Economia Politica
https://doi.org/10.1007/s40888-025-00366-1

ORIGINAL PAPER

Public choice in times of declining democracy

Bruno S. Frey[1,2] · **Andre Briviba**[2,3]

Received: 9 May 2023 / Accepted: 9 February 2025

Abstract
A marked decline of democratic institutions and states, as well as the number of people living in such countries, has been observed over the recent years. Venezuela, Turkey, and even the US, are examples of this trend. Strikingly, we argue, that also the importance of Public Choice, analysing the interplay of incentives, institutions, and politics has decreased, although immensely important for the study of democracy and politics. While the decline in democracy is well documented, the same is not true for the decline of Public Choice. This paper empirically presents the development over time of Public Choice (and related approaches such as Political Economics or Constitutional Economics) using several different measurement approaches. Scholarly attention to Public Choice increased strongly from the seventies to the beginning of the 21st century and, since then, markedly decreased. Several possible reasons for the decline are discussed, such as a sense of exhaustion with a particular approach or a new *zeitgeist*. Several possibilities to overcome the paradoxical situation of an area in need of analysis and the fall of a respective analytical approach, Public Choice, are proposed.

Keywords Public choice · Constitutional economics · Political economics · Political economy · Political science · Economics

JEL Classification B41 · B52 · H80 · N01

✉ Bruno S. Frey
bruno.frey@bsfrey.ch

Andre Briviba
andre.briviba@gmail.com

1 Department of Economics, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland

2 CREMA–Center for Research in Economics, Management, and the Arts, Zurich, Switzerland

3 University of Fribourg, Bd. de Pérolles 90, 1700 Fribourg, Switzerland

Published online: 29 May 2025

1 Democracy and public choice

Two major and paradoxical concerns motivate this paper: The number of democratic states and the number of people living in such countries, have been in decline over the last years. Similarly, the importance of Public Choice has also decreased. The first concern has been empirically well documented. For instance, according to Our World Data, Herre and Roser (2022) write: "[…] the leading approaches to measuring democracy indicate […] that the world has become less democratic in recent years. Democracy is in decline, regardless how we measure it." To cite just one other extensive study, the Economist Intelligence Unit (2021) Democracy Index based on 167 states and 60 indicators states: "Democracy experienced its biggest annual decline since 2010, when the global financial crash led to major setbacks. […] The index fell to its lowest level since the Index began in 2006, and it declined for all but one region in the world." The number of people living in a democracy fell from 3.9 billion in 2017 to 2.3 billion in 2021. Examples of particular countries are Venezuela, China, Myanmar, Afghanistan and Turkey. Even the United States was downranked from "full democracy" to "flawed democracy" as Americans' trust in governmental institutions eroded.

In view of these striking changes in political regimes it is surprising that the Public Choice approach today is less prominent than it used to be some years back. While one might expect that the erosion of democratic institutions would generate renewed academic interest in governance and accountability, democratic backsliding imposes constraints that disproportionately affect Public Choice research. Authoritarian-leaning governments frequently restrict access to politically sensitive data, weaken transparency laws, and impose institutional pressures on scholars investigating rent-seeking, government inefficiencies, and political decision-making. Unlike political economy, which can draw on historical and institutional analyses, Public Choice relies on transparency in government records and disclosure mechanisms. As these sources become increasingly restricted, empirical Public Choice research becomes more difficult, reducing its feasibility and impact. Public Choice was institutionalized in 1963 when James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock founded the Public Choice Society, and when in 1966 Tullock established the Public Choice journal (initially called Papers in Non-Market Decision-Making). Among the best known contributions are Buchanan and Tullock's (1962) book on constitutional economics, Olson (1965) on interest groups, Niskanen (1971) on public bureaucracy, and Ostrom (1990) on governing the commons.[1] The approach gained further attention when James Buchanan received the Nobel Prize in economics in 1986, and Elinor Ostrom in 2009. Mueller's (2003) survey of the field extensively documents that Public Choice is well suited to study changes in democracy and authoritarianism.

The aim of our paper is to analyse the rise and decline of Public Choice over time. To this end, we use the search term "Public Choice" on the database *Web of Science* and citations of important works of Public Choice on *Scopus*. Additionally,

[1] Important predecessors such as Borda (1781), Condorcet (1785), rediscovered by Black (1948) on voting rules; Wicksell (1896/1969) on institutions and unanimity, Arrow (1950) and Sen (1966) on the impossibility theorem.

we analyse different measures of the importance of the academic journal *Public Choice* on Scopus. Finally, we compare the trends of Public Choice to other similar approaches and analyse the usage of typical concepts related to Public Choice on Google Ngram. The empirical analysis shows a clear picture: The importance of Public Choice rose strongly until the 2000s, followed by a marked decline until today. We provide possible explanations for this development and try to show what could be done to make Public Choice more important again.

It might well be argued that the basic idea and approach of Public Choice today is applied under different names. "Constitutional Political Economy" or "Conditional Economics" is an important part of Public Choice, with Brennan and Buchanan's (1985) book being a leading example. The specific topics of Constitutional Economics have been discussed by Rowley (2004) and Vanberg (2005). A closely related approach to Public Choice is "Political Economics". Major contributions are Persson and Tabellini (1999, 2002), Alesina (1987), Alesina and Tabellini (1990), Alesina and Rosenthal (1996), Alesina and Spolaore (1997). Its relationship to Public Choice is extensively and carefully discussed in Blankart and Koester (2006, with many references to the literature). One of the reasons for this division of different approaches from Public Choice might be that the Virginia School of Political Economy, where Public Choice originated (Mueller, 2012), by some scholars is considered to be politically (Constantinescu et al. 2015) right-wing or neo-liberal (Paldam, 1993). Another name used is "Modern Political Economy" (Frey, 1978), which is broader than Public Choice and also deals with unorthodox authors such as Hirschmann (1970). The term "New Political Economy" is mostly used for Marxist approaches, which differ fundamentally from Public Choice. "Political Economy" originated in the 18th century moral philosophy with Adam Smith, David Ricardo, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill as major founders. French physiocrats such as François Quesnay and Jacques Turgot proposed similar ideas. In Germany, Friedrich List and Karl Marx should be mentioned. The name "Political Economy" normally designates what today is called "Economics"; it therefore is not considered here as it is not a variant of the Public Choice approach.

