

Antwerp, 14 April 2016

Dear Rector, Professor Verschoren,  
Dear Professor Pierre Van Moerbeke, Executive Director of the Francqui Foundation,  
Dear Professor Van den Bossche,  
Dear Professor Loots, Dean of the Faculty of the Social Sciences,  
Dear colleagues,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

When friends or family ask me what I am doing in my professional life, usually some silence follows. Then I describe parts of my daily work such as writing articles, meeting colleagues at conferences, managing research projects, analysing data, organizing meetings and workshops, reading and reviewing papers, editing a journal and supervising students. I list the courses I teach. Sometimes people ask precise questions about politics in some particular country or to clarify or comment on some specific political event – what do you think about the refugee crisis? – or, the worst of all, ask me to give advice on which party they should vote for. Sometimes my answers are meaningful, but usually it is very difficult to explain what it means to be a political scientist. I hope that this lecture will clarify things.

So, ‘politics’ and ‘science’ are two concepts that do not sit easy together. Political science is clearly an odd, but also without any doubt an old discipline, maybe one of the oldest disciplines. Already Aristotle noted in the Ethics that:

*Now it would seem that this supreme End must be the object of the most authoritative of the sciences - some science which is pre-eminently a master-craft. But such is manifestly the science of Politics; for it is this that ordains which of the sciences are to exist in states.*

And indeed, we political scientists are blessed with a long list of intellectual giants including names such as Locke, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Madison, Mill, Montesquieu, de Tocqueville, de Condorcet... Some of these people were also brilliant in other sciences such as mathematics, philosophy, biology and economics. And recently we have famous scholars such as Herbert Simon, Elinor Ostrom, Robert Putnam, Arend Lijphart, Maurice Duverger, David Easton, Fritz Scharpf – just to list a few prominent names – and some political scientists – Herbert Simon and Elinor Ostrom – won Nobel prizes. Political science is not just a fad or the pastime of some dilettant.

Yet, although political science is one of the few disciplines that has science prominently in its English name – in contrast with linguistics, biology, chemistry, or even our sister discipline sociology – the idea that a scientific approach to politics is possible or desirable seems odd to many people. Political science is about something - politics - on which many people voice their opinion. And even people who have no opinion about politics have relevant opinions; the absence of an opinion is also significant for political scientists. This aspect separates political science from many other disciplines. Most people have no meaningful idea or opinion about the Higgs-Boson, Fermat’s theorem, or the origins of human languages, because it barely affects their daily life.

Yet, politics affects our life, our daily life, in a profound manner. Smart political manoeuvring may prevent us from disasters and lead to stability and peace, but political neglect may result into catastrophic war. Politics influences the amount of taxes we pay, whether we have a welfare state or not, whether and how we regulate the food we eat, and how we protect our borders. And more profoundly, it also shapes how we think and who we are. Public debates supply us with information and ideas on what the causes and solutions are of the financial crisis, how we think about refugees, and what makes us citizens. As Aristotle already noted thousands of years ago, politics influences all the other sciences, including political science. An interesting illustration of this is that in the US, political science research is increasingly under attack as it is considered, among conservatives, as useless (it does not create much added value for the economy) and dangerous (it spreads liberal ideas). Sadly, one typical feature for countries where democratic institutions are under pressure – for instance, Turkey or Hungary - is that in these countries the academic study of politics is strongly suppressed. It is not only an odd, old, but apparently also a dangerous discipline.

In this lecture, I will tell you some things about my own journey in political science. What drives me as a political scientist and what does this mean to me? I will also delve deeper into my current subject area – the study of political mobilization, interest group politics and policy influence – and explain why it is an important study field. But most importantly, I will do this by broadening my perspective and connect this field with other subfields, such as public opinion and political equality. I do this because I strongly believe that we need to de-fragment political science and maybe the social sciences more generally. In doing this, I elaborate on some basic components that make up contemporary political life. More concretely, I will talk about the government, citizens and the organizational fabric that connects government and citizens. Nowadays, these components are strongly dynamic and prone to various transformations. I conclude with some reflections on how we can move forward with the scientific study of politics. For those who know me, you will be somewhat surprised as there will be no PowerPoint, no tables with numbers and no graphs or figures. Only my ideas and thoughts!

