

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

The Case for Public Policy Expertise in Political Science

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4kc3s6zp>

Journal

Political Science and Politics, 52(3)

ISSN

1998-1775

Authors

Herrera, Veronica

Post, Alison E

Publication Date

2019-07-01

DOI

10.1017/s1049096519000015

Peer reviewed

The Case for Public Policy Expertise in Political Science

Veronica Herrera
University of Connecticut

Alison E. Post
University of California, Berkeley

Word count: 3637

Abstract:

The politics of public policy is a vibrant research area increasingly at the forefront of intellectual innovations in the discipline. We argue that political scientists are best positioned to undertake research on the politics of public policy when they possess expertise in particular policy areas. Policy expertise positions scholars to conduct theoretically innovative work, and to ensure that empirical research reflects the reality they aim to analyze. It also confers important practical advantages, such as access to a significant number of academic positions and major sources of research funding not otherwise available to political scientists. Perhaps most importantly, scholars with policy expertise are equipped to defend the value of political science degrees and research in the public sphere.

Forthcoming in *PS: Political Science and Politics*. 2019

Acknowledgments:

We thank Shanelle Jones and Bhaavya Sinha for research assistance and Katerina Linos, Aila Matanock, and three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on previous drafts.

The politics of public policy is a vibrant research area increasingly at the forefront of intellectual innovations in the discipline. Prominent scholarship on American politics, for example, examines how exposure to the criminal justice system (Weaver and Lerman 2010) and receipt of social security payments (Campbell 2003) affect political attitudes and participation. A recent wave of field experiments examines a variety of policy interventions, such as how audits and community engagement programs impact corruption (Olken 2007), and the effects of civics courses on voters' propensity to sanction poorly performing politicians (Gottlieb 2016).

The growing prominence of scholarship on the politics of public policy stands in contrast to its status in prior decades. In the early 1990s, Sabatier noted, "in the eyes of many political scientists, policy scholars have made only modest contributions to developing reasonably clear, generalizable, and empirically verified theories of the policy process" (1991, 145). Policy-relevant political science was seen as marginal to understanding politics as compared to topics such as voting, campaigns, and elections, particularly in American Politics (Hacker and Pierson 2014, 643–44). This is no longer the case; scholarship on the politics of public policy, we will show, now appears at high rates in the most prestigious journals in the field.

We argue that political scientists are best positioned to undertake research on the politics of public policy when they possess expertise in particular policy areas. By *policy expertise*, we mean mastery of the key issues, debates, institutions, actors, and technical factors that affect political struggles over policy design and implementation. Policy expertise positions scholars to conduct theoretically innovative work, and to ensure that empirical research reflects the reality they aim to analyze. It also confers important practical advantages, such as access to more academic positions and sources of research funding not typically available to political scientists. As political science departments increase requirements for methodological training in their departments, it is important that the value of policy expertise not be forgotten.

Theoretical and Empirical Payoffs from Policy Expertise

The last three decades have witnessed the emergence of several highly influential strands of policy-focused research within Political Science. One literature focuses on how governmental policies are formulated and implemented as well as the long-run impacts of policies on the political process. This body of work includes, for example, prominent comparative politics research on the welfare state and recent work within American Political Development on social programs and policy feedback processes (see Campbell 2012). Another influential strand of research employs experimental techniques to examine how policy interventions impact both politics and policy outcomes. Studies have, for instance, examined how disseminating information about the performance of elected officials impacts politicians' subsequent performance in office in Uganda (Grossman and Michelitch 2018).

Due at least in part to the prominence of these literatures, policy-focused political science now appears frequently in highly-regarded Political Science journals. Analyzing the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *World Politics*, and *International Organization* during the last decade, we found surprisingly high numbers of articles on the politics of public policy. Table 1 shows that the percentage of articles mentioning "policy" or "policies" in the title, keywords, or abstract ranged between 10 and 45 for *World Politics*, between 23 and 32 for *International Organization*, 12 and 27 for the *American Political Science Review*, and 23 and 42 for the *American Journal of Political Science*.¹ Note that these counts capture all articles focused on policy, and not just those reflecting significant policy expertise.

