

The Ideology of Political Science

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Published online: 11 April 2013
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We let our research methods dictate the subject matter, rather than the converse. Like the drunk who loses his car keys in the dark bushes but looks for them under the streetlight, “because the light is better here,” we try to find out how humans might resemble our computational models rather than trying to figure out how the conscious human mind actually works.

—John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*

Real leaders don’t follow polls. Real leaders change polls.

—New Jersey Governor Chris Christie

In a recent article in *Academic Questions* political scientists Robert Maranto and Matthew C. Woessner have suggested a program to reform their discipline and enhance its social utility.¹ They encourage researchers to engage with consequential social issues and educate the public, while

¹Robert Maranto and Matthew C. Woessner, “Seeking Relevance: American Political Science and America,” *Academic Questions* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 403–17. Further references to this work are cited parenthetically within the text. Maranto and Woessner are in part responding to Lawrence Mead’s critique of the current discipline in “The Other Danger... Scholasticism in Academic Research,” *Academic Questions* 23, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 404–19, and “Scholasticism: Causes and Cures,” *Academic Questions* 24, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 300–18.

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admonishing political scientists to resist partisan advocacy and promote diversity of viewpoints. At first glance these suggestions in “Seeking Relevance: American Political Science and America” may seem harmless and unobjectionable. But if the need were really as great and the suggested remedies as uncontroversial as Maranto and Woessner make them appear, the discipline of political science would have reformed itself long ago without awaiting their prompting. Why isn’t political science more ideologically diverse and socially relevant already? Since the authors provide no account of how and why political science developed, they bypass any consideration of resistance that their proposed reforms might have to overcome.

There is reason to suspect that the problems Maranto and Woessner seek to ameliorate are actually endemic to their discipline; in fact, some of the authors’ own proposals might contribute to the very problems they are intended to reform. Perhaps the practitioners of an academic discipline are not in the best position to diagnose its pathologies. The following response to Maranto and Woessner offers the perspective of an academic in a humanities field.

What is political science? One fundamental axiom of a discipline called “political science” must be that politics is amenable to scientific investigation in the first place. So is it? Although we modern folk are accustomed to thinking that anything can be made the object of a science—and that whatever cannot (like the unicorn) is just not anything at all—the proposition that politics affords suitable material for science is quite problematic. In the natural sciences data about the impersonal properties of existing things is gathered by observation, inferences are made about general characteristics, and these generalizations, framed as hypotheses, are tested in turn by further observation under controlled conditions. For politics to be the object of a science it would have to be based on this sort of data and yield testable general conclusions. Political scientists do collect and investigate something they call data; but is this data actually evidence of politics? I would argue that it is not, and that politics produces no data of the sort required.

What then is politics? The phenomenon of politics, as we know it from daily life and the study of history, could be generally described as the activity of governing a legally constituted community such as a town, nation, empire, or federation. Now this activity of governing, whether it be performed by a single autocrat or a large population of citizens, fundamentally consists of decisions to take actions in the *future* that aim at results even *further* in the

future. Political decisions therefore concern imaginary projections, like goals, plans, and expectations of what others may plan and do. For this reason, in political deliberations there are no facts that conclusively matter; what matters are fantasies, and unlike facts fantasies are of essence provisional, vague, easily modified, and even open to self-contradiction. Political deliberations are not even determined by the facts of already established conditions; on the contrary, the very purpose of politics is to change conditions, for example by increasing a community's wealth or military power, or by resolving its internecine rivalries and redressing perceived injustices. Facts are to politics what marble is to sculpture. Mineralogy offers a science of marble, but not a science of sculpture, and anyone who looked to mineralogy for a science of sculpture would know less about sculpture than the least informed art-lover.

