New Political Science

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**Political Political Science: A Phronetic Approach**

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**Abstract**  For over fifty years, successive waves of critique have underscored that the apolitical character of much of political science research betrays the founding mission of the discipline to have science serve democracy. The Caucus for a New Political Science was originally based on such a critique, and the perestroika movement in the discipline included a call for more problem-driven as opposed to theory- or method-driven work that would better connect political science research to ongoing political struggles. In recent years, movements for a public sociology and public anthropology as well as dissonant movements in economics and related fields have added to the insistence that social science research was too often disconnected from the real world. Phronetic social science has emerged out of the ferment for change in the social sciences, starting with the much-debated book by Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge, 2001). Flyvbjerg critiqued the social sciences for mimicking the natural sciences, while proposing an alternative approach that focuses research on helping people address the problems they are facing. Today, phronetic social science goes beyond the call for an alternative approach to social inquiry and its growing adherents are providing evidence that this alternative approach to doing research can enrich the social sciences by more effectively connecting research to efforts to address real world problems as people experience them. This article provides a genealogy of efforts to connect political science to politics, a review of the major critiques of mainstream research, an explication of the rationale for more problem-driven, mixed-methods research, a specification of the key principles of the phronetic approach, and examples of its application in the public realm. The article concludes with implications for realizing a more political political science by way of taking a phronetic approach.

Political science research has remained a contested terrain from its first beginnings with the formation of the discipline in the late nineteenth century, the subsequent development of political science as a distinct profession, and right up to this very day. As a result, the quest for a unitary paradigm for structuring research about politics has remained unfulfilled. But the battle lines are being redrawn as we speak.

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In recent decades, the issue of how best to conduct research in political science has been shadowed by a debate between positivists who champion emulating the natural sciences and interpretivists who side with approaching the study of politics along the lines of more humanistic forms of inquiry. Competing positivist and interpretivist epistemologies have spawned distinctive methodologies with separate logics of inquiry, varying preferences for different methods of data collection, and debates about a number of other issues including, most commonly, the value of quantitative versus qualitative data. Most recently, debates between positivists and interpretivists have been complicated by interventions by others who do not situate their investigations in either camp. This group has included a growing number of scholars who refuse to accept that they must limit their research to either a positivist or interpretivist methodology. Mixed-methods researchers have been joined by others who stress the importance of problem-driven over theory-driven research. These researchers want to focus on problems in the real world of politics and then use whatever different methods of study and forms of data collection necessary to study those topics as best they can. The debates about political science research ultimately raise issues about the relationship of political science to politics.

This article examines the major points of contention about political science research today by focusing on what some are calling a “practical turn,” as manifested in the development of “phronetic social science” originating in Bent Flyvbjerg’s critique of a social science that mimics the methods of the natural sciences.2 The phronetic social science, as practiced by a growing number of researchers, features a problem-driven approach that mixes methods to address issues of power involved in specific public problems people are struggling to address.3 In what follows, we demonstrate how the phronetic approach provides a way of addressing effectively the enduring issue of the discipline’s relationship to the issues of power in politics.

Researching the Discipline/Disciplining Research

Beginning with its origins in the late nineteenth century, the American incarnation of political science as an academic discipline has always been a work in progress, dedicated to the idea of progress. That chiasmus points to the hope the discipline’s early leaders had that political science could develop as the scientific study of politics that would redound to the improvement of American democracy and vice versa.4 The push for professionalization that came with the initiation of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in the first years of the twentieth century represented an attempt to transform the discipline to

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more explicitly and successfully address the relationship of science to democracy. John Gunnell has written:

