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DEBATE

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Introduction to the Debate: How Does Political Science Matter? The Relevance and Impact of the Discipline

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Abstract
This debate aims at discussing the broader social relevance of political science research, a debate that has not yet taken place in Switzerland although it has been ongoing internationally. In this introduction, we highlight the main questions raised by the debate and illustrate the various contributions. With this debate we hope to stimulate further contributions on the topic in the future.

KEYWORDS
Political science, Relevance, Social impact

Zusammenfassung
Ziel dieser Debatte ist es, die breitere gesellschaftliche Relevanz der politikwissenschaftlichen Forschung zu diskutieren. Diese Debatte hat in der Schweiz bisher nicht stattgefunden, international ist sie jedoch im Gange. In dieser Einführung beleuchten wir die wichtigsten Fragen der Debatte und erläutern die verschiedenen Beiträge. Mit dieser Debatte hoffen wir, in Zukunft weitere Beiträge zu diesem Thema anzuregen.

Résumé
Ce débat vise à discuter de la pertinence sociale plus large de la recherche en science politique, un débat qui n'a pas encore eu lieu en Suisse bien qu'il se poursuive au niveau international. Dans cette introduction, nous soulignons les principales questions soulevées par le débat et présentons les différentes contributions. Avec ce débat, nous espérons stimuler d'autres contributions sur le sujet à l'avenir.

Riassunto
Questo dibattito mira a discutere la più ampia rilevanza sociale della ricerca politologica--un dibattito che non ha ancora avuto luogo in Svizzera, sebbene sia in corso a livello internazionale. In questa introduzione evidenziamo le principali questioni sollevate dal dibattito e illustriamo i diversi contributi. Con questo dibattito speriamo di stimolare futuri contributi sul tema.

This debate on the relevance and impact of political science is a follow-up of a one-day conference that we organized at the University of Lausanne on 30th September 2022. The event was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and took place under the joint auspices of the Swiss Political Science Association (SVPW-ASSP) and the Institute of Political Studies (IEP) of the University of Lausanne (UNIL). The conference itself followed discussions among us on the topic, stimulated by the volume on *Political Science in Europe: Achievements, Challenges, Prospects* (Boncourt et al., 2020).

While the conference also included a session with testimonies from Swiss political scientists involved in outreach activities, the current debate concentrates on fundamental issues and challenges related to that kind of activities. Our aim is to discuss the broader social relevance of political science research, a debate that has not yet taken place in Switzerland although it has been ongoing internationally. Such a debate has certainly gained in relevance itself with the controversies on the role of science, and especially of social scientists, that were sparked by the recent occupations of universities in Switzerland, among many other countries. Due to space constraints, we only mention here the major and relatively recent book-length contributions to that debate.

Stoker, Peters and Pierre (2015) were among the first to inquire about the relationship between political science and "important real-world problems and issues" by means of a seminal analysis of the discipline's impact and relevance in contemporary democracies. The debate has been rejuvenated in the most recent years, first by the various contributions to Boncourt, Engeli and Garzia (2020), each of which takes stock of achievements, challenges and prospects of political science's intellectual trends, professional structures, and relationship with changing the socio-political environment.

The edited volume by Eisfeld and Flinders (2021) has a strongly critical take on the (according to them) neo-liberal pressure to deliver evidence of non-academic impact of political science research.[1] The editors are concerned with the fact that such pressure resonates with a shift to state-imposed notions of relevance, while the restriction of intellectual autonomy that goes together with such a shift remains largely unnoticed by academics. What is more, in their conclusion Eisfeld and Flinders alert about the danger of sliding into an illiberal and undemocratic regime. This gloomy picture is largely shared by the eight country studies of the volume.

A co-authored monograph is the latest addition to this literature (Capano & Verzichelli, 2023).[2] It is not only dedicated to the impact of political science, as it studies the (partially related) trajectories of development, professionalization, institutionalization, and internationalization of the discipline. The core argument is very different from the book edited by Eisfeld and Flinders: not on the (illegitimate) pressures for relevance, but on the obstacles to social relevance and public

[1]Flinders reflects along by and large similar lines in his contribution to the present Debate.

