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Human Well-being and the Lost Relevance of Political
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Abstract

Recently, a public debate has started questioning the relevance of political science. In the United States, public funding for political science research is under attack in the Congress and major newspapers have carried articles about this issue. In this talk, this problem is discussed from a standpoint arguing that most human misery in today's world, by standard measures of human well-being, is caused by the fact that a majority of the world's population lives under dysfunctional political institutions. It is argued that this is an issue that is ignored in most political science research. This analysis concludes by listing seven reasons (or sins) why political science does not realize the discipline's potential for being relevant for human well-being.

Keywords

Political science, human well-being, democratic government, political institutions, corruption.

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Variations of relevance

To find an answer to the question “is political science relevant” demands that a more basic question is solved; namely, relevant for what? Many different answers could be given to this question. Political science could be relevant in the advice it can give on how to win election campaigns, on how politicians should best act so as to get enough support for their policies in legislative assemblies, on when and if state leaders should go to war or on how they should act in international negotiations to best further the interest of their countries, to name a few. In this approach to the issue of relevance, political scientists are seen as consultants or advisors to politicians in power, who are “speaking truth to power”, to use Aaron Wildavsky’s famous phrase (1987). The level of the relevance of political science would then be determined by how successful are the policies coming out from this type of advice. I do not know of any systematic study of the success rate for this way of making political science relevant, but if we compare political science with our sister discipline economics, our expectations should be modest (cf. Krugman 2009; Rodrik 2000, 2013).

Another idea for making political science appear more relevant is based not on informing the political elite, but the general public. This is the political scientist as the public intellectual writing op-ed articles, giving public lectures and commenting upon current political affairs in the media. The number of political events that deserves comments are, in principle, endless. Was it a good idea to invade country X? Why is party Y now changing its rhetorical repertoire? Why does nation Z have such a huge welfare state? What explains declining trust in government? Here, the level of relevance would be determined by the question of whether political scientists can offer something more, deeper or qualitatively different than what we get from the astute political journalist or pundit. Since I have ventured (or sinned?) in this business myself a good deal, I will refrain from making any statement about how useful this approach to making political science relevant can be.

Both these (and perhaps several other) approaches to the issue of the relevance of the discipline have their pros and cons. According to Mark Lilla (2001), Plato deeply regretted his three journeys to Syracuse and became convinced his advice to the King (and later Tyrant) Dionysius were completely in vain. My impression is that many, not least our colleagues in neighboring subjects, are quite skeptical about what political scientists have to offer as advice to political elites or to the general public. Be that as it may, as an alternative I would like to offer another idea of what should count as relevance, namely, in what way the discipline can contribute to overall human well-being. This idea is based on the increasing availability of what has become known as “big data”, which can be seen as measures of various aspects of human well-being, including poverty. Much of this data comes in the form of “one figure per country”, which is an advantage for political scientists since the nation state is one of its prime units of analysis. This idea, which actually goes back to Aristotle’s studies of the 158 city states about which he and his students collected information, is centered on the idea that there may be a causal link between how a state is governed and the well-being of its citizens (or their virtue, to use Aristotelian terminology). The standard measures of well-being are of course various so-called objective measures, such as population health, levels of poverty, infant mortality and literacy. In addition, a number of interesting so-called subjective measures are also now available, such as perceptions of the level of corruption in a country, perceptions of social trust, and whether people report being satisfied with their lives (aka “happiness”). In addition, there are now also a number of other rankings of countries concerning respect for human rights, gender equality, innovativeness and competitiveness, to name a few.

As mentioned, these measures come in the form of averages and can therefore disclose huge variations, not only between individuals and social groups, but also between regions and sectors within

a country. How well they actually measure human well-being can of course be discussed at length. However, most of us would prefer to live in a country where few newborn babies die, where most children survive their fifth birthday, where almost all ten-year olds can read, where people live a long and reasonably healthy life, where child deprivation is low, where few women die when giving birth, where the percentage of people living in severe poverty is low, and where many report being reasonably satisfied with their lives (Holmberg 2007). We may also like to live in a society in which people think that morality is reasonably high, implying that they perceive corruption to be fairly uncommon and that they think that “most people in general” can be trusted (Rothstein 2005). If that is the case, then the question of whether political science can be relevant becomes different from the consultant and the public intellectual approaches mentioned above. Instead, it becomes a question of the extent to which the discipline can contribute to increased human well-being or, to paraphrase the title of a recent book in this approach, whether the discipline can contribute to our understanding of why some societies are more successful than others (Hall and Lamont 2009). My first argument is that the increased focus on the importance of institutions in general, and in particular government institutions, not only in political science but also in economics (especially development and environmental economics), economic history and sociology, dramatically increases the potential for political science to be of relevance for explaining the huge differences in human well-being that we can observe (Holmberg and Rothstein 2012). My second main argument is that this hugely increased potential for relevance is underutilized because of a misdirected focus on what should be the main things that we, as political scientists, try to explain.