Between the institution of the APSA and the appearance of the first issue of the American Political Science Review, Max Weber published his 1904 essay on “The ‘Objectivity’ of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy” in the newly created Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, which he shared in editing. There is little to suggest any direct relationship between Weber’s essay and the ideas of American political scientists, but in both theme and context there were a distinct family resemblance and mediated intellectual connections. Weber’s argument was in part a response to the failure of the Verein für Sozialpolitik and the ideological and methodological disputes that had characterized its history. Although he presented his essay as an intervention in controversies about the nature of social scientific explanation, he also explicitly addressed it to a wider public audience with the aim of vouchsafing the cognitive authority of academic social science. He stressed the commitment of the journal was to the scientific pursuit of the “the facts of social life,” but it was also concerned with “social policy” and “the training of judgment in respect of practical problems arising from these social circumstances.” … Weber ... emphasized various ways in which social scientific knowledge could, in principle, constrain and direct policy decisions as well as the extent to which scientific investigation necessarily proceeded from the perspective of value-laden premises. The authority of social science nevertheless depended, he argued, on acceptance of the autonomy of empirical claims and on the professional status and independence of those who made such claims. The dilemma and solution Weber articulated bore remarkable similarities to the situation attending the founding of the APSA.5

Frank Goodnow, W.W. Willoughby, Woodrow Wilson, and others formed the APSA based on concerns consistent with Weber’s thinking about the connections between science and politics. Goodnow was an especially poignant participant due to his prior involvement in both politics and academic administration, much like Wilson, but also because he helped educate leaders of the next generation who sought to develop a science of politics for the betterment of democracy, including most prominently Charles Merriam.

With time, a number of exemplars of the attempt to fuse science and democracy to their mutual benefit appear in the histories of the profession. Prominent among them was Merriam’s colleague at Chicago, Harold Lasswell, who would eventually turn to attempting to forge what he called a “policy science.”6 Perhaps because the promise of these efforts has seemed forever deferred, periodic challenges to the idea that a science of politics could serve democracy have occurred throughout the discipline’s history.7

Yet, it was in the 1960s with the rise of what came to be called behavioralism that the push for a scientific political science reached its zenith. At this time,

explicit discussion of methodology, as in an underlying logic of inquiry, overtook debates about the value of specific methods, as in particular forms of empirical observation and data collection. The behavioral movement very much sought to deliver on the longstanding promise that political science could become a scientific discipline if research in the field was conducted by emulating the natural sciences. Yet, in spite of a desire to emulate the natural sciences, proponents of behavioralism (like Robert Dahl, David Easton, Heinz Eulau, and David Truman to name just a few of the most prominent behavioralists of the time) turned not to natural science but to the philosophy of science for models of how to conduct scientific research on politics.8

The philosophy of science provided an explanation of the logical structure of scientific explanation known variously as logical positivism or logical empiricism and is now commonly referred to as just plain “positivism.” Positivism served to create a methodological foundation for political science as a science. Political scientists would be doing science if they structured their research projects consistently with the positivistic methodology. In other words, regardless of the specific methods of empirical observation or data collection used, research needed to be framed to support explanations consistent with the tenets of positivism. Research needed to produce the basis for testing causal theories that could explain why political phenomena, relationships, and processes were the way they were.9 Various inductive and deductive approaches to empirical research in political science eventually led to more a generalized understanding of how research was organized to contribute to the scientific discipline of political science. We can specify a consolidated model of this generic understanding to include the following hierarchy of assumptions:

(1) political science exists to help promote understanding of the truth about politics;
(2) political science research contributes to this quest by adding to the accumulation of an expanding base of objective knowledge about politics;
(3) growth of this knowledge base is contingent upon the building of theory that offers explanations of politics;
(4) building of theory is dependent on the development of universal generalizations regarding the behavior of political actors;
(5) development of a growing body of generalizations occurs by testing falsifiable, causal hypotheses that demonstrate their success in making predictions;
(6) accumulation of a growing body of predictions about political behavior comes from the study of variables in samples involving large numbers of cases; and
(7) a growing body of objective, causal knowledge can be put in service of society, particularly by influencing public policy-makers and the stewards of the state.

