Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research

Edited by
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Preface

“What we need is a manifesto for ideas and politics; a book that surveys the literature and charts a direction for future research.” This statement, uttered over lunch at a conference in Washington, DC, was the start of this project. What followed was a typical back of the napkin jotting of names of people we thought were the principal figures in this emerging approach to research. It took us all of ten minutes to arrive at a list longer than we needed. And, we expressly strived to identify people who were working in a variety of diverse fields of research. That we were able to quickly compile the names indicates how widespread the interest in the study of ideas has become. After the conference we quickly contacted everyone on the list and were pleasantly surprised when almost everyone enthusiastically agreed to contribute to the project. Evidently, we were not the only ones who craved such a book.

The idea was to examine the broad collection of literature that addressed ideational approaches. This literature is vast, and exhibits a broad variety in terminology, foci of study, and levels of analysis. In part, this is because ideational approaches have settled into a number of disciplines and subdisciplines of the social sciences. In some of these subdisciplines ideational approaches are new, being toyed with by scholars who seek to move beyond rationalist or structuralist approaches. In other subdisciplines, ideational perspectives are well-established, but seem in recent years to have moved from one of many to become the dominant approach to research. All the more reason for a book that examines the phenomenon and offers an argument for what this trend means for social science research. Yet we needed to be selective, so we focused primarily on policy-related research. This is still a broad field that spans many subdisciplines of sociology and political science. But, it does not include some of the other subdisciplines where the study of ideas has also been prominent. Moreover, even when focusing on selected issues and subfields, we could not feature all the ideational approaches available in
the literature. Yet, we hope that scholars working in those other fields will find the statements we make here useful to their fields of inquiry.

This project began as a set of sessions organized at the 2006 and 2007 annual meetings of the American Political Science Association. Most of the chapters in the book were first presented on panels at one of these conferences. Since that time, we have engaged in a few lively rounds of critiquing each others’ essays, and formulating a series of statements about the role of ideas in political life. Our message is simple, ideas are at the core of political action. They shape the way we understand interests, are the inspiration for the construction of political and social institutions, and are the currency of our discourse about politics. Of course the message isn’t so simple. This book is our exploration of the complexities of the subject.

Putting together this volume was one of the most exciting intellectual projects in which we have ever participated. Our contributors were highly committed to this project, and we must thank them all for their hard work and the insightful comments they provide us and each other. The pleasure of working with them increased when Dave McBride of Oxford University Press threw his support behind the project. At Oxford University Press, we also thank Alexandra Dauler and the members of the manuscript production team. Thanks also goes to Phill Jo and Albert Schilthuis, graduate students at the University of Oklahoma who provided invaluable editorial assistance. Over the years, we had countless discussions about the role of ideas in politics with dozens of scholars and students we met at conferences or in the classroom. It would be too long to enumerate their names here but we do thank them collectively for their insight. As this volume illustrates, scholarly work is a collective endeavour and research is like the politics of ideas: a constant debate between people who often disagree on core issues but keep the conversation going, as it is part of what makes us full human beings living in a democratic
society. Finally, we would like to thank our wives, Angela and Eugenia, respectively, who provided much intellectual and personal support as we worked on this project.

Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Cox