PROFESSION SYMPOSIUM

Political Scientist or Politician: Why Not Be Both?

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"Is he a political scientist or a politician?" Those words, spoken some 20 years ago to my adviser by a professor at a university where I had a job interview, put the question squarely in front of me. As a political scientist, I could potentially contribute to the teaching, scholarship, and service missions of the department to which I was applying. As a politician? Maybe not so much.

Yet, I would argue that my experiences in politics—as a candidate, a local appointed and elected official, a county party leader, national convention delegate, and an Iowa Caucus organizer—have directly influenced my research and teaching for the better. I think I am a better teacher when I can connect the theory we read to the practice. Additionally, at least two of my books—*Why Iowa?* and *The Positive Case for Negative Campaigning*—drew in part on my real-world experience (Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan 2010; Mattes and Redlawsk 2015).

Some might argue that as "scientists" we should seek to remain objective, to stand in some way apart from that which we study. Famously, Larry Bartels says he does not vote, claiming some years ago that "I think I can do all [my research] with a better perspective… [without] an active rooting interest" (Gurwitt 2001).[1]

Bartels may be right for himself, but for others, having a deep understanding of how politics operates on the ground can both enlighten theory and help us recognize when theory has gone off the rails.

My path to political science was not the usual one, as the professor's comment suggested. I returned to school for a PhD after eight years managing technology at two different liberal arts colleges. I had become bored with computers; political science—or at least politics—had always been my first love. Starting in high school, I ran for and became president of the student council, and volunteered in real-world campaigns, always losing. In college, I quickly became the chair of the Duke College Republicans (CR) and the treasurer for the North Carolina CR Federation. I also did some work with CR National Committee folks. This kind of work wasn't a career, however, and anyway I'd become a John Anderson supporter. Not knowing what to do with myself, I went on to get an MBA and start a life. For six years in Nashville, corresponding with most of the Reagan administration, I stayed away from politics.

Moving to Pennsylvania, the state where I grew up, changed everything. Soon after my wife and I arrived, our new neighbor stopped by to welcome us to town. He was a Township Supervisor—the municipal governing body for small PA townships. Without knowing it (I had not yet begun my PhD) I was observing local "Homestyle" (Fenno 1978). Rhine Miller was the supervisor's name, and I learned he tried to visit with every new family in town–fortunately, it wasn't a very big place. Miller talked about how he hoped we would become involved in the community and mentioned an unfilled vacancy on the Planning Commission. While I knew nothing about land use planning, it sounded interesting, and so I applied, was appointed, and within a year had become the Commission's chair. A few years later, I ran for Township Supervisor, and won, though to be fair it was an uncontested election. I learned the importance of simply volunteering, and have passed that down to my students ever since.

One of the revealed truths of voting behavior in the 1960s and 1970s was *The American Voter's* conception of partisanship as a psychological attachment (Campbell et al. 1960). Even as scholars debated the role of issues and information in elections, it seemed clear that party identification is the lens through which all politics is perceived. Fiorina (1981) challenged this paradigm from a rational choice perspective, but the validity of the social-psychological model was driven home to me by my own experience in politics. Voters may adopt and change partisanship through some sort of retrospective evaluative process as Fiorina argued, but even without considering motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006) the psychological attachment makes this difficult. At least, it did for me. I was a Republican through socialization; appointed and elected as a member of the GOP in the 1970s and 1980s. Post-Reagan, my retrospective evaluation was that the party had moved to the right as I moved left. Given my activism in the party, it was difficult to accept this.

In 1990, I moved to a GOP-dominated town in New Jersey as I began my PhD at Rutgers. For complicated reasons, I found myself switching parties to run for the Township Committee—the township governing body—in 1992. Going to the Township Clerk's office to make the change so I could be on the Democratic primary ballot sticks with me even after a quarter century; it was one of the hardest political acts I have ever done. My identity and psychological attachment remained with the GOP long after my "rational" self knew the party and I had gone in different directions. Nonetheless, I made the change and ran for office, losing in the general election. I ran again in 1993 and lost again. My takeaway for political science: like most things in social sciences, partisanship is complicated. It has both a rational and a psychological aspect; neither can be ignored. As we now know from motivated

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reasoning literature, the psychological aspect can be critical. While the academic arguments and the data amassed to support them are important, sometimes the experience on the ground is clarifying.[2]

service agencies seemed important. Politics gives us some understanding of why there are soup kitchens in the first place. Avoiding politics in service-learning meant avoiding critical learning opportunities.

