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“Rent Seeking: Valuing Tullock’s Rejects”

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Gordon Tullock's published articles fall into two categories: those which were accepted upon first submission and those which were rejected by one or more journals until they were finally accepted. In most cases, undeterred by the editor's decision, Tullock simply submitted the rejected paper to another journal without revisions. This paper examines the second category of articles by comparing the number of citations of Tullock's articles with those of the articles which journals chose to publish over Tullock's. Many of Tullock's most celebrated papers were initially rejected by prestigious journals on the stated grounds that his ideas either were not clear to the referees, did not appear significant, or did not appear to result from economic reasoning. In my opinion, the less than enthusiastic response to Tullock's submissions may be explained by the radicalism of his ideas and the fact that his formal training in economics was limited to the first six weeks of a one-quarter class taught by Henry Simons at the University of Chicago. It might be said that Tullock's ideas were ahead of his time and their significance could not be appreciated by most members of the profession. On the other hand, some would say that he was an interloper unschooled in the established doctrines of the day. That said, publication in a prestigious journal is no guarantee that you will be cited in the long term. Moreover, if an author puts forth a worthwhile idea, he will eventually be cited regardless of where it is first published. And this is what happened for Tullock.

Gordon Tullock is known for the breadth, originality, and quantity of his work. He has done original work in a number of areas including public choice, constitutional political economy, law and economics, bioeconomics, and monetary history. Tullock's work in economics spans nearly fifty years. The years 1967-1980 were perhaps the most productive period of his career. During that period from age 45 to age 58, Tullock wrote sixty-eight articles,

authored six books, co-authored two books, and co-edited two books. His reputation in many areas grew, and others built upon his work and not only in rent-seeking, where he made what was perhaps his most celebrated contribution to economics.

His career has been characterized by provocative challenges to the conventional wisdom in areas not traditionally considered the province of economics. Breit 1986 referred to Tullock as "a rare bird, a generalist with the tools of a specialist" and "one of the first economic imperialists ... his work was characterized by a high degree of irreverence for sacred cows."

Thirty-four years have passed since the publication of Gordon Tullock's "The Welfare Costs of Tariffs, Monopoly, and Theft," the first article in what has become known as the rent-seeking literature.<sup>2</sup> Anne Krueger coined the term "rent seeking" in "The Political Economy of the Rent-Seeking Society" (Krueger 1974) but the original insight was Tullock's. Although Tullock has long achieved recognition for this seminal contribution, his paper was rejected by the *American Economic Review*, *Journal of Political Economy*, and the *Southern Economic Journal*, before it was finally published in what was then the rather obscure *Western Economic Journal* in 1967.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the significance of the idea was not recognized by the profession until seven

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<sup>2</sup>Full details of his work are provided in Appendix A. Tullock's most recent work in rent seeking is Tullock and Lockard (2001), which bring together attempts to solve the rent-seeking paradox which is that the market for rent seeking does not clear even with free entry and competition. Various arguments regarding this paradox have been advanced over the years, but none to Tullock's satisfaction.

<sup>3</sup>Tullock is credited with "inventing" the theory of rent-seeking, see, e.g., "Dear Landlord," *The Economist*, pp. 18-19.; Collander, D.C. (Ed.), in *Neoclassical Political Economics*, Ballenger (1984); Tollison, R.D., "Rent Seeking: A Survey", *Kyklos*, 35, (fasc. 4), pp. 575-602; Aretz, E. M., *International Review of Law and Economics* (1990), 10 (101-111), review of *The Political Economy of Rent-Seeking*, Rowley, C. K., Tollison, R. D., and Tullock, G., (eds.), Kluwer Academic Publisher, (1988); and Mueller, D. *Public Choice II*, Cambridge University Press (1989). Further recognition is demonstrated in Tullock's selection to author "Rent-Seeking," in Eatwell, J., Milgate, M. and Newman, P. (eds.), *The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics*, (London, New York, Tokyo: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1987).

years later, after Krueger had done related work in the context of development economics. Indeed, Krueger herself first learned of Tullock's paper when she presented her paper (already accepted by the *AER*) at a seminar at Virginia Tech in 1974. Having listened to her talk, someone in the audience pointed out the similarity between her work and the argument in Tullock's 1967 paper. Tullock believes that her work was more acceptable to the profession because it focused on the policies of foreign governments whereas his paper was interpreted as critical of U.S. institutions.

