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## A Relational Political Science

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Political science is diverse in its methods, theories, and substantive interests. A quick perusal of our flagship journals reveals just how heterogeneous we are, with articles ranging from mathematical treatments of theoretical problems to textual exegesis of Plato, and qualitative studies of single countries standing in contrast to quantitative analyses of experiments designed to mobilize voters. At times, the discipline's boundaries are so fuzzy that our territory is alternatively claimed by philosophers, anthropologists, economists, sociologists, and psychologists.

Yet we persist, leading many of us to search for the common thread that binds us together. And while we do not agree on many things, we would probably all agree that one such tie among political scientists is an emphasis on power, understanding how and why it is used. We all are inherently interested in the exercise of power between and among individuals and groups and the implications this holds for social outcomes.

We contend that this unifying concept is, at its very core, *relational*. For any individual actor or institution to meaningfully exercise power, it can only be defined in terms of how it affects some other actor or institution. This implies our discipline should to a significant degree be focused on describing and explaining the evolution of relationships at work in political processes, as well as the consequences these relationships hold for individual decisions and aggregate outcomes.

It is somewhat ironic, then, that we note the absence of a relational turn in political science. Arguably, the most important intellectual developments in political science -- behavioralism, rational choice, new institutionalism -- are built on core beliefs that political decisions are made by self-interested, if cognitively limited, actors who operate *independently* of each other. To the degree that decisions in politics are seen as being dependant, it is not based on the idea of *relational influence*. Instead, we believe there is a clear (and understandable) focus on either *institutional constraints* or *strategic interaction*.

Such approaches to politics have served the discipline well, leading to numerous intellectual advances across substantive areas. But these approaches are limited by the assumption of independence between the actors and institutions that exercise power. To move forward in understanding the role of power in politics, we must begin to account for *interdependence* among actors and institutions. This leads to a whole host of questions for the discipline that have not been part and parcel of the core. To what degree are the decisions of individuals and institutions dependent upon their network of connections? Are these dependencies causal, or are they reflective of other processes, such as mutual attraction based on common attributes (homophily) or the need to assimilate to divergent views and political positions?

How do these relationships develop, particularly under different institutional and environmental constraints? When do networks help people exercise political power and when do they constrain its use? In this symposium, we seek to illuminate how the role that a particular brand of reasoning about these relationships -- social network analysis (SNA) -- is useful across the broad spectrum of topics in political science. Each contribution focuses on core questions from one of the main subfields of political science or considers the sociology of knowledge within our discipline, demonstrating the benefits that can accrue from a relational turn. In this introduction, we focus foremost on the potential of social network analysis for binding the discipline more closely around the subject of power and the steps we should take for encouraging more work along these lines.

### **Power, Relationships, and Social Networks**

Power as classically formulated by Dahl (1969) is when person A gets person B to do something that she would not otherwise do on her own. It is clear from this definition that power is *relational*. That is, power only exists when considering interactions between and among individuals and groups. Returning to the seminal concept of power, as Crozier and Friedberg (1980, 20 as cited in Jackman 1985) suggest, “[Power] can develop only through exchange among the actors in a given relation.”

Even as political scientists have challenged Dahl’s simple definition and formulation of power, the concept has always remained relational. For Bachrach and Baratz (1962), power is not exercised solely in determining which decisions are made but also by which issues are allowed into the public domain.<sup>1</sup> As Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 949) ask,

[C]an the researcher overlook the chance that some person or association could limit decision-making to relatively non-controversial matters, by influencing community values and political procedures and rituals, not withstanding that there are in the community serious but latent power conflicts?

As this quote suggests, issues are overlooked in public discourse because of where a particular actor or group is situated in a larger web of interactions. Even a more radical view of power as espoused by Lukes (1974) and adopted by some like Gaventa (1980) places an emphasis on a relational view of power. While this view of power examines how power is exercised on action, it is also applied to inaction. As Lukes (1974, 23) notes, this third view of power suggests that actor A exercises power over B “... by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants.” While some reject this view of power as too manipulative or insidious, a more realistic view is one adopted by a social network perspective where the focus is on how relationships with others affect preferences and choices.

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<sup>1</sup> Schattschneider (1960) calls this the *mobilization of bias*.

