



Responsible Public Engagement Institute

Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
University of Denver

Sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York





UNIVERSITY of
DENVER
JOSEF KORBEL SCHOOL OF
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES



Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
University of Denver
Ana and John Sie International Complex, Denver, CO 80208
<https://www.du.edu/korbel/sie/>

Early career scholars face increasing pressure to engage with policy audiences and practitioners. Most graduate programs do not train scholars in either the mechanics of engagement or the ethical considerations engagement engenders, even though an overwhelming majority of IR scholars believe scholars onboard responsibility for the policies their engagement informs. With the support of the Carnegie Corporation, the Sié Center for International Security and Diplomacy has begun to construct curriculum around responsible public engagement.

This curriculum brings together the experiences of Sié Center affiliates and a coalition of deeply policy-engaged scholars at other institutions. It offers a set of exercises, lectures, and group discussions intended for advanced graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and other early career scholars. The curriculum was piloted at the Responsible Public Engagement Institute (RPEI) in May of 2021 and will move forward with various relevant partners in coming years.

Our goal is neither to be grand arbiters of ethical engagement or develop a “gold standard” professional code of ethics. Instead, our aim is to create a space for deeper reflection on the various challenges that arise when considering policy engagement at any stage of the research process. We hope that in doing so, we will better equip future scholars with tools for navigating this increasingly complicated domain.

Table of Contents

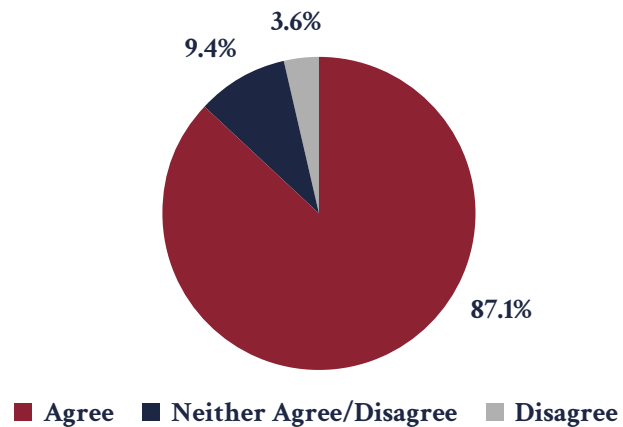
Introduction	4
Overview	5
Intended Audience	6
1. Unpacking the Black Box: The Policy Process and Opaque Institutions	7
Case Vignette: A Piece of the Puzzle: The Relative Importance and Unimportance of Academic Contributions to the Policy Process	9
2. Pro-Social Lying and Seduction	10
Case Vignette: Ignoble Lies? The Problem of Prosocial Lying in The Economics Profession	11
3. Cherry Picking, Asymmetric Expertise, and Uncertainty	13
Case Vignette: Beyond The Electoral College: MMP In The USA?	14
4. Navigating Between Inconvenient and Mistaken Facts Among Multiple Stakeholders	17
Case Vignette: When Data Closes Doors: Lessons for Sharing Unpopular Findings	18
5. Partnering with Civil Society Organizations for Policy Engagement	21
Case Vignette: Partnered Engagement: A New Form of Ethical Policy Engagement	22
6. Unintended Consequences: How Good Faith Policy Advising and Interventions can Lead to Bad Outcomes	25
Case Vignette: Confronting Biases in Policy-Engaged Research: The Case of NATO and Russia	26
7. Perceptions of Engagement in the IR Community	29
Case Vignette: Beyond IR's Ivory Tower	30

Introduction

Early career scholars face increasing pressure to engage with policy audiences and practitioners. Yet most graduate programs do not train scholars in either the mechanics of engagement or the ethical considerations that such engagement engenders, even though an overwhelming majority of IR scholars believe scholars onboard responsibility for the policies their engagement informs.

IR scholars believe policy engagement entails responsibility for outcomes:

In the event that their policy recommendations come to be adopted by policy makers, scholars bear at least partial responsibility for the impact of those policies in the real world



Source: Cullen S. Hendrix, Julia Macdonald, Ryan Powers, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney. 2021. *The Cult of the Relevant: Policy Engagement Beyond the Ivory Tower*. Working Paper.

The [Bridging the Gap Project](#) has been incredibly successful in helping scholars with the mechanics of engagement—how to frame research for policy audiences, whom to target when engaging, and which tools and venues of dissemination are appropriate—but to date there has been comparatively little emphasis placed on the thorny issues policy engagement entails. How can I engage responsibly if I don't know how my research and knowledge is being used (the black box problem)? How do I avoid coming to identify with practitioners so much that I alter my findings or move my ethical redlines to appeal to those practitioners (the problem of seduction)? What do I do when my good faith efforts to engage lead to bad real-world outcomes (the problem of unintended consequences)? These are just some of the many questions that may confront early career scholars. And in most cases, they will be confronting them without having received any structured mentorship or guidance about them.

With the support of the Carnegie Corporation, the Sié Center for International Security and Diplomacy embarked on the *Rigor, Relevance, and Responsibility* project, a two-year program of research, engagement, and curricular construction on responsible public engagement. Our mission: to develop knowledge around, and inform the practice of, responsible engagement so that future generations of academics can engage in the policy world with confidence and clarity.

This curriculum—which we will continue to expand and modify—is central to that mission. Developed over two years, the curriculum brings together the experiences of Sié Center affiliates and a coalition of deeply policy-engaged scholars at other institutions. It offers a set of exercises, lectures, and group discussions intended for advanced graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and other early career scholars. The curriculum was

piloted at the Responsible Public Engagement Institute (RPEI), which took place in the virtual space in May of 2021. Twenty-nine PhD students, postdoctoral researchers, and early-career faculty from across Asia, North America, Europe, and the Middle East were the test bed, and they contributed greatly to refining the content and identifying areas for future curricular development.

Throughout this process, we have not sought to position ourselves as the grand arbiters of ethical engagement, nor is the goal to develop a “gold standard” professional code of ethics. Equally important, this program is not a discussion of the ethics of research practices themselves—a subject dealt with by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at many research institutions throughout the country. Instead, by proposing this program, our aim is to start the conversation and create a space for deeper reflection on the various challenges that arise when considering policy engagement at any stage of the research process. We hope that, in doing so, we will better equip future scholars with tools for navigating this increasingly complicated domain.

Overview

The curriculum consists of seven structured lessons with lectures and activities designed to introduce early career scholars to various issues that arise in engaging with policymakers ¹:

1. Unpacking the Black Box: The Policy Process and Opaque Institutions
2. Pro-Social Lying and Seduction
3. Cherry Picking, Asymmetric Expertise, and Uncertainty
4. Navigating Between Inconvenient and Mistaken Facts Among Multiple Stakeholders
5. Partnering with Civil Society Organizations for Policy Engagement
6. Unintended Consequences: How Good Faith Policy Advising and Interventions can Lead to Bad Outcomes
7. Perceptions of Engagement in the IR Community

The curriculum can be delivered in a variety of ways: as an intensive, two- or three-day institute, via weekly or semi-weekly 90- to 120-minute sessions, or in self-guided format, with readings and lecture notes/slides digested by scholars independently.

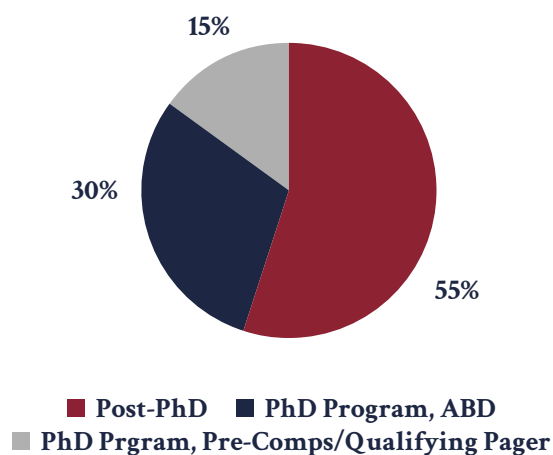
¹ Several of the lessons consist of two related but separable presentations, which could be broken out and addressed separately.

Intended Audience

We anticipate this curriculum will be most useful for those in the ABD to post-PhD stage of their careers: points at which their interests in public engagement are likely to be stoked and begin to be rewarded. A survey of the attendees at the RPEI confirms this:

At present, at what stage of one's graduate study and early career would his discussion be most helpful?

