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In the past fourteen years I have been at four different institutions where my primary job (besides research) has been to teach and design graduate curricula in formal political theory. In this time I've gotten a sense of how formal theory is perceived and used in mainstream political science; and where I think it should go if it is to remain relevant to the field of political science, which is my field.

I'll start with an anecdote. In 2002 (the summer before my job market) I went to the first EITM summer institute, where I met Ken Shepsle for the first time along with other students who were "doing formal theory." These students were from Caltech and the political science departments at Rochester, Harvard, and NYU, of course, but they were also from the political science departments at Minnesota, UNC, Chicago, Yale, and Stony Brook. Each of the students from these places went on the market as a formal theorist, and each later became a professor. These were really good students who worked with people like Mike Ting (at UNC), Alistair Smith (at Yale), and Diana Richards (at Minnesota). The point of this story is that not only did more political science departments train students in formal theory, but more used to actually produce formal theorists.

I don't see this anymore, because most of the people in the formal theory community have clustered together in a handful of departments, many of which are at business or policy schools. These places are intellectually exciting, in part because everyone speaks a common language. At the same time, the language that everyone speaks is increasingly disconnected from the language spoken by most political scientists, and this is exacerbated by the fact that fewer political science graduate students are being trained in these departments, or by formal political theorists at all.

To put it differently: fifteen years ago I would frequently talk to students who would say "I'm a consumer of formal theory, but not a producer." Today I don't think that we are producing many consumers outside of a handful of departments. This is, I think, a big problem if we want to speak to the discipline of political science, and if we want people to read and care about what we do. I find it interesting to compare our shrinking base of "consumers" with the expanding base produced by the methodology community. They have, for the most part, been able to get the discipline to believe that a basic familiarity with statistics is essential to professional development. Methods training has become more inclusive, with many top departments requiring or strongly encouraging all students to take these classes. My observation is that formal theory training has actually become more exclusive over the past decade, and is considered a vanity good in many top-25 graduate programs, as opposed to an essential part of graduate training.

I see current work in formal political theory as having two kinds of receptions by mainstream political science. Some models have been taken in by the American, comparative, or international relations communities. Well-known examples in mainstream comparative politics are the Baron & Ferejohn model in modeling coalition formation in parliaments, or the global games framework to look at protests and revolutions. I see a lot of empirical work that utilizes these models in a "consumeristic" way. On the one hand, I like that these models are being widely utilized, because a model

can make an argument better (pinning down assumptions, deducing outcomes and effects). On the other, I sometimes see this type of work as fishing for a model to apply a story (and more importantly, data) to, without engaging the theory very much. Authors may simply utilize a model to validate “Hypothesis 1,” without giving it much more thought than that.

Another strand of formal theories in political science generate insights that are not predictive. These models can often be thought of as “sufficiency results,” and include Arrow’s theorem, the McKelvey-Schofield chaos theorems, and a lot of other recent work. While these models aren’t predictive, I believe that they are just as relevant—if not more relevant—to the kind of empirical work that is being published today, particularly to work focused on causal identification. Much of this work dispels common folk intuitions. For example:

- Schnakenberg and Alonso & Camara show that meaningful information transmission to a voting body can reduce the ex-ante welfare of all voters. We can’t conclude that more information makes people better off.
- Ashworth & Bueno de Mesquita show that the fact that voters punish incumbents following natural disasters that are beyond the incumbents’ control is entirely consistent with voter rationality. We can’t conclude that responding to random events is dumb.
- Patty & Penn show that if voters care about how their elected representatives will vote, then they may be better served by politicians that are more spatially distant from them than by politicians that are closer. We can’t conclude that ideological positions closer to a voter are synonymous with positions that are more responsive to that voter’s preferences.

These insights are relevant to large literatures in political science, but they haven’t received much uptake, in part because using them requires understanding them. It’s asking too much for people with no familiarity with formal modeling to engage with the ideas developed in these models. To many people, the findings seem like tricks or “mathturbation.” This is exacerbated by the fact that the more general a model is—the more robust the findings—the more opaque it can seem to a person unfamiliar with formal modeling.

My hope—as one of perhaps two political scientists here who is in a department that is openly skeptical of rational choice theory—is that political science can move toward making graduate training in formal theory less of a luxury good; to create a generation of informed consumers of formal theory that can understand and appreciate the important work that is being done in this field, and that can in turn teach their students to understand and appreciate this work. I’m optimistic about the future, largely because I’m genuinely encouraged and inspired by the quality, creativity, and professionalism of the newest generation of scholars working in this field.