*The professional journals respond to Tullock's rent-seeking papers*

Tullock's first paper in rent seeking presents a cautionary tale of the difficulty of gaining academic recognition for original research that does not fit within a well-established field. According to Tullock, this article on the topic which became rent seeking was a response to Harvey Leibenstein's x-efficiency argument (Leibenstein 1975). Tullock thought that the rent-seeking insight might explain Leibenstein's point. As noted by Tullock (1966), the professional journals provide incremental improvements to an established doctrine or field of study which he refers to as "normal science." The resistance of journal editors to new ideas is a predictable consequence of the organization of scientific inquiry. The dismissal of Tullock's insight shows that it is more acceptable to bring order to chaos than to expose the chaos in what has been regarded as order. Tullock's contribution also had the effect of being intellectually intimidating because it exposed as unsatisfactory the premises and conclusions of accepted doctrine. Since Tullock's work was not of the yeoman-like, narrowly technical sort in an existing field of research, the broad implications of his initial work were not adequately appreciated at first by the

editors of economic journals which focused on traditional lines of research (normal science).

These problems are reflected in the reasons given by the editors for rejecting Tullock's work. Note that several of Tullock's most important papers were initially rejected on the basis that the points they made were subtle or obscure, simplistic or unimportant. In rejecting "The Welfare Costs of Tariffs and Monopoly,"<sup>4</sup> the editor of the *American Economic Review* stated:

you will no doubt note that the referee neglects your point regarding the amount of real resources devoted to establishing, promoting, destroying, etc., monopolies. However, I have noted it and, while I think it is certainly valid, *it does not appear significant* (as a theoretical contribution) [emphasis added] John Gurley, Editor, *American Economic Review* (August 16, 1966).

The "Cost of Transfers," a second paper on rent seeking, was published by *Kyklos* after initial rejections by the *American Economic Review*, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, and the *Southern Economic Journal*. In its rejection letter, the *American Economic Review* opined:

[This paper's] principal point is that the possibility of income or wealth transfers has the unfortunate consequence that people invest resources either to obtain or to prevent them. These resources are wasted... This paper never gets beyond the obvious. George H. Borts, Managing Editor, *American Economic Review* (February 18, 1971).

Tullock also discussed the concept of rent-seeking in "A Note on Discriminating Monopolies," which was rejected by the *Journal of Political Economy* (January 25, 1977) and by the *Bell Journal*, where the referee's report noted in part:

It seems that all that is going on here is an assumption that all of the producers' surplus from monopolization (profits in this case) gets eaten up by resource expenditures as firms compete to obtain the monopoly. From society's point of view consumers' plus producers' surplus in any market with perfect price

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<sup>4</sup>This article was submitted with the title "The Welfare Costs of Tariffs and Monopoly." But, according to Tullock, the editors of the *Western Economic Journal* suggested the title include "theft." Tullock agreed to the change based on the recognition that the transfer of wealth from victim to thief involves negative social cost like tariffs and monopoly.

discrimination must be zero by definition. The exact relevance of this observation is not at all clear to me. Oliver E. Williamson, Editor, *Bell Journal* (January 3, 1977).

One should not judge the editors' comments too harshly. The rejections may have occurred for several reasons, of which I shall discuss two. First, the bluntness of Tullock's statements by which he refined his argument through written and oral debate often placed him at odds with the economics profession and journal editors. Many economists have recognized the difficulties in getting original ideas into the professional journals (e.g., Gans and Shepherd 1994); such difficulties clearly delayed initial acceptance of Tullock's rent-seeking insight and may have been compounded by Tullock's blunt style. Second, Tullock's rejection may also reflect the academic fashions of the times in which he worked. By the mid-1960s, most mainstream economists had moved into mathematics and statistics with an emphasis on building econometric models. Based on what was going on in the profession at the time, it is easy to understand that Tullock's diagrammatic approach might have seemed too simple and also out of fashion. Tullock was in good company, however. Exponents of applied price theory such as those found at the University of Chicago and UCLA argue that the most useful economic ideas are simple and intuitive, e.g, opportunity cost, the prisoners' dilemma, shifting liabilities and risk allocation, the principal-agent problem, and the Coase theorem. Rent seeking is another example of a fundamental insight so basic that some economists would not think it had to be discovered. The importance of simplicity and common sense in economics is recognized by many schools of thought and is well stated by Paul A. Samuelson:

Economists use terribly complicated jargon: long words, fine definitions,

cabalistic mathematical symbols and graphs, complicated statistical techniques. Yet if they have done their job well, they end up with what is simple common sense. (Samuelson 1959, 185)

Further, Samuelson warns that it takes the most uncommon wisdom “to know which part of the filing case of muddled notions that men call common sense is relevant to a particular problem.” He further emphasized that “as a practical matter the wisdom to correctly apply simple theory seems almost always to be associated with having spent years studying economics and doing scientific research”(Samuelson 1962, 15-16).

