

Using Film Clips to Teach Public Choice Economics

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a trend away from “chalk and talk” toward alternative pedagogical approaches to teaching economics. One such approach is the use of film clips to illustrate economic concepts; this paper documents film clips that can be used to teach public choice economics.

Introduction

Economics can be found in literature. Watts (2003) explored the relationship between economic concepts, issues and themes and those found in literature and drama. Economics can also be found in music. Tinari and Khandke (2000) made use of popular songs dating back to the 1930s to help teach economics. More recently, Mateer and Rice (2007), Hall and Lawson (2008), and Hall, Lawson, and Mateer (2008) have expanded the set of songs related to economics by referencing newer music. Economics can be found on television. Ghent et al. (2010) explain the economics illustrated in episodes of the popular show “Seinfeld.” Similarly, Gillis and Hall (2010) explain how “The Simpsons” can be used for policy analysis. There is also a burgeoning exploration of film in economics. Formaini (2001), Leet and Houser (2003), Becker (2004), Dixit (2005), Mateer (2005), Sexton (2006), and Mateer and Li (2008) explore the use of films to teach introductory economics. That economics can be found in literature, film, and music is not surprising: Nineteenth century economist Alfred Marshall (1920, p.1) famously remarked that “economics is a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life.”

In this paper, we build upon Marshall’s insight by presenting some film clips that can be used to illustrate many fundamental concepts from public choice economics. (For another innovative approach to teaching public choice economics, see Burgess et al., 2010.) The clips are suitable both for introductory courses containing public choice content (e.g., those using Gwartney et al. (2011) as the textbook) and for upper level courses devoted entirely to public choice or public economics. Using the clips and accompanying lecture or textbook coverage may be appropriate for introductory courses; by contrast, instructors teaching upper level courses might want to pair the clips with the seminal public choice papers we cite or with other relevant readings.

We begin the next section with a brief discussion of some advantages of using film clips to teach economics and of some suggestions that might help instructors more effectively integrate film clips into their courses. Over the subsequent sections on public choice topics such as logrolling, we describe some film scenes which have public choice content illustrating the principle under consideration.

Advantages and Advice for Using Film Clips to Teach Economics

Advantages

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The use of media provides a unique communication medium that motivates and reinforces learning. Serva and Fuller (2004) argue that current methods of evaluating learning and instruction have not kept pace with changes in learning theory, or with the transformed technological infrastructure of the modern classroom. They then demonstrate how effective media use—which is typically not measured in traditional teaching evaluation instrumentation—is an important dimension of the classroom experience and how effective media use can play a large role in explaining student perceptions of instructional performance.

In addition, media complements many traditional approaches to learning. The method is engaging, aids student retention, motivates interest in the subject matter, and helps illustrate the relevance of many concepts. Utilizing media increases the efficiency of the learning process and helps to transfer knowledge by actively engaging the audience or learner. For example, effective instructors attempt to support positive transfer of information by building bridges between students' knowledge and the learning objectives of the course. As a consequence, the use of media serves as a scaffold to help transfer knowledge from the instructor to the student.

Neuroscience research on brain functioning has documented differences in functioning between the left and right hemispheres of the brain. The left brain specializes in digital, deductive tasks that characterize oral and written media, while the right brain specializes in iconic, intuitive tasks that characterize visual media, especially the visual and sound characteristics of film (Springer and Deutsch 1998). These differences in brain functioning patterns argue for the use of instructional media to activate both sides of a person's brain. Research findings suggest that people likely use different cognitive systems to process verbal and visual media. Some evidence suggests that people learn abstract, new, and novel concepts more easily when presented in both verbal and visual form (Salomon 1979). Other empirical research shows that visual media make concepts more accessible to a person than text media and help with later recall (Cowen 1984). Building on the work of others, Willingham (2009) asks a simple question to make his point, "Why do students remember everything that's on television and forget what we lecture?" The answer, Willingham suggests, is because visual media helps students retain concepts and ideas. Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999) also note the crucial role that technology plays for creating learning environments that extend the possibilities of one-way communication media, such as movies, documentaries, television shows, and music into new areas that require interactive learning like visualizations and student-created content.

