

Evaluations of Outside Reviewers

The Department of Economics solicited the views of ten leading figures in public finance and political economy from outside the University of Michigan, seven of whom provided letters. All of these letter writers are at arm's length from Ugo. All seven letters praise the quality of Ugo's work, and all but one explicitly support this promotion.

There are common themes in the outside evaluations. The reviewers agree that Ugo does creative and interesting work, obtaining results that substantially advance thinking about important issues at the intersection of public finance and political economy. The reviewers are impressed by the care and thoroughness of the empirical work in Ugo's papers, praising the extent to which the papers explore potential alternative explanations for the empirical patterns they report. And all seven of the reviewers note that Ugo's papers address questions that not only are important to the literature but also are important to economic policy.

The reviewers identify individual papers that they find to be particularly important contributions to the literature. If (in the spirit of political economy models) one were to interpret the reviewers as voting for their favorites, the two clear winners would be "Ghost-house busters," which all but reviewer B praise in their comments, and "Do fiscal rules matter?," which is similarly praised by all but reviewer G. These favorable reviews note the cleverness of the empirical designs, the persuasiveness of the findings, and the importance of the answers obtained.

The reviewers comment favorably on several others of Ugo's papers, though predictably there is some variation. Reviewers A, D and E are impressed by "Social capital and political accountability," reviewers D, E and F by the unpublished "Shaming tax delinquents," and reviewers F and G by the unpublished "Heard it through the grapevine." Other papers attract favorable commentary by individual reviewers, reviewer G notably lavishing praise on "What happens when a woman wins an election?"

The reviewers also express some reservations about Ugo's papers. Reviewer A finds "Law, economics and culture" to be interesting and valuable, and the topic important, but notes that its empirical method, while clever, might be criticized by others who worry perhaps overly about the validity of econometric instruments.

Reviewer B feels that "Do fiscal rules matter?" is a well-executed econometric study, and a valuable contribution to the literature, but wishes that the paper provided more information on how Italian cities finance their deficits, and that the paper offered more theorizing about what accounts for their responses to fiscal restraints. Reviewer B has positive things to say about the unpublished "Broadening the state," but (while conceding that the paper addresses this issue) worries about the extent to which the introduction of state income taxes can be properly taken to be exogenous for purpose of this study. And more generally, reviewer B feels that the paper could do more to analyze the determinants of why and when states introduce income taxes, and how the effects may

vary based what other states are doing. Reviewer B found “Ghost-house busters” to be interesting, but wants more information on, and analysis of, the role that mayoral discretion plays in response to the new satellite information. And reviewer B is impressed by the modeling in the unpublished “Social capital, government expenditures, and growth,” but is unsure that the paper’s story is empirically plausible, and is not convinced by the paper’s appeal to existing empirical evidence.

Reviewer C is very favorably impressed by “Ghost-house busters,” though notes that the paper’s empirical tests cannot distinguish between different possible mechanisms by which voters use retrospective measures to infer qualities of local politicians. Reviewer C is quick to add, however, that the paper nonetheless offers informative and valuable evidence about the fiscal channels of this inference.

Reviewer F concedes that “What happens when a woman wins an election?” offers a significant econometric methodological advance over other papers addressing similar questions, but is concerned that the paper entertains the possibility that Brazilian women are intrinsically different than men from the standpoint of being able or willing to undertake nefarious or other actions that would enhance their re-election prospects – an interpretation that, in the absence of additional evidence, strikes reviewer F as somewhat shallow.

And reviewer G shares reviewer B’s concern that the non-randomness of the assignment and timing of state income tax introductions may make it difficult to interpret the evidence of the economic effects of state income taxes in the unpublished “Broadening the state.”

Several of the reviewers indirectly reference the visibility of Ugo’s papers, with reviewers A and B, and to a lesser extent Reviewer F, noting that they were somewhat unfamiliar with the body of Ugo’s work prior to being asked to review it. Importantly, however, reviewers A, B, D and E all comment positively on the number of citations that Ugo’s papers have received.

The bottom line recommendations of the reviewers differ somewhat, with reviewers C and G very strongly supporting tenure at Michigan. Reviewer C feels that Ugo is properly treated as a public finance economist who works on topics relevant to political economy, and in this spirit ranks Ugo’s publications as being equivalent to those of the three most accomplished untenured public finance economists in the country, Danny Yagan (UC-Berkeley), Juan Carlos Suarez-Serrato (Duke) and Owen Zidar (Princeton). Reviewer G does not offer a comparison list.

Reviewers A, D and E also express their support for tenure at Michigan, albeit with considerably less gusto than do reviewers C and G.

