

Wilson's Failure: Roots of Contention about the Meaning of a Science of Politics

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Woodrow Wilson sought to establish a new kind of statesmanship for the American regime and a new science of politics. He intended the latter to support the former, so that the practicing politician and the studious academic would not talk past one another. His efforts to redirect the discipline away from a natural science orthodoxy and subdisciplinary fragmentation were largely ignored during his time because he failed to resolve the core disciplinary tension between political science and political power. Efforts similar to Wilson's have resurfaced periodically as a result, generating an ongoing contentiousness about the character of the discipline. We predict that the struggle over such fundamental matters will continue unabated, for that struggle is rooted in the very object of our studies.

Political science entered the twenty-first century engaged in a debate about its character as a scholarly discipline and the direction of its future development. The "Perestroika" movement is only the most recent manifestation of a struggle within political science that has its roots in the early years of the discipline's growth. A bifurcation between formal models and quantitative analysis, on the one side, and more analogical approaches and qualitative methods for the study of politics, on the other, continues to roil the field. Although political scientists often succeed in synthesizing the two to produce first-rate scholarship accessible to students and practitioners of politics alike, the debate rages on because it is linked to serious differences in the answers scholars offer to fundamental questions about the possibility and advisability of separating political study from political practice.¹

As a founder of the discipline and an early President of the American Political Science Association, Woodrow Wilson gave considerable attention to those fundamental questions and articulated forcefully the analytical orientation he thought most suitable to a science of politics. By his failure to convince his colleagues to follow his lead, Wilson fixed in the discipline's DNA disputes about epistemology and method that are ultimately rooted in ambivalence about political power.

In his scholarship and to a considerable extent in his political practice as well, Wilson sought to establish a new kind of statesmanship for the American regime. Closely tied to this endeavor were his ideas for a new science of politics. Indeed, he intended the latter to support the former, so that the practicing politician and the studious academic would not talk past one another. They would instead engage in the same grand enterprise of ensuring the long-run sustainability and

adaptability of the regime in the face of the cross-cutting, fracturing forces of modernity. Wilson's effort in this regard reached a culmination of sorts in his Presidential Address to the APSA in 1910, which he delivered shortly before his inauguration as governor of New Jersey. We have no extant records of the immediate reaction to Wilson's speech from his fellow political scientists, but we do know that the discipline ultimately set off in a direction largely the opposite of what Wilson advocated.

Wilson's rejection of the narrowness of formal political science training during his years at Johns Hopkins in the early 1880s presaged his charge to the discipline in 1910. As a student under Herbert Baxter Adams and Richard T. Ely, Wilson rebelled against the movement toward scientific research and disciplinary specialization. By the time of his APSA speech, he had firmly cemented his wariness of universal principles and theory not grounded in experience. "Politics is the very stuff of life," he proclaimed. "Its relations are intensely human, and generally intimately personal. It is very dangerous to reason with regard to it on principles that are fancied to be universal; for it is local" (Link et al. 1966–1994 [22], 264).

In his critique of the emerging trends in the discipline prevailing in his time, Wilson thus anticipated the arguments of those in later generations who regarded political science as having become a narrow intellectual endeavor constrained in scholarly value and practical relevance by hegemony in specializations and obscurity in statistical analysis. Ninety years after Wilson's APSA address, "Mr. Perestroika" asked "Where is political history, international history, political sociology, interpretive methodology, constructivists, area studies, critical theory and last but not the least—post modernism?" (Perestroika 2005, 10). Elizabeth Sanders complained in 2005, "Even the highly trained are often at a loss to explain or defend the statistical method employed in an article . . . It is not uncommon to find articles in our leading journals that are statistically sophisticated and substantively quite naïve" (2005, 177). Wilson would have recognized the protest. "You must not classify men too symmetrically; you must not gaze dispassionately upon them with scientific eye," he declared. "You must yield to their passion and feel the pulse of their

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¹ In many respects our analysis is consistent with the illuminating study of the uneasy relationship between political science and modern liberalism found in Seidelman (1985), although we depart from some aspects of the interpretation of Wilson's ideas and intents found therein (see Seidelman, 40–55). It is no mere coincidence, we should add, that Theodore Lowi wrote the forward to Seidelman's study.

