What this research is about

Research into the political economy of gambling arises mainly from the fields of sociology, geography, and political science. This body of work has made many contributions to gambling studies and public debates by providing important insights into the role of government in the growth of gambling industry, and by showing how governments have a vested interest in gambling tax revenue. Such interest can compromise policies to reduce harms related to gambling. The political economy perspective on gambling also highlights how gambling has a greater negative impact on socially and economically disadvantaged people. In this article, researchers first present an overview of the perspective and the contributions it makes, followed by a critical examination of the arguments made by some of the leading researchers in political economy of gambling.

What the researcher did

The authors reviewed articles published by some of the leading researchers in the political economy of gambling. Most articles were authored by researchers from Australia, New Zealand and the UK. The authors first presented an overview of this body of work and its contributions. They then provided a critical examination and raised several concerns.

What the researcher found

The role of government

Over the last 25 years, governments in many countries have overseen the legalization of gaming machines and expansion of casinos. Several reasons have been put forth: 1) casinos attract tourists and lead to economic development; 2) supporting the country’s own gambling industry prevents local people from spending their money elsewhere; 3) gambling provides a huge source of tax revenue; and, 4) legalization protects consumers from illegal gambling and criminal associations. Some assumptions about the benefits of gambling do not have strong support. In particular, there is no strong evidence to show increased tax revenue and economic development from gambling. Political economy researchers believe there is a conflict of interest when government relies on gambling tax revenue. This reliance may make government more reluctant to support policy that could reduce gambling revenue.

Social-economic disadvantage and exploitation of the working classes

Political economy research has highlighted the link between gambling and social disadvantage. Evidence to support this link is available in a number of countries. It suggests that gambling venues tend to be located in poor areas; but, other research suggests that this may not mean higher participation rates or problem gambling rates.

What you need to know

This article reviews work from some of the leading researchers in political economy of gambling. It highlights how their research has contributed to gambling studies and public debates, and raises four main concerns:

1. How this body of work regards the gambling industry as having a bigger role and more agency than may be justified;
2. How it seems to negatively portray gamblers as passive, naive consumers;
3. How some researchers may present evidence in a selective manner to support their arguments;
4. And, how the political economy perspective appears to sometimes dismiss contributions of other academic disciplines, most notably psychology, public health and medical sciences.
There is also a lack of evidence that the poor and the unemployed are more likely to gamble on electronic gaming machines. Thus, evidence supporting the link between gambling and social disadvantage is inconsistent.

Some political economy researchers have argued that gambling supports existing power structures. They tend to use language that could be seen as leading and emotive in order to support their arguments. In their view, the gambling industry provides dangerous goods that exploit the “working classes” or lower socio-economic groups. Their arguments seem to create the impression that there is a conspiracy driven by a large and unified global gambling industry. Its purpose is to redistribute wealth from the poor to a small group of wealthy elites. However, the gambling industry is diverse and usually does not work in unison. There are often competitions between gambling operators.

The negative portrayal of gamblers

In some political economy research, gamblers (and working-class people) are portrayed as passive, naive, easily influenced consumers who are blind to broader marketing and consumer forces. It is likely that people are much more aware of their behaviour than they are given credit for in these arguments. This is supported by some interview studies that found people were able to talk about potential harms and effects of gambling on the wider community.

Attitudes toward other academic disciplines

Some political economy researchers seem to dismiss work from other academic disciplines, most notably psychology, public health and medical sciences. They argue that the gambling industry is motivated to deflect blame and supports the notion of individual responsibility for the harms caused by its products. Thus, the industry encourages “responsible” behaviours, which means that gamblers are expected to act rationally and make safe choices. They also believe that researchers in psychology and health sciences reinforce this view by looking for individual causes for problem gambling. Even so, many researchers in these fields have argued for greater consumer protection of gamblers. Many psychologists regard problem gambling as the result of both individual and environmental factors.

How you can use this research

This article may be useful to gambling researchers, policy makers and intervention providers. Importantly, it encourages researchers who work in different areas to acknowledge work from outside their own areas. Political economy research has stressed the important role of social, economic, and political context and social disadvantage. Still, there is also a need for studies that look at individual factors. This article also emphasizes the need to provide strong evidence and examples.

About the Researcher

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Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in responsible gambling policies, standards and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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