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Healing the Rift between Political Science and Practical Politics

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Healing the Rift between Political Science and Practical Politics

Jacob S. Hacker

Abstract

Policy—what government does, why it does it, and what difference it makes—deserves a more central position in political science, especially in the study of American politics. This paper outlines the advantages of such a "policy-focused" political science not just for the engagement of the discipline (and those within it) with pressing real-world problems, but also for the quality of research. My argument is not simply that a focus on policy will make political science more "relevant," although it will. It is that a political science without systematic attention to policy is a bad political science—a political science that fails to capture extremely important aspects of politics.

KEYWORDS: domestic policy, political economy, academic profession

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To uncharitable observers, “Political Science and Practical Politics” may seem an oxymoron, the political science equivalent of “business ethics.” Crack open a political science journal today, and you are likely to encounter profusions of data and theorems but precious little that can be easily identified as “practical” or even, at times, “politics.” Look up from that journal to the Washington battlefield, and you will find plenty of academics involved in public affairs—from climatologists testifying on global warming to economists devising fiscal policies—but precious few political scientists among them. As a discipline, political science would seem uniquely well suited to illuminate public decision-making. Yet with some notable exceptions, political scientists have largely kept their distance from substantive policy discussions.

This is particularly apparent in the wake of the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression—a downturn that, it is increasingly evident, had deep political as well as economic roots. Economists have done a good deal of soul searching about their discipline’s lack of awareness of key dimensions of the crisis. Yet the case for disciplinary self-reflection is arguably even greater for political scientists. The political dimensions of our current crisis are more and more apparent. Over the last generation, however, political science has had little to offer to make sense of these profoundly important developments. There have been, for example, no systematic studies of financial deregulation, no detailed analyses of the relationships between political leaders and increasingly expansive, powerful, and reckless Wall Street actors, and, indeed, precious few investigations of American political economy more broadly. If economists were asleep at the switch, political scientists seem to have stopped looking for the switch altogether.

What explains this curious state of affairs? This question is really two. Why are political scientists today so underrepresented at the upper reaches of policymaking and public intellectualism? And why does political science often seem so uninterested in the basic stakes of political conflict: in what government does, why it does it, and what difference it makes in the lives of citizens? Since I believe these two questions are deeply interrelated, I tackle them both in turn, before briefly sketching out what a more “policy-focused” political science might look like.

A Political Scientist and Practical Politics

For me, these questions are of more than scholarly interest. I have spent the good part of the last decade working on issues of health and economic security. In particular, I ended up becoming deeply involved in the healthcare debate that consumed 2009 and early 2010, and eventually resulted in the passage of the Affordable Care Act in March of 2010. My advocacy for the so-called public option—the idea of creating a Medicare-like, public, health insurance plan for

Americans lacking workplace coverage—pulled me into the political and policy fray in way I had not expected. It also taught me important lessons about policy advocacy and the workings of American politics that I am still absorbing.

Not all those lessons were pleasant. Although the public option became a central aspect of the original House and Senate healthcare bills, it also became a central topic of controversy dividing Democrats from Republicans—and Democrats from Democrats. Ultimately, the public option was stripped from the health care legislation when my home-state senator, Joe Lieberman, insisted on its removal from the Senate bill in return for his vote to end a Republican filibuster. When Lieberman stuck in the knife, he actually cited my support for a proposed compromise public option to which he had agreed as one reason he had backed out of the deal (“Lieberman vs. the ‘Public Option’ Patriarch” headlined a piece on Lieberman’s about-face in the *New York Times* (Herzenhorn 2009)).

As the “‘Public Option’ Patriarch,” I came to see America’s polarized politics up close. The picture was not always pretty: I was featured, for example, in a none-too-friendly YouTube video purporting to uncover my secret Rasputin-like agenda for total government takeover of American medicine. (Simultaneously, I was being attacked by critics on the left for having given comfort to the private-sector enemy by advocating a public plan competing with private insurance, rather than a single national plan.) Needless to say in the current climate of Tea Party outrage, I received more than a few emails and phone calls helpfully pointing out that I should—among other things—be “ashamed,” be “shipped to Gitmo,” and “pay for [my] treason.”

Still, I do not have any regrets about stepping into the realm of policy advocacy. Given my prior work on the political development of U.S. health and social policy, I felt I had an important obligation to try to map out a path toward broader health security that was attentive to the major political barriers that health reform inevitably faces. But the experience did not simply leave me newly aware of how polarized and nasty American politics has become. It also reminded me of how far political science has moved away from the focus on substantive policy: the application of political science knowledge and research to the analysis—and, yes, sometimes the shaping—of what government actually does.

