Interview – Timothy S. Rich

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Timothy S. Rich is a Professor of Political Science at Western Kentucky University and Director of the International Public Opinion Lab (IPOL). His primary research focus is the domestic and international politics of East Asia, with broader interests in public opinion and electoral politics in the US, Latin America, and Africa. He has published over 70 peer-reviewed publications and over 200 news, policy and op-ed pieces. His work includes articles on South Korean opinions on refugees, Taiwanese perceptions on recognition, data showing few in Taiwan pay much attention to China, and South Korean opinions on North Korea.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates in your field?

There are many interesting debates, especially in terms of whether the US can defend Taiwan or how to engage North Korea, but what I find most interesting are the innovative ways to tackle research questions. The growing experimental research on public perceptions of foreign policy I think gives us great insight to the extent to which public support may be fragile. The growing research using automated content analysis opens up opportunities to see patterns in qualitative data that would have been nearly impossible to see just a few years ago. More broadly, I think the most interesting ideas and methods are interdisciplinary in nature.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

As a graduate student, I was stats-phobic and assumed quantitative work provided limited insight into real world problems. Over time, I became much more the methodological opportunist, seeing mixed approaches as a means to a more holistic understanding, in part as I saw more research that did this and as I saw area studies expertise meshing well with different methods. Similarly, going to conferences in graduate school quickly exposed me to approaches that just were not on my radar, especially interdisciplinary conference, and I slowly starting to see patterns across countries.

Over time, my broad theoretic lens has certainly shifted as well, where I was initially more inclined to see the world in a rational choice or institutional lens to accepting that such approaches may lead me to focus myopically on certain potential causes at the expense of others and similarly may lead to me to misidentify underlying causes. Along the same lines, I have found myself increasingly interested in the implications of state behavior and the actions of elites for ordinary people, in part due to the global refugee crisis. My interest in state behavior has also shifted, from a focus mostly of how major powers interact and shape the actions of smaller states, to a greater acknowledgement of the agency of middle and small powers.

Your research has focused extensively on East Asia. What is something you feel most people in International Relations get wrong about East Asia politics?

The biggest thing I think people get wrong is that we know so little about North Korea or that the regime is unpredictable or “irrational”. We have more information about the country than ever before, from their own documents (including English news), satellite images, and more. We know more about everyday life in North Korea than we may know about elite behavior, but even there it is not a black box. While North Korea’s bellicose rhetoric

may be unusual, we can see broad patterns as a means to restart negotiations or gain concessions. Similarly, North Korean missile tests and aggressive behavior often follows US-South Korea military drills. To a casual observer, they may think an action out of North Korea is new, when in reality many of the country's actions are repetitive.

It is also surprisingly common to think South Koreans and Taiwanese think about their neighbors more often than they do. Western media focuses primarily on these threats, but for South Korean and Taiwanese, other factors are far more important to their daily lives, for example rising costs and stagnant wages. That does not mean that Koreans and Taiwanese neither care about these threats nor dismiss them. Rather, these threats are not novel to them.

What incentives does a country have to recognize Taiwan?

This is a hard one. To maintain formal diplomatic recognition with Taiwan means to forego the opportunity for international assistance from China, to forego developing deeper economic relations (e.g., free trade agreements), and to risk China using this lack of recognition against states (e.g., blocking UN assistance to countries that do not recognize Taiwan). While some may say that what props up Taiwan's recognition is "checkbook diplomacy", the fact of the matter is China can match them. Now it is more about similarities with Taiwan (e.g., being a small, young democracy) or concerns about Chinese influence. The other issue of course is that unofficial relations with Taiwan allow countries to gain most of the benefits of diplomatic relations without the ire of China. Taiwan benefits more from unofficial recognition from countries like the US than the maintenance for formal relations from countries with limited economic and military capabilities.

How does China apply pressure to stop the recognition of Taiwan by the international community?