Why politics? Well, a great deal, maybe most and probably our most basic needs, that we human beings wish to realize, cannot be achieved alone, either by individual action, by the market or corporations. For instance, safety and security are basic needs which we can only realize through collective action. Also economic markets function by virtue of a broad set of institutional arrangements and rules. Other basic goods such as roads for transport, networks for communication, regulations for food safety and environmental protection, and rules for health care provision all depend on collective action. Politics and government primarily concern collective action. From a very young age I have been fascinated by how people make decisions, how power plays a role therein and why on some issues people work together to find solutions while other issues are not cared about at all. In our part of the world, we are lucky because we were able to develop institutions that help us to produce many of these public goods and therefore we enjoy generally a high quality of life. True, things are far from perfect, but compared to many other parts of the world, we are lucky.

In our part of the world we also developed some deeply ingrained normative ideas and expectations on how such institutions should work. We call this democracy. Time is too short to go at the heart of this heavily contested concept. Political scientists and theorists have developed a wide range of definitions of it. At this point, I try to simplify things without being simplistic. I point at three aspects which are in my view fundamental ingredients of this normative framework, I will show how this relates to my academic research and how I hope, in the coming years, to connect these democratic normative puzzles better with my theoretical and empirical work.

1. First, the collective decisions we make through our institutions should be truly collective, namely they should reflect the preferences of those who are bound by these decisions. This does not mean that everything should be at stake and that all policies should be supported by the majority of the citizens, but the idea of democratic governance is that it is generally better when policies are supported by the governed.
2. Second, in order to achieve this outcome, we tend to believe that citizens should be able to take part in and control their government. The governed should be able to select their leaders and sanction them. Much of my research relates to this aspect, namely whether and how citizen interests try and are able to shape policy outcomes that are salient to them.
3. Third, our notions of democratic governance include some egalitarian beliefs. This aspect is highly contested. Much of the debate here relates to a major cleavage between a left and a right-wing view of democracy. Those who share democratic norms – both left and right – would generally agree that a democratic system should guarantee political equality, namely all citizens should have equal political rights and political opportunities should be equally distributed. Disagreement exists about whether, and the extent to which, governance should guarantee some output-equality, namely to make sure that at the end of the day all people should enjoy equality with respect to their quality of life (education, health, income, et cetera). Yet, although output-equality cannot always be guaranteed or justified, democratic governance itself should not lead to high levels of output-inequality as this may undermine political equality.

Now, some of you may ask “what does all this have to do with interest group politics, political mobilization and policy influence”, my research area? I have to admit that I needed to think about this myself. Till now I have spoken mostly about citizens and the government. We all know that this is a huge simplification of political life. All democracies have elections through which citizens select their political leaders. Yet, this is just one element that connects citizens with their government. All democracies, and I should emphasize especially and in particular democracies, are characterized by a complex organizational fabric that links citizens with government and government with citizens. This fabric consists of NGOs, interest groups, social movement organizations, think tanks, advisory bodies, consultation regimes, and so on. It is a complex patchwork of various representational practices. Also policymaking in

supranational organizations such as the EU and global organizations like the UN is increasingly featured by an organizational fabric that involves the participation of a highly diverse set of organized interests. My research on the influence and lobbying strategies of EU interest groups, on transnational advocacy, on Belgian interest groups, on the Europeanization of organized interests as well as on territorial interest representation analyses the nature of this complex organizational patchwork and how it shapes public policy. Yet, why is it important to analyse this relationship from the perspective of democratic governance?

There are three main issues at stake from a democratic perspective. I am not pretending that I have a definite answer, but here and there I will offer some tentative answers on the basis of knowledge that has been developed by recent research.