Table 1. Percentage of Published Articles Focusing on Policy (2007-2017)

	<i>American Political Science Review</i>	<i>American Journal of Political Science</i>	<i>World Politics</i>	<i>International Organization</i>
2017	12	38	10	29
2015	16	42	23	32
2013	22	32	29	28
2011	27	23	45	23
2009	20	30	15	27
2007	19	39	33	32

While research on policy appears at high rates in influential journals, we argue that the most compelling research build upon expertise in particular policy areas. Deep knowledge of particular policy areas—such as criminal justice, education, or environment—can greatly improve one’s ability to understand the political dynamics at work. Mastering the legislation, program designs, market dynamics, and organizational landscape in a particular policy area encourages scholars to know exactly where to look to detect what is truly at stake for different groups, and which group has come out ahead in the wake of conflicts. Scholars with such knowledge can then detect problems with existing theoretical accounts and propose reformulations with the potential for broad application. Mettler (2011), for example, highlights important interest groups and political conflicts in the arena of U.S. tax policy that would fall below the radar screen of a scholar without mastery of the details of the U.S. tax code, and thus the sorts of firms and interest groups that stood to lose from changes in particular provisions. This led her to introduce the novel concept of a “submerged state” comprised of these low visibility interest groups, prompting a reorientation of subsequent research on the welfare state. Similarly, Reckhow’s command of U.S. K-12 education policy positioned her to detect the strong influence of foundation philanthropists on national education policy, and thereby contribute to a broader theoretical shift in the field of American politics emphasizing organized group influence over actors that have traditionally received far more attention from scholars, elected officials and voters (Reckhow 2016; see also Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

Policy expertise not only positions scholars to make theoretical innovations, but also to identify appropriate measures and develop the requisite skills to work with such data. Thus, their understanding of variation in the phenomenon to be explained can diverge substantially from existing work. The large literature on local public goods provision, for example, tends to measure service delivery using governmental data on service access that may be inaccurate, and does not reflect variations in service quality, such as whether or not water or electricity connections actually function the majority of the time.² Min (2015), in contrast, uses nighttime extent imagery to analyze the politics of electrification in India—imagery that is available more regularly than census data on network connections, and less vulnerable to political manipulation than official coverage statistics. Sector specialization pointed Min toward nighttime light imagery and facilitated learning the sophisticated processing techniques needed to work with it.

The theoretical and measurement advantages of policy expertise are particularly strong for experimentalists. Policy expertise positions scholars to anticipate what interventions are more likely to generate effects before planning expensive field research, and to establish relationships with local partners. It also helps researchers uncover causal mechanisms, identify outcome

measures appropriate for detecting effects, and anticipate contextual conditions under which effects are most likely to be observed. For example, policy expertise contributed to Blair et al. (2018), a study of ethnicity and policing: the authors' networks helped them secure the cooperation of the United Nations Police trainers in Liberia to work with actual police trainees—a setting in which officers could engage in role-playing of the sort that lab-in-the-field experiments often entail. Researchers also worked closely with trainers to develop the experimental modules, which included mock crime scene investigations and testimonies.

Developing sufficient policy expertise to detect problems with existing theory and propose more appropriate measures does mean risking that one's theoretical arguments or findings will not travel well to other areas or will not be perceived as sufficiently general. However, the examples cited above show that it is possible to preempt these critiques; many of these pieces focus on single policy areas, yet still have had major impacts. This suggests that the costs of investing in expertise in terms of studying fewer policy areas may not be as large as previously thought. They also highlight how scholarship by political scientists on policy formulation and implementation can complement existing work in public administration and public policy, which tends to focus less directly on connections to electoral politics and related bodies of theory in political science.

Practical Reasons to Study the Politics of Public Policy

Policy expertise confers important practical benefits to scholars as well. For doctoral students and faculty, these include marketability both inside and outside of the academic job market and access to important streams of research funding. More broadly, increasing the policy relevance of our research can help buttress institutional and public support for political science instruction and research.

Policy Expertise Facilitates Access to Jobs and Research Funding

In recent years, a significant portion of advertised tenure-track positions in political science required public policy expertise. These positions have arisen through university-wide initiatives to strengthen particular areas (like the environment), political science departments coordinating hiring with professional schools, Public Policy schools recruiting political scientists that can teach on particular policy topics, or new policy tracks within political science programs.