20 responses



1. Unpacking the Black Box: The Policy Process and Opaque Institutions

Session Overview:

When engaging with a policy-consequential actor, one often will not be able to observe directly or fully how one's insights are being used, or to what ends. This challenge is more extreme in some instances than in others. In the extreme, as with some interactions with members of the intelligence community, one may not even know the true identities of the individuals with whom one is interacting. Moreover, one may never know whether the information or insight one provided was acted upon or whether (and how) it was consequential for real-world outcomes. In these circumstances, how does one decide what kind of information or insight they are willing to share, and what are some of the ways that information will be used?

This session, designed by two veteran policymakers, will discuss some potential challenges that scholars may confront when engaging in the policy process, understanding at what point in the policy process are they intervening, and how their information might be used behind closed doors.

The format of this session is unique, entailing both a brief lecture and a simulation of a policy process around a particular question: should the U.S. government delegate authority from the President to the military commander to increase military action via drone strikes in Somalia to combat al-Shabaab?

Learning Objectives:

- Unpack the “black box” by developing an understanding of the policy process as implemented in the United States executive branch, including its various stages and how academic expertise is used throughout these stages.
- Understand why policymakers inject or request academic expertise at various stages in the process.
- Contextualize academic expertise as one input among many into complex, multi-tiered processes.

Click on icons below
to download the full
PPT Presentation or
a PDF with notes.



RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT INSTITUTE

Unpacking the Black Box: The Policy Process and Opaque Institutions Judd Devermont and Leanne Erdberg Steadman

Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
University of Denver

Sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York



The Simulation:

The exercise will look at a “Scowcroft” like NSC process where the decision under consideration by the President is: should the U.S. government delegate authority from the President to the military commander to increase military action (via drone strikes) in Somalia to combat al-Shabaab?

For the exercise, the participants will be divided into policymakers and academic experts. Each group will then be subdivided into two groups:

The policymakers:

1. Defense/Military policymakers
 - a. Goal/Objective: Secure approval for delegated authority for more strikes to ensure the threat from al-Shabaab is countered.
2. Diplomacy/Development State Department/USAID policymakers
 - a. Goal/Objective: Oppose the above decision; prefer to maintain Presidential approval where State is part of the decision and can inject other important political calculations into the threat analysis.

The academics/researchers:

1. Expertise: Military analysis on decapitating terrorist organizations
2. Expertise: politics, governance, state-building, fragility in the context of violent extremism organizations

NOTE: The structure of the exercise (intended for instructors’ eyes only) follows at the end of the document.¹

Suggested Readings:

For all:

1. Mark Mazzetti, Jeffrey Gettleman and Eric Schmitt. 2016. “In Somalia, U.S. Escalates a Shadow War.” *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/world/africa/obama-somalia-secret-war.html>.

For Policymakers:

1. Jon Finan and Rob Malley. 2018. “The Long Shadow of 9/11: How Counterterrorism Warps U.S. Foreign Policy.” *Foreign Affairs*.
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-06-14/long-shadow-911>.

For Military analysis researchers to brief:

1. Patrick B. Johnston. 2012. “The Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation in Combating Insurgencies.” *Belfer Center Policy Brief*.
<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/effectiveness-leadership-decapitation-combating-insurgencies>.

For Politics and Governance researchers to brief:

1. Eelco Kessels, Tracey Durner and Matthew Schwartz. 2016. “Violent Extremism and Instability in the Greater Horn of Africa: An Examination of Drivers and Responses.” *Global Center on Cooperative Security Brief*, pg. 29-34.
https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/GCCS_VIOLENT-EXTREMISM_low_3.pdf.

CASE VIGNETTE:

A Piece of the Puzzle: The Relative Importance and Unimportance of Academic Contributions to the Policy Process

By Leanne Erdberg Steadman and Judd Devermont

Policymaking is a complex system. It may seem linear and straightforward, but it hardly ever is. The process, even when it follows the tenets of the [Scowcroft model](#), is a vibrant, cacophonous ecosystem of input, interactions, ideation, and iteration. As such, academic research findings and policy-engaged scholarship exist in this dynamic system, but they are but one of many contributions to policymaking—let alone outcomes of the policies. Inside the system, it is difficult to ascertain such dependencies as X caused Y or Y caused Z. The concepts of multi-finality (the same path can lead to many different outcomes) and equifinality (one outcome can result from many different paths) are much more helpful in describing this system. And as such, academics should not overestimate the individual influence they have over policy outcomes. They are a part of the process, but their input is less like that of an architect and more like that of a contractor contributing a small piece to a building project.

While perhaps obvious, academic research can go a long way to shape the debate or can have no effect at all. Insights may be ignored, embraced, or instrumentalized. It is only one of many contributions, and its insights may be ignored, embraced, or instrumentalized. The problem is that scholars don't know – and may never know – how their work has been received by policymakers and whether it steered a policy decision in a good or bad direction. This opacity leaves academics shouldering more of the moral weight of policy decisions and outcomes than necessary.

For academics on the periphery of the policymaking process, there is information asymmetry, unknown players, and unknown decision points to navigate. For example, an academic briefing their findings to a policymaker might never know if that research is being used to interrogate assumptions or to reify already held positions. When we worked at the National Security Council under President Obama, we routinely asked academics to share their analysis on troubled spots, from Somalia to Nigeria, to check whether it challenged or supported forthcoming policy decision. In some cases, it was reassuring that our theory of the case was sound. In other examples, their analysis was tangential or irrelevant to the policy debate, and it was promptly forgotten. Of course, at times, the research contradicted our planned approach and prompted a rethink.

The researcher's dilemma is that they may be asked to comment on a specific aspect of a challenge, which could mean they only see one narrow part of a more comprehensive policy process. Similarly, an academic might engage heavily with one agency or department, but it remains unknown to them if that same research is seen differently or at all by other agencies.

Finally, the scholar is likely to be blind to where they are in the process. Depending on the decision, timing, and topic, an academic's input could have little impact because agencies' representatives have hardened positions and marching orders from their bosses. Unbeknownst to the scholar, they may be part of a box-checking exercise (i.e., consulted academics) to see how a decision might "sound" to specific interest groups and to deflect potential public criticisms. Or scholarly research could act as "just in time" information to deliver insights, address information gaps, and hasten a final decision. Because of all these pieces within the system, academics do not necessarily know all the potential ways their research will impact a policy decision.

With all these factors, actors, and dynamics, some academic researchers might be discouraged and want to disengage entirely from policy-relevant scholarship. That would be a mistake in our view. Just because you

can't see "inside the black box," it doesn't mean you should opt out. First, you should educate yourself on the process and be unafraid to ask probing questions about the policy state of play: where are we in the process? Some policymakers will be very transparent, and others will share just enough to continue the discussion.

Second, you should remember that policymakers ultimately bear the burdens and successes of their decisions. And with that knowledge, perhaps academics can better calibrate their own moral and ethical redlines for engagement. Because, despite all the unknowns, we can attest that scholars can enrich policies when they engage. They help unlock new insights, highlight critical missing pieces or new trends, and showcase authentic, local findings that may have never made it to top decisionmakers otherwise. Academics can be an integral piece of the puzzle, and their involvement has the potential to increase the likelihood of better policies.

2. Pro-Social Lying and Seduction

Session Overview:

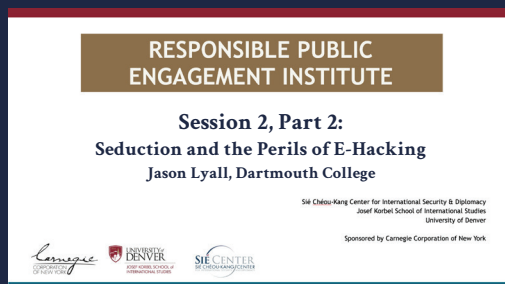
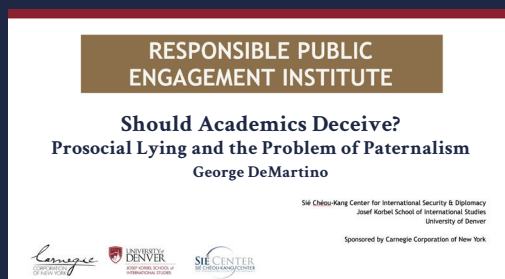
This session addresses two types of deception: deception in the service of policy formation (pro-social lying or “the dirty hands problem”) and self-deception in the form of the scholar being seduced by the actors with whom they are interacting. In the former case, the issues revolve around the professional ethics of misleading either policymakers or the public about likely consequences of decisions because the scholar believes it will lead to better real-world outcomes. In the latter case, scholars are “seduced” by the actors with whom they are engaging and come to identify with the goals and/or culture of the organization to the point that the academic compromises their objectivity or professional ethics – or both.

