My research has helped to establish the importance of spatial competition in elections. It has shown that 1) the two U.S. senators in a state very often draw votes from different constituencies (J of Public Economics May 1994), 2) U.S. senators who are too liberal or too conservative for the party in the state are less likely seek and to win reelection, and punishment for having the wrong voting record is greater in states with a more educated electorate (Economic Inquiry July 1996), 3) U.S. house members whose voting record is close to a winning statewide platform for the party are more likely to be seek a U.S. senate seat than house members who are too liberal or too conservative for the party in the state (American J of Political Science Nov 1994), 4) U.S. house members who seek higher office later slowly shift their voting record toward a winning statewide record (American J of Political Science Aug 1996), 5) in U.S. presidential races, the Democrats tend to nominate relatively liberal candidates and the Republicans nominate the most conservative candidate; for both parties somewhat more moderate nominees fare better in the general elections (Public Choice June 2005), and 6) the divergent platform model consistently out-performs the median voter model.

Laws governing who can vote can have an important impact on policies that are chosen. U.S. civil rights legislation in the 1960s that banned poll taxes (payment required to be allowed to vote) and literacy tests increased voter turnout, particularly among the poor, resulting in a decisive voter who was farther down the income distribution. This led to more welfare spending but had no impact on non-welfare spending (J of Political Economy Feb 1997). My study of state spending in 1870-1940 found that when women were allowed to vote spending increased, Congress became more liberal, and states were more likely to pass ‘feminist’ legislation banning alcohol consumption (J of Political Economy Dec 1999).

Many theorists believe that in almost all cases the benefits of voting are less than the cost of voting, and thus they do not believe that voter turnout responds to changes in the benefits and costs of voting, as simple voting theories predict. My research has helped to establish a remarkable record of empirical support for the simple theory of voter turnout. I found that voter turnout rises when more is at stake in the election (measured in various circumstances), the likelihood of affecting the outcome is greater, and the costs of voting are lower (Public Choice 1980, American J of Political Science Feb 1993). Prior to my research, there had been little evidence that turnout was higher in elections in which more was at stake. I found turnout to be higher in city-county elections that would bring about greater changes, elections in New York with larger bonds requiring voter approval, and in relatively rich counties where the size of a large tax bill hinges on whether the Republican or Democratic nominee won the presidential election. I also found that turnout among blacks rose when obstacles to their voting were removed (J of Law & Economics Oct 1991). A particularly interesting and important finding is that it took at least 20 years for turnout to completely adjust to the elimination of poll taxes (which had caused a one third drop in turnout) or allowing women to vote (Journal of Political Economy Dec 1999).

Another theme in my research is redistribution. I find that rich suburban voters expecting to lose from the consolidation of city and county governments oppose consolidation (J of Law & Economics April 1980). A state supreme court ruling mandating more equal spending in a state’s primary and secondary education system does reduce the inequality in spending, as expected, but it also causes public schools to become less efficient, perhaps because local voters pay less attention to schools they now have less control over spending (J of Law & Economics April 2000). The less inequality in spending resulting from these court rulings creates discontent in families that prefer
high spending levels and leads more to send their children to private school (Southern Economic Journal Jan 2002). My March 2004 J of Urban Economics paper explains the variation across states in intra-state school spending inequality.

Two papers explain the composition of taxes chosen by governments and find strong support for the theory’s predictions about the selection of the mix of taxes. Over time a rise in the size of the income tax base relative to the size of the money tax base and a fall in the cost of monitoring taxpayer income has led the U.S. to substitute away from revenue raised from money creation toward taxing income (Public Choice July 1997). In a study of tax revenue drawn from 7 tax categories for 100 countries over 18 years, Stan Winer and I (International Tax and Public Finance May 2006) show that a rise in the tax base or a fall in the administrative cost of obtaining taxes from this source leads to more reliance on this base. Each tax base is tapped to help finance a larger government. Dictatorships have less voter support than do democracies and not surprisingly rely less on income taxation, which requires some taxpayer compliance, than other tax instruments.