

## **The Future of Formal Political Theory**

by Jon X. Eguia, for the Shepsle Festschrift Conference, November 2016

I find it very humbling to address this audience as part of this roundtable. As the junior in this panel, what I lack in accomplishments or wisdom, I hope to make up with enthusiasm and naïve optimism.

The past fifty years have seen Formal Political Theory transformed from a contested fledgling enterprise, to an established field. Formal Theory is now widely represented: at Michigan, Chicago, Yale or Berkeley as it is at Rochester. Formal theory found a place as a respected and useful approach in a multi-methods discipline.

My co-panelists know more than I do about the past. On the other hand, none of us knows about the future of the field, so my comparative advantage is to talk about this future.

I find it almost inevitably rosy. I believe that our approach is sufficiently compelling that, whether it takes 5, 15 or 50 years, eventually others must surely come around and agree with us.

1. Political Science is a science. It is a scientific discipline that studies methods of governance, distribution of power, and collective decision-making. As any other scientific discipline, it is amenable to discovery and accumulation of knowledge through the use of the scientific method.

2. Science needs theory. The scientific method involves systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses. The formulation, testing and modification of hypotheses is theory.

3. Theory better be formal. It's rather quaint to think of "informal" theory. Precision and scientific rigor help establish logical relations. Theory might be normative or positive, but either way it better be precise, rigorous, i.e. formal.

Now, the future of Formal Theory might go beyond Rational Choice. Perhaps we'll see transformational advances in Bounded Rationality, non-Bayesian updating, or Neurological responses related to political processes. But theory there must be, and it must be formal.

At the same time, we live amid an empirical revolution. Most research is empirical, and I think this is good. The future I see is one in which most political scientists are better trained empiricists, who consume but do not produce formal theory. We don't need to convert everyone into a theorist. We do need to train all students, to provide them with a common core, language and way of thinking that includes the canon of formal theory. This will help empiricists produce better empirical work.

I see a future in which every undergraduate political science major read Ken's "*Analyzing Politics*" book, or equivalent and every PhD student read David's "*Positive Political Theory*" book, or equivalent. Then I'd encourage them to proceed to a purely empirical career, with this knowledge under their belt. We are trained in identification and estimation techniques, even if we don't use them ourselves; similarly our future colleagues should be trained in theory so they can appreciate it better.

The future I see is one in which rigorous, technical formal theory work is relevant to a larger audience.

For this to happen, we need not only a trained audience, but also an interested one. If I think of the political questions of greatest salience lately, immigration, inequality, terrorism, and global warming come to mind. Yet only a small fraction of the volume of formal theory work addresses these questions.

I think in the future more of us will follow people like Ethan and Bob (in this panel) and others, into researching such salient questions.

These issues and how to tackle them are not purely political. They are political, economic, and social. This is why I see it as vital that we work as social scientists across disciplines. We can't understand populism or opposition to immigration without understanding the economic causes of inequality; and we can't formulate adequate macro-economic responses to a financial crisis without understanding the political constraints and the general equilibrium effects that occur through the political system. Interdisciplinary conferences such as the Harvard-Princeton PIEP conference that Ken co-organizes, Rochester's Wallis conference, Battaglini's conference at Cornell or the Warwick-Princeton-Venice conference are the way to go and I expect them to grow and be imitated in the future.

I am decidedly optimistic about the future: formal theory is useful, and it will continue to be useful. Ken, McKelvey, Norman, Bruce and their generation built the field for us. Our task is much easier: we will continue their work, we will train the next generation of political scientists, and we will support the young formal theorists so that they later carry on this work.

It's an exciting enterprise and I'm thrilled to be part of it.