Can We Algorithmize Politics? The Promise and Perils of Computerized Text Analysis in Political Research

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**ABSTRACT**

In recent years, political scientists increasingly have used data-science tools to research political processes, positions, and behaviors. Because both domestic and international politics are grounded in oral and written texts, computerized text analysis (CTA)—typically based on natural-language processing—has become one of the most notable applications of data-science tools in political research. This article explores the promises and perils of using CTA methods in political research and, specifically, the study of international relations. We highlight fundamental analytical and methodological gaps that hinder application and review processes. Whereas we acknowledge the significant contribution of CTA to political research, we identify a dual “engagement deficit” that may distance those without prior background in data science: (1) the tendency to prioritize methodological innovation over analytical and theoretical insights; and (2) the scholarly and political costs of requiring high proficiency levels and training to comprehend, assess, and use advanced research models.
yet met its full potential. As this article demonstrates, the case of applying CTA to the IR field allows us to closely examine the migration of methods from one field to another and to assess the accompanying possibilities and hurdles. The main challenge, we argue, is not the introduction of these new methods, which can be measured simply by the extent to which scholars adopt CTA methods in their research, but rather—and more important—their precarious engagement and application.

This article questions the usually positive perspective on the ability of computational methods to boost research in social sciences at large and political science and IR in particular in terms of volume, variety, velocity, and vinculation, thereby promoting innovation in data-collection data analysis (Monroe 2013). We fully acknowledge that political science, like many other disciplines, is on the cusp of a transition to an academic world in which artificial intelligence (AI) knowledge and machine-learning methodologies are an integral part of research programs. However, we demonstrate that computational methods often are borrowed and methodologically implemented without giving due attention to the analytical context. The insufficient tailoring of these methods to the “receiving” field often results in studies that rely heavily on code and thus are approachable and transparent only to those few scholars who master computer language. Therefore, despite the promise of computational methods, we caution against their unquestioning application. We highlight two main caveats regarding the import of computational-method packages without careful adaptations: (1) the prioritization of methodological innovation at the expense of analytical substance; and (2) a growing inaccessibility and lack of transparency. We discuss possible options for overcoming potential discrepancies and complexities, highlighting the responsibility of the scholarly community to consider both the analytical challenge of the computational turn and its potential political ramifications—namely, widening existing gaps and creating digital inequality.

BRINGING CTA TO POLITICAL RESEARCH: THE CASE OF IR

The eminent spread of digital interactions, social networks, and online activities that have reshaped our social habitat is encouraging researchers across disciplines to rethink and revise the main paradigmatic frameworks of social and political research (Jungherr and Theocharis 2017, 99; Lazer et al. 2009, 722). Indeed, in recent years, political scientists have used digital datafication trends (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2014) to introduce new types of data and compile an incredible array of new databases (Grossman and Pedahzur 2020, 226). Computational social sciences harness the use and spread of big data and machine-learning tools for modeling, simulating, and scrutinizing social phenomena by computational means (Brady 2019, 297–98). They enable the analysis of high-dimensional and noisy datasets and provide new insights into thus far latent and unreachable layers of social and political life (González-Bailón 2013, 153). Political scientists also have implemented and developed computational models based on AI and machine learning for exploring various political systemic examination of the interactions that ultimately design our primary subject matter: world politics. Indeed, in recent years, we have witnessed nascent albeit burgeoning literature applying CTA-based research to various corpora: nongovernmental-organization reports (e.g., Fariss et al. 2015; Park, Murdie, and Davis 2019); international investment agreements (Alschner and Skou-garesklyi 2016); international climate-change negotiations (Bagozzi 2015); the United Nations Security Council (Schönfeld and Mikhaylov 2019a; Watanabe and Zhou 2020); and speeches (e.g., Beata, Diermeier, and Beigman 2008; Lauderdale and Herzog 2016; Wiener 2007), and to develop models for the automatic measuring, scoring, and scaling of political actors’ positions and preferences, including parties, legislators, and interest groups (Grimmer 2010; Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; Roberts et al. 2014; Slapin and Proksch 2008).