Advice

We turn now to a few brief suggestions for smoothly incorporating film clips into economics courses. Instructors should begin by locating the clip they intend to use in class. Clips can sometimes be found on YouTube, though they are often later removed for copyright infringement. Hence in our experience it is usually best to obtain a DVD copy of the film; we find that Netflix works well for this purpose, though one might also check DVDs out from libraries or purchase copies of films that are likely to be used repeatedly over many semesters. The increasing availability of streaming video from Netflix and other providers makes film access even easier.

Instructors should preview film clips before class to make sure that the content of the clip matches the day's learning objectives and to prepare any remarks necessary to help students put the clip in context. The remarks about the clip's context are particularly important to ensure the effectiveness of films that are unfamiliar to many students. Previewing is also recommended because many films contain violence, foul language, or other content that some students or instructors find objectionable.

On the day of class, instructors should pre-position clips before class so that playing a clip doesn't break the flow of class or waste time. (Technologically savvy instructors, or those with robust tech support, can use special software to extract clips from the full films; the clips can then be saved to a hard drive and viewed via a media player or embedded in a powerpoint presentation.) Student attention can wane quickly while an instructor queues up a clip so it is probably advisable not to use clips from more than one or two films in each class meeting. (Though we are not aware of any research on optimal clip length for maintaining student attention, we think keeping clips to one to two minutes normally works best.) Pre-positioning clips also gives instructors an opportunity to make sure the audiovisual equipment in their classrooms is functioning properly.

In class, instructors have a choice about how to work clips into their lectures. One approach is to begin with a clip and let the class discussion of the behavior observed in the clip lead students to the concept

being introduced. Alternatively, instructors can lecture on a topic and follow with one or more film clips to illustrate and reinforce the concept. (Having students view clips that are publicly available outside of class can form the basis of homework assignments and can conserve scarce class time.)

One question that inevitably arises is concern over the copyright issues that accompany using film clips and other media in teaching. The classroom use of film scenes, music, and content found on the internet, falls under the fair use exemption in the Federal Copyright Act (Section 110.1, in the Federal Copyright Act, Public Law 94-553, Title 17). The display of copyrighted materials during face-to-face teaching permits the instructor to show entire feature length films under most circumstances. The crucial distinction to understand is that the public showing of any media is narrowly defined for educational purposes and the instructor must take steps to ensure that the copyright holder's interests are protected. Changes in the way that the Federal Copyright Act has been interpreted have expanded the fair use exemption for educators (Kolowich 2010). Despite the recent relaxation of standards, placing copyrighted material on the internet, even for class purposes, is still probably outside the fair use exemption. For this reason, the promulgation of education-related media over the internet has been severely limited.

Enough of the previews. In the following sections of the paper we outline some film clips that can be used to teach major concepts from public choice economics. For some concepts, we present several films with relevant clips; in these cases instructors might want to focus on the one or two films that best match their presentation of the material at hand. (Some “outtakes”—films with public choice content that we omitted from this paper for brevity as well as future films in which we identify clips useful for teaching public choice economics will be posted on the website www.moviesforecon.com.) In some cases, the relevant public choice topic develops over several scenes of a film so the film will have multiple times listed. Instructors who don't want to skip from one scene to another may, of course, run longer film segments rather than skipping action unrelated to the public choice concept.

Foundations of Public Choice Economics

The hallmark of public choice economics is the assumption that people act purposefully in pursuit of their desired, often self-enriching, ends in the political arena just as they do in other aspects of their lives. The public choice approach stands in contrast to a bifurcated view of human behavior in which people make “economic” decisions such as consumption and labor supply based on self-interest while making “political” decisions with an eye toward “the public interest.” Tullock et al. (2002, p. 5) explain:

[I]ndividuals who enter a supermarket and purchase items of their choice are assumed, when they enter the voting booth, to vote not for the politicians and laws that will benefit themselves, but for politicians and laws that will benefit the nation as a whole. People in the supermarket mainly buy [the goods] that benefit themselves and their families. However, when individuals become politicians, a transformation is assumed to occur so that a broader perspective guides them to make morally correct decisions rather than follow the course of behavior that pleases the interest groups that supported them or the policies that may lead to reelection.

