



U.S. and them: The Geography of Academic Research [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Using a database of 76,046 empirical economics papers published between 1985 and 2005, we report two associations. First, research output on a given country increases with the country's population and wealth, yielding a strong correlation between per-capita research output and per-capita GDP. Regressions controlling for data quality, governance and the use of English give an estimated research–wealth elasticity of 0.32; surprisingly, the U.S. is not an outlier. Second, papers written about the U.S. are 2.5 percentage-points more likely to be published in the top five economics journals after accounting for authors' institutional affiliations and the field of study. This is a large effect because only 1.5% of all papers written about countries other than the U.S. are published in first-tier journals. No similar premium for research on the U.S. is detected in second-tier general interest journals, where papers from the UK and Europe command a substantial premium instead.

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1. Introduction

Is research in economics, at least to the extent that it is published in peer-reviewed journals, too focused on rich countries, and hence less suitable for informing policy in the rest of the world, where, paradoxically, it might have the highest social returns? Or even more specifically, is the view expressed for example by Bardhan (2003) and many others that researchers working on countries other than the United States do not get a fair deal in mainstream journals consistent with broad patterns in the data?

While recent work by Ellison (2002) and others documents how publishing in economics has changed over time, it is interesting to ask, at the end of three decades of globalization, how global economic journals are today in terms of publishing research about different parts of the world and whether publications in economics have moved in the direction of being more representative of the world.

Drawing on an article-level database of 76,046 empirical papers published between 1985 and 2005 in the top 202 economics journals, we provide stylized facts on the country focus of empirical economics

research and the likelihood of publication in the first and second-tier general interest journals, for research on the U.S. and other countries.¹ The key variable that allows us to identify the geographic focus on empirical articles is a geographic identifier in the EBSCOHost database of economic research papers.

The newly-assembled dataset first highlights considerable disparities in the geographic focus of economic research, and in particular the paucity of research on low-income countries. Over the 20 year span of the data, there were 4 empirical economics papers on Burundi, 9 on Cambodia and 27 on Mali. This compares to the 37,000 or so empirical economics papers published on the U.S. over the same time-period. This variation is also reflected among the highly selective top-tier general interest journals (henceforth top-tier journals) of the economics profession (*American Economic Review*, *Econometrica*, *The Journal of Political Economy*, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* and *The Review of Economic Studies*). *American Economic Review* has published one paper on India (on average) every 2 years and one paper on Thailand every 20 years. The first-tier journals together published 39 papers on India, 65 papers on China, and 34 papers on all of Sub-Saharan Africa. This compares to 2383 papers on the U.S. over the same time period.

To explore this variation further, we first document basic correlations between the geography of academic empirical research and country-level covariates using the dataset obtained by pooling the data over the 20 year span of the data. Our main result is a strong positive relationship between per-capita income and the extent of (per-capita) empirical research on the country. Population and income alone account for 75% of the cross-country variation in the geographical focus of research. We show that

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¹ The top 202 journals are all the journals that appear on one of the rankings provided by Kalaitzidakis et al. (2003) and Kordrzycki and Yu (2006).

this “worldwide” fit applies to every region in the world except for Middle East and North-Africa (MENA), where the research output is lower than predicted by the level of income and the research-wealth elasticity is different. Thus, within Sub-Saharan Africa, the difference between South Africa (721 papers) and Niger (20 papers) is largely explained by differences in population and income, as is the difference between India (1093 papers) and Bangladesh (284 papers). The role of data in explaining this relationship is assessed by explicitly controlling for measures of country-level measures of data availability and quality and by looking at the patterns of research output following the release of major household surveys. At first glance, the lack of data does not seem to be the main impediment.

Turning from the aggregated data to time trends, we look at whether the geographical focus of academic research has changed over the 20 years covered by our data. Over time, the research-income elasticity has remained constant. There is no evidence that it has declined in the last 5 years of our data and point-estimates suggest that it may have even increased over time. However, in specifications with country and time fixed-effect, the research-wealth relationship is weak and statistically insignificant. One possibility is that there is too little variation within-country over-time during the short time period that we are focusing on; in our data, 97% of the variation in GDP is across countries so that specifications with country fixed-effects seek to identify the relationship over the remaining 3% of the GDP variation. A second possibility is that different processes may generate variation in research across and within countries: Once a country is rich, recessions may become ripe topics for further research.

A striking result from the geographical focus of research is that the U.S., despite being the focus of 36,649 papers over the 20-year period of our data (out of 76,046) is not an “outlier”. It is on the regression line relating (log) per-capita publications to (log) per-capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP); excluding the U.S. from the regression does not alter the coefficient on GDP per-capita. Because a country like the U.S. is rich with a large population, it reports far more publications than other countries with similar per-capita incomes. Put another way, publications per-capita are very similar in the U.S. to other countries at similar levels of wealth.