This session is designed to address these issues and help academics identify “bright lines” and commitment mechanisms to minimize the negative consequences of pro-social lying and seduction.

Learning Objectives:

- Understand the dangers of intentionally misleading one’s audience.
- Develop commitment mechanisms that provide “bright lines” for scholars to recognize when they are being seduced.

Click on icons next to each presentation to download the full PPT Presentation or a PDF with notes.



Suggested Readings:

1. George DeMartino. 2020. “Should Economists Deceive? Prosocial Lying, Paternalism, and the ‘Ben Bernanke Problem.’” *Political Economy Research Institute Working Paper*. <https://peri.umass.edu/publication/item/1368-should-economists-deceive-prosocial-lying-paternalism-and-the-ben-bernanke-problem>.
2. Jason Lyall. 2019. “Preregister Your Ethical Redlines.” *Working Paper*. <http://www.jasonlyall.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PreregisterYourEthics.pdf>.

Ignoble Lies? The Problem of Prosocial Lying In The Economics Profession

By George DeMartino

Imagine it's time for your yearly checkup at the family doctor. Sitting on the paper covered medical bench in a fluorescent room, you submit to the full array of tests. You say "ah," you squint at letters from across the room, you feel the cold stethoscope against your back, maybe you even get some blood drawn. After answering all of your doctor's questions, they look you in the eye, smile, and send you on your way with a clean bill of health! Feeling great, you go about your day. Perhaps you even take the stairs instead of the elevator because you're feeling invigorated and full of life. There is an implicit trust between doctor and patient, so why should you feel otherwise?

Let's say however, that your doctor actually lied to you – everything is not okay. Perhaps they lied for your own good; because they don't know what will happen to you or what to do about it; or perhaps they lied for monetary gain. But does the reason really matter? The inherent doctor-patient trust has been broken and we fervently and unequivocally condemn deceit of any kind in the medical field.

Why then, are we so cavalier about untruthfulness in economics?

Just as the world economy was about to fall off a cliff in 2007, [Ben Bernanke repeatedly assured and reassured the U.S. Congress and his world audience that all was well and under control](#). All was not well nor was it under control. Years later, Bernanke's deceit is plain to see, yet the same fervent condemnation that we would feel in any other field is strangely absent. In the field of economics, we inherently presume economists are deceiving us for our own good. Economists' lies are paternalistic or "prosocial"—intended to promote social betterment – not, of course, to line pockets. Economists sometimes face the ["dirty hands" dilemma](#), permitting the violation of one valued good, in this case truthfulness, to achieve another. This is the Ben Bernanke problem. When do we consider prosocial lying to be admissible? Perhaps it is warranted in crises when there are immediate risks and fleeting opportunities? Or perhaps it is okay when decision-makers must be dissuaded by any means possible from seductive but deeply harmful policy options? Maybe it's admissible in the case of defensive, deception-countering lying, in order to counter the damaging lies of others? Or maybe not.

By excusing these "admissible" forms of deception, economists' dirty hands are thus scrubbed clean and the dilemma is resolved. The central problem with allowing for, and consenting to, any untruthfulness is that it undermines essential trust between professionals of the field and the rest of us. Even in the pursuit of social betterment, deception undermines the authority of not only the deceiver, but of all experts in their field. Even small falsehoods can do deep damage to the profession and, in turn, to all who rely upon it. And yet, economists accept, and even normalize, the unfortunate reality that economists lie. From Anatole Kaletsky to former World Bank economist [Liaquat Ahamed](#) to [Stuart Hampshire](#), economists and philosophers alike rationalize economic misrepresentation as prosocial lying because their comments can have real world implications. They're lying *for us*! It's fine, see?

Our permissive attitude regarding deception has led the field of economics astray. In economics, unlike other critical professions, we have no discourse around when to be truthful, when to deceive, what forms deception may and may not take, and perhaps most critically, who would be authorized in any particular case to judge whether lying is or is not appropriate. Is it okay to exaggerate our expertise and the confidence we have in our findings so as to influence policymakers in the 'right' direction? Think of the tone of Paul Krugman's New York Times op-eds. Is he warranted in exaggerating the extent of his knowledge and the expertise of his profession since he is dueling with the devil on our behalf? If Bernanke and Krugman

are warranted in exaggerating their expertise, are they also allowed to deceive in other ways—such as by manufacturing data to sustain an argument they know to be correct? “No, that crosses a line!” you’re thinking... but what’s the difference between that kind of deception and the kinds we are apt to tolerate? Where do we draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable deception, and who should police the profession?

Economists do not tolerate manufacturing data. That practice crosses an arbitrary line and enters the realm of undoubtedly and ethically wrong. But why? What’s the principle that distinguishes this from what we consider permissible deception? The core problem is that there is no real ethical difference. Economists distinguish between Bernanke’s deception of the public and deception of economists. When Bernanke lies to the public, we economists are in on the joke—we see the wink. We appreciate his artistry in manipulating the markets. But were he to lie to us, we would be deeply offended and clamor for redress. How dare he? *We are not to be duped!* The guiding principle we’d hoped for between permissible and impermissible deception turns out to be dependent on nothing more than professional vanity.

Just as doctors must be honest, so too must we. Deception is not always wrong – there are extraordinary cases when we understand a doctor’s need to lie. I imagine doctors overstate their confidence to children before a particularly complicated surgery. Sometimes – very rarely – it may be the best option among only very bad options. Deception should be a last resort, not the rule. As we look to the future, the field of economics must cease its cavalier compliance with lying – even with perceived prosocial lying. No longer can we stand in front of the world, proclaiming and permitting misrepresentations and falsehoods without serious internal consideration. Philosopher Sissela Bok referred to deception as “a form of deliberate assault on human beings.” Trust and authority are important pillars to uphold, and we, as economists, must do better.

3. Cherry Picking, Asymmetric Expertise, and Uncertainty

Session Overview:

Policy-consequential actors have preferences over outcomes and often over specific strategies, priors about how the world works, and concerns over the optics of their actions and decisions. Given the pervasiveness of confirmation bias and motivated reasoning, it is reasonable to expect policy-consequential actors will be more naturally drawn to some pieces of evidence or insight than others, regardless of its intellectual or social scientific merits. At the same time, academics often have staked their professional careers and reputations on a particular position or conclusion that may be at odds with consensus—a consensus the policymaker may not know exists due to asymmetric information and expertise. Thus, the academic may act as a gatekeeper in ways that obfuscate or bias perceptions of, rather than illuminate, key issues.

Social scientific evidence is often highly contextual and, in some instances, inconclusive or ambiguous. Moreover, standard modes of academic discourse incentivize the accentuation of disagreement and the taking of clear, unambiguous positions on complex issues. This issue can become particularly acute when academics are part of larger teams of researchers and/or representing organizational perspectives that may differ from the academic's own perspective.

This session is designed to address strategies for dealing with cherry-picking of evidence and for minimizing the potential harm that comes with gatekeeping activities, as well as the issues of communicating ambiguity and complexity to policy audiences.

Learning Objectives:

- Address the ways information asymmetries – expertise, knowledge of how scholarly work will be used in the policy process – affect interactions between scholars and practitioners.
- Learn about both scholar- and policymaker-driven gatekeeping in policy engagement, as well as learn strategies for managing it.
- Learn about the challenges of informing policy discussions when scholarly evidence is mixed and/or highly ambiguous, and when scholars themselves have reputational stakes at play.

Click on icons next to each presentation to download the full PPT Presentation or a PDF with notes.