Our analysis of postings to the APSA jobs database suggests that during the 2015 – 2017 period, approximately 13% of advertised tenure track positions listed a specific public policy area as one of three desired types of expertise.³ This figure is very close to the percentage of jobs postings for comparative politics (15%) and international relations (18%) (APSA 2017). These policy-related positions covered a wide range of policy areas from criminal justice to energy policy. The overwhelming number of positions, however, fell in four fields: environmental policy (88), foreign policy (56), economic policy (32), and health policy (25).⁴ These are significant figures, given a decline from 1215 to 1141 in the total number of advertised positions since 2010 (APSA 2017, 4). Notably, students with policy expertise are also increasingly competitive applicants for positions in standard subfields like American and Comparative politics due to the increasing prominence of policy-focused research discussed earlier. They are also commonly hired by schools of public policy: among assistant and associate professors at the top ten schools of public policy analysis, 30% had degrees in Economics, 25% in Political Science, and 13% in Public Administration, Public Policy or Public Affairs.⁵

Training students in policy expertise, and especially with techniques to assess policy impact, also positions them to obtain research-based employment outside academia. Only three in ten newly minted Political Science PhDs become assistant professors (Hochschild 2017). Students possessing policy expertise have strong qualifications for research positions with development banks and consultancies evaluating the efficacy of development interventions funded by USAID, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), and other organizations. These new opportunities join existing positions for researchers with policy expertise in think tanks such as RAND, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Brookings Institution.

Researchers with policy expertise also can approach a wider array of potential funders than students of traditional topics like political institutions, political parties, and voting behavior. Those studying development policy can turn to major research funding programs run by USAID or DFID, and foundations such as the Gates, Hewlett, and Guggenheim. Even when dissertation research is not directly funded by these organizations, they may facilitate access to crucial data or provide consultancies that finance field research. Relatedly, scholars with expertise on U.S. domestic or foreign policy can pursue grants from the Department of Defense's Minerva program, Homeland Security, or the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency; the vast majority of successful proposals to the Minerva program are led by scholars with longstanding expertise in security studies or terrorism.⁶ Many large NSF programs actually require collaboration across different university divisions on broad societal problems such as environmental sustainability and natural disaster preparedness and response. Yet few political scientists make use of these opportunities; for example, political scientists represent just 1.5% of the PIs or co-PIs for the NSF's Smart & Connected Communities program (grants typically US\$1-3 million)—for which collaboration between engineers and social scientists is required—half as often as sociologists, and 1/3 as often as scholars of public policy.⁷ Pursuing such funding opportunities is increasingly important given the relatively small size and vulnerability of the NSF's Political Science program. Congress has called for its elimination on multiple occasions, citing examples of scholarship whose relevance is unclear to a general audience (Cohen 2009).

Policy-Relevant Scholarship Can Help Defend the Discipline

Increasing teaching and research in specific policy areas can also help increase the perceived value of political science programs in the face of financial pressures. The financial impacts of the 2008 recession on higher education continue: 44 states spent less per student in 2017 than in 2008, and per student funding in eight states fell by over 30 percent in 2017 (Mitchell, Leachman, and Masterson 2017, 2). The financial crisis also impacted private institutions, which have seen their tuition revenue, gift giving, and endowments shrink (Dorantes and Low 2016, 188). In addition, higher education institutions increasingly compete for students and revenue streams with online degree programs. Universities and colleges have responded by increasing tuition, expanding online course options, and consolidating or eliminating campuses and programs.

Public policy expertise can potentially help invigorate political science degree programs in the face of declining enrollments. In 2016, only 1.77% of all bachelor's degrees awarded were in political science, the lowest level ever recorded (APSA 2018). Some departments have created public policy tracks within political science majors in efforts to expand enrollment; the efficacy of such initiatives should be evaluated systematically.⁸ Relatedly, masters programs can be developed around distinct tracks that combine policy focused analysis with multi-method

training, for example, in environment, health policy, or education—in collaboration with policy schools where these are present.

