

Fifty Years Past, Fifty Years Forward: The Hope for Political Science

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A brief essay on where political science has been and where it might be headed is a daunting task, especially since the most encouraging sides of political science – formal theory and political economy – have been hived off for others to discuss. Let me begin with a retrospective.

After agreeing to do this, I decided to take a look at the table of contents of the APSR for 1966. What better way, I thought, to see where we have been as a discipline and how far we have surely come. Ah, this was a depressing task.

When you have a moment, take a look at the APSR's table of contents for any recent issue and for any issue in 1966. Many of the same topics are analyzed then and now, with important but ultimately superficial changes in computation and the extensiveness and quality of data. Theorizing, as represented in the APSR, has not changed very much, especially if we ignore the improvements in formal theory and political economy, the topics of the next two roundtables.

We might be additionally depressed by having a look at the question posed to us today in light of a very similar question posed by Gabriel Almond in his 1966 APSA presidential address. He wrote, “[P]residents of this Association on these annual occasions intermittently ask, ‘Are we a science?’ or ‘Can we become one?’ My predecessor, David Truman, raised this question last September . . . I shall be following in Truman's footsteps” Almond goes on not only to answer affirmatively, noting that political *science* is a young field that is taking off in dramatic ways, but also answers enthusiastically. For instance, he observed that, “In 1903 the fledgling American Political Science Association numbered a little over 200 members. In 1934 there were 1,800 members of the Association . . . and in 1966, 15,000. The expectation is that the membership will exceed 20,000 in the 1970's.” Well, today the membership is 13,000. Are they better trained? Mostly not, but an important core decidedly is and that core is happily represented at this gathering today.

Behind the superficially depressing news, political science has made tremendous strides thanks to improved rational choice theorizing and associated empirical research. It used to be that reviewers could comment that, “This paper assumes decision makers are rational. We know that's wrong – reject!” Yes, that was the entire review for a paper I submitted in 1978. I don't think anyone could get away with such a review today. And, despite resistance by the Perestroika Movement and others, the simple fact is that rational choice ideas have penetrated almost every corner of political science. When I started out, Rochester was the only place with a graduate program in political science designed to train rational choice and social choice theorists. Today a great many well-ranked departments can train serious rational choice modelers or rational choice-informed empiricists. Today, the idea that people “game” the system; that is, behave strategically, has become commonplace. Assessments, albeit casual ones, of signaling, principal-agent problems, collective action problems, median voter calculations and issue linkage have all become commonplace. The fabric of political thought has shifted away from great edifices like

“the international system” and “states” to leaders, supporters, and oppositions with more and more focus on what they want and what they can do to get it. So the past shows movement in a positive direction that bodes well for the future.

We can look back with pride that the small group of people thirty, forty, or fifty years ago who thought about rational action, including many here, made real progress in understanding politics. Today we have compelling models that inform our understanding of the difficulties in converting what people desire into social outcomes; we understand much more about what leads governments into war or into the discovery of bargaining solutions to disputes; we now know how to think of all aspects of terrorism in a rational framework; we recognize the potential instability of majority – or supermajority – decisions and the nearly limitless degree to which politicians can manipulate majorities for their own ends through agenda setting, coalition formation, institution building, rule manipulation and so forth. Occasionally, our brand of political science has even played an important role in shaping domestic and foreign policy. Fifty years ago, the intelligence community was organized around geography. Now, in addition to a focus on geography, the intelligence community has an active game theory group and teams organized around problem solving. Political science now even has the beginnings of competing broad theories of how institutions shape resource allocations, conflict, and social welfare. These are important accomplishments that encourage confidence that there is actual science – testable, falsifiable, and reproducible arguments and evidence – in political science; that laws exist; that instabilities are not just the product of randomness but rather of rational calculations among competing actors and that further, deeper progress is likely to be made in the near future as political science turns slowly, but I believe ineluctably, toward rigorous logic and evidence as the basis for analysis and conclusions.

The future is filled with promise but also with dangers. Training for most political science students continues to focus on story-telling and the pretense that correlation is a fine substitute for causal argument. I glanced at the Amazon ranking of leading political science books of the 1950s and 1960s to encourage myself that the next generation of political scientists will have moved on from what was read 50 years ago. What did I find? Almond and Verba's *Civic Culture* is still selling enough to have a respectable ranking. So is *The American Voter*. In contrast, Arrow, Black, Downs, and Riker all have rankings worse than a million. Ah, I thought, being a good rationalizer, “that is a sign of great progress.” We have the deepest regard for what these works did but we have built on them and moved beyond, no longer needing to read them. So, I thought, I'll have a look at the Amazon ranking of Newton's *Principia*. Unbelievably, Newton ranked pretty well – surely he is not being read by physicists but rather by intellectual historians and surely – so I am convinced – this will be true of the canonical early works of rational political science. That they are not read is as it should be; that our successors relegate books like *The Civic Culture* and *The American Voter* to gather dust on library shelves is how the future will be if there is a real political science, one that celebrates its past but moves on as knowledge cumulates. The younger generation in our community is small, though a much bigger group than we were, and they are much, much, much better trained than we were. In the end, I am feeling optimistic.