April 4, 2013

Comments at panel on "Parties and Organized Interests," at Conference Dedicated to Explaining and Perpetuating the Political Insights of James Q. Wilson, at Harvard University

David R Mayhew

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/david-mayhew/175/
PROGRAM

Thinking About Politics:
A Conference Dedicated to Explaining
and Perpetuating the Political Insights of
James Q. Wilson

Thursday, April 4, 2013, Harvard University
Center for Government and International Studies,
South Building, Belfer Case Study Room, S020
1730 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA

Friday, April 5, 2013, Boston College
Corcoran Commons, Heights Room, Second Floor
Campanella Way, Chestnut Hill, MA

Sponsored by the Center for American Political Studies, Harvard University; the
Program on Constitutional Government, Harvard University; the Political
Science Department, Boston College; the Initiative for the Study of
Constitutional Democracy, Boston College; the Thomas W. Smith Foundation

Conference papers may be found at
http://jqwilson.org/multimedia/thinking-about-politics/
Thursday, April 4, 2013
Harvard University, CGIS-South, Belfer Case Study Room, S020
1730 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA

3:30-3:45 PM: Welcome and Introduction

3:45-5:15 PM Panel 1: Parties and Organized Interests

Marc K. Landy, Boston College
Martin A. Shefter, Cornell University
Steven M. Teles, Johns Hopkins University

Discussants:
David R. Mayhew, Yale University (chair)
James W. Ceaser, University of Virginia
McGee Young, Marquette University

Friday, April 5, 2013
Boston College, Corcoran Commons, Heights Room, 2nd floor
Campanella Way, Chestnut Hill, MA

9:00-10:15 AM Panel 2: Crime and Policing

Mark H. Moore, Harvard University
Mark A.R. Kleiman, UCLA

Discussants:
Christopher H. Foreman, Jr., University of Maryland (chair)
George L. Kelling, Manhattan Institute and Rutgers University
David M. Kennedy, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY

10:30-11:45 AM Panel 3: Bureaucracy and Regulation

Daniel P. Carpenter, Harvard University

Discussants:
Judge Robert A. Katzmann, Second Circuit Court of Appeals (chair)
Paul J. Quirk, University of British Columbia
Steven Kelman, Harvard University
Harvey Sapolsky, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

12:00 Noon-1:30 PM: Lunch

Lunch will be followed by talks by Hugh Heclo, George Mason University, and Peter H. Schuck, Yale Law School
1:45-3:00 PM Panel 4: From Political Science to Policy Analysis

Lawrence M. Mead, New York University
R. Shep Melnick, Boston College

Discussants:
William Kristol, The Weekly Standard (chair)
Pietro S. Nivola, Brookings Institution
Christopher C. DeMuth, Hudson Institute

3:00-4:15 PM Panel 5: Character and Culture

John J. Dilulio, Jr., University of Pennsylvania
Martha Bayles, Boston College

Discussants:
Charles R. Kesler, Claremont-McKenna College (chair)
Jon A. Shields, Claremont-McKenna College
Linda C. McClain, Boston University Law School
I would like to make a point about James Q. Wilson and political science. It is about methodology. It speaks to Wilson’s early writings of the 1950s and 1960s on political parties and other topics. For me, as an academic youngster at that time, nothing was more mind-shaking than Wilson’s The Amateur Democrat and his book with Ed Banfield, City Politics. “A study of a certain political mentality,” Wilson called the former work, and it certainly was that. How about those reformers? What were those feisty folks in Upper Manhattan up to? I had to overhaul my picture of political parties to make way for new categories. From City Politics I got ideas about machines, reform, ethnic politics, budgeting, and city planning that still swim around in my head.

First of all, in these works, we saw big questions of relevance to policymaking and society. We saw illuminations and explanations. That is obvious. But there is something else. We saw a methodology in play. These works were based on shrewd, on-site, for the most part informal investigation of political settings through interviews with elite actors and just plain watching (not to mention the mastering of background data and documents), and then smartly—I emphasize the “smartly”—reflecting on what it all amounted to. This might seem like a common-sense way to get a handle on political reality, and, yes, it is that. It has a touch of anthropology. To find out, you need to go and look. Of course, intelligence was carried into the investigating in these cases as well as administered to its results. Also, there was lots of on-site labor. City Politics was really Banfield and Wilson and many associates. I remember the twenty-five or so book-length reports on cities that went into that 1963 work. Some years later, I relied on these rich reports in my own writing about parties. I keep telling Martha Derthick how much I appreciated her size-up of politics in Cleveland.

I would guess that, for Wilson, this early investigative work was a necessary preface to his book later in 1973 that trafficked in concepts and theories, Political Organizations. There, we see the conceptual threesome of “material,” “solidary,” and “purpose” incentives that has carried down in the social sciences since. Wilson was a coiner of categories that stick.

But first came the field work. It is well to remember that informal field work, theoretically informed at the outset, then through its execution the source of light-bulbs, chin-scratching, and reflection, was once a centerpiece methodology in political science. I am thinking of works like V.O. Key’s Southern Politics, Robert Dahl’s Who Governs?, Ed Banfield’s own book Political Influence, and Richard Fenno’s Home Style. “Soaking and poking” was Fenno’s term. But no one excelled James Q. Wilson at this brand of research. No one drew results from it that have proven more important or memorable. Beyond parties and city politics, we see it also, along with the practice of research teammanship, in Wilson’s Varieties of Police Behavior and The Politics of Regulation.

Once, the discipline of political science enjoyed a comparative advantage, possibly an absolute advantage, over the other social sciences in the practice of informal field research.
It was a major sector of the discipline's orchestra. Now, this methodology has been losing its high place in political science, and the discipline is the poorer for it.