The development of subfields within economics has been extensively studied, with scholars highlighting the role of individuals and institutional settings (e.g., Wagner, 2004). The most extensive empirical analysis has been provided by Claveau and Gingras (2016; see also Truc et al., 2023). This contribution visualizes the development of various economics clusters on the basis of more than 400,000 documents from the 1950s to 2024. The joint work of Claveau and Gingras (2016), the causes for the rise, existence, and decline of specific subfields in economics journals are more deeply focused on the period 1956 to 2014.

A central theme in this literature is the increasing specialization and fragmentation of economic research. Davis (2019) analyzes the centrifugal forces that push scholars toward niche areas, leading to fragmentation and a decline in pluralism. A decline in pluralism and reinforced disciplinary silos is also observed by D'Ippoliti (2020). The author argues that this development negatively affects economic research. The History of Economic Ideas is the subject of Marcuzzo (2024) and is based on data from 1955 to 2013. The authors emphasize the dynamic nature of this subfield such as the increased use of material from archives. Goutsmedt and

Truc (2023) track the development of European macroeconomics from 1969 to 2002. They find that this subfield has been increasingly influenced by research in the United States since the 1970s but that one can still observe distinct European characteristics. The birth of Public Choice at the University of Virginia by James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock and its further development until the beginning of the 21st century are documented by Wagner (2004) while Torgler (2022) looks at the impact of Public Choice on the area of Law and Economics.

The decline or marginalization of certain research areas is rarely accidental. It is shaped by a combination of institutional constraints, shifts in dominant methodologies, increasing specialization, changing research incentives, funding biases, and intellectual gatekeeping. The growing emphasis on quantitative and technical methods often sidelines heterodox and interdisciplinary ideas, while academic publishing and citation networks reinforce existing hierarchies, limiting the space for alternative research traditions to thrive.

The case of Public Choice, a once-thriving subfield now facing diminishing influence, is analyzed with bibliometric markers. The fate of a governance critical economic subfield—particularly in an era marked by growing democratic erosion, is investigated and reasoned in this paper.

Section 2 presents evidence on the evolution of Public Choice over time, based on different measures. In Sect. 3 we provide possible explanations for the decline of Public Choice and in Sect. 4 we suggest measures to make the research agenda more important again. Section 5 concludes.

2 Development of the public choice approach

There are various possibilities to analyse the importance of a particular methodological approach over time. One option is major books devoted to the development of a field. In the case of Public Choice, the most prominent is Mueller's (2003) book Public Choice III, and more recently Butler (2012). Collections of articles, such as in the *Oxford Handbook of Public Choice* (Congleton et al., 2018), are also useful, especially as they contain introductory essays on the development of the field.

Our approach is empirical. Here again, several possibilities exist. The number of publications and the number of citations of Public Choice may be counted. There are, however, various problems connected with such an approach. In particular, the database may be too short, or only a restricted set of publications are counted (e.g. publications and citations in journals are considered while books are excluded).

Citation counts are the backbone of research evaluation and have increasingly been used for performance evaluations. Not only on an institutional level, but also individual journals are now evaluated on a citation per time frame criterion, the impact factor. Though the limits of this metric are well known, it has manifested itself as an impactful guideline in academia. One of most fundamental issues is the Goodhart's Law, stating "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure", which becomes more problematic as promotion decisions are increasingly based on this metric. In addition, the differentiation of trivial or impactful citations is not captured in this approach (Zhang et al., 2013). The generational effects of citation practices, grant trends, and the Matthew effect are all disregarded and pose a limitation to citation count analysis. Scholars engaged in evaluation and bibliometric research have been developing methods to circumvent these issues, such as co-citation, bibliographic coupling, or network analysis (Zupic & Čater, 2015). The citation count context analysis allows, for instance, to differentiate peripheral and substantial citations (Hanney et al., 2005).

We choose a simplistic approach to analyse the use of the term "Public Choice" in the *Web of Science* Database because it covers a long period and includes both journals and books. Further, we analyse citations to important works of Public Choice indexed in *Scopus*, as this database has a large collection of citations over a long period. Finally, we analyse different measures on the impact of the Public Choice journal on *Scopus*. Overall, we investigate Public Choice with the following measures to obtain a multifaceted picture: publication counts, relative publication frequencies, citation counts of seminal books, SJR-scores and citation counts to the Journal Public Choice and Ngram developments for major concepts of Public Choice. This combined approach promises to mitigate individual constraints. We believe that this approach is fruitful in deriving testable propositions for future research questioning the development of Public Choice in the context of declining democracy.

2.1 Absolute and relative counts

Figure 1 shows the number of publications over the period 1972 to 2020 in which the term "Public Choice" has been used in the two fields of research, political science, and economics, based on the Web of Science database.[2] Both curves initially reveal a strong increase over the whole period, although with some fluctuations, stagnating on average in the past decade. The trends of Public Choice in political science and economics are very similar. We interpret the absolute number of publications within a specialty as a (lagged) indicator of its relevance for scientific and societal developments. The relative share of publications within the overall discipline is rather a proxy for the relevance within the field. This proxy however is affected by various aspects such as funding, trends, and different publication delays by discipline (Ellison, 2002).

While the overall number of Public Choice related publications visibly increases, the picture looks much different when considering it as a *share* of the total publications in political science and economics. Figure 2 shows the results for Public Choice publications in political science relative to all articles in the field of "political science". The number of publications related to Public Choice increases steadily and strongly up to about 2005 and falls strongly afterward. The same figure shows the results for "Public Choice" in economics relative to all articles in the field "economics". The contribution of Public Choice in terms of publication frequency to the field of economics had a peak in the 1990s. Since then, the relative share of Public

[2] The disciplines "economics" and "political science" align with the Web of Science categories.

