

The Monkey Cage

Democracy is the art of running the circus from the monkey cage. - H.L. Mencken

[« Fortunately, making a statistical error on live TV is not a capital offense | Main | Joanne Gowa scooped me by 22 years in my criticism of Axelrod's Evolution of Cooperation »](#)

Is Political Science Too Hard for Policy-Makers?

International relations, and especially (inter)national security, is the subfield of political science where the gap between policy makers and academics is most [frequently decried](#). This is not because political science research on security is less policy relevant than in other subfields. Quite the contrary, it is because political science rather than law or economics is the dominant discipline in which policy makers have traditionally been trained. In short: there is more at stake.

Over at the *National Interest*, [Justin Logan](#) and [Paul Pillar](#) play the "blame game," with Logan arguing that the onus is on policy makers to take more of an interest in academic research and Pillar blaming academia. Like [Dan Drezner](#), I have some sympathies with both sides of the argument. I agree with Pillar that the incentives in the academy for policy relevant research are poor but Logan makes some good points about the foreign policy establishment:

[..] the idea that academic work is just too hard for busy DC policymakers to understand is a bizarre defense of the Beltway. We expect, rightly, Timothy Geithner to be up to speed on important work being published in the economics journals, and Antonin Scalia to be able to make his way through law review articles. I challenge the reader to leaf through the most prominent economics journals without finding challenging methodologies or the leading law reviews without finding elaborate theories. So why should the DC foreign policy establishment get a pass on IR scholarship because it's too hard?

I understand complaints that much IR scholarship does not seem relevant to the kind of questions policy-makers are struggling with. Yet, incessant complaints about the rigor or difficulty of scholarly work reveal more about policy-makers than about academia. IR theory is for the most part not very hard to understand for a reasonably well-trained individual. The possible exception is game-theoretical work, which constitutes only a small percentage of IR scholarship. My bigger worry is that foreign policy decision makers are avoiding any research using quantitative methods even when it is relevant to their policy area. There is a real issue with training here. My employer, [Georgetown's school of foreign service](#), at least requires one quantitative methods class for masters students (none for undergrads). Many other schools have no methods requirement at all. By comparison, Georgetown's public policy school requires three methods classes. It is not obvious to me why those involved in foreign policy-making require less methods training for their daily work. The consequence is, however, that we have a foreign policy establishment that is ill-equipped to analyze the daily stream of quantitative data (e.g. polls, risk ratings), evaluate the impact of policy initiatives, and scrutinize academic research.

Posted by Erik Voeten on December 30, 2010 3:25 PM | [Permalink](#)

My main problem with using political science in the policy world is that they are two completely different things.

Political science seeks to explain and generalize. Policies seek to fix or change, and rarely generalize. This is especially true when it comes to international relations. Can we honestly look at a spreadsheet of data and have it tell us how to fix a problem when we are comparing apples and oranges?

Iran is not like Iraq, which is not like North Korea, which is not like the U.S.S.R., which is not like Sudan, which is not like Cuba. When we use quantitative methods we lose a great deal of information that is normally applied to policy making (history, ideology, leadership organization, threat perception, and context to name a few).

Yes, we gain greater explanatory power with quantitative methods, but we lose the ability to explain salient issues. Political science is about the universe of cases. Policies are developed for the here and now.

Lets also not forget the reason a great deal of political science research is conducted-- to get tenure. Policy makers and researchers could care less about what random gap in the literature has been filled by X paper. They could also care less about what new mathematical model was developed to test some theory that is based on unrealistic assumptions.

The policy world looks to solve problems (though sometimes they create them) in a time sensitive environment. They don't spend months on one paper just so they can get an AJPS article a year from now. Academics spend a great deal of time trying to perfect their theoretical bubbles, while policy makers don't have that luxury. Why should we expect them to consistently listen to political scientists when the two don't have the same goals or constrictions?

Posted by: Michael | [December 30, 2010 8:11 PM](#)

I think you are right, I sense that there is an aversion to quantitative research in the policy world. But is a lack of training the real reason for that? Personally, I tend to find that articles on security/conflict use methods that are a few years behind those used in IPE, and even farther behind those used in American politics. It's not as if policymakers would be trying to understand articles that are on the bleeding edge in terms of the statistical techniques they employ. Furthermore, I've noticed that many publications in the field do an unusually thorough job of explaining their findings (for example, see J. Vasquez, "The War Puzzle"). I suspect this is because quantitative approaches have not become as widely accepted in security studies as they have in other subfields. Scholars who use those techniques are more concerned with supplanting the realist paradigm and other traditional approaches than with communicating their insights to policymakers.

Many of the quantitative security researchers are extremely hesitant to engage policymakers. I recently attended a panel discussion on the future of the scientific study of war. One major point of contention was whether or not scholars in the peace science movement should continue to describe their purpose as ending war, when they make few attempts to engage policymakers. The consensus seemed to be that the science is still developing, and does not yet have enough definitive findings to make