

## Conference Report

### Towards consilience

### *Thirty years of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences*

---

Nichole M. Bauer

Department of Political Science

Indiana University

1100 E. Seventh Street

Bloomington, IN 47405

*nmbauer@indiana.edu*

---

Scholars, scientists, and policymakers converged last fall at the annual meeting of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences (APLS) held on the Indiana University campus in Bloomington from October 14–16, 2010. Founded in 1980, the association uniquely merges evolutionary, genetic, and ecological knowledge with the study of political behavior, public policy, and ethics. This year's annual meeting celebrated the diversity of scholarship embodied by the association with the theme, "Toward Consilience: Thirty Years of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences."

Organized by Erik Bucy of Indiana University and Patrick Stewart of the University of Arkansas, the meeting offered a plethora of panels and presentations from scholars interested in biopolitics and related areas. The gathering marked the second time in recent years that the APLS meeting was held on the Bloomington campus, the last occurring in 2006. With nearly 70 presentations, conference attendees had no shortage of topics to choose from. Panels addressed healthcare reform, environmental policy, international security, gender and politics, nonverbal communication and leadership, and more.

The diversity of research presented at the meeting exemplified the association's founding mission to develop innovative connections across disciplines, methods, and approaches. Presentations embraced consilience by exploring the interplay between biology and politics, individual rationality and government

policy, as well as evolutionary theory and international relations. This report offers an overview and retrospective of the research showcased at the meeting.

#### Day 1

Elinor Ostrom, 2009 Nobel Prize Winner in Economics and Distinguished Professor and Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science at Indiana University, headlined the conference with an energetic keynote address titled "A Polycentric Approach to Climate Change." Ostrom stressed the need for multilevel, cooperative efforts to curb global warming, an issue that transcends national boundaries. A polycentric approach to the issue requires individuals, local communities, regional governments, nations, and international entities to collectively develop and implement an effective solution to the challenges presented by climate change. The address, both animated and inspiring, built on Ostrom's own research examining how local communities work together to prevent natural resource depletion—a line of inquiry that earned her a Nobel Prize. Ostrom's work exemplifies the principles of the association; she approaches each research project with an interdisciplinary outlook, and works with collaborators sharing diverse backgrounds.

Implementing the strategies outlined in Ostrom's address, which set the tone for the invigorating exchange of ideas at this year's conference, raises a number of challenges and new avenues of research. A major unresolved question internationally is how to

doi: 10.2990/30\_1\_107

balance disparities in economic development with environmental policies that curtail greenhouse gas emissions. Ostrom's polycentric philosophy poses problems for resource challenged communities that lack the political and financial capital needed to develop effective policies. Uncovering creative ways that small communities can better leverage existing resources is an area ripe for intensive research. Additionally, there is ambiguity surrounding the appropriate role of international institutions, namely the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Applying institutional analysis to international organizations can clarify how these entities can best promote effective and economically efficient climate change policies.

Thursday morning opened with a lively discussion about rationality on the panel "Libertarian Paternalism: Perspectives on Thaler and Sunstein's *Nudge*." Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein premise their argument in *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* on the notion that individuals act irrationally most of the time. The authors draw on traditional economic theory and define rational decisions as those that maximize economic self interest. Irrationality emerges, they argue, when an individual's cognitive and affective thought processes clash; when this clash occurs, emotions generally win. Thaler and Sunstein provocatively assert that governments have the responsibility to "nudge" people into making better decisions, guided more by reason and less by emotion. Rendered problematic by affective intelligence models and recent emotion research, this argument nevertheless provided the foundation for a spirited debate.