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My practical politics experience and my academic work coalesced into a consistent whole when I took my first faculty position at the University of Iowa in 1999. Far from being a barrier, the fact that I had practical political experience apparently contributed to my hiring there. The first thing I did in planning my move was to contact the Johnson County Democrats' Chair and ask about getting involved. His response: there's an open precinct committee seat for your neighborhood, welcome aboard. The second thing I did was think about how I could engage my soon-to-be students in both the theory and practice of politics as I began to prepare syllabi for new courses.

My involvement in partisan politics in Iowa City gave me access to local county and state elected officials, who at the time were all Democrats. I also reached out to the non-partisan city council and staff. My goal was to cover the political science in my classes—voting behavior, local politics, political psychology—with rigorous readings, while also engaging students in civic life. My sense, both at the time and today, was that the emerging efforts in "service learning" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 2000) were actively avoiding the political world, due to fears that engaging in politics might result in one side or the other finding a way to be outraged. It was a bit of a tricky business to navigate, but I did it by being upfront. My syllabi told students who I was and what I did, while noting that I had served in office as a member of both major parties.

More importantly, I was as even-handed as possible in class, not pressing my own political preferences, but making space for broad evidence-based discussion. I required students to engage in politics, but told them I didn't care which side they engaged.[3] This pedagogical approach led directly to an academic interest in service learning. My then-colleague Tom Rice and I worked to explore this in more depth, convening a conference at Iowa that led to our 2006 edited volume, *Civic Service* (2006). The idea behind the volume was to highlight important pedagogical approaches to working with state and local government as well as ways to get students out of the classroom and into performing real work of real value. An undergraduate student, Nora Wilson, and I wrote a chapter on efforts to engage students in my local politics class (Redlawsk and Wilson 2006). We ruminated a bit over the question of whether what we were doing was in fact "service-learning" but decided it didn't matter. Getting students engaged beyond soup kitchens and other social

Beyond bringing local political actors into the classroom, teaching in Iowa brought with it special perks as the Iowa Caucuses rolled around. My first year in Iowa was 1999; I arrived in August. Five months after being appointed a precinct committeeman, on January 24, 2000, I chaired the first Iowa Precinct Caucus I ever attended. My recollection is that about 150 people showed up and Al Gore had more supporters than Bill Bradley, but each won the same number of County Convention delegates. This experience started me on the path of both Iowa Caucus political activity and the political science research that led to *Why Iowa?*, examining Iowa's role in the nomination process (Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan 2010). Had I not been part of the world of politics, perhaps I would have still found the Caucuses academically interesting. But, my own engagement gave me a deep insight into the process and fed my desire to better understand Iowa's influence. It also provided needed context for the research my colleagues and I did on the 2008 Iowa Caucuses.

During my 10 years in Iowa, I stayed active in party politics, although I never ran for office. My service on the Democratic Central Committee developed from precinct committeeperson to officer positions. By fall 2003, I was the 2nd Vice Chair of the county party, tasked primarily with assuring we participated in the many parades and events that populate Iowa towns of every size. No matter where the event, if political organizations were welcome, we wanted to be there. Iowa politics is about the grassroots, whether during Caucus season or otherwise. It's easy to see why. State representatives have about 28,000 people in their districts, senators twice that. It is possible in a campaign to knock on every door, to shake the hands of most voters, and to be visible at every community picnic and potluck. It's also expected in a place where senators go by first names and anyone who wants to be a highfalutin elected official is quickly brought down to size . While political scientists were developing ever-sophisticated field experiments to study the relative effects of door-knocking on get-out-the-vote efforts (Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2003), those of us doing real politics were nodding along saying, yep, that's how it works. I had learned this in my own campaigns in New Jersey, and found it reinforced in Iowa. I'm not arguing that the research does not matter; it is important to scientifically test conventional wisdom. After all, conventional wisdom doesn't always pan out. However, often it does, and often the politicians and consultants already know the academic conclusions on at least a gut level.