Does democracy produce human well-being?

Research about democratization has been a huge enterprise in the discipline, with numerous studies of how, when and why countries shift from various forms of authoritarian rule to electoral, representative democracies. There has also been much to study, since the waves of democracy that have swept over the globe have brought representative democracy to places where it seemed inconceivable fifty, or thirty, or even ten years ago. More countries than ever are now, by the most sophisticated measures used, classified as being democratic, and more people than ever live in democracies (Teorell 2010). This is certainly something to celebrate but there are also reasons to be disappointed. One example is South Africa, which miraculously managed to end apartheid in 1994, without falling into a full-scale civil war. As Nelson Mandela said in one of his speeches, the introduction of democracy would not only liberate people but also greatly improve their social and economic situation (Mandela 1994, 414). Available statistics give a surprisingly bleak picture to this promise. Since 1994, South Africa has not managed to improve the time children, on average, go to school by one single month; economic inequality is as high as in 1994, which means that it remains at a world record level; life-expectancy is down by almost six years; and the number of women who die when they give birth has more than doubled (data from Teorell et. al. 2013). Simply put, for many central measures of human well-being, the South African democracy has not delivered any positive results.

Another example has been provided by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in an article comparing “quality of life” in China and India. His disappointing conclusion is that on most standard measures of human well-being, the communist-autocratic Peoples’ Republic of China now clearly outperforms liberal and democratically governed India (Sen 2011). Using a set of thirty standard measures of national levels of human well-being, as well as some variables known to be related to human well-being such as capacity for taxation, and including between 75 and 169 countries, Holmberg and Rothstein (2011b) find only weak, or no, or sometimes even negative, correlations between these standard measures of human well-being and the level of democracy as defined above. Maybe the most compelling evidence about the lack of positive effects of democracy on human well-being comes from a recent study on child deprivation by Halleröd et. al (2013), using data measuring seven aspects of child poverty (access to safe water, food, sanitation, shelter, education, health care and information) from 68 low and middle income countries for no less than 2,120,734 cases (children). The result of this large study is that there is no positive effect of democracy on the level of child deprivation for any of the seven indicators. This bleak picture of the effect of democratization on economic prosperity and other aspects of human well-being is confirmed by several other recent studies (Doucouliagos and

Ulubasoglu 2008; Norris 2012). In sum, the picture given by available measures is this: representative democracy is not a safe cure against severe poverty, child deprivation, huge economic inequality, illiteracy, being unhappy or not satisfied with one's life, infant mortality, short life expectancy, maternal mortality, access to safe water or sanitation, gender inequality, low school attendance for girls, low interpersonal trust or low trust in Parliament.

Why does democratization not produce better outcomes? One explanation was given by Larry Diamond in a paper presented when the National Endowment for Democracy, in the United States, celebrated its first twenty-five years of operations:

