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Section proposal:

Swept by the Flow? The Challenge of New Data Sources

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In the last 10-15 years, political data have passed from rarity to abundance. Innovations have been made in the way data are created, collected, stored, accessed, and deciphered. Multiple factors combine: technological (e.g. high-storage capacity computers, web-tracking and web-cropping systems, spying devices embedded in portable machines, more powerful data analysis software, including for qualitative data), institutional (e.g. archiving policies of public and private organizations, all-purpose advertising and marketing strategies), new social practices (e.g. “social networks”), as well as new scientific investigations (e.g. large-scale electronic surveys, simulation tools and experiments, portable technologies to collect visual ethnographic data). All these changes create new conditions and challenges for political science methods. Are the new data new or just more of the same? If they are new, do we need new methods to deal with them, or can we just step on old ones? Some existing methods cannot be adapted and miss the data flow, meaning that some new data remain unused because we lack adequate methods to process them. Conversely, new data sometimes trigger excitement just because of their novelty, without due attention to limitations or due acknowledgement that some of these data may have been generated deliberately to create a diversion or overflow of strategic information (by governments or organizations, for instance). Finally, new practices of data collection and storage also yield new problems and concerns with regards to research ethics and re-analysis. What safeguards can we put in place to ensure that new political research still respects research participants' privacy and informed consent in light of the use of ‘big data’? What are the specific challenges related to the archival and re-use of interview or ethnographic data?

All fields are concerned by new data flows: political behaviour, discourse and political ideologies, public policy, comparative politics, political psychology and ethnography, etc. In each field, new data flows turned some questions from theoretical to empirical. Some phenomena are now more densely documented or can be triangulated from several sources. We are even reformulating political theory questions about transparency, fairness, power and dissidence, and uneven access to knowledge. Our academic challenge becomes more complicated as this new information becomes accessible to political actors to inform their visions and strategies and develop new political tools.

The section assumes that scholars from different fields and traditions will benefit from sharing thoughts about similar changes in data availability. The growing division between political science sub-disciplines limits transversal connections and causes duplicate methodological advances. This is why we welcome panels and papers demonstrating new data sources and/or new research practices, their origins and causes, and their implications for political methodology. They may also deal with how new data sources, by providing new evidence in one given field, revive theory or move the line between adverse theories. Panels confronting methods for one or several kinds of new data within one given (sub)discipline or (sub)field are especially welcome.

The section is supported by the ECPR Standing Group on Political Methodology. Intending applicants are welcome to discuss their ideas with the section chairs in advance if they wish: philippe.blanchard@unil.ch, t.exadaktylos@surrey.ac.uk and sgierl@ceu.hu.

Deadline for submissions: Feb. 15th, 2014.