The dimension of imaginary projection is not the only one that renders politics unsuitable to science. The activity of governing consists of actual deliberations by particular people about particular projects affecting their communities. This dimension of circumstantial and personal uniqueness poses an obstacle to science's constitutive demand for generalizable results. Since political science does seek valid generalization and predictiveness, the "politics" it investigates necessarily cannot be the unique personal deliberative activity I have just described. But if governing isn't a personal deliberative activity, what is it? Political science finesses this question by taking as its putative object the familiar institutions, processes, and outcomes of governing, and then analyzing them *on the tacit assumption* that the operation proceeds without deliberating agents, and may be explained by impersonal factors that research seeks to establish. But who are the participants if not deliberating agents? Political science finesses this question, too, by avoiding acknowledgment that the humans who participate in politics actually deliberate. Since imaginative deliberative agents cannot be the object of a science, the social sciences had to conclude, and did conclude long ago, that human beings must be something else. Whenever political science speaks of *people* it stealthily palms the thinking human beings you and I know ourselves to be and substitutes an anatomically similar but mentally quite different species.

The humans of political science are driven by needs that within a narrow range of variation are virtually all determined biologically—individual humans are compelled by their nature to seek survival in physical comfort.

Since, like other species, humans are assumed to have evolved through the natural selection of features conducive to survival in a concrete natural environment, they are also assumed to have minds necessarily well-equipped to gather the information and make the calculations that facilitate efficient satisfaction (in the hypothetical natural-for-humans environment) of their naturally determined requirements. This efficient mental functioning is called “rationality.” Since personal projection of alternative environments does not (it is supposed) contribute to survival in the real one, imagination is deemed largely superfluous to rational cognition, and when humans pursue imaginary goals not strictly related to their immediate concrete needs, their activity is classified as irrational, i.e., beside the point, wasteful, and possibly harmful.

It is ironic indeed that this general model of human beings furnishes the methodological basis for gathering the factual data of political science, since no specimen “human being” of this type has even been demonstrated to exist. All the real humans available for inspection have complex imaginative lives that often deliberately subordinate their natural appetites, for example when humans voluntarily undertake to restrict themselves to a single sexual partner, or even to abstain altogether. Hardly a day goes by without some important political or economic news that violates the predictions of social researchers. The response of political science to these non-predicted decisions, especially when taken by large numbers, is to busily supply postmortem diagnoses of the social pathologies that could have caused the aberrant behavior. The famous question “What’s the matter with Kansas?” is asked and answered in a thousand variations. There is a straight, simple answer to all of them: *that population in Kansas consists of people, not specimens*. People aren’t what political science thinks they are, not even one of them.

So far I have claimed that as a (pseudo-)scientific discipline political science is built upon a certain account of humans (a model anthropology) and a certain account of how knowledge of humans is obtained (a model epistemology). These methodological pillars restrict how political science can conceptualize politics. A discipline that rests upon them will reliably yield analyses that support the ideology of social democracy, if only tacitly, simply because the theory of social democracy shares with political science a similar anthropology and a similar epistemology: a paradigm of non-deliberative human beings necessarily implies populations of consumers who when displaced from their natural environment into modern conditions can only

satisfy their needs by depending upon systems beyond their control, like Society, The Economy, and above all The State. Social science, social engineering, and social democracy are branches of a single tree, all fostered, historically as well as logically, by the same premises.²

The logical foundation that political science shares with social democracy also disables it from maintaining a stance of scientific neutrality toward political conservatism, or even describing it accurately. That is because conservative political ideas are based upon an account of humans that political science axiomatically refuses to consider and scarcely comprehends. Positions identified as “conservative” circulate around concepts of responsible moral agency and personal autonomy. A research discipline that systematically rejects these concepts can only regard political conservatism as a mysterious form of mental deviance. What could be the use of liberty to members of a species that lacks deliberative autonomy? Humans need liberty the way a fish needs a bicycle. Or so a post-Enlightenment scientist would say.