I start with the notion of input-equality. Here we face an interesting and important puzzle. It is hard to imagine how a democratic polity would function without the regular involvement, this means at various stages of the policy process and not limited to elections, of societal stakeholders. Organized interests, business associations and NGOs provide policymakers with key policy expertise and information, plus supply them information on political support. Without this input it would be difficult, and sometimes even impossible, for policymakers to make meaningful decisions. And often, this is an appropriate way for citizens to get involved, to learn about the policy process, and to build some allegiance with the polity to which they belong. However, one might reasonably argue that organized interest representation conflicts with the notion of political equality. The ability of citizens to mobilize and to represent themselves via political organizations is far from being equally distributed. The poor and the have-nots, those without the necessary skills are much less likely to establish political organizations. Moreover, the very rich might not need political representation or simply avoid it as they can easily withdraw from political life. The affluent park their wealth in faraway off-shores and are much less affected by public life and politics than the poor. Fortunately, there might be some good news as recent political science developed some robust, although incomplete, knowledge with regard to this topic. Despite substantial levels of inequality, we find consistently that most democracies are able to mobilize a diversity of citizen interests and we cannot conclude that it is always the strong and resourceful who win important political battles. For instance, the INTEREURO-project on lobbying in the EU demonstrated that, in contrast to some popular accounts in the media, the EU is not captured by big business. In many instances, but of course not always, non-business interests are capable to put significant pressure on the policy process and win political battles at the disadvantage of wealthy interests. Nonetheless, it remains an important political science question, namely whether and to what extent these organizations distort or contribute to the notion of egalitarian representation.

The second fundamental issue is whether policies pursued by various organized interests reflect the preferences of the broader public. If organized interests indeed influence policy outcomes and if these outcomes are not supported by citizens, we can rightly question the political legitimacy of organized interest representation. I need to admit that we have very little systematic knowledge on this matter. In my view this is because research on public

opinion, interest representation and public policymaking are largely separate study fields. On the basis of a recent project, we estimate that the number of organized interests that regularly seek policy influence in Belgium consists of about 1700 distinct interest associations situated at the national level. So, this is a substantial number. While political science spends much resources on actors that are relatively easy to identify – political parties that take part in elections – we have largely neglected the potential relevance of more hidden and less visible sources of power. Which interests and values are pursued by these 1700 organized interests in Belgium? We can ask similar questions for other democracies and/or international organizations. And do these interests correspond with some broad-based political preferences or do they rather reflect the values of some societal elite? And related to this, does the growing professionalization of civic life endanger or undermine the involvement of citizens in intermediary organizations? The leaders of civil society organizations are usually highly educated middle-class people. Does this affect the issues on which and how they seek policy attention? To be clear, I am not arguing that the organizational fabric should simply mirror popular resentments or opinions. On the contrary, it might be highly valuable that civil society organizations and/or interest groups campaign on important issues that are somewhat ignored among the broad public. Yet, it would be problematic – in terms of democratic representativeness and responsiveness – if civil society and organized interests would primarily act on behalf of the affluent, the better-off, or any other particular group.

Third, as I argued one democratic idea is that the governed should be able to take part in and control their government. They should be able to select their leaders and sanction them. During the past decades we have experienced an increase of policymaking venues that are not sanctioned or controlled via traditional electoral processes. Much of this takes place at the international or European level and involves intergovernmental networks that are composed of public officials, bureaucrats, scientists, judges and courts, and in many instances also private stakeholders. That is why some researchers in my team aim to uncover how various societal interests gain access to policymaking processes within European agencies, which are venues that are very far away from ordinary citizens. Yet, such agencification and the growing importance of intergovernmental networks is not only a matter concerning the international or the European level. Even closer to home, we experience some similar transformations of government. Contemporary government is not a matter of one central agent that steers public affairs, but rather a complex conglomerate of agencies situated at multiple levels of government. The state and the government do not exist; the prevailing monolithic conception of the state has been, during the past decades, gradually replaced by a patchwork of governance arrangements. Belgium is probably one of the most typical examples of such a multi-layered network state. This is, in my view, one of the most fundamental challenges to our democracy. While there is among the public a strong demand for and high expectations with regard to accountability, for political leaders it has become difficult to respond to that demand. Let me be clear on this. I am not pleading in favour of the impossible, namely moving back to an era with simple structures, an era that probably never existed. Despite all its faults, I tend to support the view that a network governance structure might, in the long run, be pretty robust and resilient. Yet, there are some clear drawbacks. The contemporary complex institutional context makes it difficult to attribute political responsibilities, which of