Political Scientists and Practical Politics

The reasons for the rift between political science and practical politics may appear self-evident: policy recommendations seem to be a breach of objectivity and a distraction from real scholarship (Posner 2001). Yet academic economists routinely engage with public issues, even as political scientists appear much more reticent. Compared with members of their sister discipline, political scientists have the potential to say at least as much about how institutions and policies are

structured and might be better structured. And our profession once had far less reluctance about speaking the truth that it discovered to the power that it studied.

To be sure, there are many standout exceptions. We all know of esteemed political scientists who have engaged in public advocacy and debate, bringing their research to bear on crucial matters of public concern. Yet, clearly, the list of these engaged scholars is not as long as the discipline's subject matter would suggest it should be. Political scientists, after all, study *politics and public affairs*. The discipline's roots are in the very public intellectualism of the Founding Fathers. The discipline's own founding fathers—Woodrow Wilson, James Bryce, Charles Merriam, Harold Lasswell, and others of similar stature—were, almost without exception, deeply involved in politics and public life: as politicians, advocates, advisers. What has changed? Is this a change for the worse or better?

I can only speak from my own perspective, of course. But I believe there is a strong case to be made that the lack of a substantial political science presence in contemporary public life is not just paradoxical, but lamentable and avoidable, carrying with it some serious costs for a discipline that is uniquely well suited to support such engagement. The costs include unhealthy disciplinary self-preoccupation, a fascination with trivial but technically tractable questions, supreme indifference to the stakes of politics—i.e., what government actually does—and a related lack of appreciation outside the discipline for the insights that political science can offer, made vivid by Republican Senator Tom Coburn's thankfully unsuccessful effort to cut off funding for political science research from the National Science Foundation. ("Theories on political behavior," Coburn opined, "are best left to CNN, pollsters, pundits, historians, candidates, political parties, and the voters" (quoted in Tucker 2009)).

The highly technical quality of much research in the top political science outlets cannot be the core problem, since economics has this tendency in spades and yet has produced a steady stream of policy experts and public intellectuals. The core problem, it seems to me, is that political science today—unlike political science of previous generations and unlike many quarters of economics today—is simply not all that interested in the substantive activities of governance (aka policy). In American politics research and, to a lesser but growing extent, other empirical subfields, the great bulk of research centers on public opinion and political behavior on the one hand, and models of basic decision-making action, such as roll-call votes, on the other (Hacker and Pierson 2009). The struggle to use the levers of public authority to change the economy and society in durable ways is almost entirely missing.

Now it is certainly possible to have a discipline that studies public policy and produces no policy advocates or public intellectuals. Nonetheless, there does seem to be an elective affinity between research that engages with what government does and researchers who have a desire and willingness to wade into

policy discussions. A discipline concerned with how policy is made and how it reshapes the economy, society, and polity is simply much better poised to produce scholars equipped to speak to fundamental questions about the allocation and use of public authority. Why is that not the discipline of political science today? And how could such a discipline be brought about?

Political Science and Practical Politics

When I say that policy is almost entirely missing in contemporary political science, I mean more specifically that it is almost entirely missing in my subfield of political science, American politics. The edifice of mainstream American politics research is built around two pillars: behavioralism and rational choice. The key participants are voters and politicians, operating in an environment defined by a set of rules. From this perspective, vote choice, campaigns, and elections warrant intensive scrutiny. Other features of the political environment are conceived of as either random noise or constant background, and thus not fundamental. Policy itself is typically viewed as a residual: It can safely be treated as an afterthought, useful largely as a source of data to evaluate theories of electoral influence and the legislative process.

This orientation, encouraging an emphasis on some topics and the marginalization of others, reflects powerful, mutually reinforcing trends in how political science is conducted: the rise of survey research with its capacity to offer up huge data sets for sophisticated statistical analysis; the ascendance of game theory and its associated variants of institutionalism; and, finally, the hyper-specialization of American politics into sub-subfields that arbitrarily cabin different aspects of and institutional venues within American politics. Ironically, the sheer density of scholarly resources available for the study of American politics has permitted and encouraged a peculiar division of labor, organized largely around sites of political action (legislatures, courts, bureaucracy) and modes of activity (voting, interest groups). In this highly subdivided research enterprise, public policy—which calls for research attentive to the interplay of activity across multiple political sites—largely disappears as a distinct subject of inquiry.

