

Everyday Political Engagement in Comparative Politics

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Introduction

Many students enter doctoral programs in political science with the goal of using their research to make a difference in the world through outreach, engagement, and policy relevant work. In the field of comparative politics, this is especially true for students who have studied outside of their country of origin, and who have been inspired by what they have seen and think they have learned. And yet political scientists commonly express discomfort with how academic research interacts with the world of practical politics and policymaking. Americanists and IR researchers have had addressed these concerns through new initiatives like the Bridging the Gap and the Scholar Strategy Network.¹ The case of comparative politics seems different—as a matter of course, most of the things that comparativists study have precisely no impact on U.S. politics, and perhaps only narrow effects on U.S. policymaking—even where funding ultimately comes from institutions such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).²

Interestingly, there are at least three different perspectives on just what the problem of academic engagement is. One asks whether or not academic political science

¹ See <http://bridgingthegaproject.org> and <http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org>.

² As I write from the perspective of an American citizen, throughout this essay I will treat the United States as the exemplar of the “home country” where comparativists live and work. Most of my arguments will generalize the other national contexts in the Global North where research institutions employ political scientists to study “comparative politics.”

research should be “policy relevant” at all. Focusing again on the U.S. context, initiatives such as Bridging the Gap and others highlight the policy relevance of current international relations scholarship, and seek to incentivize current students to conduct more policy relevant research. This is a question of whether or not research should be amenable to actionable policy, and the role of the academic researcher in linking research to practice.

In the case of comparative politics, two other views dominate. One focuses on academics’ professional incentives (publish books and articles for other academic audiences, earn tenure and promotion), observing that professional incentives rarely overlap with what is important in the minds of the communities that political scientists study. For some, this leads to a kind of mostly harmless superficiality, in which academic research focuses on theoretical, methodological, or conceptual issues that are not practically or politically relevant to the people whose time and resources contribute to it. If a topic or problem is “politically important” but cannot be studied via a preferred methodology, it is not studied. Some critics hold a more negative view, that research motivated by theory or method is fundamentally exploitative, treating the people whose politics are being studied as mere objects, or subjects, or curiosities who dazzle foreign academics with their behavior.

Still another perspective—most commonly invoked in the context of development research—is that research is *too* political but researchers are oblivious to how and why. For example, during the post-Soviet economic transitions, a class of economists and political economists working with international institutions may have ignored the political assumptions and likely political consequences of large-scale privatization

exercises. Unlike the critiques of policy or political irrelevance, this is a critique rooted in the power that social science may have to provide political actors with ideological cover in the form of intellectual authority.

These perspectives each have their merits, and there are also reasonable counterarguments to each. But a focus on what academic political science research “gets wrong” runs the risk of missing what other political scientists are “getting right.” One area that has received much recent attention is program evaluation and field experimental research through organizations such as IPA, J-PAL, and EGAP.³ These organizations leverage rigorous research designs to contribute to development and policy, and political scientists play a growing role in this line of research. They are also periodically subject to the second and third critiques along the lines described above.

In what remains of this essay, I address the wider community of more “traditional” comparative politics research. In much of the area-focused comparative politics research, academic research actually does focus on issues that are of contemporary practical and political importance. The debates and findings of political scientists are inputs into national political conversations, and sometimes even to the policy process itself. There is in fact a more interesting, perhaps politically fraught, question of under what conditions is it *appropriate* for foreign academics to be *as engaged as they are*.

I build this argument with reference to the comparative politics of Southeast Asia. I choose this region not just because it is the one region with which I happen to be familiar, but also because events in Southeast Asia occupied a particularly important

³ Innovations for Poverty Action (<http://www.poverty-action.org>), Abdul Jameel Latief Poverty Action Lab (<https://www.povertyactionlab.org>), and Experiments in Governance and Politics, and Evidence in Governance and Politics (<http://www.egap.org>).

place in U.S. politics itself, a result both of colonial ties between the United States and the Philippines and its long involvement in Vietnam. The reverse relationship, in which U.S. political science research has affected politics and policy in Southeast Asia during the war in Vietnam and after, is today mostly forgotten. Yet this serves to illustrate a very different perspective on engaged comparative politics than any of the three perspectives above would suggest. It also, as I will argue, highlights some of the ethical issues that such engaged scholarship raises that are particular to comparative politics as practiced by scholars who are neither citizens nor residents of the countries that they study.

