Political Science and Its Audience

by
Kenneth Prewitt,
Columbia University

I start a course on Politics and Policy by asking 100 or so students from several dozen countries to say what comes to mind when they hear the word "science."[1] Terms mentioned are objectivity, truth-seeking, hypothesis testing, experiments, data, logic, and the like. I write them on the blackboard. I then ask what comes to mind to mind when they hear the word "politics." Here they mention power, manipulation, ambition, conflict, partisanship, spin, ideology, and, less often, vision and purpose. This list is put on the blackboard. Then, with two word lists before us, I comment that because they have just joined a school of public policy they must have a view of what goes into thinking up, arguing about, designing, and implementing policy. After a bit of discussion it gradually it sinks in. Policy is the meeting ground of science and politics. It is where the two word-lists on the blackboard come together and thrash it out, neither side ever quite vanishing the other.

Policy is "scientific" in the sense that it is an empirical hypothesis about an intervention that, presumably, will fix (reform) something that is broken, or will prevent some unwanted condition or event from happening. For example,

> Campaign finance reform will weaken/strengthen political debate, and consequently harm/help electoral competition.

Policy is equally "political" in the sense that it creates winners and losers as it distributes benefits and costs. For example,

> I don't care how campaign finance reform affects electoral competition, I just know it will harm my re-election chances and I don't want it.

Political science, aptly named as far as I am concerned, works both sides of the policy equation, as is well-illustrated by the application of political science research in *McConnell v. FEC*. It advances through reasoned argument, data analysis, model testing, etc.; and, it purports to make sense of conflicting ambitions, power struggles, ideological differences, etc. This much is obvious and not that interesting.

I will argue in these comments that political science works both sides of the policy equation in another, more important, and deeper sense. Here I refer to the *project* that gave rise to professional political science in the first place, and to which it has remained attached for better than a century. This project is simultaneously analytic and political, aloof and engaged, neutral and purposeful. Understanding this, I suggest, has practical consequences for what is (or should be) viewed as a contribution to the discipline.

In the Beginning

The project was and continues to be improving society and its governance, as a quick summary of well-known facts makes clear.[2] In the latter decades of the 19th century, the new social sciences took shape against the background of social and cultural dislocations associated with industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and boom-bust business cycles. Associated with these historical discontinuities and social dislocations, and the rise of alien economic doctrines, were doubts about the capacity of democracy to guarantee social order.

Also underway was a general secularization of intellectual authority, in which "science began to appear not only as the most authoritative modern knowledge, but as a courageous source of free inquiry, as against an authoritarian, outmoded religion" (Ross 1991, 55). The forward-looking educated class that adopted the new sciences had a specific task in mind for the social sciences. Our disciplines were to "place the old principles of American exceptionalism on unassailable scientific ground" (Ross 1991, 54). Appeals to first principles from moral philosophy and a faith in historical analysis ceased to be the controlling principles. At the core of the new sciences, including the social sciences, was an emphasis on measurement.

In this the social sciences were influenced by developments that had been gaining momentum within the state itself. Starting as early as the 1830s, social empiricism was joined with advocacy and, by the latter part of the century, with regulatory action. "The most important institutional legacy of social empiricism in both Britain and the United States was the creation of new state capacities, embodied in public agencies such as the improved census in the United States and the labor bureaus in both countries" (Lacey and Furner 1993, 30).

From today's perspective social measurement at the turn of the century was primitive, not much more than the compilation of descriptive statistics and tentative steps toward social surveys. But these modest methodological efforts represent a profound shift in intellectual preoccupations. In the new political science it represented a break with the historical method and abstract political thought in favor of compiling and classifying statistics on current conditions.

The academic leaders who promoted measurement contended that in rapidly changing social circumstances explanations based on deductions from fixed theoretical premises were

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bound to miss the mark. The only certain grasp of social conditions and human motivation would arise from continuous observation. Part of the explanation for the shift to empiricism by the social sciences is the attempt to mimic the natural sciences, whose methods were proving robust enough to understand the dynamics and evolution of natural phenomena. But more was at stake than putting social knowledge on firmer footing.

"Doubts about democracy" gave give rise to the progressive movement with its emphasis on nonpartisanship, government efficiency, electoral reform, and the separation of politics from administration. Central to these new political themes was the attempt to weaken corrupt political parties and their control of public policy. In part this was to be accomplished by shifting political decisions from elected officials to appointed officials; the latter were then to be provided with nonpartisan, expert advice. It was also a political moment in which the presumed excesses of popular democracy—and agitation by the working class—could be tempered by a recommitment to the principles of representational democracy. Social order and the public interest were to be preserved by returning government to the "better element." The better element was not a moneyed aristocracy or landed gentry or clerical hierarchy; it was the well-educated professional class.