course does not mean that no-one is responsible for public policy outcomes. Institutional complexity may engender all sorts of political manoeuvring and pork barrel politics. Moreover, multi-layered institutional complexity may have varying, somewhat contradictory, consequences. On the one hand, it makes interest representation a costly affair. In order to represent some interest in a successful way, one needs sophisticated political experience and knowledge, and therefore it may fuel biased political representation. On the other hand, the current political institutional context may provide multiple opportunities for a large diversity of interests. If one loses a battle in one venue, there is still the option to seek attention via another venue. One typical example of this is the growing political role of courts within Belgium and elsewhere. For instance, a large number of litigation cases the Belgian Constitutional Court needs to process is initiated by some organized societal interests. Recently, an official who works for a medium-sized NGO, one of our former students, a political scientist, told me that they plan to hire two new staff members, people with a law degree – Prof. Van den Bossche will be happy to hear this - , who would specialize in litigation procedures on pieces of legislation this NGO seeks to challenge.

These are interesting transformations of the ways in which contemporary democracies work and they raise challenging questions for political scientists and policymakers alike. But I would like to conclude this lecture with some personal reflections on how we can move forward with the scientific study of politics, more in particular the analysis of what I labelled as the organizational fabric between citizens and government.

To begin with, I believe that an empirical research agenda is stronger if it is combined with insights derived from normative political theory. Much political science research remains split with on the one hand normative political theory and on the other hand empirical scholarship. As a result, normative political theorists often lack a sound empirical basis for their claims. Consequently, normative claims sometimes exaggerate the positive contributions of civil society as a transmission belt between citizens and government, which is for instance the case with much literature on transnational advocacy. Or, normative scholars draw a more pessimistic picture and argue that systems of interest representation are inherently biased and captured by specific interests. Such normative claims have clear empirical implications that cry for evidence-based research. Yet at the same time, I think that empirical scholarship needs to show a stronger awareness of key normative theoretical puzzles. Much current empirical scholarship remains disconnected from big questions such as what democracy and representation actually mean. The why-question of much empirical research is often not sufficiently explicated and, as a result, much empirical research has a flavour of irrelevance. Normative political theory can help us to bring more depth into empirical political research. I hope that this lecture is a modest and helpful step into this direction.

At the start I emphasized the need for a scientific study of politics. There are various valuable ways to reflect on politics. Journalists, politicians, citizens, they all develop, based on their experiences, useful and interesting views on politics. Yet, these views are not scientific in the sense that they attempt to develop an independent, theoretically informed and evidence-based perspective on politics. Key in a scientific understanding of politics is the distance it takes vis-

à-vis its object of study, and that it analyses political practices as if it would analyse other things such as economic behaviour, psychological distress, human diseases, or the behaviour of primates. I am aware of the fact that such an approach might sound alien to political practitioners and some colleagues have a different opinion. But it is, in my view, the only way we can talk about a science of politics in a meaningful way. Being and operating as a scientific discipline is the best way in which we can pay service to the society that sponsors us. It is also what differentiates us from journalists and political commentators.

This implies that we need to think more thoroughly about academic education in political science. As said earlier, we are a discipline that has science in its name, but we are too often reluctant to emphasize and deepen the scientific component in its teaching. In my view, but again there are different views on this, we should put much more stress on a deeper and more profound scientific training of our students. To be concrete, this may include more theory, more methods and more statistics. This is the most effective way to enhance the analytical skills of our students. The four years that students attend university are the time when we can develop those skills. The pay-off of developing strong analytical skills in the long run is much larger than some internship or teaching some empirical facts about political life.