The first two panelists defined the core elements in Thaler and Sunstein's argument. Charles Kroncke's presentation, on "Libertarian Paternalism and Economic Theory," tackled the conflicting concepts of libertarianism and paternalism. Libertarian ideals uphold individual freedoms, and maximizing freedom requires limited government. By contrast, paternalism requires a third party to intervene in the decision making process to help individuals make the best choice. Kroncke highlighted an inherent tension between a libertarian philosophy and a paternalistic outlook. Paternalism by definition requires some form of intervention, whether from the government or another third party, yet libertarians staunchly favor limited government. Missy Houlette elaborated the

concept of nudging in her presentation, "The Socio-Psychological Basis for Libertarian Paternalism." Nudgers, or choice architects, understand the dominance of emotions in individual thought processes and use this information to guide people to make decisions based on reason.

Mike Tweed used his presentation, "The Biopolitical Foundations of Libertarian Paternalism," to explore the applications of the nudging approach. For Tweed, the "new politics" of libertarian paternalism are a way to promote prosocial behavior in modern nations and preempt bureaucratic rigidity. Tweed used the framework of utilitarianism to explain the benefits of this new politics. Libertarian paternalism is an attractive concept on its surface, as few would argue against the need to make better decisions. However, the presentations raised some of the serious issues that emerge from expanding the role of government in individual lives. Perhaps chief among these concerns is what role there is, in a world of libertarian paternalism, for free will and individual choice.

Government intervention in individual choice, which came to the fore during last spring's heated debate over healthcare reform, was explored at the conference on a particularly timely panel. "New Perspectives on Health Care Ethics" featured three presentations examining how best to craft a healthcare system that benefits both patients and providers. James Rutherford outlined the ethical challenges facing the healthcare industry in his talk, "Consilience, Medical Ethics and Adaptive Truth." Rutherford presented a four-part guide for a more ethical system: respect for human life and dignity, adaptive truth, the multidimensionality of human nature, and consilience. Each component recognizes the uniqueness of individuals as well as the policy constraints of the healthcare industry. Rutherford provided a framework of medical principles, and the next two presentations focused on the application of these principles.

Linda Wheeler Cardillo's discussion, "Ethical Health Care Communication in the Context of Life-Threatening Illness, Death and Dying," explored the ethical challenges of physician aid in dying practices. The process of natural death involves a number of complicated moral decisions, but it is important for individuals to have the freedom to choose how they die, Cardillo maintained. Physician-assisted suicide is a contentious moral and legal issue, but Cardillo advocated an individual's desire to choose death

without pain. Key to understanding some of the ethical qualms about physician-assisted suicide is the distinction between “allowing death and causing death,” which recasts the role of the physician in end of life decisions. Cardillo concluded her presentation with the prescription for improved communication between patients and doctors.

In “Some Ethical and Scientific Aspects of the Politicization of U.S. Healthcare Reform,” Edward Sankowski addressed two healthcare reform challenges: the influence of corporate political speech and the provision of healthcare in a globalized community. Sankowski argued that corporate entities do not always approach healthcare policy from an ethically responsible position but are oftentimes powerful players in healthcare reform. A case in point is the vocal opposition of the health insurance industry to government reform. Healthcare also has a global component. For instance, when the U.S. health care system fails to provide adequate prescription drug coverage, patients seeking a more economical remedy can easily cross the Canadian or Mexican border to obtain more affordable drugs. Such realities reflect serious shortcomings of the American system. Sankowski acknowledged the need for reform but voiced skepticism about the Obama administration’s plan.

Healthcare reform, a popular theme at the conference, was the subject of another panel, “Achieving Healthcare Reform: ‘But I Have Promises to Keep and Miles to Go Before I Sleep.’” The presentations explored the policy challenges that doctors, bureaucratic agencies, and insurance companies face as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act goes into effect. Leslie Golden and William Brandon focused on the law’s extension of healthcare services to vulnerable populations, specifically the homeless. The law calls for the creation of “medical homes” to provide care to low income and homeless populations. However, there are potential problems with putting the law into place, including outreach to vulnerable populations, recruiting medical staff, and finding an accessible physical location for affordable housing. Golden and Brandon recommended that government agencies and advocates for the homeless work cooperatively to develop a plan for setting up community based treatment centers.

