



# The Relevance Question: The Professionalization of Political Science and the Waxing and Waning of Security Studies

Michael C. Desch  
Director,  
Notre Dame International Security Center  
[National Academies – March 23, 2017]

# What Is the Relevance Question?

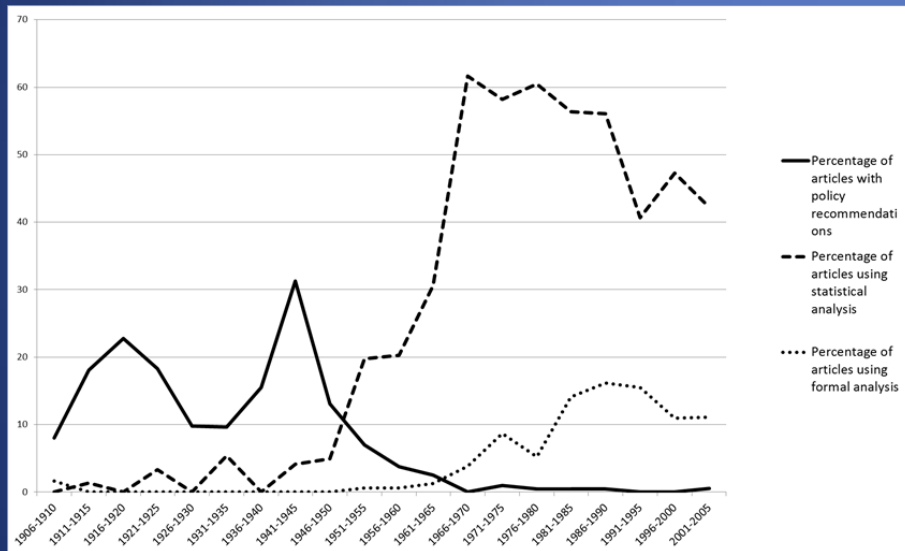
- International relations, like the social sciences in general, aspires to be both rigorous and relevant.
- The question is whether it can be?
  - When and under what conditions?
- What happens when the tensions between these two goals increase?
  - Which way are they resolved?

# What's the Evidence There is a Problem?

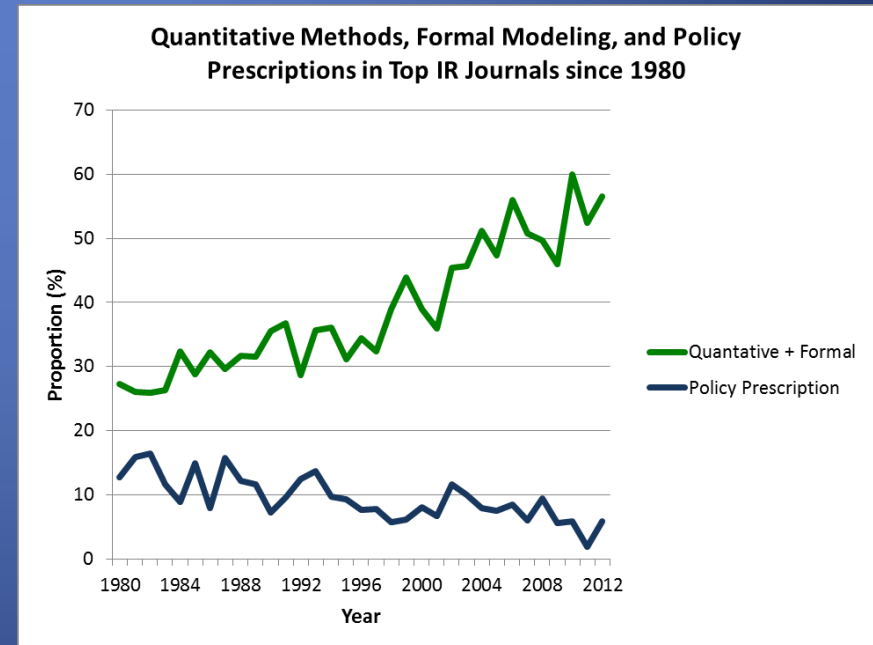
- “the relationship between the federal government and the social sciences generally and historically, while substantial in scope, has not been altogether harmonious.”
  - Advisory Committee on the Management of Behavioral Science Research in the Department of Defense, *Behavioral and Social Research in the Department of Defense: A Framework for Management* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 1971), 2.
- “the walls surrounding the ivory tower never seemed so high.”
  - Harvard Professor (and former high-level State Department, Defense Department, and intelligence community official) Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Scholars on the Sidelines,” *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2009, A15.

