

# Civically Engaged Research and Political Science

## Introduction to the Symposium: Civically Engaged Research and Political Science

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For decades, academics have faced a call to connect their work to social and political problems (Beebejaun et al. 2014; Bok 1990; British Academy 2010; Denis and Lomas 2003; Easton 1969). As the preface to this symposium highlights, this pressure has intensified specifically on political scientists in recent years. Some scholars also have critiqued the role of political scientists in the communities that they study. For example, authors in a previous symposium published in *PS: Political Science & Politics* discussed whether, how, and why political scientists should involve nonacademic audiences in their research and whether their research “can remain divorced from communities we study” (Abbarno and Bonoff 2018; Bleck, Dendere, and Sangaré 2018; Bracic 2018; Lupu and Zechmeister 2018; Michelitch 2018; Pepinsky 2018; Thachil and Vaishnav 2018).

Despite many scholars—including some political scientists—responding to these calls, political science as a discipline has yet to strongly endorse and support engaged research. Although engaged research is conducted by many individual political scientists, the lack of discipline-wide understanding of civically engaged research (CER) presents obstacles for the serious study and pursuit of this form of scholarship. This is unfortunate given that political scientists are especially well equipped to study, highlight, and offer research findings about social structures that contribute to unfair, unjust, and ineffective approaches to the governance of various public problems and collective goals.

Ongoing conversations about increasing the centrality of engaged research in our discipline was the impetus for the creation of the American Political Science Association’s

(APSA’s) Institute of Civically Engaged Research (ICER), as described in the preface of this symposium. Building on ICER, this symposium explores how CER concepts and practices can serve as a scholarly, reflexive, and practical response to calls for the discipline to be more engaged and relevant to the challenges facing society. Acknowledging and building on the collective work of community-oriented and engaged scholars, the symposium identifies and discusses foundational topics for conducting research that creates new, publicly relevant knowledge within political science. The following sections provide more background on the antecedents of CER and the rich traditions with which it shares practices and aspirations. We then discuss the nature and goals of CER and provide a set of recommendations for bridging CER into the mainstream of political science scholarship. We conclude with an overview of the symposium articles.

### ANTECEDENTS OF CER

The different approaches to participatory research are numerous, stemming from multiple traditions dating back to the calls for engagement in the early-twentieth century and methods from the mid-twentieth century. A partial list of these traditions includes participatory action research, citizen science, service learning, constructivism, fourth-generation inquiry, critical race and social theory, feminism, intersectionality, postcolonialism, and LGBTQIA+ and Black Queer Feminism.

Many of the contributors to this symposium build on this work and cite research frameworks that emphasize similar themes related to engaging community members and other nonacademic audiences. These themes include the importance of (1) equitable partnerships based on co-learning and the coproduction of knowledge, (2) capacity building and empowerment, and (3) a balance between research and action without compromising the quality of either (Wallerstein et al. 2018). These forms of inquiry also recognize the importance of intersectional power and privilege, and they emphasize positionality and reflexivity when in the research field (Carruthers 2018; Collins 1986; Falcon 2016; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015). These and other traditions cited in the symposium serve as useful frameworks for assessing how political science scholars produce engaged scholarship and encourage more work in this area of the discipline.

Engaged scholarship values addressing harms and challenges facing communities of all types as well as an inclusive sense of citizenship and justice. It encourages academics to build mutually beneficial and reciprocal bridges between the

university and civil society (Beaulieu, Breton, and Brousselle 2018). There are political scientists who are engaged scholars, including those working on scholarship to promote and analyze civic engagement on college campuses (Battistoni 2017; Matto et al. 2017; McCartney et al. 2013; Sherrod, Tor-

ney-Purta, and Flanagan 2010). This work is particularly important given its contributions to efforts by academic institutions to incorporate engaged-learning practices (Bringle and Hatcher 1996; Butin 2005; Sum 2015).

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#### UNDERSTANDING AND SITUATING CER

The preface and the “Defining CER” article in this symposium offer complementary definitions of CER that share an emphasis on the rigorous production of knowledge, mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships with people beyond the academy, and contributions to improved governance. For Bullock and Hess, authors of the “Defining CER” article, the expected outcome of improved governance distinguishes CER’s orientation from other community-based research practices even while it may include them, depending on the context of any specific project.

Many disciplines have developed their own approaches to CER. Examples include critical action research in education (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; Rowell et al. 2016); participa-

tory action research in psychology (Jason and Glenwick 2016; Lewin 1946); and community-based participatory research in public health (Coughlin, Smith, and Fernandez 2017). Scholars also have provided detailed literature reviews of the proliferation of participatory research (Goodman et al. 2018; Schram, Flyvbjerg, and Landman 2013; Wallerstein and Duran 2006). Each discipline provides frameworks for research that are discipline specific yet usable outside of the discipline, making engaged research more accessible across fields. This is our hope for CER.

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The ICER cohort acknowledges that we are not “pioneers” in encouraging scholars to critically reflect on issues related to power dynamics, ethnocentrism, and biases when conducting research with the public. In fact, ICER participants felt a need to build on and bring the discussions that occurred at the Institute to the wider political science and academic community to continue the conversation about CER with scholars currently working with nonacademic actors. The intention is

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RECOGNIZING AND EVALUATING CER

We conclude this introduction with thoughts on changes that need to be made in academia and the political science discipline to secure a place for engaged scholarship and to ensure that it will be developed and improved in the coming decades. First, CER must be recognized as an acceptable form of scholarship. This acceptance may be difficult for some scholars who have been immersed in research paradigms dominant since World War II, but there are compelling arguments favoring this change (Boyer 1996; Easton 1969). For instance, whereas some may view CER as updating our understanding of scholarship, it is better thought of as reintroducing and refining elements that once were unquestionably a part of scholarship (Boyer 1996; Smith 1997).