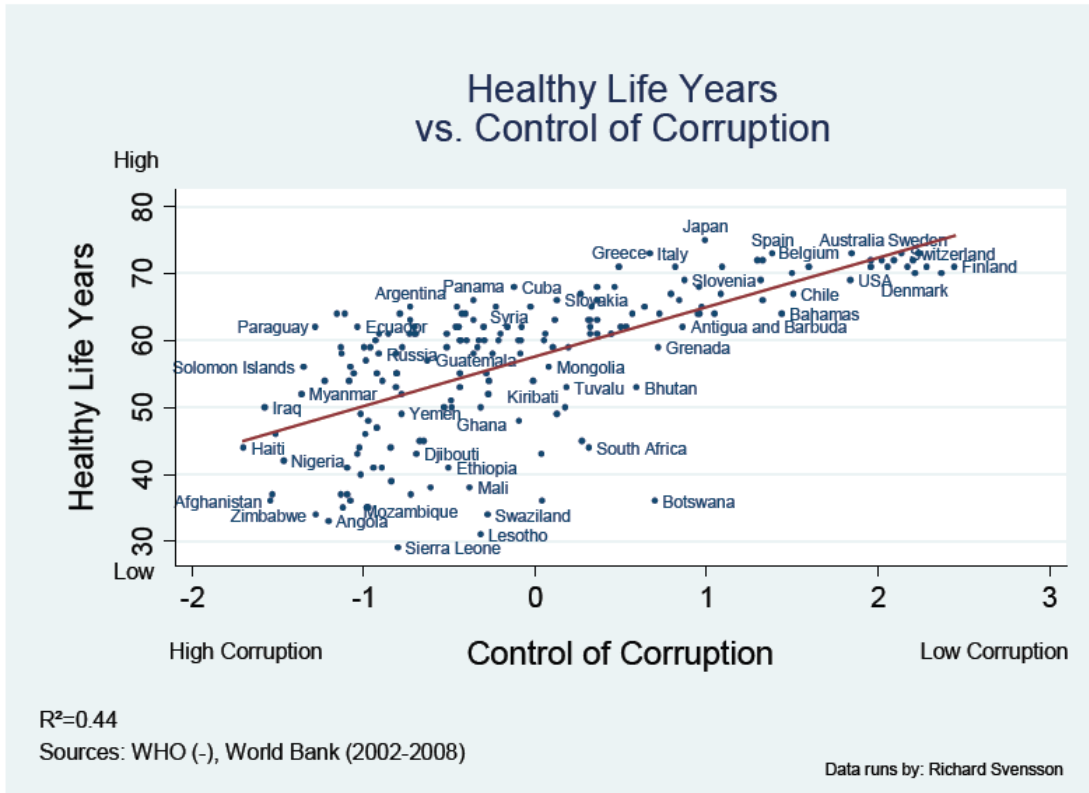
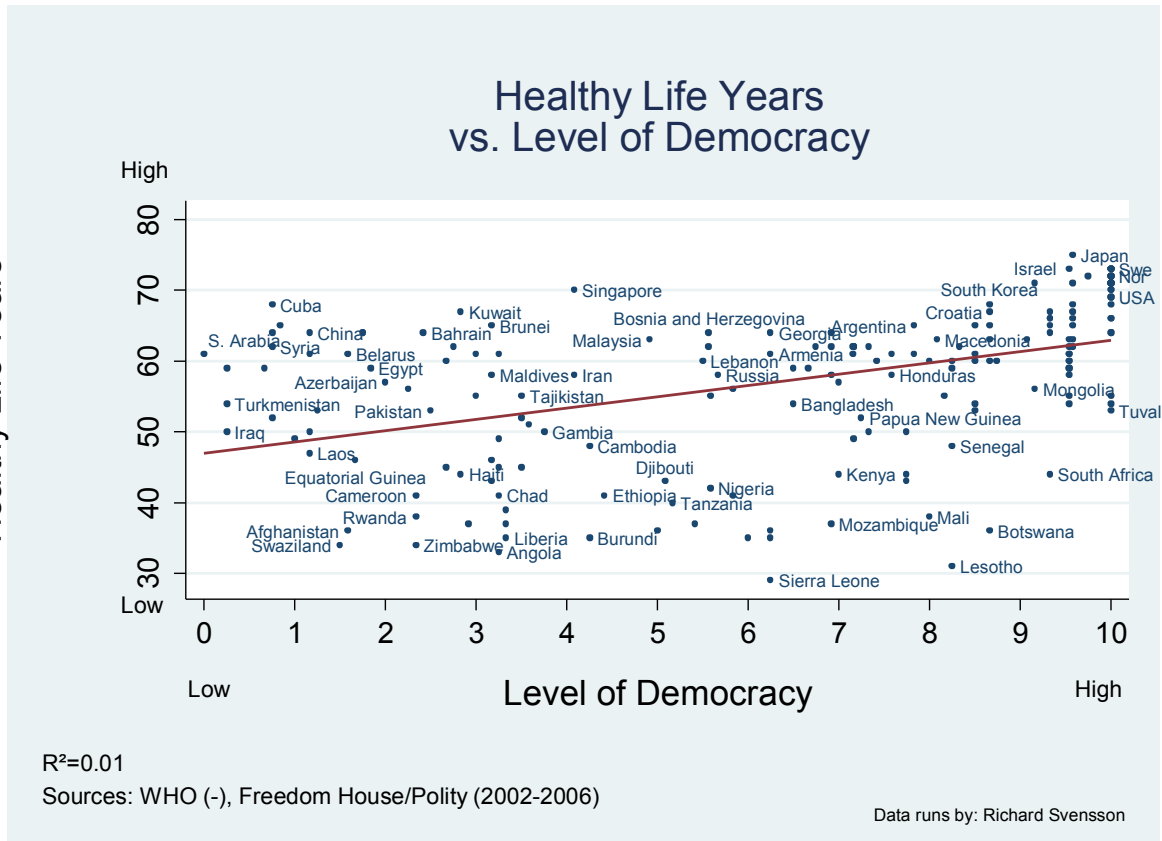
There is a specter haunting democracy in the world today. It is bad governance—governance that serves only the interests of a narrow ruling elite. Governance that is drenched in corruption, patronage, favoritism, and abuse of power. Governance that is not responding to the massive and long-deferred social agenda of reducing inequality and unemployment and fighting against dehumanizing poverty. Governance that is not delivering broad improvement in people's lives because it is stealing, squandering, or skewing the available resources (Diamond 2007, 19).