In treating the person who enters the voting booth or holds elective office as the same person who enters the supermarket public choice assumes, in the words of McChesney and Shughart (quoted in Tullock et al. 2002, p. 3), that “homo politicus and homo economicus are the same.”

The fundamental self-interestedness premise of public choice is evident in 1992's “The Distinguished Gentleman” (7:50-9:35, 15:00-16:35). Eddie Murphy plays a small time con man who, after overhearing his congressman (played by James Garner) and a key supporter talking about the perks that the congressman receives from being in office, remarks “I am definitely in the wrong business.” The congressman dies soon thereafter and we observe Eddie Murphy's character telling his con job partners that he's going to run for Congress because “Washington, D.C., that's where the money is.”

We also see the same principle illustrated in “Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs” (9:05- 9:40, 10:40-11:20, and 14:05-14:35), an animated film from 2009. The mayor of a remote island with a declining sardine fishing industry creates a theme park called Sardine Land ostensibly to attract tourists. His real motive, as he tells us in the clip, is bolstering his public image because he aspires to be “one big mayor.”

The mayor's desire for self-aggrandizement can foster a discussion of non-remunerative gains such as power or prestige that self-interested politicians might seek.

The classic 1939 film "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" has a snip that allows a deeper discussion about the public choice perspective of politicians. In the scene (1:19:15 to 1:22:00), Sen. Jefferson Smith (portrayed by Jimmy Stewart) confronts the long serving and ethically compromised Sen. Paine (played by Claude Rains). Paine responds to Smith's moral indignation (Smith has just learned that Paine is part of a corrupt dam deal) by saying that he came to Washington with Smith's idealism but learned to cut deals on behalf of his constituents. The suggestion is that politicians respond to their institutional environment rather than being morally flawed (or flawless) characters.

One incentive that politicians seeking re-election might have is the use public funds to curry favor with voters. "All the King's Men," winner of the 1950 Oscar for Best Picture, depicts (1:22:25-1:24:05) Gov. Willie Stark (a thinly disguised version of Louisiana Gov. Huey Long in an Academy Award winning performance by Broderick Crawford) building bridges, schools, and other public works and having them named for him. Similar behavior is implied in a brief clip from 1998's "Pentagon Wars" (7:50-8:35). Gen. Partridge (played by Kelsey Grammer) is on the phone explaining how military procurement has been used to influence the voters of states represented by Congressmen and Senators who support military spending. We hear Gen. Partridge saying of one member of Congress that the Pentagon has "papered his state with contracts."

Bureaucracy

Rather than viewing bureaucrats as selfless public servants, Niskanen (1971) presents a model of a budget-maximizing bureau. Clips from several films are useful for discussing Niskanen's work and other aspects of bureaucratic behavior.

In 2009's "Public Enemies" (16:35-20:20), we see J. Edgar Hoover (portrayed by Billy Crudup) testifying before a Congressional committee in an attempt to obtain additional funds for the FBI. Senator McKellar (played by Ed Bruce) says Hoover wants more money for the bureau than crooks have stolen and denies Hoover's request. Hoover then instructs his press aide to leak criticism of Sen. McKellar to newsman Walter Winchell and says of McKellar "we will not contest him in this committee room but we will fight him on the front page." Hoover also instructs his agents to go after the high profile bank robber John Dillinger in order generate favorable publicity for the bureau and holds a press conference to declare that the pursuit of Dillinger will be the country's "first war on crime."