[2]See also the special issue of *European Political Science* (21: 1; 2022) edited by Real-Dato and Verzichelli, with an introduction by the editors followed by six country studies. Entitled "In search of relevance: European political scientists and the public sphere in critical times", the special issue acknowledges the role that social relevance acquired in the evaluation of the public legitimacy of academic disciplines, especially in turbulent times. According to the editors, contextual factors such as issue salience influence whether and how political scientists engage in the public sphere and condition the broader resonance of their work.

visibility of (European) political science. According to the authors, among the social science disciplines, political science faces particular challenges: an uncertain identity, heterogeneity and fragmentation, as well as over-specialization, and an excessive focus of its research agenda on methodological issues. The authors emphasize that to enhance relevance, political scientists need to become familiar with theoretical diversity and develop their intellectual appetite for the major issues facing the world. Of course, the educational channel probably remains the most crucial channel of impact of our discipline: in our academic institutions we share our knowledge—both substantial and methodological, and resting on the shoulders of decades of basic research in political science—with a great number of future influential persons, such as administrators, journalists, members of interest groups and think tanks, and sometimes even politicians. In addition to this major channel of influence, many among us are in regular contact with policy-makers, by carrying out more applied research such as organizing opinion polls or conducting evaluation studies, or become visible in the public sphere through their media presence.[3]

From an epistemological point of view, Ostrom (1998) contends that by producing knowledge about the public, science bears the obligation of sharing that knowledge. We therefore think that Capano's and Verzichelli's (2023) concerns about the weak social relevance of political science (pp. 8–10) must be taken seriously, and neither can we ignore the recommendation brought forward by King et al. (1994), namely that political science's object of study should be "consequential for political, social, or economic life, for understanding something that significantly affects many people's lives, or for understanding and predicting events that might be harmful or beneficial" (p. 15).

As a matter of fact, assorted arguments in favor of the discipline's active engagement with the public have been repeatedly voiced (for a review, see Garzia & Trechsel, 2020). A recurrent claim is that, as scientific research is paid for by the public, it seems (at least at first glance) evident that the latter should receive some demonstrable benefit from the former. If anything, the last two decades have strengthened this call for more engagement among social and political scientists:

> "In response to politicians and commentators demanding 'value for money', particularly since the 2008 global financial crisis, research councils and funders now regularly integrate 'impact and engagement' criteria into their funding rules, promotion criteria reflect this, and research excellence assessments require statements of successful impact." (Wood, 2020, p. 246).

Of course, pressure to demonstrate the relevance of scientific work for society differs across countries and research evaluation systems, and the imperative of justification and accountability is unevenly present. Clearly, there are also different views as to how scientists should comply with such imperatives. The different positions condition the stakeholders that we consider important to (seek to) interact with, and relatedly the channels that we should privilege to disseminate our findings and our knowledge, in particular the publication strategies considered most optimal (targeting what core publics, and therefore publishing in which language and in what kind of outlets?). Even more importantly, any priorities affect the hiring and promotion criteria in academia, and more generally the symbolic retribution system and the establishment of reputation in the scientific system.

Apart from the deontological question, we acknowledge that it is important to better understand if political scientists are well-equipped to achieve broader outreach with their research results, if developments in our discipline make it easier or more difficult to fulfil such a function, if the resources that we allocate for such a purpose are well invested, and if we are ultimately impactful or not. Given space limits, the debate does not address all these questions, but revolves around two main contributions.

[3]We thank a reviewer for drawing our attention to these points.

The first one is a critical text by Matt Flinders, who has very clear views on the topic, based among others on his own experience as former President of the Political Studies Association (PSA) in the United Kingdom and more generally as a public intellectual. Flinders provocatively claims that—unexpectedly—it is pressure for relevance that risks making science irrelevant.