Margaret Wilmoth and Sheldon Fields examined the workforce provisions of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. With the law’s passage, 32 million

previously uninsured Americans now have access to healthcare services; but there are not enough doctors, nurses, and centers to treat all these patients. Although, the Department of Health and Human Services has set aside \$250 million to recruit and train 1,700 new primary care doctors and build new community based clinics, Wilmoth and Fields argued that even with these new resources, there is still a shortage of doctors and treatment centers. Ultimately, federal and state agencies, in conjunction with health care providers, must develop cooperative, polycentric strategies to ensure that all individuals have access to healthcare.

In “Health Insurance Exchanges: Making a Competitive Silk Purse out of a Sow’s Ear?” William Brandon explored how government agencies and health insurance agencies can create the health insurance exchanges set up under the recent reforms. Health insurance exchanges foster competition between insurers selling standardized insurance policies to small employer groups and individuals who do not qualify for employer-sponsored insurance or public coverage. The exchanges should lower prices for health insurance, Brandon assured. What remains unclear is whether the exchanges will accomplish the goal of lowering insurance costs without diminishing the quality of care.

Robert Sprinkle in his presentation, “Clinical-Cultural Drift: Practice Variation from a Second Perspective,” coined the term “clinical-cultural drift” to describe a process where treatment practices vary reasonably enough for patient outcomes to seriously diverge with little awareness of the discrepancy. Sprinkle identified the institutional factors and behavioral patterns that lead to discrepancies in care provision and from these findings prescribed three corrective strategies: optimization of information, incentivization, and coordination. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act supports these strategies but an effective implementation plan will be necessary, he argued. Reducing clinical-cultural drift will require a healthcare system where each individual receives a high level quality of care, regardless of where treatment is received.

## Day 2

Friday continued the theme of consilience with panels that addressed issues associated with women’s health and international security. Presentations on

“Disease, Healthcare, and Women” explored three critical issues related to the provision of women’s healthcare: postpartum depression, egg donation, and sexual assault. Bonnie Chojnacki’s presentation, “Postpartum Depression: Skepticism of the Therapeutic State and Consideration of a New Paradigm,” examined how the medical community defines, diagnoses, and treats this affliction. While the stigmatization of postpartum depression is dissipating, there are still institutional obstacles to overcome. Namely, the medical education system operates under a masculine dominated framework, even in the area of women’s reproductive health. Chojnacki argued for the inclusion of more women in healthcare provision to transform women from passive recipients to active participants in shaping the quality of care they receive. Certainly, increasing the number of female medical providers is a start, but women’s health care needs a complete transformation that starts with improved professional socialization of both genders into the field during medical training—a responsibility of medical schools.

Alisa von Hagel’s presentation, “Compensation for Oocyte Donation and Advocacy Group Rhetoric: The Development of State Regulation,” took on the topic of egg donation and interest group advocacy. Egg donation has two basic purposes: reproduction and research. Von Hagel opened with the observation that research relying on donated eggs is increasing, but federal regulation is virtually nonexistent. Young women are the central candidates for egg donation and the industry actively woos college-age women with the promise of substantial financial rewards. Not only does this industry lack regulation, there is also little interest group advocacy on the issue. Von Hagel’s analysis of women’s health advocacy groups, both liberal and conservative, revealed that egg donation as an issue is marginally salient only for pro-life organizations committed to preventing research. A next step for von Hagel’s research is to understand why there is not more interest group advocacy or federal regulation in this area. Von Hagel’s project lays the groundwork for a more expansive analysis of the relationship between the medical community and ideologically driven organizations.

Rebecca Hannagan’s presentation, on “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Military Sexual Trauma: An Evolutionary Perspective,” explored the consequences of women in the military during a prolonged conflict.