What Diamond is saying is that democracy is not enough – without control of corruption and better governance, the life situation for citizens will not improve. Needless to say, neither Diamond's nor my argument is that we should not care about democracy which, and I am sure Diamond would agree, is absolutely indispensable. The argument is that democratization is not enough to increase human well-being; without a reasonably high level of administrative capacity in the state, democracy will not deliver.

State capacity, quality of government and human well-being

If we follow Diamond's idea about the importance of "bad governance" and instead of having the degree of democracy as the explanatory variable, turn to measures of a state's administrative capacity, quality of government, or good governance, the picture of what public policies can do for human well-being changes dramatically. For example, the above mentioned study on child deprivation finds strong effects of measures of quality of government on four out of seven indicators on child deprivation (lack of safe water, malnutrition, lack of access to health care, and lack of access to information), when controlling for GDP per capita and a number of basic individual level variables (Halleröd et al. 2013). A study of how corruption impacts upon five different measures of population health finds similar strong effects, also when controlling for economic prosperity and democracy (Holmberg and Rothstein 2011c). Other studies largely confirm that various measures of a state's administrative capacity, quality of government, levels of corruption, and other measures of "good governance", have strong effects on almost all standard measures of human well-being, including subjective measures of life satisfaction (aka "happiness") and social trust (Norris 2012; Ott 2010; Holmberg et al. 2009). Recent studies also find that the absence of violence, in the form of interstate and civil wars, is strongly affected by measures of quality of government, and more so than by the level of democracy (Lapiente and Rothstein 2014; Öberg and Melander 2005; Norris 2012). Below are two simple scatterplots that illustrate the huge variation in correlations between a measure of democracy and a measure of "bad governance" for one central aspect of human well-being, namely, expected years of a healthy life.

As can be seen, the correlation between this measure of human well-being and the level of democracy is zero, while the correlation with "control of corruption" is substantial. This result is shown to be repeated for a large set of other measures of human well-being and what should generally count as "successful societies" (Holmberg and Rothstein 2011, Rothstein and Holmberg 2011). It may be added that the result is also valid for indicators that measure whether states are able to handle their public finances in a responsible way. While the correlation between Standard & Poor's credit ranking of countries and democracy is negligible, the correlation with levels of corruption is substantial.



Poverty, state capacity and quality of government

As I have said, the average measures used in the ranking of countries can certainly disguise huge internal differences. The issue of social and economic inequalities has been high on the agenda in political science, not least in studies of the welfare state and in political economy. However, also in this area, the focus has been almost completely centered on variables that relate to the “input” side of the political system, such as the electoral success or failures of left (right) political parties or different party systems (Korpi and Palme 2003; Iversen and Soskice 2006). Little attention has been paid to the quality of the state machinery that is supposed to handle the often demanding and complicated tasks of implementing social insurance systems. An example of the importance of this comes from a recent study by Svallfors (2013). Using survey data for 29 European countries, which includes questions about the fairness of public authorities (health sector and tax authorities) as well as questions about ideological leanings and policy preferences, this study has shown the following: citizens in Europe who have a preference for more economic equality, but who live in a country where they perceive that the quality of government institutions is low, will, in the same survey, indicate that they prefer lower taxes and less social spending. However, the same “ideological type” of respondent, who happens to live in a European country where he or she believes that the authorities implementing policies are basically just and fair, will answer that he or she is willing to pay higher taxes for more social spending. To summarize: citizens who live in a country where they perceive that corruption or other forms of unfairness in the public administration is common, are likely to be less supportive of the idea that the state should take responsibility for policies for increased social justice, even if they ideologically support such policies. Given this, it is noteworthy that the *Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State* does not have index entries for terms like “bureaucracy”, “administration”, “implementation”, “public administration” or “corruption” (Castles 2010).

Does democracy generate political legitimacy?

