

# Everyday Political Engagement in Comparative Politics

Thomas Pepinsky, *Cornell University*

It is common for critics of social science to consider scholarship and academic research to be too divorced from reality to be useful. This research, critics allege, is too motivated by disciplinary or methodological concerns, or funding agencies' priorities, to be relevant for the pressing political issues of the day in countries around the world (see Isaac 2013; Lynch 2016; and Stoker, Peters, and Pierre 2015). Such criticism paints modern political science as irrelevant at best and exploitative at worst.

This article presents an alternative view. In much area-focused comparative politics, academic political science research does focus on issues that have contemporary practical and political importance. The debates and findings of political scientists are input for national political conversations—and sometimes even for the policy process itself. There is, in fact, a more interesting—perhaps politically fraught—question of under which conditions it is appropriate for foreign academics to be as engaged as they are.

I build this argument with reference to the comparative politics of Southeast Asia, a region that has occupied a particularly important place in US politics—a result of both colonial ties between the United States and the Philippines and US involvement in Vietnam. It is well known how politics in the Philippines and Vietnam shaped US politics; however, the reverse relationship—in which US political science research has affected politics and policy in Southeast Asia during and after the war in Vietnam—is today mostly forgotten. Yet, it projects a different perspective on engaged comparative politics research, which I define as research that aims to create actionable knowledge about the political issues confronting societies outside of the United States. This article also highlights ethical issues raised by such engaged scholarship, specifically for scholars who are neither citizens nor residents of the countries that they study.

## THE POLITICS IN AREA STUDIES

In the decades following World War II, the United States invested significant resources into area-studies centers at US universities. The motivation was political: to develop expertise in the languages, cultures, histories, and—mostly—politics of what then were called “the developing areas.” The decades-long deep fissure between “area studies” and “political science” is not of concern here (Szanton 2002). Suffice it to say that through the 1970s, at least, the qualitative or case-study tradition that predominated in much of comparative

politics entailed researchers heading to newly independent states to learn about their political systems.

Some of that work was idiographic in nature, but much more was self-consciously comparative in ambition and inspired by the general theoretical concerns of the day, such as modernization theory. However, this work also mattered in the countries under study. One early example was the so-called Feith–Benda debate in Indonesian studies (Emmerson 2014) about how to interpret the incipient failure of Indonesia's liberal democratic period by the late 1950s. This debate pitted Herbert Feith, who located the failure of constitutional democracy in victory of one set of politicians over another (Feith 1962), against Harry Benda, who perceived the entire architecture of Indonesia's liberal democracy as bound to fail (Benda 1982). This academic debate had real-world implications, coming at a time when Indonesian politics was in a state of perpetual conflict. Was it legitimate to insist on a fundamentally Western institutional model for Indonesia? Or was that inappropriate for a diverse new nation that had experienced a decade of war after centuries of colonial exploitation and had its own cultural and political traditions? Not surprisingly, the answer to this question served some factions and interests in Indonesian politics more than others.

Less than a decade later, US political scientists found themselves implicated in two major debates about political conflict. Following Indonesia's abortive coup of 1965 and the subsequent slaughter and annihilation of Indonesia's communists, Anderson and McVey (1971) penned an analysis that tried to make sense of the events. Known today as “The Cornell Paper,” it placed the blame for the coup squarely on the military faction that ultimately prevailed. This allegation directly contradicted the standard narrative promulgated by the authoritarian New Order regime, which held that the Communist Party of Indonesia had attempted to launch a coup to which the rightist military was forced to respond. The Cornell Paper was so politically explosive that Anderson was banned from Indonesia until the fall of the New Order in 1998 (Anderson 2016, 89).

Meanwhile, their senior colleagues, George Kahin and John W. Lewis, were central figures in the anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States. *The United States in Vietnam* (Kahin and Lewis 1967) made the strong case that “Vietnam is a single nation, not two”—an argument that undermined the legitimacy of any war in support of the independence of the Republic of Vietnam or in defense of its regime. Their intended audience was the US public; however, their

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argument had momentous consequences for Vietnamese politics because it shaped the conversation in the United States about the war. (For a personal history of the interplay of politics and academia during the war, see Taylor 2004.)

### SURVEYS AND POLITICS

The days of Anderson, Kahin, and others are long past. The most visible way that political science currently contributes to

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Southeast Asian politics is through that mainstay of electioneering: the public-opinion survey.

Public-opinion surveys are relatively new in Southeast Asia, a consequence of the region’s limited experience with democratic political competition and infrastructural challenges. To my knowledge, the first modern-style public-opinion-survey research firm in Southeast Asia was the Philippines’ Robot Statistics, which conducted a presidential poll in 1953 (Holmes 2017). Indonesia has seen the most rapid growth in public-opinion polling. Following democratization in 1999, there was a spate of new survey firms including the Indonesian Survey Institute, Indobarometer, and Surveymeter, among others.<sup>1</sup> Many of these firms’ principals are US-trained political scientists. Survey research in Thailand currently is slightly more constrained due to restrictions on politically sensitive questions, but firms such as SuperPoll provide feedback to politicians and the public about parties and policies.<sup>2</sup> Public-opinion polling also is well established in competitive authoritarian Malaysia, where the Merdeka Centre for Public Opinion Research<sup>3</sup> regularly surveys Malaysians about government performance and satisfaction with the ruling coalition. Large-scale surveys about Singaporean politics are rare, although the Singaporean government funds survey research in other parts of Southeast Asia to learn about Singapore’s neighbors.