It was in the context, then, of historical discontinuity and reform politics that the young social sciences came to view themselves as offering to society a new form of social intelligence. The intelligence these new disciplines could bring to bear on behalf of social order and economic progress was not to be deduced from static first principles. The moment was too dynamic to expect answers from ancient philosophy or history. New truths for new conditions would emerge from systematic observation of contemporary realities. And insofar as rapid change carried with it tendencies to disorder, fragmentation, and civil violence, the challenge for an industrial democracy was to channel change, and somehow keep it in bounds. Moral exhortation was insufficient. The proper response was the policies that would improve conditions to the point that social order could be preserved. These policies were to be based on objective statistics and careful measurement, or so it was assumed by social reformers and government bureau leaders in partnership with the new social science disciplines.

Applying empirical research on behalf of social reform, however, was quickly seen as a double-edged sword. For example, statisticians and social scientists were concerned that the new labor statistics would lose creditability were they seen as favoring labor over management. The advice given to and heeded by Carroll Wright, founder in 1873 of the first state Bureau of Labor Statistics (Massachusetts) and subsequently first commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, is instructive. He was to "distinctly and decisively disconnect the [bureau] from politics." The Bureau "has only to prove itself superior alike to partisan dictation and to the seductions of theory, in order to command the cordial support of the press and the body of citizens" (Walker 1960, 63).

Advice of this sort was given against the backdrop of public debate over whether socialism could serve as an alternative course for a modern industrial economy. On such major issues political scientists were by no means of one voice. It was in the context of sharp differences in social values that the claims to scientific "neutrality" and "objectivity" begin to take on such importance. Credibility replaced advocacy as the basis from which to assert social influence. Many social scientists, intent on remaining politically engaged, were drawn to progressivism and the comforting assumption that government reform could be nonpartisan and scientifically based.

Deep then in the early history of the social sciences is the need to believe in their social usefulness. This article of faith has little to do with the long and generally unrewarding attempt to distinguish basic from applied social science. Even among the purists who reject applied work is a belief that the truths uncovered in basic research will, eventually, prove useful, and be applied.

The distinction that matters is between advocacy and neutrality. And this distinction matters well beyond the boundaries of the social sciences themselves, for now we enter the arena in which conflicting political and economic interests are searching for intellectual allies or for social theories to buttress politically derived goals. This is difficult territory, full of traps for the unwary and not easily navigated even by those alert to the inherent contradictions. Can there be a social intelligence that is both useful and in fact used and yet which stands outside partisan advocacy? Social science leaders schooled in pragmatic liberalism, especially from the 1920s on, have insisted that this can be so.

The play of forces, however, is subtle. By the turn of the century academic social science had begun to distance itself from its early close association with advocacy and social reform. In establishing professional disciplines, the social sciences held out the promise of academic careers in which the rewards would go to those whose allegiance was to research and intellectual work, not to social justice and political work.

This shedding of an avowed reform agenda, however, did not lessen the commitment of the social sciences to relevance and usefulness. It only required that they find a new context in which to play out the determination to matter in the affairs of state and society. Wesley Mitchell makes the point clearly: "It is not lack of will that impedes [social] progress, but lack of knowledge. We putter with philanthropy and coquette with reform. . . . What we need as guide for this expenditure of energy is sure knowledge of the causal interconnections between social phenomena" (Ross 1991, 305).

Mitchell is not seeking a science for science's sake. The agenda was to remain political relevance and social significance, but it was to be reached, paradoxically, by developing an apolitical science. In objectivity would be found credibility; credibility would establish legitimacy; legitimacy then becomes a new basis for the application of knowledge to social purposes and political goals. The circle is complete. Political science will stand outside of advocacy, but expect its new knowledge to be used by those whose business is advocacy. The inherent contradiction here shadows the social sciences across their entire history.

The Audience

This brief historical foray reminds us that political science, even as it was finding its academic footing, never imagined that it would talk only to itself. There was always an audience in mind. The audience, whether social reformers, policy elites, or apolitical bureaucrats, would take their bearings from the results of the new research enterprise based in universities.

This is certainly what the funders had in mind. Beardsly Ruml, as director of Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, was by far the most influential manager of social science funds in the early decades of the 20th century. The record of the Memorial and the extraordinary importance of Ruml to the development of the modern social sciences has been recounted often (Bulmer and Bulmer 1982, 59–82). Here we simply remind ourselves that the money had a purpose beyond what it meant for the early recipients.

