

# Political Science: Utility for Research in Librarianship

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## The Nature of Political Inquiry

IN THE VERNACULAR, political inquiry asks the deceptively simple question: Who gets what? More formally, political inquiry asks: What results from the "binding allocations of values"<sup>1</sup> that are made within the various systems of organized society known as states? States are the fundamental units which political scientists study, while the binding allocations of values are the process outcomes which political scientists seek to understand. States are defined as those units within societies which function to : (1) establish both internal and external order, (2) promote individual welfare, and (3) promote the general welfare. These societal units have five attributes which serve to characterize them: identifiable population, territory, government, sovereignty, and independence; therefore, each state composing the United States is a state, but so are counties and a large number of other societal units. Binding allocations of values are made manifest through the laws and administrative regulations which are made by states.

In order to study the characteristics of states, and of laws and administrative regulations, political scientists use a variety of units of analysis to focus their research. Examples of these units of analysis are: action, culture, system, decision, law, rule, policy, communication network, power structure, and group. In the final analysis, what fuels the political scientist's inquiry is a desire to understand the characteris-

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tics and interactions which play a role in, that cause, and/or that predict the outcomes which result from the authorized allocations made by the states. In order to develop that complex understanding, however, political scientists may study narrow questions such as:

- What decision-making processes were used in ancient cultures or are used in primitive cultures?
- What groups or persons benefit or are penalized by tax law in Montana or the western states?
- Who participates in the power structure within the executive branch of county governments and do the participants act across multiple issue areas.
- Do participants change significantly according to the issue on the agenda?
- Does the percentage of citizens registered to vote in communities correlate with positive results of library board issues?

“The study of politics has no clear boundaries and is not clearly differentiated from other social sciences.”<sup>2</sup> As a social science, political science may, for example, study the decision-making role of a person (normally the domain of psychology), the effect of a judicial decision (normally the domain of law), the effect of an administrative decision on the structure of a state’s welfare department (normally the domain of public administration) or the policy-making role of a neighborhood organization (normally the domain of sociology). Generally, the factor which differentiates the political scientist’s study is that the ultimate purpose of the study is to provide evidence in order to determine *who benefits from official/legal/authoritarian allocations* and, further, what difference those allocations make in societies.

### **Frameworks for Understanding Political Science**

There are at least several conceptual frameworks which could be constructed to aid in organizing and understanding political science research. One such framework could be developed from the primary units of analysis used in political science studies; for example, a partial framework could be developed that would focus upon two groups of political process studies, power studies and policy studies.<sup>3</sup> Power studies would be those that raise questions related to the distribution of power within states. For example, power studies ask questions such as: how power relates to control over policies; the effect on private or public interests of the distribution of power; competition or cooperation

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between public and private power sources; power used directly or indirectly, formally or informally; or with intended or unintended results; or whether power is or is not used. Attributes of power itself and concepts which are closely related to power—such as authority, influence and manipulation—are also studied by political scientists.<sup>4</sup>

Power-focused studies have divided those political scientists who study power structures and/or the individual participants involved in decision-making into elitist and pluralist theoretical camps. Simplistically, power elitists claim to have identified interlocking groups of individuals who determine what the agenda items will be in the political arena, while pluralists claim that the variety of issue areas on the agenda have identified a widely spread and diverse number of actors.<sup>5</sup> The genesis of the controversy is most often attributed to the findings of two frequently cited studies, Floyd Hunter's *Community Power Structure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953) and Robert A. Dahl's *Who Governs?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

An ancillary question related to the elitist/pluralist question is: What issue(s) or what group(s) are particular actors or groups of actors *representing* at any specific time? An important group of political science studies deals with the appropriate factors or attributes which validly measure just who or what is being represented. As an example of the complexity of this question, one could take the demographic variable of race as a measure of representation. For example, a black public library board member could be (and has been) determined, on the basis of this single demographic variable, to be representing the black community. An additional variable such as occupation (the specific black board member being studied might be a physician or lawyer—a typical occupation for board members regardless of race) could be a more significant variable in terms of representation in the context of public library governance. The single attribute of race may not be an important operative factor in this board member's representational role.<sup>6</sup>