Developing public policy expertise also positions scholars to contribute to policy debates, and thus be seen as useful contributors to public life. A recent APSA Taskforce notes that many people do not know what political science is and that the field needs to develop better communicative strategies in order to increase the visibility and perceived value of our discipline (Lupia and Aldrich 2014, 8). Observers lament the missed opportunity for political scientists to have greater public engagement or to offer coursework that engages real world issues (Cohen 2009). As Joseph Nye notes, “part of the problem has been that “parts of the academy...in the effort to be scientific, feel we should stay away from policy, [because] it interferes with the science” (Cohen 2009). Studying public policy areas positions scholars to contribute to increasingly common, direct venues for public engagement such as The Washington Post’s Monkey Cage, which published more than 8,000 articles featuring nearly 1,500 political scientists by 2016 (see Lynch 2016, 122).

Pathways Forward: Sector Specialization and Collaboration

Policy expertise clearly confers important benefits, but how can it be obtained? One avenue is through prior professional experience or academic degrees in particular policy fields. Working in a particular policy area can impart a sense of the everyday politics that animate a particular policy area, as well as a command of the legal, institutional, and technical context in which struggles over policy design and implementation occur. Unfortunately, while many Ph.D. students worked prior to attending graduate school, work experience in specific policy areas often does not weigh heavily in graduate admissions. Professional degrees in policy areas such as Urban Planning, Public Health, or Environmental Policy can also impart complementary insights about the context in which policymaking occurs, as well as exposure to alternative disciplinary lenses on the policy area of interest.

Policy expertise can also be obtained through consultation or collaboration with scholars in other disciplines or with outside organizations. Consulting with scholars in medicine or public health, for example, can help political scientists improve their measures for key variables and their understanding of how politics can affect health outcomes. Such consultations may also provide access to new sources of data. A more ambitious form of engagement would be to participate in interdisciplinary research projects through, for example, one of the aforementioned NSF programs.

Another means of ensuring research projects are informed by policy expertise is to partner with organizations involved in the policy process. When partnering with organizations, firms, or government agencies working in a specific policy area, scholars have well-informed interlocutors with whom to discuss which research topics are most likely to be impactful as well as the ways in which political institutions, political actors, and technical constraints affect the politics of policy design and implementation. Scholars engaging in field experiments, for example, often work closely with local partners on the development and implementation of research projects. A fruitful debate is emerging among scholars regarding the circumstances under which such partnerships further experimental work (Karlan and Appel 2016).

Political Science PhDs face strong pressure to acquire sophisticated methodological skills, which can sometimes limit investments in developing policy expertise. While such training is important, this should not come at the expense of obtaining policy expertise. Knowledge of specific policy areas positions scholars to develop more theoretically innovative

and empirically rigorous research on the politics of public policy, to more competitively pursue both academic and non-academic positions, and to obtain additional sources of research funding. Perhaps most importantly, scholars with policy expertise are equipped to defend the value of political science degrees and research in the public sphere.

