

Some Thoughts about Shaking Things Up: Future Directions in Political Science

The recent discussion about the current and future state of the discipline is a welcome and healthy development. While some of the discussion has generated unnecessary acrimony, my general impression is that this is an excellent time to engage seriously in a critique as well as an effort to reconstruct and move in a more positive direction.

Personally, I would like to see a radical change in the decades ahead. We need a clearer conception of our core concerns. My own way of thinking about this is consistent with that of many of the classic philosophers who focused on the study of rules, rule-governed behavior, and the effort to change rules through force or through discussion, debate, and choice. So, let me make an argument for returning to this very broad conception of the core of our discipline.

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By studying rules and rule-governed behavior, we can study decisions and actions taken within differently structured systems of authority relationships at many scales, from a small neighborhood to international bodies, as well as within private organizations of all kinds and through time. From this approach, the most general core questions are:

- How do different combinations of rules used to structure governmental and non-governmental organizations at multiple scales affect perceptions, actions, and the distribution of values including political and economic power over time?
- How do rules affect the perceived structure of incentives within diverse cultures?
- What cumulative knowledge can we develop about the factors affecting the choice of rule combinations at diverse scales and historical eras?
- In addition to self-conscious choice of rules in assemblies, by executives and by courts, how do rules evolve over time in self-organizing patterns of relationships?

All of these questions unpack into a large bundle of related questions that may focus on specific eras, scales of organization, geographic domains, or sectors of life. I open the syllabus for my own graduate seminar, for example, with the following question:

How can fallible human beings achieve and sustain self-governing entities and self-governing ways of life? In other words, how can individuals influence the rules that structure their lives? This is a particularly challenging question in an era when global concerns have moved onto the political agenda of most international, national, and even local governing bodies. (Y673 Syllabus, Fall 2001)

Similar questions were asked by Aristotle and other foundational political philosophers. These were the concerns of de Tocqueville, Madison, and Hamilton. These central questions unite contemporary political philosophers with those who study the effect of diverse rules on citizen, executive, legislative, or judicial behavior in various countries or at different geographic scales. They also link both to scholars who use game theory to model the effect of rules in order to predict behavior and outcomes and to those who conduct laboratory experiments to ascertain the empirical consequences of carefully controlled changes of rules. They link as well to those using agent-based computational models. In other words, I think it is essential to develop general, core research questions that unpack into a diverse set of special questions for which it is then appropriate to use many tools of data collection and analysis.

Viewing the central enterprise of the discipline in this way has radical implications. Instead of organizing our fields, textbooks, and comprehensives in divisions that do not make any theoretical sense, we could move toward the development of two broad fields: (1) theory and (2) empirical applications. Every Ph.D. student would be expected to take at least one theory field and one or two empirical fields. Some examples of fields for a Ph.D. student might look like:

Theory Field	Possible Organizing Questions for Empirical Fields
Theories of voting	<p>How do different voting rules affect citizen behavior over time and geographic scales and within a single country or across countries?</p> <p>What are the consequences for differing kinds of policy decisions of using diverse legislative rules?</p> <p>How have voting rules in local councils changed over time and what factors have led to these changes and resulting outcomes?</p>
Collective-action theories	<p>What kind of rules and other factors affect whether and how users relying heavily on a resource system (e.g., farmers using an irrigation canal or harvesting from a forest) are able to overcome collective-action problems and organize themselves in relationship to a resource?</p> <p>Within diverse constitutional regimes, what factors affect the success or failure of political protest movements or the organization of charitable organizations and their impacts?</p>
Multicultural group theories	<p>How do multicultural groups achieve peaceful and productive relationships in an increasingly urban and global society and avoid conflict-ridden relationships?</p> <p>How do different regimes at multiple scales affect the behavior of gangs in urban areas in developing and/or developed countries?</p> <p>How have changes in ethnic, religious, and racial characteristics of cities affected residential patterns, intergroup cooperation and conflict, and political participation?</p>

can study archival materials including congressional hearings, diaries, committee reports, etc. One can design an experiment where everything but the voting rules are constant while voting rules are systematically varied. All of these types of studies are currently going on—but many of the researchers using one form of data collection and analysis are not talking with others using diverse approaches.

We can *all* learn something from all of these approaches. We need to develop these multiple ways of testing theory and then to learn enough of these approaches so that we actually learn from others using tools that we ourselves are not using. If theory is at the heart of our research designs—rather than the study of things like the president, or Congress, or an area of the world—we have more of a chance to make our discipline cumulative and to learn from one another.

Further, we need to ensure that our discipline contributes to the education of future citizens, entrepreneurs in the public and private spheres, and officials at all levels of government. Democratic governance is always a fragile enterprise. Future citizens need to understand that they participate in the constitution and reconstitution of rule-governed polities and to learn the “art and science of association,” to draw on the Tocquevillian concept. We have a distinct obligation to participate in this educational process as well as to engage in the research enterprise so that we build a cumulative knowledge base that may be used to sustain democratic life rather than destroy it.

If we were to adopt something like this vision of an integrated political science, what type of data collection and analysis methods would be appropriate? My response is that most well-trained political scientists need to know how to use a variety of research methods that are both qualitative and quantitative. If one studies legislative behavior, for example, one can use qualitative methods including the conduct of in-depth semistructured interviews in the style that Dick Fenno perfected. Or, one can gather voting data over time or space and do multivariate statistical analysis. One

Having learned so much from colleagues in diverse fields working on a similar set of theoretical questions, I fervently hope that opening our discipline to debate, critique, and change will lead us toward the development of a more coherent and cumulative body of knowledge. And, I hope to participate over this next decade in the refocusing of our discipline on the theoretical and empirical study of rules and their consequences. The relationship of ideas to deeds in artisan/artifact relationships suggests that theoretical and empirical considerations are necessary complements to one another.