In Vietnam, where single-party authoritarian rule limits both the feasibility and the utility of classic public-opinion polling, a different type of survey has an important role in contemporary politics. Vietnam’s Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI)<sup>4</sup>—conducted by the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry under the direction of Duke University political economist Edmund Malesky and funded by USAID—relies on surveys of businesses rather than voters. The PCI is one of the most important tools that Vietnamese provincial leaders currently use to measure their performance.

Public-opinion surveys are practically and politically relevant because in Southeast Asia’s electoral regimes, public opinion matters to politicians and policy makers. They matter to comparative politics researchers for the same reason.

One example that illustrates this overlap between academic and political interests is the survey that I conducted with Bill Liddle and Saiful Mujani on Islamist party platforms and vote choice (Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani 2012). Mujani, then executive director of the Indonesian Survey Institute, held a workshop in Jakarta in 2009 to present our findings. In attendance were representatives from at least one of Indonesia’s Islamist parties, one of whom carefully took note

of our findings and volunteered his thoughts (see Pepinsky et al. 2018).

Although politicians may use public-opinion polls to learn about constituents’ preferences and select their preferred policies, thereby facilitating accountability and representation, there are good reasons to criticize modern public-opinion polling as it currently is used. For example, Indonesian elections recently have seen the growth of low-quality and candidate-sponsored polls, which may undermine trust in government and/or the media (Mietzner 2009). These are examples that clearly fall outside of the ambit of political science and therefore are not good exemplars of engaged political science research. Nonetheless, research done in the comparative politics of Southeast Asia using public-opinion polling undoubtedly shapes the practices of elections and democracy across the region.

### NEW MEDIA AND COMPARATIVE SOUTHEAST ASIAN POLITICS

A third way that comparative politics research reaches Southeast Asian audiences is through new media platforms including blogs and social media. Much as *The Monkey Cage* shares political science research with the broader reading public in the United States, sites including *New Mandala*—operated by the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University—share research, field reports, and commentary by researchers (including political scientists) who study Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> Although almost all posts are in English, which is a minority language in every Southeast Asian country except Singapore, they attract substantial interest from readers within the region. This is especially true when posts cover hot-button issues (e.g., the Thai monarchy) or in the run-up to national elections in countries such as Malaysia and Myanmar.

These blog posts can have real effects on both what is covered and researchers who write. In 2013, *New Mandala*’s coverage of Malaysia’s general elections generated approximately 120,000 hits on election night, the majority from Malaysia. Coverage of Indonesia’s presidential election in 2014

generated about a half-million hits, mostly from Indonesia. Several Thailand specialists who have written critical essays for *New Mandala* can no longer travel to that country, and there are instances in which researchers who have written critical pieces on other countries have had experiences ranging from lost interviews to harassment.<sup>6</sup> Proof of the “real-world impact” that such writing can have is that Southeast Asian governments respond to it and sometimes attempt to police its consumption by their own citizens.

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Of course, it is Southeast Asians themselves, rather than foreign researchers, whose online engagement has the greatest effect on Southeast Asian politics. However, the region’s particularly fraught relationship with the print media, relatively high literacy rates, extensive Internet penetration, and vibrant online cultures mean that this is yet another way in which the academic work done in comparative politics enters the public discussion in Southeast Asia. For Malaysians, for example, online media by far are the most open and critical sources of news. Thailand, by contrast, enforces draconian restrictions on both offline and online commentary critical of the monarchy, meaning that authors such as the anonymous “Bangkok Pundit”—who has collaborated on posts with political scientist Allen Hicken—occupy an especially important place in Thai politics.<sup>7</sup>

#### PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS

These examples of politically engaged and policy-relevant comparative politics paint a different picture of academic research than that imagined by many critics of contemporary social science. The general pattern is one in which scholarship coexists with public or political engagement: a publication in

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the *American Political Science Review* or *World Politics* probably is not going to be read by any politician, bureaucrat, or activist. Nevertheless, the research that generated that publication feeds into the political process. Researchers draw lessons and implications from their academic research and share them in shorter and more accessible formats. Even if most of this feeds into debates that are accessible only to an English-speaking readership, some of it eventually makes its way into local vernaculars as well.

