggressive

⇒ Group B thinks Group A is aggressive

⇒ Group B acts aggressively

⇒ Group A thinks Group B is aggressive

⇒ Group A acts aggressively . . .

Examples

- Spirals in the World Horowitz (2000) on ethnic conflict:
“The fear of ethnic domination and suppression is a motivating force for the acquisition of power as an end . . . The imminence of independence in Uganda aroused ‘fears of future ill-treatment’ along ethnic lines. In Kenya, it was ‘Kikuyu domination’ that was feared; in Zambia, ‘Bemba domination’; and in Mauritius, [‘Hindu domination’] . . .”
- Serbo-Croatian War (DellaVigna et al, 2011).
- Protestant-Catholic Conflict in Northern Ireland.
- Trade (Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales, 2009, Bottazzi, Da Rin, and Hellmann, 2011).
- Political polarization (Sunstein, 2006).

Ebbs and Flows of Conflict

- But not ever-lasting continuous conflict.
- Ethnic conflict in Africa way down in last 20 years.
- France and Germany not on brink of war, and trade a lot.
- Conflict and distrust in Balkans greatly diminished.
- Political polarization in U.S. was probably as bad or worse in first third of 20th century.

Idea for Cycles

- Once Groups A and B are both acting aggressively, aggression becomes uninformative of their true types.
- Once this happens, one group will experiment with cooperation, which causes trust to restart.
- Conflict spirals cannot last forever, because if they did the informational content of conflict would eventually dissipate.

Model

- Timing and Actions 2 groups, A and B. Time $t = 0, 1, 2, \dots$
- Overlapping generations.
- At time t , one active player: player t .
- Player t takes pair of actions $(x_t, y_t) \in \{0, 1\} \times \{0, 1\}$.
- t even \implies player t from Group A.
- t odd \implies player t from Group B.

Model: Information

- Before player t takes actions, observes noisy signal $\tilde{y}_{t-1} \in \{0, 1\}$.

$$Pr(\tilde{y}_{t-1} = 1 | y_{t-1} = 1) = 1 - \pi$$

$$Pr(\tilde{y}_{t-1} = 1 | y_{t-1} = 0) = 0.$$

- Each group is either normal or bad.
- If normal, all representatives are normal types.
- If bad, all representatives are bad types.
 $Pr(\text{bad}) = \mu_0 \in (0, \mu^*)$.

Model

- For bad player t , playing $(x_t = 0, y_t = 0)$ is dominant strategy.
- For normal player t , utility function is

$$u(x_t, \tilde{y}_{t-1}) + u(\tilde{y}_t, x_{t+1}).$$

- Assume “subgame” between neighboring players is coordination game, and $(1, 1)$ is Pareto-dominant equilibrium: $u(1, 1) > u(0, 1)$,
 $u(0, 0) > u(1, 0)$,
 $u(1, 1) > u(0, 0)$.

Equilibrium

- What happens in (sequential) equilibrium?
- Normal player t plays $x_t = 1$ if and only if $\tilde{y}_{t-1} = 1$.
- So normal player 0 plays $y_0 = 1$ if and only if μ_0 is below some threshold μ^* :

$$\mu^* \equiv \left(\frac{u(1, 1) - u(0, 0)}{u(1, 1) - u(1, 0)} \right).$$

- If normal player 1 sees $\tilde{y}_0 = 1$, learns other group is good, and plays $y_1 = 1$.
- If normal player 1 sees $\tilde{y}_0 = 0$, posterior belief that other group is bad rises to

$$\mu_1 = \frac{\mu_0}{\mu_0 + (1 - \mu_0)\pi} > \mu_0.$$

- Plays $y_1 = 0$ if and only if $\mu_1 > \mu^*$. Holds if π small.

Equilibrium (continued)

- Equilibrium Suppose up to time t normal players play $y_t = 0$ when $\tilde{y}_{t-1} = 0$.
- Then normal player t 's posterior when $\tilde{y}_{t-1} = 0$ is

$$\mu_t = \frac{\mu_0}{\mu_0 + (1 - \mu_0)(1 - (1 - \pi)^t)}.$$

- Observe that μ_t is decreasing in t , $\mu_t \rightarrow \mu_0$ as $t \rightarrow \infty$, and $\mu_0 < \mu^*$.
- But this implies that there is first time t at which $\mu_t \leq \mu^*$. Call it T .
- Normal player T plays $y_T = 1$ **even if he sees a bad signal**.
- But now normal player $T + 1$ faces same problem as player 1.
- This implies a **cycle of conflict**.