Suggested Readings:

1. Roger Pielke. 2015. "Five Modes of Scientific Engagement." Roger Pielke Jr.'s Blog. <http://rogerpielkejr.blogspot.com/2015/01/five-modes-of-science-engagement.html>.
2. Adam Elkus. 2016. "The Problem of Bridging the Gap." Medium. <https://medium.com/@Aelkus/the-problem-of-bridging-the-gap-5498d5f25581>. Note: Unfortunately, Mr. Elkus uses regrettable language in naming the hypothetical country discussed in the piece.
3. Astri Suhrke and Ingrid Samset. 2007. "What's in a Figure? Estimating Recurrence of a Civil War." *International Peacekeeping* 14 (2): 195-203.
4. Timothy Sisk. 2021. "Beyond the Electoral College: MMP in the USA?" Duck of Minerva. <https://www.duckofminerva.com/2021/03/beyond-the-electoral-college-mmp-in-the-usa.html>.
5. Alina Rocha Menocal. 2011. "Why Electoral System Matter: An Analysis of their Incentives and Effects on Key Areas of Governance." Overseas Development Institute. <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/7367.pdf>.
6. Paul Musgrave. 2021. "Political Science Has Its Own Lab Leaks." *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreign-policy.com/2021/07/03/political-science-dangerous-lab-leaks/>

CASE VIGNETTE:

Beyond The Electoral College: MMP In The USA?

By Timothy Sisk

The Trump-induced 2020 electoral crisis in the United States underscores that, in the world's most long-standing democracy, the "rules of the game" for presidential elections, the Electoral College, are irreparably obsolete. The diagnosis of the problem is simple: in two of the three most-recent electoral cycles, prior to 2020, the "winner" in fact failed to win in the popular vote. The presidency was won by a plurality of voters. The U.S., in so many ways, has tendencies toward a "[minoritarian](#)" winner-take-all democracy. If we know one thing in comparative politics, it is that minority- and bare-majority rule governments – especially in ethnically diverse societies – are not sustainable: such systems create broader [susceptibilities to political violence](#).

Observers including the [Editorial Board](#) of *The Washington Post* and the [OSCE](#) (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) observer mission to the 2020 U.S. elections have called for the U.S. to move beyond the Electoral College. Even some from the Republican party, which has ostensibly benefited from the disproportional effects of the Electoral College, have [argued](#) it should be jettisoned. The national move toward rank-choice voting is a step in the right direction in efforts to induce moderate campaigning in a polarized society. But ranked-choice voting is at best a baby step, as the systems adopted in Maine, Alaska, and New York City for example, ultimately still function as winner-take-all, or simple-majority rule.

Setting aside the question of how [to reform](#) an ossified electoral system, reformers must contend with an equally daunting question: What is the best electoral system to replace it?

While a good question, scholars of comparative politics should tread lightly in answering it because, in sum, there is no “best” electoral system. Thus, academics with expertise on arguably some of the most critical questions for sustainable democracy and sustainable peace face a common dilemma when engaging at the research-to-policy frontier: discussing policy alternatives in situations where evidence hints that there is no single right answer and that evidence is either ambiguous or highly context-specific, or unique.

All [electoral systems involve trade-offs](#) and prioritization of one or more democratic value, such as representation, accountability, fairness, stable coalitions or inclusion. Maximizing one, such as inclusivity, may involve trade-offs with others, possibly accountability; this has been one of the trade-offs in enhancing women’s participation in parliaments around the world, as a recent [report](#) and analysis by UN Women and the Interparliamentary Union finds.

To replace the Electoral College, then, we should start by identifying the values that need to be enhanced or prioritized in our new system. Personally, I see two that seem critical at this juncture in the United States. The first responds to the most distorting effects of the Electoral College: the need for proportionality. In a rapidly evolving, multiethnic society, inclusion of a wide range of identities and interests proportionate to the size in the population seems like a good principle on which to ground elections, which are about “representation.” Second, given the long history of the United States, retention of a territorialized or district-based system (that is, the 50 States, or more) seems a necessary principle to retain.

While there may not be a versatile system that would excel in all contexts, in my view, there is a plausibly “best” system for a post-Electoral College U.S.: a mixed-member plurality (MMP) system. In MMP systems, each voter gets two votes: one to decide the [representative](#) for their single-seat [constituency](#), and one for a political party. This system combines the positive attributes of majoritarian systems, such as candidate identifiability (the voter knows who they are voting for) with enhanced proportionality and inclusiveness, as it is much less punishing to small parties. This system is used in Germany, New Zealand, and, as of 2019, South Korea, among other countries.

But while the case for MMP is persuasively “best” [in the scholarly literature](#), and at times in the [popular press](#), unfortunately... no, it can’t be said to “be best.” Why the tepid claims from otherwise confident sounding scholars? There are three reasons why an ostensibly responsibly engaged scholar should be cautious when claiming to know what’s best (so take my previous statement about MMP as the best with a grain of salt).

First, much of our understanding about the intricacies of how electoral systems operate is highly contextual, with “what works best” recommendations contingent on context-specific knowledge about things like demographics, historical narratives, economic inequality, or the spatial distribution of identity groups. “All politics is local,” indeed, a phrase former U.S. House Speaker Tip O’Neill coined and made famous. In the U.S. there is [inconclusive evidence](#) that diversification of local constituencies has led to support for anti-immigration candidates, for example, challenging some otherwise conventional wisdom in the literature.

Second, even rigorous research which looks at electoral systems in comparative perspectives with a mid-range sample of countries comes up with findings that are highly conditional, or, in terms one might expect

from a scholar: “It depends.” For example, while it appears proportional representation systems like MMP have helped tame populism in some European countries — keeping extremist parties represented, but out of power on the fringes — in countries like Hungary, Poland, and Italy, populist parties have won power nationally anyway. In Europe, the reality is more [complex](#).

Finally, there is a more important reason to be cautious, and humble, on the research to policy frontier when looking around for the “best electoral system” for the U.S.: deep uncertainty and counter-veiling evidence. While I’m persuaded MMP is best for the ailing U.S., at the same time I know there is deep uncertainty on two important assumptions in academic literature and popular debates. The first is that it is impossible to, a priori, pair a theory of how an electoral system “works” against a set of social, economic, and historical factors and be able to adequately anticipate whether a system would have moderating effects as predicted: Bassel Salloukh’s [analysis](#) of electoral reform in Lebanon bears this out. Second, policy changes always have both intended and unintended consequences. Absent the ability to perfectly foresee them, there are significant risks of [unanticipated consequences](#) and ambiguous or null confirmation of core claims about “what’s best.” Is it conceivable that MMP might make things worse for the ailing U.S. democracy? Sure.

Even though comparative politics research cannot yield a definitively best policy prescription for reviving democracy, I like MMP for the U.S.: Despite the uncertainty, “It’s my story and I’m sticking with it.” But it’s not the only possible story and, on such fundamental and critical issues of democracy and peace, scholars must be humble and cautious when proffering policy prescriptions.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is stealth issue advocacy, and why might it matter for your engagement with policy audiences?
2. Reflecting on the concept of “lab leaks,” what are some ways in which high-profile findings in international relations can be de-contextualized and result in policymakers drawing inaccurate inferences and policy proscriptions? How might these results be re-interpreted to help prevent this from occurring?
3. Do academics have a responsibility to convey consensus, convey their own opinions/beliefs, or do some combination of both? What are the pros and cons of acting as an “honest broker” in policy discussions?

4. Navigating Between Inconvenient and Mistaken Facts Among Multiple Stakeholders

Session Overview:

While researching questions for policy actors, scholars may uncover findings that upset said policy actors' assumptions or goals. In such circumstances, policy audiences may not want to hear the message their research delivers. When sharing unpopular findings, what obligations (if any) do scholars have when policymakers do not care to hear the message?

On the other hand, scholarly research rests on assumptions and specific empirical records that may not yield correct predictions. Doubling down on what we believe to be "the facts" can lead to problematic advice.

Managing these twin dilemmas is particularly fraught in the increasingly frequent situation where the policy audience involves multiple types of authorities—from companies to civil society organizations to governments. Research findings in these circumstances are not only more or less accurate, but they can also affect relations between stakeholders, making the collaboration between different policy actors more or less likely. How can research be presented in a way that engages actors' capacity to problem solve, rather than constraining action? This session will focus on how scholars might navigate the twin dilemmas surrounding inconvenient facts and scholarly consensus that might be wrong while managing multiple tenuous relationships.

Learning Objectives:

- Understand why policy actors may not be receptive to academic expertise when it conflicts with their organizational goals and/or priors.
- Address the assumptions underlying academic research and how it may fail to yield correct predictions about how things work in practice.
- Develop strategies for managing, or at least being cognizant of, these twin dilemmas and how they color policy actor-academic interactions.
- Develop strategies for sharing unpopular opinions.