Critics from the time of behavioralism and since have been quick to note that this paradigm excludes much valuable research. For instance, it assumes that the study of a single case is “unscientific,” provides no basis for generalizing, does not

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build theory, cannot contribute to the growth of political knowledge, and, as a result, is not even to be considered for publication in the leading journals and is to be discouraged as a legitimate doctoral dissertation project.10 This bias against case studies is quite surprising given the very powerful essay in defense of case studies published by Harry Eckstein in 1975 in the Handbook of Political Science, which to this day is one of the best essays on the value of case studies to theory development.11 While there have always been dissidents to the drift toward “large-n” quantitative research in service of objective, decontextualized, and universally generalizable truth about politics, there is a good case to be made that the dissenters were for a long time increasingly marginalized as the center of gravity of the discipline drifted more and more toward reflecting these core assumptions about political knowledge.12

Nonetheless, dissent against this scientific drift was there throughout. Even in the 1960s criticisms could be heard of the failure to address the political turmoil overtaking the US at the time. Charles McCoy, as a founding member of the Caucus for a New Political Science, was particularly eloquent in his critique of what he called the apolitical politics of the push to make political science more scientific.13 The Caucus led the way to a thorough-going debate about the failure of mainstream political science to speak to the major political issues of the time: civil rights, poverty, the war in Vietnam, and so on.14

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the challenge came from the perestroika movement, which included arguments that the preoccupation with becoming a science had led the discipline away from improving politics.15 Rogers Smith and Ian Shapiro led the call to move away from method-driven research toward problem-driven research that is framed around addressing fundamental political concerns in the real world of politics.16 For Smith and Shapiro, it is less important whether political science research is grounded in one or another distinct methodology underwritten by a particular philosophy of science and more important that it be premised first and foremost on addressing real problems in the world of politics.

10 For instance, one of the authors of this article was recently told that Comparative Political Studies still to this day has a policy of not accepting case studies.
12 The second coming for positivism in political science was marked by the publication of Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba’s Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), which argues for how qualitative research can be made consistent with the positivist paradigm that tends more often to lead to large-n quantitative studies.
The perestroika movement gained sustenance from allied movements in related fields that served to underscore that the ongoing ferment within political science was associated with broadly shared concerns about the social sciences which transcended disciplinary boundaries. In recent years, movements for a public sociology and public anthropology as well as dissonant movements in economics and related fields have added to the insistence that social science research was too often at risk of not helping people address the public problems they confronted.17

It is important to note that as part of its problem-driven focus, the perestroika challenge also included a call for methodological pluralism.18 In fact, at times, this dimension of the movement seemed to override the interest in problem-driven work. Yet, they are very much related. The call for methodological pluralism has often been couched in terms of ending the supposed hegemony of positivistic approaches to the exclusion of interpretive research, particularly in the leading journals, out of concern that positivistic research was disconnected from the lived experience and concerns of the people being studied. Further, there was concern that positivistic approaches strove for an advancement of scientific techniques in service of perfecting causal models, independent of whether such research actually helped people address public problems. One response was to encourage more problem-driven, mixed-methods studies that allowed for alternative methodologies that could better connect research to the people being studied and to better help address their concerns.

John Dryzek however has encouraged a modification of the call for methodological pluralism, arguing against an “empty pluralism” that allows for a thoughtless “anything goes” attitude.19 Instead, Dryzek calls for a “critical pluralism” that would involve critical engagement of competing research traditions so that they can better learn from each other.20 Keith Topper has seconded that critique by emphasizing the need for a critical pluralism that combines research methodologies to create a more robust knowledge of politics.21 Topper joins Dryzek in pushing for a critical pluralism within research projects so that the interpretive moments in all analyses can inform positivistic ones and vice versa.

A critical pluralism highlights the important role of political judgment in the selection of methods as well as the selection of topics. Political reflexive research is sensitive to how all methods are not politically neutral and vary as to their relevance in promoting insight into political problems. Not all research is equally good, not all research methods are equally politically relevant and not all research

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conducted via different methods will enable us to effectively pursue a problem-driven type of political research that can help people address the major issues of politics. An empty pluralism would allow all methods to be included just for the sake of inclusion. An empty pluralism would encourage the study of all topics irrespective of whether they addressed fundamental political problems. An empty pluralism would blindly study whatever people in the public realm insisted was important whether they were right or not. The fact of the matter is that a critical pluralism would recognize the importance of making and defending political judgments about what should be studied and how.

