REPS Manual (2):
How to Avoid "Painfully Little Theory" in Academic Work

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In late August 2003, I started my Ph.D. program in the political science department at Duke University. I was literally chomping at the bit, eager to devour stacks of readings and learn new methodologies. By mid-September of that year, I was in shambles. I had received my first bit of professional feedback on a research design on media effects on Latinos. I had invested all the mental energy I could muster to put that brief proposal together—and I thought I had nailed it! I still vividly remember the first comment written across the page, in bold red: "The proposal addresses an intriguing issue, but provides *painfully little theory* to explain it."

There are certainly better ways to deliver feedback, but what hurt the most about this advice was its truth value: I did, in fact, have very little theory to explain the phenomenon I wanted to study. I felt so embarrassed that I resolved to never repeat this same mistake twice. That initial weight around my neck—the absence of strong theory-building skills—became a major part of what I would prove to myself and others I could eventually be competent at.

I start this essay on theory-building in this way in order to make it abundantly clear that engaging in this process is incredibly difficult, even for seasoned professionals. But it's also, I think, what distinguishes social scientists from journalists and other analysts. The mark of many competent political scientists is an ability to weave together interesting, persuasive, internally consistent, and empirically falsifiable stories. While I cannot lay any claim to reaching these metrics in isolation or in whole, I can tell you that this has been the scholar I have striven to be. In the pages that follow, I

lay out some of the tactics and personal philosophies I use to steer my career toward a place that strongly emphasizes the theories I develop and test.

Theorizing with Attitude (TWA)

Much like my approach to writing, my approach to theory-building starts with a specific attitude or temperament. I look at elegant theories with both awe and respect (especially those in social psychology). But I also see them as objects that one can achieve with some discipline and several tries. "I don't have a theory now," I tell myself, "but I can slowly build toward one." *Build* is actually a bit of a misnomer here, for it implies a smooth and linear process. I prefer to think that I *wrestle* with building a theory, using each day to bludgeon my reasoning into eventual coherence. In short, my attitude is to be flexible enough to know that there is no rule whatsoever that a tight theoretical argument must be produced perfectly and in one sitting.

The part I always consider most terrifying about theory-building is figuring out where to start. "Read the literature," my advisors and instructors would say to me. So I would read endlessly until fatigued. Still no theory. What I learned after growing sick of this unstructured process was that I had to read *with purpose* when canvassing "the literature." Much like I once did, many graduate students start reading this amorphous blob of research hoping that maybe—just maybe—a hypothesis will miraculously leap from the pages in front of us. What figured I out eventually was that reading had to be *intentional*. That is, I had to read in order to answer basic questions like: what has been written so far on my topic? What are the water's edges, conceptually, theoretically, and, methodologically in this vast expanse of work? Why haven't solutions to these

challenges been proposed before? Out of these blind spot(s), which ones can I address? These basic questions help place a firmer structure on what would otherwise be an unwieldy and open-ended process, which helps mitigate the stress associated with the trial and error that inheres in theory construction.

I'll illustrate this with one of my longer-running cage-matches with theory-building—my research on language effects on public opinion with Margit Tavits (Washington University, Saint Louis). Margit invited me to this project in 2014 because, to paraphrase her, she wanted to collaborate with a political psychologist in order to study language effects on mass opinion. I was familiar with some of the literature, but the question of language effects on thinking and other cognitive outcomes is a long one with still smoldering debates.[1] So I had to broaden my range and read from the perspective of linguists, cognitive scientists, anthropologists, and social psychologists. This took an entire summer. But once I was comfortable with concluding that I had read enough for now, I saw three major blind spots in what I had read.