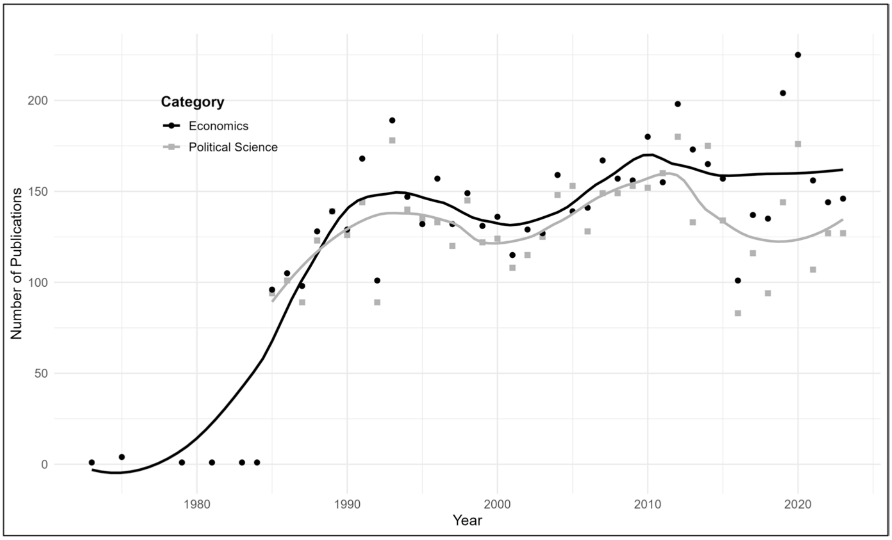

Fig. 1 Evolution of Search Term 'Public Choice' in Web of Science

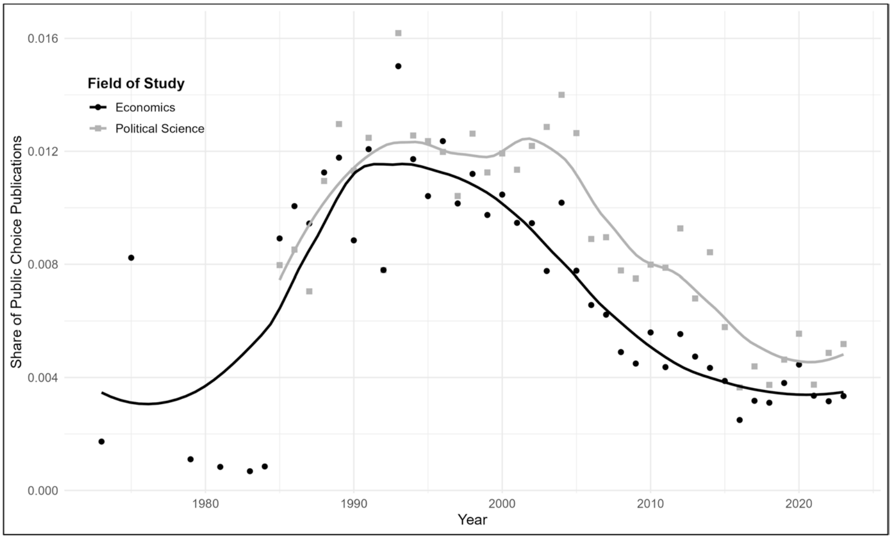

Fig. 2 Evolution of 'Public Choice' relative to 'Political Science' and 'Economics' in Web of Science

Choice contributions in economics markedly declined until 2020, when it started to stabilize.

Overall, the relative measures show a distinct hump-shaped trend of Public Choice in both political science and economics. The relative importance of Public

Choice increases strongly up to about 2005 and has since gone back to the level when it was introduced in the 1970s. The curves reveal a somewhat different picture for political science compared to economics. In the early stages of Public Choice, the field was little represented in political science but increased steadily over time until reaching a peak around 2005. The peak is somewhat later than in economics, which illustrates the more reluctant and later integration of Public Choice in political science.

2.2 Development of citations of important public choice works

Our second empirical analysis of the development of Public Choice focuses on its authors and their important works. We consider citations of important works indexed on Scopus. To identify what are "important works in Public Choice" we rely on Kurrild-Klitgaard (2018), but only focus on books (not articles). Our set of important books contains Buchanan and Tullock (1962), Riker and William (1962), Olson (1965), and Ostrom (1990). We analyse citations of those works over time for both political science and economics, resulting in two different time series per analysed book.[3] In the following figures, the grey lines represent citations in political science, and the black lines citations in economics.

The gradual shift from the prominence of books to the increasing dominance of journal articles in academia has been well-documented, largely driven by the digitization and enhanced accessibility of scholarly resources. Our analysis, which examines the citations of key Public Choice books, must be considered within this broader context. A decline in citations of these seminal works does not necessarily signal a reduction in their importance; rather, it reflects a broader trend in academia. Consequently, the observed decline in book citations mirrors a shift in scholarly communication practices rather than a diminished relevance of these foundational texts. Indeed, many fields within economics would similarly appear to be in decline if their impact were assessed based on citations to major books. Moreover, as both Cozzens (1985) and Hargens (2000) have shown, earlier citations tend to engage more deeply with the methods and findings, while later citations often refer to broader knowledge claims.

Figure 3 shows the development of citations to Buchanan and Tullock's *Calculus of Consent*. Overall, the citations to the book did not increase greatly until the beginning of the new century, when citations took off, reaching a peak in the late 2010s and thereafter declining. In its early stages, the book was cited almost as often in political science as in economics. From the 1990s, the book is cited slightly more often in political science than in economics. The first peak in citations was reached around the year 1990 after James M. Buchanan won the Nobel Prize in 1986. The lag in increased citations after the Nobel Prize can possibly be explained by the duration of the review processes for publishing in academic journals (Ellison, 2002).

[3] For economics we take the category "Economics, Econometrics and Finance". For political science we take the category "Social Science", which does not include psychology. This means, however, that this category includes more than political science.

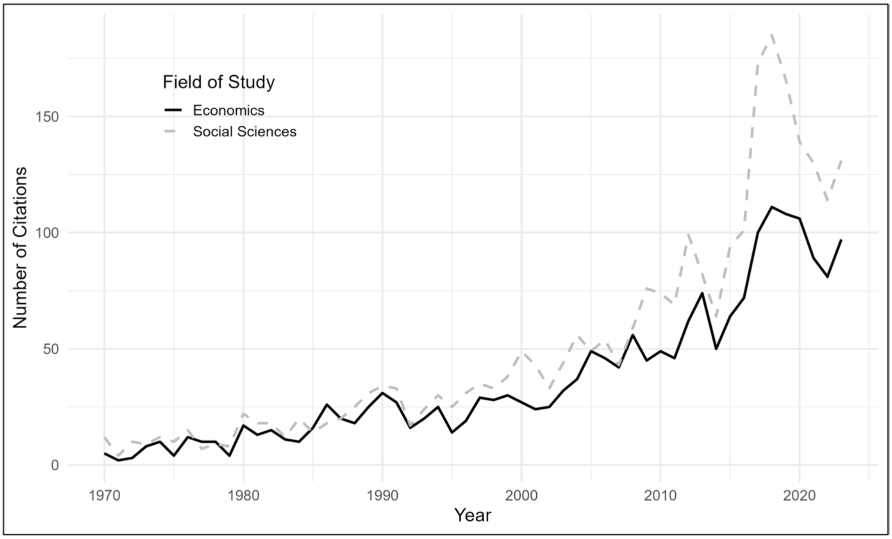

Fig. 3 Citations to Buchanan and Tullock's 'The Calculus of Consent'

Figure 4 shows the development of the citations to William Riker's *Theory of Political Coalitions*. In the early stages, his work was mostly cited by other political scientists. In political science, citations seem to have reached a peak at around 2010. In economics, the book seems not to be much cited, and citations only grew slightly starting from the early 2000s. Riker died in 1993; thereafter citations to his book started to greatly increase though they fell after the late 2010s.

