



December 7, 2004

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Reference for Tao Li

I am pleased to recommend *Tao Li* to you for a faculty position in your department or school. Tao has completed his general examinations in the Department of Government several years ago, was awarded a visiting fellowship at the Kellogg School, Northwestern, for the Spring 2004 term, and successfully defended his doctoral dissertation in December 2004. He is a gifted formal theorist, and his ideas are provocative, but what is especially impressive about him is his commitment not merely to do the mathematics but primarily to construct theories that are fundamentally oriented toward the empirical world.

Early in his graduate student career, Tao wrote a very smart paper for Professor Jeffrey Frieden and me (Government 2158 in the Fall 2000 term) called "The Messenger Game," that serves as the basis for his dissertation work. The idea is that, in communicating between themselves, two players (two nation-states, for example) utilize - sometimes purposely, sometimes inadvertently - third-party messengers. These messengers are not automata, but rather should be thought of as having interests of their own - sometimes in sympathy with the receiver, sometimes with the sender. Tao is interested in different information environments involving this arrangement, and particularly with whether or not, and to what extent, the primary players share common knowledge about the messenger's preferences. This allows him to conceptualize how openly hostile countries have secret communications through a third country, how allies share intelligence while there is possibility that one of them will serve as an "unintentional messenger," accidentally leaking the information to a third state, and other cases of strategic information transmission involving more than two states that may have spillover effects on domestic politics.

He has taken this idea of a messenger as the third-party in strategic interactions involving information transmission - an idea formulated originally in the context of international conflict and cooperation - and has applied it in an entirely novel area, viz., legislative politics. The messenger in this context is a legislative committee that transmits information from interest groups to the floor of the chamber. In Tao's view special interests focus their lobbying effort on jurisdictionally relevant committees and do not lobby the floor directly. Committees in this perspective are not so much substantive experts as they are *embedded in substantive networks*. This gives them extraordinary access, in comparison to non-committee legislators, to specialized information possessed by special interests. Committees, in turn, strategically transmit this information (that had been strategically transmitted to them) to the floor. Tao's work in this area is an original application, one very rich in possibilities. What is most impressive in my view is the way in which Tao, a citizen of the PRC, has mastered the substance of legislative politics in the United States and the modeling literature associated with it. He brings the perspective of an outsider to this substantive context. His intuitions are characterized by knowledge but not the associated baggage that Americanists often implicitly bring along. It has the feel of freshness.

The second paper, which constitutes his job-market talk, generalizes the original "messenger game" formulation. The third paper is empirical, allowing Tao to demonstrate his solid methodological training (from my colleagues Gary King and Jas Sekhon). It is a remarkable analysis of the debate among distributive, informational, and partisan theorists of legislative politics. He discovers a "unit of analysis" problem in existing empirical work that has produced biased estimators. Correcting for this difficulty, he finds somewhat surprising results, especially as applied to Krehbiel's work on informational approaches.

Tao Li has done some teaching here at Harvard, and came to us initially with very good English language skills. I believe that after five years here he still talks too rapidly and has some slight writing awkwardness, but neither of these problems will be an obstacle to academic success in the classroom or in research. His theoretical imagination is striking. His diligence in mastering technical materials is apparent from the

briefest of conversations with him. His capacity to learn and bring fresh insights to substantive materials is one of his most positive qualities. I hope you and your search committee are able to meet with him.

Sincerely yours,

Kenneth A. Shepsle

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To whom it may concern:

I am writing in support of Mr. Tao Li, who is applying for a job in your department.

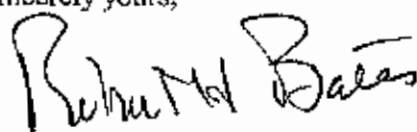
I have not taught Tao Li nor have I advised his dissertation. My voice should thus be taken as that of an outsider. Because of our shared membership in a graduate research training seminar over the past two years, I have nonetheless been able to witness Tao Li at work. I have been favorably impressed.

His work on communication in Congress, it would appear to me, takes important steps forward, extending the work of Krebheil and Gilligan and others and reinvigorating the debate about the role of committees in legislatures. Equally as important, it places this work, along with most of the important contributions to the cheap talk literature, in a general framework. He thus brings order to the field and gives it structure. It is a very nice piece of applied theory.

Given the amount that Tao Li has taught me, and my low level of preparation in his field, I can affirm my strong belief that he will be an effective instructor. His command of the language is excellent. His attitude is aggressive but warm. He takes pains to prepare and to find a variety of ways of getting his points over. He readily moves between abstract symbols and intuitively apprehensible concepts. From my point of view, he was a very fine teacher.

I strongly recommend Tao Li to anyone who is looking for an applied theorist and statistician who works on politics. He should have a very fine career and make contributions both through his research and his teaching.

Sincerely yours,



Robert H. Bates
Professor of Government