The first was that, no matter how you sliced it, the bulk of evidence on language effects was largely drawn from small-scale experiments with convenience samples. Hardly the stuff that is going to convince most political scientists. Second, despite a careful and consistent focus on language's impact on many cognitive domains, the one that was generally absent was the one Margit and I cared about the most—politics, or rather, political opinion. Most importantly, there was little available theory to explain

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[1] For an overview, see Pérez, Efrén, and Margit Tavits. 2022. *Voicing Politics: How Language Shapes Public Opinion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

why or even *how* language should affect politics—a peculiar realm where the mass public hardly pays attention to politics, on average; knows very little about it, on average; and so, therefore, has few real attitudes to report, on average. Eureka! These were the impasses that seemed worth our time to get around, so we endeavored to build a theoretic framework to address these blind spots and explain language effects on public opinion.

There are always a million reasons not to do something, and so it is with theory-building in research. What if nobody buys your story? Welcome to the club. Some people can be persuaded. Others will never come around the corner to what you're selling. Focus on expanding the circle of the former group by developing answers to questions like *why*, *when*, among *whom*? As a political psychologist, each one of these questions is worthy of theory in its own right—their combination simply enhances a framework's sophistication.

What if somebody has already done this before? Don't be alarmed. Ask yourself, what can you add to what is currently on offer in your research field? What can you improve? Setting aside criticisms of my work's quality, a close reading of it should reveal that much of what I spend my time on is drilling down into people's psychology in order to explain their reactions to politics, especially when these individuals are people of color. This is not an accident. It was a choice informed by reading broadly in two areas that hardly engage each other—political psychology and race/ethnicity and politics (REP). Something seemed off to me, especially when it's clear that our country is only getting *more* racially diverse, but many of our "universal" theories of human

psychology are based on our understanding of non-Hispanic Whites. The lesson here is: if you see a theoretical explanation missing, your job, as a political scientist, should be to propose one that you can test. Otherwise, the status quo is going to rein the day.

You might also ask: what if I build a theory and I'm wrong? That risk is always going to be there. It's part of the social scientific enterprise. But we have to learn to separate a theory's development from its falsification. The former is about "connecting the dots," as they say. The latter is about discerning whether the connected dots reflect something real or just a mirage (alas, our minds are incredible at detecting patterns where none really exist). At this point, it is useful to remind the reader that a theory — no matter how sophisticated--cannot explain everything. Being wrong about political phenomenon is part of the terrain. But just because your claims may be unsupported does not mean there is no contribution to make. This is especially the case as some cohorts of political scientists strongly and actively endorse the idea that the production of competent social science should not depend, exclusively, on statistically significant results. So long as a study or collection of them are skillfully designed and executed, there are now journals and pools of reviewers who are more open to null or mixed results.[2] I know because I've hazarded many hypotheses that have been wrong and still managed to publish them after a few tries (e.g., Hopkins, Kaiser, Pérez, et al. 2019; Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2022). I'll provide an example of this through some collaborative work my lab has recently produced.

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[2] For example, consider the *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, which expressly welcomes reports of null results.

My collaborators and I have been interested in evaluating whether Black and Latino individuals who read about each other's contribution to U.S. culture would weaken their solidarity with people of color.[3] Building on a long and distinguished line of social identity research, we reasoned that highlighting another minoritized outgroup's contributions to a higher-status group (i.e., *Americans*) would trigger a set of invidious comparisons that undermined any sense of solidarity between people of color. We pre-registered this prediction, collected the data, analyzed it and discovered that we were wrong. We wrote a paper anyway on the basis of these unanticipated results and published it in the journal, *Research and Politics*. The lesson here is: it's ok to be wrong; there are plenty of opportunities to publish competent work.