Figure 5 shows the citations to Mancur Olson's *Logic of Collective Action*. Overall, a gradual increase until the early 2010s can be observed. Thereafter, citations do not grow anymore and slightly decrease. Across all stages, the book was most cited by political scientists. Starting from around the year 2000, political scientists increasingly started to take up the book. While the book was cited less often by economists, there was still an increase in citations up to the 2010s

Finally, Fig. 6 shows the citations to Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons*. Overall, citations increased over time, most strongly after the year 2000. Citations to Ostrom by political scientists are continuously larger than by economists. Citations from both disciplines grew strongly, reaching a peak in the late 2010s. Afterwards, citations are slightly decreasing, especially in political science. An increase in citations in all categories can be seen in 2010/2011, which is likely due to her winning the Nobel Prize in 2009.

It should be mentioned that all founders of Public Choice discussed so far are no longer living. Olson died in 1998, then in rapid sequence Niskanen, Ostrom, Buchanan, and Tullock (in the years 2011–2014), and most recently Downs in October 2021. An analysis of the effect of death on citations by Nobel Prize winners suggests that a "premature" death (which, in the case of academics is below 80 years of age) tends to reduce the number of subsequent citations (Frey & Gullo, 2020).

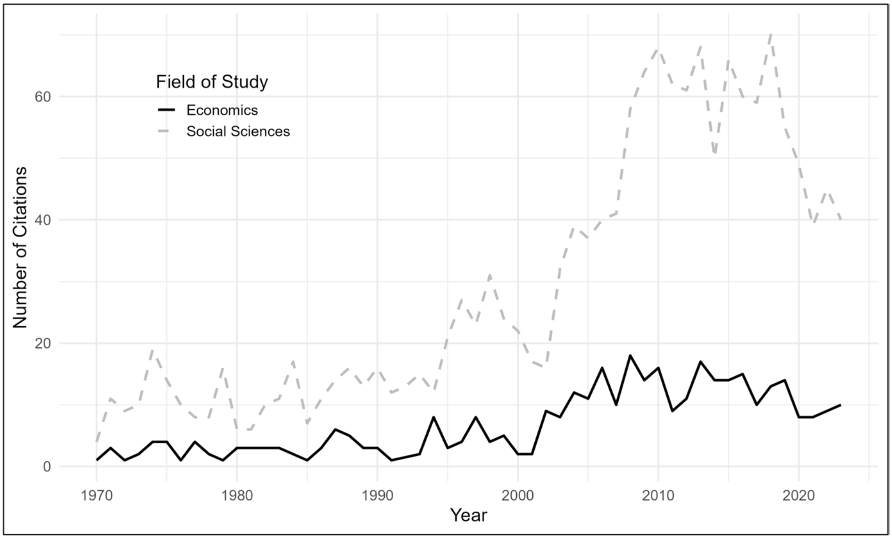

Fig. 4 Citations to Riker's 'Theory of Political Coalitions'

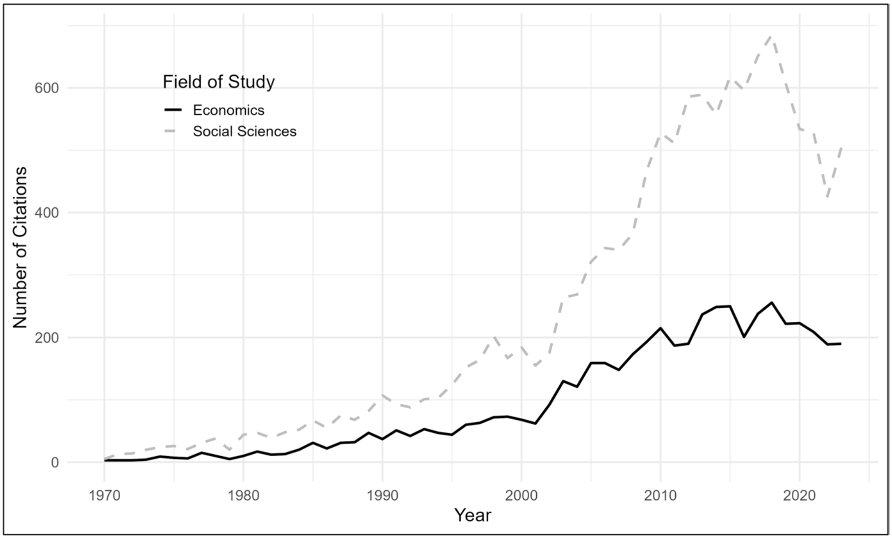

Fig. 5 Citations to Olson's 'The Logic of Collective Action'

The study found, however, Elinor Ostrom to be a major exception. This effect is also reflected in our data.

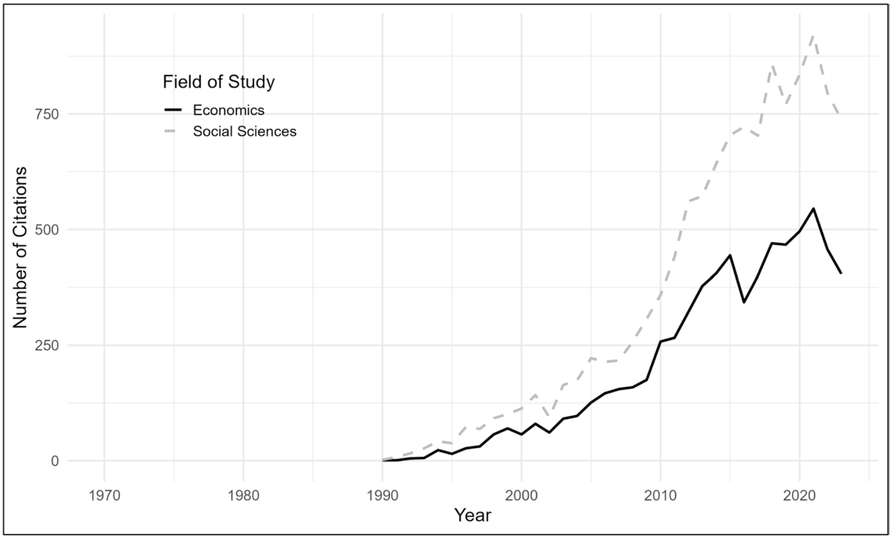

Fig. 6 Citations to Ostrom's 'Governing the Commons'