Reasoning by analogy with the natural and medical sciences, Ruml articulated the metaphor that dominated early

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thinking about the public role of the social sciences and that left an imprint across the subsequent decades:

> All who work toward the general end of social welfare are embarrassed by the lack of that knowledge which the social sciences must provide. It is as though engineers were at work without an adequate development in the sciences of physics and chemistry, or as though physicians were practicing in the absence of the medical sciences. The direction of work in the social fields is largely controlled by tradition, inspiration and expediency, a natural condition in view of our ignorance of individual and social forces. (Bulmer and Bulmer 1982, 361)

Among those who "work toward the general end of social welfare" was recently elected President of the United States Herbert Hoover, who, in one his earliest actions in the White House appointed a Committee on Recent Social Trends under the leadership of Wesley Mitchell and Charles Merriam, directors, respectively, of the National Bureau of Economic Research and the Social Science Research Council. Requesting funds from the Rockefeller Foundation, Hoover wrote that his service to the nation would be aided by "the conscious organization of all possible practicable means by which the Government might inspire, promote, or guide both public and private thought and action of benefit in the field of social problems." Hoover felt that the advice of eminent scholars would "provide a plan which, if carried through, would produce a rounded and explicit picture of the whole American social scene, with such a wealth of facts and statistics and conclusions as to form a new and unique basis of thought and action" not only for scientists and social workers but also for "officers of the government who, like himself, have a special responsibility in relation to such problems."[3] The Foundation provided the funds, and the SSRC provided the facilities.

Four years in the making, the 1,600 page Report of the Committee did indeed attempt to survey the major social trends of the period and thereby, in Hoover's words, "serve to help all of us see where social stresses are occurring and where major efforts should be undertaken to deal with them constructively."[4]

We are not here interested in the fate of the Recent Social Trends effort, largely set aside by the new Roosevelt administration, but in what it tells us about the project that engaged political science in its formative years and, I suggest, still does.

The Legacy

If it is accepted that political science is scientific in its methods, rigor, and analytic reasoning, but political in its engagement with the project of improving democratic governance, and that it is possible to be both without drifting into advocacy or partisanship, we might benefit from bringing forward the principles of the early 20th century into the 21st century.

I stress two. First, political science has an audience beyond itself. Second, its effectiveness at reaching that audience has much to do with whether its research is supported. The Beardsly Ruml quotation above was directed to the Rockefeller Foundation trustees as a justification for foundation support for the social sciences. Hoover sought funds from the same source, because "officers of the government" needed what social science could provide.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) today applies two criteria—quality and relevance, and by relevance the NSF means whether the projects that it funds have the potential to enhance the well-being of taxpayers. Foundations today, as in Ruml's time, do not ask of the grantee what will we know if we fund your project, but what will we know that others can use to some social benefit.

The issue of audience is never far from the thinking of those who manage the vast array of institutions that package and translate academic research for the benefit of policy elites. I have served on the Board or Advisory Committees of two dozen or more such institutions, and always the question sooner or later posed is "Who is the audience for this report?" Here is an example. The National Research Council appointed a Committee on Basic Research in the Behavioral and Social Sciences, a committee jointly sponsored by the Social Science Research Council and the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences, and largely funded by NSF. This pedigree places the report squarely in the basic research tradition, yet its opening pages ask, "What are the contributions of scientific knowledge beyond the normal boundaries of the discipline or disciplines that created it?" The report continues, "That available knowledge has always been brought into service for wider, often directly practical ends is clear. With its aid, ways are found to do things more efficiently, to create new goods and services, to inform decision making, and to improve the quality of life" (Behavioral and Social Science Research 1982, 2–3).

If issues of funding and audience continue in ways foreshadowed a century ago, along another dimension we see greater changes. Not anticipated at the beginning of the 20th century was something we routinely accept as we start the next. This is the "vast array" just alluded to, by which we have in mind the hundreds of policy institutions and the in-house policy units of many more hundreds of advocacy groups. It includes as well the schools of public policy, a phenomena of the last half-century. Even as Lasswell was coining the term "policy scientists" and assigning to them the task of assessing the applicability of knowledge for the solution of policy problems, the relevant institutional homes were arriving in large number and providing a new base of operation for political scientists (and even more, for economists).

Some Advice, which I preface with an autobiographical statement

I have been a card-carrying political scientist since I joined the APSA as a graduate student, and have published in its journals and been organizationally active. But I have not spent my entire career in political science departments; my non-university jobs have included the SSRC, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the U.S. Census Bureau. The advice proffered here reflects having been in the profession, but at times somewhat outside it.