This surprising lack of American exceptionalism no longer holds for publications in the first-tier journals. Across all articles, around 4% make it to the first tier. However, 6.5% of all papers written about the U.S. are published in the top-5 economics journals compared to 1.8% of all papers written on countries other than the United States. Controlling for authors' institutional affiliation, and hence partially accounting for research quality, the difference is lower but still a statistically and qualitatively significant 2.4 percentage points. We investigate further whether the premium for papers on the U.S. also applies to a broader journal set drawn from the top of the journal distribution. We find a much smaller premium in the second-tier general interest (henceforth second-tier) journal set (*Review of Economics and Statistics*, *Economic Journal*, *International Economic Review*, and *Journal of the European Economic Association*), where instead research on the UK commands a similar premium. These premiums have remained surprisingly stable over time, although with fluctuations over the mean. There is a hint of a decline in the first-tier journal set between 2004 and 2005 (where it goes down to 0.027 from an average of 0.039), but this may be part of cyclical fluctuations rather than a structural break.

We clarify that our findings consist of tabulations and correlations that describe the geographic focus of empirical research and clearly, none of our claims are causal. Identifying differential treatment (say of U.S. focused research in top journals) in any form is difficult in the absence of experimental studies.² Furthermore, with sparse information

on the availability and quality of datasets from different countries, it is ultimately difficult to rule out the influence of data on the quantity and quality of publications across countries. Our results therefore aim to book-end a debate on why there is more research on some countries than others and on the publication process in the economics discipline, with a focus on empirical studies on and outside the U.S.

The remainder of the paper is as follows. Section 2 is the description of the data. Section 3 documents and discusses the two main findings of the paper. Section 4 concludes.

2. Data description

The main data source is constructed using information on journal articles published in selected 202 economics journals during the period 1985–2004. We used journal rankings proposed by Kalaitzidakis et al. (2003) and Kordrzycki and Yu (2006) to finalize the list of journals for inclusion in the database. Ultimately, we selected the 202 economics journals that appeared at least in one of their proposed rankings. Table A1 provides the list of these journals and their rankings according to various citation indices. The large number of journals was chosen partly to ensure that country-specific publications in the dataset reflected the volume of research on the country rather than journal selectivity; of note is that the citation index for the bottom ranked 11 journals (among those included in the ranking by Kalaitzidakis et al. (2003) is 0, and close to 75 journals have a citation index less than 1 (that is, the average article in the journal is cited less than once in subsequent research).^{3,4}

To obtain the files of article records we used the Econlit database provided by EBSCOHost to conduct a field search for each individual journal title, limited to the years 1985 through 2004.⁵ If a journal started publication after 1985 we started with the earliest possible date. Every Econlit record is assigned metadata separated into fields. We kept data from the following fields: Author; Author Affiliation; Journal Name; Journal Issue; Descriptor Classification Codes (JEL codes); and Geographical Descriptors. We manually cleaned up the Author-Affiliation field and identified the 100 first academic institutions in addition to three multilateral organizations (IMF, UN and World Bank).^{6,7} Geographic

³ Kalaitzidakis et al. (2003) construct for each journal a citation rank based on citations in 1998 of articles published only in 1994–1998, excluding self-citations and adjusted for impact (influence) and size. Kordrzycki and Yu (2006) provide citations and reference-intensity-adjusted rankings that evaluate a specified set of journals according to influence of journals and influence of journal articles. These rankings take into account citations in economics academic journals as well as citations in other social science and policy journals. In addition, we use the Eigen-factor ranking produced as part of a research project at University of Washington. The Eigen factor is associated with a specified set of journals and is a measure of the overall value provided by all the articles published in a given journal in a year. The Article Influence is a measure of a journal's influence based on the number of citations per article. Thus, according to the Article Influence ranking, one publication in the *American Economic Review* will count for 4.9 publications, while one publication in the *Journal of Development Economics* will count for 1.4 publications.

⁴ Nevertheless, important research outlets may still be omitted from this database. Many papers on India, for instance, are published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, which does not appear here; neither is research that only appears in reports or books incorporated in this analysis. This database also excludes policy reports and other country specific analyses that are not submitted through the formal academic refereeing system, but with potentially important policy impact such as World Bank's Country Economic Memorandums, IMF Country Reports, or the United Nations Development Program's National Human Development Reports.

⁵ Due to the unavailability of data on some governance indicators and growth variables for the years 2005 and onwards, we restrict all the analysis in this paper for the years 1985–2004.

⁶ We take the 100 first institutions ranked by the number of pages published provided by Kalaitzidakis et al. (2003). These institutions produced a third of the total number of publications over the period 1985–2004. Affiliations we did not uniquely identify were coded “Other”.

⁷ The codes used to identify the institutional affiliations are open access (<http://econ.worldbank.org/staff/qdo/>), and we welcome additions to the list of institutions already identified. Above all, we encourage Econlit to code authors, their affiliations, geographic descriptors and other paper attributes in a more standardized fashion.

² Previous work examines whether top economics journals are biased in their publication rates towards authors in the editor's networks as well as how the introduction of double-blind review changed the publishing process (Blank, 1991; Laband and Piette, 1994).

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