2.3 The Public Choice journal over time

Our final empirical analysis focuses on the impact of the *Public Choice* journal compared to the average of all indexed journals in political science and economics subject categories over time.[4] Two different measures, all taken from Scopus, are used. The SCImago journal rank (SJR) postulates to show a journal's general impact and has been employed in various contributions to the field of scientometrics (Scheidegger et al., 2023). It has clear benefits, such as being normalized to account for differences in citation practices across academic fields. This allows us to more accurately compare journals across the two investigated disciplines, political science and economics. However, the SJR consists of the number of citations in the past three years and is also weighed on the citing journal's prestige. The second measure, total citations, measures how often a journal is cited in a given year over the past three years.

The SJR for Public Choice starts only in 1999; it is, therefore, impossible to produce any information about the early development of Public Choice. Figure 7 shows an increase in the SJR until approximately 2013, followed by a clear decline. In 2017, it falls under the average SJR score of all economics journals. The discipline averages stay quite constant over the whole time frame.

Figure 8 shows that citations steadily increase until 2013 and thereafter decrease substantially before rising again. Citations to Public Choice experience a strong increase up to 2013 and align with the average trend of all economics journals after 2018. We attribute this pattern to a combination of individual, institutional, and

[4] Categorized according to Scimago's subject categories "Political science and Sociology" and "Economics".

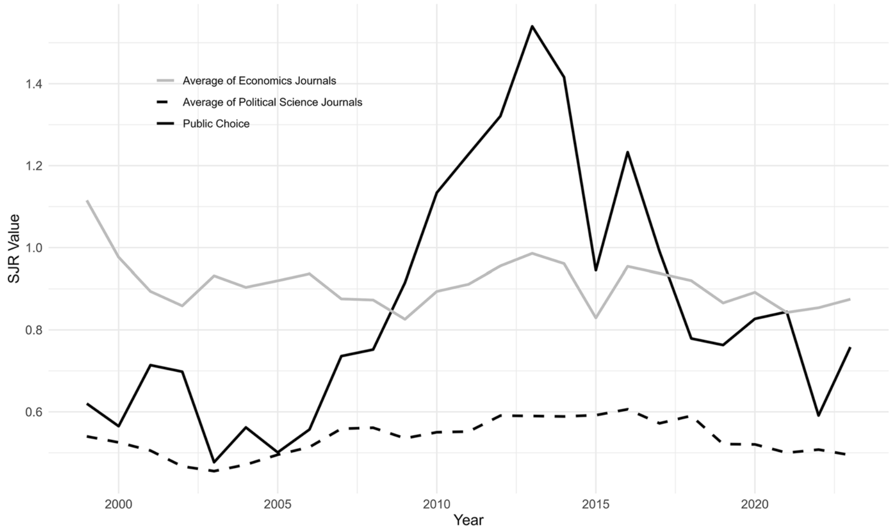

Fig. 7 SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) for the Public Choice Journal and Discipline Averages by year

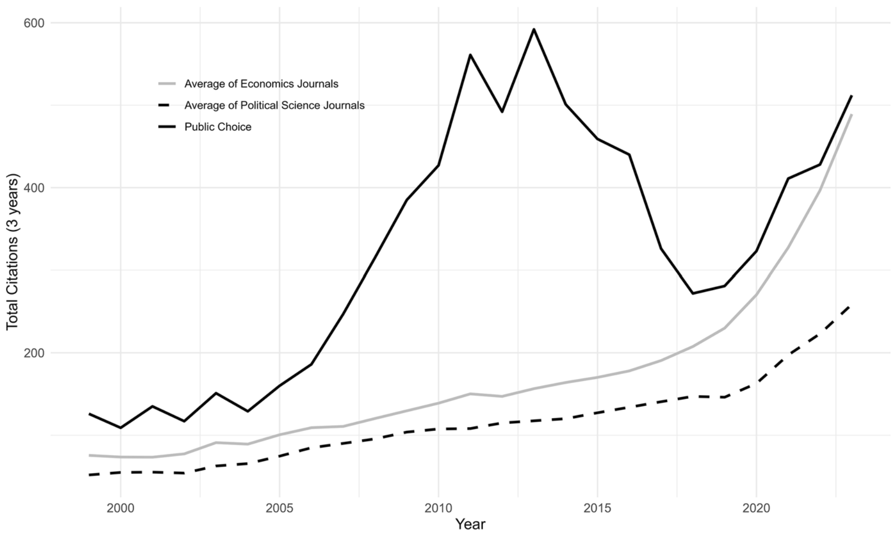

Fig. 8 Citations (3 years) for the Public Choice Journal and Discipline Averages by year

external shock influences. With respect to individual influences, Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2009. Her contributions and reputation likely contributed to citation spillovers into Public Choice. The peak leading up to 2013 aligns with Ostrom's late-career influence. Furthermore, the number of published manuscripts within the Journal of Public Choice is to be emphasized. The number of manuscripts published by the Journal of Public Choice, and the citation patterns align well with a lag of approximately 1 to 2 years. At its peak in 2012, the journal published 157 papers, while in 2016 (the minimum), only 63 were published. This suggests a supply-side effect. Whereas the development of external and internal citations does not give any explanation for the overall trend. The most reasonable shock to influence researchers' choices in this timeframe is likely the financial crisis around 2008. We assume that renewed interest in government failures and intervention, regulatory capture, and public-sector inefficiencies, fostered Public Choice themes.

3 Reasons for the decline of public choice

The reduction of attention to Public Choice shown in the sections above, does not necessarily mean that its approach and methods are no longer used. It is possible that the approach is still used but without direct reference to Public Choice or that it is used under different names, such as "political economics", "economics and politics", or "economics of politics", to mention a few. We inquire this possibility by comparing the trends of Public Choice to similar approaches, based on the yearly frequencies of these terms in the Google Ngram library. We do not include the term "Political Economy" in this graph, as it is more extensively used than any of the other terms and the term is much broader than the Public Choice approach we are interested in.