That said, while political science research has yet to achieve a critical pluralism, it is now arguably increasingly post-paradigmatic in the sense of not being confined to one perspective about what research ought to be like. The discipline is moving away from the idea that research should be according to one overarching philosophy of science, overall methodology, or distinctive logic of inquiry. In fact, the changing currents associated with political science research indicate that perhaps the field was always best seen as nonparadigmatic both in terms of what it ideally should be in theory as well as what it actually was in practice. It is perhaps only now with Minerva’s Owl that we can look back to see the value of the diversity that was present in political science research throughout its history.

Against Methodological Purity and for Methodological Pluralism

The current debate about methodological pluralism has been a long time coming, arriving at the end of an arduous journey across the methodological minefields that have served as the ground for political science research. The pressures for a unitary paradigm have been a real and persistent temptation. There are understandable reasons to insist on methodological purity as opposed to methodological pluralism. Political science is an academic discipline; and like all academic disciplines, it is organized to promote scholarship according to the highest standards of what counts as good research. The temptation to discipline research is therefore implicit in the very idea of organizing an academic discipline. Gatekeeping to keep out bad research and include only good research is an unavoidable corollary.

While the methodological purity of the positivist paradigm could be countered with a call for a methodological pluralism, instead the most common response until most recently has been to push for a more “interpretive” approach to the study of politics. The interpretive approach is really a loose collection of many different approaches, including such disparate approaches as political ethnography, constructivism, discourse analysis, thick description, narrative analysis, and many others. What these approaches share in common is an emphasis on the interpretive dimensions of political analysis, stressing the importance of accounting for how political phenomena, relationships, and processes are not so much pre-existing objective facts of the social world as they are subjectively experienced and interpreted phenomena.22 This distinction revisits the debates that preoccupied Weber and his colleagues over whether social science ought to be more about erklären (explanation) or verstehen (understanding).23 The interpretive

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approaches emphasize it is more important to try to arrive at understanding how the social world is subjectively experienced and interpreted by people than it is to provide an explanation of what caused social phenomena to happen. Most interpretive approaches therefore do not look to the natural sciences for a model of how to conduct research on politics because they see an asymmetry between social sciences and the natural sciences stemming from what Anthony Giddens and others have called the “double hermeneutic.” From this perspective, the natural sciences are interpretive in that natural science research is framed through interpretive lenses for constructing the facts that are observed whether they are quarks within atoms or the black holes in the cosmology; however, the social sciences are doubly hermeneutic in that research on social phenomena involves interpreting the interpretations social actors make of their experiences. Social science research is doubly hermeneutic because it involves researchers’ interpretations of other people’s interpretations.

The “interpretive turn,” as it came to be called in the social sciences, had many sources, including, perhaps most prominently, Clifford Geertz and his leadership in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. Geertz, to be sure, saw interpretive approaches as providing important perspectives for understanding whatever was being studied and famously argued that thick description comprised “piled up inferences and implication.” Yet, Geertz resisted the idea that researchers had to choose either an interpretive or positivist approach as a distinct logic of inquiry. Nonetheless, over time, the main thrust of the interpretive turn has been to insist that interpretive social science implied a distinct logic of inquiry that prevented mixing methodologies.

Positivism and interpretivism became the oil and water of political science research. While researchers might be able to mix different methods of data collection, they increasingly were discouraged from mixing the methodologies on the grounds that positivism and interpretivism implied distinct logics of inquiry that could not be sensibly combined in the same analysis. Over time, the separate logic of inquiry argument has undoubtedly contributed to the idea that political science is a fractured discipline where different researchers employing different approaches talk less and less to each other.

Yet, in recent years, the longstanding impasse between positivism and interpretivism has begun to come undone by researchers who pursue more problem-driven, mixed-methods research. Mixed-methods research in particular

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has attracted a growing number of proponents in political science as well as other social sciences. There are books and whole journals dedicated to promoting the idea of mixing methods in the name of engaging in problem-driven research. The idea of mixed-methods research itself can be contained within either the positivist or interpretivist paradigm, and one can find different versions of it in different instances in the social sciences. Yet, the ferment associated with mixed-methods research has come to political science with its more critical versions crossing disciplinary boundaries and ending up appearing even in the pages of the *American Political Science Review* (which for years has been roundly criticized for featuring positivistic research focused on perfecting method at the expense of connecting to ongoing politics).