FIGURE 1. Woodrow Wilson

Courtesy of Library of Congress.

life when you are studying them no less than when you are acting for them" (Link et al. 1966–1994 [22], 270).

To understand the periodic emergence of protests about disciplinary philosophy and methods, it is necessary to see them as manifestations of an undercurrent of thought about the study of politics and the state of the discipline to which Wilson first gave a distinctive expression, and which has produced marked upwellings in the recent APSA presidencies of Theodore Lowi and Charles Jones, and the rallying cry of Perestroika. This continuum of thought exists largely as an undercurrent because of Wilson's failure to move the discipline away from abstract formal analysis, from methodology as an end in itself, and most especially from a natural science orientation to the scientific study of politics. To explore the import of Wilson's failure and its implications for the continued evolution of the discipline and the association that bears its name, we begin by elaborating on Wilson's thinking about political leadership and a supportive science of politics.

DEMOCRATIC STATESMANSHIP

Wilson's ideas about political leadership in a democracy perhaps have received more scholarly attention and scrutiny than any other dimension of his political thought and behavior. Several scholarly treatments (see, especially, Tulis 1985, chap. 5; Thorsen 1988, chap. 3 and 228–34) make irrefutably clear that leadership was at the very center of Wilson's endeavor toward a sweeping revision of the theory and practice of the American political regime made necessary by the forces of modernity. As he stated it in notes for his never-completed "philosophy of politics" treatise, the "most helpful service to the world thus awaiting the fulfillment of its visions would be an elucidation, a real elucidation, of the laws of leadership" (Link et al. 1966–1994 [11], 239).

Wilson was particularly concerned that an unreformed American political system would not provide the proper institutional setting for the cultivation and exercise of national political leadership (see Thorsen 1988, 46–64). For most of his years as a scholar, he contended that a properly organized legislature, in which there was an intimate connection between the makers and the executors of the law, would provide the necessary institutional setting for national leadership that was lacking in American national government. Wilson did not begin to turn his focus away from the national legislature and toward the national executive as the institutional locus for the cultivation of the new statesmanship he sought until he saw evidence at the end of the 1890s that it was not Congress but the president that could best lead the nation in coping with one of the signal characteristics of modern times—the internationalization of public affairs. Yet Wilson did not really complete the shift in his focus until he had assumed an executive position himself as president of Princeton.

What would define leadership as truly modern democratic statesmanship? With his focus on the legislature as the seedbed of leadership development, Wilson stressed parliamentary debate, and the instruction of public opinion about important public measures, primarily with respect to the administration of the nation's affairs. As international engagement loomed larger on the nation's agenda, however, Wilson turned away from an idea of leadership as the guidance of informed public scrutiny of administrative endeavors and toward a concept of leadership as the forging of public opinion in support of public action. "Leadership eludes analysis," Wilson contended in notes prepared in 1902. "It is only by the action of leading minds that the organic will of a community is stirred to the exercise of either originative purpose or guiding control in affairs." He defined leadership as "the practicable formulation of action, and the successful arousal and guidance of motive in social development" (Link et al. 1966–1994 [12], 365). Similarly, he characterized statesmanship as "the guidance of the opinion and purpose of a nation in the field of political action" (Link et al. 1966–1994 [15], 33). At the heart of this guiding of opinion, motive, and purpose was the core idea in Wilson's conception of democratic political leadership: interpretation.

First, a true democratic statesman exercising leadership as interpretation had to be from and of the people. By talent and ambition, however, and especially by imagination and a special sense of shared interest, leaders rose above the common folk. Neither class status nor privilege, but only merit and capacity, should play a role in the identification of leaders. "The real test," Wilson declared, of democracy's "excellence as a form of government is the training, the opportunities, the authority, the rewards which its constitutional arrangements afford those who seek to lead it faithfully and well. It does not get the full profit of its own characteristic principles and ideals unless it use the best men in it, without regard to their blood or breeding" (Link et al. 1966–1994 [12], 179). Lincoln was the exemplar in this regard. He was "of the mass, but he was so lifted

and big that all men could look up to him” (Link et al. 1966–1994 [19], 42).