Given Tullock’s challenge of the received doctrine, the simple analytical tools that he used, and his lack of an economics degree, it was understandable that those with doctorates in economics and highly specialized training which emphasized mathematics might question the sense of Tullock’s ideas. Perhaps more important than the straightforward question of whether it was significant, is the fact that Tullock’s insight was a major change in examining a particular problem which they thought had been fully explored. For any type of activity (including academic endeavors), a practitioner is familiar with the supply and demand for his services. A change in the technology (e.g., mathematics) or demand (fashion) for specific studies would be reflected by shifts of supply and demand. The practitioner would perceive a change in the costs and benefits for him to undertake different types of studies using new tools. In this case, Tullock’s insight shifted the focus of the analysis away from calculation of the deadweight loss measured by the foregone consumer surplus to the less easily calculable area of lost opportunities for society resulting from the activities of those who seek and defend monopolistic advantage. It may be that by opening a whole new area for consideration,

Tullock's insight raised the cost of analyzing such topics as trade protection, public utility regulation, and other forms of regulation (Buchanan and Tullock 1975).

In the mid-1960s, there were few established journals which published the types of analytical approaches and questions used by Tullock.<sup>5</sup> Recognizing the absence of appropriate outlets for such work, Tullock was the prime mover behind the formation of *Frontiers in Economics* and *Papers on Non-Market Decision Making* (later renamed *Public Choice*) in 1966.

#### *The recognition awarded to Tullock's work*

The importance of his research into the costs of monopoly is demonstrated by the number of citations of his 1967 paper. During the period 1980 to 1999 the *Web of Science* (consisting of the three indexes *Science Citation Index*, *Social Science Citation Index*, and *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*) indicate that Tullock's 1967 article received 497 hits.<sup>6 7</sup> The *SSCI* for 1972-79 (the *SSCI* was published in 1972) indicates that there were 50 citations to the 1967 paper during this period.

A more accurate measure of the importance of Tullock's work in the area that came to be known as rent-seeking would include five other papers in which Tullock built

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<sup>5</sup>Based upon his experience with editors and as an editor, Tullock came to have definite views on editing in the development of science. See, e.g., "What's Wrong With Editing," *Speculations in Science and Technology* 3, no. 5 (1980), pp. 610-16. Also see, "Science's Feet of Clay," in William Breit and William P. Culbertson, Jr. (eds.), *Science and Ceremony: The Institutional Economics of E. E. Ayres* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), pp. 135-45.

<sup>6</sup>For a specific work these indexes count "hits" defined as individual citations within an article. Thus an article may cite a specific work more than once and each time constitutes a "hit."

<sup>7</sup>This compares with 1382 hits for Buchanan and Tullock's *The Calculus of Consent* (1962) for the same period (1980-99).



upon his insight. “Hits” for these papers for the period 1972-99 are provided below:

o "Social Cost and Government Action" ( <i>AER</i> 1969)	10
o "The Cost of Transfers" ( <i>Kyklos</i> 1971)	25
o "More on the Welfare Costs of Transfers" ( <i>Kyklos</i> 1974)	3
o "Competing for Aid" ( <i>Public Choice</i> 1975)	3
o "The Transitional Gains Trap" ( <i>Bell Journal</i> 1975)	68

When the 109 "hits" for these subsequent papers are added to those for his original 1967 paper, the total is 606. The grand total for Tullock's 1967 article and the five subsequent rent-seeking papers is thus 656. In contrast, Krueger's "The Political Economy of the Rent-Seeking Society" (1974) received 693 hits and Posner's "The Social Costs of Monopoly and Regulation" (1975) received 324. It should be noted that Krueger's article appeared in the *American Economic Review*, the most widely circulated economic journal in the world. Tullock's work, on the other hand, was published in journals with a much smaller circulation.

*How does recognition for Tullock's articles on rent seeking compare with that enjoyed by what the journals chose to publish in lieu of Tullock*

The lead article in any issue of a scholarly journal is likely to be the one which the editor expects will attract the most readers. The editor may consider an article to be the most interesting for one or more of several reasons, e.g., the reputation of the author, the subject matter of the article, etc. The relative prestige of the journal also helps determine which journals are read and therefore which articles are cited in the early years after publication. However, as time goes by, articles are increasingly cited for their original contribution irrespective of their source.