# Some Data:

## Decreasing Willingness of Scholars to Offer Policy Recommendations As Discipline/Field Become More “Scientific”

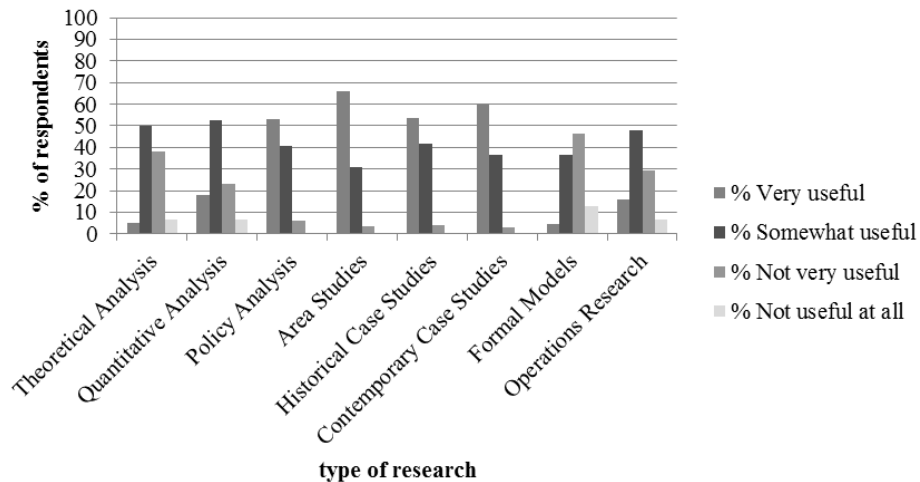


Percentage of Policy Relevant Articles in APSR from 1906-2006



# What Do Policymakers Want?

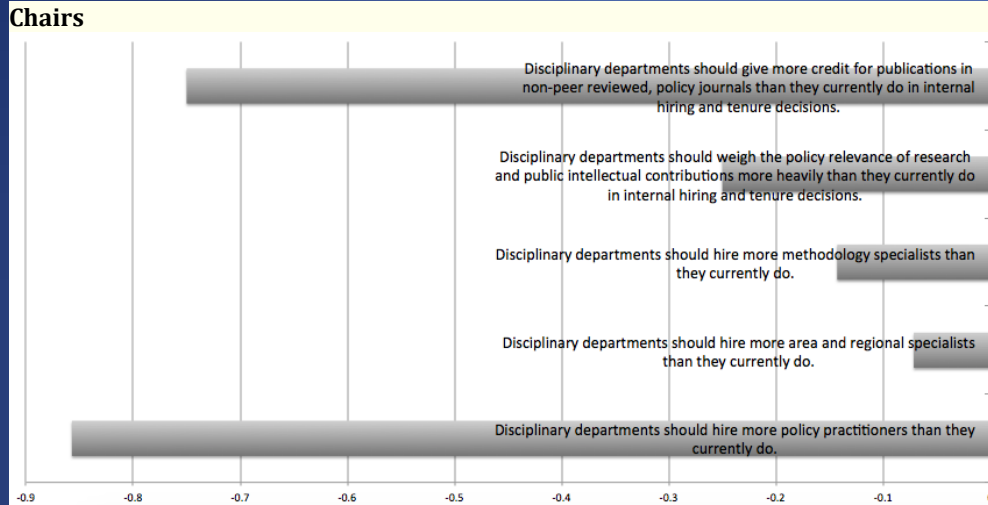
**Figure 2. How useful to policymakers are the following ways of conducting social science research? (q18a-18h)**