Second, despite what he suggested in his description of Lincoln, Wilson understood the democratic leader as not standing aloof or above the people, but in their midst, at the center of discussion and, more importantly, action (see Thorsen 1988, 62). And what the leader worked with at the center of political society was the myriad habits and sentiments, thoughts and motives, of citizens. This is what the leader interpreted, and by virtue of that, identified the commonalities and unities, gave voice to the common interest and purpose, and thus articulated public opinion. Wilson saw this as a subtle yet powerful process that required careful explication.

The true work of leaders, Wilson contended, was action, not thought. However, leaders worked with “the firm and progressive” popular thought, and not the “momentary and whimsical” popular mood; that is what in part distinguished true leaders from demagogues. Thus, interpretation was the enterprise of reading the common thought, in order to “test and calculate very circumspectly the *preparation* of the nation for the next move in the progress of politics” (Link et al. 1966–1994 [6], 659, emphasis in original). Wilson also stressed in his conception of leadership that democratic statesmen worked with the masses, not with individuals. They had to advance ideas that were simple and easily absorbed; they had to work not through dissemination of information but through persuasion and gaining the confidence of large numbers. Leadership as interpretation did not mean that leaders told citizens what to think, however. Instead, the leaders showed citizens what they *would think*, based on their own inclinations and partial thoughts, if only they had the time and energy to fully contemplate the common interest and the general good.

Furthermore, popular leadership did not follow the straight line of logic, but instead the more convoluted path of habit and sentiment, “the actual windings of the channel” (Link et al. 1966–1994, 662). Successful leadership, Wilson concluded, was a matter not of antagonism, but of sympathy, “the impulse of a profound *sympathy* with those whom he leads,—a sympathy which is insight,—an insight which is of the heart rather than the intellect” (666, his emphasis). Although circumstances and conditions, including variations across regimes, would demand leaders of varying characteristics, there were common elements, including sensitivity, conceptual and interpretive prowess, initiative, and “subtle persistency” (Link et al. 1966–1994 [12], 365).

Finally, constraints on the leader were a crucial component of Wilson’s conception of democratic statesmanship (Thorsen 1988, 232). In his notes for his unpublished manuscript “The Modern Democratic State,” under the subheading “Individualism,” Wilson stated, “One dare not be so individual in social activity as in art, e.g., dare not outrun or shock the common habit; dare not *innovate*. Such is not the task of leadership” (Link et al. 1966–1994 [5], 59, emphasis in original). Similarly, in *The State* Wilson warned that the “habit of the nation” was a stubborn and sometimes

volatile material that would resist a leader who sought to push it too far (Wilson 1890, 661–62).

Summarizing his thoughts on the matter a decade later, Wilson concluded that the “problem of every government is leadership: the choice and control of statesmen and the scope that shall be given to their originitive part in affairs; and for democracy it is a problem of peculiar difficulty” (Link et al. 1966–1994 [12], 178). Democracy’s problem was “to control its leaders and yet not hamper or humiliate them; to make them its servants and yet give them leave to be masters too, not in name merely but in fact, of the policy of a great nation” (179). Helping democracy solve its problem, and in the process helping but also restraining its leaders, was the science of politics Wilson envisioned.

THE STUDY OF POLITICS

As we have already noted, Wilson’s ideas about a science of politics can be found among some of his earliest scholarship. Such a science would be based on historical and comparative analysis and dedicated to practical use in government. He argued that representative government, while subject to logic in the long-run, was governed primarily by short-run prejudice and convenience. Thus, a purely academic orientation, with its embrace of logic and reason, was inadequate as an approach to the study of politics. The proper approach, he insisted, had to be more in tune with the nature of politics in representative government, and thus of “great direct aid” to government (Link et al. 1966–1994 [5], 139). He characterized politics as “an experimental art,” and as “largely an affair of management and expediency” (140).