The Politics in Area Studies

In the decades following the Second World War, the United States invested significant resources into area studies centers at U.S. universities. The motivation behind this was political: to develop expertise in the languages, cultures, histories, and most of all politics of what were then called “the developing areas.” There has been a deep fissure between “area studies” and “political science” for decades that need not concern us here (Szanton 2002). Suffice it to say that through the 1970s at least, the qualitative or case study tradition that predominated in much of comparative politics saw researchers heading to newly independent states to learn about their political systems.

Some of that work was idiographic in nature, but much more of it was self-consciously comparative in ambition and inspired by the general theoretical concerns of the day, such as modernization theory. But this work also mattered in the countries under study. One early example was the so-called “Feith-Benda debate” in Indonesian studies (Emmerson 2014), on how to interpret the incipient failure of Indonesia’s liberal democratic period by the late 1950s. This debate pitted Herbert Feith, who located the

failure of constitutional democracy in victory of one set of politicians over another (Feith 1962), against Harry Benda, a historian who saw the entire architecture of Indonesia's liberal democracy as bound to fail (Benda 1982). Importantly, this was not just an academic debate, for it had implications for what shape Indonesian politics ought take at the time when Indonesian politics was in a state of perpetual conflict. Was it legitimate to insist on a fundamentally Western institutional model for Indonesia, or was this inappropriate for a diverse new nation that had seen a decade of war after centuries of colonial exploitation, with its own historically-rooted cultural and political traditions? Not surprisingly, the answer to this question served some factions and interests in Indonesian politics more than others.

Not a decade later, U.S. political scientists found themselves implicated in two major debates about political conflict. Following Indonesia's abortive coup of 1965 and the subsequent slaughter and annihilation of Indonesia's communists, Benedict Anderson and Ruth McVey penned an analysis that tried to make sense of the events (Anderson and McVey 1971). Known today among Indonesians and Indonesianists as "the Cornell Paper," it put the blame squarely on the military faction that ultimately prevailed. The allegation directly contradicted the standard narrative promulgated by the authoritarian New Order regime, which held that the Communist Party of Indonesia had attempted to launch a coup to which the rightist military was forced to respond. The Cornell Paper was so politically explosive that Anderson was banned from Indonesia until the fall of the New Order in 1998 (Anderson 2016: 89).

Meanwhile, their senior colleagues George Kahin and John W. Lewis were central figures in the anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States. *The United States*

in Vietnam (Kahin and Lewis 1967) made the strong case that “Vietnam is a single nation, not two,” an argument that undermined the legitimacy of any war in support of the independence of the Republic of Vietnam or in defense of its regime. Their intended audience was the U.S. public, but this argument had momentous consequences for Vietnamese politics *because* it shaped the conversation in the U.S *about* what to do in Vietnam. Recently, a revisionist historical perspective on “the Vietnamese people” has questioned that core premise of Kahin and Lewis’s argument (Taylor 2013: 623-5).

Surveys and Politics

The days of Anderson, Kahin, and others participating in national political discussions from abroad are long past. The most visible way that political science contributes to Southeast Asian politics today is through that mainstay of electioneering: the public opinion survey.

Public opinion surveys are relatively new in Southeast Asia, a consequence of the region’s limited experience with democratic political competition (which makes public opinion polling politically risky in nondemocratic settings) and infrastructural challenges (which has made it historically difficult to conduct nationally-representative public opinion surveys). To my knowledge, the first modern-style public opinion survey research firm in Southeast Asia was the Philippines’ Robot Statistics, which conducted a presidential poll in 1953 (Holmes 2017). The country that has seen the most rapid growth in public opinion polling is Indonesia, which since democratization in 1999 has seen a flowering of survey firms such as the Indonesian Survey Institute, Indobarometer, and Surveymeter, to name just a few.⁴ Many of these firms’ principals are U.S.-trained

⁴ See <http://www.lsi.or.id>, <http://www.indobarometer.com/>, and <http://surveymeter.org>.

political scientists. Survey research in Thailand is slightly more constrained at present due to restrictions on politically sensitive questions, but firms such as SuperPoll provide feedback to politicians and the public about parties and policies.⁵ Public opinion polling is also well established in competitive authoritarian Malaysia, where the Merdeka Center for Public Opinion Research⁶ regularly surveys Malaysians about government performance and satisfaction with the incumbent Barisan Nasional coalition. Large-scale surveys about Singaporean politics are rare, although the Singaporean government does fund survey research in other parts of Southeast Asia in order to learn about political attitudes in neighboring countries.