As Hafner-Burton and Montgomery (n.d.) note, traditional operationalizations of power are somewhat at odds with these conceptualizations because they focus on the possession of resources. Such an approach unintentionally limits the concept of power in ways that miss the role of connections between actors; for example, having a large military, but no actor to threaten with these capabilities is a fairly empty understanding of power. Instead, they claim that resources only make sense in the context of an actor's web of connections, which can both affect the resources they have and their ability to use them effectively. Hafner-Burton and Montgomery specifically argue that social network analysis provides appropriate tools and concepts for bringing relationships back into our operationalizations of power.

We agree. A network approach to understanding politics explicitly adopts a relational perspective on any political process and implicitly adopts a view of power that is different from standard operationalizations. So while many in our discipline are conceiving of their work in terms of power -- whether it be social status for individuals or natural resources for a state -- very rarely do they explicitly consider how that power derives from or is influential because of relational context. And once we begin to consider these questions, it is clear that a failure to consider these relations and their import impedes our ability to understand and explain important political and social problems.

### **Relational Analysis at the Core of Political Science**

It is one thing to argue that power is inherently relational, but quite another to suggest that this kind of work ought to lie at the core of the discipline. Those with a critical eye can reasonably suggest that outcomes that appear to be driven by relationships among actors can in fact be explained by other theories. Alternatively, others can argue with cause that overemphasizing relationships and networks discounts the importance of agency and self-determination; in short objecting to the absence of self-determination. Still another objection to our argument is that the inherent need of relational approaches to study problems holistically represents a step backwards for a discipline that has recently come to embrace the scientific criteria of causality and experimentation more strongly. Each critique has merit. But rather than seeing them as reasons to ignore networked views of political power more deeply into political science, we see them as opportunities for political scientists to add their own insights to the understanding of social networks concepts and methods.

The first objection derives from the straightforward principle that correlation is not causation. A scientist steeped in the network tradition sees correlation between attributes of the network and individual behavior as evidence of causality; those steeped in other traditions see the same evidence as indicative of other processes, such self-selection driven by conflict avoidance.<sup>2</sup> We agree with skeptics of social

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<sup>2</sup> For example, a person isn't necessarily a Democrat because her friends have influenced her, but because she avoids encounters with Republicans because they make her uncomfortable.

influence that unambiguous evidence of network effects is difficult to attain, but disagree that this should dissuade us from a relational approach to political science. Indeed, to the extent that we want to understand power in politics, an important part of the discipline is trying to understand *which relationships* are influential, which ones are merely supportive, and which ones are simply irrelevant. It is only in the serious pursuit of strong evidence of social influence in the face of omitted variable bias, homophily, and a host of other methodological challenges to establishing causality that allows us to begin to make such distinctions.

We argue that such a focus is preferable to other approaches that either assume independence among actors or make the assumption that dependence only flows from rules and institutions. While there is old, vigorous debate over whether assumptions in models should be realistic or just useful (e.g. Friedman 1953), we side-step this dispute by simply claiming that the assumption of independence for individuals limits the study of political science to certain questions. Relaxing this assumption brings social relations to the fore and suggests a host of new directions for political science research. Whether a social network approach is more “realistic” or “better” is ultimately an empirical question that can be resolved through the output produced by a relational versus individualist research program (see Bueno de Mesquita (2010, 389-402) for an excellent related discussion).<sup>3</sup>

Such a discussion flows naturally into concerns that a relational approach leads the discipline down a path of social determinism. To state this differently, the objection is that prioritizing questions about the influence of networks and the origins of their structures significantly downplays the role of individual agency in politics. This critique is grounded on both intellectual and political grounds, and is legitimate in both cases. However, as a practical matter, there is no reason to assume that a focus on the attributes of network structures is inconsistent with the principal of methodological individualism. To be sure, the tools for analyzing networks are more advanced when it comes to unpacking structures and predicting relationships than they are for understanding how these things interact with the attributes of the actors in the networks.

Yet here is a case where political science can make a strong contribution to the study of networks. With so many of us studying political and economic systems that are best described in terms of how much agency is allowed, it would be untenable for us to overlook the hard questions about how this is balanced against the impact of networks. It is only by focusing clearly on the degree to which relations constrain agency that we can begin to fully explain our depictions of what the concepts of liberty, freedom, and agency mean in different political systems and contexts.