This is a fundamental omission. At the heart of politics is the exercise of authority. Winners of political contests are positioned to use the control of the coercive power of the state to impose their preferences on losers through public policies. The stakes are often vast, involving hundreds of billions of dollars and, literally, matters of life and death. Policies are not a side-show. For major political actors, especially the most well-resourced and enduring, they are the central object of contestation. And because policy is the central prize, it deserves a

central position in the analysis of political systems—a position it has lost, at a considerable cost to our understanding of politics.

What happens if, instead of starting with voters and elections and working outward from there, we begin with policy? A focus on policy as the central prize forces us to grapple with substance—the significant things that government actually does in real societies. This has an obvious and extremely important normative benefit: it aligns political analysis more closely with some of the deepest concerns of citizens. In doing so, it serves as a useful corrective to the tendencies of much contemporary political science to veer into discussions of matters deemed trivial by most of the world outside the academy.

Even more crucial for the discipline, however, are the *analytical* payoffs associated with the tighter focus on substantive outcomes. Once we make policy (rather than electoral victory) the prize, we see politics for what it is: a game with substantive, permanent stakes. Awareness of this central fact can change the way we look at the political process: which actors we see as important, what we think they are trying to do at any time, and the range of factors that influence their capacity to get what they want. More important, it can get us closer to grasping how and why the political process works as it does. We need to bring policy back in not just to better understand what government does, but also to better understand *why*.

Let me return briefly to the example with which I started: the contemporary American political economy. Astonishingly, over the past thirty years, American politics specialists have essentially eliminated the study of political economy (meaning the analysis of how economic and political systems interact) from its purview. As Graham Wilson recently lamented “there are about a hundred political scientists studying parties and elections for every one studying business and politics” (Wilson 2006, 33). Political economy, of course, is a field that concentrates intensely on organized actors and the stakes involved in struggles over governance. In its attempts to understand politics it embraces context and substance. “Labor unions” and “business” are relevant categories, rather than the more general, de-contextualized category of “groups.” In short, political economy has run headlong into the ascendant conception of political science, and has thus been allowed, indeed encouraged, to wither.

Yet facts are stubborn things. The changes in the American political economy over the past generation, including staggering increases in inequality and a now-apparent proclivity to devastating asset bubbles, are hard to ignore (Hacker and Pierson 2010). To their credit, mainstream political scientists have now begun to face these facts (e.g., Bartels 2008; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006). Unfortunately, they have tried to do so with almost no attentiveness to public policy or organized interests, assembling accounts from the conventional focus on the voter-election-legislator relationship. Suffice it to say that even

brilliant and creative scholars cannot produce a persuasive account of skyrocketing inequality (in which the top 1 percent of the population regularly captures nearly 40 percent of all post-tax and benefit income growth) when they leave policy and organized interests to the side and focus all their firepower on voters and elections. A convincing American political economy will of necessity be a more policy-centered political economy.

Nor would a revived political economy be the only benefit of policy-centered analysis. By focusing attention on the central prize of politics, such a shift would revitalize inquiry into the role of long-lived, resourceful actors—namely organized interests—who are frequently the dominant players in the political game. It would give us a deeper appreciation of what these actors seek to do and the strategies (such as exploitation of information asymmetries) that may make it possible for them to do it. By focusing attention on the vast array of government activities that structure modern political life, policy-focused analysis would give us a far more accurate sense of the constraints and opportunities facing political actors. In doing so, it would also give us a far more accurate sense of the way in which politics really works.

Healing the Rift

I learned many things from my tumultuous foray into public affairs. But perhaps the most important is the message of this essay: policy substance matters. It matters, most obviously, because what government does has an enormous effect on Americans. But it also matters because of the political ramifications of this obvious but oft-neglected fact. Fights over policy are fights over who gets to exercise government authority toward what ends. For this reason, party leaders and mobilized groups expend enormous resources to influence the outcome of those fights. Political scientists often treat policy as a black box or an ideological label. But this is to miss the extent to which it is policy substance itself—“who gets what, when, and how,” in Harold Lasswell’s famous phrasing—that is the key concern of political contestants.

Political scientists should not simply leave their desks and enter the political fray. And they should be under no illusion that professional rewards will follow if they do. But we as political scientists should, I am ever more convinced, be more attuned to the contours of public policy and the process by which it is made—not because it will make our work more “relevant” (though it will) but because it will make us better political scientists, with a stronger grasp of the forces that drive politics and of the larger stakes of our research ventures. If we were to let ourselves be guided a little more by the fascination with what government does that first sparked the profession, we might just see a broader, though not always prettier, picture of how and for whom our democracy works.

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