We may plausibly assume that approximately one year lapses from the date of the acceptance of a paper until its publication. Therefore we may compare the citation count for any one of Tullock's "rejected" papers with the citation count for the lead article in the issue that was published approximately a year later than the date on which Tullock's paper was rejected. This provides one measure of the relative appeal of the two articles. Moreover, even though a particular article by Tullock may not hold up well against the lead article, it may stand up well against one or more other articles in that issue. Yet the editor preferred every article in that issue, and not just the lead article, to Tullock's (rejected) article. Furthermore, a meaningful comparison is surely only possible if the rejected paper is not materially changed before it is accepted by another journal.

Gordon Tullock's seminal article, "The Welfare Costs of Tariffs, Monopoly and Theft," was rejected by the *American Economic Review* in a letter dated August 16, 1966, prior to its acceptance by the *Western Economic Journal*. A year later, in the September 1967 issue, the *AER* published Robert J. Gordon's "The Incidence of the Corporation Income Tax in U.S. Manufacturing, 1925-62" as its lead article. According to the *Science Citation Index* (1965-74), the *Social Science Citation Index* (1975-1979), and the *Web of Science* (1980-1/2002), this article received 60 hits in 35 articles. However, these numbers ignore all but one citation in the social science literature prior to 1972 when the *SSCI* began.

Tullock's *WEJ* article was also rejected by the *Journal of Political Economy*. Almost a year later, in the September-October 1967 issue, the *JPE* published Abram Bergson's "Market Socialism Revisited" as its lead. According to the *Science Citation*

*Index* (1965-74) and the *Social Science Citation Index* (1975-1979), this article received 21 hits in 21 articles. However, the *Web of Science* (1980-1/2002) indicates no hits whatsoever. However, these numbers may ignore citations in the social science literature prior to 1972.

Tullock's *WEJ* article was also rejected by the *Southern Economic Journal*. Almost a year later, in the October 1967 issue, the *SEJ* published John Conlisk's "A Modified Neoclassical Growth Model with Endogenous Technical Change" as its lead. According to the *Science Citation Index* (1965-74) and the *Social Science Citation Index* (1975-1979), this article received 4 hits in 4 articles, and the *Web of Science* (1980-1/2002) indicates no hits whatsoever. However, these numbers may ignore citations in the social science literature prior to 1972.

According to the *SCI*, the *SSCI*, and the *Web of Science*, Tullock's 1967 article in *Western Economic Journal*, received 547 hits during the period 1967 through 1999.<sup>8</sup> These numbers may also ignore citations in the social science literature prior to 1972. Although Gordon's article was very likely cited far more than Tullock's in the first several years after publication, it is clear that Tullock's has been cited far more frequently since 1972. And although Bergson's and Conlisk's articles may early on have been cited more than Tullock's, there is no record of any citation for either article after 1979.

Gordon Tullock's article, "The Cost of Transfers," was rejected by the *American Economic Review* in a letter dated February 18, 1971, prior to its acceptance by *Kyklos*. A year later, in the first issue of 1972, the *AER* published Duncan Bailey and Charles

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<sup>8</sup>The author was unable to update the data to include 2000 through 1/2002.

Schotta's "Private and Social Rates of Return to Education of Academicians" as its lead article after James Tobin's presidential address to the American Economic Association, which is necessarily placed at the front of that issue. According to the *Science Citation Index* (1970-74), the *Social Science Citation Index* (1972-79), and the *Web of Science* (1980-1/2002), this article received 23 hits in 16 articles.

Tullock's *Kyklos* article was also rejected by the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. Rather more than a year later, in the February 1972 issue, the *QJE* published Robert Hanley Scott's "Avarice, Altruism, and Second Party Preferences" as its lead. According to the *Science Citation Index* (1970-74) and the *Social Science Citation Index* (1972-79), this article received 16 hits in 16 articles. The *Web of Science* (1980-1/2002) indicates 28 hits in 17 articles.

Tullock's *Kyklos* article was also rejected by the *Southern Economic Journal*. Almost a year later, in the April 1972 issue, the *SEJ* published Joseph J. Spengler's "Prospective Population Changes and Price Level Tendencies" as its second article after James W. McKie's presidential address to the Southern Economic Association, which is necessarily placed at the front of that issue. It might be argued that Spengler's article was placed second out of deference to a senior figure rather than in the belief that it was the most important contribution to that issue. According to the *Science Citation Index* (1970-74) and the *Social Science Citation Index* (1972-79), this article received 3 hits in 3 articles, and the *Web of Science* (1980-1/2002) indicates no hits whatsoever.