Equilibrium (continued)

Proposition

Assume $\mu_0 < \mu^*$ and $\mu_t \neq \mu^*$ for all t .

Then the baseline model has a unique sequential equilibrium.

It has the following properties:

- At every time $t \neq 0 : \text{mod} : T$, normal player t plays good actions $(x_t = 1, y_t = 1)$ if she gets the good signal and plays bad actions $(x_t = 0, y_t = 0)$ if she gets the bad signal.
- At every time $t = 0 : \text{mod} : T$, normal player t plays the good action $x_t = 1$ toward player $t - 1$ if and only if she gets the good signal, but plays the good action $y_t = 1$ toward player $t + 1$ regardless of her signal.
- Bad players always play bad actions $(x_t = 0, y_t = 0)$.

Equilibrium (continued)

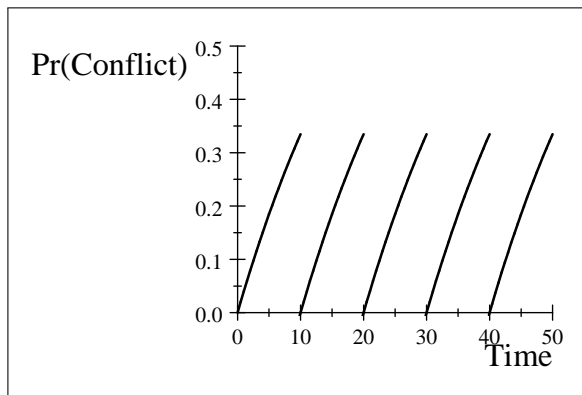


Figure: A Cycle of Conflict

Equilibrium (continued)

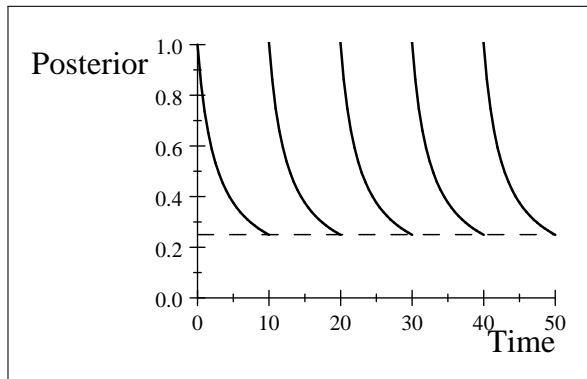


Figure: The Corresponding Cycle of Beliefs

Comparative Statics

Proposition

The cycle period T has the following properties:

- *It is increasing in $u(0, 0)$, decreasing in $u(1, 0)$, and decreasing in $u(1, 1)$.*
- *It is increasing in the prior probability of the bad type μ_0 .*
- *It is decreasing in the error probability π .*

Comparative Statics (continued)

Proposition

Welfare If player t 's payoff is u_t , define social welfare to be

$$\lim_{N \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{N} \sum_{t=0}^N u_t.$$

Suppose both groups are normal. Then:

- *The limit of social welfare as $\pi \rightarrow 0$ is less than the efficient level $2u(1, 1)$.*
- *For any sequence $(\pi_n, \mu_{0,n})$ converging to $(0, 0)$ as $n \rightarrow \infty$, the limit of social welfare as $n \rightarrow \infty$ equals the efficient level $2u(1, 1)$.*
- The limit of no misperception is not the same as the perfect information game because any conflict lasts so much longer in that limit.

Conclusion

- Important feedbacks between beliefs and political/public actions.
- Important high-level questions are:
 - Does the presence of political economy lead to biased or less accurate learning/belief formation?
 - Does imperfect information exacerbate political economy conflicts? Does it lead to new types of inefficiencies?
 - Are there feedback cycles leading from bad politics to bad information to bad politics?
 - How can these issues be empirically operationalized?