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By a quirk of fate, I became acting Johnson County Democrats' Chair in late 2003, as the previous Chair resigned to go to work for Howard Dean, and the 1st Vice Chair left to prepare to run for County Supervisor. As 2nd Vice Chair, I was next in line. No big deal, except that the 2004 Iowa Caucus was on the horizon, and it was suddenly my job to make sure 57 precinct caucuses came off without a hitch in what would become the largest ever turnout (until 2008). In my own precinct, turnout doubled as Howard Dean's candidacy brought in new voters. I spent December and January working with key and experienced local caucus people, without whom I could have never pulled it off. I also needed to remain neutral in the hard-fought battle, which was difficult for me but essential to my role as Chair. I had earlier hosted Dick Gephart and John Edwards in events at our home, and I was itching to be publicly on board with a candidate. But local politics requires a certain amount of restraint, at least in this case.

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My job was to ensure a smooth county-wide Iowa Caucus while also teaching a 3-week (read: daily) winter session course on the caucuses, and commenting to the media on the candidates. The challenge was to keep these roles separate, to wear the appropriate hat at the appropriate time. The day before the Caucus a story in the *Daily Iowan* newspaper highlighted the experience a reporter had shadowing me as I was:

> Answering calls from party members, organizing caucus efforts, fielding constant questions from local and national reporters, taking notes on a brown napkin as he tries to eat "maybe lunch, maybe dinner … maybe it's breakfast"—even a simple meal offers a glimpse into what caucus preparation is like. "The first priority is whatever needs to be done" … "Wednesday, we'll disappear," he said. It may be just as well; grades are due Thursday. (Elmquist 2004)

While there were glitches due to the massive turnout, we pulled it off, and we did it with teamwork. There is little doubt in my mind that my interactions with the national and international media as well as my party responsibilities enhanced my winter session class. One result of this intertwining was having Elizabeth Edwards come to my class, trailed by ABC News cameras, giving my students a front-row seat to the craziness.

I continued my political activities for several more years, including serving as Treasurer for a winning US House challenger campaign in 2006—a rare experience, indeed—and getting elected as one of Iowa's Democratic National Convention delegates in 2008. Space precludes me writing more about these, but I certainly learned first-hand about quality challengers and campaign finance in 2006.

My personal partisan activity ended when I moved to Rutgers University to be the Director of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling in 2009, precluding involvement in partisan politics. Additionally, my recent appointment as chair of the department of political science and international relations at the University of Delaware means that I just don't have time. However, what I learned as a politician has continued to feed my teaching and my research. It is possible to be both a political scientist and a politician. Navigating both successfully is challenging. It requires a certain amount of luck and well as careful thinking about one's role in the classroom and outside, but the gains far outweigh any of these challenges. ■

NOTES

1. This came up when Bartels was appointed "tiebreaker" in New Jersey's 2001 legislative redistricting process. As tiebreaker, Bartels was tasked with deciding between two plans, one presented by the Democrats and the other by the GOP.
2. In 1995 I ran yet again, and this time I won a 3-year term. In 1998, following completion of my dissertation the year before, I was re-elected in a hard-fought battle that featured extensive negative advertising. I was both the target and perpetrator of such ads. That experience helped form my perspective in *The Positive Case for Negative Campaigning* (Mattes and Redlawsk 2015) but space precludes me from detailing it. One interesting time was when my opponents claimed I was using my campaigns as experiments for my research. While Rick Lau and I were in the final stages of *How Voters Decide* (2006), I really wasn't. However, the research into voting did help my understanding of campaigning, and I certainly learned much from the practical experiences that found its way into my other work on motivated reasoning, and later, *Why Iowa?*
3. While I am not sure how well this strategy might work in today's hyper-polarized world, at the time it seemed effective in allowing students of all ideologies to feel they could participate in my class. I would argue that my involvement in real-world politics brought something to the classroom students would not have gotten otherwise. A number of my students later became GOP staffers, including during the 2016 Iowa Caucus campaign. In 2004, as part of an every-so-often newspaper exposé of professors' partisan leanings, my partisan activities were noted, with a self-described GOP student denying feeling limited, singling me out as someone who was presumably even handed (Jordan 2004).

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