Wilson further called for a regime-specific orientation to political analysis, envisioning “inquiry, through every available channel, as to the real forces now at work in politics and the actual operation of governments of the world. This would be, not a study of systems merely, but also of the circumstances and spirit which make each system workable in its own country and amongst its own people.” He insisted that students of politics had to seek alternate routes to understanding that passed through the works of the giants of literature, like Shakespeare, and not just the works of political theorists and philosophers. Such alternative paths were essential “to penetrate to the heart of the nation’s—if possible, of *each* nation’s—being, laying bare the springs of action and the intricacies of acquired habit, political morality as well as political forms, political prejudice and expediency, as well as political reason and rigid consistency” (Link et al. 1966–1994, 140, emphasis in original).

Direct observation was a critical method, so the student of politics “must frequent the street, the counting-house, the drawing-room, the club house, the administrative offices, the halls—yes, and the lobbies—of the legislatures.” Especially important was to learn “how men who are not students regard the Government and its affairs.” One may acquire “many valuable suggestions,” but more importantly, “learn the available

approaches to such men's thoughts." What was the purpose? "Government is meant for the good of ordinary people, and it is for ordinary people that the student should elucidate its problems" (Link et al. 1966–1994, 399). Yet Wilson pointedly argued against a natural science orientation to the study of politics. He warned those who sought to make the study of politics a science not to follow economics down the path of emulating the structure and methods of the natural sciences. The proper concept of science for the study of politics, he insisted, was "a science whose very expositions are as deathless as life itself. It is the science of the life of man in society." That meant, again, that the student of politics had to get his hands dirty or learn nothing. Studying only from the library was counterproductive, for it might lead one to "admire self-government so much as to forget that it is a very coarse, homely thing when alive," so one "may really never know anything valuable about it" (Link et al. 1966–1994, 405).

Wilson's approach to political science derived, in part, from his appreciation of the law. "The life of society is a struggle for law," Wilson stated at the beginning of his APSA presidential address (Link et al. 1966–1994 [22], 263). The former University of Virginia law student went on to say that "where life changes law changes, changes under the impulse and fingering of life itself." Wilson was unimpressed with the American system of legal education, one that favored practical training without any thought to the societal experiences that lead to the formation of the law. Practical training without a keen appreciation of the philosophy of law was too rigid for Wilson. Thus did he imagine the study of politics "to be the accurate and detailed observation of these processes by which the lessons of experience are brought into the field of consciousness, transmuted into active purposes, put under the scrutiny of discussion, sifted and at last given determinate forming law" (Link et al. 1966–1994, 264).

One of the most distinguishing features of Wilson's political science was his absolute and unshakable insistence that a theory of political organization and political conduct generally applicable to all states could not be fashioned out of a few *a priori* assumptions and idealistic principles. To build political theory on such foundations was to be speculative and doctrinaire, which was neither useful nor safe. It missed the subtleties, intricacies, and even the illogic of society that was the true stuff of politics, and it led to radicalism and revolutionary doctrine that was destructive of the habits, character, and sentiments of a people, which constituted the only realistic foundation for truly democratic governance.

In rejecting the radical and doctrinaire in political thinking, Wilson also rejected the rigid and inadaptable. A science of politics had to be oriented toward action and not just aimed at the refinement of political thought. It thus had to be oriented toward democratic development and changing conditions at the level of the nation and national leadership, and it had to understand the past, what went on in other regimes, and current conditions so as to help guide leaders in taking the next step in the progress of the regime. Again,

then, Wilson saw an ultimate connection between the student of politics and the statesman that rested in a common aim. The "task, the difficult, elusive, complex, and yet imperative task of political science," Wilson announced in his APSA presidential address, was to build the sectioning, fragmentation, disorder, the "unprecedented differentiation" of modern social conditions "into a whole which shall be something more than a mere sum of the parts." But this was "also the task of the new statesmanship, which must be, not a mere task of compromise and makeshift accommodation, but a task of genuine and lasting adjustment, synthesis, coordination, harmony, and union of parts" (Link et al. 1966–1994 [22], 265, 267). Instead of labeling the enterprise political science and treating it as a science, and thus examining social phenomena as pure and separate forces, Wilson preferred the label "Politics," which included "both the statesmanship of thinking and the statesmanship of action" (271). Both were engaged in interpretation, and needed to have "Shakespearian range and vision" allowing them to see "things fall into their places . . . , no longer confused, disordered, scattered abroad without plan or relation." Both must also yield to men's "passion and feel the pulse of their life" (270). The ultimate aim was to ensure that law and policy were an interpretation of life as a whole.