Click on icons below to download the full PPT Presentation or a PDF with notes.



RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT INSTITUTE

Navigating Between Inconvenient and Mistaken Facts Among Multiple Stakeholders

Dr. Deborah Avant and Dr. Tricia Olsen

Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
University of Denver

Sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York



Suggested Readings:

1. Deborah Avant. 2016. "People (Including Me) Used to Think that the Private Military Industry Couldn't Govern Itself. We Were Wrong." *Washington Post's Monkey Cage*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/04/12/people-including-me-used-to-think-that-the-private-military-industry-couldnt-govern-itself-we-were-wrong/>.
2. Tricia Olsen. 2021. "When Data Closes Doors: Lessons for Sharing Unpopular Findings." *Duck of Minerva*. <https://www.duckofminerva.com/2021/02/when-data-closes-doors-lessons-for-sharing-unpopular-findings.html>.
3. Cullen Hendrix. 2021. "The Importance of Being (Pragmatically) Earnest." *Duck of Minerva*. <https://www.duckofminerva.com/2021/02/the-importance-of-being-pragmatically-earnest.html>.

CASE VIGNETTE:

When Data Closes Doors: Lessons for Sharing Unpopular Findings

By Tricia Olsen

It was the ideal scenario for a policy-engaged scholar: high-level policymakers had reached out with a series of questions that could be answered empirically and with a need for new data. I sought and received funding to collect the data, which was in line with my expertise, existing scholarship, and research trajectory. I hired a team of amazing students to work with me to create the database. I encountered interesting, unforeseen findings and shared them with high-level policymakers. Seemingly ideal. Instead, I subsequently waded through a quagmire of challenges and mismatched expectations. Data collection efforts are important; informing policymakers and ensuring policies are effective and appropriate. You may be thinking *of course it's important and informs policymakers!* But what if our data collection yields unexpected results? How do we criticize the very institutions (and its stakeholders) we are working with when their good will is necessary to bring about better policy outcomes? When sharing unpopular or "[inconvenient](#)" findings, what obligations (if any) do scholars have when policymakers do not care to hear the message?

I'd like to share my lessons learned so that, perhaps, your story will end better than mine.

Lesson 1: Clarifying Your Role as a Scholar

When my conversations began with a contact at the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights, there was a lack of clarity as to the role of research in this particular context. The UN Working Group (UNWG) member assumed that our research would help achieve their policy goals, rather than potentially question the validity of those goals. This is sometimes the case, but the challenge emerges when it isn't.

A quick clarification was all I assumed was needed to assuage any misconception of my role. In retrospect however, this type of disconnect requires a more detailed conversation; a clear definition of roles, possible results, and future outcomes—while also revisiting the topic periodically. This first recommendation is crucial as it sets the stage for your partnership. What is your role as a scholar and what is your role within your partnership? Can these two roles coexist?

Lesson 2: Recognizing Misaligned Incentives

While we had numerous conversations about filling the data gap and the powerful role that data could play in policymaking, the findings I had to share did not fit what the UNWG wanted or were willing to hear. In psychological research “motivated inference” describes a scenario in which people have strong motivations or incentives, and thus they are very selective in the sort of evidence they absorb or internalize. We’ve all been there: once we’ve decided, we only want to hear information that supports that decision. [Kunda explains it this way](#):

“The motivation to be accurate enhances use of those beliefs and strategies that are considered most appropriate, whereas the motivation to arrive at particular conclusions enhances use of those that are considered most likely to yield the desired conclusion” (p. 481).

I wanted to be accurate. The UNWG wanted to continue on their pathway, not assess whether it was the correct one. I was motivated to play a part in helping them better understand the nuances of the challenges of business and human rights through data. The UNWG was motivated to improve adoption of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The fact that scholars and policymakers contend with juxtaposed incentives isn’t inherently wrong; however, failing to acknowledge our mismatched incentives will lend all parties to dissatisfaction. There is an elephant in the room, and it is better to point it out than to potentially get trampled.

Lesson 3: Sharing Unpopular Research and Fostering Conversation in the Midst of Contention

Conversations leading up to these meetings focused on the dearth of systematically collected data on business and human rights and the UNWG’s commitment to understanding how evidence could inform their policy work. What I did not fully understand or appreciate is that, while this is what was said and felt, certain types of data and findings would simply not facilitate further action. After years of collecting data, I was very excited to present findings at a variety of UN-sponsored events. I shared that, in contrast to narratives about the “governance gap,” there is evidence that states are not necessarily, or always, weak. I shared that, while not ubiquitous, victims of corporate human rights abuse often work to access remedial mechanisms at a greater rate than many would have assumed. And, perhaps most controversial, the data I collected shows that, in the context of corporate human rights abuses, the state was either complicit in, or assisted in, the abuse of approximately 30 percent of all allegations.

The findings were (are!) intriguing and I was so deep in the data, I assumed others would think so, too. When it came time to share, I was so wrapped up in these findings, I expected they would spur greater inquiry and interest. At a minimum, I expected some type of engagement: perhaps thoughtful glances or some furious note taking in the audience. As I presented these findings, instead of pleasantly surprised and engaged faces, the room fell silent.

That was the end of that. I did not have the opportunity to share additional findings with the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights (though some of my work on access to remedy can be found on the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights [website](#)). And, what is worse, the findings and their possible influence were muted. While misaligned incentives likely explain this in some part, the UNWG also became quickly consumed with the debate over whether there should be a treaty on business and human rights.

If I had a redo button, I would frame unpopular findings as the beginning of a conversation. It would entail saying something as simple as *“I know what I’m telling you is unexpected and even unwanted, but how can we use this information as we move forward?”* There are countless conversations to be had in light of (and despite of) unpopular findings. Sparking conversation is a good outcome, much preferred to stopping discussion all together. On a more practical level, this is a case of missing the “meeting before the meeting.” While I had the opportunity to engage with my contact at the UNWG, I had not met, nor did I have a working relationship with, the other UNWG members. Were there an opportunity to socialize the findings with other UNWG members and learn more about the constraints they faced prior to my presentation, I imagine I would have been able to engage more deeply with the UNWG. Had I been more aware of this, perhaps I could have framed the findings in a way that empowered them to act on, rather than ignore, problematic findings.

To be clear, this account is not to denigrate or criticize the work of the UNWG or any others advocating for improved corporate behavior or victims’ access to remedy. It is simply an observation that, without clarifying the role of scholarship, recognizing misaligned incentives, and thinking through how to share unpopular findings, efforts will be spent defending one camp rather than understanding how to better coordinate and collaborate on existing efforts. John Dewey noted that today’s institutions are the residue of yesterday’s problems. If we academics cannot position our work to, at a minimum, be heard if not embraced, especially in complex policy areas like business and human rights, we might find that policymakers are simply adding to the residue.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you had to share unpopular findings? What findings of yours might be unpopular? To whom? Can you think of strategies that could be useful in addressing these challenges?
2. What kinds of assumptions or definitions go into the work you are doing that may limit your ability to see processes of change (or structures that might influence them)? How might one account for, and help others understand, these limitations?
3. What are the complexities in the governance processes with which your work engages? Are there strategies you have developed to account for the multi-faceted (and multi-interest) nature of large, complex governance initiatives?
4. What has been your experience with relationships in the policy world related to your research? What thoughts do you have for engaging in ways that enhance actors’ capacity to problem solve, rather than constraining action?
5. Who do you engage with in the policy world? How do you think strategy should change depending on the actors with whom scholars engage (i.e., government (or different levels of government), industry, civil society, international organization)?

5. Partnering with Civil-Society Organizations for Policy Engagement

Session Overview:

This session explores a relatively new and still infrequent form of policy engagement: “partnered engagement,” or collaboration between academics, local peacebuilders, and NGOs in the dissemination of research findings and policy implications. The lecture component focuses on the example of sharing with NGOs and government policymakers the successes and failures of strategies for the prevention of community-based atrocities.

The activity will move participants to consider questions about researcher positionality and roles, such as whether one chooses to either represent the researcher’s own work and findings or interpret the collaborator’s work. It will also coach participants to develop their own guidelines and practices to ensure ethical and equitable engagement, such as applying Immanuel Kant’s notion of a “categorical imperative.” This principle calls for valuing something or someone as an end in themselves, and not using them to achieve some other end. In this context, this principle can guard against the local actor being “used.” The activity is designed to apply for broader cases and situations than just the example case of NGOs and local activists.