Further evidence of movement in this direction comes from debates in major political science journals. In a recent series of articles in *Perspectives on Politics,* but also, other journals, including the *Journal of Social Policy,* commentators have engaged in debates that suggest a growing interest in getting beyond the positivist/interpretivist divide in ways that include pursuing mixed-methods, problem-driven inquiry. In fact, a number of scholars have for some time self-consciously and explicitly designed their work as mixed-methods research that is focused on real political problems. Recovering the insights of Geertz, Howard Becker, and other leaders of the interpretive turn of the last generation, Soss has joined with others in conducting work that takes a problem-driven approach and mixes methodologies in research projects that strive to study specific topics as fully and thoroughly as possible so as to better inform public deliberation on pressing social issues.

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35 The sociologist Howard Becker’s contributions to the interpretive turn rivaled Geertz’s in importance for the social sciences. And like Geertz, he resisted the separate logics of inquiry insistence that followed his path-breaking work. See Howard S. Becker, “The Epistemology of Qualitative Research,” in Richard Jessor, Anne Colby, and Richard Schweder (eds), *Essays on Ethnography and Human Development* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 53–71.
Nonetheless, even though problem-driven, mixed-methods research is a growing trend in political science and related fields, such research comprises still the minority of projects and is even less represented in journal articles. Given the format and space constraints of most academic journals, the tendency is to present findings associated with one particular data collection effort even if it was part of a mixed-methods project. These constraints may need to change if problem-driven, mixed-methods research reflective of the phronetic approach is to get a full hearing. The possibilities that come with electronic publishing of journals over the internet may well help in this regard.

Were the conditions to be made right, the possibilities increase for problem-driven mixed-methods research to flourish not just across political science research efforts but within specific political science research projects. These would be projects that resist the Manichean debates between positivists and interpretivists that pose the false choice of the separate logics of inquiry. These would be projects that often find their frame as primarily what Shapiro has called problem-driven research, where a researcher starts with a specific problem in the world of politics and then employs multiple approaches to study it as best he or she can. Further, these are not simply mixed-methods, problem-driven projects but instead are mixed-methods, problem-driven investigations that explicitly practice a critical pluralism, specifically by seeking to gain an analytical advantage that comes from highlighting the interpretive moments in their positivistic analyses and vice versa. This, then, is more than triangulating findings by collecting several different types of data about a particular topic. In joining Dryzek’s call for critical pluralism in research, Topper provides the philosophical orientation for such political science research. His argument can be summarized without too much violence as highlighting the analytical power that comes with constructing a critical pluralism within specific political science research investigations.

The power of such combined approaches needs to be assessed by researchers on both sides of the positivistic and interpretive divide. Should the claims made for a critical pluralism within political science research hold up when evaluated by political researchers of various stripes, we might start to see our way beyond some of the most fractious and debilitating divisions that afflict the discipline. Then, mixed-methods, problem-driven research might be able to better deliver on the founding promise of the field to connect science and democracy, leading to the improvement of both, not just in theory but in practice as well.

**Phronetic Political Science is Political Political Science**

The turn to problem-driven and mixed-methods approaches is matched by another turn. In recent years, debates over choosing between positivism and interpretivism have been overtaken by a “practical turn” that is agnostic on methods if they are employed or even combined in service of better connecting research to ongoing political struggle. As with any movement, sometimes the

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36 Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences*.
37 Topper, *The Disorder of Political Inquiry*.
agenda can be pushed too far, suggesting that all research should have immediate practical relevance, eschew the use of abstract theories that are not immediately digestible by public policy-makers, or should be in service of the state. Yet, many political scientists of various stripes, from empirical researchers to theorists, have warmed to the idea that more efforts in the discipline should try to connect to ongoing political struggle. Moreover, at least in the context of the United Kingdom, government assessment of political science research output now includes significant attention (20%) to the “impact” of research on practice, which in our terms creates new incentives for problem-based research of the kind we advocate here.