Process

While theory-building can feel unwieldly, there are many method(s) to this madness. I'll share mine with you. I have never found my thoughts to be linear or even modestly connected, which is very easy for me to interpret as "dead-end." And why not? Brainstorming is messy, which makes me feel sloppy, which then gives me the impression that I'm going nowhere fast. But messes can be cleaned up and organized, which can result in new inspiration and motivation for additional thinking. The key here, for me, is to have a replicable process to bring this messiness into coherence. The first stage here is to learn to arrest my own thoughts. These pop up at all times of the

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[3] See Pérez, Efrén, Bianca Vicuña, and Alisson Ramos. 2022. "Does Affirming Black and Latino People as *American* Weaken Racial Solidarity? A Surprising 'No' from Two Pre-Registered Experiments." Working paper. UCLA REPS Lab.

day for me, including during my shuttling of kids to school, my commute to campus, when I work out, etc. I therefore try to make sure I have some device—pad and paper, my cell phone, my actual desktop—to write down and express these thoughts as succinctly as I can. This act of cataloging my thoughts has the simple effect of reminding me that I have actually been working, even if I didn't make as impressive progress as I wanted to make. The next available moment I have to organize these thoughts, I organize them. If I see connections between them, I make them, while reserving judgment for a later time. At that later time, I ask myself, what is weak or inconsistent? When I identify those soft spots, I try to do something about them, taking care to document those efforts, too. This might entail circling back to producing more thoughts and connections, hazarding an informed guess, or (gulp!) reading more. It's ok. It's worth the investment.

One way I soften the pressure of theory-building is to focus on those things in the literature that I can solve. I remind myself that I don't have to solve them in a perfect or definitive way. If social science is collective and cumulative, which I do believe it is, then what I have to do is just solve these theoretic blinds spots in a way that yields some noticeable improvement relative to what was done before. I think that too many young scholars place unbearable pressure on themselves to produce a splashy, ground-breaking idea each time. Not everything we produce will have these qualities. But if we admit to ourselves that our careers will be long, then what matters is the central tendency of the work we produce over time—and with more tries—we can

push it in the higher-quality direction. So, rather than focusing on perfection, I try to focus on investing on more opportunities to practice my craft.

Rules of Thumb

At this point, you may be wondering, what makes a good theory—and how do I preserve it in light of criticism? The first thing to remember is that social science is a collective enterprise where skepticism is a built-in feature. Invariably, what you design and construct in terms of a theoretical framework is going to get criticized, full stop. Just consider it an occupational hazard, like I do. Some critics are never going to believe your theory no matter what you do. Some critics will be persuaded if you pay attention more to this or that aspect of the proposed framework. The question, then, is how to navigate these straits when feedback is voluminous and often contradictory?

First, remind yourself that a good theory is parsimonious. In plainer language, our theories should explain regularities in the political world with *very few* moving parts. The more parsimonious the explanation, the better, if only because it allows others to observe its essence in the clearest way possible. Parsimony doesn't mean obvious. It also doesn't mean intuitive. It simply means *compact*. This feature of a theory allows one to focus attention on the most fundamental aspects of our reasoning: how two or more political concepts are, in principle, related to each other.

Second, a theory should be falsifiable. We often focus on the many ways that our theory would be correct in light of empirical evidence. But it is just as important—if not more so—to clarify when and why our theory would be *incorrect*. A parsimonious theory does not and cannot explain everything about a political phenomenon. For

example, a psychological theory of voting behavior will zero in on the mental contents and processes of individual citizens. But privileging this aspect will come at some expense of equal attention to structural forces on voting behavior. Why not speak to both levels of analysis, you may ask? That is certainly an option, but in broadening our scope to include these varied layers of analysis, we run the risk of over-complicating and over-determining our thinking and analyses, not to mention overwhelming other scientists' capacity to grasp what we are up to. A parsimonious theory is therefore more likely to be understood and appreciated.

Efforts to preserve a parsimonious theory is complicated by one of the hardest challenges in our profession. We *need* critical feedback to sharpen our theories. But, the onslaught of this criticism can also scare us into adding more detail to our theories, thereby producing bloated and messy frameworks that generate little new light. To balance a natural drive to defend one's ideas against the need for input from others, it is important not to lose oneself. You must fully appreciate the theoretical ground you're standing on and plant yourself their firmly, but flexibly. An example will suffice.