Some may argue that the normative reasons for representative democracy should not be performance measures like the ones mentioned above, but political legitimacy. If people have the right to change their government through “free and fair elections”, they will find their system of rule legitimate. In regard to this, empirical research shows even more surprising results, namely that democratic rights, or the feeling of being adequately represented by elected officials, do not seem to be the most important cause behind people’s perception of political legitimacy. Based on comparative survey data, several recent studies show that “performance” or “output” measures, such as control of corruption, government effectiveness and the rule of law, trump democratic rights in explaining political legitimacy (Gilley 2006, 2009; Gjeffsen 2012). As stated by Bruce Gilley, “this clashes with standard liberal treatments of legitimacy that give overall priority to democratic rights” (2006:58). Using a different comparative survey data set, Dahlberg and Holmberg (2014) conclude, in a similar vein, that “government effectiveness is of greater importance for citizens’ satisfaction with the way democracy functions, compared to factors such as ideological congruence on the input side. Impartial and effective bureaucracies matter more than representational devices”. Thus, if the relevance of political science is about understanding the causes of political legitimacy, most researchers in this discipline have studied the parts of the political system that are less relevant.

What does political science want to explain?

The relevance problem of political science can readily be seen from this “input-output” perspective of the state. First, remarkably, political science seems uninterested in having measures of human well-being as the main dependent variable. Instead, the main part of the discipline is interested in explaining politics, rather than what the political machine (i.e., the state) can do (or in many cases is doing) for people. Thus, most political science tries to explain things like “who wins elections?”, “when and why are countries democratizing?”, “why do parties change their strategy?”, or “how do states negotiate international agreements?”. As recently argued by Fukuyama (2013), the discipline has paid little attention to the capacity of the state to actually do things that improve human well-being. Second, if the relevance of research in political science is understood in terms of how it may improve human well-being and/or improve political legitimacy, then political scientists have, to a

large extent, been focusing on the least important part of the political system, namely, how the access to power is organized – that is, electoral and representative democracy and democratization –, ignoring the more important part of the state machinery, how power is exercised, or in other words, the quality of how the state manages to govern society. As Fukuyama argues (2013), this seems to have been driven by an underlying ideological view inspired by neo-classical economics, particularly strong in the United States, which emphasizes the need to limit, check, and control (and also minimize) the state, which is basically seen as a “predatory” organization. In other words, how to tame the beast has the central focus, not what the animal can achieve.

The result is that the quality of the administrative part of the state, which we now know is of the utmost importance for increasing human well-being, has been severely under-studied, under-theorized, and under-measured in political science. It is also (and maybe even more) surprising that public administration scholars have largely ignored this comparative “human well-being” aspect of their enterprise (cf. Pierre and Peters 2009). In sum, a political science that ignores empirical study and that lacks a sound theoretical conception of the part of the state that is most important for delivering human well-being (and political legitimacy!), may very well deserve at least some of the critique of being irrelevant that has lately been launched at the discipline (Cohen 2009). This should be seen in the light of the fact that most human misery in today’s world is, in all likelihood, not caused by a lack of medical technology or treatments, lack of economic resources, or lack of technical devices. We have the resources and knowledge of what we need to create reasonably good human well-being for the world’s population. The reason for the massive amounts of social and human misery that exist today is probably related to the fact that a majority of the world’s population lives under dysfunctional government institutions. Thus, if political science could produce knowledge that would improve the quality of government, minimize corruption, and increase the state’s administrative capacity, the discipline would become more relevant for the life of real, existing people and societies.

Political theory, state capacity and quality of government

This neglect of the importance of states’ administrative capacity and the quality of government institutions in general can also be seen in political theory. One example comes from Richard Arneson, who discusses the issue of whether welfare distribution should be tailored to people’s preferences. First, he recognizes that this would perhaps be impossible because we could not imagine public authorities with the capacity to collect and use the amount of information necessary to accomplish such a task. Nevertheless, he states that he will “ignore these practical feasibility problems” and instead “assume that correct and full information regarding people’s preferences is available at no cost whatsoever to whatever institutions we establish to implement the principles of distributive justice that we accept” (Arneson 1990, p 158f, see also Cohen 1989). Although such reasoning may be justified as interesting thought experiments, they are launched by these political philosophers as policy devices. In general, political philosophers have been remarkably uninterested in, and unaware of, the political importance of the administrative and institutional sides of politics. When they deal with the question of what the (democratic) state ought to do to increase social justice, they ignore the problem of what this state is capable of doing. David Estlund even claims that political philosophy is easily distorted by an “ever present thought that it might be of practical importance” (Estlund 2008, p. 1). As Wolff states, philosophers tend to “fall short of taking up the challenge of thinking hard about questions of the process and, even more importantly, consequences of implementation” (Wolff 2011, p. 192). One example comes from an important approach in political theory known as “luck egalitarianism”. Scholars using this approach argue that citizens should only be compensated by the state for problems in their lives that they themselves cannot be held responsible for. The main idea is that the differential impact of circumstances for which an individual cannot reasonably be held responsible (“brute luck”) are to be neutralized by some type of public policy, whereas consequences due to the different choices people make (“option luck”), are to be left intact. A typical case is John Roemer’s idea that, when deciding whether people who have contracted lung cancer should get medical treatment in a public program, patients should be divided into classes giving information about whether their decision to smoke was their own responsibility or not. As he argues, the choice to smoke is “determined” by a person’s social circumstances, such as her class, ethnicity, gender, education, etc. Thus a steel worker