Figure 9 shows that the trend for Public Choice is very similar to the trend we found in the previous sections. The term Public Choice is still and has been more frequently used than its proximate alternatives. While "Economics and Politics" and "Political Economics" are also used relatively frequently, the terms "Economics of Politics" and "Constitutional Economics" show relatively little usage. The term "Political Economics" shows a downward trend from the mid-1990s. "Economics and Politics" shows a stagnating trend since the beginning of the current century. This graph sustains our notion that the attention to Public Choice in general has been declining. Interestingly, all three major terms show a slight upward trend in recent years.

Although we can say that there is no substitution of an alternative approach or name for Public Choice, there is the possibility that the theoretical concepts are being used without specific reference to any of these names. To control for this possibility, we plot the trend of the key concepts of the Public Choice literature over time in Fig. 10, using data from Google Ngram.[5]

The figure shows that most concepts gained importance in the 1970s, and that the interest in them has either decreased or remained stable. The term "party competition" has a first peak at the end of the 1960s. A decline in interest is followed by a renewed usage of the term from the mid 1980s onwards, with a very similar trend to the terms "rent seeking" and "median voter", which both started to gain attention around the 1970s. The terms "electoral cycle" and "political business cycle"

[5] The individual JSON files were transformed and merged together. All Ngram data depicted here uses the "English" corpus, with a smoothing gradient of 6, and the case-insensitive search option.

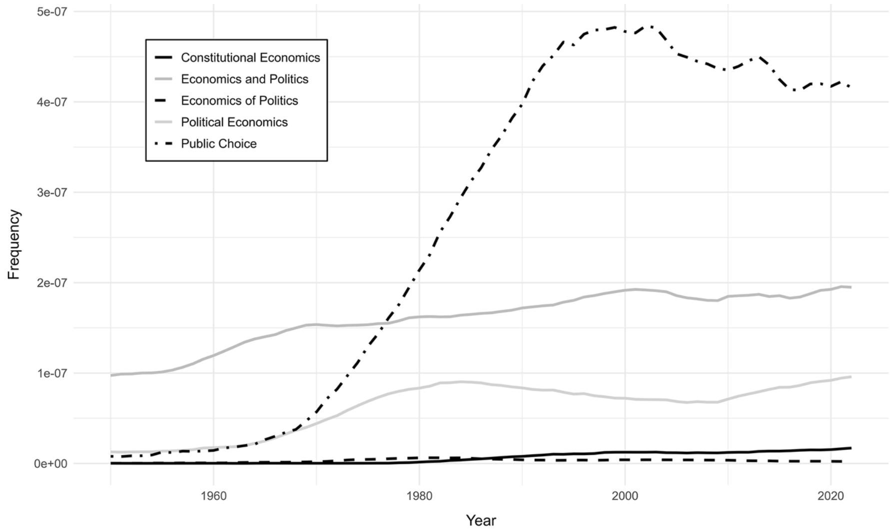

Fig. 9 Comparison of Public Choice to similar approaches

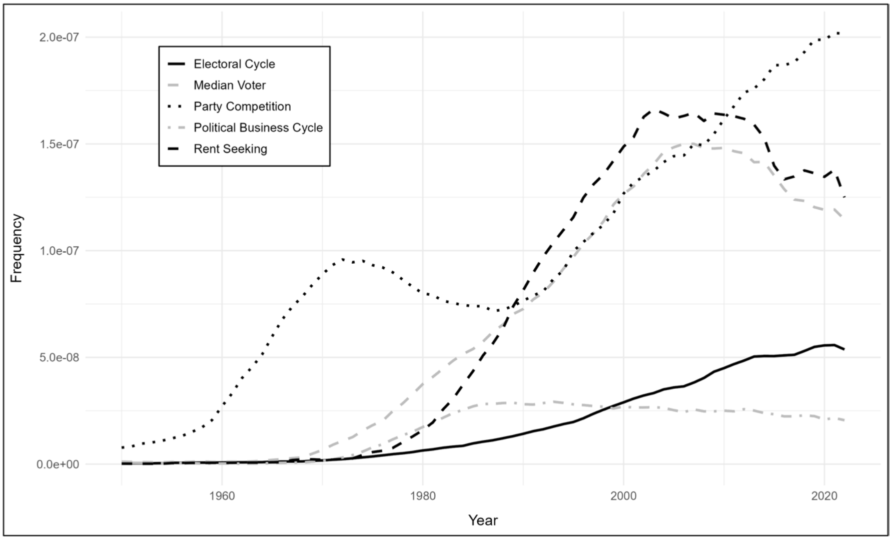

Fig. 10 Major Public Choice concepts over time

are being used relatively infrequently compared to the other concepts, although "electoral cycle" exhibits an upward trend. In contrast, "political business cycle" was more frequently used during the 1980s until the mid-1990s. "Rent seeking" and "median voter" show a marked decline since the mid-2000s. Only "party competition" has gained renewed attention over the past three decades.

As the decreasing interest in Public Choice can be taken to be a real phenomenon, it may be attributed to various causes. The arguably most important reason is the need for scholars to publish insights and results extending existing knowledge. When a new approach emerges, the academics first focus on those issues that can therewith be treated most easily; they exploit the "low hanging fruit". The longer an approach has existed, the more difficult it is to gain interesting new results. The incentives to further work with a particular approach therefore dwindle.

The time sequence of interest in a particular approach has been empirically analysed for the case of specific economic theories by Nobel Prize winner Shiller (2017). He defines narratives as "the study of the speed and dynamics of popular narratives, the stories, particularly those of human interest and emotion, and how these change through time". He empirically analyses such economic narratives and finds (p. 977) that "the contagion rate should decline with time, as the idea becomes gradually less exciting". The rise and fall are shown for specific economic theories, namely the IS-LM equilibrium, the multiplier-accelerator model, the overlapping generations model, and the real business cycle model (table 4 on p. 983). They reveal a hump-shaped development over time, suggesting an exhaustion effect. The development is similar to those observed above for Public Choice. The theories considered by Shiller are more narrowly defined than an approach like Public Choice but from the point of view of researchers needing to publish, the exhaustion effect may be considered to be similarly relevant.

