

# Exploring the Link Between Scholarship and Public Engagement: My Journey into Political Science

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In the corridors of political science, our personal narratives often weave into the fabric of our academic pursuits. Whether amidst the solemn ambiance of our campus offices or the clinking of whiskey glasses at APSA gatherings, the inevitable question arises: what led us to dedicate five, or more, years of our lives to the rigors of graduate school, carving out our own slice of research in the political science pie? Such introspection transcends being a conversation about mere career aspirations; it unveils our very essence—our priorities, values, and the indelible imprints of our history.

My own odyssey into graduate school involved stumbling through an indirect path, replete with twists and turns. Yet, it seemed that studying political science was always destined to be an inescapable force. You see, my father, hailing from Iran, had always been fervently passionate about politics. This not only led him to study political science, but it also manifested in active participation in Iran's nascent civil society during its tumultuous struggle between constitutional monarchy and authoritarian rule. When the Islamic revolution reshaped the landscape, my father, who happened to be in the United States at the time, returned to Iran to join the opposition against the new authoritarian regime. Spoiler – they failed.

His activism came with a steep cost. My father endured detention, arrests, and even dodged informal executions on multiple occasions. Eventually, my parents had to flee Iran under the cover of night, embarking on a perilous journey on foot to Turkey, before zigzagging across the globe as refugees, seeking to rebuild their lives in the United States.

Rebuilding your life in a new country is usually not an easy process, and my mother, deeply scarred by the political upheaval that had uprooted lives, marked a definitive "X" over any inclination toward the study of politics. In her eyes, it was the catalyst for their displacement and an impractical academic

pursuit in terms of earning a livelihood. Instead, in the spirit of the democratic values of her new country, she allowed me a wide spectrum of potential careers (the list was doctor or engineer).

Yet, political science, despite being explicitly discouraged, remained a constant presence in my life, as it is with most children of refugees. As a child, it was impossible not to overhear words like "revolution," "autocrat," "political persecution," and "social movements" while listening to my parents' daily discussions. No Iranian gathering was complete without music, dancing, excessive amounts of food, and impassioned political discourse. My parents continued their activism from abroad, organizing protests against the new regime and on a lucky day, I was in charge of the bullhorn. Conferences on Iranian politics were on the family calendar next to soccer practice. My interests also bridged over to local civic involvement and I was able to actively participate in my local government as a teenager, even co-chairing a city board...the prospects of evading an interest in political science were growing dimmer by the day, but out of respect for my parents' wishes, I settled for a compromise when choosing my undergraduate major: international economics.

Upon completing my bachelor's degree, I knew in my bones I needed to continue onto graduate studies, I had so many research questions and was eager to begin unearthing answers. Yet, I was navigating unfamiliar territory as I was the oldest child and the first in my family to pursue postgraduate studies and in a foreign land. In those days (the late 2000s) academic counselors emphasized the importance of "life experience" before embarking on graduate programs. Determined to gather whatever this "life experience" was, I embarked on a journey to teach English in Spain and subsequently worked in the fields of investment banking and finance upon my return to the United States. Despite the interesting and challenging nature of my work, it did not seem like the right fit. My focus often drifted away from daily trades towards pondering what socio-political factors were behind these financial movements.

Eventually, I entered graduate school and earned an MA in Development Studies. Subsequently, I began a graduate degree in International Economics at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, but within a few weeks, a persistent and familiar unease settled in. It became evident that economics was not the realm where I could explore the questions that truly captivated me. Conversations with various professors from different disciplines eventually led to a clear diagnosis: what I was actually interested in was Political Science. Oh, the taboo! But, I had invested enough time in doing what others wanted me to do that I felt it was finally time to pursue my interests. With approval from my institution's administration, I changed fields in the sixth week of classes.

In hindsight, the decision was sheer lunacy. Not only had I missed a month and a half of coursework, but I had never even taken a single political science course. I vividly recall the moment panic washed over me during my first graduate seminar when I realized how little I knew about political science. Still, this was what I had asked for and wanted, I had no alternative but to dive headfirst into the discipline. Did I ski Mt. Blanc? No. Did I go explore Zurich or the beauty of the Swiss Alps? Also no. But the political science nerd in me loved every second of time spent in the library diving into readings. I was excited that finally, my field of study potential to effect tangible change in the world—or so I believed.

A startling revelation awaited me when I discovered how divorce academia and policy remain. I was annoyed that policymakers were not keeping up with our research and also annoyed that our work was pretty inaccessible to non-academic audiences. My initial enthusiasm gave way to frustration. I had been drawn to political science precisely because of how relevant and useful it is in the real world. In fact, I went into the PhD thinking an integral part of the job was bridging the gap between academic research and a wider audience. I wholeheartedly believe that our efforts should strive for accessibility and active engagement with audiences beyond academia, and it is incumbent upon us to elevate public understanding. In this new digital age of disinformation, the perils of democratic backsliding and de-liberalization are evermore ubiquitous and fueled by low literacy in political science amongst general populations.

Simply publishing academic articles is not sufficient to combat the problem. Somewhat controversially, I believe that elevating public knowledge to prevent democratic backsliding falls squarely within our purview as researchers and educators. Fostering political literacy among the public is imperative. Part of our work should be engaging with a public audience because we are the most well-equipped to do so and if not us, then who? People are going to get their information from somewhere and objective, scientific analysis from scholars is undeniably a better source than a certain pod-cast wielding, supplement slanging, former Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) commentator, for example.

In this pursuit, I see APSA's Public Scholar program as a pivotal initiative, training young scholars with the skills to communicate dense academic research effectively to a non-academic readership.

My department, the School of Politics and Global Studies (SPGS) at Arizona State University has always made itself



Illustration of a young Iranian woman in green with her hijab turning into fire, a symbol of protest and rebellion (GettyImages/Olha\_Oleskova)

a home for innovation. It encourages students to look beyond what is done, asking what could be done. To this end, they have always supported my interest in public scholarship. Last year, I was encouraged to apply for the APSA Public Scholar program and had the privilege of being selected as a fellow. The fellowship taught me how to take recent, compelling, and usually technical *American Political Science Review* articles and translate them into blogs that could be comprehensible to an everyday, non-academic reader. The task was more challenging than I anticipated, condensing complex research findings into one-page articles devoid of jargon required practice. Nonetheless, APSA supplied patient and supportive mentors (thank you Dragana!) and provided workshops with MonkeyCage editors, experienced in the trade, to guide us through the learning process.

The APSA Public Scholar program proved immensely gratifying and I am grateful to APSA for seeing the importance of this activity in our field and creating the fellowship. My positive experience in the program leaves me eager to continue honing this skill and I am actively looking for opportunities to produce public scholarship. I am certain public scholarship will always be an important facet of my future work. I enthusiastically encourage all those interested in public scholarship to consider applying for this program. Together, we can do more to bridge the divide between academic research and public engagement, enhancing the broader understanding of our field and contributing to informed decision-making by individuals and policymakers alike. ■