Bibliography

- APSA. 2017. "2016-2017 APSA EJobs Report." *APSA*, August.
- . 2018. "Trends in Degrees Awarded in the Social Sciences: 1949-2016," February.
- Blair, Robert, Sabrina Karim, Michael Gilligan, and Kyle Beardsley. 2018. "Policing Ethnicity: Lab-in-the-Field Evidence on Cooperation, Discrimination and Ethnic Balancing in the Liberian National Police."
- Campbell, Andrea. 2003. *How Politics Makes Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- . 2012. "Policy Makes Mass Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 15: 333–351.
- Cohen, Patricia. 2009. "Field Study: Just How Relevant Is Political Science?" *New York Times*, October 19, 2009.
- Díaz-Cayeros, Alberto, Beatriz Magaloni, and Alexander Ruiz-Euler. 2014. "Traditional Governance, Citizen Engagement, and Local Public Goods: Evidence from Mexico." *World Development* 53: 80–93.
- Dorantes, Andrew R., and Justin R. Low. 2016. "Financial Crisis Management in Higher Education: Responses by 20 Private Colleges and Universities to the 2007–2009 Financial Crisis." *Journal of Education Finance* 42 (2): 188–219.
- Gottlieb, Jessica. 2016. "Greater Expectations: A Field Experiment to Improve Accountability in Mali." *American Journal of Political Science* 60 (1): 143–57.
- Grossman, Guy, and Kristin Michelitch. 2018. "Information Dissemination, Competitive Pressure, and Politician Performance between Elections: A Field Experiment in Uganda." *American Political Science Review* 112 (2): 280–301.
- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2014. "After the 'Master Theory': Downs, Schattschneider, and the Rebirth of Policy-Focused Analysis." *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (3): 643–662.
- Hochschild, Jennifer. 2017. "Mismatch between (Some of) APSA and (Some) Political Scientists?" *PS: Political Science & Politics*, no. October: 917–18.
- Karlan, Dean, and Jacob Appel. 2016. *Failing in the Field: What We Can Learn When Field Research Goes Wrong*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Lupia, Arthur, and John H. Aldrich. 2014. *Task Force on Improving Public Perceptions of Political Science's Value*. APSA.
- Lynch, Marc. 2016. "Political Science in Real Time: Engaging the Middle East Policy Public." *Perspectives on Politics* 14 (1): 121–131.
- Mettler, Suzanne. 2011. *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Min, Brian. 2015. *Power and the Vote: Elections and Electricity in the Developing World*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Mitchell, Michael, Michael Leachman, and Kathleen Masterson. 2017. *A Lost Decade in Higher Education Funding: State Cuts Have Driven Up Tuition and Reduced Quality*. Washington D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

- Olken, Benjamin A. 2007. "Monitoring Corruption: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Indonesia." *Journal of Political Economy* 115 (2): 200–249.
- Reckhow, Sarah. 2016. "More than Patrons: How Foundations Fuel Policy Change and Backlash." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 (3): 449–454.
- Rosenzweig, Steven C. 2015. "Does Electoral Competition Affect Public Goods Provision in Dominant-Party Regimes? Evidence from Tanzania." *Electoral Studies* 39: 72–84.
- Sabatier, Paul A. 1991. "Political Science and Public Policy." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 24 (2): 144–47.
- Skocpol, Theda, and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez. 2016. "The Koch Network and Republican Party Extremism." *Perspectives on Politics* 14 (3): 681–99.
- Weaver, Vesla M., and Amy E. Lerman. 2010. "Political Consequences of the Carceral State." *American Political Science Review* 104 (4): 817–33.

¹ We used these search terms after assessing the "false positive" and "false negative" rates of several approaches. "False positives" from using "policy OR policies" included, for example, studies on political philosophy, studies including policies as control variables, and articles examining policy preferences. We find such marginal cases were roughly equivalent in number to policy-relevant articles missed using our search terms because they focus on a particular policy area (e.g. criminal justice, financial regulation). Using keywords associated with a set of different policy areas yielded much higher false positive rates.

² Prominent and otherwise excellent examples include Diaz-Cayeros *et al.* (2014) and Rosenzweig (2015).

³ Data extracted from <https://hmdc.shinyapps.io/apsajobs/>, September-December 2017. Figures from the public policy subfield yielded only a subset of the positions involving policy expertise, so we conducted a search encompassing 15 policy expertise areas available to those listing positions: criminal justice, economic policy, education policy, energy policy, environmental policy, foreign policy, gender politics & policy, health care, housing, immigration policy, public finance & budgeting, regulatory policy, science & technology, social welfare, and trade. A count of non-duplicate, tenure-track positions requiring policy expertise is compared with the overall number of tenure track positions advertised each year.

⁴ Totals for each policy field do not include duplicate listings within the category; however, jobs may be listed with three different expertise areas, and thus appear in multiple categories here.

⁵ We consulted the websites of the public policy schools falling within the top 10 for public policy analysis according to 2018 U.S. News and World Report's rankings and recorded the Ph.D. discipline for every ladder rank (not adjunct, lecturer, teaching, of practice, or clinical) professor at the assistant and associate rank.

⁶ <https://minerva.defense.gov/Research/Funded-Projects/>

⁷ Calculated from the NSF awards database and web searches for PI affiliations for 2017-2018.

⁸ E.g., University of Colorado at Denver, Western Michigan University, and NC State.