I identify strongly as a political psychologist, which means that most of my own theorizing centers on the psychological contents and processes that drive political attitudes and behavior of individuals, especially people of color. This means that structural considerations, such as inequality and racial stratification also bear on my thinking. But in the grand scheme of things, this focus is but one tiny island in a larger sea of political reality. Recognizing this, I strive to assess how the feedback I receive bears on my own little isle of theory. I ask myself: "If I integrate this feedback, will my

theory improve in terms of the cases it explains, the conditions under which it does (not) apply? Does this additional detail come at the expense of parsimony and falsifiability? If my theory is psychological in nature, then I strive to integrate the feedback I think will make it a stronger *psychological* theory, since that is the goal of my thinking. To continue the metaphor going, I fortify my own island of theory in a way that allows me to link it to a larger archipelago of understanding about the role of psychology in the politics of people of color.

Finally, it is important to remember that while all feedback and advice is free, not all of it is valuable or actionable. Your job as a theoretician is to separate the wheat from the chaff. When I sit down with the (in)formal comments I receive on my work-in-progress, I often ask myself: "how will incorporating this feedback improve my theory's ability to explain more cases, isolate (other) mechanism(s), and/or yield clearer evidence for (against) it?" If I were to be honest, I would say that at least 75% of feedback I receive is useful and actionable in some way—that is, it will enhance my thinking and is well within my reach with some effort. This might sound generous, but you have to remember that part of what critics are providing you with is an indication of what it would take a person, who is often as smart as you are, to be persuaded by your claims. Although I may dislike how a critic delivers their feedback to me, its provision is enough incentive for me to spend the time thinking about how to integrate the advice I receive. After all, I want my work to be broadly legible to others.

The challenge, of course, is that if you incorporate all the feedback you receive, then your theory becomes unmanageable. But not all feedback has to be integrated into

your own theory, per se. Some of the comments you receive are the starter pieces to an alternative explanation—another theory that is not yours, but that can provide a key falsification test. For example, in much of my work on Latino politics, the mobilizing effects of pan-ethnic identity appear front and center. But how do we know that it is pan-ethnicity doing the political work, rather than a *political* identity, like partisanship. Rather than incorporate partisanship as yet another variable in my theory, I instead design my studies so I can distinguish the effects of partisanship from those of pan-ethnic identity, which my theory privileges.[4]

At other times, however, one integrates feedback into a theory by bolstering the framework one has already built. My work on language-opinion effects illustrates this.[5] When my co-author and I began workshopping our research in its early stages, the biggest threat to inference was culture. That is, how can we really know that language produces effects on mass opinion, rather than culture. Setting aside for now the much deeper conversations about what culture is (not), we took this criticism to heart. Indeed, we wracked our brains for more than year thinking about how to address this. Ultimately, we left our theory intact, but we designed a set of studies where we could control, by design, the effects of culture. To this end, we conducted a study where all participants shared the same (Swedish) culture and language, but where we manipulated referents to objects (i.e., gender pronouns). This allowed us a strong falsification test of our theory, certainly far stronger and more definitive than other tests

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[4] See Pérez, Efrén O. 2015. "Xenophobic Rhetoric and Its Political Effects on Immigrants and Their Co-Ethnics." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 549-564.
[5] *Ibid,* Pérez and Margit Tavits (2022).

of the language versus culture variety we had conducted. Our theory did not change, but how we tested it did—and all thanks to the critical feedback we received.

Coda

The lesson of this brief essay is that theory-building is incredibly difficult, but not impossible. At its most fundamental level, it is a process, rather than a destination, and one that requires structure to harness the intellectual energy inside our heads. If you don't invest in a process, then the messy, non-linear activity that is theory-building is likely to frustrate you, tempting you to limp along or ignore a vital part of your work as a scholar. Insofar as you care about the long-term viability of your career, you must invest in developing a routine to tackle this regular feature of your day-to-day operation. Developing theories that are wrong or only partially supported are prevalent in political science. Thus, failure on the theoretic side of things is just fine, so long as you try again. What is not ok, however, is constant paralysis in the face of this key task behind producing political science, because constant inaction is what often kills young and promising careers in our profession.