In the IR field, the potential of CTA for text analysis is indispensible. The international political sphere is rich in texts and built of texts, relying on and realized by discursive and textual interactions. Public discourse at the international level is an essential source of data, and computerized methods can foster systematic examination of the interactions that ultimately design our primary subject matter: world politics. Indeed, in recent years, we have witnessed nascent albeit burgeoning literature applying CTA-based research to various corpora: nongovernmental-organization reports (e.g., Fariss et al. 2015; Park, Murdie, and Davis 2019); international investment agreements (Alschner and Skougaresklyi 2016); international climate-change negotiations (Bagozzi 2015); the United Nations Security Council (Schönfeld and Mikhaylov 2019a; Watanabe and Zhou 2020); and speeches (e.g., Beata, Diermeier, and Beigman 2008; Lauderdale and Herzog 2016; Wiener 2007), and to develop models for the automatic measuring, scoring, and scaling of political actors’ positions and preferences, including parties, legislators, and interest groups (Grimmer 2010; Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; Roberts et al. 2014; Slapin and Proksch 2008).

In recent years, much scholarly attention has been given to the previously neglected corpus of speeches in the annual general debate of the United Nations General Assembly. In international
politics, the UNGD is a rare and perhaps the only ritualistic discursive arena in which states have convened regularly and equally since 1945. Despite its name, it is less a debate and more a battery of speeches typically delivered by heads of state in a highly structured and ritualized way. These texts often signify states’ perceptions and experiences of world affairs, thus serving as a barometer (Smith 2006) that traces the agenda of international politics (Mingst and Karns 2011). IR researchers tend to show little interest in these speeches. However, there has been recent systematic quantitative and qualitative research of this textual corpus (Baturo, Dasandi, and Mikhaylov 2017; Hecht 2016; Kentikelenis and Voeten 2021) that highlights these texts as a promising data source for illuminating latent currents in world politics and teaches us about the dynamics of international discourse.

Not only IR scholars have found interest in this corpus; in recent years, data scientists have also presented and published several studies applying various NLP methods to this dataset. However, most of the studies were conducted by data scientists who published or presented them in data science journals, archives, and conferences (e.g., Blei and McAuliffe 2010; Dieng, Ruiz, and Blei 2019; Gurciullo and Mikhaylov 2017a, 2017b), thereby advancing computational development more than political knowledge. Blei’s works are a notable example. A prominent computer scientist at Columbia University, Blei and his colleagues use political corpora (including the UNGD) to develop NLP algorithms for textual analysis. Their work is directed almost exclusively to the data-science community; therefore, their publications also remain in this realm. Even Watanabe and Zhou’s (2020) attempt to directly address IR scholars by showing how semi-supervised methods may assist theory-driven analysis in IR eventually was published in Social Science Computer Review, a non-IR journal. Consequently, a political scientist who wants to build on these studies to advance political theories would have to invest significant effort to locate and much less understand them. Although efforts have been made to suggest potential political insights (e.g., Baturo, Dasandi, and Mikhaylov 2017; Chelotti, Dasandi, and Mikhaylov 2021), these studies primarily emphasized the technical elements of applying CTA methods and models.