Learning Objectives:

- Consider questions about researcher positionality, roles, and power dynamics.
- Coach participants to develop their own guidelines and practices to ensure ethical and equitable engagement, such as applying Immanuel Kant’s notion of a “categorical imperative.”

Click on icons below to download the full PPT Presentation or a PDF with notes.



**RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT INSTITUTE**

**Positionality and the Ethics of Partnered
Policy Engagement**

Oliver Kaplan

Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
University of Denver

Sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York



Suggested Readings:

1. Oliver Kaplan. 2015. "Taking it to the Streets: Engaged Research in Political Science."
https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2668046.
2. Eleanor Knott. 2019. "Beyond the Field: Ethics after Fieldwork in Politically Dynamic Contexts."
Perspectives on Politics 17 (1): 140-153.

CASE VIGNETTE:

Partnered Engagement: A New Form of Ethical Policy Engagement

By Oliver Kaplan

What happens when a research subject becomes a research and briefing partner? In 2017, I was contacted by the peacebuilding NGO [Peace Direct](#) to contribute to a policy report on community-based atrocities prevention ([Atrocity Prevention and Peace Building](#)). I invited a local peacebuilder I knew from Colombia to partner with me in the endeavor. We co-facilitated an online forum and drafted a [report chapter](#). We then shared our findings—plus her experiences and my research—with NGOs and policymakers in the U.S. Although I didn't realize it at the time, once I got involved with the Sié Center's [Responsible Engagement](#) program at the University of Denver and reflected on the experience, I came to refer to what we did as "partnered engagement."

This form of policy engagement entails collaboration between academics, local partners, and NGOs in the dissemination of research findings and policy implications. This approach differs from [traditional research-sharing processes](#), where local partners may contribute raw information for academic analyses but are left out of the policy engagement process—and thus whose views are filtered through the interpretations of the researchers. By contrast, the partnered approach directly includes these voices and perspectives. With collaboration and strategizing among partners, it is not simply giving separate, uncoordinated remarks side by side.

This approach has several practical advantages. It can provide more accurate and impactful information to policymakers because it is less of a game of "telephone"—where insights may be [lost in translation](#) via academic researchers. The local partner's presence is also a costly form of engagement that may attract greater policymaker attention, as the partner can convey more stories, specific examples, and nuances based on their experiences. For their part, the partners have greater control over how their views, insights, and lived experiences are communicated to policy audiences.

Our Partnered Process

My “partner” in the engagement was Cristina Serna, then-president of the [Peasant Workers Association of the Carare River of Colombia, or ATCC](#) by its initials in Spanish. The ATCC was founded in 1987 to gain autonomy from multiple threats by guerrilla (FARC and ELN), paramilitary, and state actors, and is one of Colombia’s earliest local [peace organizations](#).

Because I had visited Cristina’s community years earlier to [study their mediation processes](#), our new collaboration as co-authors was built on a solid foundation. Through Peace Direct’s 24-hour online “consultation” we gathered the perspectives of 90 peacebuilders, academics, and professionals from around the world. Per our chapter, forum participants reaffirmed the existence and value of both *formal and informal* local peace organizations. They also praised community-self-protection factors such as early warning, local mediation and reconciliation, and skilled local leaders (as Cristina remarked, “Communities must be vigilant and alert to new people and new commanders among armed actors”). Cristina then joined me in Washington, D.C., where we met for dinners and other meetings with U.S., U.N., and NGO policymakers sponsored by the [Stanley Center for Peace and Security](#).

The Pros... and Cons of Partnering

As I would come to find, partnered policy engagement promises various benefits for the different actors involved. These include new experiences and networking for civil society actors, successful brokering and advocacy roles for NGOs, more legitimate and unique perspectives and lessons available for policymakers, and broader dissemination of research findings for academics. It works toward the inclusion of partners to sustain research relationships so they are not simply built around information “extraction.”

Yet there are also potential costs, risks, and [challenges](#), especially for the civil society actors, the most obvious being diversion from their daily activities and responsibilities. In our experience, one unforeseen challenge stemmed from Cristina’s position as the leader of her community. Because of her responsibilities, Cristina had to [conciliate threats](#) against residents of her community *during the very days of the online consultation and was monitoring conditions back home while giving briefings in Washington, D.C.!* (The threats were likely from [neo-paramilitary criminal bands](#)—so-called BACRIM—that emerged in Colombia after the demobilization of the AUC paramilitaries in the mid-2000s). This limited her availability and attention, but protecting her community did seem slightly more urgent than academic analysis and forum moderation. She also had to incur the costs of time and effort to travel far from her home for the engagement activities. These costs and risks should be analyzed and accounted for when making requests on our partners’ so they are fairly compensated for their time and energy.

Positionality and Policy Engagement

Partnered engagement acquires its persuasive power precisely from the different positions held by the different participants. It therefore encourages greater reflection on [positionality](#)—recognizing one’s social position—than might normally occur during policy engagements. Civil society actors bring influence because of their direct experiences, while academics can contribute research-based evidence and assist with [interpreting, emphasizing, and explaining](#) key insights brought by the engagement partners. However, there can be different benefits and vulnerabilities for each participant. Positionalities should therefore be explicitly identified and managed before they are possibly leveraged for ethical policy impact.

I could not ignore the differing incentives and power imbalances between Cristina and myself, especially in a setting like Washington, D.C. She is an Afro-Colombian woman with leadership skills from a small rural community, but she had language limitations and was on her first international trip. By contrast, I am a White man and was in a familiar country, city, setting, and language and had the benefit of the (modest) prestige and access from holding a PhD (plus a modicum of credibility from past field experience). Yet Cristina’s unique real-life experience plus my academic position proved a powerful combination to communicate policy implications in a structured, heartfelt, and ground-truthed way.

Managing positionality begins with explicitly [recognizing and assessing positions](#) and what they imply for how partners might uniquely interact with policymakers. This entails articulating what characteristics, access, advantages, and limitations each individual has. These can vary based on each person's professional and life experiences, or even relative to one type of policy audience versus another.

The Future of Partnered Engagement

Partnered policy engagement applies to a broader set of engagement scenarios beyond peacebuilding. One example is the possibility of conducting joint presentations of research findings by academics and bureaucrats (or academics and activists) to higher-level policymakers. In their book, [Eli Berman and co-authors](#) report instances of academics partnering with subordinate military officials to brief research findings to higher-ranking commanders. One nimble option for additional partnered engagement in the post-Coronavirus reality is using online forums—like Peace Direct's—since they can bring new voices, including ones that may not speak in the lingua franca, to the conversation without the risks and costs of travel.

Future analyses of the partnered engagement modality could compare its impact relative to traditional engagement formats (e.g., briefings by scholars alone). They could check whether the engagements go beyond simply educating policymakers to directly contribute to shifts in decisions or policies, either immediately or down the road. Although partnered engagement is not without risks, with sufficient planning, reflexivity, and support the risks can be managed to produce valuable experiences for all.

6. Unintended Consequences: How Good Faith Policy Advising and Interventions can Lead to Bad Outcomes

Session Overview:

This session examines two episodes of “unintended consequences.” The first is the failure of NATO to consistently ensure democratic governance among key new member states admitted since 1999. The second concerns the protracted, and along many dimensions destructive, consequences of the “forever wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq. In both cases, policymakers drew on incomplete evidence and in-apt historical analogies to champion particular policy positions: in these cases, NATO enlargement to post-communist Europe and military intervention in two deeply complex political contexts. Neither policy approach elicited its intended effect. We start from the presumption that scholarly and media interventions could have done more to alert policymakers to the perils of inferring too much or too selectively from the past as they speculated about the likely consequences of these actions in the future. While the readings by both Porch and Epstein offer some reflections on what researchers could have improved in their analyses, the exercise here is intended for participants to consider these two cases in terms of how researchers can avoid enabling ill-conceived policy.

Learning Objectives:

- Discuss the imperatives of offering advice when the future is largely unknowable.
- Think critically about one’s past predictions/recommendations and why they might have failed/been unhelpful.
- Devise frameworks to avoid enabling bad policies.

Click on icons below
to download the full
PPT Presentation or
a PDF with notes.



**RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT INSTITUTE**

**Unintended Consequences: How Good Faith Policy
Advising and Interventions Can Lead to Bad Outcomes**

Naazneen Barma & Rachel Epstein

Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
University of Denver

Sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York



Suggested Readings:

1. Rachel Epstein. 2021. "Confronting Biases in Policy-Engaged Research: The Case of NATO and Russia." *Duck of Minerva*. <https://www.duckofminerva.com/2021/03/confronting-biases-in-policy-engaged-research-the-case-of-nato-and-russia.html>.
2. Douglas Porch. 2014. *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*. "Vietnam with a Happy Ending: Iraq and 'The Surge'", pp. 289-317.
3. Editors of the New Republic. 2004. "We Were Wrong?" *New Republic*. <https://newrepublic.com/article/67651/were-we-wrong>.
4. Jonathan Chait. 2013. "Iraq: What I Got Wrong, and What I Still Believe." *New York Magazine Intelligencer*. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2013/03/iraq-what-i-got-wrong-and-what-i-still-believe.html>.

CASE VIGNETTE:

Confronting Biases in Policy-Engaged Research: The Case of NATO And Russia

By Rachel Epstein

As early as middle school, we are teaching young minds to think critically and notice bias when it inevitably arises in news and media. Yet as academics, there is an illusion that we are free from bias and conflicts of interests that permeate all other parts of the world. To perpetuate this illusion only hinders policy engagement and deepens the divide between academics and practitioners. PhD training addresses part of this problem pretty effectively—by teaching us to consider alternative explanations in depth, to articulate the limits of any given study, and to avoid making sweeping statements about future developments that are intrinsically unknowable.

However, considering a recent review of literature on NATO enlargement, I ponder whether there is a critical strategy to be added to the discourse. Antithetical to what we are taught at the advanced level—to strive for objectivity—academics should openly acknowledge political commitments where they exist, because of course they will exist. These political commitments can lead us to become "[stealth issue advocates](#)," in the words of Roger Pielke, where social scientists claim to be arguing from expertise but are in fact arguing from a political position. And we may only be dimly aware of doing this; the first victim of the deception may be the researchers themselves, in terms of not recognizing their own biases.

This is not to suggest that researchers fail in general to approach their topics with an open mind or that our political commitments cannot change because of our research—ideally, they would. But in the area of NATO enlargement's hypothesized effects on the Russian regime's conduct in recent decades, there is evidence that,

in striving for objectivity, scholars actually just hide their biases rather than incorporating them explicitly into the debate, which has in turn undermined the quality of discourse. NATO enlargement is a particularly good case through which to examine this issue because, although the biases are relatively subtle, they have had undeniable influence on the conclusions scholars draw and the stridency of their claims.

The early debate about NATO enlargement's likely effects on Russia generally had various contours. Critics of enlargement to East Central Europe in the 1990s, such as [Michael Mandelbaum](#) and [George Kennan](#), argued that it would incite Russian nationalism, elevate that country's sense of humiliation and defeat, and lead to the dramatic worsening of Russia-Western relations. Other skeptics downplayed Russia's objections or potential capacities, finding fault with the policy instead on the basis of its [limited utility and high cost](#). Meanwhile, supporters of enlargement, including yours truly, speculated that Russian domestic politics would take their own course regardless of NATO actions or concluded that [NATO enlargement would be a productive](#) hedge if Russian revanchism resurfaced and/or a useful tool for stability, even if it didn't. But early on, whether NATO enlargement would cause Russian aggression, revanchism and heightened hostility with the West was essentially unknowable.

So, have we learned anything in the intervening decades about who was correct? While the short answer is "no," this has not stopped committed observers, myself included, from marshaling confirmatory evidence for their side. On the surface, the debate over NATO's effect on Russia takes the following form and reflects an update to the version outlined above. Critics of NATO enlargement, as of 2021, could plausibly argue that NATO enlargement since 1999 had encroached on Russia's sphere of influence, pushed Western forces up to Russian borders, and provoked Russia into launching conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine. Meanwhile, having fed Russia's sense of insecurity and encirclement, critics argue, the leadership embarked on a series of ferocious domestic repression measures, including poisoning, jailing or killing journalists and opposition members, curtailing protest and severely limiting the free flow of information. None of this was necessarily inevitable, this reasoning suggests.

The other side of the argument insists, however, that the Russian regime was riddled with corruption and was intent on covering it up. Governments from Yeltsin to Putin very likely engaged in subterfuge that resulted in the massacre of their own citizens to [build support for authoritarianism](#) and relentlessly pursued imperialist ambitions, regardless of the will or sovereignty of neighboring states. Whether NATO enlarged or not, this argument goes, democratic endurance in Russia was never likely. And given Russian and Central-East European history, [it was better to secure the small, vulnerable states to its west](#) rather than risk further curbs on their autonomy or, worse, infringements by Russia.

But beneath the surface, another debate was playing out—and this is where consequential bias is revealed. While some scholars prioritized relations between "major powers" (particularly Russia and the US in this case), others were more concerned about guaranteeing the rights, prosperity, and security of the countries in "Zwischeneuropa"—those states sandwiched between Russia and Germany that had long been beholden to large power rivalry. As two scholars, [Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, concede themselves](#), while they "agree on how to go about evaluating the costs and benefits of enlargement," they nevertheless "disagree on the merits of the policy because [they] place different weights and assign different probabilities to those different factors." And both the weights and probabilities depend largely on the personal beliefs of the author.

It turns out that the value judgments Goldgeier and Shiffrinson point to permeate the literature without scholars being in direct dialogue about how central those differences are to the conclusions they draw. On the side of privileging "great powers," Stephen Cohen, for example, argued that, after the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, ["the foremost goal of U.S. policymaking should have been a Russia. . .that was prospering, politically stable, at peace and fully cooperating with the U.S. on the most threatening international problems"](#). John Lewis caddis agreed, stating that among the most important rules of foreign strategy was to ["treat former enemies magnanimously"](#) and that NATO enlargement violated not only this basic principle of diplomacy, but every other, as well. Mandelbaum's assertion that the policy of enlargement

was [“largely irrelevant to the problems confronting countries situated between Germany and Russia”](#) mirrored another sentiment in the literature, which was that East Central Europe was not in the Western strategic interest to protect. As Dan Reiter matter-of-factly pointed out, [“The West did after all accept Soviet annexation or domination of all of these states during the Cold War without taking military action.”](#)

For many specialists working primarily on East Central Europe (ECE), however, the statements above are politically problematic, even if there are few empirical disagreements. For example, many ECE specialists would agree on the goal of constructive Western relations with Russia—but would not concede that such relations should come at the expense of Eastern Europe’s ongoing exposure to possible Russian violence, intervention, and revisionism. Second, there is no empirical disagreement over Western and US abandonment of Eastern Europe following World War II—though many scholars of the region do contend that it was a catastrophic mistake, not to be repeated. Third and finally, proponents of NATO enlargement are continually asking their critics whether the sentiments of those “situated between Germany and Russia” should matter in this controversy. Defenders of the enlargement policy argue that, from a democratic perspective, we should listen to those populations and leaders who had rarely, if ever, willingly succumbed to Soviet domination. And here, there is an empirical correction—[the drive for NATO enlargement originated within postcommunist countries](#)—so, by those countries’ own assessment, it was not “irrelevant” to the problems they confront.

It is perhaps to be expected, though certainly not universal, that researchers, depending on the empirics they absorb, the history they read, and the field research they do, end up internalizing to a certain extent the values and interests of the countries and populations they study. This kind of socialization should not necessarily be discouraged, even if it could be. On occasion, it leads to sharp insight, as when Valerie Bunce, long more immersed in the politics, economics and languages of ECE than her Sovietologist counterparts, [identified fissures in the Soviet empire that presaged its collapse](#), even before Gorbachev came to power.

On the one hand, scholars acknowledging their political positions might clarify for policymakers where empirical differences end and where value judgments begin. On the other hand, even that formulation may prove to be naïve in the sense that the empirics we gather and analyze are probably never separate from our political priors, a point that goes against much social science training and the striving for objectivity. Nevertheless, for constructive policy engagement, researchers could acknowledge more clearly when they are arguing over the probabilities that certain events will take place based on empirics as opposed to when they are arguing that something is more probable because of an underlying but inexplicit political commitment.

Discussion Questions:

1. How effective was your advanced training in helping you build alternative future scenarios, predicted upon past events and research, for the purposes of policy engagement?
2. In your view, what contributed the most to unintended consequences in these two cases?
3. What should scholars and journalists have done differently with respect to these two issue-areas to improve the quality of their analysis?
4. Can researchers help policymakers present the complexity of policies and their possible unintended consequences to broader audiences, including publics?