would have a much greater chance of getting his lung-cancer treated by society than a female college professor who, because of her given circumstances, decided to smoke, and she should thus take the full financial responsibility for getting medical treatment (Roemer 1996, 1995, 1998). The problem with this approach is that anyone with the slightest knowledge of research about implementation problems in public policy would realize that having a bureaucracy that would a) collect all this information about citizens and b) make decisions based on this mountain of information would create an administrative Leviathan that would severely delegitimize any public health care insurance system (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). How could the information and problems of integrity involved in solving the problem of personal responsibility for issues like obesity, venereal diseases and injuries from dangerous sport activities be approached? What type of administration could handle the issue of whether unemployment is due to “brute luck”, for which the individual has the right to receive unemployment insurance, or is a result of choices, for which the individual should be held responsible, such as not showing enough effort to get new skills, following the changes in the global economy (Risse 2002). I wish the “luck-egalitarians” best of luck with solving these issues because they will for sure need it. In sum, the policies that would follow from “luck egalitarians”, such as Arneson, Cohen and Roemer, are likely to result in implementation nightmares that, as is very well known from empirical research, would create a political majority against increased efforts for social justice. The ethics of disregarding this knowledge is comparable to medical researchers who would ignore well-known dangerous side effects when they present new drugs or treatments. To paraphrase noted Holocaust scholar Yehuda Bauer, the troublesome issue is whether political science and other academic disciplines are still “producing technically competent barbarians” (Rothstein 2005a).

Empirical measures of the relevance problem in political science

Can this neglect of issues relating to the output side of the political machinery in large parts of political science be empirically verified? The answer is yes. I have looked at two sources that should capture what political scientists are interested in. The first is the article database, Thomson’s *Web of Science*, where I have searched for articles, published over the last twenty years (since 1993), that have the term “corruption” as a keyword, either in the title or in the abstract. Instructing the database to sort these more than 8,000 articles by the times they have been cited gives the following result. The most cited such article, published in a political science journal, is placed as # 42. Higher up on the citation list, the dominance of articles published in economic journals is overwhelming. The picture that comes out of this search is that economics completely dominates the field of research in corruption, with thirty-three articles scoring higher than the most cited article by political scientists. This is also seen in the fact that, over the two decades 1990-2010, the flagship journal of the discipline, the *American Political Science Review (APSR)*, published only six articles about corruption according to this measure, out of a total of 904. Another quite telling example is that, out of the 211 articles published by APSR over the last five years (2009-2013), only one has the term “poverty” in the abstract, as a keyword or in the title. The same surprisingly low result is true for the terms “human welfare”, “human development” and “infant mortality”. The scores for “literacy” and “life satisfaction” are zero (data from author’s own search of Thomson’s *Web of Science* December 10, 2013). Obviously, these central measures of human welfare are issues that the leading journal in the discipline, and those who publish in it, find uninteresting and/or irrelevant.

It should be added that it was economists and not political scientists who, in the late 1990s, drew attention to the devastating effects that “bad governance” had on development (North 1990; Rodrik 2000; La Porta et al. 1999). On the one hand, political science should be grateful and applaud the interest economists now pay to the importance of political institutions and good governance for development (Rodrik et al. 2004; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). On the other hand, I would argue that leaving the issue of what should count as “good government” to economists is a little like giving the full responsibility of how to conduct wars to the generals. I believe the historical record shows that this has turned out to be a bad idea.

The second source for the argument that political science has neglected issues about the state’s administrative capacity and the quality of government are the many “handbooks” that have been published over the last decade in various fields of the discipline. None of the following list of ten such

“handbooks” includes a chapter, or even a section of a chapter, that deals with issues of how states’ administrative capacity and the quality of government relate to human well-being. However, the *Handbook of Comparative Politics* does have a chapter that, to some extent, deals with this issue (titled “The Poor Performance of Poor Democracies”) but it is, symptomatically, written by an economist.

