Thomas Romer

The career of Thomas (Tom) Romer, professor of politics and public affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and director of the Research Program in Political Economy, spans four decades during which time he made foundational contributions to several questions in political economy. Tom's earliest work embedded a model of income taxation into a majority rule voting framework. That framework helped shape intuitions about the preferences of voters for redistribution and how democratic societies should respond to increased income inequality. Elaborations of his model are fundamental to the political economy of redistribution and the welfare state.

Working with Howard Rosenthal, Tom developed theoretical models of the power of agenda setters, which have proven to be the foundation for rational choice analysis of legislative and electoral institutions. Their now classic model emerged from a puzzle—why was there so much variation in local school budgets in the state of Oregon? The answer was that Oregon had a rule requiring that if a school bond initiative failed, the spending levels would revert to their 1916 levels. As it turned out, the places with higher spending in 1916 exhibited lower spending levels in the 1970s, even after correcting for various social and demographic characteristics. Romer and Rosenthal realized that this was because the consequences of rejecting the initiative were less dire in places with higher 1916 spending levels, which more severely constrained school boards with high spending preferences. Their model incorporated the fundamental insight that the reversion spending level was of vital strategic importance, and their model has been subsequently applied well beyond the domain of school bond initiatives. Today the model has become a staple of legislative politics, where it is used to model the agenda setting power of legislative committees and floor leaders.

In yet another series of important papers with Dennis Epple at Carnegie Mellon University and their students, Romer began studying redistribution by local governments. The conventional wisdom was that the ability of voters to decamp to other municipalities would preclude redistribution by local governments. Romer, et al., showed that this was not the case, even when residential mobility is assumed to be costless. His models show that while the poor have a greater preference for redistribution, even affluent communities will redistribute and provide public goods valued by lower-income residents. In addition to his seminal contributions in political economy, Romer has written extensively on land use policy, campaign finance, and the political economy of the savings and loan, and the subprime mortgage crises.

A native of Hungary, at the age of nine Tom moved to Montreal, Canada. He studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and then at Yale, where he earned his Ph.D. in economics. After a brief stint at the University of Western Ontario, Tom spent a dozen or so very productive years at Carnegie Mellon University, before arriving at Princeton in the early 1990s. He has served the University as the chair of the Department of Politics and as the head of the Wilson School's graduate program in public policy. Importantly, he created and directed both the Research Program in Political Economy and the multi-department graduate program in political economy. In these roles, he has played a crucial role in the training of at least two generations of political economists at Princeton.

He has served as a visiting scholar at the Federal Trade Commission, Stanford University, the Institute for Advanced Study, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. In 2011, he was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.