

Shooting (or Ignoring) the Messenger

Ron Rogowski
UCLA

Contemporary political science suffers from too much policy relevance, not too little. Politicians simply do not like the policies that scholarly research supports, prefer policies (often put forward by charlatans) that better suit their interests, and seek to suppress or ignore evidence-based research that contradicts their own, or their “base” voters’, ideologies.¹ When these same politicians assert piously that political science offers no policy-relevant research, what they really mean is that it offers no research that supports their own biases. Politicians accept research from political science, as I shall argue below, only when it assists their own efforts at re-election.

Doubters should consider two prominent instances, both laid out more fully later in this essay, electoral reform and immigration. Political science has established unambiguously that proportional representation benefits parties of the Left, while first-past-the-post (FPTP) methods of election greatly advantage the Right. Yet in much of the Anglo-American world, and most tenaciously in the U.S., parties of the Left have opposed proportional representation or remained neutral on the question.² At the other end of the spectrum, parties of the Right have usually opposed immigration, sometimes even of highly skilled workers;³ and, when immigration has increased despite their efforts, have just as strongly opposed funding efforts to assimilate the newcomers more rapidly, e.g., language classes or residential integration. Yet elementary economics shows that immigration powerfully benefits the economy as a whole, especially employers; and political science finds that voters approve both of high-skill immigration and of immigrants who can assimilate quickly. I shall say more below about what political science demonstrates in both of these cases, and in some other, almost equally prominent, ones

Immigration and anti-immigrant politics. As anti-immigrant sentiment, and support for anti-immigrant parties and policies, has exploded both in Europe and in localities within the U.S., conventional wisdom has blamed direct economic competition: young, male, low-skill natives, particularly ones threatened by unemployment, will most oppose immigration,

¹ Economists will know this phenomenon, well portrayed by Paul Krugman in *Peddling Prosperity*. “Supply-side” economics, to take the most egregious example, was simply a fraud, utterly lacking in serious scholarly support. The experience at least led high-profile economists (including Krugman, but also Barro, Sargent, Stiglitz, and others) to enter the public fray. Debate remains sharp but at least has become serious.

² Labour in the UK has favored PR, and then only lukewarmly, when it seemed (a) that Labour might be a permanent minority party or (b) its leaders foresaw a “hung” parliament, in which they would need Liberal support to form a government. Mark Evans, *Constitution-Making and the Labour Party* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 130.

³ Only a few years ago, leading Christian Democrats in Germany opposed increased quotas for high-skill immigrants with the slogan, “Kinder statt Inder” (“children instead of Indians,” i.e., increase the birth rate rather than admit more foreigners).

above all low-skill immigration. Among the broader public, opposition supposedly rises because of the increased burden on social services. As Sniderman *et al.* (2004; cf. Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2009) however showed in early survey experiments in the Netherlands, and as Hainmüller and Hiscox (2010) have convincingly demonstrated in more recent U.S. survey experiments, cultural motivations trump economic ones. Most citizens in all economic and educational brackets⁴ welcome immigrants (especially high-skill immigrants) who will “fit in,” i.e., learn their new country’s language and accommodate to its culture. So far as local opposition (anti-immigrant riots, ordinances, state laws) is concerned, Hopkins (2010) shows that hue and cry in the national media matters far more than the actual influx of immigrants into an area. So, if increased immigration is an economic necessity (and it is, given the low birthrates and high pension guarantees of many advanced economies), and if immigration most clearly benefits employers, who usually back the Right, the policy implications are clear: the worst possible path is to cut back on language instruction for immigrants, to oppose high-skill immigration, and to encourage xenophobic media coverage or campaign rhetoric. Yet, as noted earlier, leaders of the Right (and some of the Left) regularly indulge in all three policies.

How FPTP elections favor governments of the Right. Iversen and Soskice (2006), following on a conjecture by R. Bingham Powell, have demonstrated (and in part explained⁵) the remarkable tendency of FPTP electoral systems to install disproportionately governments of the Right or Center-Right, and indeed governments whose policies are well to the Right of the median voter, with obvious consequences for redistribution (see below). In a series of papers and a forthcoming book, Jonathan Rodden (2011) gives one succinct reason: voters of the Left typically reside in more densely populated areas (cities); hence even under honest (non-gerrymandered) districting Left voters end up “packed” into districts that the Left wins by large margins, while voters of the Right (typically more suburban and rural) constitute thinner majorities in their districts and thus capture more seats – a higher share of seats than of popular votes.⁶ As noted earlier, the institutional implication of both strands of work is clear – parties of the Left should favor proportional representation – and the mystery is why those parties so often ignore the implication (while parties of the Right seem, at least nowadays, to see things more clearly).