Concerns about ideological bias in political science are therefore well-grounded, but the bias has nothing essential to do with the discipline’s demographics, although of course demographics is where anybody trained in political science would look first. Maranto and Woessner offer false reassurance of intellectual diversity in statistical data allegedly showing that over the past half-century the percentage of conservatives in political science has remained steady (at one in six!) while other social science disciplines have suffered comparative declines. But quantifying how political scientists or other professors “lean” in the voting booth misses the more consequential matter of whether methodologically “sound” research in political science can accommodate objectives based in conservative reasoning. The example of Maranto and Woessner, who identify themselves as “moderate/conservative political scholars” (416), is not encouraging. Their essay displays them as enthusiastic partakers in the “vision of the anointed” and its liberal contempt for the intellectual capacities of nonexperts.³ They proclaim, for example, that “disturbingly large percentages of citizens...believe that the government might be hiding aliens from outer space” (413). What could have convinced

²F.A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952).

³Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

these political scientists of something so improbable and difficult to confirm? An inflated sense of educational superiority to nonexperts was doubtless a contributing factor. But notice also that their bizarre comment treads into the irresistible but epistemologically treacherous quicksand of *what people think*, where political science finds itself compelled to substitute factoids for the indeterminables of imagination. Oblivious to the difficulty, Maranto and Woessner confidently announce that their claim to knowledge is based upon that ubiquitous research instrument of their discipline—"surveys."

Maranto and Woessner's incredible assertion about the beliefs revealed in surveys suggests to me that political science may use the word "belief" as a term of art whose peculiar meaning is unknown to nonspecialists. Ordinarily we reasonably ascribe belief in a coming shower to someone who goes out with an umbrella, or belief in a robbery to someone who calls the police to report one. Accordingly, even without surveys I might be prepared to ascribe a belief in government-harbored space aliens to citizens who created some public manifestation of concern, since Americans usually speak up when they believe something troubling about their government. If Maranto and Woessner know of such public manifestations I wish they had mentioned them in their article, because they would have provided much more convincing evidence than any "surveys" reporting the respondents' answers to a question that only a social scientist would ask them. But since no agitation about government-harbored space aliens has occurred, there is good reason to doubt the claim that "disturbingly large percentages of citizens" believe in them. On the contrary, I would bet that the surveys on which the authors rely are vitiated by disabling methodological flaws. These political scientists seem awfully gullible to me.

As instruments of mindreading, surveys presuppose that human beings are stupid, because the process of data collection systematically ignores the opinions that citizens volunteer publicly, while it manipulates research subjects into allowing words to be put in their mouths—which is what choosing answers from a prepared list amounts to. So we should not be surprised that political researchers go out seeking evidence of widespread stupidity (have they nothing better to do?) or that their instruments produce evidence of the stupidity presupposed. But the eventual price of this dogma is a general conception of democracy as a stupid form of politics. Maranto and Woessner exemplify this when they explain that "voter ignorance lowers the quality of political discourse, giving politicians rational incentives to run

relatively simplistic campaigns” (414). The most simplistic campaign pitch could hardly be more simplistic than this crude analysis of factors and causation. More conscientious investigators would at least have weighed their formula against a rival hypothesis. Framing one would not have been difficult. These words from Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO) provide a plausible example: “It’s hard to do things if you don’t have a shared understanding of the facts, and the politics of this place is all about obscuring the facts. That’s confusing the public.”⁴ This outline almost exactly reverses the political scientists’ dichotomy between rational politicians and ignorant voters. Is the senator totally wrong? Possibly, but as “scientists” Maranto and Woessner should bear the burden of proving it.

Senator Bennet does agree with political science that in legislation “facts” are all-important, but he adds that the facts are inaccessible to the public, and even to policy makers, because the legislators closest to the source don’t *want* the facts to be known. His perspective thus lifts the veil on a personal dimension of the political process, the need for shared understanding and politicians’ desire to obstruct it. The perspective of Maranto and Woessner omits the personal factor of cooperation; but since in the case of legislation even the pertinent “facts” would include the projections and goals of the *legislators*, who according to Senator Bennet engage in deliberate obfuscation, one wonders how political scientists, much less the voters Maranto and Woessner expect them to educate, are ever to obtain access to the critical information.