Second, CER should not be categorized as service (Peters and Alter 2010). Treating CER as service is deeply problematic for conceptual and instrumental reasons. CER, as we define it, is a form of scholarship and it should be treated and evaluated as scholarly work (Glass and Fitzgerald 2010). Despite its critical importance, service often is perceived as secondary and something to focus on after tenure (Neumann and Terosky 2007). Treating CER as service decreases the likelihood that faculty will approach it with the seriousness and rigor that engagement with public problems deserves. Our suggestion is that work that is public facing but not engaged research—that is, not involving a reciprocal relationship with a community that produces new knowledge—could be viewed as service. However, CER that meets the criteria outlined in this symposium should be considered scholarly research.

Third, evaluating CER should use criteria that define scholarship as outlined by Diamond and Bronwyn (2004) and criteria that define CER. Specifically, evaluations of CER

should include the rigor of the research, the level and quality of engagement with nonacademic partners, and the project's contribution to improving the understanding and governance of a social or political problem. These criteria should have a baseline expectation of performance that all CER projects should achieve. Beyond this baseline, however, each criterion should have a scale of excellence that recognizes that neither traditional nor engaged scholarship will always achieve high marks on all criteria.

Fourth, institutions should provide adequate support for faculty pursuing this type of work. Expanding on recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences Committee

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on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research (2004, 69–70), we propose that institutions (including APSA) offer “active assistance in helping departments to assess the value and substance of the work” that is civically engaged (and often multi- or interdisciplinary).

Fifth, the evaluation process should expand “the understanding and valuing of scholarly products beyond publication in highly specialized disciplinary journals” (Brown University 2019). Of course, when CER results in traditional peer-reviewed publications, this is not a problem. However, in many cases, CER also may lead to various products such as technical reports, testimony at a hearing, technical assistance to governments, and evaluations of proposed or existing policies. It is the responsibility of the engaged researcher to document these efforts; however, institutions should develop standards that recognize that CER often consists of a portfolio of work that signals an active scholarly enterprise that is both deep and broad. Institutions should treat these products as scholarly activities that can be reviewed by peers instead of accepting only traditional publications—a practice that has created distorted incentives leading to problems in the value and even validity of academic research (Brint 2019).

Sixth, evaluators of CER scholars for retention, promotion, and tenure should be selected—at least in part—based on their expertise in CER and their ability to distinguish it from other forms of connecting research to society. We recommend that APSA develops a list of political scientists who can fulfill this role as well as guidelines for evaluating CER projects.

If the political science discipline can implement these six recommendations, it will lay the foundation for scholars to make significant contributions to addressing society's pressing challenges while also leading to more robust research and more nuanced knowledge within our field. Furthermore, valuing CER in academia has important implications for our wider society, given that the participatory culture embedded in CER is vital for strengthening democratic institutions. We are confident that advancing CER will lead to more relevant and

stronger scholarship, more engaged pedagogical practices, and—ultimately—a more vibrant democracy.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE SYMPOSIUM

The five articles in this symposium focus on five different critical questions associated with CER. First: What is CER? Graham Bullock and Doug Hess discuss how CER provides a framework for political scientists to produce rigorous scholarship centered on reciprocity with partners beyond the academy that “contributes to the improved governance of social and political problems.” For Bullock and Hess, the expected outcome of improved governance distinguishes CER's orientation from

other community-based research practices even though it may include them, depending on the context of any specific project.

Second: Why should a scholar choose this framework? Jenn Jackson, Brian Shoup, and Howell Williams discuss why political scientists might choose the CER research framework. Drawing from the LGBTQIA+ and Black Queer Feminism scholarship, they emphasize the importance of embeddedness, particularly because CER can be used in studies in which the community's experiences with a public problem are central to understanding how this problem can be resolved. A researcher also might be attracted to CER because it requires scholars to consider how their perspective and work connects to the goals of individuals and groups outside of academia, thereby highlighting the crucial component of self-reflection.

Third: How does a scholar engage in a CER collaborative partnership? In the pursuit of more equitable partnerships, Adriano Udani and Kirstie Lynn Dobbs discuss the necessity of deconstructing power asymmetries while outlining the processes behind forming relationships, which they argue is an essential component of CER. Drawing on previous research, they identify guiding principles and questions for achieving reciprocal and equitable partnerships.

Fourth: How might CER be implemented in the classroom? Focusing on a specific set of partnerships (e.g., the APSA/Carnegie Civic Engagement literature), Margaret Commins, Veronica Reyna, and Emily Sydnor connect directly to the work of numerous scholars who incorporated civic engagement in their classroom and they outline how CER can be additive to these experiences.

Fifth: What are the ethical issues associated with CER? The issue of exploitation is touched on in all of the symposium articles; however, it is addressed specifically by Veronica Reyna, Randy Villegas, Michael Simrak, and Maryann Kwakwa in their article, which focuses on the ethical complexities of conducting research with communities—especially marginalized groups. Building on previous work, the authors note that the ethics of conducting CER often go beyond the

boundaries of institutional review boards because scholars reckon with power asymmetries, community fatigue, and their own positionality with respect to the project in question (Michelitch 2018).

In conclusion, the authors in this symposium conceive of CER as a “big tent” and embrace the fact that each contributor offers a slightly different perspective. Given the diversity of our research and collaboration processes, our efforts to define, conduct, and evaluate CER will continue to evolve—as do other approaches to research. Building on related work, our hope is that this symposium will provide a foundation for this process and give shape to CER within our discipline. ■

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