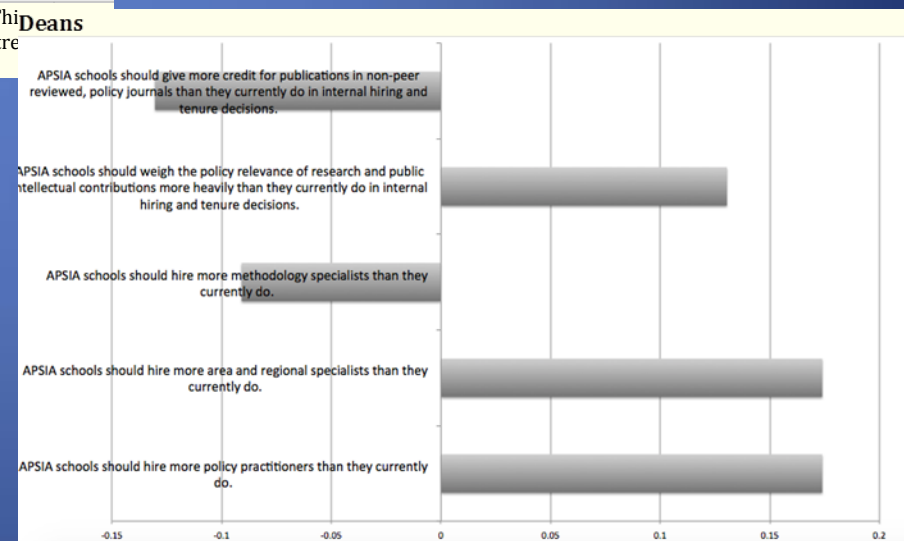
**Table 5. Scholar and Policymakers views on method utility for policymakers**

Method	TRIP Average Rank (q57)	Policymaker Average Rank (q18)	Correlation
Theoretical Analysis	1.51	1.54	0.96
Quantitative Analysis	1.80	1.81	
Policy Analysis	2.47	2.46	
Area Studies	2.52	2.63	
Historical Case Studies	2.07	2.49	
Contemporary Case Studies	2.44	2.56	
Formal Models	1.03	1.32	
Operations Research	.	1.73	

# The Different Perspectives of APSIA Deans and Top-50 POLS Chairs



Note: The respondents were asked to rate their agreement/disagreement in a five points scale. This shows that the average Chair disagreed with all the statements. The bars show the relative strength of disagreement, -2 being a strong disagreement and 0 being a neutral stance.



Note: As above, the bars show the average agreement/disagreement, this time for the Deans.

# Why Does the Relevance Question Remain Open?

- The relevance question is largely the result of disciplinary professionalization:
  - Source of tensions between rigor and relevance.
- How?
  - Division of labor produces narrower and narrower work:
    - Most policy questions broader.
  - Professionalization leads to greater sense of “corporateness:”
    - Privileges disciplinary > societal agendas.
  - “Science” increasingly defined as “method:”
    - Math/universal models = hallmark of science.
    - Limits range of questions to which it can be applied.
  - Basic research > applied work:
    - “Objectivity” requires focus on former.

# What Explains Its Waxing and Waning?

- I look at the place of the subfield of national security studies in the discipline of political science from WWI through Minerva as case studies.
- Two Key factors:
  - Disciplinary dynamics:
    - Tend toward disengagement with policy/applied research.
  - International security environment:
    - Wartime/high threat:
      - Demand from govt./society for academic expertise.
      - Greater willingness to balance rigor and relevance = supply from the academy.
    - Peacetime:
      - Disciplinary dynamics privilege basic research.



# Why Many Scholars Are Not Overly Concerned About These Trends

- A few believe science is all about the pursuit of “pure knowledge,” untainted by application:
  - It will never be relevant.
- Others think IR is too scientifically underdeveloped to expect relevance now:
  - That will change in the future.
- But most care about application and are optimistic:
  - Democratic Peace.
  - Trickle-down thesis.
  - Policymakers becoming more methodologically sophisticated.
  - New media offers alternative “transmission belt” for conveying applied implications of basic research.
  - Broader forms of relevance aside from policy recommendations for govt.