Budget maximizing bureaucratic behavior is also implied by a clip (17:30-23:25) from 1998's "Pentagon Wars." Air Force Col. Burton (portrayed by Cary Elwes) is appointed by Congress to oversee development of the Army's Bradley Fighting Vehicle. Although Col. Burton tries diligently to do his job, he encounters a Pentagon bureaucracy that is more interested in pushing the Bradley into development than in building a weapons system that is effective and protects the soldiers who will use it. (A longer clip, 23:25-34:20, illustrating the rapidly escalating development costs of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle as it goes from being a light scout vehicle to an armored personnel carrier could also be used to discuss budget maximizing bureaucrats.)

"Canadian Bacon," a 1995 film by Michael Moore, illustrates another implication of the public choice theory of bureaucracy. With the Cold War over, the U.S. military establishment and defense contractors have lost their *raison d'être*. In a series of clips (11:25-14:55, 23:30-24:55, 31:00-32:40, 39:15-41:00) we see a presidential aide, a general, and a defense contractor maneuver the U.S. into a military confrontation with Canada thereby demonstrating bureaucracies' adapting to justify their continued existence.

Other aspects of bureaucratic behavior can be explored using film clips. One is the fundamental public choice assumption of self-interested actors. Although public choice does not assume that bureaucrats are inherently corrupt, self interest may sometimes lead bureaucrats to seek inappropriate financial gain. In 2007's "The Simpsons Movie" Russ Cargill, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, orders a glass dome placed over Springfield to contain an environmental disaster caused by the bumbling Homer Simpson. He then happily notes that he owns the firm that produced the dome.

The 2004 Academy Award winner for Best Foreign Language Film, "The Barbarian Invasions," also offers a useful scene (16:25-20:15) for discussing self-interested behavior of bureaucrats. A man is dying of cancer and is receiving treatment in a crowded hospital (we see patients on beds in the hallway). Yet the

hospital has an unoccupied floor. The man's son approaches the hospital's administrator and union leader about arranging for the dying father to be moved to a room on the unoccupied floor. They refuse until offered side payments by the dying man's son. Their behavior is clearly motivated by self-interest rather than an idealistic devotion to serving the hospital's patients.

Such self-interested bureaucratic behavior is also evident in 2008's "Lower Learning" (7:10-8:40) when elementary school principal Harper Billings (played by Rob Corddry) solicits a \$15,000 bribe from a father in exchange for guaranteeing his daughter all A grades.

Another aspect of bureaucracy that can be illustrated using film clips is deadweight loss. 1998's "Pentagon Wars" also contains a scene (53:55-57:00) that humorously demonstrates this concept. Col. Burton wants to obtain some sheep to place inside a Bradley Fighting Vehicle during a test firing to assess the vehicle's worthiness for carrying soldiers. After encountering the Pentagon's Office of Ruminant Procurement which wants to take over one year to determine specifications for sheep that will be used in such tests, Col. Burton simply buys some from a farmer.

Voting

In a famous scene (8:50-12:00) from "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" King Arthur encounters two peasants who question how he became king and why he is entitled to be their ruler. After hearing the Arthurian legend, one peasant remarks, "Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government." The seeming absurdity of such a method of government provides an excellent jumping off point for introducing voting paradoxes, the possible randomness arising from using voting for collective decision making, or agenda setting (Tullock 2002). Instructors might then choose to discuss Arrow's (1951) well-known result that no voting system can simultaneously fulfill five seemingly reasonable and basic conditions (Rosen 2005, pp. 120-122).

The median voter model, which posits that the person whose preferences fall in the middle of a policy continuum will be the decisive voter, is a mainstay of public choice research (Downs 1957). An important implication of the median voter model is that candidates will move to the middle of the policy space to try to win elections. A good film for introducing the median voter model is 2008's "Swing Vote" (1:16:15-1:20:05). Kevin Costner plays a good ole boy, Bud, who is accidentally thrust into the role of being the median voter in a U.S. presidential election. (When Bud plays pool instead of meeting his daughter as promised at the voting precinct, his goody-goody daughter sneaks into the polling place to cast his vote but miscasts it when she fears being caught by the precinct workers.) After election night neither candidate has a majority of the Electoral College votes, and the remaining state, New Mexico, is tied pending Bud's recasting his miscast vote. Over the next few days, as Bud is trying to decide which candidate to support, he seems to reveal preferences on policy issues such as abortion and gay marriage. We then see candidates adapting their positions to his utterances: e.g., the Democratic candidate (played by Dennis Hopper) comes out against abortion rights and the Republican candidate (played by Kelsey Grammer) endorses gay marriage. Hence, the clip shows candidates moving toward the center as the median voter model predicts.