Political impact of outsourcing. When workers lose their jobs to outsourcing (e.g., movement of production to India or China) or to direct import competition, whom do they blame? And can retraining or compensation assuage their anger? For the case of the U.S., at

⁴ However, a university degree makes one markedly more pro-immigrant.

⁵ A vulgarized version of their argument would run as follows: where Center voters are forced to choose either Left or Right (as is typically the case in SMD systems), they choose the Right to avoid the danger of radically Left policies. Under PR, Center voters can choose a Center party and embrace a Center-Left government, secure in the knowledge that such a coalition government cannot move radically to the Left.

⁶ In the 2012 U.S. elections to the House of Representatives, a combination of gerrymandering and the “Rodden effect” translated a 1.4 million-vote Democratic majority overall into a 33-seat Republican majority (234-201) in the House. To put it more simply, the Republicans won 48 per cent of the popular vote but 54 per cent of the seats; the Democrats, slightly over 49 per cent of the popular vote but 46 per cent of the seats. See Griff Palmer and Michael Cooper, “How Maps Helped Republicans Keep an Edge in the House,” *The New York Times*, 14 December 2012.

least, Yotam Margalit (2011) finds clear answers: displaced workers blame the incumbent President (allowing for other factors, his popularity declines in regions affected by outsourcing, and by about twice as much as in regions that suffer non-trade-related unemployment), but that effect is attenuated where the affected regions and workers receive specifically trade-related aid and retraining. One suspects that the phenomenon generalizes to other countries (displaced workers will take out their anger on the incumbent government); and it follows that parties in government should favor trade-related aid, while opposition parties should, well, oppose it. Yet even when in government, the U.S. Republicans (and likely many parties of the Right in other countries) usually oppose such aid.

How politics affects business cycles. Political scientists have long understood that elections are in large part “referenda on the economy,” that incumbents therefore have incentives to stimulate the economy before elections, and that hence we should expect to see “political business cycles,” i.e., government-induced booms in the run-up to elections. But we do not see these, or at least not very consistently. In an important recent article, Canes-Wrone and Park (2012) show why: in all OECD countries on which we have data, a close election with highly polarized alternatives curtails private investment (since firms and investors hate uncertainty), to an extent that more than offsets the government’s efforts to stimulate the economy. Surprisingly, pre-election booms arise more often where partisanship is less pronounced, or elections less likely to be close. Again, the policy implication is clear: the wise incumbent, facing a close election, will seek consensus; the clever opposition, at least when the election looks to be close, will highlight partisan differences to hobble both the economy and the incumbent. In reality, close elections often lead both incumbents and opponents to accentuate their differences (*pace* Anthony Downs) and thus to curtail private investment.

One should also note the institutional implications: systems that can avoid sharp contestation and sudden policy shifts (to be more precise: normally, proportional representation) will suffer less pronounced business cycles and steadier private investment. Worst of all are systems of divided government, where the party that holds the legislature, but not the Presidency, has every incentive to stall the economy.

Popular support for (or opposition to) redistribution. For thirty years, the standard “workhorse” model of governmental redistribution has been that of Meltzer and Richard, which – to simplify drastically – predicted that, in democracies, demand for redistribution would grow with inequality, or more precisely with the difference in income between the mean and the median voter. While there is some evidence that change in redistributionist sentiment follows this pattern (increasing inequality increases popular support for redistribution), just about every cross-sectional study has found the opposite: the most equal societies (e.g., Finland) support redistribution the most, the most unequal (e.g., the U.S. and UK) support it least. Following the great student of modern welfare states Peter Lindert, this phenomenon has become widely known as the “reverse Robin Hood paradox,” i.e., in highly unequal societies few voters support taking from the rich to give to the poor. But why should this be?

