Research Agenda

My broad research interests include state and legislative politics. More specifically, I am interested in using the analytical advantages of the states to look at national level phenomenon. My specific interests involve campaign finance and the relationship between contributors or interest groups and recipients given different institutional and policy differences. Additionally, I am very interested in legislative committees, the relationship between executives and legislatures, divided government, and voter turnout.

Dissertation: “The Timing of Campaign Contributions in State Legislatures: An Examination of the Motives and Strategies of Contributors”

Abstract: A great deal of work has been done on campaign finance at the national level, however, research at the state level is relatively sparse. My dissertation attempts to fill this void in the literature by examining the motivations of contributors to state legislators. Two major motivations of contributors are discussed through the literature –universalistic contributors, who give with the hope of influencing election outcomes, and particularistic contributors who give with the hope of influencing legislative votes. The primary hypothesis is that proximity to the general election will be the primary factor in explaining contributions patterns in state legislatures; however, proximity to a major legislative vote of interest to the PAC will also be significant in explaining contribution patterns in state legislatures. Additionally, the dissertation examines the impact of restrictions on contributions during the legislative session on campaign contribution patterns. I use campaign contribution data collected by the National Institute on Money in State Politics and select twenty five bills in nine states to test the primary hypothesis using a contributor fixed effects model to test for increased or decreased levels of contributions for each contributor given proximity to the election and legislative votes on importance to the contributor. The bills selected include a variety of different issues including the minimum wage and various health care issues. The results indicate that contributions increase across all states in the two months prior to the general and primary elections and that proximity to the election is the most important factor in explaining campaign contributions in state legislatures. In 24% of all cases in the study there was direct evidence that interest groups were attempting to influence the outcome of important legislative votes. Additionally, an increase in contributions close to a major legislative vote was found in 77% of the cases in which all contributions were allowed during the legislative session indicating that interest groups are highly active in attempting to influence policy outcomes. An additional examination of contribution patterns indicates that PACs shift their contributions to prior to the beginning of the legislative session when faced with legal restrictions on contributions during the legislative sessions. My research contributes to our understanding of the motives of campaign contributors and their actions when faced with legal restrictions on their contributions. This research helps us to be better informed of the actions of interest groups thus helping to make better decisions in reforming current campaign finance laws.
Other Current Research

In addition to my dissertation research I am also involved in several other research projects at this time. First, I am involved in several research projects on Committee Outliers in state legislatures. This research has resulted publications in Legislative Studies Quarterly and State Politics and Policy Quarterly. These research projects examine the question of whether committees in state legislators are preference outliers or if they are representative of their parent chamber. The findings of this research support the informational model of committee composition.

I am also currently involved in a research project that examines the success of governors in enacting their legislative agendas which we plan to submit for publication very soon. This research uses state of the state addresses by governors to determine their legislative agendas and newspaper and legislative searches to determine success. The findings reveal that governors have been extremely successful in passing their agenda with governors on average passing more than 70% of their agenda. This success is only slightly diminished when divided government is present with governors still being successful over 60% of the time. Additionally, when examining success by policy area governors are least successful in passing tax policies with 55% of proposals being passed and most successful in the area of environmental policy with 83% of proposals being passed.

Future Research Projects

Additionally, there are other research projects I hope to work on in the future. Future planned projects include previous research I want to revisit as well as new projects I hope to undertake. Previously, I have done some work on divided government and its impact on the passage of legislative in state legislatures and I hope to continue that work soon. This research suggests that divided government in state legislatures does not have the major impact of the passage of legislation that one might expect. Previous research has found that despite what we may expect governors do not use the veto a lot more frequently under divided government. I want to more fully develop this research to determine how legislators change their legislative agendas in the face of divided government in the effort to more fully explain my previous findings.

I also want to update work I have done on the Texas Early Voting Law in which I found that early voting had little effect on increasing voter turnout. I hope to update the study of Texas as well as expand this research to other states that now have early voting provisions in their law. Additionally, I want to revisit research I have done on the use of seniority in the selection of committee chairs in which I found that party change results in a greater adherence to the use in seniority in committee selection while a change in the speaker results in a decrease in the use of seniority in making committee assignments. I hope to be able to expand this research across more states in the future.

In addition to continuing work on previous projects I hope to start on several new projects. First, I want to attempt to create a better measurement of legislative
professionalism that recognizes that professionalism changes and therefore I hope to create a yearly measurement of professionalism. Finally, I hope to examine party cohesiveness in state legislatures as well as the effectiveness of faith based programs in future research projects.