If we are right that political science can expand its ability to understand fundamental issues of power by confronting the question of social influence and balancing this against individual agency, this still leaves open the question of

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<sup>3</sup> This suggests a Lakatosian philosophy of science. See Elman and Elman (2002) for a discussion related to the study of International Relations.

whether we can do so rigorously. While significant debates rage about what constitutes rigorous research, those debates often rest upon epistemological differences over the meaning of causation and interpretation. Social network analysis and its accompanying methods should not be exempt from these same debates. Yet neither should they be rejected outright because fundamental assertions of interdependence complicate our studies and make causal effects difficult to establish.

To take dependence seriously often means putting questions of external validity, randomization, statistical independence, and even contextualization of data in the background. Instead, it suggests a different set of criteria such as completeness of the network, identification of the appropriate links, connecting knowledge about relationships with information about the parties to the relationships. Thus, the study of networks -- including large scale-networks, such as co-sponsorship links in a legislature or social media connections -- often requires us to rethink standard assumptions about what constitutes meaningful evidence of an interesting social process. Only then does it make as much sense to bring those criteria back to the foreground. Yet again, we feel this presents more opportunity than opposition. Trying to challenge standard assumptions about what is a meaningful relationship for politics is alone a potentially fruitful way to begin expanding the methodological toolbox of our discipline.

### **How To Advance the Agenda**

For a truly relational political science to succeed, we must recognize that it can provide a common thread across the subfields. We hope that the pieces in the symposium -- each devoted to explaining the importance of political networks in different corners of our intellectual cafeteria (Almond 1988) -- will demonstrate just these sorts of connections, all the while being faithful to the questions that motivate those subfields.

But what other steps are necessary? We will argue here for three simple, pragmatic steps that can go a long way towards incorporating a relational view into our thinking about politics and political science. First, we must begin to incorporate social network topics into the core of our methods training in the discipline. While a great deal of the SNA methodological core is quantitative, we also mean for this advice to hold for training in qualitative methods. The core methodological problems of social network analysis as practiced in other fields involve the question of how to model dependence among actors, the importance of relational patterns that show up regularly in social processes, and the fact that what looks chaotic and random often emerges from simple and elegant problems. These issues, we feel, are not well incorporated into our research training even though there are large bodies of literature in sociology, economic, medicine, computer science, biology, and even physics that suggest that the world is rife with such complexities.

Second, we believe that the discipline should begin to re-think the standards we use to determine what data are "good" and what data are "bad." To be clear from the

outset, we are *not* arguing that relational studies are lacking in rigor or that the criteria that get used to judge non-relational studies are unreasonable. What we are suggesting is that the kind of data that *can be used* to study relations are often of a different nature than many more standard forms of evidence. For example, for us to understand the role of networks in many areas of American politics, from voters to legislators, we may have to accept that external validity will be difficult (if not impossible) to achieve.<sup>4</sup> There are important scientific criteria for relational analyses, set forth in a voluminous literature in other disciplines that should be adhered to.

But we should not, as it were, throw the baby out with the bathwater. As techniques for gathering network data on a large scale become more available, we believe that there will be a convergence between the characteristics of good relational research and the standard political science study. But in the mean time, we would argue that good relational studies should be judged on grounds appropriate for the questions they raise. Consider as an example that the impact the Columbia sociologist's research on networks and voting behavior is still felt decades later, even though it was constrained to a representative sample of residents in unrepresentative Elimira, NY (Berelson et al. 1954).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the pathways towards professional success in the discipline should not only encourage but also seek out the best relational work. Here we are referring, of course, to the choices that are made about what gets into journals, what kinds of jobs are listed, and other indicators. Rather than seeing relational studies of politics as better suited to other disciplines and journals, we should be encouraging this work within the boundaries of our own.

Here we have seen some encouraging steps. There is a new organized section of the American Political Science Association devoted to Political Networks, meaning that there is now space set aside at our national meeting for the very best research in this vein. Through the generous support of the National Science Foundation, there have now been three summer conferences devoted to training in social network methods and presentation of political networks research.<sup>5</sup> *American Politics Research* devoted a special issue to political networks, with eight articles spanning subjects across the subfield.<sup>6</sup> And Temple University Press has begun to publish a political science series entitled, *The Social Logic of Politics*. Yet more progress along these lines is welcome.

