Some random thoughts:

The immediately following is along the lines I had been thinking in terms of framing. It might be way off base.

During most of the past half century, quantitatively oriented political scientists have shared a research perspective that has led them to generate some of the most important findings in the discipline’s history. In the following pages, we first put the perspective’s emergence in context, identify its defining characteristics, and briefly review a few prototypical studies. We next note how recent quantitative research has (perhaps unwittingly, in part) begun to challenge the very foundations of the earlier perspective, especially its emphasis on generality and generalization. Pitting new against old leads naturally, and, we think, inevitably, to questions such as: Has the strong emphasis on generality and generalization over the past 50 years been misplaced? If not, are recent currents, which downplay generalization, pushing the discipline in a wrong direction? (These currents include an emphasis on demonstrating “true” cause and effect via the use of counterfactuals and the identification of mechanisms, a growing emphasis on heterogeneity and a concomitant reduction in the importance of average treatment effects, a growing recognition of the significance of spillover effects, and so forth.)

What are some of the most general (generalizable?) studies in political science? I would nominate Downs, for sure. I might also nominate Taber and Lodge’s studies of motivated reasoning, which rely on Long Island subjects. This work, it seems to me, is general because there is a theory of decision-making, motivated reasoning, that should apply broadly. That the authors used LI subjects is beside the point. This does not mean that MR will always exist or that the manifestations of MR will always be the same. However, MR is nevertheless a general idea (theory?).

Suppose, however, that T-L did not begin with a full-blown conceptual framework. Rather, they had some fragmented ideas, and used LI subjects to determine, empirically, what the world looked like. Would this matter? Would we then be inclined to say their work is not generalizable?

Are general statements derived empirically from large data sets, and using average treatment effects, meaningful?

Explanation, it seems to me, requires explicating the \*logic\* of a process by which something happens. That logic can only be done theoretically, and must be done prior to data analysis.

Is generalization based on the assumption that explaining “small scope” phenomena is not worthwhile?