Next, I am also of the opinion that we need better, and maybe more, data. We need better data on many topics and my research team has done some relevant work on developing and improving data-collection methods and analysis. I know that there is a debate on how to further develop the field and questions might be raised about the usefulness of an increasing sophistication of our data-collection methods and measurement techniques. I do not share all these concerns. Instead, I have an outspoken view on this matter. But I am also optimistic that we can gradually develop a more robust, cumulative and scientific understanding of politics. Scientific disciplines such as astronomy, physics or biology would not be where they are today – in fact they would be nowhere – without the continuing reflection on methodological advancement and sophistication. We are just at the start of a profound data-revolution in the social sciences and if we are not consciously anticipating and making strategic use of this, we will simply become a dismal and irrelevant discipline. In the worst case we will be overtaken by mathematicians, which I believe would be a disaster. I suppose the rector and Prof. Van Moerbeke will agree with me on this issue. But, is it not odd that we as human beings start to understand complex issues such as the origins of life, the structure of the universe or the functioning of small particles, but that our scientific understanding of something that affects our daily life – politics – remains relatively underdeveloped? Importantly, I am not necessarily advocating for more data, but rather better data and a smarter usage of existing data. This means foremost that we need to develop projects that connect and integrate existing datasets much better. There is already a wealth of data. Using existing data more cleverly, that means by linking data-sources or building data-networks, is one of the crucial ways through which we can make the best use of already existing data. This brings me to my next point.

During the past decades we have experienced an incredible methodological sophistication and specialization in political science. Some research projects we implement today would be unthinkable twenty or even ten year ago. Much of this is also the result of better

communication technologies and increasing computing power. However, this highly positive development has come at a cost. It corresponds with the establishment of various highly specialized niches between which little cross-fertilization takes place. Subsequently, we developed in a fragmented discipline that is less capable to answer big questions. Today I tried to broaden my own research agenda and to link it to other agendas. I sincerely hope that this is just a start.

Last but not least, I would like to extend my gratitude. I will not mention specific names since this would otherwise result in a very long list and I would run the risk to forget someone.

- To start with, it is really an honour that the prestigious Francqui Foundation awarded me this chair. I truly appreciate their recognition of my work and the relevance the foundation attached to it.
- I should acknowledge all my students. Since my start here in 2007 I have been blessed with the opportunity to supervise various PhD-students and several of them are now building a research career at foreign universities. This has been one of my most exciting professional experiences during the past decade.
- I also would like to thank my current crowd of PhD-students for all the fruitful interactions and exchanges. As some will notice, some ideas expressed in this lecture are the result of our mutual intellectual exchanges. Thanks!
- Next I would like to express my appreciation to all my colleagues, in particular the colleagues at the department of political science, who welcomed me back in Antwerp, and those colleagues who helped me to establish a vibrant research team. When I arrived in Antwerp, I not only joined a department or a university, but also the Faculty of Social Sciences. We academics, me included, complain about many things, but I think there is one big exception, namely the Faculty of Social Sciences in Antwerp where you will probably find the lowest level of complaining in the whole academic universe. To this I would like to add the university management, especially ADOC and the head of the Research Council who strongly supported me, not only in applying for this chair, but also with other key grant applications.
- The list of organizations that supported me during all those years is very long and cannot be reproduced here. Yet, I really have to mention the Research Foundation-Flanders. As most scholars, I have some love-hate relation with the FWO. Sometimes, it is an agency whose decisions are experienced as a bit awkward and somewhat misguided. Yet, there cannot be any doubt that without regular FWO support, I simply would not have been able to build my academic career.
- The final and most important words are for my two kids and wife. Probably, you know more than anyone else in this room what it means to live together with someone who most of the time thinks and talks about work, who gets easily frustrated because of some silly work-related topic, and who passions sometimes then to overgrow more important things in life. Thanks for all the patience and love and for all other valuable things you bring into my life.

Quod dixi, dixi.