A DISCIPLINARY NEXUS

We certainly cannot argue that the generations of politics scientists who entered the field after Wilson's presidential address to the association failed to get their hands dirty. Nevertheless, what we detect as a clear bifurcation in the field, at least with respect to the study of American politics, reflects precisely two approaches that contradict Wilson's vision for the study of politics. There is the approach to the study of American politics that examines the behavior of public officials and government institutions down to the minutest detail, giving us a remarkable picture of the conduct of our sometimes coarse and homely system of self-government and its development over time. But these valuable images are rarely tied to reflections on what they may reveal that can be of guidance to political leaders and citizens more generally. There is, second, the approach that does indeed proceed to study politics on the basis of a few *a priori* assumptions and idealistic principles, and proceeds from that to "test" hypotheses deduced from them, with the results rarely contradicting the theory. The results are then often tied, remarkably, to prescriptions about both policy design and officials' behavior.

Wilson's "failure" to redirect the course of the study of politics derived, in part and ironically, from his own practices as president—practices that laid the groundwork for the creation of a true American national state about which he was at best ambiguous. Wilson's New Freedom campaign of 1912 dissented from the national centralization advocated by his chief political rival, Theodore Roosevelt. The New Freedom expressed a

fear of the bureaucratization of American life. Where Roosevelt called for national administrative bodies such as a national trade commission with wide-ranging discretion, Wilson emphasized programs that would not lead to administrative aggrandizement, programs such as tariff reform and anti-trust measures that would restore competition in business without the imposition of national regulations formulated largely on the basis of broad grants of administrative discretion. Significantly, Wilson did share some of the views of the New Nationalists; for instance, both sets of progressives believed that Jefferson's commitment to localized politics and a limited presidency was not compatible with a large industrial society that was impinging upon political freedom and economic liberty. And during Wilson's tenure, the presidency became the chief initiator and coordinator of both domestic and foreign policy.

Wilson's first few years as president demonstrated the strength of his theory of presidential leadership, with major legislative successes such as the Underwood Tariff, the Federal Reserve Act, the Clayton Anti-Trust Act, and the Federal Trade Commission Act. Wilson's commitment to working within the localized party system impeded the immediate development of a strong national state that could direct social and economic matters. It also reflected his ambivalence about expanding the administrative power of the national government. But Wilson as president moved increasingly toward positions and policies—the creation of the Federal Reserve, the Federal Trade Commission, and the nationalization of the railroads during World War I were among the prime actions in this regard—that were more accepting of the kind of national administration that would come to full fruition during the presidency of one of Wilson's political protégés, Franklin Roosevelt.

The New Deal as a "Second Republic" is, for Theodore Lowi, the fundamental turning point in the discipline and one that Wilson himself feared. The shift was away from what Lowi maintains was the zenith of research in political science, works that were "thorough, honest, and imaginative in their use of statistics to describe a dynamic reality; and powerful and cogent in pointing out flaws and departures from U.S. ideals" (1992, 2). The discipline shifted to science and economics, exactly the opposite of Wilson's hopes. The Second Republic, with its executive domination of a centralized state, decline in political parties, expansive bureaucracy, and commitment to science, also brought about the replacement of law with economics as "the language of the state" (3). For Lowi, this turn presented the discipline with a challenge of identity, for "economics rarely even pretends to speak truth to power." Economics emphasizes methodology, and "the key to the method is the vocabulary of economics, which is the *index* . . . not a truth but an agreement or convention among its users about what will be the next best thing to truth" (5, emphasis in original). Lowi's address thus forms a continuum with a Wilsonian conception of the study of politics: "Political science is a harder science than the so-called hard sciences because we confront an unnatural universe that requires judgment

and evaluation . . . The modern state has made us a dismal science, and we have made it worse by the scientific practice of removing ourselves two or three levels away from sensory experience" (5).

Wilson forewarned his colleagues of the rise of the interdisciplinary fragmentation that began to plague the APSA in the latter half of the twentieth century. His alternative was an approach to studying politics that was relevant to political life and to the development of the state and statesmen. Similarly, Lowi claimed accusingly that "Political scientists of the Left, Right, and center are a unity in their failure to maintain a clear and critical consciousness of political consciousness. Causal and formal analyses of the relations among clusters of variables just will not suffice. Nor will meticulous analysis of original intent. It is time we became intellectuals" (1992, 6).