Reviewer A favors tenure based on the high quality and relevance of Ugo’s work, though notes that with just one publication (“Ghost-house busters”) in a top-five economics

journal,² a mechanical expectation that a candidate for tenure have more than one such publication could prove an impediment at some schools. Reviewer A compares Ugo to other political economy scholars, noting that the more senior Melissa Dell (Harvard) and Francesco Trebbi (UBC) are the stars of the field, followed by the also more senior Suresh Naidu (Columbia) and Noam Yuchtman (LSE). Reviewer A puts Ugo in an equivalence class with Thomas Fujiwara (Princeton) and Fernanda Brolo (Warwick), and slightly below the more senior Felipe Campante (Johns Hopkins).

Reviewer D feels that this is a close case for tenure given the relatively small number of publications, but is encouraged by the quality of the unpublished papers, and recommends tenure on the basis of the totality of the published and unpublished work. Reviewer D compares Ugo to other scholars in public economics and political economy, ranking him below Nathan Hendren (Harvard), Stefanie Stantcheva (Harvard) and Owen Zidar (Princeton), while noting that these individuals are stars. Reviewer D puts Ugo into an equivalence class with Thomas Fujiwara (Princeton), Camilo Garcia-Jimeno (Penn) and Juan Carlos Suarez Serrato (Duke), all of whom are leading young scholars.

Reviewer E supports the promotion, ranking Ugo below the political economy scholars Thomas Fujiwara (Princeton), Leonardo Bursztyn (Chicago), and Pablo Querubin (NYU), and equivalent to Ricardo Perez-Truglia (UCLA) and Lorenzo Casaburi (ETH Zurich). Among public economics scholars, Reviewer E ranks Ugo below Danny Yagan (UC-Berkeley), Owen Zidar (Princeton), and Eric Zwick (Chicago), and equivalent to Sebastian Sieglöch (Mannheim).

Reviewer B cautiously supports tenure at Michigan, noting that this would be a reasonable promotion, though one that could possibly go either way. Reviewer B draws attention to the issue that Ugo has just one “top five” publication, noting that this could be viewed as problematic for a tenure case in some economics departments. And more generally, reviewer B worries that Ugo’s papers lack the combination of analytical rigor and conceptual clarity that is characteristic of really great papers. Reviewer B ranks Ugo compared to scholars in political economy, putting him below the senior scholars Francesco Trebbi (UBC) and Brian Knight (Brown), and also below Thomas Fujiwara (Princeton). Reviewer B ranks Ugo above Giacomo Ponzetto (Pampeo Fabra) and Camilo Garcia-Jimeno (Penn), and roughly equivalent to Salvatore Nunnari (Bocconi) and Claire Lim (Queen Mary, London).

Reviewer F does not offer a positive or negative tenure recommendation, sharing that Ugo would not be at the very top of the reviewer’s list of the best young political economy scholars, a list that includes Noam Yuchtman (LSE), Suresh Naidu (Columbia),

² The “top five” economics journals are the *American Economic Review*, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *Econometrica*, the *Journal of Political Economy*, and the *Review of Economic Studies*. The *Journal of the European Economic Association* has lobbied, so far largely unsuccessfully, to have itself included in a “top six” classification that would supplant the “top five” – a consideration that may be slightly relevant given that Ugo’s paper “Social capital, government expenditures, and growth” is under resubmission at that journal.

and Raul Sanchez de la Sierra (UC-Berkeley). Reviewer F instead puts Ugo into an equivalence class with Decio Coviello (HEC Montreal) and Marit Rehavi (UBC).

Taken as a whole, the external reviews present a picture of a scholar whose work is interesting, creative, and widely cited in the literature. Two of his pieces are broadly praised, and others receive strong acclaim from individual reviewers – though Ugo is still without a signature piece that would impress all the potential skeptics and make his work central to the literature. The reviewers praise the cleverness of the designs of the empirical investigations in several of Ugo’s papers, but some regret that there is not a closer connection to theory. To some degree the strengths of the tenure recommendations vary based on comparison groups, with Ugo faring better when compared to scholars in public economics than when he is compared to scholars in political economy. On balance the reviewers recommend tenure, but only two of the seven do so unreservedly.

The committee feels that the reviewers do good jobs of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of this tenure case. As the research summary section details, the committee shares several of the reviewers’ concerns about individual papers, and has others of its own – though is not persuaded by reviewer F’s concerns about “What happens when a woman wins an election?” which seem largely to miss the point of the paper. The thoughtfulness of the reviews lends credibility to their general assessments of this case.