Out of all the ferment, Bent Flyvbjerg’s call for “phronetic social science” has led a charge in the practical turn. Phronetic social science promotes mixed-methods problem-driven, contextualized studies that relate to specific issues political communities are struggling to address. Flyvbjerg anticipated the two main complaints that the perestroika movement made about political science in his original critique of the social sciences more generally: (1) mainstream research too often mistakenly sought to apply the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social phenomena; and (2) as a result, research too often was disconnected from helping people address the problems they were confronting. Without the labels, Flyvbjerg called for problem-driven, mixed-methods research that offered contextually specific understanding of social problems in ways that helped the people being studied to address their problems better.

By drawing on the Aristotelian categorization of types of knowledge, he called his approach “phronetic social science.” For Aristotle, episteme was universal knowledge, techne was essentially practical application of that knowledge in the form of a technique, and phronesis was the practical wisdom that emerged from having an intimate familiarity of what would work in particular settings and circumstances. For Flyvbjerg, while the natural sciences studied a subject matter of the physical world that was amenable to universal models of causal laws and such, the social sciences could not produce such knowledge of the social world given its subject matter, that is, people whose subjective states of consciousness and shared understandings were not amenable to being modeled by transcontextual, universal causal models. Instead, the social sciences were better adapted to provide contextually specific knowledge that could help people address the major problems they confront in their lives. Social science could conduct research that would enhance phronesis, the practical wisdom born of an intimate familiarity with a practice that could help people act effectively in particular situations. Flora Cornish notes:


40 For general arguments in favor of greater engagement by theorists, see Jason Frank and John Tambornino (eds), *Vocations of Political Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).


Phronesis can be understood as part of a “turn to practice” in the social sciences. After the “linguistic” and “cultural” turns gave center-stage to symbols and meanings in human affairs, attention to practice is one way of returning materiality to social theory. Phronetic social researchers engage in detail in the complexities of the phenomena which they study, examining why things are the way they are, often uncovering undesirable workings of power, and asking how things could be improved. In so doing, they develop both practical wisdom and theoretical tools that provide lenses for problematizing and reconstructing practices in other settings. They explicitly do not strive to create general or universal theories of human behavior.43

Flyvbjerg has argued that there is nothing new in linking political science with phronesis.44 Aristotle explicitly did this more than two thousand years ago in his original definition of phronesis, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which today is still foundational in studies of phronesis. Aristotle here emphasized that “Political science and prudence [phronesis] are the same state of mind” and that political science must deal both with general legislation and particular circumstances and must be practical and deliberative. “Prudence [phronesis] concerning the state [the object of political science, for Aristotle] has two aspects: one, which is controlling and directive, is legislative science; the other... deals with particular circumstances... [and] is practical and deliberative.”45

Two things are worth noting here. First is Aristotle’s assertion that political science, as a consequence of the emphasis on the particular, on context, and on experience, cannot be practiced as *episteme*. To be a knowledgeable researcher in an epistemic sense is not enough when it comes to political science because “although [people] develop ability in geometry and mathematics and become wise in such matters, they are not thought to develop prudence [phronesis],” according to Aristotle.46 A well-functioning political science based on phronesis is imperative for a well-functioning society, says Aristotle, inasmuch as “it is impossible to secure one’s own good independently of... political science.”47 Second, we may benefit from paying close attention to Aristotle’s emphases in his concept of phronetic political science of both the collective (the state) and the particular, of control and circumstance, of directives and deliberation, of sovereign power and individual power.

Since the time of Aristotle, an unfortunate division has developed in political philosophy between two separate traditions, each representing one of the two sides stressed by Aristotle. One tradition, the dominant one, has developed from Plato via Hobbes and Kant to Habermas and other rationalist thinkers, emphasizing the first of the two sides. The other, Aristotelian in origin, has developed via Machiavelli to Nietzsche, and to Foucault in some interpretations.48 Today, the two traditions tend to live separate lives, apart from occasional attacks from thinkers within one tradition on thinkers within the other, the critique by Habermas of Foucault and Derrida, and vice versa, being cases in point. However,

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43 Cornish, “Social Science as Practical Wisdom.”
46 Ibid., 1142a12–29.
47 Ibid., 1141b27–1142a12.
Aristotle wisely insisted that what is interesting, for understanding and for praxis, is what happens where the two now largely separate intellectual traditions intersect—where particular circumstance and context meet general rules of governance and conduct—and that this point of intersection is the locus of appropriate phronetic activity.