Public choice scholars also examine the rationality of voting (Downs 1957). Since any single voter has an extremely low probability of being decisive, the act of voting appears irrational because the costs of voting outweigh the expected benefits. Short clips in two films address this issue. In "Wag the Dog" (27:30-28:00), one character tells another not to vote because "it's futile." And in "Election" (40:15-42:15), a candidate for student body president expresses skepticism that elections matter and whether people should vote by telling other students in her campaign speech "don't vote for me; don't vote at all."

A related concept is rational voter ignorance, the notion that because voters bear the full costs of becoming informed voters but share the benefits with the entire polity that it is rational not to become well-informed about candidates and their stances on important issues. "The Distinguished Gentleman" contains two clips (13:40-19:20 and 21:10-24:15) that illustrate rational voter ignorance. A con man named Thomas Jefferson Johnson (played by Eddie Murphy) runs for Congress as "Jeff Johnson" following the death of the sitting Congressman (played by James Garner) who had the same name. In the clip, we see Murphy's character urging voters to vote for "Jeff Johnson, the name you know" while avoiding being seen (thereby giving away that he couldn't possibly be the Jeff Johnson who had represented the area because one is black and the other is white). We also see a couple entering their polling place and one remarking to the other that "we always vote for Johnson."

Logrolling

In the public choice literature, the practice of vote trading or exchanging political favors is known as logrolling (see, for example, Tullock 1970). Several films contain examples of this concept.

The 2008 film “Milk” starring Sean Penn and Josh Brolin as members of San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors contains a scene (1:02:15-1:03:50) in which Harvey Milk (Penn’s character) asks Dan White (Brolin’s character) to support a proposed ordinance banning employment discrimination against gays. White responds by pointing out that he’s interested in keeping the city from locating a planned psychiatric hospital in his part of the city and asks Milk, “What do you say we watch out for each other’s interests? I would really like that.” Milk responds, “I’d really like that too, Dan.”

“Charlie Wilson’s War,” a 2007 film starring Tom Hanks as the Congressman who secured U.S. funding for Afghan guerillas in the 1980s, contains several scenes depicting logrolling. In one clip (8:15-9:25), Rep. Wilson agrees to a request to serve on the House Ethics Committee (because the Speaker thinks he’d be lenient) in exchange for being appointed to the Kennedy Center’s Board of Directors (which would give Wilson free tickets to the Center’s performances). In another scene (55:35-57:00), Rep. Wilson tells a CIA agent (played by Philip Seymour Hoffman) that he can secure \$40 million in funding for the Afghan fighters because he has accumulated many IOUs by providing his colleagues with yes votes on legislation that is important to them. We then see (1:19:50-1:20:10) a brief example of this sort of vote trading when Wilson tells some of his colleagues that he can get the Black Caucus to support their farm subsidy legislation if they will support his Afghan funding initiative.

1995’s “The American President” also illustrates logrolling (1:21:40-1:23:25, 1:28:10-1:28:50). President Andrew Shepherd, played by Michael Douglas, drops his support for an environmental bill in exchange for getting some key senators to support his crime bill. This exchange of political favors angers the President’s environmental lobbyist girlfriend Sidney Wade (played by Annette Bening) because he had promised to support her environmental legislation.

Politicians trading votes for personal benefits rather than voting in the public interest is illustrated in 1994’s “The Madness of King George” (48:50-51:30). In the scene, the British Parliament is voting on a motion to appoint the Prince of Wales as Regent instead of his incapacitated father George III. We see Mr. Fox (played by Jim Carter), the Prince’s leading supporter in Parliament, telling the Prince (Rupert Everett):

These are the nation's representatives. Some come to Parliament in the hope that they might serve their country. But most of them, being human, are here to fill their pockets. Pitt [the King’s Parliamentary leader] and your father have done them very well... pensions, places... bribes. Once it is plain that Pitt is finished and there is no more swill in the trough, your Royal Highness will be made regent.