In Vietnam, where single-party authoritarian rule restricts both the feasibility and utility of classic public opinion polling, a different kind of survey plays an equally important role in contemporary Vietnamese politics. Vietnam's Provincial Competitiveness Index,⁷ conducted by the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry under the direction of Duke political economist Edmund Malesky, and funded by USAID, it relies on surveys not of voters, but of businesses. The PCI is today one of the most important tools that Vietnamese provincial leaders use to measure their performance.

Public opinion surveys are practically and politically relevant because in Southeast Asia's electoral regimes, public opinion matters to politicians and policymakers. This is the same reason why they matter to comparative politics researchers. One example that illustrates this overlap between academic and political interests is the survey that I conducted with Bill Liddle and Saiful Mujani on Islamist

⁵ See www.superpollthailand.net/.

⁶ See <http://www.merdeka.org>.

⁷ See <http://eng.pcivietnam.org> and Malesky (2017).

party platforms and vote choice (Pepinsky et al. 2012). Mujani, then Executive Director of the Indonesian Survey Institute, held a workshop in Jakarta in 2009 to present our findings. In attendance were representatives from at least one of Indonesia's Islamist parties, one of whom carefully took note of our findings and volunteered his thoughts (see Pepinsky et al. forthcoming: for a discussion).

Although politicians may use public opinion polls to learn about constituents' preferences and select their preferred policies, thereby facilitating accountability and representation, there are good reason to criticize modern public opinion polling as it is currently used (Jacobs and Shapiro 2005). For example, Indonesian elections recently have seen the growth of low-quality and candidate-sponsored polls, which may undermine trust in government and/or the media (Mietzner 2009). Nonetheless, research done in the comparative politics of Southeast Asia using public opinion undoubtedly shapes the practices of elections and democracy across the region.

New Media and Comparative Southeast Asian Politics

A third way that comparative politics research reaches Southeast Asian audiences is through new media platforms such as blogs, social media, and other online platforms. Much as blogs like the Monkey Cage have sought to share political science research with the broader reading public in the United States, sites such as *New Mandala*, run out of the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University, share research, field reports, and commentary by researchers—including some political scientists—who study Southeast Asia.⁸ Although nearly all posts are in English, which is a minority language in every Southeast Asian country but Singapore, they attract

⁸ See <http://www.newmandala.org>.

substantial interest from readers within the region. This is especially true when posts cover hot-button issues such as the Thai monarchy, or in the run-up to national elections in countries like Malaysia and Myanmar.

These blog posts can have real effects, both on what is covered and on researchers who write. In 2013, *New Mandala*'s coverage of Malaysia's general elections generated approximately 120,000 hits on election night, the vast majority from Malaysia. Coverage of Indonesia's presidential election in 2014 generated roughly half a million hits, again mostly from Indonesia. Several Thailand specialists who have written critical essays for *New Mandala* can no longer travel there, and there are instances in which researchers who have written critical pieces on other countries have had experiences ranging from lost interviews to harassment.⁹ The proof of the “real-world impact” that such writing can have is that Southeast Asian governments respond to it, and sometimes attempt to police its consumption by their own citizens.

Of course, the impact of such new media engagement by political scientists is bound to be limited. And it is Southeast Asians themselves, not foreign researchers, whose online engagement is bound to have the greatest effect on Southeast Asian politics. But the region's particular fraught relationship with the print media, relatively high literacy rates, extensive internet penetration, and vibrant online cultures mean that this is yet another way in which the academic work done in comparative Southeast Asian politics enters the public discussion in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, for example, restrictions on print and broadcast media mean that online media are by far the most open and critical sources of news. In Thailand, by contrast, enforces draconian restrictions on both offline and online commentary critical of the monarchy, meaning that authors such

⁹ Personal communication with Liam Gammon, current editor of *New Mandala*.

as the anonymous “Bangkok Pundit”—who has collaborated on posts with political scientist Allen Hicken—occupy an especially important place in Thai politics.¹⁰

Professional Challenges and Ethical Dilemmas

The examples of politically engaged and policy relevant comparative politics described above paint a very different picture of academic research than the one that dominates much of the contemporary discussion of engaged scholarship in political science. These examples above describe a kind of political science research that is relevant without making a big deal about it. The general pattern for this kind of contemporary researcher is one in which scholarship coexists with public or political engagement: a publication in the *American Political Science Review* or *World Politics* probably is not going to be read by any politician, bureaucrat, or activist, but the research that generated that publication feeds into the political process all the same. Researchers draw lessons and implications from their academic research and share them in shorter and more accessible formats. Even if most of this feeds into debates that are accessible only to an English-speaking readership, some of this eventually makes its way into local vernaculars as well.

