17.871
Spring 2012
Group Projects

Assignment summary

Working with your assigned group, answer the question posed to you. You will give a 20-minute presentation (with 5 minutes available for questions) on your work on March 12. Your group will also turn in a nine-page written report on your project on Friday, March 16. (Please e-mail a copy to me by 5:00 pm., in one of the following formats: doc, wpf, or pdf.) The report should be in the form of a (mini) term paper meaning, among other things, that it should follow the format described by Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations.* The paper should do the following:

1. State, or re-state, the question, and discuss to whom the question is important and why.
2. Review any relevant literature you can find, either in journals or books.
3. Describe your method, including, how you measured the variables of interest (dependent and independent variables) and where you gathered the data.
4. Summarize your findings, using the appropriate figures and tables.

The nine page limit includes tables, figures, and bibliography.

Statement about Collaboration

You are encouraged to seek and extend as much help as you can, both within and between groups. I expect you to be meticulous in citing the written work of others that you use.

Grading

I will assign a letter grade to each group's project. That will be the grade you receive, plus or minus an adjustment that will be determined as follows: I will ask each member of the group to indicate the relative amount of effort each person contributed to the successful completion of the project. If someone in the group stands out as being a conspicuous over- or under-contributor to the group effort, that person's letter grade will be adjusted upward or downward as appropriate.

Project 1: Electoral Systems and the Quality of Representation

Background: Democratic countries the world over employ a wide variety of electoral systems. Citizens of democratic countries vary in how responsive they believe their leaders are to their desires. A natural question arises about whether some electoral systems are better than others in transmitting the voices of citizens to the ears of elected officials. This question is intrinsically interesting, but it has practical implications, since reformers the world over often try to change the local electoral system in order to make it more "responsive" to the people. In particular, it is commonly believed that systems that have more parties from which to choose and that employ some form of proportional representation are more responsive to citizen demands.

Question: Do citizens from countries with more political parties and that employ proportional representation in their legislative elections feel that their voices are heard more than citizens from countries with few parties and that employ plurality voting for legislatures?

Possible explanations
- *Multi-partyism.* The more parties a country has, the more they are able to populate the full array of possible issue positions. This gives voters more of a reason to believe their voices are heard in the parliament.
- *Proportional representation.* Proportional representation (PR) systems allocate seats in the legislature in proportion to the votes received throughout a geographic region, in contract to plurality systems, which allocate seats on a "winner take all" basis. Under this system, minority views are presumed to be more likely to be represented in the legislature.
- *Individual demographics and partisanship.* Certain types of people may be happier with governing institutions than others, despite the electoral system. Sometimes this will be a function of local political factors. For instance, left-leaning people in a country controlled by a liberal party may be less likely to believe the parliament is "fair" than conservative people.

Data sources
- *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.* This is a cross-national survey that asked an identical battery of questions to citizens in several dozen countries and is available through its own web site (http://www.umich.edu/~cses/). There are individual reports that document the political and partisan context of each country included in the project.

Bibliographic sources
- Christopher J. Anderson and Christine A. Guillory. 1997. "Political Institutions and Satisfaction with Democracy: A Cross-National Analysis of Consensus and Majoritarian Systems." *American Political Science Review* 91: 66–81.
- Anderson, C., Blais, A., Donovan, T., Listhaug, O., Bowler, S. 2005. *Losers' consent: Elections and democratic legitimacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Comments/hints: This project will involve the use of a large, unwieldy data set (the CSES), merging it with information gathered from other sources. You will want to meditate on whether the questions asked in the different countries actually mean the same thing, across different languages and cultures. Pick one variable as your key explanatory variable, treating other variables as controls.

Project 2: Unfamiliar Names and Congressional Elections

Question: In House elections, many voters know nothing other than the candidates' names and party affiliations. Does having a less familiar name hurt candidates in House elections?

Possible Explanations
- *Incumbency*. Incumbents tend to fare better than do challengers so you may consider controlling for incumbency.
- *District partisanship*. Districts tend to be stable in their partisanship, which researchers often measure with the average tendency to vote Democratic in recent presidential elections.
- *Ethnicity*. You may wish to control for or exclude races where one or both candidates have "ethnic" last names.

Data sources
- *Census Bureau*. Data on the frequency of names in the United States is available through the Census Bureau, e.g., http://www.census.gov/genealogy/www/data/2000surnames/index.html
- *Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research*. ICPSR has biographical data on candidates for house elections, as well as election results.
- *United States Congress, Congressional Directory*. This guide to members of the House and Senate includes election returns for every congressional district and state.

Project 3: U.S. Foreign Aid and Voting in the United Nations

Question: Why do some countries vote with the U.S. in the United Nations General Assembly, and others do not?

Possible explanations:
- *Democracies stick together.* The U.S., as the "leader of the free world," is able to pull along coalitions that are predominantly democratic.
- *Reliance on U.S. foreign aid.* Nations that receive foreign assistance from the U.S. are more likely to support the U.S. position.
- *"Anti-Americanism":* Public opinion in some countries is less favorable *to* the U.S. than in others. Knowing this, representatives of these countries to the U.N. will vote against the U.S. position more often.

Data sources:
- *"United Nations General Assembly Voting Data."* Compiled by Erik Voeten and Adis Merdzanovic and online at http://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/12379.
- *Freedom House.* An organization that annually issues a report detailing how free each country in the world is. (Note: A simple literature search will uncover many different "democracy" and "freedom" data sets out there.)
- *Statistical Abstract of the United States.* This nifty data source includes tables that detail foreign assistance given to every country on earth, for many years.

Comments/hints: First, there is the issue of measuring support. This could be a dichotomous variable (vote with the US/not with the US), a continuous variable that measures when a country supported, or another variable that takes into account the "importance" of different votes" Second, the possible explanations require some refinement. Many of the proposed explanations don't have "natural" indicators, so you need to think hard about how to measure them and finding the data.

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