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Research Statement

My research is in the area of Political Economy considering both empirical questions and theoretical analysis. I examine how aspects of the political system influence the political decisions made by individual voters and campaign contributors. I will summarize three current projects on the topics of the impact of redistricting in the U.S. on campaign contributions and spending, a theoretical examination of public information and voter turnout, and an investigation into whether individual campaign contributions act as substitutes or complements using U.S. Senate and House of Representative elections.

“Political Contributions, Campaign Spending, and Redistricting” (Job Market Paper)

The redistricting process in the U.S. can result in substantial changes to the political environment for campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives as the geographic boundaries of Congressional Districts are redrawn. In my job market paper, I examine how these changes impact campaign contributions and campaign spending strategies used in Congressional Districts. I use data on political contributions and campaign spending from the Federal Elections Commission (FEC). I use the Cook Partisan Voting Index (PVI) as a measure of the partisan composition of a Congressional District. I control for demographic variables using data from the Census Bureau and the IRS. I first examine how changes to a district’s partisan composition impacts individual campaign contributions. I use the fact that redistricting can induce large changes to a district’s partisan composition to examine the impact of such changes which more typically would take place over longer periods of time. I categorize districts’ Cook PVIs into certain ranges depending on the extent to which the district leans toward the incumbent representative’s party. I then analyze the impact of the change in a district’s category before and after the redistricting process in 2010. I find that individual contributions increase in districts that become more competitive. This occurs both along the extensive margin with greater numbers of contributors and along the intensive margin with a higher average contribution. However, the effects of the change in a district’s partisan composition differ between individuals contributing to the incumbent and individuals contributing to the challenger. Individuals contributing to the challenger react to shifts in a district’s partisan composition that are further in favor of the incumbent’s party compared to individuals contributing to the incumbent. Individuals contributing to the incumbent respond strongly only when the district becomes balanced with respect to partisan composition.

I then use a difference-in-differences approach to analyze how redistricting itself impacts individual campaign contributions. ZIP Codes that stay in the same Congressional District act as controls for ZIP Codes that change Congressional Districts. In this analysis, I find that changing Congressional Districts leads to a small increase in total contributions. This effect is only significant for the first election cycle following redistricting and disappears in subsequent election cycles. Using repeat candidates for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives allows an analysis of how redistricting impacts campaign spending strategies. I find that candidates running in Congressional Districts that have been substantially changed by redistricting spend

more on political advertising. Spending more on political advertising could have an impact on individual contributions by increasing name recognition of the candidate.

“Public Information and Voter Turnout”

In this paper, I build a theoretical model to analyze how public information about the quality of a candidate affects voter turnout rates. Voters seek to elect the higher quality candidate and receive a noisy, private signal about candidate quality. In combination with the noisy, public signal, voters can choose to vote for a candidate or abstain from voting. The population of voters is uncertain and distributed according to the Poisson distribution. Since the margin of victory is what determines which candidate wins the election, the analysis depends on the difference between the Poisson distribution for voters of one candidate and the Poisson distribution for voters of the other candidate. The distribution of this margin is given by the Skellam distribution. I use Bayesian updating and the Skellam distribution to find the equilibrium strategies of voters and then compare how different parameters such as the expected population of voters, the quality of the public signal, and the quality of the private signal impact voter turnout rates using a simulation. I find that increasing the expected population of voters increases voter turnout rates because the probability that voting for the wrong candidate actually causes that candidate to win the election decreases. Higher quality public signals decrease voter turnout rates since voters with conflicting private signals choose to abstain instead of voting. Higher quality private signals increase voter turnout rates.

“Are Political Contributions Substitutes or Complements? The Impact of U.S. Senate Elections on Individual Contributions to the U.S. House of Representatives”

In this paper, I seek to answer the question of whether individual campaign contributions are substitutes or complements. I use the fact that the presence of a U.S. Senate election in a state is exogenously determined. Therefore, if the presence of a Senate election in a state increases individual contributions to campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives, that suggests political contributions are complementary. On the other hand, if the presence of a Senate election in a state decreases individual contributions to campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives, that suggests political contributions substitute for each other. I find that the presence of a Senate election in a state results in an increase in individual campaign contributions to the U.S. House of Representatives suggesting political contributions are complementary.

In further research, I want to examine political contributions to campaigns for state legislative seats. State legislatures are important in setting policies such as education, infrastructure, and social issues, but receive less attention from the media during election cycles. Therefore, spending by state legislative campaigns may be more decisive in election outcomes. Moreover, analysis across states can provide insights into how different campaign finance laws impact political outcomes and how institutional aspects of the state legislatures affect political contributions.

Theoretical research remains to be conducted on how differences between the way U.S. political parties conduct their primary elections impact the selection of candidates. Political parties, furthermore, have significant influence over candidate entry decisions which can also be

examined in theoretical models. This research would provide insights into the strategic decisions facing political parties and their impact on the political system.