This observation is supported by Hayek, who argued that the continuous usage of earlier powerful terms and concepts gradually weakens their meaning over time (Hayek, 1960). Hayek believed that truths must be reformulated in the language and context of the following generations to resonate. Thus, the exhaustion effect noted by Shiller may be not only a matter of diminishing excitement but also a reflection of the necessity to evolve foundational concepts to stay meaningful and influential within the discourse of subsequent generations. This aligns with the observed trajectory of Public Choice, which may require a reformulation in the language of the current generation to regain its prominence in contemporary scholarship.

The decrease of attention to Public Choice may also be attributed to a general "zeitgeist" characterized by a more positive view of the state by a large majority of people compared to former decades. While this explanation may indeed play a role, it leaves open why the zeitgeist is as it is. As long as it is not possible to explain and predict its major changes, this explanation provides little insight. It can at best be argued that the same change we observe for Public Choice can be observed in other areas of society. This applies in particular to the media which recently adopted a more favourable view of the state and its interventions than was the case before the turn of the century.

A third explanation for the decline of Public Choice is the strongly increasing tendency in political science and economics over the last decades to resort to statistical (politometric or econometric) analysis. Access to governmental data has definitely improved in the past decades, however, data on governmental and bureaucratic activities are less easily available than, for example, on finance. This is, in particular, the case for developing countries. Combining data for public activity referring, for instance, to regulations and other non-monetary interventions by the government from different public institutions presents substantial obstacles. In addition, public economics has benefited from greater access to administrative datasets on taxation, government spending, and financial flows, where data collection is systematic and relatively neutral. This is reflected in the prominence of public economics and granted awards (e.g., Raj Chetty in 2013 and Gabriel Zucman in 2023). In contrast, key areas of Public Choice, such as government decision-making, lobbying, rent-seeking, and political influence, often rely on information that is restricted, fragmented, or selectively disclosed. Unlike structured financial records, data on discretionary government contracts and bureaucratic decision-making is frequently incomplete or unavailable. The difficulty in obtaining reliable data on these politically sensitive topics significantly limits empirical advancements in Public Choice. As a result, academics have a lower incentive to engage in research dealing with that sort of topic.

It could well be that other forms of organizations have taken over certain core domains of Public Choice, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Freedom House. Those organizations also target core issues such as corruption or suppression of political rights. As they have become more sophisticated, extensive reports and analyses are available.

4 How to overcome the decline in public choice and democracy?

There is strong evidence that liberal democracy has been in decay in recent years. To analyse and overcome this dire situation, Public Choice, or any analysis of government, institutions, and electoral rules, would have to be made popular again. If the decline in the importance of Public Choice is due more to an "exhaustion" type of development, it might be difficult to change. The introduction of new methods of empirical analysis might help revive the field. New developments in statistics and the availability of new data sources allow a better empirical analysis of the public sector and the testing of Public Choice theories. Special emphasis could be laid on issues of causality.

If the main driver of the decline of Public Choice is not exhaustion but rather the "zeitgeist", it should be made clear that Public Choice is a positive research field and does not have an ideological orientation. Often, however, Public Choice is identified with libertarianism (see Boettke & Piano, 2019), or the new right (see Dunleavy, 2014). This association may have some validity in the United States but not elsewhere. The European Public Choice Society and its conferences have always assembled scholars with different political views.

5 Conclusion

Public Choice analyses government and institutions, as well as the relationships between the state and the private economy and society. The approach has been prominent from the seventies to the onset of the new century. Since that period its importance as a research approach has strongly fallen. The paper discusses various reasons for this rise and fall. While it can be argued that Public Choice is used today under different names, we show that also “Political Economics” and “Economics and Politics” has been used less often since the mid-1990s and 2000s. Still, the possibility exists, that the concepts propagated by those schools of research are used today without specific reference thereof. We show that also essential concepts of Public Choice and similar schools—for instance “Rent Seeking” and “Median Voter”—are used less frequently today.

An erosion of democracy is most typically associated with compromised institutions designed to check and balance political power. This environment fosters inefficiencies and drives the self-serving behaviour of less controlled political agents, creating fertile ground for core phenomena of Public Choice such as rent-seeking, corruption, and manipulated electoral processes. The paradox, therefore, presents itself even though the symptoms of democratic decline become more prevalent, the framework well-suited to analyse these developments has seen a decline in scholarly attention.

Arguably, the most important reason for the decline of public choice is the exhaustion of the approach. Scholars find it difficult to find new insights and results publishable in scholarly journals. This view is supported by research on narratives where a similar rise and fall of attention can be observed. If that view prevails among today’s scholars it is not easy to mitigate, except to point out that the decline of democracy offers many new and rewarding aspects to analyse, and to successfully publish.

The recent upward trend in Public Choice, as well as similar schools, makes us optimistic that researchers have noticed the necessity to analyse institutions and the interplay of economic incentives and politics in order to overcome the issues associated with a decline of democracy.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s40888-025-00366-1.

Acknowledgements We had the chance to discuss the topic with a large number of academics and persons in the public sector and in business. We are particularly grateful to Reiner Eichenberger, Vanessa Kasties, Louis Moser, Margit Osterloh, Fabina Ruhlmann, Valentin Schnellmann, Oliver Zimmer, and for feedback from EPCS conferences.

Funding Open access funding provided by University of Basel.

Data availability Data are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

References

Alesina, A. (1987). Macroeconomic policy in a two-party system as a repeated game*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 102*(3), 651–678. https://doi.org/10.2307/1884222

Alesina, A., & Rosenthal, H. (1996). A theory of divided government. *Econometrica, 64*(6), 1311–1341. https://doi.org/10.2307/2171833

Alesina, A., & Spolaore, E. (1997). On the number and size of nations*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 112*(4), 1027–1056. https://doi.org/10.1162/003355300555411

Alesina, A., & Tabellini, G. (1990). A positive theory of fiscal deficits and government debt. *The Review of Economic Studies, 57*(3), 403–414. https://doi.org/10.2307/2298021

Arrow, K. J. (1950). A difficulty in the concept of social welfare. *Journal of Political Economy, 58*(4), 328–346. https://doi.org/10.1086/256963

Black, D. (1948). On the rationale of group decision-making. *Journal of Political Economy, 56*(1), 23–34. https://doi.org/10.1086/256633

Blankart, C. B., & Koester, G. (2006). Political economics versus public choice. *Kyklos, 59*, 171–200.

Boettke, P., & Piano, E. E. (2019). Public choice and libertarianism. In R. D. Congleton, B. Grofman, & S. Voigt (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of public choice.* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.