The line between Wilson's fascination with the law and his pursuit of a historically informed political science and Lowi's call to "meet our own intellectual needs while serving the public interest" (1992, 6) was further buttressed by the APSA presidency of Charles Jones. A Wilson–Lowi–Jones nexus reflects the pursuit of a reintegration of the discipline and a movement away from fragmentation that was, in part, one of the concerns raised in the Perestroika movement.

In his 1994 presidential address, Jones declared that "to decline to observe lawmaking is to deny oneself an understanding of how democracy works, how life is expressed through law" (Jones 1994, 1). Wilson contended that "It is still the object of political science to see how the forces move, to note how experience develops into law" (Link et al. 1966–1994 [22], 266). Jones further commented on the oft-repeated understanding that the institutions of American government are "often mixed up in each other's business." In the undergraduate curriculum and graduate training, specialization might be in order, Jones suggested. But accompanying the benefits of this specialization, which Jones readily acknowledged, there are also substantial risks "related to our understanding that the separation is ultimately a means for governing, and risks related to 'going native' by identifying too closely with our institution of choice and overestimating its role in governing" (Jones, 3). Jones's solution is Wilsonian. "A focus on lawmaking ensures that the scholars will exceed the bounds of any one institution. In its fullest sense (and by original design in a separated system), lawmaking is a cross-institutional, often inter-level, enterprise" (Jones, 3). An added benefit of this focus is substantial comparative analysis.

THE STRUGGLE WILL CONTINUE

The Wilson–Lowi–Jones continuum is the manifestation of a strong preference for induction as the defining logic for a science of politics. The arguments and critiques of the likes of Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Lowi, Charles Jones, and others express a strong desire to place observation and experience ahead of theorizing and a strong suspicion of the application to the study of

politics of simple, law-like generalizations, such as the behavioral postulate in economics, not clearly derived from direct experience or close observation of political life. The recurrences of these critiques are also expressions of deep suspicions toward ways of studying politics that do not have as their ultimate aim the improvement and advancement of liberal-democratic governance. This is what underlies the call emanating from this orientation for returning the discipline to its passion for politics, reflecting a love for coarse and homely self-government.

Lowi advocated, only half tongue in cheek, membership criteria in the APSA. Members "should love politics, love a good constitution, take joy in exploring the relation between the two, and be prepared to lose some domestic and even some foreign policy battles to keep alive a positive relation between the two" (1992, 6). This particular notion of a common core to the discipline also leads to efforts not to abandon subdisciplinary foci but to strive to make the subdivisions far less rigid, to assemble the parts into a larger whole, and thus to recover, as Lowi suggests we have lost, at least a rudimentary ability to see the signs of major transformations in the regime. Jones articulated his own approach toward such an aim. "As a parochial Americanist, I begin where my interest and training have led me—with a discussion of statute making in a separated system. It is my intent, however, to do so in a manner that encourages and strengthens comparative, historical, and cross-institutional analysis and that places statute making in the broader context of lawmaking" (Jones 1995, 4).

It is Lowi's (1992) conclusion that in the aftermath of the rise of the Second Republic political science can never fully separate itself from the state it studies. There is thus in the deep structure of the discipline a profound confusion about the relationship of political study to political practice and the exercise of power. We can trace this confusion back at least as far as Wilson's failure to convince his colleagues that his particular

conception of politics as a field of study could resolve the dilemma between the support for political practice and the restraint of political power at the heart of liberal constitutionalism. Although we may be comfortable joining those who call for returning passion and first or second order sensory experience to the study of politics with the aim of seeing the whole regime, many of our colleagues may legitimately ask whether a more studious detachment is a better approach, so that political scientists can speak frankly to power and thus ensure, as Wilson envisioned, that government is "meant for the good of ordinary people." Thus, in an even greater sense than Lowi intended, political scientists have become what we study because collectively we embody as a discipline the deep and permanent ambivalence toward power that is at the center of politics itself.

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