Rent Seeking

Rent seeking, the political pursuit of gains that would not be earned engaging in the market process (Tullock 1967), is a common theme in many films.

In 2003’s “Daddy Day Care” (27:50-28:05, 34:50-35:05, 39:35-39:50, 41:25-42:55, 48:30-50:00, 1:02:15-1:04:40, 1:07:45-1:08:10), Eddie Murphy plays a character who starts a daycare center after he loses his corporate job. The new daycare is fun for kids and lures customers away from an expensive and stuffy daycare center run by a character portrayed by Anjelica Huston. In response to losing customers in the market place, Huston’s character attempts to stifle the competition from Murphy’s new center by having the local daycare licensing bureau hassle Murphy’s center over safety code violations.

A similar sequence is presented in the 2005 Iranian film “Border Café” (32:50-34:00, 45:50-47:15, 49:55-51:30, 1:07:55-1:08:05, 1:18:00-1:20:30, 1:35:00-1:37:00). A widow tries to re-open a family café after the passing of her husband. She is told by her brother-in-law who runs a competing café that, under Islamic law, women don’t run cafes. When she insists on continuing to operate her café and leaves his business with few customers, he prompts the police harass the woman and ultimately close her café. One could also use this film to introduce Yandle’s (1983) bootleggers and Baptists hypothesis. While some

people might oppose the widow's working on moral grounds, her brother-in-law's opposition is motivated by remunerative gain rather than moral judgments.

While rents are unearned transfers, the true cost of rent seeking is the dissipation of resources by those trying to obtain rents. In 1992's "The Distinguished Gentleman" (35:20-36:35), newly elected Rep. Johnson (Eddie Murphy) is seated at a table with lobbyists from industries such as tobacco and asbestos. One lobbyist offers to sponsor a fund raising event for the new congressman thereby illustrating rent dissipation via lobbying and campaign contributions. In a subsequent scene (44:40-45:50), a congressional leader tells Rep. Johnson that he should join the Power and Industry Committee because "there's no better committee on the Hill if you're interested in fundraising." This clip's suggestion that Representatives might choose certain committees to gin up campaign contributions both reinforces the fundamental self-interestedness assumption of public choice and provides an excellent basis for instructors to turn the discussion of rents to McChesney's (1997) work on rent extraction.

With clips from the acclaimed 2004 film "The Aviator," the discussion of rent seeking can be broadened to include the related concept of regulatory capture (Stigler 1971). After Pan Am leader Juan Trippe (played by Alec Baldwin) is unable to convince TWA's Howard Hughes (portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio) not to offer competing flights across the Atlantic (1:24:50-1:26:45), Trippe turns to Senator Owen Brewster (played by Alan Alda) to introduce a Civil Aviation Bill that would hamper TWA's ability to compete with Pan Am (1:31:30-1:32:35, 1:35:40-1:36:50, 1:56:05-2:03:10). The clips illustrate the gains, in this case campaign contributions, prestigious committee chairmanship, and personal travel, that politicians can receive from pushing rent seeking legislation such as that favoring Pan Am.

A similar process involving regulatory capture is at work in "Tucker: The Man and His Dream" (1:32:50-1:44:00) which chronicles the real life attempt of Preston Tucker (played by Jeff Bridges) to build a better automobile in the 1940s. The automobile that Tucker creates is way ahead of its time and comes with safety features that will cost the automakers in Detroit millions to compete with. The "Big Three" automobile companies in Detroit do not want to compete with a new company so they devise a strategy that will put Tucker out of business through political pressure and maneuvering.

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on moving from traditional "chalk and talk" lectures toward alternative means of teaching. An alternative pedagogy is the use of multimedia materials to introduce or illustrate material related to the course objectives. In this paper, we catalog many films that can be used to teach concepts of public choice economics.

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