This model works because there is a coincidence between the subjects that comparativists working in Southeast Asia find intellectually interesting—democratization, populism, clientelism, corruption, oligarchy, conflict, identity, decentralization, accountability, dissent, mobilization—and the issues that animate Southeast Asian politics. There are of course aspects of contemporary research that hew more closely to the “basic research” style of political science, and that accordingly are

¹⁰ See <http://www.thaidatapoints.com/home>.

not directly relevant for contemporary politics or policy. Nevertheless, the state of affairs in the study of Southeast Asia does not much match any of the three critical perspectives that I identified at the beginning of this essay: scholarship that is uninterested, irrelevant, or oblivious.

There are challenges and dilemmas that remain. The most obvious challenge is the inclusiveness of scholarship on Southeast Asian politics. Most U.S.-based researchers will admit frustration with the difficulty of attracting Southeast Asian students to the United States. One problem is distance, cost, and commitment: Australia, for example, offers a much more affordable and convenient place to pursue an advanced degree, with still a more welcoming environment for area specialists. Other issues include the importance of placement statistics for departmental prestige (Southeast Asian students who return to Southeast Asia are “not a good bet”), English language skills, and the difficulty of pursuing an academic career in a country where even a full-time academic salary is insufficient to maintain a high standard of living. That said, in countries like Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, local, U.S.-trained political scientists have built local polling industries, and they are in turn seeding a next generation of local scholars who make a career doing political science.

The ethical dilemmas are more interesting. One such challenge lies in working in countries whose governments one finds objectionable: what happens when research can be used by governments to better repress their citizens, or to more effectively circumvent popular calls for reform? A related concern is the role of the researcher as a political actor. Many foreign researchers who study Southeast Asia have more than a professional interest in the countries that they study. They have a personal interest in these countries’

politics, often experienced as a commitment to advocate for and where possible to work for what they consider to be good policy, good governance, political equality, civil liberties, and so forth. Networks of colleagues, collaborators, friends, and sometimes family who live in these countries sustain this commitment. But no matter how deep this commitment, these foreign researchers themselves are not citizens or residents of these countries. Despite what may be genuinely heartfelt political commitments and good intentions, foreign researchers are inevitably insulated from all of the consequences of the politics for which they advocate. It is thus reasonable to ask whether there are limits to which comparativists' research ought to affect the politics of the countries they study.

To draw out these points, consider the 2014 presidential election in Indonesia, which pitted the ex-son-in-law of former dictator Soeharto, Prabowo Subianto, against Jakarta governor Joko Widodo. Every political scientist and Indonesia specialist I know at least weakly preferred Jokowi to Prabowo, and most strongly preferred Jokowi. Nearly all of my Indonesian friends and colleagues supported Jokowi over Prabowo. Many of these friends and colleagues expressed fear for the survival of Indonesian democracy were Prabowo to be elected president. My personal commitments to democratic politics, and my knowledge of Prabowo's history as a disgraced former general with a stained human rights record (and hot temper, and an authoritarian personality...), led me to favor Jokowi as well. To understand Prabowo's campaign, I attended a mass rally in Jakarta just prior to the election. I then shared some notes on the experience on my personal blog and on social media, and garnered a moderate amount of attention and commentary from Indonesians as a result. I also wrote on how to interpret Indonesia's pre-election polls, drawing on my own work conducting surveys in Indonesia. The audience for these pieces

was Indonesia's English-literate population. I do not believe now, nor did I ever, that Jokowi was the ideal candidate, but in a head-to-head contest with Prabowo I consider the argument for Jokowi to be overwhelming.

I am certain that this work had no effect on any Indonesian's vote. Still, the ethical question may clarified by asking *what if my research had influenced the outcome of the Indonesian election and do foreign researchers know what is best for the people who live in the countries that they study?* I cannot help but find these questions disquieting, no matter how confident I am in my preference for Jokowi over Prabowo.

The history of Southeast Asia is replete with well-meaning foreigners—social scientists among them—whose ideas and actions have shaped Southeast Asian politics, with tragic consequences. This has been a theme in Vietnam retrospectives since *The Best and the Brightest*, and is brought home by the reluctance of so many foreign academics to accept the horror of the Khmer Rouge's reign in Cambodia (Beachler 2011: ch. 3).

Comparativists, accustomed to narratives of how narrow and irrelevant their research is, must be mindful of the influence they actually might have.

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