This can range from providing large aid and investment packages, ones that Taiwan cannot or will not match, to leaving countries out of regional efforts coordinated by China. For example, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) excludes countries recognizing Taiwan (now, just eSwatini). China has used its UN Security Council veto to prevent peacekeepers to those recognizing Taiwan as well. If not for these types of pressures, there would likely be many other small countries open to recognizing Taiwan. China has also taken advantage of weakening US-Central American relations under the Trump administration to expand aid and influence to the region, further eroding the number of formal diplomatic partners of Taiwan in a region that was once a stronghold for the country.

How do South Koreans tend to perceive refugees from North Korea? Why is this the case?

At first, so few North Koreans arrived that this was not an economic burden, but rather evidence of the supposed superiority of their political and economic system. That changed in the 1990s with North Korea's famine. Pre-COVID, over a thousand North Koreans arrived each year. Plus, South Korean law treats arrivals not as refugees. Once processed, they automatically become citizens. As more arrive however, the economic costs build up. Poorer South Koreans see the assistance packages to North Koreans as perhaps undeserved, while more broadly North Koreans struggle to integrate into South Korean society. This actually creates an even broader problem: if South Korea cannot effectively integrate thousands of arrivals, how will they be equipped to handle millions if the North Korean regime collapses and unification occurs under the South Korean leadership?

How do South Korean perceptions of North Korean refugees compare with perceptions of refugees from other states?

South Koreans tend to be sympathetic to North Koreans, as they are still as brethren, although this has declined over time, with younger generations more likely to see North Koreans as different from themselves. Even here, South Koreans are increasingly hesitant to welcome North Koreans, again likely due to the economic strain. Historically, South Korea has accepted very few refugees, much like Japan, with broad public backlash when Yemenis seeking refugee status arrived a few years ago on Jeju island. My own survey research generally shows preference for ethnic Korean immigration over other arrivals. As South Korea attracts additional permanent residents from abroad, this challenges the sense of the Korean nation as defined by ethnic lines.

You have collected and analyzed public opinion data extensively. What are the advantages and challenges to using this method?

The biggest disadvantage is that it can limit what you can study. There are several aspects of political science you cannot ask, especially if the goal is to understand the insight of elite behavior. The public may also be ill-informed or give what they believe are socially-acceptable answers. However, the public often surprises you. Surveys can allow you to see whether the conventional wisdom is wrong. Surveys can go beyond multiple choice questions too. I often ask open-ended questions and quickly realize how different groups, whether by age or gender or party identification, choose different words, even when concerned about the same basic topics. Survey data is also crucial in making cross-national comparisons. For example, there is a lot of research lately on the role of misinformation in the US, but this is also a problem in all democracies. My own research shows that where views of misinformation and especially the use of fact-checks has been polarized in the US, this is not quite the same in South Korea and Taiwan, which begs the question why. And I think survey work often leads to new questions. I assumed respondents with support A, and they support B overwhelmingly, so I have to ask myself what was I missing?

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Read beyond your main areas of interest. As scholars, we are expected to have a clearly defined research niche, but reading outside of this area will only make you a better scholar. Not only will it help in seeing similarities across countries or issues, connections others are unlikely to see, but will generate new research questions. For example, I found myself interested in microstates in graduate school and this made me think a lot more about how state size and population influences various behaviors, including diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. When I was first working on my dissertation about legislative election reforms in Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, I sought out other countries with similar reforms. In the process, I ended up thinking a lot more about the institutional challenges of places like Mexico and Lesotho, ultimately leading to several publications. I also became very interested in email scams a few years ago and their common association with Nigeria. This led me to think about not only about the logic of the scam, but the organization of scam networks, and even how word choice in such scam letters may influence perceptions. Reading broadly goes beyond geography as well. I found a lot of inspiration for survey projects and content analysis projects based on research that in some cases only tangentially related to political science. The point is new ideas come from areas outside of your comfort zone and you should not be afraid to explore those areas.