During times of war and peace, the military community reports rates of sexual assault much higher than the civilian population. Sexual assault in the military is not a new problem, but it is exacerbated by prolonged violent conflicts. Part of the problem stems from a culture steeped in masculine norms that does not accommodate the unique factors that women bring to training, non-combat, and combat situations. The military’s basic training curriculum is silent on gender differences and how units can adapt to the inclusion of women. A problem with this research, acknowledged by Hannagan, is that the military is tight lipped when it comes to sharing data on sexual assault. The difficulty in obtaining data about reported cases, the conduct of investigations, and the treatment of survivors is a hindrance to this important research. Hannagan’s work is part of a book about gender and war, a project that will certainly be of relevance to the biopolitics community.

The next panel, “Biopolitics and International Security,” departed from healthcare and addressed the question: What are the political applications of biotheory? Three scholars discussed how bioscience and evolutionary theory apply to the study of international relations. An overarching theme connecting their papers was the idea that biotheory is not a symbol of determinism but an application within the cultural, social, and political context of international relations. No single theory predicts whether nations coexist peacefully or erupt into war. Rather, the unique context of each nation and community matters for international relations. Panelists each emphasized how researchers should not overlook these factors.

Matthew Cantele’s presentation, “Genes, Memes, and the Knowing Man: Constructing a Scientific Foundation for the Study of International Relations,” took the first crack at blending biopolitics and international relations. Genes transmit biological information in individuals. Memes are ideas and norms that spread throughout cultures. Cantele argued that memes are crucial to studying behavior in a group context. “Selfish genes” guide individual behaviors in rational choice accounts of political behavior, casting citizens as self-interested, utility maximizing rational actors. From an evolutionary perspective, however, human society developed in such a way as to limit the dominance of selfish genes and allow individuals to work together in the interest of a group. Practical



applications of Cantele's framework include examining the formation of democratizing social movements in non-democratic states.

Cantele's research suggested biology was an important supplement to traditional theories of international relations. John Friend's presentation took this notion a step further by claiming that biopolitics challenges conventional wisdom. Friend's discussion, "Synapses at War: The Implications of Neuropolitics for the Study of International Relations," focused on the implications of neuropolitics in nuclear deterrence. Conventional rational choice theory argues that the Cold War avoided a nuclear conflict because the perpetual threat of annihilation engaged leaders on both an emotional and rational level. Technological breakthroughs in neuroscience and behavioral genetics applied to the study of leaders may yield important insights about decision making in the context of broader post-Cold War dynamics and more specific modern crises. For instance, neuroimaging techniques can elucidate how the brain responds to crisis, such as the 9/11 attacks or economic collapses. With the use of fMRI and other techniques, the role of leaders in either inciting uncertainty or projecting calm and reassurance in response to international developments can be assessed neurologically.

Valerie Hudson and Bradley Thayer investigated contemporary threats of terrorism in their presentation, "Sex and the Shaheed: Insights from the Life Sciences on Islamic Suicide Terrorism." Hudson and Thayer drew on theories of evolution, ecology, and gender to study the political, cultural, and religious factors that lead people to become suicide bombers. The authors observed that Middle Eastern cultures are highly authoritarian, have strictly demarcated gender divisions, and value masculinity above all else. Thus, one interpretation is that becoming a suicide bomber is a way for young men to prove their "manliness." This research only examines the conditions under which men become suicide bombers. However, applying a similar gender dynamic analysis can elucidate not only why *men* become suicide bombers but why *women* do as well. With continued unrest in the Middle East, understanding why individuals resort to drastic behaviors is critical to preventing terrorist actions.

Complementing Elinor Ostrom's keynote address and the many panels at the conference, were several Founders Panels to attend. These discussions celebrated

the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the association and offered longtime members an opportunity to assess the contributions of APLS to the advancement of biopolitics as a field of study. Friday afternoon's panel, "Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future of Interdisciplinarity," explored the evolution of the association as an initial outgrowth of the American Political Science Association's organized section on biopolitics. On this panel were Peter Corning, James C. Davies, John Orbell, Steve Peterson, and Al Somit. As is well known, the association emerged out of frustration with the research approach of the social sciences that ignored the biological elements of behavior. Work supported by the association has made, in a mere three decades, vast strides in understanding the complexity of individual thought and behavior. Somit observed how innovative methodological approaches to studying human behavior pioneered by biopolitical researchers, such as the close observation of primates, offer insight into how humans form social structures and hierarchies.

