Funding American Democracy

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Academic Objectives

The academic objectives of the project were largely met. Students participated in a number of research projects from beginning to end. Two students were included as coauthors on papers that were eventually published in academic journals. Other students participated throughout the process as research assistants. They collected data from archival sources, scraped data from webpages, merged a variety of existing datasets using computer software programs, and conducted analysis of these data using statistical programs.

Mentoring Environment

I worked intensively with a number of students on this project, many of whom highlighted their experience as a research assistant on these projects to help them gain admission to graduate programs at other universities, outside scholarships, and other selective positions at BYU and beyond. All of the mentoring took place at BYU where we met weekly to discuss the progress of each student’s project. Each student had ownership of a separate sub-project (i.e. what did/will become an academic paper), but all of the students were aware of the work of the other students’ projects. The weekly meetings were thus designed to allow each student to report on their progress and have the other students comment and offer suggestions for future directions. In this way each student felt responsible for their particular project but was also expected to offer guidance and suggestions for the other students’ projects in the weekly meeting. I also met throughout the week outside of our official weekly lab meeting with each student as questions arose about their particular project.

Student Participation

Hayden Galloway – provided data collection of institutional features of constitutions of the early American republic. Hayden read through these documents and noted whether or not each document contained any of over 1,000 different institutional features. This dataset of features is the main data used in a paper that is currently under review at an academic journal.

Soren Schmidt – worked from beginning to end on a paper that investigates how legislators react to competitive primary elections. Soren collected data on primary election competitiveness and merged it with a dataset of legislator activities. He then conducted analysis of these data and wrote up many of the results. The final product is a coauthored paper with Soren as the equally contributing coauthor. The paper is published at American Politics Research, a well-known journal in political science.

Mandi Eatough – worked on a variety of the projects that other students worked on. She was the lead research assistant in the group and would help other students who were unsure of how to proceed with any particular assignment. She also worked with me on a project that investigated the contribution behavior of political action committees (PACs). She collected a new dataset of politicization of issues by searching through newspaper archives for mentions of political terms. She then used this dataset in a statistical model of campaign contributions. The paper is forthcoming in the Journal of Politics, one of our discipline’s top journals.
Connor Kreutz – worked on a project with both me and Professor Adam Dynes. Connor analyzed data on the frequency and correlates of state legislative preemption, when state legislatures prohibit municipalities from enacting particular legislation. He conducted a number of statistical models and wrote a report summarizing these initial results. These results are the main empirical portion of a working paper that Professor Dynes and I are presenting at the Midwest Political Science Association annual conference in Chicago, IL in April 2019.

Elizabeth Whatcott – worked on archival data collection for a project on the persistence of political power across generations. She painstakingly read through a history of the colonization of Arizona by Mormon pioneers and noted which families colonized which cities and when. The final product of this effort is a dataset of families who founded or were instrumental in the founding of most cities in Arizona. We plan to link this dataset with the current set of elected officials in Arizona to see if having ancestors who were political leaders makes a person more likely to be a current political leader. This project is still ongoing.

Rachel Finlayson – collected data about states and state legislatures so that we could create an index of similarity across states. This involved collecting information about the size of each state’s legislative chambers, the dates of each state’s legislative sessions, the number of people represented by state house and senate members, the partisan composition of the legislature, and a variety of demographic features of the population of each state.

Canyen Heimuli – collected (and is still collecting) data on Super PAC contributions to congressional candidates. Super PAC contributions are collected by the Federal Elections Commission. However, they are poorly maintained and contain a number of revisions, errors, and omissions. Canyen has combed through these data to create a complete dataset of contributions by Super PACs for several election cycles. He is then linking this data to other data about members of Congress to see what covariates are related to Super PAC contributions. He will then compare these covariates to the variables that predict contributions by traditional PACs and individuals to see if Super PACs operate with different interests than traditional PACs or individual contributors. This project is ongoing.

Scholarly Outcomes

Thus far, the grant has funded research that has led to two publications in academic journals, a paper that is under review at an academic journal, a working paper that will be presented at an academic conference (and eventually a journal), and a dataset that is being used to write an academic article/book.


Abramson, S. F., Barber, M., Pope, J. C., (2019). A Revolution of Rights in American Founding Documents. Under review. In addition to these papers, there are two other working papers that will be under review in the winter 2019 semester. Finally, the work with Canyen Heimuli will be used to write an academic article as well as a chapter of a book on campaign contributors.

Budget
Of the available MEG budget, I have spent roughly $12,500 of the total funds, all of which has gone to student wages. The remaining funds will be spent in 2019 on a combination of student wages and a survey of campaign contributors in the 2018 election.

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