Local Control and Realities in the Relationship between Institutional Review Boards and Political Science Research

Introduction

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Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) were federally mandated more than 40 years ago as the principal actors in a decentralized regulatory system intended to protect and manage risk to all human research subjects (US Department of Health and Human Services 1993). The relationship between IRB oversight and political science research has never worked very well and, perhaps as a natural consequence, political scientists typically have sought to keep their dealings with IRBs to a minimum, frequently downplaying their importance (Hauck 2008; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2008). However, recent high-profile controversies involving political science research and the potentially unethical behavior on the part of the researchers involved suggest that political scientists could benefit if they take the IRB approval process more seriously.

In this second PS *symposium, we also highlight problems in the IRB process and offer solutions; however, our focus is at the local level, where we believe the greatest opportunity for addressing the problems between IRBs and political scientists is found.*

The "Importance of IRBs in Research" is a regularly covered topic in research-methods classes in psychology.[1] This is not surprising given the prevalence of clinical studies and experiments using human subjects in that discipline. With greater variation in research methods and units of analysis, political science likely will never be as dependent on IRB approval as psychology. Nevertheless, because experiments and other causal-inference methods are increasing in political science research,[2] a working knowledge and a greater appreciation for the IRB process—specifically, how the process works (or not) at home institutions—arguably are needed more today than ever before, which is why we offer this symposium. When Robert Hauck organized the first *PS* symposium on IRBs in 2008, the focus was on identifying and analyzing problems in the overall IRB system and, more importantly, on proposing solutions to those problems that could be achieved through policy reform at the federal level. In this second *PS* symposium, we also highlight problems in the IRB process and offer solutions; however, our focus is at the local level, where we believe the greatest opportunity for addressing the problems between IRBs and political scientists is found.

In the first essay, Kenneth Mayer shares his knowledge regarding the "nuts and bolts" of how an IRB functions on a college campus, from his vantage point as a former chair of the Educational, Social, and Behavioral Sciences IRB at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Readers may be surprised by the massive amount of resources committed to the process—one that does not even include the hard sciences—on the part of the institution and the faculty who serve on the IRB.

From their public administration perspective, Kenneth Meier and Apolonia Calderon identify in the second essay many practical problems and the arbitrariness resulting from local implementation of a centrally determined policy. They offer a simple two-step strategy for local IRBs to follow that should make the processing of proposals more standardized and efficient.

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As a political scientist whose research relies primarily on field experiments, Melissa Michelson frequently collaborates with scholars at other universities, so she is familiar with the preferences and peccadillos of IRBs at multiple institutions. With this knowledge, Michelson warns in the third essay of the risk when there is overreliance on IRB approval as the sole determinant of whether a project should proceed. She offers suggestions for supplementing the local IRB process to prevent unethical experiments from going forward.

Brian Calfano has used experiments in the field and on surveys in his research. He sees the prospect of obtaining IRB approval for field experiments as an increasingly difficult task, which is made even more challenging for a researcher at an institution where the primary mission is teaching rather than research. In the fourth essay, he outlines actions for researchers to take to "push back" on uninformed or recalcitrant IRBs.

In the final essay, Lee Walker—who is the current director for the Political Science Program at the National Science Foundation (NSF)—discusses why local IRB approval is necessary in meeting the requirements for NSF funding of research projects, and he recommends best practices for coordinating with the local IRB to ensure timely approval. At the conclusion of his essay, Walker provides several sources that researchers can consult for more information on protections concerning human subjects, as well as answers to frequently asked IRB questions.

It is hoped that all of the essays in this symposium will be useful in some way to political scientists who are working for or interacting with IRBs on their campus. One final strong suggestion is to make these essays required reading in the training of future political scientists. ■

NOTES

1. See online syllabi for research-methods classes in psychology at the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, Project Syllabus, available at http://teachpsych.org/otrp/syllabi/index.php.
2. I make this claim based primarily on my three-year experience as an editor of the *American Political Science Review* and witnessing the number of annual submissions using experimental methods more than double, from 66 to 159 papers. However, what we are experiencing at the *APSR* also is supported by the views of other journal editors with whom I have spoken.

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