Not only did this discussion reflect on the origins of the field, new paradigms were presented for blending political and biological approaches. Holistic Darwinism is one such theory that focuses on the functional relationships between units and various levels of biological organization from genomes to ecosystems. Peter Corning offered a view of how the paradigm shift away from "selfish gene theory" had an important impact on the social sciences. Human behavior is part of a larger evolutionary process and social group dynamic; studying these aspects offers a more comprehensive understanding of how humans behave than rational choice theories or other individualistic accounts. Researchers working at the intersection of politics and the life sciences have filled in many gaps in understanding human behavior in a relatively short time, but myriad unanswered questions remain.

### Day 3

Concluding the conference were two panels that scrutinized the political implications of biobehavior and individual attitudes. "Biobehavior in Politics" featured four presentations that critically examined how the nonverbal behaviors of politicians matter for voter responsiveness and policy outcomes. Erik Bucy

and James Ball, in their presentation “Quantifying the Claim that Nixon Looked Bad: A Visual Analysis of the Kennedy-Nixon Debates,” revisited the 1960 presidential debates, performing a detailed analysis of the candidates’ nonverbal communication. Conventional wisdom holds that radio viewers thought Nixon outsmarted Kennedy in the first debate while television viewers certified Kennedy as the winner. Bucy and Ball coded the debates, shot by shot, recording the number of times each candidate blinked, changed their expression, or was filmed from a different camera angle. Anchoring the analysis was the theory of nonverbal expectancy violations. This theory posits that public communicators must adhere to appropriate presentational norms. In the case of politics, candidates who violate viewer expectations pay a heavy evaluative price. Empirical analysis of the debates confirmed that Kennedy exuded an air of confidence; he appeared calm and met the norm of expected nonverbal communication. On the other hand, Nixon blinked rapidly and smiled inappropriately throughout the first debate, engaging in nonverbal behaviors that arguably left viewers with a sense of unease about the presidential candidate.

Patrick Stewart and Pearl Ford also emphasized the importance of visuals. Their presentation, “The ‘Happy Warrior’ Revisited: Participant Response to Happiness/Reassurance Displays by President Barack Obama,” updated Roger Masters’ earlier research on how voters respond to televised leader displays. Stewart and Ford coded five types of smiles from Obama’s television appearances and measured the emotional responses of Caucasian and African-American viewers to these displays. Various degrees and types of mouth movements distinguish smiles, which can be felt, false, or fear based. Overall, white and black voters did not respond differently to Obama’s smiles. This finding suggests that Obama’s race is not a confounding influence on how voters respond to the president’s nonverbal communication display.

The role that communication plays in influencing how individuals respond to political leaders in turn has crucial implications for voting behavior. Rebecca Hannagan and Chris Larimer moved from nonverbal communication to examine how the gender composition of city policy boards affects policy creation. In their presentation, “Out-group Threat and Gender Balance in Policymaking Groups.” Hannagan and

Larimer recounted how Iowa’s recent law mandating gender balance on city boards and commissions was the springboard for their study. Examining 20 cities in Iowa, Hannagan and Larimer found, perhaps not surprisingly, that men dominate most boards. More compellingly, their results showed that members of unbalanced, male dominated boards expressed high rates of dissatisfaction and perceived the board as unfair. The implication stemming from this is that local government works more effectively when both women and men are present, namely because a more balanced gender dynamic promotes group norms of cooperation, respect, and fairness.