Table 1. Political Science Handbooks that do not deal with the state’s administrative capacity versus human well-being

1. The Oxford Handbook of Political Science
2. The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics
3. The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy
4. The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Institutional Analysis
5. The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory
6. The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State
7. The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy
8. The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions
9. The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior
10. The Oxford Handbook of Law and Politics

Eight of these huge volumes do not even have an index entry for the term “corruption” (the exceptions are the Political Economy and the Political Behavior handbooks). The *Oxford Handbook of Political Science* does have two index entries on “poverty”, but over fifty for “participation”, and more than a hundred that begin with the term “party”. The *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* also has two entries for “poverty”, but over fifty for “preferences”, and not a single entry for “corruption”. Since American political science, at least quantitatively, is so dominant in the discipline, it is noteworthy that, according to Michael Johnston, “American political science as an institutionalized discipline has remained steadfastly uninterested in corruption for generations ” (Johnston 2006, p 809). Given the detrimental effects that corruption has on all standard measures of human well-being, including poverty, and how prevalent corruption, according to all standard measures, is in most countries in the world, this ignorance is nothing less than astonishing. This is all the more surprising since three of the most acclaimed books in the field published over the last twenty-five years have put forward the importance of state capacity. In *Protecting Mothers and Soldiers*, Theda Skocpol (1992) explained why the United States failed to develop a Northern European type of welfare state by emphasizing the corruption and other forms of malpractices that tainted the implementation of the war veterans pensions scheme after the Civil War. In *Making Democracy Work*, when measuring the quality of democracy in Italy’s regions, half of the indicators Robert Putnam (1993) used were about administrative capacity. Also, in her “modern classic” *Governing the Commons*, Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom put a lot of emphasis on the relation between high levels of social trust in the local communities she analyzed and their ability to create legitimate administrative arrangements for preventing overuse of their common natural resources.

Interestingly, the newly published *Oxford Handbook of Mexican Politics* has about fifty entries for corruption in its index. It should also be added that political scientists have been interested in “clientelism”, however, that is usually understood as various forms of vote-buying and not related to issues about the state’s administrative capacity or quality of government (Stokes 2007; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). In sum, the picture that comes out of these handbooks, which in total amount to around 7,000 pages, is clear. Political scientists are very interested in “politics” but they are not that interested in what politics imply for the well-being of citizens. Second, political science is dominated by scholars who are interested in the part of the political machine that studies the “input” side of the political system but are largely ignorant of the part that has to make sure that, whatever policies are decided upon, they are also implemented in an orderly, fair, efficient and impartial manner. Since the quality of the latter, as shown above, has very important implications, not only for human well-being

as such, but also for the possibility of getting broad based political support for policies that may increase human well-being, this indicates that those who have argued that the discipline lacks relevance may be, at least partly, right.

Theory: why state capacity and quality of government generate human well-being

The argument that the state's administrative capacity, control of corruption, and quality of government is central for development and human well-being is certainly not based only on empirical findings. In addition, what can be seen as the "institutional turn" in the social sciences gives ample theoretical support for the existence of a strong causal link between "good" administrative institutions and human well-being. The central idea is that, in order to be "successful" in producing high levels of human well-being, societies need a much larger pool of public goods than has generally been understood in neo-classical economics and rational choice oriented political science (Hall and Lamont 2009). As argued by North, Wallis and Weingast (2009, p. 11), this does not only include things like the rule of law, secure property rights, and physical infrastructure. In addition, they argue that goods like education, public health, and social insurance programs should be added to the list of public goods that societies need in order to prosper. Moreover, they also argue that successful societies have much larger governments (as seen as the percentage of GDP that is public spending) than less successful societies. As Rodrik has argued, developing countries lack a large set of public and merit good types of institutions "that economists usually take for granted, but which are conspicuous by their absence in poor countries" (Rodrik 2000, p. 4). This is not only a problem for developing or former communist countries. Available measures of corruption and quality of government show a huge variation within Europe. Moreover, countries like Greece and Italy now score lower than several African countries.

The causal link between quality of government and human well-being can be thought of as follows: creating and maintaining a large enough amount of public goods is by and large a "trust game". First, since public goods usually have to be paid for by taxes, citizens must trust that most other citizens are actually paying their taxes. Second, they must also trust that most other citizens will not overuse or abuse the public goods in question. Third, they must also trust that those in charge of managing the public goods can be trusted not to subvert them to private goods (that is, engage in corruption). Social (or generalized) trust is thus the key and here the empirical evidence is, for once, clear. Societies that have higher levels of social trust also have higher levels of human well-being (Healy et al. 2001).

