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What Are Your Most Underappreciated Works?: Second Tranche of Responses

Econ Journal Watch

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

prologue by Daniel B. Klein

At a scholar's Scholar Profile page at [Google Scholar](#)—for example [this one for Angus Deaton](#)—one finds a list of the scholar's publications, the citation count for each, and the scholar's h-index. The h-index is the largest number b such that b publications have at least b citations.

We posted an [open invitation](#) to scholars working primarily in the social sciences and/or humanities with at least 4,000 Google Scholar citations, asking them to identify one or two publications with publication date 2012 or prior, for which the citation count is lower than their present h-index, that they consider underappreciated. We encouraged them to remark briefly on why they selected the publication, and to provide a link to it.

We believed that this project would be useful, first, because a scholar herself is likely to be a good judge of what work of hers is underappreciated and therefore this project will alert people to works worthy of greater attention, and, second, because the selection she makes here will inform understandings of that scholar herself.

In the September 2022 issue of *Econ Journal Watch* we published a first tranche of responses received from Doug Allen, Niclas Berggren, Christian Bjørnskov, Peter Boettke, Nick Bostrom, Bryan Caplan, Joshua Gans, Terri Griffith, Zoe Hilton, Dan Klein, Douglas Noonan, Michael Ostrovsky, Sam Peltzman, Eric Rasmusen, Paul Rubin, Steve Sheffrin, Stefan Voigt, and Richard Wagner ([link](#)).

Here now are additional responses from Andrew Gelman, Robert Kaestner, Robert A. Lawson, George Selgin, Ilya Somin, and Alexander Tabarrok.

response from Andrew Gelman

Gelman, Andrew. 2004. Treatment Effects in Before-After Data. In *Applied Bayesian Modeling and Causal Inference from an Incomplete Data Perspective*, ed. A. Gelman and X. L. Meng, 195–202. London: Wiley.

It is standard practice to fit regressions using an indicator variable for treatment or control; the coefficient represents the causal effect, which can be elaborated using interactions. My article from 2004 argues that this default class of models is fundamentally flawed in considering treatment and control conditions symmetrically. To the extent that a treatment “does something” and the control “leaves you alone,” we should expect before-after correlation to be higher in the control group than in the treatment group. But this is not implied by the usual models.

My article presents three empirical examples from political science and policy analysis demonstrating the point. The article also proposes some statistical models. Unfortunately, these models are complicated and can be noisy to fit with small datasets. It would help to have robust tools for fitting them, along with evidence from theory or simulation of improved statistical properties. I still hope to do such work in the future, in which case perhaps people will see in this work the merit that I am hoping it has.

response from Robert Kaestner

Kaestner, Robert, and Jeffrey H. Silber. 2010. Evidence on the Efficacy of Inpatient Spending on Medicare Patients. *Milbank Quarterly* 88(4): 560–594. [Link](#)

The abstract, from 2010, follows: It is widely believed that a significant amount, perhaps as much as 20 to 30 percent, of health care spending in the United States is wasted... This article uses Medicare claims data to study the association between inpatient spending and the thirty-day mortality of Medicare patients admitted to hospitals between 2001 and 2005 for surgery (general, orthopedic, vascular) and medical conditions (acute myocardial infarction [AMI], congestive heart failure [CHF], stroke, and gastrointestinal bleeding). Estimates from the

analysis indicated that except for AMI patients, a 10 percent increase in inpatient spending was associated with a decrease of between 3.1 and 11.3 percent in thirty-day mortality, depending on the type of patient. Although some spending may be inefficient, the results suggest that the amount of waste is less than conventionally believed, at least for inpatient care.

response from Robert A. Lawson

Lawson, Robert A., and Jayme S. Lemke. 2012. Travel Visas. *Public Choice* 153: 17–36. [Link](#)

Travel visas seem to really have big effects but very little attention goes to this policy.

response from George Selgin

Selgin, George, and John L. Turner. 2011. Strong Steam, Weak Patents, or the Myth of Watt’s Innovation-Blocking Monopoly, Exploded. *Journal of Law and Economics* 54(4): 841–861. [Link](#)

The patent that James Watt and Matthew Boulton secured, and then had extended, for Watt’s external condenser, is often treated as Exhibit A in arguments to the effect that industrial patents hinder innovation. Historians and others often say that, in this case, the patent delayed the advent of high-pressure steam technology. The hitch in this argument, John Turner and I point out, is that high-pressure engines don’t require condensers, separate or otherwise—a point surprising numbers of economic historians appear to have overlooked. The truth, we explain, is that high-pressure steam technology was considered too dangerous to toy with—Watt actually tried to have it outlawed. It was only for the sake of *evading* Boulton and Watt’s patent that Richard Trevithick risked experimenting with high-pressure steam, after others had given it up as hopeless. In short, far from hindering the development of ultimately superior and, eventually, safe high-pressure steam technology, Boulton and Watt’s patent actually served, inadvertently, to inspire it.

response from Ilya Somin

Somin, Ilya. 2011. What if *Kelo v. City of New London* Had Gone the Other Way? *Indiana Law Review* 45: 21–39. [Link](#)

The article challenges the conventional wisdom on the impact of one of the Supreme Court’s most controversial modern rulings, which held that government could take property for private “economic development.” Some have suggested that, because defeat led to a major political backlash against eminent domain abuse, the decision actually aided the cause of property rights protection. I argue that property rights advocates would have been better off had they won the case. In addition, I develop a more general framework for using counterfactual analysis to assess the impact of court decisions. The latter is relevant far beyond the specific context of the *Kelo* case.

response from Alexander Tabarrok

Tabarrok, Alexander. 2013. Private Education in India: A Novel Test of Cream Skimming. *Contemporary Economic Policy* 31(1): 1–12. [Link](#)

Students in private schools often outperform their counterparts in public schools. But what drives this difference, superior teaching or selective admission of high-performing students? If selective admission (or ‘cream skimming’) is the explanation for the higher scores on standardized tests, then the average test score across all students—both public and private—should remain constant as the share of private schooling increases. Just shuffling students around wouldn’t change the average. But if better teaching is the explanation, the average score should increase as more students attend private schools. I test this hypothesis in India, a country where the percentage of students in private schools varies dramatically between districts—from as low as 5% to as high as 70–80%. The public-private average score increase as the share of students in private schools increases, suggesting that better teaching methods are the driving factor.

It’s simple, but I think telling. I hope the paper finds its audience. Private schooling in India *per se* is important.

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