Flyvbjerg’s call for a phronetic social science rejoins these competing philosophical traditions, laying the basis for a more politically engaged approach to research focused on the role of power in addressing specific public issues. In recent years, his work has been joined by growing numbers of researchers who want to connect their work to people’s efforts to address public problems and make change in the political arena.49 There is now a growing interest in following Flyvbjerg by pursuing problem-driven, mixed-method research in the social sciences today. It is not difficult to see how research into the politics of health care, climate change, airport expansions, human rights, transitional justice, urban planning, poverty alleviation, conflict, and other topics would benefit from application of the phronetic approach. The knowledge community around these and other significant issues is replete with the “unconsciously competent” expertise that ought to be part of the scholarly endeavour. Well-designed problem-driven research that is informed by this knowledge community, fortified with systematic research analysis, challenges many of the dominant understandings, framings, and hegemonic discourses of these issues as well as the relations of power that sustain them.

The phronetic approach focuses specifically on the role of power in public problem-solving. Indeed, in our book Real Social Science, we identified a remarkable set of common “tension points” across eight case studies that form the core of the book. Whether analyzing Native American people in Canada, women re-entering the workforce in New York, or the New Labour government in the UK pursuing a policy of “sustainable aviation,” the idea of “tension points” emerged as a critical theme across the case studies. Such tension points consist of “power relations that are particularly susceptible to problematization and thus change, because they are fraught with dubious practices, contestable knowledge and potential conflict.”50 In fact, the identification and investigation of these tension points across whatever area of policy can bring about significant change, as these points are analogous to the tiny exploitable fissures in a rock face that when hit often enough with a hammer can bring down a mountainside. For us, tension points are “the fault lines phronetic researchers seek out.”51 In other words, the tension points phronetic research identifies go to the heart of political analysis. Indeed, our own research on megaprojects (Flyvbjerg), human rights (Landman), and poverty and race (Schram) use social scientific analysis to challenge power relations and bring about positive social change by focusing on tension points. In this way, we are engaged in value-based, problem-driven research that in many ways sidesteps the whole problem of positivism versus interpretivism.

Challenging power relations by doing phronetic political science focused on tension points can be a conflictual and, in some instances, adversarial process. This is particularly the case as scholars insert their research into the breaches they

49 See Flyvbjerg, Landman, and Schram, Real Social Science.
50 Flyvbjerg, Landman, and Schram, Real Social Science, p. 288, emphasis added.
51 Ibid., 290.
are studying in order to affect change. People who stand to win from the change may applaud the research, but people who stand to lose are likely to oppose it. Tension points “bite back,” as observed in *Real Social Science*. If nobody cares about your research, positively or negatively, perhaps it is time to reconsider its relevance. For some researchers, and perhaps especially early-career scholars and graduate students, the level of public attention and conflict that may ensue when tension points bite back can possibly be intimidating.

Ultimately, what is the alternative? Do we really want the next generation of political scientists to become conventional academics, concerned mainly about academic impact, that is, journal citations, instead of public, practical impact on policy and politics? We suggest not. To make a difference to the communities and societies in which we live and work, we need to be concerned about both types of impact, and the two are equally important. From its founding as a social science discipline to now, political science has been first and foremost about political practice; its efforts to understand politics have always focused on helping improve political practice and the expectation has been that the empirical research political scientists engage in ought to as well. Today, there is ferment in political science, pushing past methodological debates, encouraging a mixing of methods in order to better connect political science research to political practice. Phronetic social science can contribute to this ferment. It provides a thoughtful approach to better connect political science research to ongoing political struggle. Like phronetic researchers in other fields, phronetic political scientists do not hide in the ivory tower of academia; they have the courage and skills to enter into the fray of public debate and policy with their research. They know that knowledge is power and that they have a civic duty to use this power—and use it wisely, that is, phronetically—in the service of the communities in which they live.