For most political scientists, nothing in the historical summary above is particularly new. Neither, I suppose, is it likely to draw ire. My advice, however, might. It is simple. Reward those of our colleagues who are successful at bringing the results of research to an audience beyond the discipline's boundaries, an audience that might be policy makers, social reformers, judges, agency heads, or even the media that reaches a yet broader audience.

And I have in mind serious rewards, like weighing such success favorably in hiring and in tenure review. The research that is cited in judicial hearings or congressional testimony or agency standards and guidelines is not necessarily better research than that which is uncited. But it has managed to catch the attention of "officers of the government who . . . have a special responsibility in relation to [social] problems."

Catching such attention is seldom if ever happenstance. It occurs because political scientists, such as those writing the companion articles in this discussion of McCain-Feingold, have made it happen. They have combed the research literature, added to it, packaged the argument, and have written for an audience beyond the boundaries of the discipline. All too

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frequently this effort is ignored when departments are hiring or tenuring. In some instances, it is even held against the candidate—"why was he wasting his time trying to influence the Supreme Court?" To ask this question, or any of its many variants, misses a big truth about political science. Its project is ongoing. And to successfully advance this project requires that some among us enter the public sphere and speak as directly as possible to its practioneers. It is well within reach to assess the quality of what is offered, even to establish a peer review process drawing on those who have a proven track record in catching the attention of the policy world.

Postscript—Robert Dahl's Audience

In a seminar titled Social Science and Public Policy, the first assigned reading is Ira Katznelson's the *Origins of Policy*. Students then read such other luminaries as Herbert Simon (*Are Social Problems Problems Social Science Can Solve?*), Harold Lasswell (*The Policy Sciences*), James S. Coleman (*Policy, Research and Political Theory*), and Jim Scott (*Seeing Like the State*), before considering the largest and longest running social science project in American history, the decennial census. The topics and readings are predictable enough, until, perhaps, we get to the final assignment—which is Robert Dahl's *How Democratic is the American Constitution?*

The question posed: "In the terms of the seminar, is Dahl's study of the Constitution a policy study? If so, who is his audience?" The answer to the first question is, "of course," and to the second, "American citizens." Dahl is working both sides of the policy equation. He brings logic, jurisprudence, historical evidence, and comparative data to the question asked in the book's title. He would like to see the Constitution reformed in ways that would strengthen democratic equality, but he realistically assesses how constitutionally protected political interests, especially those of small states, which because of equal representation in the Senate benefit disproportionate to their population size, make certain reforms highly unlikely.

Political impediments to reform notwithstanding, Dahl is encouraging his audience, American citizens, to fresh thinking about the flaws as well as the genius of the Constitution. He writes:

> I can envision the possibility—here a degree of optimism breaks through—of a gradually expanding discussion that begins in scholarly circles, moves outward to the media and intellectuals more generally, and after some years begins to engage a wider public. I cannot say what the outcome might be. But surely it would heighten understanding of the relevance of democratic ideas to the constitution of a democratic country, and specifically it would heighten understanding of the shortcomings of the existing constitution viewed from the perspective and possibilities of change. (Dahl 2002, 156)

Dahl has tenure, and every other award, accolade, honor, and prize the profession has to offer, but suppose for a moment he were being reviewed for tenure. Would his committee give as much, even more, weight to commentary on his book in the "media or among intellectuals more generally" as it would to a review in *Perspectives*? For example, would it matter to the committee that Dahl's brilliant analysis was brought to the attention of a large, general audience in an extended and erudite essay in the *New Yorker*? (Hertzberg 2002, 85–90). If not, he would be unfortunate in having a tenure committee that misses the point of what political science is about. This committee would fail to see what Dahl clearly does see, that the project which launched professional political science in America—improving our democracy—is ongoing, and that at least some among us, from time to time, should get credit for reaching an audience beyond our disciplinary boundaries.

Notes

1. The course is taught to entering MA students in the School of Public and International Affairs, Columbia University.
2. The discussion here summarizes an extended treatment in Prewitt, *Social Science and Private Philanthropy: The Quest for Social Relevance*. Essays on Philanthropy, No. 15. (Bloomington: Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, 1995).
3. Letter from presidential assistant Strother to George E. Vincent, President of the Rockefeller Foundation, October 22, 1929. Cited in Barry Karl, *Charles E. Merriam and the Study of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974) 214.
4. Cited in Neil J. Smelser and Dean R. Gerstein, eds., *Behavioral and Social Science: Fifty Years of Discovery* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1986), 1. This NRC report was in commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the *Report of the President's Committee on Recent Social Trends*, most commonly referenced as the "Ogburn Report" after William G. Ogburn, the Committees' study director and chief author.

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