Quality of government, social trust and human well-being

The central question is then, what generates high levels of social trust in a society? The most widespread idea has been that social trust is generated "from below", by people being active in voluntary associations (Putnam 2000). In this Tocquevillian approach, the capacity of a society to produce social trust depends on citizens' willingness to become active in broad based, non-exclusionary, voluntary organizations. However, the evidence that associational membership of adults *creates* social trust has not survived empirical testing (Armony 2004; Delhey and Newton 2003; Dinesen 2013; Claiborn and Martin 2000; Herreros 2004; Robbins 2011; Wollebæk and Selle 2003). To take one example, one large-scale empirical study, which aims to explain variations in social trust based on the World Values Study surveys and covering no less than sixty countries, concludes that "perhaps most important and most surprising, none of the four measures of voluntary activity stood up to statistical tests, in spite of the importance attached to them in a large body of writing, from de Tocqueville onwards" (Delhey and Newton 2004, 27).

As a response to the failure of the society-centered approach to produce good empirical indicators for its claims about how the causal mechanisms generating social trust operate, the *institution-centered* approach claims that, for it to flourish, social trust needs to be embedded in, and linked to, the political context as well as formal political and legal institutions. According to this approach, it is trustworthy, uncorrupt, honest, impartial government institutions that exercise public power and implement policies in a fair manner that create social trust and social capital (Rothstein 2005b). For example, Delhey and Newton concluded from their above mentioned study that "government, especially corruption free and democratic government, seems to set a structure in which

individuals are able to act in a trustworthy manner and not suffer, and in which they can reasonably expect that most others will generally do the same” (2004, 28). Using survey data from 29 European countries, Bjørnskov (2004) concluded that a high level of social trust is strongly correlated with a low level of corruption. Another study, also based on comparative survey data, concludes that “the central contention ... is that political institutions that support norms of fairness, universality, and the division of power, contribute to the formation of inter-personal trust” (Freitag and Buhlmann 2005).

Using scenario experiments in low trust/high corruption Romania and in high trust/low corruption Sweden, Rothstein and Eek (2009) found that persons in both these countries, who experience corruption among public health care workers or the local police, when travelling in an “unknown city in and unfamiliar country”, do not only lose trust in these authorities, but also in other people in general in that “unknown” society. Another recent large-scale survey, consisting of 84,000 citizens/respondents, in 212 regions within 25 European countries, gives strong support to the theory that high levels of corruption and low levels of quality of government are important causal factors behind low social trust. In addition to the standard question about social trust, this survey has detailed questions about both *perceptions and experiences* of the extent to which three regional public services (policy, health care, education) are seen as impartial, of high quality, and clean from corruption. Taking advantage of the extreme variation among European countries and regions in both levels of social trust as well as quality of government (QoG), this study shows evidence for the impact of QoG on variations in social trust in European regions also when controlling for wealth. The effects of civic engagement, income inequality and ethnic diversity (as measured by the percent of citizens in each region born outside the European Union) are negligible, while the effects of QoG is robust and strong (Charron and Rothstein 2014).

In sum, what comes out of this research is that the major source of variations in generalized trust is to be found at the output side of the state machinery, namely the legal and administrative branches of the state, which are responsible for the implementation of public policies. Thus, the theory that high levels of the state’s administrative capacity and quality of government generate social trust, which makes it easier to create large sets of public goods in a society, and which explains why such societies are more successful than their opposites in fostering human well-being, is currently supported by an extensive amount of empirical research.

Conclusions: the seven sins depriving political science of its potential for being relevant for human well-being

1. When thinking about the relevance of what they do, most political scientists think about being advisors, either to the political elites or to inform the general public. These are aspects of relevance with limited importance.
2. Most political scientists are uninterested in explaining what the “political machine” (that is, the state) can do for improving human well-being broadly defined. There is a lack of understanding that a very large part of human misery in today’s world is caused by the fact that a majority of the world’s population live under deeply dysfunctional government institutions.
3. Most political scientists, especially the American branch, have for ideological reasons concentrated their thinking about the state on how to tame and limit its power and therefore have been less interested in issues about the state’s administrative capacity and the quality of government.
4. Most political scientists take it for granted that democracy is the main source of political legitimacy, which seems not to be the case.
5. Issues of “bad governance”, especially corruption in public administration, have largely been ignored by political scientists.
6. The detrimental effects of “bad governance” upon political legitimacy, prosperity and human well-being, are mostly unknown to political scientists.
7. Normative efforts in political theory about how to increase social justice have ignored problems about implementation and governance that are empirically and theoretically well established.

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