# Why I Am More Pessimistic

- Democratic Peace:
  - Not clear most “scientific” version influences policy.
  - When it has influenced policy (Iraq), it has been disastrous.
- Trickle-down thesis:
  - Assumed rather than proven.
  - DoD studies of natural sciences and weapons systems not encouraging (HINDSIGHT).
- Policymakers becoming more methodologically sophisticated:
  - Assumes they weren’t before.
  - Assumes that aspiring policymakers appreciate cutting-edge social science.
- New media offers alternative “transmission belt” for conveying applied implications of basic research:
  - Assumes what needs to be proven.
  - Signals to noise ratio problem.
- Broader forms of relevance aside from policy recommendations for govt.
  - Agree in one sense.
  - But on the other hand, whether directly or indirectly, influencing govt. policy is the ultimate criterion of policy relevance.

# Where Are We Today?

- Minerva = “mixed bag:”
  - Pro:
    - Renewed interest in govt. in “embracing egg heads and ideas,” as SECDEF Gates put it.
    - Many scholars have responded to the call since 9/11.
  - Con:
    - Minerva, especially NSF link, not popular in Congress:
      - Congress not enamored of funding basic research!
    - Minerva supported work more policy-relevant than normal IR (24% vs. 5%) but not as relevant as leading work published in subfield of security studies (*IS* = 38%).

# What Is to Be Done?

- $\neq$  vs. science or advanced social science methods.
- =
  - Recognize tensions/limits of professional social science.
  - Strike balance between rigor and relevance:
    - Problem>method-driven research agendas.
  - Rebuild “transmission belts:”
    - Not just think tanks and other third parties but scholars themselves.
  - $\Delta$  disciplinary incentives:
    - Broader input into scholarly evaluation.
    - Reward policy relevance.
  - Reframe ethical debate:
    - $\neq$  just about our obligations to science.
    - = our obligations to broader society as well.

# What NDISC And Other Groups Are Doing About This Issue

- Carnegie Corporation of New York has made major investment in portfolio of projects to “Bridge the Gap” between the Ivory Tower and the policy world:
  - BtG project at AU:
    - Train academics how to better navigate the in policy world.
  - William and Mary/TRIP project:
    - Collect data on scholars’ attitudes toward BtG and policy relevance.
- Other projects as well ...

# NDISC, I

- Pilot grant:
  - Survey of senior national security policymakers on when and how they use academic social science:
    - Published as “What Do Policymakers Want From Us? Results of a Survey of Current and Former Senior National Security Decision-makers,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (June 2014): 227-46. [with Paul C. Avey]

# NDISC, II

- First board-level grant:
  - Relevance Ranking of international relations program in top 50 POLS depts.:
    - Published results as “Rank Irrelevance: How Academia Lost Its Way,” Foreign Affairs.com, September 15, 2013 at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139925/peter-campbell-and-michael-c-desch/rank-irrelevance> [with Peter Campbell]
  - Convened three workshops:
    - Austin, TX: Scholars’ Summit, 2/27-3/1/13.
    - Washington, DC: Scholars and Policymakers [w/Stimson Center], 1/30-31/2014.
    - New York City: Higher Education Leaders/Philanthropic Community Summit, 5/13-14/15.
  - Theory of interrelationship between disciplinary dynamics and security environment:
    - Published “Technique Trumps Relevance: The Professionalization of Political Science and the Marginalization of Security Studies,” Perspectives on Politics Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 2015): 377-93.
    - Book coming soon ....

# NDISC, III

- Renewal grant projects:
  - Re-run policymaker survey trying to capture views of younger policymakers on social science:
    - TRIP and Virginia Tech.
- Add questions to TRIP 2017 to gauge “disincentives” to doing policy-relevant scholarship:
  - Also work with TRIP and BtG again on this.
- Broader relevance ranking looking at all sub-fields of top 50 POLS depts.
  - With Baylor University.
- Impact of blogs on policy relevance:
  - With Virginia Tech.
- APSIA Deans’ “Delphi Survey:”
  - With MIT and TRIP.