On the other side of this power/policy framework is policy study. Policy studies examine public problems—how they get to the agenda of government (these studies are obviously closely related to issue area power studies) how they are acted on there, how solutions are applied, and what happens as a result of these events.<sup>7</sup> Policy studies focus on one or more of ten activities related to policy: (1) perception, (2) definition, (3) aggregation/organization, (4) representation, (5) formulation, (6) legitimation, (7) application/administration, (8) reaction, (9) evaluation/appraisal, and (10) resolution/termination.<sup>8</sup> Any specific policy under study might never develop past the perception activity or could

proceed only so far as the formulation activity before it vanished from the political agenda either for a year or a decade or more. As is the case with power studies, considerable complexity enters into the further analysis of policy. One group of studies in the policy arena focuses upon highly diffuse areas of policy outcomes such as foreign policy. Another group focuses on narrow technical policies such as telecommunications policy.<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect of policy analysis concerns itself with the type of value system with which a policy is most concerned. Oliver Williams, in a particularly compelling discussion, classifies policies as those which are developed to maintain the state's system—e.g., sewers and roads—and those developed to support the life-style values of states—e.g., libraries, museums and schools.<sup>10</sup>

Still another factor related to policy analysis is the degree to which policy development is accomplished, or the degree to which policy laws and regulations operate, in a more centralized or more decentralized manner. Education policy is often studied focusing upon what policy aspects are centralized—e.g., federal education policy—and what aspects are decentralized—e.g., state and local education policy.<sup>11</sup>

The key to a refinement of this simple dichotomous power/policy framework for understanding political science studies (which has already been shown to be not particularly simple) is to classify the studies undertaken based upon the definitions of power and policy utilized in them. As in most social science fields, definition of concepts varies considerably. It would be difficult to develop consensus for a classification of research studies even at this broad level of power and policy studies because the domains of both types merge with one another conceptually.

A conceptual framework for organizing and understanding the field of political science which may be more easily agreed upon is an historical approach. This type of framework could look at studies through their chronological appearance and determine periods during which identifiable analytical foci predominated.<sup>12</sup> Two generally accepted frameworks of the historical type (if any frameworks can be identified as "generally accepted" in the social sciences) classify studies in political science as at first historical and ethical followed later by empirical studies. Another, but fundamentally similar framework identifies the earliest studies as institutionally based, followed more recently by behavioral or process-based studies. In examining research in librarianship which utilizes political science, the institutional/behavioral framework will be used.

### Institutionally Focused Political Studies in Librarianship

Carleton Joeckel's *The Government of the American Public Library*<sup>13</sup> is often cited as the first significant analysis of libraries in the political process. He described, analyzed and evaluated the position of the public library in the structure of government in the United States. He concluded that there was no required correspondence between forms of municipal government and types of library governance. He also concluded that there was no single pattern by which to classify public library boards based upon the powers authorized for these boards. Six years later, in 1941, Eliza A Gleason<sup>14</sup> analyzed the legal basis of free public library service to blacks in the south by examining their rights, first under the Constitution and the laws of the United States and then at the level of state law and the point of local library control. Two years later, Gwaldys Spencer's excellent history of the Chicago Public Library<sup>15</sup>—published in 1943—traced the development of Illinois state law related to libraries and analyzed in detail the relationships of Chicago's public library to the city's municipal government. Spencer's work is cited here as one example of a relatively large number of historical studies which include some analysis of the legislative foundation for the development of a specific library.

Oliver Garceau's seminal volume, *The Public Library and the Political Process*, was created as part of the late 1940s' "Public Library Inquiry" and is probably the most cited work of a political nature in the field.<sup>16</sup> This study is one of the early empirically-focused studies in librarianship. In site visits ranging from two to ten days, Garceau and his colleagues studied fifty libraries in incorporated municipalities, ten county library systems, and twenty-two state library agencies. Nine topics were used to organize the study: (1) history, (2) governing authority, (3) the librarian as chief executive, (4) the library in the group life of the community, (5) relationships with schools, (6) budget, (7) librarians' participation in and attitudes toward professional organizations, (8) working relations with state library agencies, and (9) relations with other units of library service. Garceau concluded:

By and large public libraries are not thinking of themselves as employees of government or department heads in a public bureaucracy....It is the conclusion of our research that it is of paramount importance...that public librarians understand and appreciate more clearly the political world of the public library.<sup>17</sup>

An interesting non-United States study of libraries in the political process was done by John E. Pemberton, who studied public libraries in

England and Wales from 1850 to 1970.<sup>18</sup> Pemberton found that there were a few studies of municipal services that included libraries and that this was due to the ambivalent role of public libraries; i.e., it was not clear whether the public library is an educational, recreational or leisure service.<sup>19</sup> Pemberton's study—which looks primarily at the legislative development of libraries—also includes the political role played by the Library Association in the development of libraries.