According to the *SCI*, the *SSCI*, and the *Web of Science*, Tullock's 1971 article in *Kyklos*, received 26 hits during the period 1971 through 1/2002. Thus Tullock's article

has been cited slightly more frequently than Bailey and Schotta's. It has also been cited less frequently than Scott's and far more frequently than Spengler's. The results are summarized in Table 1.

*What more might we say?*

The exercise which I have done compares the citation count for article A in journal X with that for article B in journal Y. For example, I compared the citation count for Tullock's article in the *Western* with that for Robert Gordon's article in the *AER*. What I might have done is to see how article A stands up against the others in journal X, and then to compare its performance with that of article B against the others in journal Y. In other words, I might have compared the citation count for Tullock's article in the *Western* with that for the other articles appearing in that issue. Then I might have compared the citation count for Gordon's article in the *AER* with that for the other articles appearing in that issue. And then, finally, I might have seen how Tullock's relative performance compares with Gordon's relative performance. This could tell us something about how well a particular editor is doing his job if we assume that one of his objectives is to raise the citation count for articles in his journal.

In the exercise I have just described, I have taken account of the fact that articles in some journals are cited on average more frequently than articles in other journals. And this is true irrespective of the unique characteristics of any particular article. Moreover, we shouldn't forget that the relative popularity of a journal varies as the composition of its editorial board changes and professional interests evolve over time.

There are a number of other possible comparisons. We could examine the extent to which citation counts differ for an author between journals. We could look at how citation counts vary for different authors within the same journal or in the same research field. We could also look at how citation counts for one journal change as the identity of the editor or editorial board changes. And we could examine how citation counts differ between journals.

### *Conclusion*

My paper seeks to demonstrate that Tullock's articles on rent-seeking continue to be cited, often far more frequently than the papers which journals chose to publish when they rejected Tullock's submissions. We should expect as much for Tullock's seminal contribution to economics, presented in a number of path-breaking papers, has launched many new lines of inquiry. I believe that his work will continue to provide a framework to explain the problems encountered in deregulation, privatization, and the transformation of socialist economies.

Moreover, recognition of Tullock's pioneering work is no longer confined to the professional journals, but may be found in popular periodicals like *The Economist* and *Forbes*. In addition to citations in the economic literature, another example of how his work has come to be recognized is his commission to write the entry on "Rent-Seeking" in *The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics* (1987).

### *Table 1*

*Comparing citation counts:*

*Tullock vs. authors that the journals chose to publish*

1. "The Welfare Costs of Tariffs, Monopolies, and Theft," <i>WEJ</i> , 6/67	547 hits (1972-99)
Rejected by the <i>AER</i> , <i>JPE</i> , <i>SEJ</i> .	
Gordon, <i>AER</i> , 9/67	60 hits in 35 articles (1967-1/2002)
Bergson, <i>JPE</i> , 9-10/67	21 hits in 21 articles (1967-1/2002)
Conlisk, <i>SEJ</i> , 10/67	4 hits in 4 articles (1967-1/2002)
2. "The Cost of Transfers," <i>Kyklos</i> , 4/71	25 hits (1972-99)
Rejected by the <i>AER</i> , <i>QJE</i> , <i>SEJ</i>	
Bailey & Schotta, <i>AER</i> , 3/72	23 hits in 16 articles (1972-1/2002)
Scott, <i>QJE</i> , 2/72	44 hits in 33 articles (1972-1/2002)
Spengler <i>SEJ</i> , 4/72	3 hits in 3 articles (1972-1/2002)



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## APPENDIX A

### Gordon Tullock's Rent-seeking Papers

- "The Welfare Implications of Tariffs, Monopolies, and Theft," *Western Economic Journal* (1967) 5 June, pp. 224-32.
- "Social Cost and Government Action," *American Economic Review* 59 (May 1969), pp. 189-97.
- "Charity of the Uncharitable", *Western Economic Journal*, 9 (December 1971), pp. 379-92.
- "Cost of Transfers" *Kyklos*, 24, Fasc. 4 (1971), pp. 629-43.
- "More on the Welfare Costs of Transfers", *Kyklos*, Fasc. 2 (1974), pp. 378-81.
- "The Transitional Gains Trap," *Bell Journal of Economics* 6 (Autumn 1975), pp. 671-78.
- "Competing for Aid", *Public Choice*, 21 Spring 1975, pp. 41-51.
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