

Researching and Doing Policy Science as a Political Scientist

I lead a dual life. On the one hand, I work full-time as a data scientist at Code for America, where the primary goal is to simplify, ease, and speed up safety net delivery. On the other hand, I conduct academic research affiliated with the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins on the side, where the goal is to advance academic research on civil society and democracy. It's a tough balance. I have had to sacrifice many weekends and even breaks. However, I made this choice because my long-term goal is to become a researcher who produces high-quality research with real-world impacts.

An academic colleague recently asked me whether I identify myself as a data scientist or a political scientist, given my dual life. I said that I consider myself a policy scientist who believes in the value of effective government. As both a professional and a citizen, my goal is to contribute to making the government work for everyone, or at least to be a part of that effort.

In order to design, adopt, and implement good policies, it is sometimes necessary to understand politics, as it may be a key factor in explaining the origins, development, constraints, and possibilities of a given policy. The connection between politics and policy is why I pursued graduate studies, earned my Ph.D. in political science, and built my career in research.

Although economics influences policy more than any other field, I was drawn to political science because it combines normative commitment and scientific rigor (Samii 2023; Popp Berman 2022). In economics, the primary consideration is cost-benefit analysis, which equates efficiency with values. Policy is seen as a tool, and if a method achieves a goal with less cost, it is considered more desirable. In contrast, from the perspective of political science, a policy is desirable if it upholds and promotes the values cherished by a democratic society. In political science, economic efficiency is just one important consideration among many. We also value normative principles, such as representation, accountability, and responsiveness. That is why political theory (or philosophy) remains a key subfield of political science, despite its marked differences from other fields where empirical methods play prominent roles.

However, I find two aspects of political science research unsatisfactory. Since most academics don't work within the government or with it, we must infer how elected representatives, bureaucrats, and voters believe, feel, think, and act based on accessible data. The issue is that accessible data are limited. Practitioners don't have the time. Academics don't have the data.

This is one of the main reasons why I became a practitioner in this field. My primary research area is poverty, and my goal is to gain insights into poverty management using internal data. Governments typically use case management systems to handle citizen cases and process applications for government programs. However, researchers often have a limited view of these systems, relying on government statistics or interviews. This results in a selected and restricted representation of a complex and extensive data landscape. Hence, my desire is to be in a position where I can access and observe the flow of this information within the government.

Another motivation was to better understand how to solve public problems. In order to improve a policy, I may need to modify or add certain features and test the changes. This requires partnering with the government to develop and test a research program (Duflo 2017). Although administrative data can be disorganized, it is often the only source of relevant data on social issues. This data can be used as a foundation for developing, testing, and improving policy ideas through an iterative process (Moynihan 2022).

It has been nine months since I transitioned from primarily being an academic researcher to becoming a data scientist. My main takeaway confirms my initial hypothesis: understanding how the government adopts and implements policies is valuable. Equally important is grasping how these cases are managed through the government's information system. Furthermore, it is invaluable to be aware of the types of policy ideas that the government is willing to invest in and successfully implement in practice.

These are the types of skills and experiences that I could not have obtained solely from my graduate program and research career. I am grateful for the opportunities that my current job has provided me. I acquired this knowledge through close collaboration with government partners, and by developing and implementing a project with them through field experiments and surveys.

Nevertheless, I believe that research can play a crucial role in shaping sound policies and effective governance. Research and practice complement each other, with research informing practice and practice inspiring research (Stokes 1997). While academics may be too removed from the field, practitioners may be too immersed in it, leading to blind spots. Although research is not wholly objective, researchers can observe, theorize, and identify patterns. They can then analyze data to refine and validate ideas, eventually revealing what works and what does not. Research can shed light on what has been done and what has not, revealing possibilities and limitations while adding evidence to narratives.

The strength of political science in conducting policy research lies in its focus on politics. Good policies are not adopted or implemented solely based on their cost or value propositions. Rather, it is the influence of power that ultimately determines their fate. Decision-makers may not support sound policies not because they are inherently evil, but because they operate within institutional and organizational constraints that create certain incentives and disincentives.

Poorly designed and implemented policies cannot deliver promised benefits. Government service is also a service. Based on my experience with the US government, I have observed that many policy failures result from well-intentioned procedures that ultimately end up hurting both staff and citizens. In essence, policies are likely to fail if street-level bureaucrats lack the knowledge possessed by citizens, and top-level bureaucrats lack the knowledge of street-level bureaucrats. Politics guides how policies are designed, and these default conditions have downstream effects.

Although many political scientists left the study of policy adoption and implementation for public administration scholars, it was Aaron Wildavsky, one of the founding fathers of American politics field in political science, who co-authored a book titled *Implementation* in 1973.

I became an applied data scientist in the public sector because I realized that there was a gap in my academic training and experience. Ironically, during this time, I rediscovered the value of academic research in political science for policy analysis. Political science research offers unique perspectives on the link between politics and policy, and how it affects the effective adoption and implementation of policies.