

On Chickens and Eggs: A Response to Joseph Nye

Written by Matthew Murray

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MATTHEW MURRAY, NOV 5 2010

In an impactful op-ed published in the Washington Post entitled “*Scholars on the Sidelines*”, the distinguished Dr. Joseph Nye critiqued the academic political science community for not adequately participating in contemporary debate on political policy. Nye notes the lack of political scientists in advisory roles compared to economists and lawyers within the Obama administration as one example of this trend. Nye notes the lack of policy experience for many top academics in the field of International Relations and lays the responsibility for this shift in the prominence of academics in government squarely on the academic establishment.

Nye notes how the priorities of an academic career often contradict with advocating for or critiquing government policies. This dynamic within political science has led to a decline in policy engagement as an academic practice. Nye states that the retreat into academic exercise rather than active engagement is damaging the level of policy discourse. He feels it is also creating a generation of students who are proficient at political science jargon rather than critical debate. Political Science has become more of a self-sustaining microcosm filled with fragmented strands of expertise that is growing less relevant to the practices of government. By removing themselves from commenting about policy in context, political scientists assume that their input will be made relevant through others directly involved in the processes of government and warns that these mediums can often have bias. The assumption of input filtering through to government from academia rather than being directly asserted weakens the level of discourse in policy-making.

Nye suggests that the academic establishment needs to reassess its priorities. Contemporary policy engagement is a worthwhile academic pursuit and should be valued as such. Though he is ultimately pessimistic about the present prospects for change, Nye suggests that a paradigm shift is needed to correct the shortcomings of the political science establishment including publication venues and universities. In doing so, academia can be made relevant again in the policy area.

There is much intuitive appeal to Nye’s critique. His prestigious position and achievements give his observations great authority. Academia clearly is not the pacesetter it once was in policy engagement in the United States or elsewhere in the world. Governments are relying more on professionals from other fields and third party policy analysts to advise the direction and aims of their administrations. The fragmentation of political research in splintered sub-genres has contributed in producing fewer academic voices making political claims and policy suggestions. The structure of academic practices does have a profound effect on the research aims and output of academic professionals. The bias in these structures perpetuates standards and practices that academia should view critically rather than giving deontological reverence. Engagement with governmental policy debate is a valuable and intellectually challenging pursuit that ought to be valued as such by the structures of higher education.

Nye’s claim is that academic practices within the field of political study have led to the increasing disinterest in their input by government. He argues that this is in part from the growing irrelevancy to government of what academics within political science are producing through their research. Nye argues that it is also in part due to practices in the field rewarding academics for these pursuits instead of engaging with the policy debates that would be relevant to government. The conclusion Nye then implies is that the excess of theory, modeling and methodical practice is not just contributing to the conditions in government and the paradigm but that these are the cause.

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But if we are to accept Nye's critique in its entirety, we are asked to accept an uncomfortable position, that academics are to blame wholly for this turn in policy engagement. The question I want you, the reader, to consider is whether the alienation of academics from an advisory role in contemporary policy occurred due to Nye's observed shift into a focus on theory and method, or was this shift a response by the paradigm to alienating actions by various governmental administrations? The answer here does not appear to be as clear as Nye wishes us to believe. The retreat of academics from the advisory realm could be just that, a retreat from a hostile environment. It is plausible that the focus on theory and method came about because direct advocacy by academics was undervalued or rhetorically one-sided.

If academia can be accused of not embracing new and controversial ideas, surely the same criticism can be levied in equal degree against recent political administrations. One must question whether academics are responsible for the regression in dialogue or whether we are witnessing the heritage of an increasingly bilateral and unimaginative political discourse. Academics clearly play or are capable of playing a role in political discourse but academics are far from the only participants. Equal or greater roles are undertaken by political administrators, candidates, political parties, NGO's, the press, non-political science academics and the general public. Academics in political science are not capable of lifting this debate on their own if the other players are resistant to their input.

The well documented influences on political processes yield a public discourse that is concerned with playing the political game rather than questioning the rules of it. This frames the debate of political issues, including policy issues, within strict parameters. These parameters yield limited areas for debate and contribution, much in the same way Nye believes academic practice is massaging particular forms of scholarly work. If the answers to political debates are assumed, then it makes sense that the issues facing the present administration are perceived as primarily economic and legal rather than political. The approach to government and leadership by recent administrations can be cogently argued to be as equally self-sustaining as the academic practices Nye critiques. Importantly, this is an outcome not visited on academics by their profession but rather by administrations uninterested in questioning their own treatment of the issues at hand.

The production of theoretical and empirical research is directly relevant to policy decision-making even if these practices are not advisory in nature. After all, the determination of what is the correct course of action is a discussion rooted deep within the theory and philosophy of political thought. If it were not for the discussion of philosophic beliefs, there would be no motivational questions to spark debate when discussing policy. Engaging with this debate is clearly relevant to decisions of policy. However, these technical explanations can be hard to express concisely. One cannot explain a comprehensive account of justice in a sound byte. Practices of quantification through statistical modelling help determine the potential or actual outcomes of policy. Policy engagement does not exist without these aspects of political study, no matter who is undertaking them. They are inexorably part of the process of determining a policy track. Hence, the proliferation of theory and methods can never hurt the field of political study or policy interaction, only broaden it. These academic discussions are providing valuable pieces of the political debate as a whole. These forms of study intrinsically enhance the process of policy making even if the direct link between the research and policy is not expressly drawn.

These aspects of academic practice have a crucial role in the process of designing and implementing policy. Given this relationship between academia and the actions of government, if academics are not consulted, it cannot be wholly their fault. Discussions of theory and statistical studies do not attract votes, but they are vital for the study of politics. If administrations come to a point at which they actually question their motives and seek to define new arguments in political discourse, then direct academic participation will become relevant again.

The point here is not to undermine Nye's general observations but rather to illuminate that academia may not be the sole protagonist in this tragedy. The relationship between these aspects of study, policy decisions and sub-paradigms is a cyclical one. Philosophy and theory justify policy aims and implementation. Policy creates quantifiable results. These results can be measured in many ways which form their own level of theory and debate. These results cause us to reconsider our theory and policy. The cyclical nature of these attributes implies there is plenty of blame to go around. Academia was not solely responsible for creation the situation nor can be alone in attempting to fix it. Determining which condition came first, the academic chicken or the administrative egg is neither

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possible nor useful. The fact is that academics need to make their arguments accessible and governments need to acknowledge their relevance in determining how to proceed when conceptualizing policy. Until administrations become concerned with changing the level of discourse rather than simply out maneuvering their foes on the political chessboard, any changes in the practices of academic research will fall short of re-enfranchising academics into meaningful advisory roles.

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