The tension between analytical and methodological components of research is well known. Returning to the fundamentals of research, we know that an analytical framework is a prerequisite and that research questions should guide the decisions made about both the method and the analysis. For a researcher, however, the choice of method—especially in a world of big data and automated code-based analysis—is like being in a magical theme park packed with inordinate possibilities. For a researcher, the choice of method—especially in a world of big data and automated code-based analysis—is like being in a magical theme park packed with inordinate possibilities. The challenge is even greater when fields and disciplines collide; data scientists are prone to advancing ways to collect and utilize data of any type, whereas IR scholars are oriented toward gaining political insight and knowledge. Whereas many of the studies present sophisticated and cutting-edge methodologies, with this potential subsequently, many CTA applications prioritize methodology innovation over immersion in the political field. There is no doubt that methodological innovation is critical and essential for enriching the political-research toolkit. However, we should be aware that (1) this innovation may come at the expense of providing new empirical and theoretical insights; and (2) the ability of scholars
who are not trained in computerized methods to review, assess, and even understand the research process is limited. For example, in many CTA-based papers that are published in prominent political science journals (e.g., Barnum and Lo 2020; Greene and Cross 2017; Park, Greene, and Colaresi 2020), the design, execution, and language used are often in professional jargon, whereby possibly hindering and even preventing engagement with wide audiences within the political science community. This may quickly distance those (many) political researchers who have no prior knowledge of data science and may result not only in low-quality or even inaccurate research but also engender a publication bias that promotes proficiency in computer science over political science. Ultimately, importing ready-made method packages from external fields and disciplines as new methodological purviews for analyzing politics is an obstacle not only because it minimizes the potential reach of these methods but also because the solution cannot be limited to increased training.

In response to different methodological trends, political science graduate students have been trained in the past two decades in advanced statistics, experimental designs, and various software languages along with the core political science curriculum. At some point, developing these skills must come at the expense of deep and exhaustive knowledge of the dynamic political field and its research traditions. Moreover, not all political scientists have the privilege of learning and employing intricate text-as-data methods or have access to the costly hardware, software, and bandwidth that these methods demand. The challenge is not only the heavy burden of expanding the spectrum of training now required of political scientists; it also is—and perhaps even more—the invisible and thickening veil that separates those who can do the research and those who are supposed to understand and review it but are at a loss when it comes to deciphering long and cryptic Greek-letter formulas and code scripts.

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This state of affairs has important political implications. Conducting and learning computational research are extremely costly and therefore available only to those few who are employed at or study in high-ranking, wealthy academic institutions that can provide access to the often-expensive program and facilities required for these endeavors. The more computational methods become a requisite for political research, the more this trend will widen scholarly inequalities by excluding groups of scholars who often already are underrepresented in major political science journals.

This article is not a call to resist evolution; advancing science relies on developing new research trajectories. Nonetheless, normalizing these questions and articulating skepticism can promote a more open, dialogic, and constructive research and highlight the need for interdisciplinary collaboration. The conditions for such a dialogue, first and foremost, depend on working together to find a common and balanced ground concerning the use of technical language and an analytical framework that can make studies in both disciplines more accessible. Review processes play a vital role in this; authors must be committed to a vocabulary that is comprehended easily and reviewers to a more hospitable approach toward new methods. This also requires transparency regarding the choices and decisions made throughout the research process (Kapiszewski and Karcher 2021)—for example, by providing explanations of the connection among the method, the results, and the political implications.

This also is pivotal for the application of NLP-based methods in IR; they continue to emerge and develop; thus, meticulous engagement approaches can be used to harness wider audiences within the IR community. However, these approaches require going beyond the promotion of inclusiveness and interdisciplinary collaborations. First and foremost, they require caution against conflating lack of knowledge with self-abnegation. New and unknown methods often are captivating but cannot and should not be followed blindly. Whereas data science—especially in “soft” political science—may appear to be a solution that provides objective and computerized tools that minimize human intervention and solve common issues of limited research choices, this ultimately is not the case. Eventually, computerized models and methods are constructed and decided by human intervention, and they are as subjective and biased as any other method (Chatsiou and Mikhailov 2020). In fact, human interpretivism guided by political-oriented knowledge is a crucial part of developing more advanced and accurate computerized tools, particularly because—from the viewpoint of political scientists—texts and words cannot and should not be treated solely as a methodological resource for data. Text is a (some scholars would argue the) fundamental and primary polit-
CONFLICTS OF INTEREST
The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

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