Flinders' analysis starts by observing that the international emergence of academic "impact assessment" regimes led to an increased emphasis on non-academic social impact. Achieving non-academic societal impact is increasingly seen not as separate to, but rather as a component element of, research excellence. Flinders writes that the UK was an "early innovator" in that respect, and many of its frameworks, insights and assumptions are now being replicated in different countries through processes of policy transfer. At the same time there is not only "strategic ambiguity" around the definition of impact and its measurement, with different countries adopting different approaches, but also contestation, as political science in particular evolved as a "divided discipline" with fundamental internal disagreement about what being relevant meant and how relevance could be best achieved.

Flinders' view is that political science needs to retain a certain healthy distance and independence from the state, which facilitates scientific perspective and ensures a degree of democratic criticality. He is concerned with the increasing "shadow of the state" as expressed through politically rather than scholarly selected research priorities, and with the creation of incentives that might serve to co-opt political science into established frameworks in ways that undermine independence. Flinders points to the risk of "Faustian" bargains whereby academics essentially buy access to lucrative funding opportunities by implicitly agreeing to constrain their criticality. According to Flinders, this recalibration of the science-society relationship has political dimensions that remain under-acknowledged. His core message is to draw attention to the—at first glance paradoxical—risk of *impotence through relevance*: those scholars who currently appear to be most socially relevant may in fact be most irrelevant. However, Flinders remains optimistic in believing that there is no such fatality, and he pleads for a broader understanding of different types of impact and for a reconceptualization of relevance that needs to be promoted within and beyond political science. In that respect the impact agenda represents both a threat and an opportunity for political science.

Flinders' contribution is critically discussed by Mark Bovens, a specialist of political ethics with practical experience as a member of the Dutch Scientific Council for Governmental Policy, and by Marleen Brans and Arco Timmermans, who conducted a survey of the profession on the advisory roles of political scientists (Brans & Timmermans, 2022).

Bovens clearly disagrees with Flinders' relatively gloomy picture. In particular, he disagrees with Flinders' idea of a strong shift towards impact and collaborative partnerships in the funding of political science insofar as "academic achievement remains by far the most important indicator in research assessments and tenure decisions at universities". More importantly, Bovens denies that "government is the devil who comes to get the soul of political scientists", and forcefully argues that at least in democratic regimes there is nothing illegitimate for political scientists in conducting policy relevant studies on pressing social issues, in evaluating policy programs and in advising on the appropriate policy measures. Large amounts of taxpayers' money are dedicated to academic research instead of pressing social problems, and it is normal that societal relevance is expected in return. In addition, "well-trained civil servants and policy staff are crucial for the vitality and survival of liberal democracies". Ultimately, Bovens pleads for ensuring a balance between practical engagement and critical distance. This can be done at the individual level, although Bovens understands that scientists can be overwhelmed by the combined requirements of research excellence and social relevance. Therefore, it would be wise, according to him, to establish a division of labor at the institutional—departmental—level, in which diverse role models should co-exist to safeguard a pluralist political science.

Brans and Timmermans' commentary of Flinders' piece is based on empirical rather than normative grounds. They agree that Flinders' warnings deserve consideration given the "long

historical struggles for academic autonomy". At the same time, their recent international survey of political scientists found that—notwithstanding some significant cross-country and individual-level variation—most political scientists declare to act as policy advisors and to communicate publicly. This leads these authors to deconstruct several of the dichotomies in Flinders' thesis.

First, Brans and Timmermans find that political scientists can be of four possible types. Their empirical profiles identified in the survey closely match the ideal-typical profiles discussed in Bovens' commentary, but most scholars display mixed profiles that do not fit in binary oppositions such as those that Flinders uses in his demonstration. This would be encouraging for Bovens, who claims that diverse profiles are necessary.

Second, not only are political scientists diverse, but also the recipients of their advice are much more varied than Flinders acknowledges, and this provides checks and balances. There are different locations of advisory activities beyond the science-policy nexus alone, and in particular three—partially intersecting—arenas in which policy advice is produced, flows towards other actors, and is subject to debate: the government arena, the academic arena, and the societal arena (the latter also comprising the media and the wider public).