Research in political science and political economy has established three, perhaps four, main forces that counteract the logic of the Meltzer-Richard argument. (1) Ethnic fractionalization matters. As Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote (2001) first showed, all else equal, a more ethnically or racially fractionalized society will support redistribution less. There is tentative evidence that the relationship holds across time: as European societies have become more ethnically diverse, popular support for their welfare states has declined. (2) “Skew” may count for more than inequality. As Lupu and Pontusson (2011) have argued, support for redistribution may be better predicted by the extent to which the median voter resembles the richest vs. the poorest voters. Even where the difference between the mean and median voter is high, support for redistribution will fall where the difference in income between the median voter and the poorest ten per cent is great compared to the difference between the median and the richest ten per cent. Median voters, in short, respond not only to financial self-interest, as in Meltzer-Richard, but to whether the poor are “like them,” or quite differently situated. (3) Volatility. Since a government “safety net” is in part a system of social insurance, support for it, especially among the better-off, will depend on a realistic assessment of risk: how likely am I, one day, to need this kind of support?⁷ Hence support seems to rise with economic dislocation and unpredictability (Rehm, Hacker, and Schlesinger 2012); and important current research by Yotam Margalit (in press) finds, at least within the U.S., that this holds among individuals: those who became unemployed in the Great Recession quickly began to express greater support for redistribution (but, if and when they regained employment, reverted to their prior convictions). (4) Private “nest eggs.” Just as uncertainty, all else equal, raises support for redistribution, so the ready availability of a private “cushion” against misfortune – ownership of a rapidly appreciating home or stock portfolio – seems to diminish individuals’ support for the welfare state.⁸

The policy implications, as before, seem clear: opponents of the welfare state, mostly on the Right, will be shrewd to (a) increase their society’s ethnic diversity; (b) narrow the gap in income and consumption between the middle class and the rich; (c) minimize economic volatility, especially as it affects society’s better-off; and (d) foster an “ownership society,” where private wealth obviates less well-off individuals’ perceived need for social insurance. Yet politicians of the Right have usually sought to keep their societies homogeneous (cf. earlier discussion of immigration), widened the gap between the richest and the median voters, and accepted “boom and bust” as a normal part of the business cycle. Equally paradoxically, leaders of the Left have usually supported home ownership (low-interest loans, government guarantees of mortgages, relaxed credit standards) more zealously than politicians of the Right.

Getting out, and influencing, the vote. By way of contrast, a fair number of politicians have begun to follow avidly research in political science that shows, often through

⁷ An obvious element of endogeneity is conceded by all students of the subject: the better the social guarantees, the less the incentive to insure oneself against misfortune.

⁸ Ben Ansell has offered the most intriguing argument along these lines: Ansell, “The Political Economy of Ownership: Housing Markets and the Welfare State.” See <http://www.polisci.umn.edu/~ansell/papers.htm>.

field or laboratory experiments, (a) what influences voters to get to the polls and (b) how effective, and how enduring, various forms of political propaganda (e.g., television advertising, mailers, telephone calls) actually are. The work in question, and the traction it is getting among campaign managers, is nicely summarized in Issenberg (2010). Among the major contributors have been a group at Yale University centered on Alan Gerber, Donald Green (who has since moved to Columbia), and Gregory Huber. Some of the most important laboratory work has been led by Jamie Druckman, at Northwestern. Perhaps most indicative of how seriously practicing politicians take this research, Gerber, Green, and associates were invited to allocate randomly a large part of television advertising in a Texas gubernatorial campaign and to get real-time feedback on the effectiveness and duration of the ads (Gerber *et al.* 2011). In this line of research, however, politicians' success and survival are at stake, not just the public policies that they advocate or enact.

And here, surely, is the nub of the matter. Because politicians are not really held accountable for the success or failure of their policies,⁹ and because they fear their core voters (who can deny them renomination) more than they do failure of their policies, they remain free to reject the findings of political science, even where those findings are clearest and most policy-relevant. This should hardly surprise us. Even in the face of other scientific findings, politicians can believe in creationism, deny global warming, embrace austerity as a cure for recession, or express absolute certainty that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction – and, worse, pursue policies that reflect these delusions.

What seems stranger is that politicians will ignore or denounce even the findings that, in the long run, would benefit their parties or the ideologies they claim to embrace. Their time-horizons rarely stretch beyond the next election, they have better things to do than fight entrenched interests within their parties and constituencies, and they challenge their followers' impermeable beliefs only at great risk to their own careers.

So political scientists are not alone in being ignored as “not relevant.” Politicians believe equally that physicists, climatologists, biologists, physicians, and economists are “not relevant” to their policies, and in a terrible sense they are right. While all these experts can and do point the way to better and more effective policies, or even to ones that are to the politicians' long-term advantage, leaders often do better by continuing to pursue the bad policies that their ideological “base,” their wealthy supporters, or their own office-holders support.

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⁹ This is a classical problem in principal-agent analysis: was the bad crop the fault of the tenant or the weather?

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