

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
ECONOMICS

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Dear Colleague,

I am writing this letter in support of the application of *Elliott Ash* for a position in your institution. Elliott's interests are in the fields of political economy and law and economics. I am not one of his main advisers (he has five people writing letters for him!), but I have interacted with him over the years and — in particular — his job market paper is related to my work on tax complexity and tax base so that I was more involved in advising him on this topic.

Elliott has a very original research agenda. He has worked tirelessly on digitizing a number of legal sources and pursuing textual analysis of that type of data. I am sure that Bentley MacLeod will write about their interesting joint work on measuring performance of judges using quality of opinions and citation information. The job market paper relies on digitizing state-level tax code and analyzing the language used. The usual public finance approach would be to characterize the tax system by specifying rates and components of the tax base. Tax legislations are complex though, cover a lot of different things and are impossible to fully characterize using a small number of parameters. Elliott focuses instead on the phrases used in legislations and using a data-driven approach classifies them to discover ones that are associated with changes in revenue from income, corporate and sales taxation. This is an ingenious way of characterizing the tax code, although it is not necessarily an easy to interpret characterization. Still, one may ask whether this way of describing the tax code has internal validity and whether it provides additional information over standard ways of summarizing the tax system quantitatively. This is the approach that Elliott pursues. Using close elections, he studies the effect of Republican vs Democratic control of state government and shows that Democratic electoral success leads to modifications in legislation in the direction of using the language that's associated with more redistributive policy. This

is so even though statutory rates do not change, suggesting that parties pursue their goals by modifying the base rather than by modifying the rates.

The paper is using sophisticated “big data” techniques and state-of-the-art econometric methodology, and it is clearly showcasing Elliott’s technical abilities. The idea is creative and very original, and the outcome is an interesting contribution to both political economy and public finance literature. I expect that this paper will be published in a very good journal. Elliott has high energy and a lot of passion for his work. I expect him to be very productive. He has a well-defined agenda that may well be an important direction in the future, so that he might end up being a leader of a new and exciting subfield. I recommend him very highly.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Wojciech Kopczuk". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent flourish at the end.

Wojciech Kopczuk  
Professor of Economics and  
of International and Public Affairs  
Columbia University