Third, although political scientists are able to speak the language of the receivers of their knowledge, they often also present and defend their own normative views, disconfirming thus the potentially depoliticizing impact of engagement with policy-makers.[4] As a matter of fact, the majority of university-based political scientists in Europe belong to the category of "opinionating scholars", who publicly define what they believe to be desirable, thus involving value-based considerations. Contrary to Flinders' argument, they do not behave as technocrats who follow the governmental agenda, but they also trigger debates in society and in the media and engage in advocacy with the core target being civil society and not state actors.

Is maybe Flinders too pessimistic, and does he perhaps generalize from the UK experience and the multiple pressures on academics that it generates? In the light of such considerations, Bovens' proposal for scientists to act as critical friends sounds reasonable and we do agree that it is legitimate for experts to seek to contribute to social welfare. However, what constitutes a scientific contribution to the improvement of society is often a matter of controversy and the same applies to the selection of governmental actions that deserve to be backed by science and those that are considered to "work". Bovens maintains that liberal democracies are fragile nowadays and need to be defended by scientific scholarship. Few will disagree with such a "Lasswellian" understanding of science in the service of democracy (see Torgerson, 2024), but is this a sufficiently tangible source of legitimacy for policy-oriented advice by scientists? On most policy issues, there is agreement neither on ends nor on means, be it among elites, the society at large, and the scientific community itself. We can be relieved by the empirical findings of Brans' and Timmermans' survey: they tend to disconfirm both concerns that political scientists remain secluded in their ivory tower and Flinders' warnings on the weight of "Faustian bargains" with rulers and on the lack of criticality. The actual picture on the multiform engagement of political scientists is reassuring, and it is also of note that professional norms rather than instrumental concerns drive engagement. Although engagement does not pay much in terms of academic reputation, sense of duty seems to trump an incentive structure that is misaligned with the public engagement of science (see Stoker, 2010, pp. 74–77), as the overwhelming majority of political scientists are not deterred from engaging publicly.[5]

[4]Whether policy advice leads to depoliticization is not clear from Flinders' approach. On the one hand focusing on "what works" is prejudicial to critical thinking according to him, on the other hand collaborating with government can hardly be considered as depoliticized.

[5]Of course, it can be objected that the survey results are based on self-reporting by the sample of political scientists, and that social desirability bias may play a role. However, we see no major reason why such self-assessments would substantially deviate from actual practice.

The second core contribution to this Debate is a comparative paper by Michael Ochsner, based on work conducted within the network "Research evaluation, innovation and impact analysis for the social sciences and the humanities". In dealing with the social sciences more in general, the focus of Ochsner's contribution is broader than Flinders', but it uses the Swiss case to demonstrate the existence of multiple pathways to the societal impact of research. Ochsner's piece is also critical of the negative effects of the UK-inspired impact agenda, and suggests that research in Switzerland benefits from not being too much constrained by such an agenda.

Ochsner asserts that, although the societal impact of research is an important topic, such a criterion has been hastily introduced in research evaluation, so that its definition and theorisation lag behind. Beyond that, Ochsner lists multiple flaws related to the prevailing shortsightedness in the identification of societal impact through performance indicators. Ochsner also locates the Swiss approach (which is not always explicit) within broader international trends, which are not limited to the UK and Dutch experiences that Flinders and Bovens mostly have in mind. He challenges the idea that impact evaluation of research is absent in Switzerland and reminds of the dual research landscape in this country: a relative division of tasks between full universities and universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen), coupled with the existence of two different competitive funding institutions, the Swiss National Science Foundation focusing essentially (but not only) on basic research and InnoSuisse funding mainly applied research. For Ochsner, thanks to direct democracy the research-society nexus is often publicly discussed in Switzerland, and substantial input is provided in conferences and by policy papers in which different perspectives are presented. Switzerland "actively decided against a simplistic concept of societal impact": for example, each university evaluates research in its own way, and there is no centralised evaluation scheme. Consequently, "whether or not societal impact plays a role, and if so in what form, differs from institution to institution". Ochsner pleads precisely for such a pluralist approach on societal impact: he challenges the idea that every project should be socially impactful or that it should offer immediate solutions.