Although most studies in librarianship which use a political focus concentrate on public libraries, there are a small number which analyze academic libraries.<sup>20</sup> Also, there are a number of studies which examine either the role of state government related to libraries or the role of the state library agency as a unit of state government. Beach's study<sup>21</sup> is an example of the first type and Monypenny's study<sup>22</sup> and the study by The Nelson Associates<sup>23</sup> are examples of the second type. Another study of the second type was completed by Bruce Shuman. Shuman tested the validity of an earlier study of state library agencies which indicated that such agencies, if administratively placed in state departments of education, received higher funding levels than agencies placed in other administrative arrangements.<sup>24</sup> Shuman concluded that placement of a state library agency in an education department tends to have a favorable effect upon funding levels for the agency.

### **Behaviorally-Focused Political Studies in Librarianship**

#### *"Power" as the Concept Analyzed*

Dürr<sup>25</sup> completed a case study of Baltimore's information environment to assess the role played by information in the political process as it relates to the exercise of power. He posits that there are four aspects of enhanced access to power created by control of information: (1) freedom to utilize and manipulate information in any applicable area; (2) freedom to spread or withhold information in relation to any recipient chosen; (3) freedom to choose the time to reveal information to the recipient(s) of choice; and (4) freedom to deal with information in a way that makes it possible to accept, reject or modify projects, programs, etc.<sup>26</sup> Dürr's work borrows appropriately from studies of both power elitists and pluralists and relies heavily on the seminal work of Amatai Etzioni, *The Active Society* (New York: Free Press, 1968).

A theoretical rather than empirically-based study, also borrowing heavily from Etzioni, was done by Richard A. V. Diener.<sup>27</sup> Diener, like Etzioni and Dürr, suggests that power requires control over information and that politics in bureaucratic societies is based on information control. Power emanates from differential access to strategic resources.

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Edward N. Howard<sup>28</sup> provides librarians with a framework for analyzing local interest groups, and he suggests processes through which community librarians can activate sources of local power for the benefit of libraries.

In another study which focuses on management research findings, Virginia Schein<sup>29</sup> examines the possible impact of sex-role stereotyping in libraries. Schein sees sex-role stereotyping as functioning to exclude women, "from the power and political networks within the organization,...[thereby limiting] ability to develop power acquisition behaviors."<sup>30</sup>

A final example of a library-based study using power as a unit of analysis is Pauline Wilson's study of the uses of information in leadership in the community.<sup>31</sup> Wilson used Berelson<sup>32</sup> as the source for her empirical study's question. Berelson stated that even though a minority of adults used the public library, if that minority was a particularly important segment of the community in terms of community leadership, then the public library could argue that its services had a special significance. (In other words, the public library is thus serving some members of a community's power elite.) Wilson found that while community leaders did *not* use the public library for their leadership area information needs, these leaders were in fact "a communications elite."<sup>33</sup> Further, the communications elite in the community was found demographically to resemble the public library's public.<sup>34</sup>

### *"Representation" as the Concept Analyzed*

Both Joeckel<sup>35</sup> and Garceau<sup>36</sup> described the characteristics of public library board members. More recent studies have attempted to determine whether there has been a change in the demographic characteristics of these board members since the 1930s and 1940s. Prentice,<sup>37</sup> Robbins<sup>38</sup> and White<sup>39</sup> all find that, demographically, public library board members have changed little.

Prentice's study concentrated on the degree to which public library board members were active politically. She determined that in 1970 board members were not particularly active, "but more than half do participate in non-partisan activities such as conservation and education."<sup>40</sup> Further, she determined that: "Boards of trustees, the majority of whose members were *active*, had no greater success in obtaining higher levels of funding than those boards whose members saw their role in a *less active* fashion, although in some individual libraries there was a relationship between trustee role perception and level of funding."<sup>41</sup> Prentice's study was based upon the membership of boards in thirty-six libraries serving communities with populations from 60,000

to 150,000 located in Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.

Robbins's study, conducted in the early 1970s, was based on a national stratified random sample of public libraries, and it attempted to determine whether these libraries were seeking representation from nontraditional publics through the use of advisory committees. Public library board members were identified as predominantly made up of traditional members and "citizen participation in any form other than the traditional library board is a phenomena which has not impacted the public library."<sup>42</sup>

White's article is a review of some of the research on lay citizen boards in library governance. She suggests that further study should be undertaken regarding whether there are trends in (1) the elimination of public library boards, (2) making these boards advisory rather than policy making, and (3) broadening the representation of members of library boards if boards are to be maintained.<sup>43</sup>

All of these studies measure representation in only its most simplified form. None of them address the complex characteristics of representation identified by Pitkin.<sup>44</sup> Representation, as is true of the other units of politically-based analysis identified in this article, is a fruitful source of research related to the governance of all types of libraries.

