
ZACH FREITAS-GROFF

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Department of Economics, Stanford University
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EDUCATION

2024 Ph.D. in Economics, Stanford University
DISSERTATION: *Policy Persistence and Intergenerational Tradeoffs*

2020 M.A. in Economics, Stanford University

2013 B.A. in Ethics, Politics & Economics, Yale University
Magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

Prof. B. Douglas Bernheim
Economics Department, Stanford University
650-725-8732
bernheim@stanford.edu

Prof. Matthew Gentzkow
Economics Department, Stanford University
650-721-8375
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Prof. Ran Abramitzky
Economics Department, Stanford University
650-723-9276
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Prof. Caroline Hoxby
Economics Department, Stanford University
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RESEARCH AND TEACHING FIELDS

Public Economics, Political Economy, Behavioral/Experimental Economics

WORKING PAPERS

Persistence in Policy: Evidence from Close Votes ([Job-Market Paper](#))

Policy choices sometimes appear stubbornly persistent, even when they become politically unpopular or economically damaging. This paper offers the first systematic empirical investigation of how persistent policy choices are, defined as whether an electorate's or legislature's decisions affect whether a policy is in place decades later. I create a new dataset that tracks the historical record of more than 800 policies that were the subjects of close U.S. state referendums since 1900. In a regression discontinuity design, I estimate that passing a referendum increases the chance a corresponding policy is operative 20, 40, or even 100 years later by over 40 percentage points. I collect additional data on U.S. Congressional legislation and international referendums and use existing data on state legislation to document similar policy persistence for a range of institutional environments, cultures, and topics. I develop a theoretical model to distinguish between possible causes of persistence, and I present evidence that persistence arises because policies' salience systematically declines over time. Calibrating my model suggests that many policies remain in place—or not—regardless of popular support.

Paying It Forward (and Back): An Experiment on Sequential Giving

with Ben Grodeck, Oliver Hauser, and Johannes Lohse

Within both families and states, important policies involve pay-it-forward schemes where one cohort invests in the next cohort (e.g., via education), sometimes with an expectation of a future reward (e.g., retirement support). We study whether altruism, reciprocity, social information, or self-interested equilibriums can sustain forward transfers in an experimental setting. A sequence of players choose whether to allocate some of an endowment to be multiplied and given to a future, prior, or contemporary player. By varying the option set and the information set, we can separate possible mechanisms for sustaining investment in the future. We find that the ability to give back increases the willingness to give forward, but a social preference for reciprocity rather than individual rationality drives the result.

The Effects of Large Group Meetings on the Spread of COVID-19: The Case of Trump Rallies

with B. Douglas Bernheim, Nina Buchmann, and Sebastián Otero. SIEPR Working Paper No. 20-043.

We investigate the effects of large group meetings on the spread of COVID-19 by studying the impact of eighteen Trump campaign rallies. To capture the effects of subsequent contagion within the pertinent communities, our analysis encompasses up to ten post-rally weeks for each event. Our method is based on a collection of regression models, one for each event, that capture the relationships between post-event outcomes and pre-event characteristics, including demographics and the trajectory of COVID-19 cases, in similar counties. We explore a total of 24 procedures for identifying sets of matched counties. For the vast majority of these variants, our estimate of the average treatment effect across the eighteen events implies that they increased subsequent confirmed cases of COVID-19 by more than 250 per 100,000 residents. Extrapolating this figure to the entire sample, we conclude that these eighteen rallies ultimately resulted in more than 30,000 incremental confirmed cases of COVID-19. Applying county-specific post-event death rates, we conclude that the rallies likely led to more than 700 deaths (not necessarily among attendees).

- Media: NYT, WaPo, Reuters, USA Today, Forbes, The Guardian, CNBC, CBS, Saturday Night Live.

WORK IN PROGRESS

Positive Time Preference and Intergenerational Equity

In an incentivized survey experiment, respondents allocate resources over time for other people in different age cohorts. In incentivized scenarios, respondents choose how many meals to the homeless and how much clean water gets donated now or in twenty years. I use these choices to estimate a social discount rate consistent with respondents' choices, which is modestly negative and indicates little preference for earlier compared to later generations. To better understand the shape of respondents' intergenerational equity views, I present respondents with a series of choices about how to divide allocate consumption across two time periods for themselves, another person or for two different people, one early and one late. Respondents' decisions indicate indifference between giving a dollar to an early person and a dollar for a later person but strongly prefer a dollar earlier for themselves or another person. Additional decisions show that people systematically ignore certain efficiency considerations when thinking about intergenerational equity, behaving in a manner inconsistent with conventional approaches to intertemporal social welfare.