Wrapping up the panel was Phil Roberts, Jr. with a presentation on “Why Human Irrationality Cannot Be Experimentally Demonstrated: Doubts About the ‘Standard Picture.’” Roberts asserted that irrationality in decision making cannot be empirically demonstrated, a premise with implications for behavioral economics. Essentially, Roberts argued that rationality is a relational concept; it is measured by how well individuals meet accepted social norms. What is sometimes seen as evidence of human irrationality might not be irrational at all. For instance, an individual choosing between two jobs under traditional rationality would choose the one that pays more. However, an individual can choose the lower paying job and still be making a rational choice. The job may have better benefits, more engaging work, or offer better hours. Roberts’ argument brings to mind Thursday’s panel that explored the concept of nudging people into making “more rational” decisions. Using a definition of rationality not grounded in economic theory reframes how researchers think about decision making. Roberts’ discussion left the audience pondering whether people make rational decisions at all and brought to light problems with defining and measuring rationality.

The final panel, “Environmental Attitudes,” probed issues of sustainability, local cooperation, and green behaviors, bringing the conference full circle to Elinor Ostrom’s keynote address. Thomas Greitens presented research conducted in collaboration with Joaquin Ernita and Patrick Stewart on the pesky business of mosquito control policy. “The Potential for Regional Policy Responses in a Rural Setting: Mosquito Control in the Mississippi Delta” measured the public’s approval of local mosquito control policies. The

researchers found that members of the public, despite education, income, and racial differences, uniformly wanted better mosquito control. A preliminary conclusion emerging from this survey based analysis is that some policy problems transcend traditional socioeconomic divisions.

Angelica Kraushar investigated the edible dimension of sustainability in her presentation, "Identifying the Northwest Arkansas Foodshed." Foodsheds determine which supermarket receives produce from which farm, and foodshed boundaries are part of a process that determines how food gets from farms to grocery stores to dinner tables. Existing foodsheds use political boundaries to facilitate how food gets to the supermarket; this means that foodsheds were not designed to meet the needs of local growers and consumers. Kraushar advocated a more nuanced approach to identifying foodsheds that support local communities in a sustainable manner. Providing produce and grains to local supermarkets based on farm proximity and the food needs of the community is ideal for developing more effective foodsheds, Kraushar argued.

Concluding the conference was Sven van de Wetering and Richelle Isaak's analysis on "Measuring Implicit Environmental Attitudes." Explicit attitudes are readily expressed and easily measured. However, implicit attitudes are less accessible and often reflect underlying predispositions individuals have toward an attitude object. Wetering and Isaak fielded a survey designed to tap into implicit attitudes and connected these attitudes with the likelihood of individuals supporting green policies and behaviors. The investigators tested their hypotheses with an undergraduate sample and encountered difficulties connecting explicit attitudes with implicit ones. Nevertheless, they found that materialism and social dominance attitudes correlated negatively to environmental atti-

tudes. The presentation points to the difficulties of tapping into latent attitude constructs, an area of research in need of more effective measurement strategies.

## Conclusion

Thirty years after the founding of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences, integrating the life sciences remains an innovative approach to understanding political behavior. Social scientists perpetually grapple with how to explain basic facets of political phenomena at the aggregate and individual level. To a substantial extent, empirical and experimental social science research falls short in accounting for individual political behavior. The research presented at the 2010 APLS conference addressed important questions about why and how people make decisions and the implications these decisions have for policy outcomes. Borrowing principles from evolutionary theory, biology, neuroscience, and gender studies provides a comprehensive framework for more fully understanding social and individual behavior. Biopolitical research illustrates the necessity of this type of interdisciplinary work and how it can expand the breadth of knowledge about government, politics, and social life more generally.

## Note

*This conference report was compiled from a series of individual reports produced by the students in Erik Bucy's Communication and Politics graduate seminar at Indiana University in the fall of 2010. Many thanks to the thoughtful comments and detailed summaries provided by Ozen Bas, Kathleen Brophy, Kioko Ireri, Hongyuan Jiang, Isabell Rhenwick, Brian Steward, Shuo Tang, and William Taylor.*