#### *"Voting" as the Concept Analyzed*

Voting studies have formed a large portion of the research undertaken by political scientists, but only a very small portion of the studies undertaken in librarianship. While it is to be hoped that many local librarians have completed studies of their community's voting patterns and it is known that many state library association committees have undertaken studies of state legislators' votes on library laws, few of these studies appear in library literature.

Guy Garrison's work<sup>45</sup> and that of Lindahl and Berner<sup>46</sup> are two examples of library research centered on voting as the unit of analysis. Garrison concluded, "that the public library, when it must seek financial support at the polls, is the victim not so much of opposition, as of apathy."<sup>47</sup> He also identified that: "Areas [defined in terms of census tracts] high on the occupation and education indices, as well as on home ownership, were favorable to the library bond issues, while areas high on home ownership, but lower on the education and occupation indices were unfavorable."<sup>48</sup> The Lindahl and Berner study produced similar results.

It seems apparent that voting studies could provide librarians with much useful information about political behavior related to funding of public services. An analysis of the many local and state studies which have been done with a focus on educational funding could provide valuable information to librarians.

It seems logical to assume that librarians have studied voting patterns on the local level in connection with library-related issues on the local ballot. But reports of such studies rarely appear in print. Perhaps librarians believe that publishing local studies and analyzing such studies regionally or nationally will produce no meaningful results. Or perhaps they have simply not considered the larger question of regional or national analysis and believe that their studies, if they have been done, have only local significance and use.

*"Policy" as the Concept Analyzed*

Perhaps the most studied unit of analysis in political science today is policy. Of course, policy studies have been undertaken for decades, even in librarianship, but during the 1970s policy studies became a principle focus of political research.

A policy study in librarianship, dating from 1944, includes case studies of South Carolina and Minnesota concerned with the impact of the library assistance projects undertaken through the Works Progress Administration in 1940-41. This program was the first federal involvement in the provision of local library service, and the study also is the first of its kind.<sup>49</sup>

In the late 1960s, Nyquist<sup>50</sup> examined the effect on public library service of the federal government's new policies related to poverty and prejudice. He concluded that these new federal policies should create an emphasized educational goal for public libraries, as that goal would serve to enhance individual benefits for the common good of society. Nyquist's study is only one example of several library policy-based studies undertaken in the 1960s.<sup>51</sup>

As the involvement of the federal government in library policy matured and was sustained, several studies of federal library policy were undertaken during the 1970s. One study was completed by the System Development Corporation (SDC) under a grant from the U.S. Office of Education,<sup>52</sup> and another by an experienced state librarian, Joseph Shubert.<sup>53</sup> The SDC study analyzes federal policy and recommends changes, while the Shubert study describes the impact of federal funding.

A major policy study related to state library agencies was undertaken by St. Angelo and others<sup>54</sup> and used an empirical approach. This

policy analysis studied eighty-two quantitative variables including, for example, population density, Democratic percentages in the houses of state government, total general state revenue, general expenditures on education, voter participation in gubernatorial elections, and state library expenditures. The authors concluded in part that:

State library agencies vary greatly in form of program and mode of operation. The support extended to the library program—whether from the legislative or executive branch, professional organizations, or the grass roots level—varies from state to state, as do the form of agencies. Yet, the study found that these support differences did not relate to the environmental characteristics of the state in any meaningful way when states were grouped on the basis of their similar characteristics. Surprisingly, the results of our analyses reveal that libraries and persons concerned with library programs operate free of the environmental restraints imposed on other agencies whose programs are more visible to the public or are more pronounced in their effect.<sup>55</sup>

The most significant study of federal library policy conducted during the 1970s was done by R. Kathleen Molz.<sup>56</sup> Molz attributed the decline in federal support for libraries in the 1970s to “the seeming lack of focus of the library program on priorities of national importance such as the equalization of educational opportunity; the absence of hard data to substantiate the social utility of libraries; and the lack of visibility of libraries within the educational arena and particularly within the Office of Education itself.”<sup>57</sup> Her analysis of policy led Molz to maintain that the purposes of the federal role in library policy should not be related to library extension and development, but rather to (1) policy research, (2) systematic experimentation, and (3) interlibrary and inter-institutional cooperation.<sup>58</sup>

One portion of policy research in political science focuses on outputs and outcomes. Within public librarianship, the movement toward studying outputs (i.e., what libraries produce) is a major shift of real significance in the field.<sup>59</sup> The impact of having a tool for measuring library outputs is not yet known; however, the high degree of interest in these measures demonstrated by librarians working in all types of libraries augurs well for their widespread adoption.