Ochsner's contribution is discussed in shorter pieces by Laura Bernardi, based on her experience and reflections as Chair of the Humanities and Social Sciences Division in the SNSF, and by Benedetto Lepori, an expert on research and higher education policies.

Bernardi agrees with Ochsner that it is research as a collective undertaking that produces value for society by suggesting solutions to complex problems. It appears indeed short-sighted to focus narrowly on the evaluation of the impact of individual projects, not to mention the fact that societal impact can simply be negative. Bernardi also emphasizes that the "curiosity-driven" and "societally valuable" dimensions of science are inextricably connected and that the trade-off between research creativity and research accountability, which leads to an illegitimate intrusion of actors from outside the scientific community who decide which research objects shall be prioritized, is a "constructed" one. She seems however aware that the public at large may not easily discern such connections, and she proposes to enhance the public's support for science and understanding of the research process through its participation in it. This could take shape, for instance, through early exchanges between researchers and societal stakeholders that public funders should orchestrate, or at least encourage. Finally, Bernardi considers the necessity to develop a clear view of what the value of research for society means even more urgent with the growing role of artificial intelligence in research evaluation.

Lepori also agrees with Ochsner that societal impact is complex and elusive, that its assessment can be flawed, and that the absence of a centralized instance (like the REF in the UK) does not mean that the quest for such impact is not on the policy agenda. He adds—concurring with Ochsner—that concerns about societal impact are changing but not new. He nevertheless believes that such concerns cannot be ignored and insists that science cannot be independent from politics. He asserts that more precise responses than those suggested by Ochsner in his

"defensive" approach need to be provided to the rising accountability pressures driven by the diffusion of managerialist thinking. Although Switzerland has avoided extreme approaches to research evaluation, impact considerations and societal impact thus become increasingly critical also in this country, and—as also suggested by Bernardi—scientists need to become proactive and creative in that respect.

On the one hand, Ochsner's findings can be considered reassuring: based on a comparative assessment of the Swiss case, the author suggests that research in this country is shielded from the excesses and adverse effects of an impact agenda that operates as a straitjacket. We also agree with Bernardi that evaluating the social impact of every individual research project is reductionist and can be misleading. However, we also need to consider that evaluating the more diffuse social value of research as a collective endeavour can be a daunting task. Can we be as confident as Ochsner about the merits of the "soft", bottom-up and decentralized, Swiss way to promote societal relevance? Are "sermons" (as opposed to "sticks" and "carrots", Bemelmans-Videc et al., 1997) sufficient incentives likely to lead to socially relevant research and to mitigate the risk of lack of relevance? Furthermore, how far can science be independent from politics? Lepori considers such a distinction historically not tenable, but —much like other social subsystems (education, arts, etc.) in strongly differentiated and democratic societies—science has significantly gained in autonomy from politics or religion. However, a structural problem persists: although scientists plead for setting their own research priorities and for research not to be guided by extra-scientific considerations (a claim that is strongly endorsed by Bernardi), the self-referentiality of science is constrained by its resource dependence from political decisions. We therefore agree with Lepori that scientists are in practice asked to be accountable to funders (including to economic agents when research is privately funded), regardless of whether we consider this as a normative *desideratum* or not, and that justifications based only on the necessary scientific independence and "ivory tower" narratives often fail to convince. Bernardi is right that involving societal stakeholders in the research process can improve their understanding of, and for, that process. However, we also need to keep in mind that involving key decision-makers, such as overcommitted professional politicians with quite different policy priorities, in the research process, may prove to be mission impossible.

The debate concludes with a postface by Karin Ingold and Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen, in their roles as co-chairs of the Swiss Political Science Association. With this debate we hope of course to stimulate further contributions on the topic in the future.

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