

THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

100 Perspectives

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DON'T STAY HOME

The Utility of Area Studies for Political Science Scholarship

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What does or should an "area studies political scientist" do? Within the past two decades, this question has led at times to heated debates. For some, area studies research is at best the source of footnotes that more analytically oriented political scientists may employ fruitfully and effectively. For others, "political science" embodies pompous pretense in its own name and, at its worst, profoundly misrepresents politics as real human beings ordinarily understand it, experience it, and believe it. These two caricatures could be readily dismissed if they were to have no impact on careers, appointments, funding decisions, or collegiality within universities.

Area studies political science is not an oxymoron. It presumes that scholars interested in the study of politics somewhere would value the particularities of that "somewhere" as they frame the questions, hypotheses, and research instruments and procedures that they will employ. It equally presumes that they have read, pondered, internalized wherever appropriate, and otherwise learned in various ways from a wide array of fellow scholars who have worked in other "somewheres" with different research instruments and procedures and contrary hypotheses or analytic frameworks. Area studies political scientists seek to contribute to the analysis of the somewhere that has been the principal object of their research and also to the wider analytic and empirical study of comparative politics.

Harsh and unfair as many critiques of area studies research may have been, some scholars in that research tradition may have inadvertently caused their own self-isolation. They had emphasized the particularity or uniqueness of their research subject almost as if to build a barrier of scholarly "protectionism" to prevent external intrusion. Yet, in so doing, they also made many of their arguments subject to easy disconfirmation. Let me illustrate with reference to some research on Mexico.

Until the end of the 1980s, research on Mexico emphasized that the long-dominant party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), was a "party without members." Only electoral fraud could explain support for the PRI, such scholars believed.

Similarly, until the end of the 1980s, the bulk of research on Mexico emphasized that the main opposition party, the National Action Party (PAN), which finally won presidential elections in 2000 and 2006, was a Roman Catholic party, such that religiosity was the key explanation for its mass base.

Finally, there was an unresolved debate among area studies scholars of Mexico with regard to how Mexicans may have thought about the main issues of the day. Some seemed to think that they simply did not; others averred that Mexicans worried strongly about such issues as corruption, electoral fraud, and poverty, and that a legacy of nationalism and revolution made them intensely hostile to the U.S.

Beginning in the late 1980s, scholarly survey research on Mexico became much easier, with various datasets available for analysis. It turned out that none of the area studies propositions summarized just above was accurate.

The PRI had considerable voter support in the late 1980s and through the 1990s and retained it even after it lost the presidency in 2000, thus winning thereafter many governorships, mayoralties, and seats in Congress. The interesting research question turned out to be why so many voters continued to vote for the PRI even though they understood that the PRI governments had often ruled badly.

Frequency of church attendance distinguishes PRI from PAN voters only rarely. The interesting research question is why the absence of religiosity distinguished voters who support the Party of the Democratic Revolution from both the PAN and the PRI. Even in this narrower circumstance, religion was rarely, if ever, among the more important explanations for voter behavior.

Mexicans focus on valence issues, much less so on positional issues. They worried about corruption, electoral fraud, and poverty, but none of those issues was a dominant explanation for voter behavior. Mexicans typically held the U.S. in high regard, even if at times (the 2000s) they strongly opposed the incumbent Bush administration. Mexicans showed that they were not unlike voters in other countries in their concern for the economy as a whole (sociotropic voting) and in their attention to "competence" as one way to distinguish between candidates.

From these findings, a research agenda emerges for area studies political science. A deep understanding of the particularities of a place matters; yet to have it requires both systematic data about citizens and systematic comparisons among countries. Focus first on questions of universal interest and applicability to enable scholars to demonstrate variation, for it would contribute to political science as a whole and to the study of a particular

country—and it would make it easier to identify in what way was this country different from others. It turns out, for example, that Mexicans resemble “North Atlantic area” voters in their patterns of economic voting but differ in their patience for a misgoverning party such as the PRI, which they supported again and again over time albeit at declining levels. Mexicans were not unique in every respect but they did differ from less patient voters in other countries.

Area studies political scientists who work on Mexico would like others to join them in asking why voters in some but not all formerly authoritarian countries in Central and Eastern Europe and East Asia continued to support the parties heir to authoritarian regimes. Why is “voter patience” less common in North Atlantic democracies? Or, to put it in language that might be more familiar, why is partisan identification stronger or “stickier” in countries that seemingly never had “real” parties for most of their histories than in countries that have long had what for a while seemed strong parties that embodied timeless, “frozen” political cleavages?

This research also implies one important experience of which too few have taken timely notice: social science surveys of Mexicans, and citizens in many formerly authoritarian countries, have much higher response rates than surveys in the U.S. If you wish to study “the human condition,” don’t be just an “area studies political scientist” who works solely in the U.S.

Of possible related interest: Chapters 12, 34, 49, 75.

Suggested additional reading

- Brady, Henry E., and David Collier, eds. *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.
- Domínguez, Jorge I., and Chappell Lawson, eds. *Mexico’s Pivotal Democratic Election: Candidates, Voters, and the Presidential Campaign of 2000*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.