Borda J. C. (1781). M'emoire sur les'elections au scrutin. *Histoire de l'Acad'emie Royale des Sciences*. https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1570854175105600384

Brennan, G., & Buchanan, J. M. (1985). *The Reason of Rules: Constitutional Political Economy*. Cambridge University Press.

Buchanan, J. M., & Tullock, G. (1962). *The calculus of consent: logical foundations of constitutional democracy*. University of Michigan Press.

Butler, E. (2012). Public choice-a primer. *Institute of Economic Affairs Occasional Paper*, *147*.

Claveau, F., & Gingras, Y. (2016). Macrodynamics of economics: A bibliometric history. *History of Political Economy, 48*(4), 551–592. https://doi.org/10.1215/00182702-3687259

Condorcet, N. (1785). *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix*. Cambridge University Press.

Congleton, R. D., Grofman, B. N., & Voigt, S. (2018). *The Oxford handbook of public choice* (Vol. 2). Oxford University Press.

Cozzens, S. E. (1985). Comparing the sciences: Citation context analysis of papers from neuropharmacology and the sociology of science. *Social Studies of Science, 15*(1), 127–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/030631285015001005

Davis, J. B. (2019). Specialization, fragmentation, and pluralism in economics. *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought, 26*(2), 271–293. https://doi.org/10.1080/09672567.2018.1555604

D'Ippoliti, C. (2020). Democratizing the economics debate. *Routledge*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429324451

Dunleavy, P. (2014). *Democracy, bureaucracy and public choice: Economic approaches in political science*. Routledge.

Economist Intelligence Unit. (2021). 'Democracy Index 2021'.

Ellison, G. (2002). The slowdown of the economics publishing process. *Journal of Political Economy, 110*(5), 947–993. https://doi.org/10.1086/341868

Frey, B. S. (1978). *Modern political economy*. Martin Robertson.

Frey, B. S., & Gullo, A. (2020). Sic transit gloria mundi: What remains of famous economists after their deaths? *Scientometrics, 123*(1), 283–298. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-020-03393-w

Goutsmedt, A., & Truc, A. (2023). An independent European macroeconomics? A history of European macroeconomics through the lens of the European Economic Review. *European Economic Review, 158*, Article 104559. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2023.104559

Hanney, S., Frame, I., Grant, J., Buxton, M., Young, T., & Lewison, G. (2005). Using categorisations of citations when assessing the outcomes from health research. *Scientometrics, 65*(3), 357–379. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-005-0279-y

Hargens, L. L. (2000). Using the Literature: Reference networks, reference contexts, and the social structure of scholarship. *American Sociological Review, 65*(6), 846–865. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240006500603

Hayek, F. A. (1960). *The constitution of liberty*. Routledge.

Herre, B., & Roser, M. (2022). 'Democracy -- Our World in Data', https//ourworldindata.org/democracy, no. OurWorldInData.org.

Hirschmann, A. O. (1970). *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Harvard University Press.
Kurrild-Klitgaard, P. (2018). Public choice and political science: A view from Europe. *Public Choice, 175*(3), 245–257. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-018-0554-0
Lott, L. (2024). Academic freedom growth and decline episodes. *Higher Education, 88*(3), 999–1017. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01156-z
Mueller, D. C. (2003). *Public choice III* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
Mueller, D. C. (2012). James Buchanan, Gordon Tullock, and The Calculus. *Public Choice, 152*(3), 329–332. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-012-9977-1
Niskanen, J. (1971). *Bureaucracy and representative government*. Routledge.
Olson, M. (1965). *The logic of collective action: Public goods and the theory of groups*. Havard University Press.
Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.
Paldam, M. (1993). Public choice: More of a branch or more of a sect? In C. K. Rowley, F. Schneider, & R. D. Tollison (Eds.), *The next twenty-five years of public choice* (pp. 177–184). Springer.
Persson, T., & Tabellini, G. (1999). Political economics and macroeconomic policy. *Handbook of macroeconomics* (Vol. 1, pp. 1397–1482). Elsevier.
Persson, T., & Tabellini, G. (2002). Political economics and public finance. In A. J. Auerbach & M. Feldstein (Eds.), *Handbook of public economics* (Vol. 3, pp. 1549–1659). Elsevier.
Rowley, C. K. (2004). Public choice and constitutional political economy. In C. K. Rowley & F. Schneider (Eds.), *The Encyclopedia of public choice* (pp. 3–31). Springer.
Scheidegger, F., Briviba, A., & Frey, B. S. (2023). Behind the curtains of academic publishing: strategic responses of economists and business scholars. *Scientometrics, 128*(8), 4765–4790. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-023-04772-9
Sen, A. K. (1966). A possibility theorem on majority decisions. *Econometrica, 34*(2), 491–499. https://doi.org/10.2307/1909947
Shiller, R. J. (2017). Narrative economics. *American Economic Review, 107*(4), 967–1004. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.107.4.967
Torgler, B. (2022). The power of public choice in law and economics. *Journal of Economic Surveys, 36*(5), 1410–1453. https://doi.org/10.1111/joes.12490
Truc, A., Santerre, O., Gingras, Y., & Claveau, F. (2023). The interdisciplinarity of economics. *Cambridge Journal of Economics, 47*(6), 1057–1086. https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/bead021
Vanberg, V. J. (2005). Market and state: The perspective of constitutional political economy. *Journal of Institutional Economics, 1*(1), 23–49. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744137405000032
Wagner, R. E. (2004). Public choice as an academic enterprise. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology, 63*(1), 55–74. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1536-7150.2004.00274.x
Wicksell, K. (1896/1969). *Finanztheoretische Untersuchungen: Nebst Darstellung und Kritik des Steuerwesens Schwedens*. Scientia-Verlag.
Zhang, G., Ding, Y., & Milojević, S. (2013). Citation content analysis (CCA): A framework for syntactic and semantic analysis of citation content. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 64*(7), 1490–1503. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.22850
Zupic, I., & Čater, T. (2015). Bibliometric methods in management and organization. *Organizational Research Methods, 18*(3), 429–472. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428114562629
Constantinescu, C., Aaditya, M., Michele, R. (2015) The Global Trade Slowdown: Cyclical or Structural? IMF Working Papers 15. https://doi.org/10.5089/9781498399135.001
Marcuzzo, M.C. (2024) Is History of Economics What Historians of Economic Thought Do? A Quantitative Investigation. In Palgrave Studies in the History of Economic Thought, 59–77. Palgrave Macmillan.
Riker, William H. (1962) The Theory of Political Coalitions. New Haven: Yale University Press.