## Conclusion

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<sup>4</sup> It is hard to envision what a study of the network of all American voters would look like, let alone how we would obtain such information. And the question of whether we can get a sense of "the" network of American voters from random sample surveys has already been put to rest by sociologists.

<sup>5</sup> Summer meetings are already in being planned for 2011 at the University of Michigan as well.

<sup>6</sup> *American Politics Research*, 37(5).

We encourage you to look carefully at the arguments laid bare in this symposium. Although each author comes from a different subfield and has his own views on the benefits of a relational political science, all of them agree that it holds the key to many more important advances. Additionally, each author suggests some issues and limitations related to the study of social networks.

Perliger and Pedahzur (2011) illustrate the potential of studying terrorism and political violence using the tools of social network analysis (SNA). As the authors argue, SNA can help us understand how and why certain people join violent groups, and how the structure of networks can affect targeting, motives, and tactics. For Perliger and Pedahzur (2011) the ties or relations among actors are critical for understanding the activities of violent networks. Understanding who important actors are in these decentralized networks is more difficult than in more traditional hierarchal organizations. SNA offers a unique approach to solving this problem and Perliger and Pedahzur offer a range of possibilities for identifying these actors.

While analyzing social ties is one of the innovations of SNA, Perliger and Pedahzur (2011) also address a critical methodological problem for SNA--the boundary problem, or which actors to include the analysis. Although there are contending approaches to solving this dilemma, this issue is illustrative of the need for specific methods training for future SNA researchers.

Siegel (2011) applies SNA insights to the study of Comparative Politics and political context. Consistent with our suggestion above, Siegel argues that SNA can bridge divides between political scientists (e.g. quantitative vs. qualitative) in explaining how context matters for political behavior. Notably, Siegel (2011, ##) suggests how a relational research approach can be effective:

A mapped-out network of relations allows one to employ...theoretical insights to produce predictions as to how a population of individuals within such a network behaves, given a particular distribution of individual incentives.

According to Siegel (2011), one of the central concerns is data. Networked data is more difficult to collect and analyze, and is less prevalent. He concludes, however, by providing examples of the possibilities in comparative politics for SNA research from prominent research on democracy, social movements, party systems, and government formation.

Djupe and Sohkey (2011) echo our argument that networks are about power, but by focusing on the exchange of information between voters in such a way that it influences their behavior. Of particular note is that their essay focuses on the fact that the idea of power in networks is still consistent with the idea of *choice* in American politics. Even given the lack of interest that average Americans have in politics, they make a strong case that social influences still play an important role in the formation of opinions and the propensity toward action. As a consequence, they raise important questions about the extent to which average citizens are more



strongly influenced by their network *because* of their own disinterest or *in spite* of it. As such, they suggest this raises important issues about the degree to which networks operate on their constituent elements and vice versa,

Lazer (2011) provides a deeper intellectual history of SNA and its roots in sociology and political science, noting in particular the evolution of two themes relevant to political science -- the effects of networks and their origins. Building on his insights about the origins of SNA and its relevance to political science, he makes a number of poignant remarks about our disciplines failure to embrace these concepts in the past and how to do so in the future. According to him, the principal contributions that political science can make will come through an acute focus on causality in networks. Here he strongly recommends attention to longitudinal research designs and greater use of the large reams of data that are now becoming available from the Internet, phone and computer logs, and many other "passive" data sources. His insights show us important ways to move forward in the discipline that stretch beyond a particular subfield

The symposium ends with Ramiro Berardo's (2011) study of how networkers themselves are networked. This self-conscious sociology of the emerging body of work among political networker makes two important points that overlap with our own arguments. Drawing on survey data from the NSF-supported summer network meetings in 2008 and 2009, he first demonstrates that the ability to learn from others and to access training with experts has significant professional benefits. This fits nicely with our recommendation for more such opportunities in moving the subfield forward. But even more importantly, the analysis shows that subfield homophily -- that is, networks where people in subfields only talk with others in the same subfield -- *declines* in the wake of these conferences. Even though these are a small group of scholars specifically interested in networks, we feel that Berardo's results illustrate the unifying potential of SNA as a method and theory among political scientists. And to return to the theme with which we opened this brief essay, our field is often fragmented and in search of the things that can bring coherence to our wide-ranging interests. The analysis of political networks is one tie that can bind us, primarily because politics is relational at its core.

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