Interventionist Preferences and the Welfare state: The Case of In-Kind Nutrition Assistance

with Sandro Ambuehl, B. Douglas Bernheim, and Tony Fan

Poverty assistance is often administered in-kind even though cash transfers might raise recipients' welfare more effectively. We characterize the political economy constraint that paternalistic motives impose on the welfare system. In our experiment, a representative sample of U.S. citizens reveals their motives by deciding whether to constrain real U.S. food stamp recipients' choices between in-kind donations and cash equivalents we disburse. The modal respondent (40%) imposes the strictest possible constraints, while 30% impose no constraints. Hence, the majority's behavior is consistent with deontological motives rather than trade-off thinking. Yet, because of biased beliefs about recipient preferences, respondents underestimate the restrictiveness of their interventions, suggesting that they are partly misguided. Overall, respondents' goal is not to ensure sufficient healthy nutrition, but to prevent consumption of items deemed inappropriate. While respondents reveal racial and gender stereotypes in various survey questions, neither donor nor recipient demographics have substantial effects on restriction decisions, though restrictions increase with respondents' political conservatism. In-experiment behavior correlates strongly with views about government policy.

The Inelasticity of Meat Consumption?

with Carl Meyer

The past decades have seen a number of new policies and food technology businesses concerned with alleviating animal welfare or environmental impacts of animal agriculture. We study whether there is evidence that social changes are driving a change in consumer behavior by examining real grocery purchases matched with machine-scanned label data. We find that meat consumption has been at its highest in recent years, consistent with prior observations, but we offer the first observational evidence that a growing share of the population is purchasing fewer or no meat and other animal products. As partial evidence that meat consumption may be less deep-seated than some argue, we examine people who move to show that consumption of animal products quickly shifts toward behavior typical of the destination region, even after controlling for price. We finally examine potential causes of this change and show that while more consumers are buying newly available substitutes, this is too small a share of the population to account for the bulk of the recent change in behavior.

PUBLICATIONS

Shackelford, Gorm E. et al. "Accumulating evidence using crowdsourcing and machine learning: A living bibliography about existential risk and global catastrophic risk." *Futures* 116 (2020): 102508.

Groff, Zach, and Yew-Kwang Ng. "Does suffering dominate enjoyment in the animal kingdom? An update to welfare biology." *Biology & Philosophy* 34.4 (2019): 40.

GRANTS AND AWARDS

Graduate

2023	IRiSS Dissertation Fellowship, Schultz Dissertation Support Fund, Leonard W. Ely and Shirley R. Ely Graduate Student Fellowship, Hawley-Shoven Fellowship
2022	Forethought Foundation Research Grant, Food Systems Research Fund Research Grant
2019	Global Priorities Fellowship
2018	National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship

Undergraduate

2009-2013 Wrexham Prize (top essay in social sciences), Orrick Prize (top essay in Ethics, Politics & Economics), Liman Public Interest Law Fellowship, Yale Public Service Research Grant

PRESENTATIONS

2023 The Political Economics of Environmental Sustainability Conference, Global Priorities Conference
2022 Stanford Institute for Theoretical Economics, Global Priorities Institute Forecasting Workshop
2021 Society for Benefit-Cost Analysis Annual Conference
2020 Berkeley-Stanford Student Behavioral Economics Conference
2019 Global Priorities Conference, Effective Altruism Global San Francisco

TEACHING AND MENTORSHIP

2023 Teaching Assistant for Marcel Clerici-Arias, Stanford University, Behavioral Economics Academic Mentor, Global Priorities Institute Open Student Workshop
2021 Stanford Effective Altruism Fellowship Facilitator

RELEVANT POSITIONS

2022 Senior Programme Associate for Global Priorities Research, Longview Philanthropy
2019-2020 Research Assistant for B. Douglas Bernheim, Stanford University
2017-2018 Senior Research Analyst for Dean Karlan, Global Poverty Research Lab, Kellogg School, Northwestern University
2016-2017 Senior Research Analyst for Dean Karlan, Innovations for Poverty Action
2014-2016 Research Analyst for Dean Karlan, Innovations for Poverty Action

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Referee for *Journal of Development Economics*.
Co-Organizer of Economics of Animal Welfare session, Stanford Institute for Theoretical Economics
Mentor in the 2023 Open Student Workshop, Global Priorities Institute

SKILLS

Coding : Stata, Matlab, Python, R, html, CSS, JavaScript

Language: French, Portuguese, Spanish