The general validity of Senator Bennet’s “native informant” perspective is supported by the drafting and passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The law itself was written, by Democratic politicians and their policy aides, in such a way that *nobody* could *not* be ignorant of its provisions, if only because many were delegated to future bureaucracies and hence left unspecified. Here even the politicians themselves were ignorant, and they deliberately conspired to keep the voters in the dark as well. Nevertheless, many voters became quite well-informed about the bill’s deceptiveness, and they rose up in articulate protest. Did the Democrats in Congress and the White House heed the voices of these constituents? They did not. They declared in effect that they didn’t need to listen, because the

⁴Quoted in David Wessel, “Executives Press Washington to ‘Fix the Debt,’” *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2012, A6.

dissenters were ignorant, “Astroturf,” a minor fringe, and so forth. Instead the Democrats claimed that they spoke *for* the law’s putative beneficiaries, and for all the supporters the law would supposedly attract in the future. In effect the Democrats fabricated an imaginary constituency to represent, as a pretext for dismissing and disempowering actual constituents who opposed their plan.

This abuse of democracy was facilitated and abetted by mainstream professional journalists and their source of academic authority, the discipline of political science, which tirelessly generates factoids that propagate the twin myths of ignorant voters and rational population groups who automatically recognize when The State is satisfying their needs. These myths of political science corrode faith in democratic decision-making by accustoming us to regard humans as mere research specimens whose public expressions—including the legally authoritative act of voting—are rendered otiose by the allegedly scientific evidence of surveys and demographics.

In their disquisition on voter ignorance Maranto and Woessner cite “fantastic beliefs about where public money goes” and about “progress on such matters as pollution, crime prevention, race relations, and health” (414). They prescribe more education in political science as a way to help citizens and their representatives “make rational choices among the available political alternatives” (414). These are dimensions of politics about which political scientists think they have expertise, but they are not the only factors or necessarily the most important ones. It should be obvious that whether a policy option is “available” depends significantly upon whether a leader or party that offers the policy can actually be trusted to implement it in good faith. Moreover, officeholders must also be trusted to make decisions in unforeseen circumstances that may arise in the future, so that when citizens choose representatives the relevant policy “alternatives” might literally not be “available,” or even known, to anybody.

Most important, Maranto and Woessner do not seem to grasp the ideological factors that generate policy *programs* rather than menus of unrelated agenda-items. As I suggested earlier, differing views of what humans *are* correlate with differing conceptions of what is good for humans to have and do, and with differing programs for achieving those goods. When a future president writes in his memoir that in college he made friends with “Marxist professors and structural feminists,” he is indicating sympathetic familiarity with comprehensive systems of political principles, goals, and

policies: i.e., with ideologies. Unfortunately too few Americans, including politicians and journalists, know enough about Marxist ideology to understand how this educational and social background might concretely bear upon a successful candidate's performance in office. *This* form of ignorance seriously disables our political discourse, since a tactful Marxist sympathizer who ran for office in the U.S. would encounter few opponents of either major party who could coherently explain to voters what Marxism is, and few voters who could listen comprehendingly to a politician who tried. But this ignorance cannot be ameliorated by political science, a discipline that has itself fostered ignorance of ideology. Ignorance of Marxism is a symptom of a curriculum that disparages study of philosophy and history.

If political science were granted a larger role in educating ordinary citizens, as Maranto and Woessner suggest, the impression that in politics nonexperts should be seen and not heard could only continue its unhealthy spread. Citizens would participate in politics even less than they do already, and they would become even less informed; while the research of political scientists would continue its descent into technicality and "scholasticism." A better way to advance public understanding of politics would be to subtract the dogma and misinformation that political science currently disseminates to politicians, opinion pollsters, and pundits. But since social planning bureaucracies cannot dispense with so rich a source of authority as political science, the discipline's security is assured, and modest incremental reform is probably the best that we can hope for.

The simplest meaningful improvement would be a change of name. Political science is not science: its data are factoids, its generalizations are illusions, and its predictions prove right only when trivial. Worst of all, its purposes are often manipulative. An academic discipline mindful of its integrity would not make a false claim of scientific authority. Perhaps if political science stopped calling itself "science" it could begin to transform itself into a humbler and more honest study of politics that assisted democratic participation instead of inhibiting it.