7. Perceptions of Engagement in the IR Community

Session Overview:

Policy engagement has implications for how researchers are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves. Many graduate programs either do not discuss or actively discourage policy engagement, on the grounds that it detracts from research activities and tends to bias work in favor of “hot” topics, rather than areas of sustained scholarly interest and therefore larger bodies of accumulated knowledge and larger constituencies in the academic community.

Using information from the TRIP survey on policy engagement and personal experiences, the instructors will provide a context for discussing how active engagement affects one’s relationship with the broader scholarly community.

Learning Objectives:

- Understand the common modes and extents of policy engagement by IR scholars at different points in the profession.
- Interrogate the ways engagement is perceived, both in terms of the ways it shapes prospect for tenure and promotion and how engaged scholars are viewed within the academy.

Click on icons below to download the full PPT Presentation or a PDF with notes.



**RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT INSTITUTE**

Perceptions of Engagement
Julia Macdonald and Ryan Powers

Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
University of Denver

Sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York



Suggested Readings:

1. Stephen Walt. 2016. "How to Get Tenure." *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/17/would-you-like-to-be-a-tenured-professor-policy-education-ir/>.
2. Cullen Hendrix. 2016. "Why Engagement Can't Wait: Walt on Tenure and Bridging the Gap." *Political Violence @ a Glance*. <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2016/02/23/why-engagement-cant-wait-walt-on-tenure-and-bridging-the-gap/>.
3. Cullen Hendrix, Julia Macdonald, Susan Peterson, Ryan Powers, and Michael J Tierney. 2020. "Beyond IR's Ivory Tower." *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/28/beyond-international-relations-ivory-tower-academia-policy-engagement-survey/>.
4. Daniel Maliniak, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney. "Policy-Relevant Publications and Tenure Decisions in International Relations." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 52 (2): 318-324.

CASE VIGNETTE:

Beyond IR's Ivory Tower

For years, prominent international relations (IR) scholars have openly criticized the field for privileging "[rigor over relevance](#)," offering little practical advice to those who live and work outside the ivory tower. For example, Stephen Van Evera, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, argues that traditional academic disciplines and incentives promote a "[cult of the irrelevant](#)"—"an internal discussion of arcane questions that the wider world is not asking." On the other hand, scholars such as [Ido Oren](#) and [Adam Elkus](#) reject the idea that political scientists should make themselves policy-relevant and argue that doing so biases political science by encouraging academics to cater to the "whims of elite governmental policymakers."

Are these concerns well founded—are IR scholars too removed from the policy world? Or should we worry that academics are distorting their findings for policy audiences?

In 2019, the [Sié Center for International Security and Diplomacy](#) at the University of Denver's Korbel School of International Studies and the [TRIP Project at William & Mary's Global Research Institute](#) collaborated on a survey to gauge IR scholars' perceptions of policy engagement within their field. The [results of the survey](#), from 971 respondents at U.S. colleges and universities, reveal that IR scholars are more engaged than the "cult of the irrelevant" discourse suggests. The findings highlight a significant gap in perceptions between IR scholars and their employers regarding the importance of engagement for promotion and tenure, with many scholars saying that [universities should value policy-engaged activities more than they do](#). Though respondents expressed some concern that scholars might distort their beliefs and opinions for policy audiences, few reported doing so themselves. Overall, it appears that IR scholars are engaged in policy activities despite a lack of professional incentives to do so: Faculty members do

not perceive that engaged policy work enhances prospects for tenure and promotion. Nevertheless, their engagement is deeper and more widespread than might be expected given the prevailing criticism.

If the failed U.S. response to the coronavirus pandemic reveals anything, it is that government officials should draw on the knowledge of experts to inform policy decisions. Policy crafted without attention to expert knowledge has produced avoidable loss of life on a massive scale, a collapse in the United States' international reputation, and an economic crisis. But a lack of policy engagement by members of the ivory tower doesn't account for practitioners' failure to heed expert advice. The survey data shows that policy engagement among IR scholars is the norm, not the exception—even if universities don't adequately reward it.

A substantial proportion of the experts who participated in the survey had experience in the policy world before entering academia. Almost half (48 percent) had some work experience in the policy world, and 38 percent reported working in the policy world for six months or more. Generally, prior policy experience didn't seem to be linked to academic rank, but a larger proportion of chaired professors have more than six months of policy experience. In short, if the ivory tower were failing to engage with real-world problems, it would be doing so in spite of broad scholarly interest and experience with such issues.

Some form of continued engagement with the policy world—writing op-eds, media appearances, writing reports, consulting activities—was the norm for a large number of respondents. Only 7 percent reported never engaging in some form of policy-related activity, and there was no evidence of a trend away from engagement among younger scholars. In fact, while older scholars report more frequent engagement, younger scholars were less likely than their older colleagues to not engage at all over the past five years.

These results accord with the advent of what George Washington University's Marc Lynch calls "[a golden age of academic engagement with the public sphere](#)"—in part linked to the number of online outlets where scholars increasingly share their work and the growth in [funding](#) and [fellowship](#) opportunities available to academics with policy interests. Publishing bylined pieces in prestigious but non-peer-reviewed outlets is a [low-cost, high-reward means](#) of policy engagement. The readership of outlets like Foreign Policy and the Washington Post's Monkey Cage blog includes policy practitioners as well as the same group of scholars with whom academics want to build a reputation.

Deeper engagement, including consulting for government agencies or nonprofits, often takes a significant amount of time and offers fewer opportunities for recognition: Briefings with Senate staffers or members of the intelligence community, for example, are rarely bylined. Despite these barriers, 41 percent of respondents had written policy briefs for government agencies, advocacy organizations, or think tanks, and a greater percentage (49 percent) had engaged in consulting activities.

This high degree of policy engagement is consistent with the belief, held by 70 percent of respondents, that policy engagement enhances the quality of their teaching and research—providing real-world examples for the classroom and a policy-practitioner network for interviews, data, and funding opportunities.

Respondents are more divided over putting country before party. Despite significant [opposition](#) to the Trump administration within academic circles, some scholars reported that they were willing to engage with the policy community regardless of who occupied the Oval Office—even despite the current administration's [general hostility toward experts](#). The next four years could look quite different for policy engagement depending on who wins in the November election.

When asked whether they considered the identity of the president when deciding whether to engage with the government, 36 percent reported that they did not take it into account, while a slightly larger proportion (41 percent) reported that they did. Partisanship and low levels of support for the Trump administration may make these responses atypical: Only 17 percent of self-identified Republicans said they took the identity of the president into account compared to almost half of Democrats. Significantly, the types of engagement

reported and the frequency of that engagement were similar regardless of whether the respondent said that they conditioned their engagement with the government in particular on the identity of the president.

More than at any other time since World War II, addressing America's myriad and severe problems—the coronavirus pandemic, climate change, global economic crisis—requires more engagement from experts in general and IR scholars specifically. Contrary to criticism about the “cult of the irrelevant,” many of our colleagues stand ready.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does the “is/ought” distinction with respect to policy engagement and tenure and promotion persist?
2. Are engagement activities widely valued?
3. Is engagement a net positive with respect to professional advancement?

¹ Each researcher team will be given one piece of scholarship and asked to deliver that insight to policymakers.

1. Each “brief” between researchers and policymakers will be 15 minutes.
2. Researchers will have the opportunity to brief both sets of policymakers. *What participants will not be told in advance is that there will be asymmetry in the amount of time for the different briefs. While they go into the exercise believing that they will have a full 15 minutes to brief each set of policymakers, in fact they will be interrupted and only have half of that time for the policymakers that are not within their niche.*
 - a. Politics/Governance experts will brief Diplomacy/Development for the full 15 minutes but will only get a chance to brief Defense for half the time.
 - b. Military Analysis will brief Defense for the full 15 minutes but will only get a chance to brief Diplomacy/Development for half the time.
3. After two rounds of briefs, researchers get to be observers when policymakers are asked to brief the President and National Security Advisor (Judd & Leanne)
4. After that presentation, we will discuss all the issues that came up in the exercise and brief.
5. After two rounds of briefs, researchers get to be observers when policymakers are asked to brief the “President” (the instructor)
6. After that presentation, the group discusses the issues that came up in the exercise and brief.