This model works because there is a coincidence between the subjects that comparativists working in Southeast Asia

find intellectually interesting—democratization, populism, clientelism, corruption, oligarchy, conflict, identity, decentralization, accountability, dissent, and mobilization—and the issues that animate Southeast Asian politics. There are, of course, aspects of contemporary research that hew more closely to the “basic-research” or “normal-science” style of political science and that, accordingly, are not directly relevant for contemporary politics or policy. Nevertheless, the state of affairs in the study of Southeast Asia does not quite match

caricatures of political science scholarship that is uninterested, irrelevant, or oblivious.

Challenges remain. The most obvious is the inclusiveness of scholarship on Southeast Asian politics. Most US-based researchers admit frustration with the difficulty of attracting Southeast Asian students to the United States. One problem is the distance, cost, and commitment. Australia, for example, offers a much more affordable and convenient place to pursue an advanced degree, with a more welcoming environment for area specialists. Other issues include the importance of placement statistics for departmental prestige (i.e., Southeast Asian students who return to home are “not a good bet”); English-language skills; and the difficulty of pursuing an academic career in a country where even a full-time academic salary is insufficient to maintain a middle-class standard of living. That said, in countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, local, US-trained political scientists have built local polling industries. They, in turn, are fostering the next generation of local scholars who make a career of political science.

The ethical dilemmas are more interesting—for example, working in countries the governments of which researchers

find objectionable. What happens when research can be used by governments to further repress their citizens or to more effectively circumvent popular calls for reform? A related concern is the researcher as a political actor. Many foreign researchers who study Southeast Asia have more than a professional interest in those countries. They have a personal interest in the national politics, often experienced as a commitment to advocate and, where possible, work for what they consider good policy, good governance, political equality, civil liberties, and so forth. Networks of colleagues, collaborators, friends, and sometimes family who live in these

countries sustain this commitment. However, regardless of how deep their commitment, foreign researchers are not citizens or residents of these countries. Despite what may be genuinely heartfelt political commitment and good intentions, foreign researchers are inevitably insulated from all of the consequences of the politics for which they advocate. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask whether there are limits to which comparativists' research should affect the politics of the countries they study.

To draw out these points, consider the 2014 presidential election in Indonesia, which pitted the ex-son-in-law of former dictator Soeharto, Prabowo Subianto, against Jakarta governor Joko Widodo ("Jokowi"). Almost all of my Indonesian friends and colleagues supported Jokowi over Prabowo. Many expressed fear about the survival of Indonesian democracy if Prabowo were elected president. My personal commitment to democratic politics, and my knowledge of Prabowo's history as a disgraced former general with a stained human-rights record (as well as a hot temper and an authoritarian personality), led me to also favor Jokowi. To understand Prabowo's campaign, I attended a mass rally in Jakarta immediately before the election. I then shared notes about the experience on my personal blog and on social media, which resulted in a moderate amount of attention and commentary from Indonesians. I also wrote about how to interpret Indonesia's pre-election polls, drawing on my own work of conducting surveys in Indonesia. The audience for these pieces was Indonesia's English-literate population. I do not believe now, nor did I ever, that Jokowi was the ideal candidate; however, in a head-to-head contest with Prabowo, I consider the argument for Jokowi to be overwhelming.

Both types of comparative politics research—that is, outreach on critically reading public-opinion polls and commenting and dissecting the campaign rally of a presidential candidate—fit the conception of "engaged research in comparative politics" outlined in the introduction to this article. Although the former may invoke the researcher's preference for evidence-based decision making, the latter may reveal the researcher's values and preferences over *outcomes*.

There certainly is no ethical requirement that engaged political science scholarship must be value-free, in either comparative politics or any other part of the social sciences. I suspect that this work had no effect on any Indonesian's vote. Still, the ethical question may be clarified by asking: "What if my research had influenced the outcome of the Indonesian election" and "Do foreign researchers know what is best for the people who live in the countries that they study?" I find these questions disquieting, no matter how confident I am in my preference for Jokowi over Prabowo. The history of Southeast Asia is replete with well-meaning foreigners—social scientists among them—whose ideas and actions have shaped Southeast Asian politics with tragic consequences. This has been a theme in Vietnam retrospectives since *The Best and the Brightest* (Halberstam 1972), and it is brought home by the reluctance of so many foreign academics to accept the horror of the Khmer Rouge's reign in Cambodia

(Beachler 2011, ch. 3). Comparativists, accustomed to the criticism of how narrow and irrelevant political science research is, nevertheless must be mindful of the influence they might have. ■

## NOTES

1. Available at [www.lsi.or.id](http://www.lsi.or.id), [www.indobarometer.com](http://www.indobarometer.com), and <http://surveymeter.org>.
2. Available at [www.superpollthailand.net](http://www.superpollthailand.net).
3. Available at [www.merdeka.org](http://www.merdeka.org).
4. Available at <http://eng.pcvietnam.org>; see also Malesky (2017).
5. Available at [www.newmandala.org](http://www.newmandala.org).
6. Personal communication with Liam Gammon, current editor of *New Mandala*.
7. Available at [www.thaidatapoints.com/home](http://www.thaidatapoints.com/home).

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