“If outputs are what governments produce, outcomes are the grand design which citizens see behind those outputs.”<sup>60</sup> In *Urban Outcomes*, Levy, Mettsner and Wildavsky studied “the government’s distribution of goods and services to the citizens of Oakland, California...how such agencies...allocate their outputs among groups in the city, and what makes the agency allocate its outputs as it does.”<sup>61</sup> In the part of their

study dealing with the public library they determined that low income areas of Oakland received less than an equitable share of library expenditures based upon the percent of tax revenues collected from them. For the library they state, "the dominant force shaping allocations is clearly the professional norms of the personnel.... Their outputs lead to outcomes that rank employees above patrons, the central library above branches, and salaries above books. Neither rich nor poor do as well as they might, but the poor end up worse because they start with less."<sup>62</sup>

By using output measures for libraries, librarians during the mid-to late-1980s may be able to study library outcomes. Outcomes are the most accurate measure of the binding allocations of values which political processes produce.

### **A Brief Comment on Methodology and Design**

The data collection methods and research designs used in political science research are the general methods and designs used in all social science research (e.g., methods such as questionnaires, interviews, observations [either unobtrusive or obtrusive], and designs that are historical, survey or experimental). Some methods are closely allied with political science research, such as gaming as a type of simulation, but method is not essential to defining what political science is. The essential definitional question is not method, but rather the question which the research attempts to answer. While method and design will determine whether a specific study is scientific research, it is the nature of the question which defines a study as political.

### **Explanations of the Dearth of Politically-Based Research**

Historically the culture of librarianship has not been oriented toward the systematic search for new knowledge. Many librarians require neither theory nor research as necessary bases for valid knowledge. The knowledge base of librarianship has been developed predominantly from previous practice, authoritative pronouncement or intuition. Perhaps because the majority of working librarians and those now entering the field lack undergraduate majors or minors in either the natural/physical sciences or in the social sciences, librarianship remains a field relentlessly oriented to practice and bereft of research studies, despite the growing research sophistication and production in the field. Doctoral programs in library schools have emerged and grown dramatically since 1965—the date of the inception of the Higher Education Act, Title II-B doctoral fellowships<sup>63</sup>—and correspondingly, the

number of Ph.D. library school faculty members trained in research methodology has risen.<sup>64</sup> However, the curriculum content of the schools continues to lack a research orientation.

In addition to its historically nonresearch orientation, librarianship has conceived of itself as importantly apolitical. Through a misunderstanding of the ubiquitous nature of political life in a bureaucratic society, and by equating nonpartisanship with nonpolitical behavior, librarians have eschewed "things" political. Again, as Garceau stated in 1949:

By and large, public librarians are not thinking of themselves as employees of government or department heads in a public bureaucracy....It is the conclusion of our research that it is of paramount importance...that public librarians understand and appreciate more clearly the political world of the public library.<sup>65</sup>

Garceau's observations about public librarians are generally believed to be true of librarians working in other publicly supported institutions.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article has not been to identify all research in librarianship which has used political theories, concepts or variables, but rather to illustrate some of the types of studies which have been undertaken. Clearly, the field could dedicate itself to a decade of studies focused on the political, and even so, such ground-laying research would only begin to identify, describe and evaluate political variables important to librarianship. Useful politically-based studies have been done, but they are few and do not lead to a "theoretical formulation which identifies the profession's position in a broader social context of all social [or informational] services and all professions."<sup>66</sup>

Simply, it is time to get on with the politically-based research in our field. There is much from the discipline of political science which can be used to shape our studies and we should borrow assiduously.

Because the stakes are so small in relation to other expenditures by states, because most legislation related to libraries is enabling rather than binding, and because use of libraries is voluntary rather than mandatory, librarians cannot expect political scientists to be highly concerned with libraries. Although as Monat states: "The mantle of 'civic ornament' is after all, infinitely preferable and strategically much more functional than the image of a 'necessary evil' or a public nuisance."<sup>67</sup> In this age of accountability, remaining a largely misunderstood and poorly explained civic ornament may not be sufficient to

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guarantee the continuity of library institutions as librarians presently know them. As those to whom society has entrusted the maintenance and development of libraries, librarians must engage in research related to the role of the library within society. Most library-based studies involving political analysis have been exhortative or theoretical. Librarians must engage in more empirical research focused upon library-related variables in relation to political-process variables.

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